Still Bobbi

Still Bobbi BOBBI BROWN

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Still Bobbi



PROLOGUE

"I WON'T WANT TO WORK WHEN I'M SIXTY."

The year was 1995, and I was sitting with my husband, Steven, at our dining room table, ready to sign the biggest contract of my life.

Bobbi Brown Cosmetics, the little makeup company we founded in 1991, had been outselling the giant corporations, and it didn't

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take long for one of those giants—Estée Lauder—to approach us with an eye-popping offer. There was only one catch: as part of the deal, I couldn't start another competing company for twenty-five years.

Steven gave me a wary look as my pen hovered over the dotted line. "Are you sure?" he said.

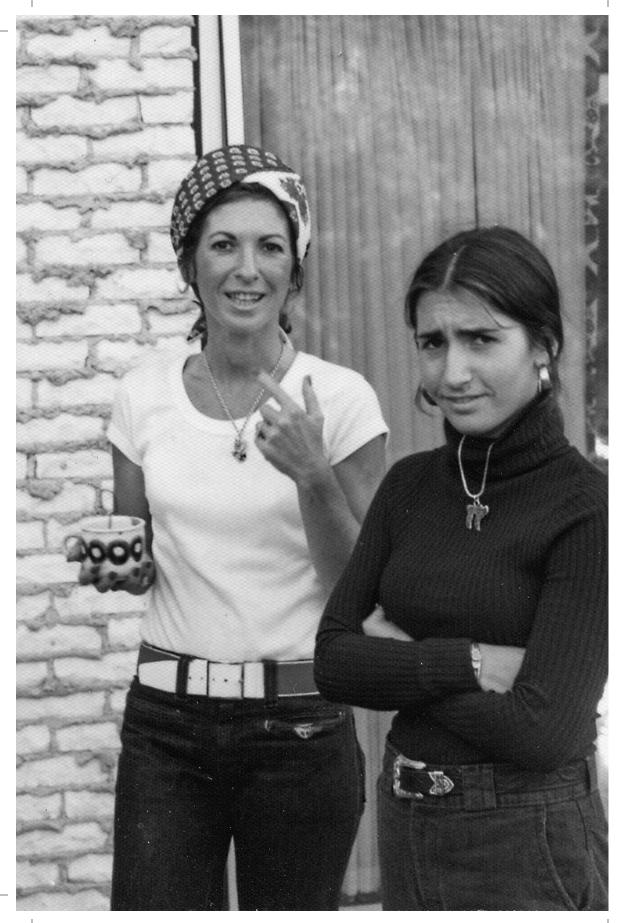
I did the math on my fingers. I was thirty-seven years old. In twenty-five years, I'd be . . . thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty . . . sixty-two! Time to retire! Pour me a tequila shot!

I turned to Steven and uttered those famous last words: I won't want to work when I'm sixty.

Fast-forward twenty-one years, to 2016, when things got complicated at Estée Lauder and I left with four and a half years remaining on my non-compete. At fifty-nine years old, I could retire. My kids were out of the house. I never needed to work again. Most people would have taken a year off, gone to Paris, learned to play tennis. I gave it some thought, but none of that interested me. I never had hobbies. For the last twenty-five years, I'd been working building a business, and when I wasn't working, I had three hungry boys to feed, PTA meetings and baseball games to attend, a sink full of dishes to wash, and a pile of kids' sneakers to tidy. Those were my hobbies. On the precious few occasions when all that work was done, you'd find me picking out paints to redecorate the kitchen, or new throw pillows for the couch. My mind loves creative work. In fact, it's not even work. It's a passion.

There I was, at sixty, with no demands on my time and nothing but time to spare. I still felt that same creative passion, but where could I put it?

After climbing my way up from a struggling freelance makeup artist to having created a billion-dollar company, what comes next?



PART ONE

KNOW WHERE YOU'RE FROM



CHAPTER ONE

NANA AND PAPA

At the age of fourteen my grandfather Papa Sam sailed from Ukraine to America, alone.

Imagine leaving your home as a child, saying goodbye to all that is familiar and comforting, and traveling across the world to a place where you don't speak the language and everyone is a stranger. He must have suffered lonely nights missing home, but he didn't wallow. Wallowing was a luxury he couldn't afford. He got on with it.

At first he hawked newspapers on the city streets to well-heeled

Chicagoans. Then he sold ladies' handbags downtown. For a struggling immigrant, there was no such thing as a career. He took whatever jobs made money, whatever jobs put a warm meal in his stomach. But he was always searching for the next step up, the next opportunity to become something better.

He scrimped and eventually saved enough money to buy a gas station. One day, someone abandoned a car there. When he was sure the owner was never coming back, Papa Sam sold the car for three hundred dollars, and a new career was born. Across the street from the gas station stood an empty store next to a restaurant. He went into the restaurant and said, "Someone is going to open a competing restaurant next to you and drive you out of business, but if you lend me two thousand dollars, I'll open a car dealership instead." That's how he became a car dealer, selling cars to nice suburban families and to infamous gangsters like Al Capone and Meyer Lansky.

Papa Sam met my grandmother Hermina (everyone called her Minnie) at a party in Chicago in the late 1920s. The details are lost to time, but I can imagine what it must have been like: the fashion, the makeup, the music. They made quite a couple. He was a little five-foot-five man who dressed impeccably and talked with a tough guy's Chicago accent. She was a tiny woman who never raised her voice and who loved her family ferociously.

Both Nana and Papa were incredibly hard working and very old-fashioned. Papa was the head of the family, no question about it. Nana's whole life was Papa and her children—and later, her grand-children. She never attended college, and never had a job. She came from an era when a woman handled the domestic responsibilities,

and she did it happily. Papa usually worked late, and Nana waited for him to come home before serving dinner. The second he opened the front door, it was all about him.

Soon after they married, Nana and Papa welcomed their first daughter, Alice. Six years later came my mother, Sandra. It was the depths of the Great Depression, but Papa Sam had a special ability to survive and flourish. He sold enough cars to keep his family afloat and to spoil my mother like crazy—according to my Aunt Alice, the eldest child, who swears she never got the same treatment. Papa Sam even named his car dealership Sandra Motors, after my mother, so enthralled was he by his baby girl.

By the 1950s, Papa Sam was called "Cadillac Sam" and had built one of the biggest car dealerships in Chicago. He was proud of his business, and proud of the radio and TV commercials he starred in. Everywhere he went, whether a sandwich shop, a clothing store, or the fruit market in Skokie, everyone treated him like a king. He loved being a big shot. He'd go to the same restaurants, a five-dollar bill folded in his hand for the maître d', and push open the doors to the refrain: "Sam! You're here!" A waiter would then show him to his table and plug in a phone at Papa's booth in case he needed to make a call.

As a local businessman of note, he was selected to meet Harry Truman during a presidential visit to Chicago in the 1940s. Imagine the transformation: the immigrant boy who spoke no English to the businessman deemed worthy to meet the president of the United States. It must have blown his mind. Sadly, he died in 1996, long before President Obama appointed me to the US International Trade Commission. Whenever President Obama would see me, he'd say

"Hey, B-Squared, what's going on?" and I'd think of Papa. He would have been so proud.

When Papa Sam was pushing eighty, he was convinced to retire. Who wants to work when they're eighty? Well, as it turned out, Papa Sam did. He didn't have hobbies (I guess I got that from him). All he knew was work. Without his work, he became depressed. His life, his purpose, was providing for his family. So, he unretired. He had a promotional brochure printed and sent to his old customers. It featured a picture of him holding his great-grandson (my oldest son, Dylan, six months old). The caption read: "I tried to retire, and I didn't like it. So I'm back and I have a deal for you."

What made me think I would want to retire at sixty?



CHAPTER TWO

MEET THE BROWNS

My mother was the most glamorous woman I have ever known. To me, she looked like a young Jackie Kennedy. She was five foot two and always wore high heels to gain a couple extra inches. As a child, she struggled with her weight, so when she lost it later in life, she loved to show off in the tightest clothes she could find, emphasizing her tiny waist. I never saw her without impeccable makeup, hair, and outfit. As a child, I'd stare at her as she stood in front of the mirror and made up her face, her lit cigarette hanging off the edge of the counter. I watched the way her delicate fingers grasped

her charcoal eyebrow pencil as she carefully filled in her eyebrows. With a toothpick she'd put on her false eyelashes, then rub bronzer on her cheeks and uncap one of her lipstick tubes to apply a pale lip. That's how I fell in love with makeup and beauty.

At a college party, my mom met my dad, James (Joe) Brown, and fell in love. They were two very young beautiful people who also happened to share the experience of being chubby kids. My dad's nickname growing up was Fat Boy, but when he lost all the weight in high school, he looked like a young Michael Landon. He had piercing blue eyes that could light up a room. My girlfriends were obsessed with him. They called him Gorge, as in "gorgeous," and they'd come over just to get a look at him. Still, he always had that old nickname in the back of his head. As a result, he too put great importance on appearances.

My parents were loving, wonderful people. When I was born in 1957, they were only twenty-one and twenty-two years old. Brother Michael came about three years later, and Linda, who was my little doll, came two and a half years after that, which meant my parents had three kids by the time they were in their mid-twenties. No one thought twice about such a thing back then.

They dealt with that pressure in different ways. My dad, a brilliant, well-read, successful lawyer, wanted to be original, to break out of the mold. His law practice gave him a steady salary, but it wasn't his passion. During my childhood, he tried to reinvent himself several times. He loved writing, so he first pivoted from law to work as a

magazine travel writer. They sent him to Croatia and other far-off places. He pivoted from that and became a day trader, then he started a junket business, where he'd take gamblers on a private plane to the Bahamas or Las Vegas. That was fun because he often took Michael, Linda, and me with him. He was chasing his dreams, but he realized he couldn't support us with these jobs, so he reopened his law practice. Watching him, I realized that life could be more exciting than working an unfulfilling job. I learned that I could chase and fulfill my passion. I knew he wanted that for me too.

Later in life, I found a manuscript my dad had written about a New York City taxi driver named Marceau who teaches the world about imagination and curiosity. As a gift for my dad's seventieth birthday, I had a friend at Scholastic print one hundred books, and on a trip, I put them in a bookstore window in Telluride, Colorado. We walked by on the way to dinner, and upon seeing his own book there, he was floored. We went inside so he could take it all in. He could not stop talking about what a gift it was. We later went on a press tour together in New York City—including a spot on the *Today* show with Al Roker and book signings with Ann Curry. Dad ended up retiring early, walking away from his law practice and becoming a full-time children's book author. Scholastic edited and reprinted his first book and updated it with art he had commissioned. He has now written ten books, many of them self-published. At age ninety, he still reads in classrooms and teaches the power of imagination. Lesson learned: passion and work are a winning combination.

My mom tried hard to make me feel special and I absolutely adored her. When I was little, she was always there when I needed her. And as I grew older, she loved sharing her beauty rituals with

me. She'd take me to Woolworth once a week and buy a big tub of Queen Helene clay mask, which we'd take home and rub on our faces for an at-home spa night. Waiting for the mask to work its magic, we'd do manicures and pedicures, then we'd wash off the mask and moisturize, moisturize, moisturize. In later years, sometimes she'd wax my legs and my bikini line. She was very practical. Yes, we could have gone to the salon, but why not do it at home? I'd lie on the kitchen table, and she'd set newspapers down and get to work.

On occasion, my mom let me skip school. She'd pull her credit card out and say, "Charge it!" and we'd go running out the door on a shopping spree. If I saw something I liked, she wanted me to get it in three colors. My dad made enough money at his law practice so that we were comfortably upper-middle class, but we certainly weren't rich. I didn't take these extravagances for granted.

My mother needed to be the perfect wife, the perfect housekeeper, the perfect mother. Maybe as a result, I felt I needed to be perfect for her.

My mother's perfectionism in the house might explain why I'm a little nutty to this day with visual order. I can walk into any room and immediately find what's wrong with it. I've learned this ability does not always endear you to others, but I came by it honestly. My mother inspected our bedrooms every Monday after school. She wanted the clothes folded in the drawers like she had folded them when she put the laundry away. Dirty clothes needed to be in a hamper. Everything had a place. And if things weren't in pristine order, we couldn't leave the house until we'd fixed what was wrong. Early on, I learned to keep my room clean so I could go out to play. I guess I always had a practical mind.

When I was in middle school my mom started to act different—a little sad, a bit paranoid. Just off. She could be biting about my looks and my weight. Until then I'd experienced a warm and caring mother most of the time. But she had such high standards. I wanted to be perfect as a result. I remember feeling I wasn't good enough, smart enough, thin enough, or pretty enough for her.

It soon became clear my mom was struggling with mental illness. And when she got sick, things could turn dark, fast. She tried to take her life several times. Once, she jumped out of a car while she was driving. The car swerved out of control and brought down a streetlamp before ending up totaled on the side of the road. My mother walked away with a broken fingernail, and missing a heel on her shoe. We later learned she was bipolar, but she had to live through an era when no one talked about mental health and there was limited understanding of it, let alone help in dealing with such things.

I was thirteen when my mother had her first nervous breakdown and ended up in a hospital for a few months. My dad hired a woman to come in and create a semblance of stability for us. She'd make hamburgers for dinner, put the buns on the grill and slather them with mayonnaise. Bread and mayo! My mother would have never allowed that. It was a huge treat in a hard time. After dinner, Dad and I would drive to visit Mom, just the two of us. Michael, at ten years old, and Linda, at eight, were too young. Driving half an hour to the locked hospital ward downtown gave me and my dad a chance to bond. He'd pop in the 8-track, and we'd listen to rock music—he loved Creedence Clearwater Revival—while we talked about school, my brother, my sister, my mom.

One of the best things about each of my parents was that I could

talk to them. When my mom was healthy, I shared things with her that most kids would never tell their mom. The first time I smoked pot as a teenager, I came home and said, "Guess what I just did?" She didn't punish, judge, or lecture me. She just told me to be careful.

I felt equally comfortable with my dad. Having those heart-toheart moments with him while driving to see my mom made me feel pretty grown up, but I was still a child dealing with things that were too heavy for me to understand.

At the hospital, my mom was usually quiet and depressed. They gave her lithium, which numbed her. She spent most of her time making ashtrays and crocheting napkins. Seeing her like that was difficult and heartbreaking, but the scariest part was seeing the other patients walking around making all kinds of noises. It was like a scene from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. My mother got better, but she always struggled. She ended up in the hospital several more times during my childhood.

When things got tough at home, Nana and Papa's house became my sanctuary. They lived thirty minutes away in the city. I'd often be with Nana in the evening, waiting for Papa to come home from work. Then we'd sit around the table listening to stories from his day while Nana served him dinner. After dinner, we would stuff envelopes full of brochures and advertisements for his car dealership and lick the stamps for him to mail out the next day.

I grew up watching the way Papa did business, the way he treated his salesmen, his mechanics, his customers—many had been with him for decades—and even strangers off the street. One time a man came into the dealership carrying a big shopping bag. He looked rough, possibly homeless. None of the sales guys would go near

him, but Papa Sam put his arm around the man and said, "How ya doing, boss?" Turns out the shopping bag was full of cash, and the man bought two cars that day.

These were invaluable lessons to me. They gave me an entrepreneurial mindset from an early age. When I was about twelve years old, my friends and I started a jewelry store called LBJ (Lynn, Bobbi, and Janice). Our headquarters were in my parents' basement. We'd make little bracelets and necklaces, put them on display, and wait for customers to arrive. I'm not sure what customers we were expecting in the basement. Nevertheless, it was an early attempt to do what Papa Sam did.

Papa and Nana always made me feel important. When I think of Nana, I think of rose perfume and unconditional love. She loved the essence of me. She made it okay to be myself. In my house, there were rules. With Nana, the rules were relaxed. She loved to spoil me at the soda shop. She'd buy me pretzels and ice cream floats, and tip the soda jockey enough that he remembered her name. After a few trips with Nana, he remembered my name too. It felt special to be included in her world.

Papa wasn't as quick to spoil me as Nana was, but it didn't take much to get past his gruff exterior to the mush inside. He once let me, Michael, and Linda dress him up in girls' clothes and makeup. We made him wear high heels and walk around the room while we howled with laughter. He loved us so much, he'd let us do whatever we wanted.

This powerful, loving connection helped me navigate my home life. After my mom's first breakdown, my dad checked out of the marriage. I'm sure it was tough for him. He had to work full time,

support my mother, and deal with three kids at home. I think he did a phenomenal job, but it was just too much.

The summer after eighth grade, I learned my parents were getting divorced. During a trip to my grandparents' lake house in Michiana, my parents took us all for a walk. As my brother and sister trailed behind us out of earshot, my mother and father held hands and said, "Bobbi, can we talk to you? We just want to tell you, we're getting a divorce." I was flabbergasted. I never even heard them fighting. I didn't know anyone who was divorced.

I don't remember much of what came next. I'm sure I was sad, and I knew I had to put on a good face and a good front for my brother and sister. But mostly, I accepted it. Besides, I had reached the age when nothing is more important than your friends.

By the time my parents decided to divorce, my mom was healthy enough to take custody of us kids. Dad remained in our lives, but it was a bumpy transition. On our first outing alone with him, he took us to a Cubs game, with seats near the field. I was having a great time until a foul ball came and smacked me in the head. The second visit, my dad took us to see a cousin in Wisconsin. This guy raised animals in his backyard, including caged lions and tigers. My sister petted a lion on his nose between the bars of the cage, and it chomped down on her hand. My dad slammed his body against the cage and the lion opened its jaws to show my sister's finger dangling by a thread of skin. Luckily, they reattached it at the hospital.

Meanwhile, my mother's hairdresser introduced her to his exfather-in-law, Norty, and they fell madly in love. My mother was incredibly happy with Norty. He offered her stability, which she needed. They got married, and all of a sudden, our house was a