

## MY SCREENTEST, OR, I COULD'VE BEEN DEBRA WINGER

On a hot September afternoon in 1969, four months past my college graduation, I found myself dozing on a hand-me-down convertible sofa in pre-gay West Hollywood, Sweetzer Avenue, to be exact, a street on which many have begun their pursuit of the Hollywood dream. It was here, in a drab fifties apartment complex which looked more like Army base housing – no charming Spanish courtyard bungalow dripping in bouganvilla –that I found myself wasting away yet another afternoon. I had been an English major which meant I had given no particular thought to a “career.” I had spent the summer writing a series of unfinished short stories in varying states of inebriation. My ongoing fantasy was to become a latter day Anais Nin crossed with Katherine Mansfield and a dash of Virginia Woolf. After all, I kept a journal. In truth, I had no idea what kind of a writer I really was. I had been a student all my life and the fact that I wasn't going back to school in the ninth month of the year had thrown me into a vague state of confusion I was loathe to call an identity crisis, let alone a depression. When the wall phone rang, I half-expected Lindsay, my roommate, to answer it until I remembered she was at UCLA in her senior seminar on Thackeray, so I dragged my lazy ass over to answer it.

“Hey Lizzie. It's Charlie.” Charlie didn't wait for me to return the salutation. “Do you have any pictures of yourself?” He was way ahead of me. I was still getting over last night's hangover.

“Pictures? What kind of pictures?”

“Didn't you say you modeled for awhile?”

“Oh yeah. I have a portfolio actually,” I stretched my forehead upwards to open my eyes. “Why?”

“I want you to come in and meet this director,” he said. “They’re looking for an unknown to play this hippy chick.”

I wandered into the kitchen and started boiling water for some instant coffee. “Wait, aren’t you working for a music agent?”

“Yeah, but the agency represents actors and writers and directors too,” Charlie quickly explained. “Can you come in today?”

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost 3:30. “You mean right now?”

“Right now. Just come and meet this agent. Richard Roth. He represents the writer-director. And bring some pictures.”

“But Charlie, I’m a writer.”

“You’re an actress too. You’re a natural. And they’re looking for an unknown.” My silence on the other end spurred him on. “Anyway, what else are you doing this afternoon?”

He had a point, and in making it, the hangover somehow vanished. I knew I’d been waiting on that couch for something to happen.

Apparently I was up for the part of a hippy chick so I wore one of the Easy-To-Sew dresses I’d made over the summer made out of an Indian print bedspread. And a string of beads, of course, made from some exotic red seeds that were probably hallucinogenic. Not that I considered myself a bona fide hippy. My brief modeling stint in college had given me beauty tips and tools I

wasn't about to give up. I was more of a "mod"-ified hippy, which meant I wore fake Twiggy lashes with my peasant blouses. I had been plain all through my teens. I wasn't about to embrace the "natural" look now, or join a commune for that matter. If I was a hippy, I was an urban hippy, a college-educated hippy, a neurotic hippy, which meant I smoked grass but preferred the familiarity of being drunk.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, my drinking was already becoming a problem. Charlie was the first to call me on it. Days before this auspicious phone call, we had been sitting on the curb in front of my house under the streetlamp at two or three in the morning. He had been questioning my life of aimless debauchery ever since graduating from college. Charlie was five years older, my brother's age, and also the older brother of my friend, Jane, who I'd met in a writing class. When my First Love Boyfriend dumped me after four years. Charlie sent me flowers in an effort to spark a romance. But I wasn't interested in romance. I wanted to spite-fuck, which could only be done with guys who I didn't care about, guys who were slightly younger, dumber, or obnoxiously handsome. Charlie was none of these. So he opted for big brother advisor.

"You're drinking too much," he told me as my head fell on his shoulder and I tried to bring the moon into focus. "You're wasting your talents. You have so much to offer but instead you're just escaping." There was no condescension in his comments. Instead the truth of his words pierced the haze in my brain. Everyone else in my life at that time seemed to be under my spell, touting me as

one of the great free spirits of the western world, worshipping my dare and dazzle. Charlie was also in thrall but he saw the potential within the act, sensed the pain behind the play. To this day I remember that moment and appreciate Charlie's honesty with me.

So when he lured me over to Chartwell Artists in Beverly Hills on that toasty September afternoon, I was partly going to prove to Charlie my willingness to change, to turn over a new leaf. Or at least shed a few. After all it was Fall. I wasn't going back to school anymore. I had turned down going to graduate school (having been accepted into Stanford's Creative Writing Program), maintaining it cost too much and I should just get on with the writing life. (Little did I know how much discipline it was going to take.) Travel was out of the question for financial reasons. Neither was I quite ready to assume the proverbial fall-back position and become a high school English teacher. But movie star? Why not?

Chartwell Artists occupied an entire floor in a bank building on Wilshire Boulevard. Coming out of the elevator I immediately found myself in a swanky dark reception area where a young woman asked my name. I told her I was here to see Charlie Plotkin and within minutes a door opened and there he was, smiling with delight that I'd actually shown up. Once in the inner sanctum, I followed him down a long corridor past cubicles of secretaries until we came to Richard Roth's corner office. I broke the ice by observing that Charlie was wearing jeans and a shirt; and Richard Roth a suit and tie.

“That’s the difference between the movie division and the music division,” Charlie said.

“I just went to law school and you didn’t,” Richard mused.

Both men had grown up the sons of rich Beverly Hills Jews who gave lots of money to their respective temples. Richard had stuck to the professional game plan; Charlie hadn’t. Richard was still a bachelor; Charlie, already divorced. Charlie had long hair and a beard; Richard was billiard ball bald, except for some equatorial fringe and a fastidiously trimmed moustache.

I could tell right away that Richard liked me. It was the old shiksa allure. . I had never been the classic shiksa goddess, but I definitely had an Anglo-Irish look which attracted Jewish men, and vice versa. Richard unzipped my portfolio and quickly flipped through the plastic windows, then closed the book. He didn’t even ask me about modeling or whether I had any acting experience. He just picked up the phone.

“Hi, can I speak to Jim?” He smiled at me from behind his desk. I smiled back. “Jim, hi, it’s Richard. I want you to meet this actress. She’s here in my office right now.”

I looked over at Charlie. He tapped on his watch and headed for the door, indicating he had some meeting. Richard and I both waved.

“Are you free tomorrow morning?” Richard asked me.

I nodded.

“Great. Then we’ll see you at eleven. Her name? Elizabeth Gill.”

When I heard him say my name, it sounded like he was talking about someone else. This actress. Elizabeth Gill. Someone you should meet. I had to admit it made me feel special, singled out, star material.

Richard walked me to the elevator like a proper gentleman. He handed me back my portfolio.

“Bring that with you tomorrow.”

Lindsay was more excited than I was. She was more beautiful than I was too. I couldn't understand why this wasn't happening to her instead. I had always thought you had to look like Marilyn Monroe to be a movie star and Lindsay had dyed her hair a fiery red in a successful effort to resemble Rita Hayworth.

“I've always known you were destined for greatness,” she gushed as we shared a Tuna Alladin (a.k.a. tuna melt on English muffin) at the Old World restaurant on the pie slice point of Sunset and Fountain.

“I'm just going to meet the director. It doesn't mean I have the part.”

“I always knew you were going to be famous,” she insisted.

“I want to be a famous writer.”

“You can do both. You will do both. You're a Renaissance woman!”

I'll admit living with Lindsay provided a constant adulation which was hard to resist. She had already cast me in the role of star long before Charlie's phone call. We had met as English majors at UCLA and had sometimes had intense headraps at parties, but as a commuter student from the Valley she remained a

passing acquaintance. That is, until April of my senior year, when the phone rang just as I was pulling the last tissue from the Kleenex box about a week after First Love Boyfriend had dumped me for the Catholic slut. She was desperate to get out of her parents' house and away from her way too controlling, incestuously possessive father. I was living in a single apartment in West L.A. and desperate myself, for company other than Isadora, the bipolar Siamese cat I'd found in the alley.

When Lindsay moved in, the closet bloomed with color. She wore bright pinks and oranges and florals, floppy hats, wide belts, and jazzy shoes. Her hair cascaded, her make up shimmered, her smile dazzled. Her blatant beauty managed to overcome what some might have called an almost gaudy sense of style. Lindsay had grown up poor in the Valley. The oldest of four, and the smartest, she was their Hero, a source of pride and competition for her actor-turned-barber father (a fairly common Hollywood career progression) whose gambling addiction more than once left nothing under the Christmas tree. I, on the other hand, had come from a financially stable, if eccentrically dysfunctional family. My father had been a corporate lawyer, my mother a housewife with help; our house in Hancock Park might have been considered a mansion by some standards. The youngest of three artistic offspring (sister, painter; brother, singer/actor), I was sufficiently loved and encouraged by my parents to believe in myself enough to develop only minor insecurities, most born more of my own temperament than some environmental cause. What Lindsay admired, nay often worshipped, about me was my spontaneity, the freedom to be me, or the latest

me, anyway. The more she applauded, the more I performed. It was a perfect match. Little did she know how much I admired her for her femininity and an analytical intelligence which her breathy MM voice belied. Little did she know I compensated for my plain Anglo-Irish looks by taking center stage in a non-stop, booze&grass-fueled talk-and-tap show complete with young stud groupies. To Lindsay I was breaking new ground. Maybe I was.

Maybe I'm fooling myself, I thought, as I waited outside the apartment the next morning for Richard Roth to pick me. I'm no actress. I'd had a summer course in improv when I was eighteen and an acting class at UCLA just for fun. (I'd gotten a B, even though I thought my Blanche Dubois was second only to Vivien Leigh's.) I was just about to run back into the apartment and hide under the covers for the rest of the day when, like a rocket to the moon, a bright red Corvette convertible pulled up to the curb.

"Ready?" smiled Richard behind his extra dark sunglasses.

I climbed in and we roared off. Humming east along Santa Monica Boulevard, sun on our faces, breeze in our hair, or mine, anyway, people turned their heads and stared at us with curiosity and envy. I wondered if Richard's pate was going to get sunburned.

"You never know. You just might get this part," he said over the engine and traffic. "You have a good look. And they want an unknown,"

"I can't believe this is happening," I said lamely.

At the stop signal at Fairfax, he turned and looked at me directly, and I never forgot the words that came out of his mouth at that moment.

“You do not want to be in this business.” As if to answer my delayed reaction, a pause which I would later come to call a “beat” in my screenplays, he added, “I’m serious. It’s a terrible business, a cruel business, a ruthless business. Get out while you can.”

I didn’t know what else to do but smile. I think I might have even thrown my head back to add a dash of glamour. He didn’t really think I was going to tell him to take me back home. After all, we were in a red Corvette convertible en route to a movie studio and he was a bald agent cautioning me about the evils of Hollywood. It sounded more like a seduction than a warning. Suddenly I felt like I was in a Harold Robbins novel.

It was clear that destiny was at work, that my going to meet this movie director was somehow in the natural chain of events. I had been “chosen” before. In my freshman year of college, I was asked to model in Mademoiselle’s famous and now obsolete “College Issue.” Three of us, decked out in silver lame minis, had been shot by a cute Brit photographer on the stage of a Sunset Strip club in between sets by the Velvet Underground. The next year a cinema school professor stopped me as I was strolling between classes and told me I was perfect casting for one of his student’s films, a period piece in which I played a repressed girl in love with her brother. From the first take, in which I had to stare at myself in a mirror and start crying, I was hooked. When the director said “Action!” I clicked effortlessly into space and time, into the Absolute Moment of this alternate reality. I don’t know what performing on a stage would be like, but

acting in front of a camera made me feel intensely alive, a better high than any drug or drink could induce.

This penchant for the camera's eye most likely grew out of my dominant childhood fantasy that every moment of my life was being filmed and broadcast somewhere in the universe, not because I was a pretty child but because I enjoyed being watched. Some children have an imaginary friend whom they play with; I had an imaginary audience whom I played to. I relished this scrutiny, this cosmic attention, and secretly harbored a strong desire for recognition, if not outright fame. Somewhere around nine or ten, staring out the back window of our red-and-white two-tone Ford station wagon, I can remember suddenly being horrified by how many people there were in the world, those multitudes the Bible talked about, those masses of humanity and multiplicity of lives. Like the infinitude of stars over my head, this profusion of human life scared the hell out of me because it made me feel my utter insignificance. I thus vowed to stand out, to distinguish myself in whatever way I could. I refused to be part of the masses. Being lost in the crowd was death.

We pulled up to the studio gates.

"Hi Sam," Richard said to a pink-faced fiftyish guard in a modified cop costume.

"Mr. Roth." The guard slipped a parking pass onto the dash. "That car you got there, it's just like the one on Route 66. Now that was a good TV show."

"George Maharis and Martin Milner," Richard recalled.

"You know where you're going. Yellow line to Building 15."

Richard steered the course along a real-life version of the yellow brick road which wended its way past huge sound stages as big as airplane hangars. The office buildings which ran along the perimeter of the lot looked almost miniature by comparison. And even though I knew this was a present-day Hollywood movie factory I felt as if there was some kind of time warp happening, that at any minute I would see Don Ameche or Judy Holliday or some other movie star from the past walk by. Or a bevy of dolled up dancers from a musical. Or some character actor gunslingers. But the only sign of life we saw that afternoon was a golf cart with a couple of overweight electricians.

We parked in a space marked "Guest." As I followed Richard into Building 15, up a flight of stairs, and down a hall with old floorboards creaking under new carpet, I was surprised at how quiet it was. It felt like nobody was there. We came to a door with a sign on it which read, "THE BABYMAKER." Just before we went in, Richard quickly informed me that Jim Bridges had been an actor and a writer, and this was his first time directing.

A blasé secretary escorted us in to a makeshift, unadorned office. Richard and I sat on a faded nubby turquoise sofa and waited for Jim Bridges to get off the phone. The young director wore a freshly ironed white shirt with jeans, ran his free hand through his unkempt hair several times, and paced as he spoke. Behind him, rows of black-and-white headshots of actresses were pinned on a large bulletin board. Assaulted by their Pepsodent smiles, I suddenly felt sorely deficient of the glamour genes required for a potential movie star. The truth is I had a certain contemporary appeal, a gamine quality made popular by

the English waif look which had finally made it okay to be small-breasted. The pixie and the tomboy which oscillated in my visage and created a particular androgenous charm would surely be out of place on that wall of winsome theatrical beauties.

Jim Bridges smiled with delight, as he approached from behind the desk.

“Elizabeth Gill.” He said my name as if remembering me, not meeting me for the first time. Or maybe he was testing it out for marquee appeal. “I’m Jim.”

He sat down in the matching faded turquoise armchair and hooked one leg up over the arm, whereupon I began to ingratiate myself to this short man with a large strong head and kind, intense dark eyes. He seemed immediately taken with me, though perhaps this was just his way with everyone, I couldn’t tell. At any rate, I felt instantly relaxed in his presence. Richard visibly relaxed too, his own taste validated by Jim’s enthusiastic response.

“Tish is a young woman, a hippy, who is hired by a childless couple to have their baby. Because they want it to be at least half their biological child, the husband sleeps with Tish to impregnate her.”

“Wow.” This was going to be quite a part.

“Anyway, after she gets pregnant, she moves in with them so they can take care of her and make sure she’s getting the proper nutrition and so nothing will go wrong. And what happens is, she gets overly attached to them, because she’s really been looking for a home herself.”

“But in the end, she has the baby and has to give up and leave,” I said, anticipating the bittersweet ending.

Jim looked at Richard and glowed.

“Where did you find her?”

“One of our music agents.”

“Oh. Do you sing?” he asked.

“Oh no. Charlie’s just a friend.”

“Well, your boyfriend sings.” Boyfriend. Boyfriend. I don’t have a boyfriend. Jim explained, “I mean, Tish’s boyfriend.”

The door burst open and another man entered the room. He was tall, tan, tousled-haired, and friendly as a puppy.

“Geoffrey, come meet Liz Gill.” He had already shortened my name.

“Geoffrey’s our dialogue coach. He’s going to read the scene with you.”

Before I even had time to get nervous, I was reading “sides” with Geoffrey, the dialogue coach. He played Jay Wilcox, the husband, and I played Tish. It was a getting-to-know-you kind of scene which more or less mirrored the real situation. I tried not to be distracted by his aqua blue eyes. By the time we got to the last line, I truly didn’t know where I ended and Tish began.

Jim broke his own silence.

“Well, you’re definitely going to get tested. You have a picture for me?”

I rummaged through the old black portfolio from my modeling days and pulled out a four year old composite with a head shot on one side. I hated that picture of me. Why my old modeling agent had chosen it I’ll never know. My hair in a classic flip, my eyes so wide open as to be Lucille Ball comical, my freckles too pronounced for fashion shots. But it was all I had. He walked over and

pinned it up with the others. Suddenly I was in the running. I had become an actress.

As he drove me back to my apartment, Richard never stopped smirking.

“I knew he’d like you,” he said.

“You don’t sound very happy about it,” I observed.

“I’m happy if you’re happy,” he said, pulling out a pack of Marlboros.

I realized I was. “So what does it mean, I’m going to get tested?”

“A screen test. They’ll probably test about five actresses and you’ll be one of them.”

“You mean, in front of a camera?”

He lit up. “Yeah. You’ll do a scene on a set, on a soundstage, in front of a camera. Just like it was a real movie. It’ll even be edited.”

Just like it was a real movie. I suddenly remembered how much I identified with Natalie Wood in “Inside Daisy Clover” when she belted out that song “You’re Gonna Hear From Me.” Or Barbra Streisand in “Funny Girl” when Flo Zeigfeld signed her on and all the old folks in the neighborhood threw her a party. Or any other number of Hollywood movies about unknowns becoming overnight successes. I was going to be one of them. I could feel it. Destiny filled my veins like a drug, congratulating me for being so damn talented, loveable, and unique.

In the weeks leading up to the screen test, my movie star fantasy reached egomaniacal proportions, at least inside my head. I tried to downplay my

excitement but it wasn't easy. My friends weren't surprised that I was up for the part and took it more in stride than I did. My mother took the opportunity to regale her gin cronies and acquire some serious social currency. Everyone knew I was going to be famous (I'm not sure why) and I was more than ready to meet their expectations. I had to. They were counting on me to glamorize their lives, to be the conduit between them and the thrill of celebrity. And I was counting on stardom to answer the big post-college question, "Now what?"

"Hi Sam," I chirped out my window as the pink-faced guard waved me through the studio gates.

At Jim's request, I was now coming to the lot every afternoon, offering my opinion on scenes, even supplying dialogue. I was turning into Jim's muse and Tish was turning into me. Chameleon to the non-existent core, my identity was up for grabs. I was no longer a student, no longer the dutiful daughter, no longer the "technical virgin." *Au contraire*. I had begun attracting all class, caliber, and chronology of male, and had embraced the credo, "If they can have sex for fun, so can I," or: your basic love em and leave em/catch-and-release approach to relationships, a.k.a. one-night stands.

Jim was the first gay man I had ever attracted. I didn't know he was gay at first. I just knew he wasn't coming onto me, like Geoffrey was. Only Geoffrey was married. To Colin Wilcox, who had made major waves playing the young girl who lies about getting raped by a black man in "To Kill A Mockingbird." To Colin Wilcox, who was going already cast in the part of Suzanne (Wilcox!), the barren wife. And where did our friendly director fit into this imitation of life?

According to Geoffrey, Jim was really Tish in disguise, kind of like Tennessee Williams's heroines really being Tennessee. Did this mean Jim had unfulfilled maternal feelings? That he was looking for a family to take him in? A young actress to express his feminine desires? All I know is, Jim and Geoffrey and I became an odd trio, lunching at the Formosa Café, talking endlessly about the movie, how much fun it was going to be to shoot and how good it was going to be and how ground-breaking the subject matter was. Jim needed our enthusiasm to counteract any insecurity about his directorial debut.

What I remember about hanging out with Jim was how comfortable I felt, and how appreciated, as if he found each thing I did or said more charming than the last. But I knew hardly anything about him. There was something impenetrable and inaccessible about him which I attributed to his creative drive. He was also busy prepping for a major motion picture and often left me in the care of the affable, harmlessly flirtatious Geoffrey.

"You know, of course, who Geoffrey is," said Richard when he took me out to lunch one day at La Scala Boutique in Beverly Hills.

Always ready for a paid meal, I devoured my Canneloni GiGi and waited for him to tell me.

"Geoffrey Horne. He was in 'Bridge on the River Kwai' and also in that Jean Seberg film, 'Bonjour Tristesse.' He was well on his way to becoming a big leading man."

"Really. What happened?"

Richard shrugged. "Hollywood."

Hollywood. To Richard, it wasn't a place, it was a disease, an addiction, the road to heartache. To me it was nine letters on a hillside which you could occasionally make out through the smog as I stood in front of my childhood home in the flats of Hancock Park. Nine letters like my name, Elizabeth.

"Why are you an agent then? You obviously don't like what you do."

"It's better than being a lawyer."

Richard tried to kiss me that afternoon when he dropped me off. Thank God for the Corvette gear shift. Not that I was taken aback by this pass. Actually I was surprised he hadn't made it sooner. I was of the age when men of every age sniffed me out. Sniffed and eyeballed and blatantly propositioned in bars and restaurants, on the street and in elevators, supermarket aisles and gas pumps. Why would Richard be any different?

One night Jim surprised me by taking me to the Aquarius Theater to see "Hair" which had just begun its L.A. run. I was excited about finally seeing the show. I'd listened to the album over and over and had memorized all the songs. (Yes, I was one of those kids who put on musicals in the living room. Blame it on my brother, the tenor, who got all the leads in the high school productions.) It was also the first time we'd gone anywhere without Geoffrey, so it almost felt like a date. Almost. Being out with Jim alone only reinforced my fantasies of becoming a household name. After all, none of the other girlheads on the wall were getting this close to him.

"I wish I didn't have to test anyone else," he said to me, scanning the cast list in the Playbill. "But agents call and I have to at least pretend to listen. Like

this girl here. She's totally wrong but I have to see her anyway. It's such a waste of time when I know who I want."

After the show, which put me on a pleasant natural high with its upbeat message of the dawning of the Aquarian Age ("sympathy and trust abounding"), Jim bought me a pack of Tarot cards on sale in the lobby. I still have them after all these years. A few days later he also bought us matching purple print shirts at Fred Segal, which in 1969 had just barely opened its West Hollywood doors. We tried them on and took in our image – twins! As I watched him pay with his credit card, I felt certain that our collaboration on this movie was going to be brilliant. We were soulmates. I would be his Tish. My life was on the brink of a new era, was about to begin. Everywhere the Beatles were singing "Here Comes the Sun" as the Tarot showed me the Sun card of a smiling child with her giant sunflower conquering the world.

Jim and Geoffrey may have been big fans but my inexperience and lack of training made National General, the company footing the budget, nervous. Before even investing in my screentest they wanted to run me by the veteran viewfinder of the movie's executive producer, none other than Robert Wise, the man who directed "The Sound of Music." At that time Wise was a serious Hollywood honcho. His name on this movie gave it stature, not to mention financing. I'm not sure what Jim's connection with him was, but if I was to continue to be considered for the title role, I was going to have to impress the hell out of him.

Jim and I drove over to his office on another lot. Which one escapes my memory. It's enough, after all these years, to still be able to feel the intense scrutiny behind those black-rimmed owlsh glasses. Even Jim started squirming in his chair. Finally the older white-haired man leaned back behind his desk and sighed, thus ending the examination.

"You remind me a lot of Shirley MacLaine," he pronounced, deadpan.

I smiled, deeply complimented. I had heard this comparison before. When "The Apartment" first came out people thought I looked like a younger version of Shirley MacLaine because I had the same short hair. Of course I was only ten at the time so I found it quite flattering. Despite a slightly more mature face and long dark hippy hair, Mr. Wise could still see the resemblance, a resemblance which obviously meant I had what it took to win audiences.

"She was in my last movie. It was a flop."

What movie was that? How could anything Shirley MacLaine was in be a flop?

Driving back to Goldwyn, Jim tried to allay my fears.

"So he thinks I'm a liability because I look like Shirley MacLaine?"

"But you're still going to have the screen test."

"But he doesn't like me."

"If I like you he likes you. You're still going to be tested."

The fact that I had failed to wow Robert Wise had put me in a bad mood. Suddenly I was feeling insecure about the whole experience. Richard's words came back to me, "You don't want to be in this business."

Yes I do! I want to prove Robert Wise wrong! Just because he directed a big box office hit doesn't make him the final authority. In fact, I am not Shirley MacLaine. I don't think I really look anything like her. Poor Shirley -- already becoming a has-been! Young up-and-comers and total unknowns like myself were going to knock her out of the running. It was inevitable.

"What's so bad about Shirley MacLaine?" I asked.

"Nothing. I think she's great. Bob has a problem with her."

So now I have to suffer because he has a problem with her.

He smiled, boyish and neutral as always, and changed the subject. "Can you come over to my house for dinner this Friday? I want you to meet Jack."

"Who's Jack?" I asked Geoffrey as we sloshed our Mai Tais in the dark red den of the Formosa. Both of us never seemed to want to go directly home. Lindsay was always studying at UCLA and as far as I could tell Geoffrey and Colin preferred a late dinner. I'd never met Colin but I assumed one day I would.

"Jack is Jim's lover."

"Oh." The rum rhumba'd through my veins, carrying the words to realization in my blotto brain. "OH." Jim was gay!

Now you have to understand that in 1969 I'd never even heard the word gay for homosexual. I wasn't particularly homophobic. Just ignorant. My Uncle John had come out (another phrase not in my vocabulary at the time) a few years before, no thanks to his lover trying to stab him with some scissors in the art gallery they owned.

“Huh.”

“You knew that, of course,” Geoffrey assumed.

“No. But it makes sense.”

“I’m not gay,” he smiled, attempting to look seductive. It didn’t really work on me. He was too handsome and too good-hearted for my taste. At the time I was more susceptible to outright wolves.

“Not gay but married,” I smiled back.

He clinked his glass against mine. “It’s a good thing you’re such a good girl.”

I let Geoffrey think it was my strong moral fiber that kept us from heading for the nearest motel. It was really a lack of physical attraction. He was way too soft for me. However, we enjoyed the pretense of attraction, had Jim in common (who also vicariously enjoyed our pretense of attraction), and were probably going to be acting together in the screentest. Also, if I did get the part, his childless wife was going to be playing *The Childless Wife*. Best to keep things aboveboard and blameless. Besides, I had a feeling I was going to like Colin when I finally met her.

But first it was time to meet Jack, Jim’s partner.

The setting October sun flooded the western sky fuschia and gold as I followed Jim on Sunset all the way from Hollywood to Brentwood. Skeletons, pumpkins, witches, and ghosts had sprung up all over town in anticipation of Halloween. The air was clear and dry, and my Opel Kadett pattered along behind Jim’s zippy sports car. I don’t remember what kind it was, just that it

suiting him perfectly as he took the curves and hit the straight-aways. He was clearly showing off although he never lost sight of me in his rear view.

We turned right on Kenter Avenue and then took another right fork on a strangely spelled street called Skyieway. Jim pulled into a steep driveway (visit site)

Jack Larson looked familiar as he came towards me with his hand outstretched. Then it hit me. He was Jimmy Olson on the Superman television series. Only Jimmy Olson looked much older and smarter than he had in his suit and bowtie as the cub reporter at the Daily Planet. If memory serves me well, he was wearing a cream-colored crew neck sweater and light slacks. He exuded a quiet intelligence and a gentle caring.

“This is Liz,” Jim declared. It was more of an announcement than an introduction. “My Tish.”

“Hi Liz, I’m Jack,” he said, eyes twinkling. “Jim’s talked a lot about you. I’m glad to finally meet you.”

As for what we ate, I can only remember possible hors d’oeuvres and cocktails. As for what we said, I can only remember that Jim was once more incorporating me into his self-created family.

“How do you feel about playing Tish?” Jack asked me. He could tell I was no bimbo.

“She’s more of a hippy than I am. But I understand her wanting to both be a child and have a child.” This was utter bullshit. I had no idea what it was like

to want to have a child. My maternal instinct was still ten years away from kicking in.

“Isn’t she wonderful?” Jim gloated, wine-warmed and chomping on a cracker.

“Do you still act?” I asked Jack, risking intimacy.

“No, not much anymore. I’m writing these days. I’m working on a libretto for a Virgil Thompson opera.”

Whoa. Jimmy Olson had obviously been a definitive detour, one which had created a false public perception of this fine-tuned soul. I never asked where Jim and Jack met. Maybe at a party James Dean had attended. Or an acting class. Or a bar. However long ago it had been, they were, for all intents and purposes, married to each other, a perfect balance between the serene and the intense, the thoughtful and the impulsive. I sat there in that Frank Lloyd Wright house they shared not quite sure how to fit in. I wasn’t anyone’s lover. I felt sexually vestigial, like an appendix.

“I’m a writer too,” I told Jack when Jim went to take a phone call in the other room.

“Are you?”

“I’m not really an actress. I mean, I like to act but writing’s my real talent.”

“Are you writing anything right now?”

“Well, I had an idea the other day for a play. Two couples at a fancy restaurant having two separate conversations...one above the table and one below the table. In other words, their genitals are also having their little drama.”

“Very interesting. But how would you stage it? Would you have a second set of actors under the table?”

I hadn't even thought that far. It was just an idea, something to bring up when people asked me what I was writing. It always got an amused response. Jack was the first person to consider it as an actual production. I appreciated the fact that he took the writer me seriously. As I gave him a hug good-bye, I admitted that perhaps this whole acting business was a diversion from my real dream. He smiled knowingly.

Three nights before the screentest Jim arranged a reading of the entire script at the home of Geoffrey Horne and Colin Wilcox-Horne, a one-story California cottage in Pacific Palisades. I was a little nervous, not for the reading so much as meeting Colin for the first time. Little did she know how many times her husband had come over to my apartment with a bottle of wine on his way home from work. Geoffrey often got sloppy but never aggressive; in fact, alcohol seemed to have the opposite effect on him. He would lie on the couch and listen to me tell anecdotes, fantasize about being famous, complain about my friends who were still in college, especially Lindsay's taste in men, and somehow this would make him feel young again. After all, he had been “discovered” once too. Was that it? Some identification with my being on the brink? He didn't seem particularly unhappy in his marriage. Geoffrey admired Colin's talent and never complained about her as some married men do.

Colin served us a casual dinner by candlelight. She had a sense of Southern hospitality, being herself from North Carolina, but also a Southern woman's suspicion of outsiders, especially an untrained native Angeleno actress. I remember we sat around on couches in a dimly lit room, reading our parts, the whole script playing out as if it were really happening to me and Geoffrey and Colin. Just like the movie Wilcoxes, they couldn't have children, and my comfortable familiarity with Geoffrey gave credence to those borderline intimate scenes between Tish and Jay. We had all gotten high too, which further merged fact and fiction. When we got to the end, Jim's smile floated above the room like a pair of Man Ray lips. We were his perfect cast.

I may have been the director's "dark horse" favorite, but there were four other actresses also being tested for "The Baby Maker." Only two remain in my memory: Dorothy Lyman, an actress Jim had seen on the New York stage, and Meg Foster, a new arrival in town who had a pair of stunning ice-blue eyes. I believe Dorothy went on to become a director and Meg, the first Cagney or was it Lacey...before Sharon Gless replaced her. Apparently those incredible eyes were too much for the primetime audience. Whoever my competition, Jim kept reassuring me that I was his first choice and that all I had to do was be myself.

The day of my screentest – November 17<sup>th</sup> -- finally arrived. Jim wanted me to wear the Fred Segal shirt with my purple jeans. This boyish get-up wasn't exactly what I would've chosen for the lovemaking scene, but Jim thought it would bring me luck. I wore my hair long and straight and kept the eye make-up

to a minimum. Lindsay gave me her good luck dyed green rabbit's foot. On the drive over to Goldwyn I must've looked like a nutcase as I repeated my lines over and over like Franny Glass saying her "Jesus prayer."

"Big day?" Sam smiled at the guard gate.

I nodded.

"Break a leg."

Did people say that for film as well as theater performances? At least he didn't say "Break the camera."

As I parked next to Stage 15, brightly sunblasted by the fresh morning light, my heart suddenly lurched. It wasn't a dream. There was the door with a sign on it -- "The Babymaker" Testing. It took all my strength to lug it open. It was a foot thick to keep the sound out. Treading onto the massive sound stage, steeped from floor to rafter in the musty sawdust-and-powder smell of decades of movie productions, I suddenly thought, *This is it. This is the moment I will look back on and say changed my life. The moment I went from being an ordinary person to a famous movie star.* Over in a corner of this huge dark space, a camera crew was lighting a set -- the interior of a mountain cabin complete with glowing fireplace and bear rug on which Geoffrey and I, as Jay Wilcox and Tish Gray, would get to know each other well enough to make a baby. The whole scene was going to be shot on 35 millimeter film, just like a real movie.

Jim approached me with a smile and a bounce in his step. He gave me a hug and sent me to a temporary vanity table haloed in stage lights on another

part of the stage. Between these small places of light spanned large spaces of dark. These monoliths had once been vibrant with filmmaking, but television, along with a desire for more realism on location shoots, had turned them fairly ghostly. As I traversed the dark desert of movies past I began to feel a part of Hollywood history. Sitting in the make-up chair getting sponged with Max Factor pancake, my imagination soared into the future. There I was in the market, pushing my cart while shoppers whispered to each other and tried not to stare. Genial and accommodating, I would sign autographs when asked. I would lend my name to all good causes. More parts would come and I would find myself best friends with other movie stars who wanted to work with me. Who knew? Maybe I'd even win an Oscar some day. My mother would never get over it. What I didn't fantasize about was money. Fortune would come but it was icing on the cake; it had nothing to do with my personal satisfaction. Besides, I was still too young not to think I'd eventually have all I needed or wanted in life, and my financially secure childhood had made the material benefits of fame less alluring. At twenty-two, I was in it for love and glory.

And that's exactly what swept over me as Chuck Rosher, the Director of Photography, passed his light meter across my face. It was like a priest blessing me with the sign of the cross. I was adored and saved, anointed and revered all at once. The lights went off for a moment and Jim squatted in front of me, consecrating me with the kindest of smiles, a smile which said he had the utmost faith in my acting ability. Then Geoffrey, reclining, poured us each a glass of fake wine and patted the bear rug, inviting me to join him. The lights

came on again. Beyond them I could sense the hungry camera lens, a dark brooding presence just on the border of illumination, and Jim next to it like its tamer.

“And...action,” he stated simply.

Several takes later, I was in a state of complete ecstasy. Seriously. I was so high on the experience I think I left my body. Never before had I been so absolutely in the present moment. Knowing the film was running consolidated all my loose ends and crystallized my soul. The ordinary performance of life paled in comparison. With the camera not only witnessing but recording every gesture, I felt electrified, shining, complete. The general consensus seemed to be that I'd nailed it. Jim was even more euphoric than I was and took us all out for lunch at Musso and Frank's. The two screen tests still left to shoot seemed like mere studio protocol. I was the babymaker.

Two weeks later they announced that Barbara Hershey had gotten the part. Barbara Hershey hadn't even been tested! Her agent had lobbied for her at the last minute, emphasizing her vast experience as a regular cast member on a T.V. western called “The Monroes.” I have no recollection of how I found out. I think maybe it was Richard Roth who made the call. Or Geoffrey. It could have been Jim but all I can remember is how Jim suddenly disappeared from my life. Of course he had a movie to direct; he was busy in pre-production. According to Geoffrey, who kept buying me drinks, Jim was also fairly embarrassed that he had had to capitulate to the studio and go with a safer bet. “Well, you always knew you were the ‘dark horse,’” they kept saying to me as I sucked my vodka'd

ice cubes and order another round. Slowly I realized I had been a long shot, but I had been made to feel like a shoe-in. Jim had let me down and he didn't want to have to face me.

And so the taste of stardom turned more sour than a night of wine, cheese, and smokes, and my dream of being famous dissolved in the cold morning light of each day that ensued. I grieved for my lost celebrity. I really did. I felt duped, even betrayed, and yet I wasn't. I just hadn't gotten the part. If I were a real actress perhaps I would have been used to this kind of rejection. The truth was, I wanted to feel that high again, that sense of pure being which I felt in front of a motion picture camera. It was no accident that I had been blown away by Julie Christie, when I went to see "Darling" six times in a row during my freshman year of college. Like Diana Scott, I had been plucked off the street and set on the course of becoming "someone," not in any spiritual sense but by the extreme of secular definition. My life never would be the same again.

The following fall, 1970, "The Babymaker" opened in Los Angeles at the Bruin theater in Westwood. By then I had become a card-carrying member of the Writers Guild of America, west, which further twists of fate will be narrated several chapters hence. I went alone, bought myself some popcorn, and hunkered down in the sixth row center to watch. I remember being unabashedly critical of Barbara Hershey's Trish, and when it was over, felt deeply relieved that I hadn't gotten the part. It was an uninspired movie which would never have made me a star. As I walked up the aisle and out the theater, noting the bored, dissatisfied faces of the audience, there was the briefest passing thought, a

residue of my own lingering fantasy, that had I been in it, I would have infused it with enough charm to raise it above the material. Recently, I found this bit of validation on the Cinephilia website.

*Barbara Hershey must cringe at the memory of this. Dreadful but almost classic "issue" film with the worst wardrobe imaginable, stilted script, and plump Hershey and hirsute Scott Glenn as giggling hippies."*

Almost thirty years later I sat in the theater at UCLA's Melnitz Hall listening to Debra Winger, among others, pay tribute to James Bridges as part of the dedication of the theater bearing his name in memoriam. Jack Larson was there, as gentle and kind as ever, glowing with the satisfaction of honoring his life partner in this way. So were other friends whom I had met long after those "Babymaker" days, whose lives had also crossed Jim's in some way. As Debra Winger talked about her relationship with the sensitive director, a curious feeling of *déjà vu* came over me. No, not *déjà vu*, but flashback, if flashback can be called a feeling. The closeness she described was the same I had felt. The way he had discovered her, fought for her, and made her a star (although she had already been on T.V. as Linda Carter's sidekick, Wonder Girl). After all these years, I finally understood why I hadn't gotten the part. Jim had not yet accrued enough power in the Hollywood game to get his way. He was lucky enough to get to direct his own script. But by the time he made "Urban Cowboy," he had proven himself with "Paper Chase" and "China Syndrome." The studio wasn't keen on D.W., a nice Jewish girl from the Valley, to play a saucy Texan, but Jim

wanted her and he got her. Sitting there in that theater that night, entrenched in a full life of career, marriage, and children, I still harbored the tiniest dot of desire for the stardom that had eluded me back in 1969. It was bad timing, pure and simple. I could've been Debra Winger.