

## THE BIG H

On those rare nights in high school when my mother wasn't working late in the office or catching up on her reading for work or sorting through the mail, she was mine. We would retreat to the corner of the living room, the large picture windows overlooking the Central Park reservoir, and sit in the two oversized swivel chairs to watch television. When my father and Neil, my older brother, joined us to watch the Olympics or a former actor become and then get re-elected president, we had to pull up two of the damask-covered dining room chairs to accommodate them. But most of the time, they were somewhere else; my father closeted in his home office and Neil closeted in his room or going out with his friends.

Our favorite show was the then-new series, *LA Law*. My mother, a lawyer herself, liked to point out the show's legal mistakes. When someone in school said they had seen last night's episode, I would say with great authority "You know, they misused the term *habeas corpus* and there's no way Michael would have won that case in real life." My mother often remarked that the show was unrealistic because despite all the female lawyer characters it didn't demonstrate enough of the sexual discrimination which she said ran rampant throughout her profession.

During Friday and even some weekday nights, we heard Neil preparing to leave. Neil was always under-dressed, wearing only a sweatshirt and sneakers even if there was a snowstorm. Seeing my brother about to descend into the heady whirl of nighttime Manhattan, he loved going to the punk rock clubs in the village, caused my mother to purse her lips making words unnecessary. She and Neil fought often, their voices carrying across the apartment's long corridor, when I was trying to study or sleep. It was always the same fight: my mother wanted

Neil to take his schoolwork more seriously. But no amount of yelling and grounding could make Neil into the kind of person then my mother wanted him to be.

Neil eventually decided to attend college in Colorado, a state that didn't exist on my parents' map of the country which resembled the famous *New Yorker* cartoon map in its parochialism. I said, "my parents," but it was really my mother's view that dominated in our household. In some ways this was a corrective of the sexual inequality about which my mother spoke often, in other ways this was the reality of domestic life in the early 1980s.

It was understood that Neil was never going to amount to anything. I, however, was going to attend the country's most elite college, the same one my mother had attended. As a child I called this school the big H, intuiting even then its largeness. This nickname made my mother laugh, something she didn't do often, and the name stuck.

To increase my odds of being accepted into a school that rejected most of its applicants, my mother had made a financial contribution – I never found out how much – and volunteered to interview prospective students. The donated time was more surprising than the donated money. My mother had always looked down on the mothers in my school who volunteered in the high school library or made chocolate chip cookies for bake sales. She was one of the few female associates in a prestigious law firm and she worked long hours in the office. But she had deemed being a volunteer interviewer an important use of her time, even several years before I was ready to apply there.

During the Fall and Winter, the eager candidates arrived weekly at our home and were ushered into the living room. These interviews were supposed to be private, but I always snuck into the adjoining dining room to see what I considered my competition.

On one of the nights there was a girl with black hair so straight that it had seemed to bend to her considerable self-discipline. She was seated on the edge of the couch with her back ramrod. My mother, relaxed against the couch's back, held a notebook and pen.

"Tell me about yourself, Hannah," my mother said.

The girl's voice was soft but possessed a self-confidence as if it didn't need to be any louder. She rattled off her accomplishments – National Merit scholar, international trophy winner in physics, concert violinist and intern at the Rockefeller Institute.

I measured myself against her. My middling PSATs had knocked me out of the National Merit scholarship competition. My major extracurricular activity was working on the school newspaper, which I loved, but I didn't have any fancy title like editor. No, Hannah and I weren't in the same league. Not even close.

After she left, I joined my mother on the swivel chairs in time to hear the jazzy opening credits of *LA Law*.

"Well, are you going to suggest admittance?" I asked casually.

"I don't think so."

"Why?"

"She didn't seem that impressive."

The sound of a car trunk shutting emanated from the television.

"I really don't know why you think I'll ever get in there," I said.

"Because you are my daughter, Deborah, that's how I know."

For many years the Big H was more of an idea than an actual place. That changed in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade when my mother asked me to accompany her there for her 20<sup>th</sup> reunion. It was the first

time just the two of us would go away. I eagerly awaited the chance to see this place about which I had for so many years. The week before our departure, she became the lead attorney in a high-profile case and had to work every night until midnight. That was it, I was sure. She would cancel the trip -- just as she had done with our family vacation to the Bahamas last Winter and on most parents' day at the school.

But to my relief and amazement we set out for the airport early Saturday morning as planned, although my mother was in a foul mood. She was preoccupied on the short plane ride, writing angrily on her legal pad the entire time and snapping at the stewardess because they didn't have Fresca, saying little as we took a taxi from the airport, and finding fault with the hotel. I didn't understand it and wondered if I were somehow to blame.

But when we finally walked to the nearby campus and passed through the open gate my mother visibly relaxed and even squeezed my hand, an uncharacteristic gesture. The campus had lush green lawns, a profusion of stately oaks and elms, brick buildings covered with ivy and several brick paths leading in different directions, all of which looked potentially interesting. I evaluated the chosen people who had gained admittance to this world. They looked like a typical youthful cross section of jocks, beauties and nerds. Maybe there were a few more bespectacled ultra-serious young men toting adult briefcases and overweight girls clutching textbooks to their bosom than at other universities. But everyone seemed to glow as if powered by an invisible electrical current.

My mother walked ahead of me. She stopped before one of the brick buildings.

"Ah, Mathews Hall. I had a boyfriend who lived here," she said. "Of course, in my time all the female students lived in Radcliffe, the women's college, but now this is all coed so even a woman can live here."

She squeezed my hand for the second time. I permitted myself a fantasy, as if partaking of a decadent chocolate dessert: A beautiful Fall day, red and golden leaves swirling over the many paths. My mother and father hauling my typewriter and record collections into Mathew's dorm and past a door with my name on the front. My father posing my mother and me, arm in arm, outside the building and clicking his Leica, a photo that my mother would frame and place on her desk at work.

The front door slammed shut as someone with the right key entered Mathew's Hall. I trailed my mother across the quad and past an enormous building that looked as if it belonged in Washington DC. The brick façade was supported by pillars with elaborate Corinthian capitals.

"Ah, Widener Library, where I studied with my friends," my mother said.

My mother was not a woman with friends. But in this world, it seemed, she had found people like herself.

While she attended her reunion luncheon, I found an enclosed lawn and sat under an oak tree, a copy of Moby Dick, required reading for AP English class, on my lap. A cute boy sat not far away immersed in a chemistry book and occasionally looked my way, possibly taking me for a student here. If he were a freshman or sophomore, he would still be here when I came and who knows what might happen between us. One thing I knew for sure: If I was rejected, I was never returning to this place.

After a few hours, I went to meet my mother in an oversized room with a cathedral ceiling. Here were some of the chosen elders, sipping from wine glasses filled with crimson liquid. My mother was deep in conversation with a white-haired man wearing a plaid jacket and bow tie.

“...They took me off the case, right in the middle, even though I’d done most of the work. It was obvious that they didn’t want the lead attorney someone with two x chromosomes,” she told him.

She saw me.

“Ah, here she is, my daughter, who’ll have all those chances I couldn’t. Deborah, this is Prof. Taylor, the world’s foremost authority on the U.S. Constitution,” my mother said.

He offered me a limp papery hand to shake.

“Your mother was one of my smartest students,” he said in a tone that emanated from his nose. “Tell me, are you as brilliant as she is?”

No, I wanted to cry, I’m not. I have no special talents except writing and I’m not even great at that.

“I try,” I squeaked.

“Well that’s all you can do,” he said. “I’ll look forward to perhaps seeing you in one of my classes, young lady.”

“You most certainly will,” my mother squeezed my hand yet again.

“It’s a longshot, a real longshot.”

My school’s guidance counselor. Mr. Edgars was ridiculed by the students because of his egg-shaped bald head, bad breath and profession. Everyone knew the joke: those who can’t do, teach, those who can’t teach, become guidance counselors. Yet in an exclusive private school with a high tuition, his job was critical which was likely why he had been given a large and sunny office.

It was our first meeting and I had just told him that the Big H was my top college choice. I wondered how many times he had sat across from children in this school – the offspring of high-powered Wall Street moguls, well-known writers and even film stars -- and had to tell them to tamp down their expectations and dreams.

“I could paper my entire home with the letters of all the worthwhile students who’ve been rejected from that school, the competition for these schools just gets more and more difficult,” he said. “What were your SATs?”

I had already answered this question, but I told him again.

“There’s your problem, better get those babies up,” he said.

“I’m working with a very good tutor. And you see, my mother is an alumni of the school.”

He smiled, finally, as if I’ve said the magic word. “It’s alumna.”

“Huh?”

“Alumni is plural, the correct term is alumna for females, alumnus for males.”

“Oh, I see. Well my mother is an alumna and a volunteer interviewer for the school. She even donated some money to them. Won’t that help me get in?”

“Did she donate enough for a building in her name?”

“I don’t think so.”

“If you like Boston, how about Wellesley? It’s an excellent college.”

“I don’t think so.”

“All you kids are the same, you want the name brands in everything. But there are some very fine schools, which folks here don’t consider. Such as Northwestern for example, which is

known for journalism. You said you were working on the school newspaper, right? And there's my alma mater, Colgate, a fine school."

I imagined telling my mother I was going to school in Chicago or to a place named after a toothpaste.

"But I have a chance to get into my dream school, don't I?"

"Get those SAT scores up," he said.

Angie had waist-long hair, ripped jeans and reeked of cigarette smoke. Her arrival always prompted Carmen, our housekeeper, to remove her own purse from its usual place on the kitchen counter. Yet Angie, who had been recommended by a partner in my mother's firm, was a child prodigy who had scored 1600 on the SATs, attended Princeton on a full scholarship and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. She was tutoring and travelling around the world before deciding her next step. She charged an astronomical sum that was close to my mother's own billable hours and would receive a bonus if my score increased by 100 points. She was using the money to finance her travels around the world.

In our first lesson, we sat down at the dining room table and she scrutinized me.

"Libra, right? You look as if you're in need of balance."

"Actually, I'm a Cancer."

"I should have guessed. You're highly sensitive and ruled by the moon."

Angie then delivered a lecture about how the SATs, were basically bullshit and no reflection whatsoever on intelligence. Success would depend upon my remaining calm. We started each lesson with breathing and meditation exercises Angie had learned in an ashram in India.



Once, I opened my eyes from a breathing exercise to see my mother standing there looking startled. She was holding a check.

“Are you actually teaching my daughter now?” she asked.

“It’s a warm up,” Angie said.

My mother seemed to accept that explanation, handed Angie her check and didn’t ask me about it again. She and I had both put our faith in Angie’s reputation. Angie gave me tricks for solving analogies and mathematical word problems. But it was her pep talks that I most remembered.

“You’re a very smart girl but you don’t believe in yourself. Tell yourself, at least ten times a day and another ten times before you go to school, that you’re smart and capable and amazing,” she said. “You know, the kinds of things we kids hear from our mothers or grandparents.”

I had never heard my mother utter any of those words and we weren’t on speaking terms with my surviving grandparents.

At night I lay in my bed and tried out the mantra: “I am smart, capable and amazing.” I told myself this again and again, the words like some foreign language. I told myself that I was overreacting, that I would attend a good university which was more than most people my age would ever get to do so I should be grateful. And yet I wanted more. Sleep eluded me.

During one SAT lesson, Angie told me she had seen the school newspaper at the home of another student and read the feature piece I’d written about Mr. Rose who taught ethics, a class that was obligatory for all students in my school.

“I never heard of a school that had an ethics teacher which was pretty ironic, but the article itself was really good,” she said. “Is that what you want to do, become a reporter?”

The highlight of my school day was my work on the school newspaper. When I interviewed students about the new science lab or changes in the cafeteria menu I felt most in control. I loved taking all these words of others and fashioning them as I chose into an article. But I had never seen writing as anything but a hobby.

“Oh no, I’m going to be pre-Law in college.”

“Why would anyone want to be pre-Law? Being a journalist is way cooler and you’d be great at it.”

I shifted in my seat. “My mother’s a lawyer.”

“So, you want to be pre-Law or your mother wants you to be?”

I said nothing. Angie squeezed my hand which hadn’t been squeezed since that reunion trip with my mother.

“I don’t want to give you a hard time, it’s just that every lawyer I know hates his job, except those on television.”

I barely slept the night before the SATS and arrived a half hour early. The tests were held on a Saturday in our school lunchroom, but all the tables had been moved out and replaced by individual desks. Tom, the class brain, looked completely relaxed, as if he had just stepped out of a sauna. Susie, one of the most popular girls, applied mascara to her eyes. I began by closing my eyes and focused on my breathing but was assaulted by an attack of diarrhea which necessitated a bathroom run. I sharpened my already sharp pencils, returned to the bathroom for another diarrhea attack and tried to relax. I tried to channel Angie’s voice and gave myself a prep talk but I couldn’t shake the panic of sitting in this room about to take one of the most important tests of my life.

Finally, Mr. Bernard, the test proctor, arrived in the lunchroom with a thick stack of exams and we were told to take a seat. He distributed the tests and I felt their lightness and impermanence. They were just sheets of paper I kept telling myself as I filled in my name.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen,” said Mr. Bernard. “One, two, three. You may begin. Good luck!”

Naturally the first part was math, my weaker subject. With my heart pounding, I worked out the answer to the first question, which really wasn’t all that hard, but when I went to fill in the letter B, the correct answer on the answer grid, I couldn’t do it. My hand trembled uncontrollably, like a fish gasping for life. The trembling was so severe that I couldn’t properly hold the pencil to shade in the answer. I tried shaking my hand, but it that didn’t help. The shaking increased the pounding of my heart. I saw the second hand on the clock move forward, precious time that I needed to complete the test. I didn’t know what to do. I could not get my hand to cooperate.

I took several deep breaths, but they were awkward in my panic. My hand still felt disconnected from the body, as if it had a mind of its own. Then I put my left hand over my right one and held onto as a mother would with a child in forming her first letters. The shaking gradually lessened enough for me to sufficiently shade in the letter “B” on the answer grid. Shading in the next answer was a little easier, my breathing slowed. I eventually got through the test.

Even though it was a Saturday, my parents were working when I returned home that afternoon, thinking I would take a nap. But I still couldn’t sleep. Then Angie called me.

“Yo, Deb, how did it go?”

“Let’s just say that you won’t be getting any bonus.”

“I’m finishing up with a client here, not far from you. How about meeting at a coffee shop?”

“It’s okay, I’ll be okay. You don’t have to worry about me.” I was wrapping the phone cord tightly around my finger.

“You’d be doing me at a favor. I’m starving and hate to eat alone.”

I met her at a small natural foods’ café specializing in strange multicolored juices and salads sprinkled with a myriad of nuts and sprouts. Angie ordered a green drink concoction and urged me to try some: it was surprisingly sweet. Then I bought myself a carob brownie and told her how my own hands had betrayed me.

“Panic reaction, it’s not uncommon for kids today and it’s probably going to get a lot more common. All this stress you kids are under is insane. You all have to stop talking all this college admissions stuff so seriously.”

“That’s easy for you. You went to Princeton.”

“So what? It doesn’t make me better or smarter than anyone else.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“I take tests well, you can write a great article. Different skills. Look, let’s just imagine you end up with a 1600 SAT and are accepted by your dream school, that place in Cambridge. Then you’d be a different Deborah?”

“Yes, I would.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong. You’d be the same.”

I only saw Angie one more time. It was soon after I received my lousy scores – I hadn’t even broken 1200 -- and I ran into her on Fifth Avenue waiting for the bus. She told me that

despite her parents' pleas that she settle down she was headed for India again soon. I wished her well.

Cruel April brought the letters. A lot of seniors were now skipping classes after calling home where someone – usually their stay-at-home mother – told them the size of the envelope making my friend, Abigail say “for once in my life I’m praying for something fat.”

School was out early April 15, at least for seniors, and I couldn't bear the thought of going home to wait for the mail. It was raining, a warm spring rain that one knew was necessary for the colors and beauty of May, and it made the city gray and glistening. I skipped my stop and rode the bus to Rockefeller Center with the sculpture of a recumbent Prometheus stealing fire from the chariot of the sun and bringing it to mankind where it proved a mighty weapon. My mother's office was nearby and when I was younger, she used to occasionally take me ice skating there. She was a confident skater, while I could barely keep my balance and kept falling. I believed everyone – the other skaters and the many onlookers -- was laughing at me. I would then go with her to her office where her secretary, a white-haired woman fussed over me and gave me jellybeans from a big jar but would stiffen when my mother called for her.

I briefly considered surprising her in the office, something I had never done, and asking whether she'd come home with me to check the mail. But I knew that she would never agree to leave her office so early. I walked the 20 blocks uptown, as the rain fell heavier. I didn't have a rain coat or umbrella Maybe if I became cold and wet the God which I didn't even believe in would take mercy on me. But I knew that God—if there was one -- was busy with far needier people.

The letter, the one I'd been waiting for, was on top of a stack on the kitchen counter. I could already see the verdict from its absence of heft. I opened it quickly, with the last small nugget of hope, and learned what I had known for many years: I was not one of the chosen people. I took the letter with me to my room and laid down and closed my eyes. There I cried until I felt exhausted and then slept.

Several hours later, I got up from the nap and went into the kitchen. My mother stood there opening the other mail and greeted me without looking up.

"You're not feeling well?" she asked.

I had thought of all the ways I could say it but decided on the simplest:

"I received the letter from Harvard today. I was rejected."

She didn't pause in her movements opening an envelope. "Yes, I know."

"What? How could you have known?"

"The university sent me a letter a few days ago telling me you had been rejected." She briefly read through another letter and set it aside.

I was stunned.

"Why on earth would they write to you when I'm the applicant?" My surprise had turned to anger.

"Simple. It's a courtesy. They want me to continue contributing money and volunteering."

"Why didn't you tell me a few days ago that I'd been rejected? Why did you make me wait?"

“Your father and I,” she began. This was what she always said she was unsure of her actions. “We were waiting for the right moment to tell you. We I knew you would be disappointed. But Deborah it’s not your fault. If I hadn’t been a female alumni -”

“The correct term is alumna,” I interrupted her.

“If I hadn’t been an alumna then my financial contribution and volunteer work would have meant something, but as a woman they meant a lot less. I thought the world had changed by now and such discrimination would have been ended, but I guess it hasn’t. Anyway, we can appeal and there’s the possibility of transferring and graduate school there. . .”

I held up my hand as one did to ongoing cars when jaywalking.

“Stop. I didn’t get in because my SATs were too low. It was always a longshot, always.”

“It was a form of discrimination,” she insisted, her tone weaker. “Let’s go watch television.”

Many years later I understood that the emotional intensity of the moment had probably frightened her. Our television watching was what she could offer me, like the squeeze of the hand when we entered Harvard Yard.

“I’m too tired,” I said. “I’m going back to sleep.”

I left her there alone, as I would be doing soon when I left for college. Amidst the sounds of the television coming awake, I went to my room, shut the door and laid back down on the bed still ruffled and warm from my nap. I wondered if she would come check on me, even though I knew she wouldn’t. I felt the pain of her absence but also the comfort of finally giving into the exhaustion.