

# Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center

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From the Selected Works of Louise Harmon

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## The Legacy

Louise Harmon, *Touro Law Center*



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# THE LEGACY

LOUISE HARMON\*

The pressure's always been on me. I've inherited a family legacy that's got some debt attached. My father never finished college. In his junior year, my mother got pregnant, and he had to go to work in his brother's camera shop. He never expressed any disappointment about the way things turned out, but my mother did. She was always making little digs at my father about selling cameras, and working for his brother, how she thought that when she'd fallen in love with a college man, there'd be more in store than a store. He never said much when she went off like that. Maybe he thought her disappointment was justified. I don't know. Their marriage was always a mystery to me. I've scrutinized the fading color photographs of them as a newlywed couple, my father solemn, so upright and contained, and my smiling mother totally alien to me, so young and supple, leaning into my father like a willow tree. Who were these two people and how did they find each other? And what glue, besides that of children and convention, kept them together? The whole relationship had to be inferred, proven up by circumstantial evidence, and the state never made its case, as far as I was concerned.

I always figured that my mother grew weary of her disappointment in my father, and when I was born, shifted the burden to me. My mother bears the same relationship to disappointment that yeast bears to sugar. She thrives on it. Something or someone has to cause her grief--and I was the likely candidate. Victoria, my sister, wouldn't do. In fact, Victoria has always resented that my mother had such low expectations of her. She would go to college for sure, but to earn her Mrs. Degree. Of her only son, however, it was made clear from the very beginning that I was to excel in school, to become a doctor or a lawyer, not to waste my talents in a camera store.

For the first sixteen years of my life, she had nothing to complain about. I was a total nerd, unathletic, a hard working grade grubber of the first degree. Then in high school, I discovered music, drugs, and sex, in that order--and the joys of disappointing my mother became manifest to me. It was a miracle that I got into college, and even more of a miracle that I finished, almost in the top third of my class, thanks to my stellar last three semesters. Of course my mother attributed my academic comeback to my finally having made an alliance with a Jewish woman who knew how to steer her man in the right direction. And there's truth

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in that. Certainly I never would have ended up in law school were it not for Leslie Cohen. She's a woman who knew how to steer, and for the last few years, I'd been her designated steereee.

My father had passed away by the time I met Leslie, so I have no clue whether he would have approved of her or not. He died in my senior year of high school, before I had any significant dealings with the opposite sex, so he never had the chance to pass judgment on any of the girls I hung out with at the time. It's true, he never joined in when my mother complained vocally that none of the girls I knew was Jewish, but then again, he was fairly sick at the time. I don't really know what my father thought about being a Jew. Those are things sons ask of their fathers much later in life, and our question and answer period was cut short by cancer. I did have a bar mitzvah, a modest one, thank God, and the only thing I remember my father saying about the ritual was that I would survive it. My mother would have liked a much splashier affair, of that I'm certain, something more like what my cousin Leonard had, with a band and a caterer and all of that obnoxious paraphernalia embossed with Leonard on it. Actually, most of my life my mother has aspired for me to have something more like what my cousin Leonard had, be it a bar mitzvah, a leather jacket, a designer haircut, a ten speed bicycle, a high grade point average, and later in life, a girlfriend you could introduce to the family with impunity. My cousin Leonard is a nice enough guy. I've never held it against him that he was my mother's benchmark. He's in dental school now, and doing very well, or so my aunt says, although my mother always discounts anything my aunt says. My mother holds a grudge against her, probably because she's married to my uncle. My mother always thought my uncle's share of the pie in the camera business was more generous than it ought to be, and there's probably some truth to that. My uncle and his family lived better than we did. They still do. Still, my father was a good provider. He did the best he could, and made extra money on the side with his photography.

His biggest season was in the fall, taking pictures of families gathered in front of the fireplace—*Holiday Greetings from Our House to Yours*. He would line them up, the mother perched in an armchair covered in floral chintz, the father standing behind with his hand on her shoulder, the children in descending order, a row of unstacked Russian dolls, color-coordinated, all pink-cheeked, and full of teeth. Sometimes the family dog was included which always caused my fastidious father great consternation. We never had any pets in our family, and he wasn't comfortable around dogs. They were unpredictable and yappy, and almost never interested in sitting still.

When I was a boy, I used to go with him on the weekends during Christmas card season. In the car, he would predict how the shoot would go. The Robinson's were never ready, and one of their teenage daughters would invariably throw a fit and announce that she would not be in the family picture. Her identity changed from year to year, but one of the Tracys or Stacys would always stage a rebellion, usually on the pretense of unfitness for memorialization, and my father and I would wait patiently in the kitchen, he drinking black coffee and me a Coke, rolling our eyes at each other, waiting for Mrs. Robinson to cajole the miserable mutineer, and eventually, for Mr. Robinson to lower the boom with a threat of telephone deprivation. I remember another family, the Cox's, now there's a tightly run ship, my father would say. Anne Cox was so organized that she put the Christmas decorations away in early January in a certain order, in anticipation of posing next October for the Christmas card. The last box packed in the attic had all the essential accouterments of holiday cheer: the red candles for the mantle, and the stockings to hang by the chimney with care, just enough props to muster through a Halloween sitting, without having to drag down all the boxes of holiday decorations prematurely. My father used to say that it was a good thing we were Jewish and stationary. My mother could never have competed with an old line military WASP like Anne Cox who had years of training in packing and labeling cardboard boxes and in strategically storing them in anticipation of a future that she had every assurance would come. There was never any doubt in the Cox house about the future. The garden always came out splendidly, and Christmas always came.

My father also toted a second camera on the portrait shootings, this one loaded with a high-speed black and white film. The commission was always for a glossy color photograph, evidence of health, prosperity, and tribal unity, but my father would ask for permission to take a few black and white portraits as well, at no extra cost. Permission was always granted, but no one ever asked to see them. He always referred to his black and white photography as "fooling around," but I knew that those pictures captured his imagination in a way that the Christmas card portraits did not. In college, he had taken a course in black and white photography, and now years later, he somehow could not let go. It was as if the black and white photography represented his youth to him, when he still had integrity and did not have to drive around in a used Ford station wagon with *faux* wood paneling, taking pictures for Christmas cards, prostituting his art to put food on the table. Truth to tell, his early work from college was not all that good. I had seen some of the prints, and most of them were abstract, still lifes of vegetables and fruits, derivative of Steichen. But his black and white portraits of

various members of suburban families—now those were interesting. He used to develop them in his darkroom in the basement, and I would often go down with him and sit in a pool of red light on a stool in the corner and watch the mystery of an image emerging in a pan of developer.

My father had an uncanny ability, at least when he worked in the medium of black and white, to capture psychological truth. The face of Anne Cox in color, seated before the fireplace, at the elbow of Mr. Cox, was confident, ruddy; she looked like Mrs. Santa Claus. But Anne Cox in black and white—there was a different woman altogether, a woman who might be able to pack up and label cardboard boxes with the best of them, but who might also know that there was more to life—and that she had missed it. Without the distraction of color, and without Mr. Cox's hamlike hands on her shoulder, there was a melancholy girl child beneath her façade, with an aura of disappointment about a dream that only she knew about. A dream packed away, and not labeled, in her heart. I remember too the black and white photograph of Tracy Robinson who in color looked just like what she was: a spoiled fifteen year old with braces and acne. But in black and white, a startling beauty emerged, and a disturbing sensuality. When I first saw the outline of that other Tracy take shape in the developing pan, I felt a pang of envy. She was giving that look right into the camera, the camera that was held by my father. She had given him a look that I knew instinctively she would never give to the likes of me.

Women had a real weakness for my father, a trait that none of the other men in the family ever possessed. We are all of us, me, my uncle, my cousins, good-looking enough, but nearsighted, thin and wiry, with a propensity to lose our hair. Actually I can't say I've had trouble attracting women, once they get to know me, but I do know that I don't have my father's charisma. I've studied photographs of him as a young man, looking for some physical attribute to point my finger at and say, ah, that's why women loved him, but there's nothing there to take a picture of. It must have had something to do with his attitude towards them, something I am just now beginning to appreciate. My father judged no one. He accepted everyone, man, woman, and child, just the way they were. That attribute may not mean much to other men. The culture more or less grants us the privilege to be just the way we are, and if you don't like it, tough. But for a woman to be accepted just the way she is—now there's a rare treat. Being with Leslie taught me that: women have to spend a lot of time being someone they aren't. And children, they've got it toughest of all. They are somebody already, except grown-ups don't recognize that, and devote themselves into turning you into the person they want you to be.

My father never did that to me. Through all those years of listening to my mother, harping on me to become my cousin Leonard, particularly during high school when I took the path less traveled—future dentists never take the path less traveled—my father never once criticized me. He always told me he was proud of me no matter what I did, and that he knew I would do a good job at anything I set my mind to. Those words were very soothing to me during the defection from goodboydom in my junior year of high school. I dyed my hair orange, pierced my left ear, stayed out until all hours of the morning, sometimes making out in the back seat of my mother's car with Katy Byrne, and flunked organic chemistry. There really was a sort of thrill in misbehaving, and in not doing well in school. It drove my mother crazy, for example, and got me out of all sorts of family events until the following year when my normal hair color had grown back in. But at the same time, I had a sense of shame about the declining grades, particularly because my father was sick, and I knew that my mother's apoplectic fits over my report card wreaked havoc in an already stressed-out roost. I still remember the night she got the call from Mr. Reiner, my organic teacher, about my failing grade, how much she cried and carried on and accused me of the worst sin of all in our home: Not Living Up to My Full Potential. I hid out in the den with my father who was spending most of his time those days on the green naugahyde reclining chair in front of the TV, too weak to be up and about, but not sick enough to crawl into bed. My mother was weeping in the kitchen, and we sat together in the dark and the silence and watched an old Star Trek rerun, one of our favorites, *The Trouble with Tribbles*, and in the middle of the scene at the end where you learn that the monster Tribble was just a mother protecting her young, he reached over and squeezed my hand, and said, Don't worry, David, it'll be all right.

It was years before the prophecy came true, and long after his death. I followed the black sheep path intently for the next four years, although I never had the courage to stray off into the wilderness altogether, probably because of a pathological fear that I had of hard work. During the summers, I usually had jobs that required me to get up in the morning and sweat all day doing something I hated for someone I hated, and I figured that staying in school ensured that would not become a permanent regime. I developed the fine art form of doing just precisely enough work in college to maintain a C+ average which wasn't all that much since I had only been able to get into the state university. Leonard had gone off to Brandeis.

I had a lot more fun in college than Leonard did though, of that I am certain. We used to see each other in the fall for the holidays, and compare notes, and as far as I could tell, all Leonard did was study and

go out on the weekends on staid, middle-aged mainstream movie dates with a woman named Amy. I like to go to movies too, but prefer the esoteric, foreign films with subtitles, particularly French ones about tortured lives. I love Godard. Leonard doesn't like subtitles. He says they distract him, but I also suspect that he can't read them fast enough. Leonard generally doesn't read, but I find that's true of all dental students. It is probably a good thing. Reading makes you think, and daydream, and I don't really want the guy who's applying an electric drill to my teeth to be burdened with an overabundance of imagination. Better he should stick to Arnold Schwarzenegger and meditate on my mouth, thank you very much.

I also went through a lot more women in college than Leonard did, none of them Jewish until Leslie. In my freshman year, I bunked down in the dorm with Patricia Duffy. She was pretty and sweet, and we did a lot of drugs together and engaged in pedestrian, albeit steady sex. (It was my first real girl friend, and I didn't know the sex was pedestrian at the time, so dazzled was I by the steadiness.) My sophomore year, I vacillated between Patricia and a tow-headed blonde of Polish extraction named Marilyn Dubowski. Marilyn was a lot more interesting than Patricia. (It wasn't hard.) She was a vegetarian, and didn't believe in taking drugs, so there was a gap in understanding there between us. She also found my lifestyle dissolute, and Marilyn had a sharpness of tongue that often grated on me, mostly because she was usually lecturing me with the Polish equivalent of Not Living Up to My Full Potential. She told me that we could never be a couple because we "didn't share values," and I was both relieved and annoyed by that stance. But I learned a lot from Marilyn. She was really smart, a comp lit major, and loved movies and travel, and the sex was adventurous, made spicier by the guilt I felt towards Patricia. Patricia eventually got sick of my cheating ways, and dumped me, much to my mother's great relief. I had taken Patricia home during spring break my freshman year, and I thought my mother would keel over when she first saw Patricia's rosy, round face sprinkled with freckles and heard Patricia say Gosh for the first time. I watched my mother's furrowed brow as she projected into the future, wondering if her grandchildren would also have freckles and rosy, round faces, and say Gosh. It was not a worry without substance. I don't know where Patricia is now, but it wouldn't surprise me to learn that she's already given birth to such a child, and is living in a house with a redwood deck that you get to through a pair of sliding glass doors, and Gosh, you just have to undo this latch, we keep it there for the baby.

Marilyn talked me into going on a semester abroad program in Strasbourg in my junior year, and it was during that trip that I sunk to

my lowest depths of depravity. Perhaps it was because I was finally liberated from Patricia, perhaps because the Atlantic Ocean was between me and my mother, perhaps because I was speaking French all the time which made life seem unreal and inconsequential, but I hardly went to school at all, and instead traveled around Europe, but mostly to Amsterdam, in search of drugs and music and women who didn't want to know my last name. I found them all, including ecstasy, a glorious drug that I wish even today I could ingest each and every waking moment. It made my skin feel so alive, and everything in life seemed so much more intense and crisp and bright and shining than it really was. But it also does other things to your body over time, and on occasion, I was worried my heart was going to burst right out of my chest. Plus, I got run down from the constant partying and succumbed to a bout of mono—and a terrible dose of crabs. When I got back to Strasbourg, I had to go to the *Pharmacie* with my phrase book, and buy the parasitocidal shampoo, and I scoured myself obsessively, and picked away at the nits, and felt such deep shame at having lice from indiscriminate fucking in Amsterdam, when I knew my grandfather had suffered terribly from lice in a labor camp for indiscriminately being a Jew. The mono flattened me, and put me to bed, but the crabs sobered me, and made me think about the path less traveled, and whether I liked where it was going. I was ripe for Leslie Cohen.

Leslie was on the Strasbourg program too, from another university, and Professor Shapiro, the program's director, assigned her the task of getting me up to speed on all the academic material that I had missed during my forays to hell in Holland. She had consented to help me out, so she said, because there was no better way to study for an exam than to teach the material to someone else. I suspected that she had volunteered for the job because she was interested in me, and that had me worried. I wasn't really attracted to her at first, even though I knew most of the guys on the program thought she was hot. Actually, I recognized her beauty—it was there. She had a great body, and silky, white skin you could almost see through, and long, black hair that was usually pulled up in a reckless ponytail, giving her an air of studied, casual elegance. So I wasn't oblivious to her charms, but I had known the type before: dark, Jewish, intense, borderline anorexic over-achievers who waxed most of their body hair and had gotten a discrete nose job between their sophomore and junior years of high school. The first thing I thought of when Leslie came into my dorm room, as I looked up at her from behind the edge of a starched sheet, was: uh oh, this is a woman my mother would approve of. But the mono had flattened me, and I didn't have the energy to resist, and besides, I recognized that unless some miracle happened, I was going to flunk the entire semester



abroad. So I relented, recognizing that Leslie was the only miracle in town.

I was dubious about Leslie's ability to help me pull the rabbit out of the hat, but she turned out to be a closet worker bee. Before we started working together, I thought her demeanor was always light and breezy, and borderline seductive. On the day of a midterm earlier in the semester, I'd seen Leslie come into the classroom in sweats, and collapse in her chair in an exaggerated gesture of feigned exhaustion, as if she were reeling from an all nighter, and say in a breathy voice, I'm really not ready for this exam. I'd been surrounded by women like that all through college, and I used to foolishly chime in, me neither. Except in my case it was true, and in theirs it was not. It was all a ruse, to create a façade of nonchalance, perhaps to lure others into a false sense of security so they wouldn't study, hence giving the poseur an edge. But I also think there was a desire on their part, at least on Leslie's part, to mask the fact that she was acutely competitive, on the theory that it turns guys off. The fact is, Leslie is like a pit bull when it comes to school—she's the consummate student. She never misses a class, she studies every night, she retypes her notes on her laptop, she underlines her books with yellow magic markers, she outlines everything, she puts stickums in the books at important places in the text, she puts phrases that need to be memorized on flash cards. I had never seen such an operation before. It was really an eye-opening experience for me, watching Leslie in preparation mode. I felt as if I had been in the wedding cake business all these years, trying to put the layers together with tooth picks and extra white icing, when what was needed was a hidden set of plastic platforms, wire scaffolding and a degree in engineering. Is this what my cousin Leonard had been doing all those nights as he earned his 3.3 at Brandeis, I wondered? How did people learn how to do this? Was there some kind of school for going to school that I had missed? Another hidden cost of drug addiction?

That spring, Leslie systematically prepared me for exams in French Culture, Advanced French, and Twentieth Century European World History. She got out a calendar and marked the exam dates, and the number of days we had to prepare, and then she made me a schedule. In the morning, I would read the history and books about French Culture, at least the pages that she had marked off, then I would take a nap. When I woke up, we drilled French vocabulary and grammar, and then I would take another nap. Then in the evening, she would come back to my room, and we would outline answers to essay questions. When she first told me that we were going to do that, I was dumbfounded. How did Leslie know what questions to prepare for? That's easy, she quipped, you go to class. Go to class? This was a new concept

for me. Now, it's not that I never went to class in college, but my attendance record was sporadic, to say the least, and when I did manage to get there, I never took notes. If you go to class, Leslie explained in the no-nonsense voice that she had come to use with me, you not only have the material explained to you, but you can psych out the professor and figure out what they think is important, and then get ready for that. The syllabus is useful too. Syllabus? I usually tossed them as soon as they were passed out, and would always have to borrow one at the last minute, the night before the exam, when I tried to cram into my head just enough material to get my required C. Take Shapiro, for example, Leslie looked at her notes and his syllabus, and did an analysis of how much time he'd spent on the causes of World War II, and decided that he was going to ask a question "down that alley." And so the two of us prepared the answer to the hypothetical question that Leslie made up, and lo and behold, when I took the exam five weeks later, there was that alley, just waiting for me to roll my ball into.

Not only had Leslie gotten me ready for the causes of the war essay, one, two, three, but I added a fourth of my own, drawing upon a documentary film course I had taken in my sophomore year in which I had seen Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. Hitler had captured the imagination of the German people because he understood the media and the power of symbols, I argued, and he was charismatic and looked great in black and white. (Marilyn Dubowski sat next to me in class and actually admitted to me that she found the back of Hitler's neck very sexy, the way it bulged out ever so slightly over his starched military collar; it was smooth, she said, and very strokable.) Shapiro scrawled at the end of my exam, for which I received my first A in college, This was a well written, thoughtful essay that showed imagination and a real flair for history. Leslie got an A too, but there were no comments on her essay. I got an A- in French culture, having written another canned essay about the French and their attitudes toward food, and a B+ in French. Leslie got all As because that is what she set out to do. I was grateful that she had accumulated a better grade point average that semester than I, because I could tell it pissed her off that Shapiro had written me a sentence of praise that she had not garnered. After all, I could hear her saying to herself in her head, she was the one who had taught me the material, and pulled me through the course, and just months ago, I had been a pathetic mono victim (with crabs, although she didn't know that) who had wasted his semester doing drugs in Amsterdam.

We didn't have sex at all when we were in France. Leslie had set some pretty firm ground rules for our tutor/tutoree relationship. She almost immediately dropped the breathless, seductive manner, and after

one of our early sessions, said outright, I hope you understand that this is going to be a totally platonic relationship—all business, no pleasure. Of course, I answered from my sickbed, too tired to even contemplate sex, it goes without saying. But wouldn't you know, acceding to that blanket prohibition from under the blankets brought out the bad boy in me, and I found myself staring at her mouth, and her restless pony tail, and her breasts under her t-shirts which were surprisingly full for a borderline anorexic, and wondering what it would be like to have this worker bee in bed with me.

I had a theory about Leslie Cohen. Even though she had a seductive demeanor with guys, at least guys she didn't know, or guys she wasn't tutoring, I suspected she was rather naïve sexually. She had one serious boyfriend before me, another guy also named David, and she confessed to me one night when we were talking about relationships that she and David had "gone all the way." The way she said it, it sounded as if it had taken place only because it seemed like a logical conclusion to a set of premises: first we are dating, second we are holding hands, third we are kissing, etc, etc, etc, grinding their way to the therefore, and over time, she and David felt compelled to finish the thing because both of them are high achievers, and that is what high achievers do: finish the thing. Come to think of it, it's amazing to me they didn't finish the thing altogether, eight, we are getting married, nine we are having two children, ten we are buying a house—no, make that nine we are buying a house, ten we are having two children. But at the end of their sophomore year, David dumped her for a girl in her sorority who was much dumber and sexier, so Leslie said, if you like that sort of *zaftig*, dyed blonde look on a woman who will surely battle weight after the first baby. Leslie said that she always suspected that David didn't like the fact she was smarter than he was, and got better grades. My suspicion is that her suspicion is right. David wasn't all that smart, but David was no fool.

I was no fool either, but I had an advantage over David. While I did not get better grades, at least not at the outset of our relationship, I was—and continue to be—smarter than Leslie Cohen. She knows it, and I know it, and this simple fact helped to maintain a delicate balance of power in our relationship. Here is how the shifting of weight went on between us, on almost a daily basis, never articulated, but always communicated somehow on a subliminal basis: She said, I've been to all the classes, I typed all the notes, I've outlined the chapter, I know what the teacher is going to ask, and have prepared an answer, and I've got the 3.86 grade point average, to which I responded: I understand more than you do without going to classes, I don't need the notes, I breezed through the chapter once and have critiqued it in the margins, I don't

have the 3.86, but the professor is going to write something at the end of my paper about my imagination and real flair for history.

When I read this confession over, I find myself critiquing the story line and asking: who is ever going to believe this guy could ever have thought he'd fallen in love with the likes of Leslie Cohen? She represented everything he had been rebelling against: his Jewishness, his mother, the pressure to achieve, a slavish pursuit of the dominant culture's standards and rewards—and add to that, she'd had a nose job and belonged to a sorority? I don't know how to answer that question, except to say that this isn't a piece of fiction. It's my life which gives me license to lead it in as quirky, inconsistent fashion as I please, and you'll just have to take my word for it, there was a time in my life, in the not too distant past, that I thought I was in love with Leslie Cohen. If I were to be honest, and it is my inclination to be, there were two reasons for my infatuation. First, the sex was great, and second, it was my season for salvation.

Our relationship become physical over the summer, after the program, when we had both returned to our respective homes which, it turned out, were not that far apart, despite our attendance at different universities. I was working that summer for my uncle in the camera store, trying to recover from mono and avoid my mother, and Leslie had gone home to save money and prepare for the LSAT. We started making out one day in my room at home on my lunch hour, and on Leslie's break from the LSAT prep course, and the rest is history. We made love almost every day, four times a week, Monday through Thursday. My mother had taken a part-time job as a receptionist for a doctor's office, which cleared the way during the day, except for Friday when we couldn't count on her being out of the house. My assumptions about Leslie's sexual naivete were all on point, except that I had underestimated her willingness to try to please me. I had my own genre of naivete, and it did not dawn on me for some time that Leslie had decided I might be a worthy fish to fry. She had a sort of kittenish, coy quality when it came to sex that always took me off guard, since our usual stance was one that involved a lot of sparring and one-upmanship. But in the bedroom, and on our way there, Leslie would shift gears and become my love slave (her words, not mine), and I was mesmerized for awhile. She also had a beautiful body, one developed and maintained I was to learn that summer in an expensive health club where she daily climbed stairs, and did arm curls, and leg lifts, with the same dogged determination that she prepared for the LSAT. Any goal Leslie decided to pursue, she threw her whole heart and soul into it, including the improvement and acquisition of me.

The improvement of me consisted of steering me into a profession that she thought worthy of a husband, and law school seemed the only real viable option. (I hadn't taken the right courses for medical or dental school, and law school didn't require any kind of special major. From my point of view, the plan had the virtue of giving me three more years of relative economic dependence. Not only would it keep me out of the dreaded workplace, but it would give my existence some legitimacy.) Leslie could—and did—help me prepare for the LSAT, plan my last year of college to boost my GPA, micro-manage the studying over the telephone, and assist me in the law school application process, developing the theory I was to use in my personal statements to explain my dramatic “upward trend” in grades—that I was upset by my father's death, and could not take my studies seriously. I felt a little bit guilty about exploiting my father in that way, but it beat telling the truth, that the dramatic “upward trend” was directly attributable to my “upward trend” for Leslie Cohen, pardon my phallic centrality. Once I got the hang of it, and employed all of Leslie's methods for consuming and analyzing the material, and relegating it into the requisite color coded boxes, and then made my own contribution, the good grades just flowed my way. The first semester of my senior year, I studied about four hours a day, and racked up a 3.7, and in my final semester, I took all history courses and actually achieved a 4.0, again with moderate but sustained effort, and a genuine passion for the nineteenth century.

We took the LSAT together. It was a retake for Leslie, and she devoted most of the summer and a lot of money to prepare for it. I spent two nights going over the sample questions. As far as I could tell, the LSAT was just a series of word and logic games, not any kind of test of real knowledge. Standardized tests have always come easy to me, and I knew I could ace it without much effort, and I did. Leslie, on the other hand, did quite respectably, but her score was much lower than mine, and not commensurate with her elevated GPA, which was, of course, the consequence of her being such a worker bee. Leslie was fairly crushed when we got our scores. She perceived the results to be unfair since there was such disparity in our preparation, but I didn't think they were unfair. I scored better on the LSAT because I performed better at the word and logic games than Leslie Cohen. And the fact is, like I said before, I am smarter than Leslie Cohen, so that I should get a high score on a fairly moronic standardized test was no surprise to me.

Leslie never forgave me for doing better on the LSAT. Things were never the same between us after that. For one thing, it put us almost on equal footing *vis-a-vis* law school admissions. The playing field was leveled. I had a much weaker GPA, but an outstanding LSAT. Leslie had a much weaker LSAT, but an outstanding GPA. Different schools put

emphasis on one over the other, but most had a formula that combined the two into some kind of secret numerical ranking. And for those schools with members of admissions committees who actually read the personal statements, I had the advantage of rising like a phoenix out of the ashes, the brilliant bad boy driven to drugs, decimated by the death of his father. There was some drama to my application that must have been lacking in Leslie's steady, plodding semester upon semester of straight A's, and her summer jobs at the *Gap*. After sitting on a waiting list all summer, she ended up getting into a much more prestigious law school than I did, but I did well enough for myself, and achieved something she did not: a substantial scholarship that with excellent first year grades, turned into a free ride.

I was startled by how much I enjoyed the study of law. I tried having conversations with Leslie about it, whether she was appalled by the drowning baby rule in the no duty to rescue doctrine, or how it struck her that we were studying the same body of property law as Sir Edward Coke and Thomas Jefferson. But I found that Leslie could talk about the phenomenon of law school, going to class, her study group, doing her outlines, this professor or that, but she couldn't talk about its substance. It reminded me of that spring in Strasbourg, when I had been amazed that for all of Leslie's preparation, her outlines, her one, two, threes, she didn't really have much interest in or insight into French culture or history. She never entered into the material. She never thought about the material. She never questioned the material. She never let the material change her. She never let it bother her, or sneak up on her at night, in the smoke of a cigarette, or in her dreams. Me, on the other hand, I had the advantage of many years of serious drug use, and I knew how to let something get a hold of me. Once Leslie showed me how to focus on what the professor had to say, I usually found something about the material worthy of consideration.

It was as if Leslie knew how to take a superbly competent color glossy Christmas card photograph, but I knew how to work in another medium altogether—black and white—and it was in “fooling around” like my father with those photographs, spending some time in the darkroom, contemplating the gradations of black to white, wondering about the source of light, and how the picture was structured because I could see lines and patterns that were not perceptible to those who worked in color—that was where I got my ideas. You had to give in to the subject matter when you worked in black and white, let it take you over in order that you might come to understand it from the inside out. That was the only way to make it yours, and to transform it. Learn to live in the gray between the dark and light. But with a color photograph, you can make the record and yet stay totally outside the subject matter, never let it

touch your skin, let alone get under it. I would try to explain this to Leslie, and she didn't have a clue what I was talking about. It wasn't her fault: she just wasn't made that way. But if I let myself think about it, and sometimes I did, it made me sad. Was I destined, like my father, to love a woman who did not understand me? Would the two of us be frozen in a photograph that our children would shake their heads over, and wonder at the improbability of our conjunction?

Leslie and I stayed together through the first two years of law school, but our relationship became more and more competitive. During the first year at least, she retained her kittenish quality sexually, but even that disappeared by the time we were in the second year and actively engaged in the war of the GPAs. I was ranked number two in my law school class after the first year, and Leslie had barely made the top ten per cent at her law school. I was willing to grant that competition was stiffer at her more elite institution, but not enough to account for the several decimal points in GPA that separated us. The fact was, I had turned into more of a dogged worker bee than Leslie Cohen. As soon as I got to law school, I quickly perceived what it took to do well: prepare for class, go to class, be focused, be organized, memorize a lot, and then think about the material. I never missed a class, upped the study hours to about six a day, and more when finals season came. I graded onto the Law Review, and eventually became an articles editor. I fell head over heels in love with intellectual property in my second year, and did a summer internship with an LA firm that does copyright. I published an article on the copyright issues implicated in those strategies employed by visual artists who appropriate images from film and photographs for use in their works of art. I've got an offer from the firm in LA and will be representing visual artists and writers. I'm up to my ears in the swamp known as the fair use doctrine, and I may be the only human being alive who actually loves squishing his toes in the mud and co-existing with the frogs and the dragon flies. Then thanks to some good tips from Karen who works in the registrar's office about how to finish off law school with a four point, I loaded up on seminars and paper courses in my last semester, and ended up beating out Michael Winthrop, the editor of the law review, for valedictorian. Overall it was a rather obscene display of over achieving. I don't want to ever do it again, but there was some satisfaction in knowing that I could do it. Finally, I had done something better than my cousin Leonard. And something better than Leslie Cohen.

You would think all this academic success would have made my mother happy. Now she can say: My son, who graduated first in his law school class, did X. X doesn't matter. X could be "found a great job in an LA firm" or "committed a mass murder" or anything in between. The

verb and the direct object will be lost in the wake of the eight words "who graduated first in his law school class." Those eight words will forever modify her son, should he become the subject of her sentence. But even so, she still has an air of disappointment. Again, it's not her fault. It's just her nature. She wouldn't know how to be in the world if she wasn't aggrieved about something, and as usual, I'm the most likely candidate.

My mother was heartsick when Leslie and I broke up last summer, and she has not yet forgiven me. I was in L.A., and Leslie was a summer associate on the opposite coast for a firm that did commercial litigation. Leslie and my mother had gotten really tight, forming their own alliance that I suspect was turning into a conspiracy. On breaks from law school, when Leslie was hanging around my house a lot, the two of them would take off to get their nails done, or to shop, or to see a movie that had Julia Roberts in it that I wouldn't be caught dead watching. (Just about the same time she ceased to be my love slave in bed, Leslie had given up going to foreign movies with me, siding with my cousin Leonard on the subtitles issue. I had taken to going to movies on my own, and relished sitting alone in the dark in those weird little art film theaters, drinking ginger tea and eating popcorn salted with grit from the sea.) That long, hot summer in California, I got nightly calls from the two of them about this outing or that, to the mall, to the movies, out to eat, renting a video from Blockbuster and making microwave popcorn, when suddenly it dawned on me: Leslie Cohen was dating my mother. I recognized her strategy: to ingratiate herself with the family matriarch as a way to solidify her position in the family. And on all those occasions of female bonding, I knew what they were doing: Planning the wedding. Surely there was going to be a wedding, wasn't there? So I lay there at night in my room in LA, and stared at the stucco ceiling, conjuring up not one, but two faces, looking at me expectantly, waiting for the words of contract to issue. Eventually, in my mind, those two faces merged into one, and I saw myself yoked forever to my Full Potential. Before I left L.A., I repierced the hole in my left ear.



