

GRIP

A Memoir Of Fierce Attractions



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The names and identifying details of some characters in this book have been changed.

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To David

I always expected to have an interesting life,
but I never thought I'd be happy until I met you.

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FAMILY



I

We gathered around the small kitchen table as though the breach had never happened. The same blue and white checkered cloth covered the Formica top. A stick of margarine lay in the chipped plastic holder next to a saltshaker that was always sticky.

My mother thrust the dishes over to my brother—hot baked potatoes wrapped in aluminum foil, yellowish canned peas, and finally a meatloaf made with Borden’s evaporated milk. Then she stepped away from the stove, yanked her chair out and sat down, her lips pinched. My brother took some of everything, even the peas, which he hated, before he slid the plates to my father.

In years past, we’d all be talking by now but tonight no one spoke. My brother poured ketchup over his meatloaf until the edges disappeared. I concentrated on peeling the wrapping off the potato, trying not to make noise. Finally, I glanced over at my brother sitting across from me. His hair was slicked down and swept into an Elvis wave in front, like most other sixteen-year-old boys in 1962. He rolled his eyes.

“What?” I mouthed.

My brother shook his head but didn’t speak.

After most of the food was gone, my father turned to me.

“Tell your mother, if she wants to use the car, she better ask me in advance.”

His face was red and his voice shook. I’d never seen him angry like this. My father would have made a perfect spy. He was the kind of man who could slip by unnoticed. Doughy

and pear-shaped, of average height, with horn-rimmed glasses, thinning brown hair and a soft voice, he was suited to his job as a school librarian. I glanced over at my mother. She looked like Debbie Reynolds in *Singin' in the Rain*, almost five feet tall, just a little bigger than me. She was sitting right there. I peeked back at my father and slouched down.

"Tell her," he ordered.

"Dad says you should ask him when you need the car," I muttered, twisting around so I didn't have to see him.

"You explain to your father that everything we own is half mine, including the car. Tell him I'll take it when I need it." Her back was rigid, her teacher's posture, the stance she used in front of her class.

I swiveled in my chair to face my father. My voice sank lower. "Mother says everything belongs to both of you."

"You inform your mother that she can't dump everything on me, then waltz back in scot-free."

He didn't even bother to glance at me. He was almost spitting out his words, staring straight across the table.

My mother turned to Ron. He looked back at her and blinked, the color disappearing from his face. My brother never got pulled in.

"You tell your father, I'm the one who worked for everything we have. I'm the one who supported this family. I have a right to anything in the house."

Ron stared at his plate and mumbled. It continued that way, my parents using my brother and me like puppets for a few more minutes, until my father shoved himself back from the table and strode toward the den. A moment later, my mother rose stiffly from her chair and marched upstairs, leaving us to clean up the mess.

Three years before, when I was ten, my mother had enrolled

in a graduate psychology program in Miami and took me with her. Ron stayed behind with my father in Queens. We were supposed to be away from New York for one year, but within a few months, from the way she talked, I was afraid we'd never go back. While I was growing up, my parents had never argued. I thought they were happy. But in Florida my mother complained that my father was a miser who recorded every dime he'd spent on their dates. She said he was a weak man who whined about finding a job while she'd slaved away as a substitute teacher in the Bronx slums, her salary holding the family together.

To her, my father was a failure, but that wasn't how I'd seen him. He was the one who carried me to my bed after a long car trip, even though I was only pretending to be asleep. He was the man who could fix anything, who'd unroll a felt pouch with tiny screwdrivers and repair my Cinderella watch while whistling tunes from *Your Hit Parade*. But after hearing my mother's tales of disappointment so many times, her view conquered mine and I felt betrayed by him as well.

During those years in Florida, I saw my father in the summer, sometimes visiting for a month. But at the end of August when I was thirteen, my mother told me I should stay with him and start high school in Queens. She'd remain behind in Florida to finish her doctoral dissertation, then come back to New York in less than a year and make a new life, a better life, for my brother and me.

But she returned much sooner than that.

A lawyer had told her that she needed to occupy the house for a month if she hoped to win it in their divorce settlement. I never knew if she'd consulted my father on her plans, but they surprised me. She showed up one day in late September when the marigolds were still in bloom.

My mother took over Ron's old bedroom in the attic just down the hall from me, sleeping on a twin bed under wallpapered eaves with images of prop planes diving through a night sky. I kept the same pink bedroom I'd had all along, the one my father and uncle had built for me, with a recessed dresser and cubbyholes for my dolls. Downstairs, my father stayed in my parents' bedroom surrounded by the massive mahogany furniture they'd bought when they married. My brother moved into the knotty pine paneled basement my father had finished for Ron's bar mitzvah three years before.

One night, a week after my mother's return, I followed her into the den. It was her turn for the TV room, eight o'clock, time for *Playhouse 90*, an hour-and-a-half live drama that she said was the best show on the air. She settled into the brown vinyl La-Z-Boy chair, lined up directly in front of our thirteen-inch black-and-white screen, while I sat on the daybed in the corner, slouching against the wall. I never liked *Playhouse 90*, but I didn't really care. I was done with my homework and it was something to do.

At nine o'clock, my father appeared in the doorway. He still had on his gray work slacks, but he was wearing just his sleeveless white undershirt, his favorite attire at home, even in winter. He never seemed to notice how fleshy and pink his upper arms were, how exposed he looked.

"Get out. You've had the TV for an hour. Now it's my time," he said to the back of the recliner, his voice high and tight.

"I'm not ready," my mother said from the other side. "There's another half hour to go."

"Get out. My show is coming on."

She shifted her weight in the chair as though she were bolting herself in.

"No. I want to finish this." She stared at the screen.

I knew that *The Phil Silvers Show* was about to start. My father loved comedy and this was his favorite program. He never missed it. Every time Sergeant Bilko, the sly chubby soldier in charge of the motor pool, pretended he didn't know how to play poker my father chuckled. So did I. I'd rather be watching Phil Silvers, too.

He stomped into the middle of the den and stood, feet apart, his hands on his hips.

"Get out now."

"You can't make me," she said, not turning to look at him. It sounded like something an eight-year-old would say.

In a few quick steps he was around behind her, grabbing the top of the La-Z-Boy and pulling it back until my mother was upside down staring up at him.

"Get out of here," he screamed, glaring down at my mother. Then he let the top of the recliner spring from his grip. It snapped upright so fast, I was afraid she might shoot out of the chair and slam into the TV. Without glancing back, he lurched out of the room.

As soon as he'd gone, she leaped up and rushed over to me, kneeling alongside the daybed. "Don't ever leave me alone with him," she said, sounding strained and hoarse, as if she'd been the one shouting.

She reached over and grabbed my hand and although I saw her clutching me, I couldn't feel anything. I nodded, barely breathing. What did that mean? What was I supposed to do? My father weighed two hundred pounds, twice as much as I did. I came up to his chest. How could I defend her? When she dashed out of the room seconds later, I trudged after her through the doorway and upstairs to my room, my legs thick and wooden beneath me.

My parents slid into a standoff after that. They didn't speak

to each other, ordering Ron and me to scurry back and forth between them instead. But my brother had friends who drove, so he could get away. I was the one who was trapped.

At the end of October, my mother told me she needed to return to Miami by herself so she could finally finish her dissertation. I wasn't sure if this was the real reason, but since I'd already started high school, it made sense for me to stay. In some ways, I welcomed her decision. My father was easy to get along with when she wasn't around. He did the cooking, the cleaning, the laundry, all the chores I'd been assigned in Florida. And he was home much more than my mother ever was. He was predictable and reliable. With him, I wasn't as lonely.

So, four weeks after she'd come back to Queens, my mother carried a stack of her clothes into my room, dumped them on a chair upholstered with green and pink tulips, pulled her dinged-up blue suitcase out of my closet and opened it on my bed. She began folding her clothes quickly, a nylon blouse with pearl buttons, a Madras plaid skirt. I sat on the bed a few feet away, not talking, just watching her pack. I felt tired and heavy, the way I did most of the time. All I wanted to do was crawl in bed and sleep.

Something crashed below us, followed by the smack of footsteps on the stairs. My mother dropped the blue chiffon scarf in her hands, leaned toward me and whispered in one quick breath, "Don't leave me."

There was no time to reply. An instant later, I heard my father before I saw him, growling. "No, you don't." His voice was torqued, like a twisted towel, so compressed it didn't sound like it could be coming from him.

My mother edged in front of me as he surged into the room. At first I thought she was moving to protect me, but from the angle of her body, I sensed she wanted to underscore my

presence, to use me as her shield.

“I won’t have it,” he said, his feet planted wide apart. “You’re not walking out again. You’re not leaving me high and dry for another year.”

“I have to go back to Florida and finish my doctorate,” she said, turning away from me to face him, her voice barely wavering.

“You’re not going without giving me my freedom.”

“We haven’t come to terms yet.” She stood up straighter, glaring at him, acting as if they were the same size and she weren’t a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter.

“You’re not doing this again. Do you hear me, you bitch!”

He’d never used that word. It distorted his mouth and then it changed his body. He seemed to grow larger. His face turned scarlet. Then, in a fraction of a second, he charged at my mother and threw her against the wall. Her back hit the plaster with a deep thud, the sound of the first rock crashing in an avalanche. He pinned her by the throat, stiff-armed and leaned into her, his white shirt damp with sweat, his back heaving like he’d run a long way. My mother didn’t move, didn’t try to resist. Her feet barely touched the floor. She held herself as still as the live butterflies my brother used to pin on a board. My father was unrecognizable, as though his softness had been a disguise, a cloak to hide the truth that underneath the excess weight hid a weapon of a man.

It was all happening so fast. It wasn’t real.

He held her there, suspended for an instant before his arms fell limp to his sides and he released her. Neither moved. Then he turned away and as he did, he appeared to shrink, a man who hated to raise his voice, who never swore. It seemed to me he moaned but I don’t think he did. The only sound that came from him was the slap of his footsteps going down the

stairs, slowly and deliberately, as if he couldn't see where he was heading and had to feel his way to the landing.

My mother's eyes darted around. Her voice raced as she said she was getting out of there, driving over to Judith Cohen's house. She grabbed her purse and sweater before rushing out of my room.

I hadn't budged from the bed where I'd been sitting, next to my mother's open suitcase. I didn't want to get up but I knew I couldn't stay there. I had to go somewhere else, too. But my body felt huge, impossible to move. After what seemed like a long time, I forced myself to rise and lumber downstairs, dragging my shoulder against the stairwell, letting the wall hold me up.

At the base of the stairs, I saw my father in the living room, hunched over on the knobby brown chair that he and mother had upholstered together in night class. His shoulders were shaking. His nose was dripping. Tears streaked down his face and he just let them slide off his chin. He gestured for me to come over and I did—I felt I had to—squatting a few feet in front of him.

"I'm so sorry," he said, no longer looking at me.

I stared at him without replying. His face had turned rubbery and wrinkled.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. When you're older, you'll understand." The words bore their way out of him, broken by gasps for air.

His hands were clasped on his lap. He opened them and raised them toward me, but I was out of his reach and I was glad. I didn't want his touch to contaminate me.

He dropped his hands and moaned. A moment passed. He rocked back and forth, slowly at first, then more insistently, like a man in prayer, sobbing and muttering, "When you're older, you'll understand."

I stood up, barely looking at him, still silent. What was I supposed to say? That it was okay, that I understood, when it wasn't and I didn't.

I let the screen door slam behind me. Judith Cohen's house was miles away, farther than I'd ever walked, but I couldn't think of where else to go. I trudged down our block and onto the next, over cracked concrete sidewalks that had buckled where some fault line must have given way. Somewhere a radio announcer called out a baseball score, a bicycle bell jingled. I was crying so much it was hard to breathe.

There were stones in my stomach. I hated my mother. Why couldn't she just give my father a divorce? She didn't love him. Why not tell Ron to protect her? He was older and bigger. Why me? And my father? He'd been a chump. Who wouldn't be mad after all these years? But why did he have to blow up in front of me? Why did I have to watch?

My canvas sneakers had smooth rubber soles, copies of the style rich people wore on sailboats so they wouldn't mar their wooden decks. Usually they were fine for walking, but now they stuck to the pavement, every step an effort. I wanted to smash my parents together, squeeze them into a brittle little ball and hurl them as far away from me as I could.

A year later, more than four years after my mother first left him, my father finally got the divorce he wanted. My mother was awarded her doctorate, the house in Queens, and my brother and me.