A Picture of Jayne Mansfield

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A PICTURE OF JAYNE MANSFIELD

ELLEN STEPPED DOWN INTO THE DARKNESS carefully, around the cans of paint on her cellar steps — her knees bent, her back straight, her hands pushed flat against the walls of the narrow stairway.

Tai chi, she said to herself. It feels like I'm doing tai chi.

She was going to the cellar to prove a point. Somewhere, there was a picture of her as a girl, standing next to Jayne Mansfield. Nobody at her party believed her.

The people talking in her kitchen had moved on to other topics. She knew when she returned with the picture nobody would really care and any one of the men would probably say hey, which one is Jayne Mansfield and everybody would laugh, but it was still something she had to do.

At the bottom of the steps, she dusted her hands then tucked them under her armpits. Halfway back, under the living room now, she found a light that worked, and when she turned it on, she could see across the back half of the ancient cellar, all the way to the bulkhead.

Everything they had ever owned was in the cellar, all their old furniture and clothes, skis, books, kids' bikes and band equipment, Tim's home brewing junk and neglected workshop. There were three metal filing cabinets by the bulkhead, packed with pictures, awards, old schoolwork, taxes. Somewhere near the cabinets was a stack of boxes Ellen had moved from her parents' house. Jayne Mansfield was in one of those boxes.

The day they bought this house, Tim came home from work early to oversee the inspection. He had worn a pair of coveralls over his suit and walked around the empty basement with the inspection guy, poking old beams with a screwdriver.

"This foundation isn't going anywhere," he had said, slapping one of the great stones with the flat of his hand.

I guess not, Ellen said to herself. It's got a house sitting on top of it.
Now she shuffled toward the back, turning sideways in the tight places.

She could hear people talking above her, moving around her living room. She opened a duffel bag. Inside was her son's old wrestling gear — headpiece, shoes, warm-up sweats. She put her face close to the opening and breathed again the smells of Saturday tournaments, carloads of rowdy boys.

Near the bulkhead was a Whirlpool box Ellen had painted for her daughter, with a curved doorway and “Princess Stephanie” written above it in silver glitter. She remembered the inside of the cardboard playhouse, decorated with pictures of unicorns.

She crawled into the dark box. Inside, on her knees, she looked at the drawings of winged horses cut from coloring books and taped like pin-ups on the walls of the little girl's castle.

Something moved beside her right leg. Ellen looked down.

A snake the size of a spare tire looked back at her. Eyes like glass in the dust.

It moved toward her. Ellen screamed and dove for daylight, but her hips were jammed in the small opening and she pulled the box over, on top of herself. Kicking and shrieking, she lay on the cellar floor, trying to get free of the Whirlpool box.

The room above her went silent, then she heard footsteps running across the house, toward the cellar steps.

The snake untangled itself and moved slowly across the cold floor, toward the stacks of boxes.

People piled down the stairs.

“El. Is that you?”

“I just saw a snake. Tim, there's a snake in the basement.”

“No. It was probably just the cat, or something.”

“Tim, I know the difference between a cat and a snake. What's it doing in here?”

“I don't know. Where is it now?”

“It went over there.” She waved her hand toward the bulkhead. Her elbow hurt from rolling around on the hard floor.

The word passed back up the stairway. “Ellen climbed in a box with a snake, and now she's all freaked out.”
“You’ll never find him,” said one of the guys. “You’ve got to take everything out of the basement — into the back yard — and go through everything, a box at a time. He could be anywhere.”

“How’s he staying alive?”

“It’s winter. He’s hibernating. Anyway, they don’t eat until Spring. I say just leave him alone. Wait ‘til it warms up. He’ll leave.”

“What if it’s a female, and she has babies down there?” asked one of the women.

Ellen went upstairs to the bedroom. She sat on her side of the bed.

After awhile, Tim came up. He stood in front of her.

“I went through everything, and I can’t find it,” he said.

“I’m sure it’s gone — probably the way it came in. Are you coming back down? Everybody is asking.”

“No.”

“What were you doing down there, anyway?”

“I was looking for my picture of Jayne Mansfield.”

He stood with his hands in his pockets, then he took his right hand out of his pants and set it on her shoulder.

“I thought we weren’t going to be so dramatic,” he said.

“I’m going back downstairs.”

She didn’t look at him. She moved her shoulder sideways.

After he left, she went into their bathroom, took off her blouse and looked in the mirror at the backside of her elbow. She flexed her arm like she was doing french curls, then she wiggled her wrist like she was testing a doorknob. The underside of her arm moved like an udder, so she stopped.

She undressed, then put on her pajamas and robe. As she walked across the upstairs hallway, she could hear the people downstairs. Dishes were being stacked in the sink, someone was pushing a chair across her kitchen floor. No one was talking. The music was still playing.

She went to her daughter’s old bedroom. The door still had a poster of winged horses flying around a pastel castle in the clouds. She shut the door and wandered around the room, pok-
ing through the closet, looking again under the cushion where Stephanie used to hide her diary. She brushed a dusty web off the ceiling with her slipper. She pushed the chest of drawers tight against the door, then she pulled back the covers on her daughter’s bed and lay down. She got up again and picked up as many stuffed animals as she could carry. She arranged them around herself on the bed and pulled the covers high, up close to her chin.

Ellen remembered when she was fourteen and her father told her about the new mall in Worcester. Let’s go, you and me. Jayne Mansfield will be there. She used to be a big movie star. You can buy some things.

One end of the food court was roped off and a lot of men were standing in front of a small stage. Her father was standing at front center, with his knees touching the edge, his overcoat unbuttoned and one of his hands in the pocket of his trousers. He had a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and he was staring at the door to the ladies’ room.

Ellen watched from the mezzanine where she could see the stage, her father, and the ladies’ room door.

Show music started playing and a man in a red jacket came to the microphone.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “Welcome to the new Spring Hill Mall.”

He talked for a few minutes about how much fun everybody was having and how important the mall was. More men crowded around the stage, the music got louder, the man in the red jacket threw coupons into the crowd.

Ellen watched her father. Around him, at his elbows, people jostled and talked, and pushed against the lip of the metal riser. He never moved, never let his eyes slide from the door behind the stage, as if it would open to his will.

“All right,” said the man. “And here to help us dedicate Worcester County’s newest and biggest mall is a young lady who’s pretty big in her own right.” He jiggled his eyebrows and showed teeth.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Straight from her engagement in Las Vegas — the one, the only, Miss Jayne Mansfield.”
Her father stretched to get a better view as the door opened and three men wearing top hats, black pants and white shirts ran out and jumped onto the stage. The three men danced and shook their canes at each other and the audience. They pretended to sing along with the tape.

The music got louder, the men dropped to their knees and aimed their canes at the ladies' room, where a large, tired-looking woman appeared suddenly as if she was pushed from behind.

Ellen watched her father as the woman straggled loosely to the microphone, holding up her meaty arms and cocking her hip.

Close enough to touch her, he watched, motionless, as she danced and sang and lumped around the tiny stage with the three bouncing men. Without looking at his hands, he lit a second cigarette and blew clouds of smoke that eased around the dancing woman. She sang theme songs and bobbed back and forth. When she finished, she bowed deeply in front of him, threw kisses, then went back to the ladies' room.

Ellen and her father sat on orange chairs for an hour, waiting for the movie star to come out of the bathroom.

Ellen sat with her legs together, her parka zipped to her chin. She held the bags of new clothes tight to her chest, including the one with the real bra. She prayed her father wouldn't ask to see what she bought with his money.

Her father sat, bent over with his elbows on his wide-open knees like a man on the toilet, smoking and flicking ashes from his cigarette on the floor of the new mall.

"Not being a woman," he said, "I've got my own opinions." He took a long pull on his cigarette. "The way I see it, looks without brains beats brains without looks. Know what I mean?"

Ellen nodded to a spot on the floor several feet in front of her father.

"Like this one," he said, waving his smoke at the ladies' room. "She got lucky. Any guy would kill himself to show her a good time."

From the side, her father looked like a different person.
"This would make more sense if you were a boy," he said. "I don’t know about girls, but this is the way boys think. I guess that’s my point."

On the long drive home, the Polaroid picture lay on the seat between them. The shot was centered on the pasty film star. Ellen was partly off-frame, her arm and shopping bag cropped by the border.

She remembered how the woman smelled as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, smiling for her father — like hairspray, smoke and spearmint.

"Thank you, honey," Jayne Mansfield had said, after the flash.

"Okay," said Ellen.

"No, thank you," said her father, lowering the camera, smiling gamely at the woman and ignoring his daughter.

Ellen lay curled on her daughter’s bed, under the pile of soft toys, listening to the people downstairs. The rustling of winter coats shuffling toward the door, the abrupt burst of contrived goodbyes. They were leaving early. Tell Ellen this, tell Ellen that, they were saying. Sorry, sorry, sorry.

Ellen rolled toward the wall. The thin bed shuddered with her quiet cries.

Downstairs, Tim marched through the house, fortifying — turning off lights, locking doors. He came up the stairs and stopped in front of their lost daughter’s room.

"El," he said. "Everybody’s gone. You can come out now."

He stood outside the door, waiting for something. Ellen made herself smaller in the dark.

"Okay," he said. "I’ll be in our room if you need me."

She heard the television and the sounds of her husband in the bathroom. From the TV came sounds of a man and woman talking. Set-up and punchline. Thrust and parry. The rush of phony laughter.