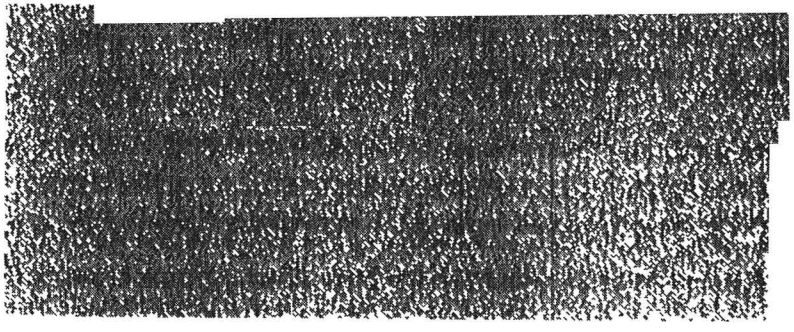
THE FIFTIES

A Women's Oral History

BRETT HARVEY



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For Ronnie

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Introduction

Did you ever think about the fact that all the fabrics we wore in the fifties were *stiff?*" my friend Ronnie once asked me. I hadn't, but the minute she said it I thought: faille, shantung, felt, taffeta, pique. Nothing clung, or fell, or draped—everything was crisp.

Forties clothes were truly sexy—those swingy little dresses in soft, flowered rayon prints with shoulder pads had a jaunty, competent femininity. Fifties clothes were like armor. Our clothes expressed all the contradictions of our roles. Our ridiculously starched skirts and hobbling sheaths were a caricature of femininity. Our cinched waists and aggressively pointed breasts advertised our availability at the same time they warned of our impregnability.

In the daytime we wore tight, revealing sweaters, but they were topped by mincing little Peter Pan collars and perky scarves that seemed to say, "Who, *me?* Why, I'm just a little girl!" At night our shoulders were naked, our breasts half-bare, the lower half of our bodies hidden in layers of tulle. Underneath it all, our flesh, like our volatile sexuality, was "contained" by boned girdles and Merry Widows, in an era when "containment" was a political as well as a social obsession.

Americans have a kind of fondness for the fifties. We think of

it as a jokey, cartoonish decade, full of too-bright colors, goofy space-age designs, outlandish people and events, extreme ideas. We collect streamlined appliances, big-finned cars, poodle skirts and Hula Hoops as artifacts from an exotic and slightly ridiculous era. We pore over *Life* magazines of the period, enthralled by the crisp black-and-white photos of couples in bomb shelters, the ads in which smiling, wholesome teenagers toss back Cokes, and families speed down country roads in gigantic Chryslers with Dad at the wheel. Behind our bemused fascination lies a yearning for a past as black-and-white as those old *Life* photographs. Under our nervous, condescending laughter at the old "Father Knows Best" episodes lies a longing for a time when women were women, men were men, and the rules were clear.

What some of us tend to forget—and what many of us are too young to remember—is that the engine that drove the rules was fear.

There was much to be afraid of in the postwar era, or so we thought. An American girl who was fifteen years old on VJ Day in 1946 had experienced two profoundly disturbing events. Her childhood had almost certainly been touched, if not severely disrupted, by the Depression. Her father might have lost his job, her mother gone back to work. Her family might have been split up and she and her siblings separated, farmed out to relatives.

World War II created new kinds of instability. Fathers, uncles, friends, and fiancés vanished, some never to come back. In spite of more jobs, higher wartime earnings, and an easing of certain kinds of hardships, a sense of deprivation and scarcity persisted. Rubber and gasoline shortages meant you couldn't travel far from home. Public transportation was congested, housing was scarce, schools were overcrowded. Meat, butter, sugar, and many other things were rationed. Blackouts, air raids, warning sirens in the night, first aid courses in how to bandage

the wounded, and, more than anything else, newsreels showing ruined cities, exploding buildings, endless lines of haunted-looking people trudging down muddy roads with their suitcases on their backs—these things created fear, uneasiness, a sense of vulnerability.

And though America had emerged from the war a major power, the world itself appeared more dangerous than ever. We had an enemy, Russia, who not only had an A-bomb, but powerful missiles aimed straight at us. The "Red tide" of Euro-Communism was headed our way as well, our leaders warned us, an evil force whose goal was nothing less than the destruction of "our American way of life." This fear of the enemy outside was easily manipulated by demagogues like Senator Joe McCarthy into a suspicion of subversion within, which rapidly spread into a queasy fear of difference itself.

This is an oral history of American women who came of age in the 1950s. It's about how these women, products of a great depression and a great war, made decisions—about school and work, marriage and motherhood.

"What decisions?" most women retorted when I called to ask if I could interview them. "Who made decisions? I just drifted." This is not, of course, strictly true. People are making choices even if they appear to be, even perceive themselves to be, drifting. But in the fifties as in no other decade, the current of the mainstream was so strong that you only had to step off the bank and float downstream into marriage and motherhood. "Before I knew it, I was married." "Before I knew it, I was pregnant." The phrase came up again and again in my conversations with women. The "it" we didn't know can be construed many ways: Before we knew who we were. Before we knew what we wanted. Before we knew what was happening to us. And before we knew what feminism was to teach us: that we had a right to control our own destinies.

For women, the postwar era represented a dramatic retreat

from the trends of previous decades. From the twenties through World War II, women had been steadily expanding their sphere by going to college and going to work in growing numbers. The war years brought huge numbers of women into the work force doing jobs that had been previously open only to men. It was a turbulent time when everyone's life seemed to change practically overnight. Thousands of people left home, migrating to urban areas. Not only were women making money, but many were living alone or with other women, many experiencing independence and self-sufficiency for the first time. The rigid sexual codes of previous times rapidly gave way to a more free-and-easy sexuality. Even the movies of the thirties and early forties glamorized the image of the plucky, resourceful career gal, epitomized by Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* (1940).

When the war was over, all these changes raised worrisome questions among government leaders and social scientists. What if women had come to enjoy their independence and didn't want to give up their jobs to returning veterans? What if women's sexuality couldn't be curbed? What if not enough of them were willing to return home and start creating the nuclear families that would in turn create the demand for goods that the nation's prosperity depended on?

The response of government, aided by the social scientists and the media, was a massive effort to channel all these disturbing energies into one safe harbor: the family. In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Elaine Tyler May explains that the home was the perfect vehicle for domestic containment: "Within its walls potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired. . . . More than merely a metaphor for the cold war on the homefront, containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home."

A young woman approaching adulthood after the war was surrounded by powerful inducements to early marriage. The whole country seemed full of young men eager to date, to marry, to get on with their lives. They were glamorous, these returning soldiers. They'd been through something; they'd seen the world; they were sexually experienced; they were practically irresistible.

Magazines and newsreels were full of beaming couples buying homes, appliances, and shiny new cars. By 1956 Americans were buying 20,000 television sets a day and two out of every three families owned at least one set. Night after night, situation comedies like "Father Knows Best" and "Ozzie and Harriet," television dramas and commercials, drove home their powerful messages about male and female identity, their blueprint for family life.

As women, we were constantly warned about dangers, many of them hidden. The advertising industry taught us about the germs, odors, and wetness, insidious and often invisible, that could sabotage our confidence and make us unlovable. We learned we needed to be "extra-careful" about "personal hygiene," and that vaginal odor was "a grave womanly offense." We knew bad breath could make the difference between "laughter and love and marriage almost before you know it" and "boredom and loneliness."

"Insecurity" and "self-doubt" were our buzzwords. We worried about not being clean enough, or womanly enough, about not finding husbands, about not being good enough mothers. We were afraid of "getting a reputation," of "being a cock-tease," and we were terrified of getting pregnant. We made our life decisions on the basis of safety and security. We chose solid, reliable mates and valued maturity above all other personal qualities.

Increasingly, marriage and family were expected to be a woman's whole world. Her intelligence, energy, creativity, and

sexuality all were funneled into the constricted sphere of family life. This narrowing of women's sphere was reinforced by the lack of desirable options outside of marriage. The professions, except for nursing and teaching, were virtually closed to women, and most of the jobs available to them were dead-end and poorly paid. Sexual experience was difficult to come by and risky unless you were married. Sexual activity could result in the loss of reputation—an essential commodity if marriage was to be your sole identity. More important, in the absence of legal abortion, an extramarital pregnancy could be—and almost always was—disastrous.

When I began working on this book, I saw fifties women as the hapless, passive victims of a culture that forced them into their biological slots. I had an image in my mind of the prevailing culture as a giant thumb pressing women back and down into the mold of wife and mother. But the real women I interviewed refused to fit neatly into my theories. They lurched, struggled, wavered, veered, regrouped, and floundered. They did things that made me angry and uncomfortable, like turning down interesting job offers, turning their backs on men they were attracted to, and marrying men who were boring but responsible, ignoring the encouragement of fathers and teachers. Many of them turned their backs on their own talents and desires, refused to take risks, retreated from situations that would have tested their mettle, chose smaller, safer, more comfortable spheres. I wanted these women, in Walt Whitman's words, to "give up toys and fictions and launch forth as men do amid real, independent stormy life."

As time went on and the stories accumulated, my understanding of the predicament of fifties women deepened. Women made their choices out of complex knots of motives that included their own emotional needs and family dynamics as well as cultural and social pressures. A woman's decision to set aside her own interests and devote herself to her husband's career, for

example, might come out of a subtle interplay between her conflicting desires and fears—for work, for a family, for security, the wish to accommodate others, a fear of testing herself, rebellion against a parent's ambition for her. And reinforcing all the above, the messages her culture gave her about her role as a woman.

My own story contains some of these contradictions. Born in 1936, I'm a little younger than most of the women I interviewed, more a fifties girl than a fifties woman. I spent most of the decade learning "how to be a woman" from *Seventeen* magazine. On the other hand, I had a mother who hoped I'd "do something," and I went to girls' schools, where I was encouraged to do well and there were no boys around to distract and compete with me.

At twenty-two, after three years at Northwestern University studying theater and Beginning Bohemianism, I came to New York to make my fortune as an actress. I worked hard at it, and a year later I had a highly successful season in summer stock under my belt, as well as a coveted Actors' Equity card, and a letter of introduction from a famous actor to a very big agent. On the eve of my first audition for my first Broadway play, I got pregnant. (Did I forget to mention that I'd fallen in love with a fellow actor during my summer in stock?)

Crisis. Should I get an abortion? (My mother would have engineered it somehow.) Should we get married? (We would have married eventually anyway . . . wouldn't we?)

We decided to get married. I felt relieved. Off the hook. I wasn't sure I wanted the life of a professional actress, I reminded myself. As much as I loved acting, there was an element of self-exposure about it that repelled me. Then there was this baby inside me that I seemed to want more than I could have imagined. I felt my existence to be vindicated with this baby, although I wasn't sure why. I gave up acting and became a full-time mother. My husband didn't ask me to give up acting;

he didn't have to. There was a tacit agreement between us that *he* would have the career.

When I revisited this decision years later, viewing it through the lens of newly acquired (and insufficiently digested) feminism, I saw it as an outright retreat. I blamed myself for what I saw as my failure of nerve, the culture for brainwashing me into thinking I was no good unless I was a mother, and my ex-husband for depriving me of my career.

Writing this book has forced me to look at that moment again, this time with more respect for its complexities (and for myself). The decision, I see now, came out of a desire, submerged but powerful, for connection, for family. I believed that if I succeeded as an actress, I risked losing the man: the pregnancy would necessarily call a halt to a career that threatened him. I couldn't, in 1959, imagine having both accomplishment in the world *and* love.

Many of the women I talked with felt this way. What constrained them was not always the blatant sexism of barred doors and low expectations. It was their own profound belief, internalized from a lifetime of messages, that achievement and autonomy were simply incompatible with love and family. The equation was inescapable: independence equalled loneliness.

Most of the ninety-two women I interviewed for this book are now between fifty-eight and sixty-eight years old. I focused on women in this age range because they would have been in their late teens to midtwenties during the fifties—a time of intense and critical decision-making about college, marriage, children, and work. I tried to get women to home in on those moments of decision, to remember what they were thinking, feeling, what their friends were doing, what messages they were getting from their parents and teachers.

The book moves more or less chronologically through the phases of a woman's life. The first six chapters are about the progression from college to marriage to motherhood. They also

include the wild cards that could interrupt that orderly progression: sex and pregnancy.

Chapters 7 through 10 are about women who deviated from the norm in one way or another, either by entering male-dominated professions, or loving their own sex, or going against the political grain of the time.

These rebellious spirits didn't come out of nowhere. Under the glassy surface of the fifties, sea changes in women's behavior and attitudes were taking place, changes that had been under way since the 1920s. The fifties only slowed them down for a while. The liberalization of ideas about women's sexuality continued despite efforts to contain that sexuality within the institution of marriage. The baby boom turned out to be only a blip in the century-long decline in the birthrate. And despite the domestic revival, the numbers of women entering the work force climbed steadily during the decade, although the patterns were different from those of the war years. By 1960, twice as many women were working as had been in 1940, and the proportion of working wives doubled during the same period. In fact, the increase in employment was greatest among older, middle-class wives whose children were in school. However, the jobs they got were in low-paying, sex-segregated fields. Rosie the Riveter didn't necessarily leave the work force; she just moved—or was moved—over into clerical and sales jobs, or the "helping professions" of teaching, nursing, or social work. While the growing numbers of women working outside the home did not alter the balance of power within the family, or directly challenge assumptions about women's roles, it meant that the realities of women's lives were being transformed.

The civil rights movement was also gathering steam during the fifties. The 1954 *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka* decision striking down "separate but equal" education was followed by the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, spearheaded by two middle-class black women, Rosa Parks and Jo Ann

Robinson. The civil rights movement, so unassailably *right*, with its roots in the black churches of the South, made working for social justice respectable again. It served to dissolve the Cold War consensus that equated advocating social change with subversion, opening the way for the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies.

Other crosscurrents were roiling under the becalmed waters of the fifties. In spite of the harsh repression of homosexuals, gays and lesbians who had tasted a degree of freedom during the war, created their first organizations, the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis. Beat writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were challenging the status quo, and if their critique didn't extend to the status of women, their rebellion eventually helped shake loose the heterosexual hegemony of the fifties. Rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues were rumbling like an earthquake beneath a pop music scene dominated by the blandness and inanity of Mitch Miller and Patti Page.

Many of the women I interviewed for this book had a hard time sticking to the subject of the fifties. They kept hurtling forward to the sixties and seventies because that's when they changed their lives. Nearly everyone I talked to had made substantial changes in the two decades after the fifties, though not every woman viewed these changes as rebellions. Some who finished college and went to work simply saw it as a new stage in their lives. Others deliberately kicked over the traces: they divorced their husbands, remarried, or came out as lesbians and created radically different lives with women lovers. Some took up interests or explored talents they'd left behind when they married or, finding it was too late to regain lost ground, turned in new directions.

Women sometimes resisted my efforts to pull them back to the fifties. They seemed to feel almost ashamed that they'd been so docile, so quick to submerge their identities into their husbands'. They needed to be reminded that they were hardly

alone; that millions of American women were doing just what they were doing.

Their stories demonstrate the complex range of strategies that women of the fifties employed to accommodate themselves to their narrow spheres. Many emerged as triumphant survivors. But their survival should not distract us from a hard-eyed look at the costs of a decade that asked women to use only a fraction of themselves, to be satisfied to live through their husbands and children, and to forego the pleasure and power of free sexual expression.