

We started out so young and strong only to surrender.  
Say a prayer for the pretender.

-Jackson Browne

## **Chapter 1: You May Now Be Seated**

I never leave the house without wearing lipstick. My lipstick dependency started in the late 70s with the lightly tinted Chapstick-upgrade of *Bonnie Bell*, then my style elevated to the high-shine of *Wet and Wild* as a teenager in the 80s. Three decades later, I carry shades in every brand, from drugstore Revlon to the high end L'Occitane from the Mall at Short Hills. Lipstick is one of my only indulgences. Don't think *Rocky Horror Red*, or *Turn-of-the-Millennium Mauve* as seen on *Friends*. My signature color is Clinique's Bamboo Pink: a silky nude with just a hint of soft, glossed pink. I never considered my lips as a standout facial feature, and I'm only aware of them when they're not coated in wax, oil, and pigment. My glossy, full pout has withstood the test of time, independent of any fashion trend, never needing to line them in the 90s. I crisply recall being sexually harassed for their potential talent in college, and was introduced to a vulgar description that made me grossly uncomfortable, which takes a lot. While I was in college, though, I always had Tony to protect me.

For today's occasion, I opted for Bamboo Pink. Legally pulling the plug on my thirteen-year marriage to the father of my children, my college sweetheart and former best friend demanded the comfort and confidence only Clinique could provide. I didn't know what to expect. The last time I was in a courtroom was when I chaperoned a field trip a few years ago for the American History Club. Some people find the courtroom magical and dramatic, riveted to television shows and movies that exaggerate and romanticize the law. The only court scene that ever appealed to me was in *Goodfellas*, when Scorsese directs Ray Liotta to break the fourth wall allowing his character Henry Hill to speak directly to the audience while Sorvino and DeNiro remain still, in suspended animation. If divorce court was going to be anything like the events that got me here, I can guarantee today will be my personal 9/11, an absolute disaster. Tony was a toxin to

anything fighting to flourish in my life. How could I be so smart in some areas of my life, yet so naïve in others? I wish someone could have taken me by the shoulders and said, “Nicole! Settle! Don’t take him to court! Court is a shit-show waste of money and the only ones who win are the lawyers.”

I wouldn’t have listened anyway. My heritage is half Sicilian, half Ukrainian. A true fifty-fifty split down the centromere. I thank my maternal side for my dark hair and grudge holding, and my dad’s side for height, light eyes, tenacity, and feelings of inadequacy. My dad is a right-off-the-boat, World War II displaced person who made a success of himself in his new country. My mom is a first-generation American who was discouraged from ever speaking Italian while growing up in Newark, NJ. She was, however, expected to maintain all the traditions of her Sicilian family. It is not unusual to grow up with this type of family framework in Northern New Jersey, where the culture has always been, and always will be, a well-seasoned human spice rack. And we’d have it no other way.

Sitting at the witness stand was my “expert” psychologist wearing a white linen suit with a light blue, silk button-down underneath. Pink tie. He was man-spreading quite comfortably. No socks. Brown Coach loafers with a gold buckle. Wait a minute. Those are Gs not Cs! Shit, they are Gucci. Really? *Fuck*. What a tool. I’m so dead. I’m so dead. Seven thousand dollars for this guy. And he was my second choice! I was hoping to get his partner, but she said she didn’t have time for me, so I trusted her “highly recommended” referral, Dr. Sullivan. Seven. Thousand. Dollars. I had to take a pension loan from my NJ Teachers’ Pension and Annuity Fund to even get this guy. It would take me three years to pay it off.

“Your Honor, if it pleases the Court,” proceeded Doctor Sullivan, I would like to read from the Parental Custody Report containing my professional psychiatric evaluation of plaintiff, Nicole Prova and Defendant, Anthony Prova that I completed just this year, in August of 2011.”

*No way. No way* was he going to read it word for word.

“Objection, your Honor,” Tony’s lawyer rose. “This is ridiculous. What kind of *expert* is this? Let’s not waste the time of the court, your Honor. This report was submitted weeks ago!”

Tony was clenching his jaw, which was as perfectly chiseled today as it had been twenty years ago in college. Dante Cattiva, the best divorce attorney that Tony’s parents’ money could buy, stood in his perfectly tailored suit. Sweat moistened the tips of Cattiva’s salt and pepper hair where it met his sideburns, and the perspiration from his body started to penetrate his dark, wool jacket creating uneven patches of dark blue on dark blue. He stood just over six feet, with the frame of a former athlete. He was solid, but starting to add that middle-age extra body mass athletes never have to worry about until they hit forty-five.

It was September, and in New Jersey, it was still summer. The air conditioning in the historic county courthouse could not manage the temperature differential, and the emotionally charged day only exacerbated the heat in the room.

I looked at my lawyer, a dead ringer for the 70's character-actor Alan Alda, who was rifling through his disorganized, worn, accordion folder barely holding the yellow legal papers shoved in all different directions. My freshmen Biology students' binders were more organized. I wondered if my students were behaving for the substitute teacher while I was on my "emergency personal day." It was only the second week of school. Is my lawyer even going to respond to the objection? Sweet Jesus, I should have gone with a stranger instead of a family friend. I just didn't have the money. How do people fucking afford to get a divorce these days?

The Honorable Anthony Danza paused. Oh yes, you read that right. Tony *fucking* Danza. You just can't make this stuff up. Only I wish it was that same lovable actor who is still rocking it, by the way. Anyway, it was only His Royal Majesty who knew that he had not read any of the documents of the case prior to this very moment. Nobody else knew he wasn't prepared. Except his clerk. She knew. But she would not dare say a word.

"I'll allow it," Judge Danza announced without emotion, a natural consequence of his complete desensitization to yet another marriage ending in a highly contested divorce because of child custody issues. Cattiva slammed both hands on the table and dramatically, lowered himself back into his seat, his body language screaming in protest.

*Here we go. Fifty-two pages and seven-thousand dollars' worth of some shrink's assessment of my life, all about to become public fucking record...*

## **Chapter 2: Disorder in the Court**

Dr. Sullivan sat on the stand looking like a guest reader at Grandparent's Day in a first-grade classroom. He looked up at us, put on his readers, shifted his binder and balls, and began to read word for word. "Nicole Weaverson describes her childhood as "normal," and says that she was a silly teenager..."

This was true. I had a great childhood. Born in 1972, I had all the benefits of growing up in an intact, white-ethnic family who all lived within a thirty-mile radius. My brother, Dmitry Jr., came along two years later and we had the typical relationship of two innocents growing up with unsupervised cable television, MTV, and emerging technology like Atari, the Commodore 64, and VHS. I may or may not have memories of my parents drying out their own pot with heat lamps in our avocado wallpaper covered, 70s style kitchen. The school portraits that *still* hang on my parents' walls, cross-reference my age with my evolution of hairstyles: the Dorothy Hamill, the Farrah Fawcett, the Pat Benatar, the Jersey High-Hair Helmet Head, and finally, the Jennifer Aniston to which I still follow today.

Dmitry's age could always be cross-referenced by his bedroom posters: Wonder Woman, Reggie Jackson, Heather Locklear, Samantha Fox, Traci Lords. Across the hall in my bedroom, were posters of Billy Idol, Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA*, a *Tiger Beat* magazine centerfold of Jake Ryan from the movie, *Sixteen Candles*, and later, the Beastie Boys *Licensed to Ill* album unfolded and thumb-tacked to my wall because teenagers don't give a shit about putting holes in walls.

Funny story about my Billy Idol poster. It was a version of his iconic *Rebel Yell* cover, which shows a shirtless, leather-vested, angry Billy Idol, wearing black leather, metal stud-covered bracelets and fingerless gloves. Idol was the punk-meets-pop crossover ambassador who made too much money in Top-40 pop, and thusly never returned to his native punk roots. The poster highlights Billy's thin body, glistening in sweat, as if he was just about to do you, or perhaps he had just finished up with you, in his filthy bachelor flat located in the lower Hell section of London. When sizing him up, your eyes would start with his spiked, blonde hair, go down to his signature crooked smile, then skip right down to his very low-rise, leather pants that were punctuated by chains connecting...connecting I don't even know what. I guess they were ornamental. Now, take that wicked, provocative image and insert it onto the wall of a thirteen-year-old girl's bedroom, juxtaposed between her Holly Hobby canopy bed set and white, French provincial second-hand furniture. Sunny-yellow semi-gloss painted walls. Did the thirteen-year-old me recognize I was showcasing a hot, sex-demon on her wall? *Maybe*. I was thankfully too innocent to understand the kinky sex connotations, but I did, however, gain a thrill over the reaction the poster gave the adults when they caught glimpse of it. And at the time, I did not have any level of understanding nor appreciation for Connie and Dmitry's parenting style, which was vacillated between permissive and authoritative. It was only for only a few events, typically public, when their parental behavior conspicuously become authoritarian, and Dmitry Jr. and I snapped into our expected roles with great agility.

One of such events was when the Father Tymczyszyn (Tymczyszyn: rhymes with 'magician') from the Ukrainian Catholic Church would come to the house for his annual Blessing of the Family Home, I'm pretty sure there were no legal vowels in his last name. The

memorable/traumatic annual home-visit took place just after the Ukrainian Christmas in early January, and he was accompanied by two “carolers” as my mom would call them, who were both solemn men of great height, much taller than my six-foot father. Both men were dressed like Dr. Zhivago with full length wool coats, and fur hats. The white scarves that were so carefully tucked around their necks resembled the artfully folded, fine linen napkins you might find on the table of a fancy restaurant. They chanted in Ukrainian along-side of Father Tymczyszyn in a most terrifying trio of deep baritone voices, straight out of the most horrific devil movies you could imagine.

In three-part harmony, the men would slowly walk room to room, chanting in Ukrainian, Father Tymczyszyn leading the way with his carolers in the wings. One caroler carried a wooden cross on an ornate, brass handle while the other held a Bible with two hands in front of him, displaying it in the same manner when Simba was born in the Lion King. But no smiles here. No talk. Straight, blank stares. Entranced and fully focused on the task at hand: bless the house & the inhabitants by sprinkling (launching) holy water on the walls of every room. Death-faced, they made their way to my bedroom to find me, hiding. Uninvited, the trio floated in, penetrating my pop-culture, collage-plastered sanctuary.

Father Tymczyszyn’s ornate, gold incense dispenser swayed from front to back, as his old, pasty white, wrinkled hand became the fulcrum of the swinging pendulum of the smoky holy spirit. I was scared. I was fascinated. I knew this ritual was transcendental, but I was not yet connected to it in any way. As I’d watch the smoke lift out of the ornate, *I Dream of Jeannie* bottle at the end of his pendulum, he saturated my Billy Idol poster with the remains of the holy water creating water



marks all over it. In my dramatic, exaggerated false memory, it burned holes in the poster, and a trace of a closed-mouth smile appeared on Father Tymczyszyn. I was ambushed and startled when out of nowhere, Father T anointed my forehead with a dab of oil administered by what felt like a mini ballpeen hammer, but really it was a four-inch, brass stick with a ball at the end. In an unseen, supernatural motion, the holy smoke had disappeared, and Father T's hands now cradled a shallow, copper dish resembling a scallop shell, containing the liquid holy spirit. Before I could duck, he dabbed me on the forehead with the oil, and just before the drip's trajectory was diverted by my bushy eyebrows, Father Tymczyszyn made a small cross at the center of my forehead with his thumb, cuing the carolers to chant in unison, "*Kyrystos Voskres!*" His overgrown, sharp Nosferatu thumbnail scratched me just enough to leave a red mark reminiscent of that crazy serial killer from the 60s. I was terrified. I was blessed. I knew that I had to try harder to be a better person. With that, for the next three hours, I refrained from cursing.

The poster that I had hoped Father Tymczyszyn would have blessed, remained bone dry. This was the life-sized poster of Don Mattingly. Donnie Baseball was the finest first baseman the New York Yankees had ever seen. When he left the game, he should have gone out with all the fanfare like Jeter and Rivera, but the 80s were just a different time. Plus, Donnie Baseball had a back injury and I think he had young kids at the time. I'm going to guess he had a fragile marriage, but maybe that's projection. Donnie Baseball went out the year of the strike or shortly thereafter. He was robbed of the accolades and respect that he deserved. His unspoken black cloud started then, back in '94. It haunted him for years until he reinvented himself as a manager. I actually boycotted watching professional baseball following the MLB strike for a couple of years because I was so soured by it all, but I eventually went back. Pro-athlete salaries still

disgust me, and I know I'm not alone. One year when I was forced to incorporate more math into my Biology curriculum, I had my students calculate A-Rod's estimated take-home pay for every at bat he had in one season. It came out to almost fifteen grand! No joke. But I could be wrong. Someone should fact check that.

My brother and I are obvious siblings. When I use the social media camera filters like the "guy-filter" interface that adds facial hair and an exaggerated jaw line, I'm seriously a clone of Dmitry Jr. Alternatively, when my brother uses the glam, "flawless chick" filter with auto lashes and lip gloss on a social media filter, he becomes a trannie version of me. We get such a juvenile kick out of the distractingly delightful, digital genetic mash-up, and we randomly send these curiously grotesque pictures to each other during the workday, trying to aim for the most inappropriate timing, of course. Sometimes we copy our mother, on the exchange of texts, whose response is always one of two text-replies, "Why?!" or "What's wrong with you two?"

My brother and I were both popular athletes in high school: me with softball and field hockey, he with football and baseball. While I never reached the popularity status as Homecoming King Dmitry Jr., I was *certainly* the captain of the junior-varsity popularity team. Well, okay at least a starter on that team. Shit. Okay, so I wasn't very popular, but I always had lots of friends, in all sorts of different circles. My secret guy-crushes were equally distributed, spanning all cliques: the introverted Dungeon and Dragons guy with piercing blue eyes, the Firebird-driving Marlboro smoker with the mullet and tight Levi's, the herculean blonde running back with above average intelligence, and the socially-awkward Ricky Martin look alike, whose less-attractive,

extroverted twin brother got all the attention. My love interests never came to fruition in high school, probably due to my *own* awkwardness and perceived rules of engagement.

In athletics, my brother and I were both quite good, but we never gave it our all because we juggled part time jobs and were just too busy being social. I worked part time at the Lomelo's Dry Cleaners around the corner, and my brother worked at whatever he could hold down for six weeks in a row before he got nabbed for taking five-finger discounts. We had more than enough friends. We listened to our bootlegged Springsteen tapes in the upgraded cassette-players, "tape decks," we installed in our ten year old cars. Every so often we would cut school to catch 1:05pm Yankee games during the week. Bleacher seats, of course. Best eight dollars you could spend. Parking was free if you go there early enough and had enough brass ones to parallel park on Jerome Avenue. We were the upper-middle class of North New Jersey, wearing our Z-Cavaricci pants and designer fragrances. We had great fucking hair, and always wore our signature gold chains. Dmitry Jr. blew a Seton Hall baseball scholarship over a girl. I blew Conover College because, well, that's my business.



From the stand, Dr. Sullivan continued reading his report, licking his finger to turn the page, "Nicole was the first one in her entire family to attend college. She attended Conover College and majored in psychology..."

Oh no. Damn it! *Don't read it, Sully.* I quickly glanced over my shoulder at my courtroom guests. My mom, dad, and brother were sitting just one row behind me in support, and clueless as to what was going to come of out of Sullivan's mouth next. They had no idea.