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THE SAFEST TIME

*PUSSYCAT'S CHRISTMAS, BY M. W. BROWN, TOLD BY ALBERT GROBE,
FEATURING THE GENE LOWELL CHORUS (1949), ENCOUNTERED CA. 1950*

NO PLAYLIST TRACK

I REMEMBER ONLY one record of my own from before my mother and my father went their separate ways. This was *Pussycat's Christmas*, a 78 rpm shellac which, in two short sides playable in about 5 minutes, depicts a cat exploring the sights, sounds and feel of Christmas in a happily-stereotyped snow-covered American town. In this safe and secure place, she is no stray but neither is she a fettered housecat; she is free to venture out and listen to carolers and the bells of a sleigh, secure that at any time she can also demand readmittance to the warmth of a fireside near a Christmas tree. There is no hint of competing religious or cultural traditions: here Christmas prevails uncontested and unquestioned. The world is stable and safe, and yet, in its wintry and holiday possibilities, it is thrilling.

This mirrored how I felt about my own world as I was coming to consciousness. I knew my parents loved me, and had no idea yet that anything else mattered. I did not know that there could be threats in this exciting place. If you had told me, for instance, that there had recently been powerful people who would have tried to kill me and my father just for who we were, I would have been incredulous. If you had told me that my situation would shortly change in all sorts of unsettling ways, I would have been equally stunned.

Often complacency like mine is justified; there is a permanence to a child's family and his or her place in it. Not in my case, however. Though I did not know it, my world was rigged to be blown away in a moment, and even the fact that I had a place in it for that moment owed to a set of unlikely circumstances.

I was an American child born into what amounted to a provisional and temporary marriage, living a high and pampered life in London, celebrating Christmas when it might with equal likelihood have been a Jewish feast or no feast at all.

Emile, my father, was the first-generation child of secular Jewish immigrants to the U.S. and New York, a grad student at Harvard when he met my mother. Louise, my mother, was then an undergrad at Radcliffe, in the midst of the Great Depression. He sat behind her in a class taught by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, and the story goes that he was so struck by her beauty and brains that he immediately pursued her. As I'm sure became known to him on their first date (at a tea room on Harvard Square), they hailed from different worlds. Louise, a Bostonian, was nominally Catholic, although she was then beginning a period (it proved to be temporary) of disowning that identity. She had done formidably well as a scholar at the Boston Girls' Latin School, but she was as interested in English poetry as in the classics. They were married within a year of her 1935 graduation, as he was working on (and she was typing) his doctoral dissertation in sociology (since at that time Harvard reportedly would not allow persons of Jewish extraction to pursue a doctorate in his real field, economics).

Not only did they come from different places, but after a few years, it seemed clear they were going to different ones as well. I do not know precisely when they separated, but it is clear that during most of the World War Two years they were living apart. He had become a part of the New Deal Labor Department, and I believe had also worked in war production regulation. She was pursuing advanced degrees first at Cornell and then at the Johns Hopkins University. Even when they both resided in Washington, she was not living with him.

You would not have expected any child to have issued from such a marriage. But they maintained a lot of affection for each other, and they each wanted a child notwithstanding the absence of conventional marital bonds. In 1948, Emile was given the opportunity to join the State Department and run the Marshall Plan for England with the position of Economic Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in London. They worked out a deal; I don't know who asked

whom. But the deal was that my mom would come with him, and they would try to have a child together, apparently without any expectation that they would stay together after a child was born. Louise signed on, even though by then she was “returning to Rome,” becoming the fervent Catholic her mother had failed to make of her twenty years earlier.

I’m sure from my mother’s perspective the deal was irresistible, even though there is some evidence that at that time she was already involved with her fellow-grad student Ernie, the man who later became my stepfather. To live in Europe for awhile, though, as the consort of one of the American viceroys ruling the continent amid the war’s wreckage, in the land that had produced the literature and drama she loved the most, and to have a child during some of her last fertile years – I’m sure it wasn’t a hard decision for her.

The photo albums tell the story of those three years in London, complete with ocean liner travel, excursions around England, and trips to the Continent (Eiffel Tower, Alps, Colosseum). Louise’s diary reflects audiences with the King and Queen, shows on the West End, and diplomatic receptions. And then, to top it off, in mid-July 1949, there was me. Outwardly to many of their friends, and, most importantly, to me, they must have seemed like a happy and glamorous couple.



I assume the Pussycat record, that little bit of Americana, made its way into my mother’s hands from the shelves at the PX, the Post Exchange in London where the U.S. occupiers, diplomatic and military, shopped, unhindered by the postwar rationing that created so much discontent for our neighbors. I remember hearing the record played for me at Christmastime at least once during my first four years, and, so long as our placid but precarious situation passed as normal, I felt exactly like the Pussycat.