TRISTAN TAORMINO

"A passionate memoir packed with emotional punch . . ."—Kirkus

A PART OF THE HEART CAN'T BE EATEN

A MEMOIR

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The events and dialogue are portrayed to the best of the author's memory. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.
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FOR **QUEER PEOPLE** EVERYWHERE

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To my dad, Bill Taormino: this story is ours, and I hope I have honored you with it. I miss you every day.

CONCEIVED

I was conceived in a moment of queer love and confusion. At least that's how I imagine it—obviously, I wasn't there.

My mother was born in 1940 and raised in Oyster Bay, on Long Island, New York, where she was the only girl in her class until sixth grade. She did everything the boys did, including playing on the basketball team. By high school, she was known only as the younger sister of her brother, whom some teachers believed was a genius. Her classmates voted her the wittiest. It wasn't until she got to college that anyone told her she was really smart.

When my father graduated high school in 1961, he joined the army. No one knew when the Vietnam War might end, and the possibility of combat terrified him, but anything was better than sticking close to home with his big Italian family. He liked playing Superman with his cousins at the beach in Coney Island, and he loved TV and movie stars, but his childhood was more profoundly marked by his mother's bouts of mania and depression. Her episodes were punctuated by violence and threats: *You better lie to this ER doctor about how your arm got broken. I'll send you to the home for bad boys and leave you there forever.* He needed a way to pay for college, and his family said the army would make him a man, which was both appealing and repulsive to him for different reasons. Being straight, in every sense of the word, was drilled into him by slaps of the ruler at the hands of the Catholic school nuns and the never-ending onslaught of homophobic jokes from his relatives. So off he went to basic training at Fort Dix.

Figure 1.1 Dad (left) and another soldier in the army, Okinawa, Japan, circa 1962

When he got back to the States in 1964, he enrolled at Suffolk County Community College on Long Island. The first time he saw my mom, she was wearing stylish Italian shoes and a chartreuse wool tweed coat as she got out of her MG convertible, where the ashtray overflowed with fuchsia-ringed cigarette butts. At twenty-four, she had spent the summer in Europe and was returning to campus for her second year as an English professor. She saw him onstage in a school play and was intrigued. They went to a concert together and bonded over their love of a then mostly unknown Dionne Warwick. Shortly after, they started dating and fell in love. An older, stuffy male colleague of hers said about their relationship, "Well, you two certainly have moxie."

After the community college, she got a job at Long Island University's C.W. Post campus, and my dad enrolled there. He graduated, and she taught there for one more year. My mother, whose mind is sharp at eighty-two, told me, "I can't prove it, but I think my contract wasn't renewed because he was such

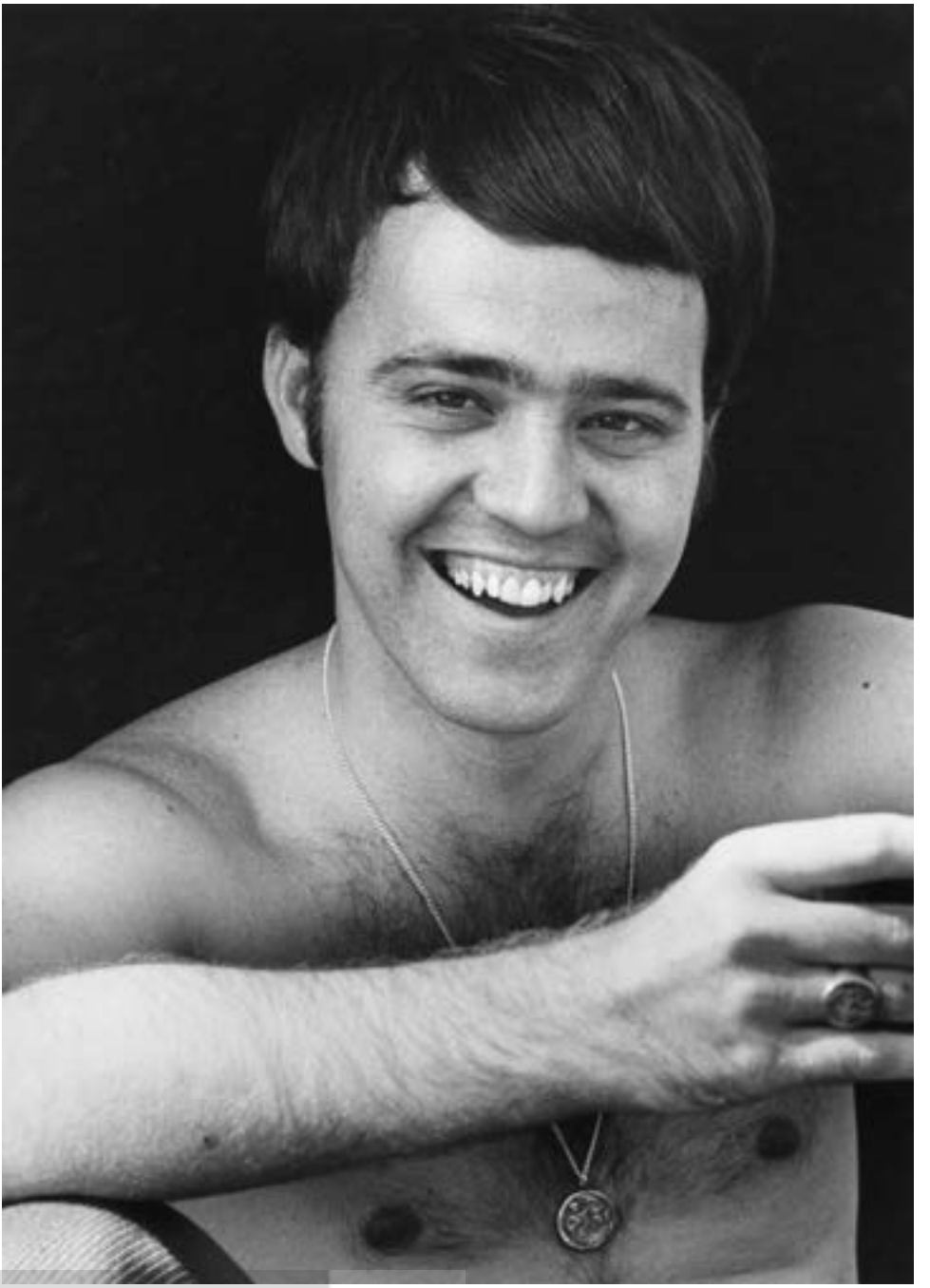

Figure 1.2 Dad's acting head shot, Brooklyn, New York, 1968

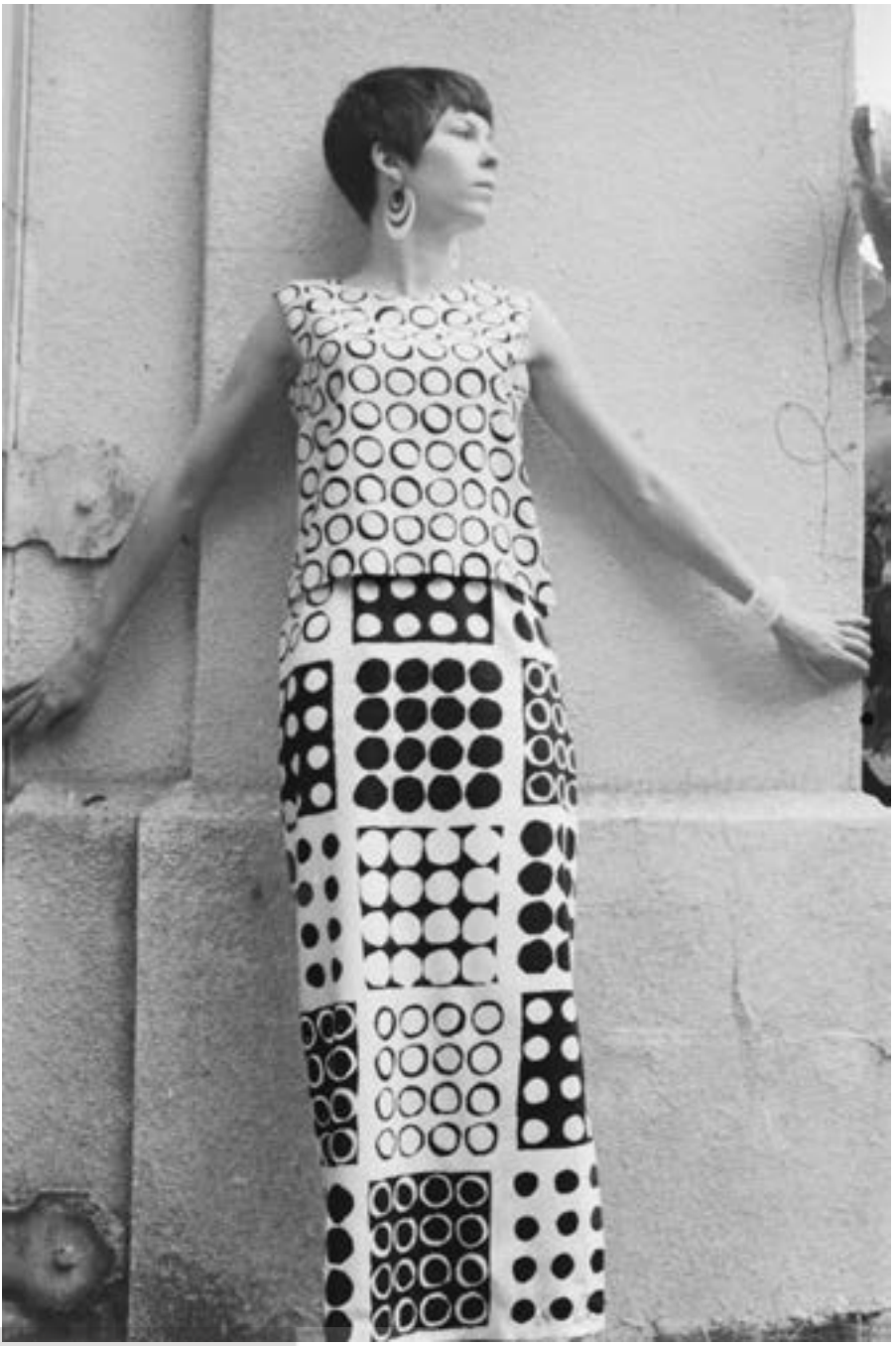

Figure 1.3 Mom, Long Island, New York, circa 1969

a troublemaker in the drama department." He aspired to be an actor. He was born a troublemaker.

I have a single photo from their wedding day, twenty months after they met, taken at her parents' house in the backyard among my grandfather's prized rosebushes. She looks fashionable in a white column dress with her nearly black hair cut in a short pixie style framing her thin face. Standing next to her in a dark suit and tie, my father is handsome, with thick dark brown hair and intense eyes. They both look stunned. Not caught off guard that someone had taken their picture at that exact moment; no, more like serious and slightly confused. There are no smiles. But someone preserved the photo along with a photo of my grandparents from that day; they sit opposite each other in a gold-edged double frame with a hinge between them. Decades later, my aunt gave me a copy of their wedding album which featured a similar photo from the Catholic church where they were married.

While my mom was pregnant, ultrasound to determine the sex of the baby wasn't yet widely available, but it didn't matter because my parents wanted to decide on my name before I was born, regardless of whether M or F would be checked on my birth certificate. Instead of poring over baby name books, they created a contest for their friends and family, which they called "Name the Little Creature," complete with a mimeographed flyer. Typed on the page, among scattered baby clip art, are the guidelines:

> You can pick only one *multi-purpose-unisex* name. Prizes will be awarded for originality, bizarreness, and in some cases a refreshing tackiness. Winners could receive two weeks with the creature, a Tony Perkins album, a collared peccary, or 3/8 of a bushel of garlic salt.

No names from the contest spoke to them, and they instead decided on Tristan, the tragic hero in *Tristan and Isolde.* Best known as a Richard Wagner opera, *Tristan and Isolde* is a story that dates back to the twelfth century that has been retold in many different versions and languages and references King Arthur mythology. The gist is that Tristan, a knight, is tasked with going to fetch Isolde and bring her back to marry King Mark of Cornwall. Tristan and Isolde drink a potion that causes them to fall madly in love (Was it intentional? Was it an accident?). Isolde ultimately marries Mark, who loves Tristan like a son, but she and Tristan carry on an affair. There are several versions of what happens once King Mark finds out: they escape but are caught; or he sentences them to death for adultery (hanging for him, burning at the stake for her); or Tristan leaves the kingdom so Isolde and the king can be together.

Figure 1.4 Mom and Dad's wedding, Oyster Bay, New York, 1966

Figure 1.5
Huntington
Station,
New York,
1971

My mother tells the story of my birth on Mother's Day in 1971. She had taken Lamaze classes, learned the breathing, and decided beforehand she didn't want any drugs. She labored for a long time, all night, until she finally gave up and said, "Give. Me. The. Fucking. Epidural." Then she pushed and pushed and had a clear vision: I was coming out of her, head first, with my arms folded against my chest and my eyes wide open. I was holding a sword. She said it must have been the drugs.

In 1972 they decided to flee Long Island so they would have more distance from their parents and so Dad could get his master's in film. We moved to a rural town thirty miles north of Hanover, New Hampshire, and lived in a church they bought with a mortgage from the Veterans Affairs (VA) home loan program. It was a tall brick building with big windows and a wooden steeple painted white. A hand-painted sign still hangs under the window at the top of the entrance to the building. There is an ornate filigree in the middle, and black lettering that reads:

1837 Meeting House. 1859 Abandoned.
1875 Village Hall. 1968 Dwelling.

When my parents moved in, it had already been converted to a living space. They were hippies and thought it was cool. *Look at us, we live in an old, broken-down church!* Heavy doors in the vestibule opened into one big space with a stage at the back of the room—the original pulpit. Stage left were the kitchen, a bedroom, and a very DIY bathroom. A wooden staircase led to a small loft. There was a narrow balcony opposite the stage that ran the entire width of the building, where I'm told I spent hours running back and forth. The whole living situation was deeply ironic since both my parents were raised Catholic but had consciously rejected and abandoned the religion. They found it entirely too dogmatic. To them, Catholicism crushed souls, it didn't save them. They didn't baptize me or raise me with any religion. So when people ask me about the first time I went to church, I tell them I lived in a church. In North Haverhill, off the main road, with a big field behind it.

Figure 1.6 Roslyn, New York, 1974

In 2015, en route to a queer wedding between two dear friends, I made an uncharacteristically spontaneous detour. I saw Haverhill on a sign on the highway and urged my partner to exit. I called my mom, and she guided us to the place from memory. I found the imposing brick building standing majestically among tall grass that hadn't been mowed for months. It looked the same as the photos I'd seen. I got out of the car and walked up to the front door; when I turned the knob, it opened to the vestibule. I ventured inside to see that it had once again been abandoned. It had been used as a dance school, and much of its recent past—posters of ballerinas, tiny pointe shoes, dusty tutus—had been left behind. It was a little spooky, like I could be walking into a Stephen King novel. I looked around, climbed the stairs to the balcony, took some photos. I wanted to feel some connection to the place, a body memory, but I didn't. So I went on Zillow, which listed its value at a little over $100,000. It recently sold for $27,000. Probably at auction.

Before my second birthday, my dad announced to my mom that he was moving out. He didn't tell her he was gay, but she overheard him telling his mom on the phone. He moved in with his lover, a local priest. A church was apparently also the best place to find single gay men in New Hampshire. When he took off, she became a single mom in the middle of nowhere with a toddler and no job (they'd been living off his student loans). He told her she could have the church, but that meant monthly mortgage payments she couldn't afford. She decided to go back to Long Island, the place and the people they had initially fled. 1973, abandoned. Before we moved, she baked pies and sold them from the front yard to support us. She still makes her apple pie at holidays; it's got a cinnamon crumb topping that could bring you to your knees.

My dad never put on a tutu like some budding gay boys, but when he was growing up, there were other signs that he might be queer. He had his first male lover when he was stationed in Okinawa: a marine whom he was deeply ambivalent about, in his own words. He knew his desire, but he fed it reluctantly. I had always assumed he kept this secret from my mom. Many years later, when I was home on winter break from college, we were at the new apartment she moved into when I graduated high school. I sat longways on the couch that had followed us from place to place, which she had reupholstered for the fifth time. The new fabric was a flamboyant jewel-toned flower print. She was in the kitchen baking Christmas cookies.

"Did you ever suspect that Dad was gay before you got married?"

"Well, he told me he was bisexual."

"Really?" I hadn't expected that.

"It wasn't at all surprising to me," she said, being very casual, and followed that up with: "It was the late sixties, wasn't *everyone* a little bit bisexual?"

It was amazing my dad could say that much out loud since the homophobia in his family was not subtle or unspoken; every day was a new opportunity to shame a man with feminine traits or use the word *fag* to eviscerate someone. *Do you know why queers all have mustaches and goatees? To make their mouths look like pussies!* I believe he married my mother in a complex web of emotions: certainly there was love, a want for a partner, but marrying her was also a way for him to hide from his desire for men. Marriage *was* a good cover story.

As I write this memoir, I am living through the second pandemic in my lifetime, the one after AIDS, a word that stings like a fresh wound. Most of my work as a sex educator is on hold, so I have something that ordinarily eludes me: time. I call my psychiatrist, and he ups my meds. I bake lemon bars, binge *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and read the books of authors I will interview in the next weeks for my podcast: *The Not Wives*, *The Ultimate Guide to Seduction and Foreplay*, *Female Husbands*, *Crossfire* by the poet Staceyann Chin. I update the PowerPoint graphics for my polyamory workshops, catalog photos and letters from old lovers, organize my copies of *On Our Backs* magazines, rearrange the cabinet that holds my Feminist Porn Awards. And I decide, finally, to read my dad's memoir, which is dedicated to me. As I am writing my own story, I am delving into his. Printed on a dot matrix printer, the title, "Lies and Circumstance," is still remarkably dark on the page after all these years. I stare at the typewriter font as I type the manuscript into Word on my MacBook Air, and I hear his voice, low but animated, whispering to me. It brings me comfort and renewed grief.

I have had this manuscript, which was never published, since he gave it to me in 1991, but I never read it all the way through until now. There are so many reasons why, and probably more I have yet to uncover. I miss him too much. I might find answers in these pages to questions I never had or solve mysteries I didn't know existed. It's scary to read about his troubled childhood, his complicated desire, his transgressions, in black and white. Fearing the nuns at school would catch him with another boy. Watching his hypermasculine cousin Bubby shave his face in the nude. Ducking when his mother hurled a frying pan at him for talking back to her. Losing his virginity to an Okinawan sex worker. Leaving his family and never looking back. What's written into

his DNA, my DNA, emerges in stark details. It's disconcerting to see a line that connects his trauma and mine. The story ends in 1973, so it doesn't contain any of the closeness and joy we shared. It's painful to be with him through only words and memories. I should be thankful that he left behind this archive. It is my inheritance, the story of my life before me.