City of Girls; a novel

(a summary by Pat Evert)

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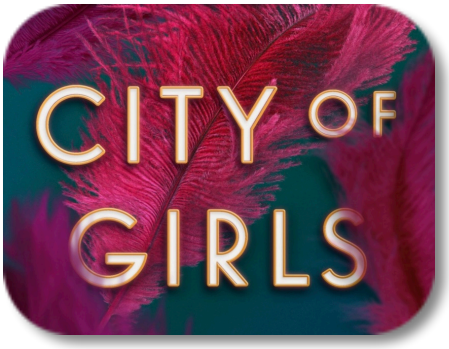

I received a letter from his daughter the other day. Angela. I'd thought about Angela many times over the years. "Vivian," Angela wrote, "given that my mother has passed away, I wonder if you might now feel comfortable telling me what you were to my father?"

In the summer of 1940, when I was nineteen years old and an idiot, my parents sent me to live with my Aunt Peg, who owned a theater company in New York City. I had recently been excused from Vassar College, on account of never having attended classes and thereby failing every single one of my freshman exams. Out of a class of 362 bright young Vassar women, I ended up ranked at 361. So Vassar sent me home—fair enough— and kindly requested that I not return. My older brother, Walter, was off doing great things at Princeton, and giving no thought to me, other than to disapprove of my irresponsible behavior. Walter had never done an irresponsible thing in his life. Accompanying this nineteen-year-old virgin to New York City were two large suitcases— one filled with my clothes, all folded neatly in tissue, and the other packed with fabrics, trimmings, and sewing supplies, so that I could make more clothes. Also joining me was a sturdy crate containing my sewing machine—a heavy and unwieldy beast, awkward to transport. But it was my demented, beautiful soul-twin, without which I could not live.

My grandmother was the most colorful woman in the world. She loved drama. Obviously, I loved her. The rest of the family, though, didn't. My grandmother embarrassed everyone but me. It was Grandmother Morris who taught me how to sew. She was a master seamstress. And that was serious business. She wasn't afraid to demand excellence from me. When I was thirteen, Grandmother Morris bought me the sewing machine, a black Singer 201. From earliest childhood, I'd always been too tall, too lanky. Nothing purchased at a store was ever going to fit right, so it would always be better for me to make my own clothes.

Aunt Peg was a nurse in WWI, but had learned that she was even better putting on an entertainment show for the soldiers. She had married a very wealthy soldier, Billy Buell, but the marriage ended after a few years. With her half of the royalties she bought herself a big, old, run-down New York City theater of her very own: the Lily Playhouse.

The Lily Playhouse was unlike any world I'd ever inhabited. It was a living animation of glamour and grit and mayhem and fun—a world full of adults behaving like children. I swiftly learned, to my head-spinning astonishment, that no figure of authority was going to be monitoring my comings and goings anymore. I had nobody to report to and nothing was expected of me. If I wanted to help out with costumes, I could, but I was given no formal job. There was no curfew, no head count in the beds at night. There was no house warden; there was no mother. I was free. Peg was of the mind that **people should make their own decisions about their own lives**, if you can imagine such a preposterous thing! As Peg had learned back in the Great War—when she used to produce cheerful song-and-dance skits for soldiers who'd just lost limbs, or had their throats burned out with mustard gas—"Sometimes people just need to think about something else." On the third floor, where I got to live, I shared a room with Celia, a showgirl. I got to be near her glamour, and she got to be near my sink. I was rich, and I was spoiled. I'd been raised during the Great Depression, true, but the crisis never affected my family in any pressing manner. Yet, I didn't know I was rich.

I've never seen anyone who could get more deeply lost in a mirror than Celia Ray. She could stand for ages in the glory of her own reflection, nearly deranged by her own beauty. One evening, it came to the attention of the showgirls that I was still a virgin. But the truth was, I did not want to be a virgin anymore. Not even for another day. So they fixed me up with a gentle man for my first time.

Celia and I cultivated an almost hysterical commitment to having a good time. Essentially, our chosen line of work that summer of 1940 was romping and rampaging—and we did it with a tirelessness that staggers my imagination even to this day. We were a pretty unstoppable duo, we were stunning. I can't say that I got good at sex during the summer. To get "good" at sex—which, for a woman, means learning how to enjoy and even orchestrate the act, to the point of her own climax—one needs time, patience, and an attentive lover.

I was living a very sheltered life, oblivious of the war in Europe. If I'd known then what I know now—namely: that so many of those beautiful young boys would soon be lost to the battlefields or to the infernos of the South Pacific—I would have had sex with even more of them. It had no consequences upon me until September of 1940. That's when Edna and Arthur Watson moved into the Lily Playhouse.

The Watsons came to New York City. But before they could sail back home to England, the Germans began the bombing of Britain. Within just a few weeks of the German attacks, the Watsons' town house in London had been obliterated by a Luftwaffe bomb. Destroyed. Everything gone. They were artists trapped in America without jobs, without a home to return to, and without safe transit back to their besieged country. So they moved in.

By the next week, my Aunt Peg had already begun creating a show for Edna to star in. She was determined to give her friend a job, and it had to be a better job than what the Lily Playhouse currently had to offer—because you can't very well put one of the

greatest actresses of her age in Dance Away, Jackie! Uncle Billy couldn't resist making the trip out from Los Angeles when Peg told him. He couldn't resist trying to make a good show for her.

Within a week of his arrival, Billy Buell had written a script for City of Girls. He was monstrously talented, but also monstrously inclined toward laziness. Peg loved the script. Edna did too. Now they had the top actress and a great script to create a hit production. So they now had to decide on bringing up the quality of everything else, more dancers, actors, songs, costumes, advertising, etc.

Anthony Rochella made the male lead role. He was one of immense self-confidence. If you're a fellow who can sensually send a woman to the moon without even needing anything in return, why wouldn't you think awfully highly of yourself? I felt it. There was a sensation occurring here that I didn't even know could occur. I took the sharpest inhale of my life, and I'm not sure I let my breath out for another ten minutes. I do feel that I lost the ability to see and hear for a while, and that something might have short-circuited in my brain—something that has probably never been fully fixed since. My whole being was astonished. I could hear myself making noises like an animal, and my legs were shaking uncontrollably (not that I was trying to control them). Then it became more. And after that, it became even more still. Then I screamed as though I were being run over by a train, and that long arm of his was reaching up again to palm my mouth, and I bit into his hand the way a wounded soldier bites on a bullet. And then it was the most, and I more or less died. He never even took his clothes off that night. That boy had ravaged me right to the point of unconsciousness without even removing the jacket of his cheap, cute suit! I don't mind telling you, Angela—he waited until I was begging for it. I wanted Anthony, and he was in no hurry to give me what I wanted, which only made me want him more.

We had a hit on our hands. Within the space of a week, we'd gone from begging people to come see our little play to turning them away at the gates. By Christmas, both Peg and Billy had made back all the money they'd invested, and now the shekels were really pouring in. What makes someone a star is when the people decide to love you en masse.

One fateful night I went out on the town with Celia Ray and Arthur Watson. The three of us wound up in a passionate kiss in the streets. I pulled my mouth away from Arthur's to catch my breath, and in the next instant, Celia's lips were on mine. This triad would have been more satisfying if the man in question hadn't been Arthur Watson. This was caught by a reporter and my friends had to quickly and courageously go to bat for me to keep my name out of the tabloid article. This saved me from embarrassment with all my family, but it still had its consequences. Celia was fired from the play, I was alienated from Edna and Anthony and left New York to again live with my parents. The fun was over.

In the past day and a half, I'd been drunk and screwed and scared and debased and dumped and reproached. I'd lost my best friend, my boyfriend, my community, my fun job, my self-respect, and New York City. I'd just been informed by Edna, a woman whom I loved and admired, that I was a nothing of a human being—and moreover that I would always be a nothing. My brother Walter had to get special permission from his commanding officer in the navy, and borrow a car with its driver to take me back home that evening. On the trip Walter tore into me for an hour. Then the other soldier said something that finished the discussion - "Must be pretty disappointing for a stand-up guy like you, Walt, to end up with a sister who's such **a dirty little whore**." Those words did more than just sting; they burned me all the way to the center of my being. I was a dirty little whore. I had done such a rotten thing to Edna Parker Watson. To betray a person who has helped you and been kind to you—this is the furthest reach of shame. I walked through more agitated days, and slept fitfully through even worse nights. I did everything I was told to do, and caused no trouble to anyone, but I still could not solve the problem of how to bear myself.

A year later Aunt Peg had come to enlist my help and bring me back to New York City. We had been commissioned by the military to put on a series of lunchtime shows for workers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Some propaganda, some song-and-dance numbers, some romantic dramas and such. To keep up morale. I don't regret it. It was an adventure. You must learn in life to take things more lightly, my dear. **The world is always changing. Learn how to allow for it. If you get too upset about it all, you become a stupid, unhappy person—and where's the good in that?**

Needless to say, I became a fixture at Lowtsky's Used Emporium and Notions—even more than before the war. Marjorie Lowtsky, who was now in high school, became my partner in costuming. New York was a different place now than it had been my first time around. Frivolity was dead—unless it was useful and patriotic frivolity, like dancing with soldiers and sailors at the Stage Door Canteen. What I most remember about the war years was an overriding sense of coarseness. We didn't suffer in New York City like so many people across the world were suffering, but nothing was fine anymore—no butter, no pricey cuts of meat, no quality makeup, no fashions from Europe. Nothing was soft. Nothing was a delicacy. The **war was a vast, starving colossus that needed everything from us**—not just our time and labor, but also our cooking oil, our rubber, our metals, our paper, our coal. We were left with mere scraps. **It'll all end soon enough**.

My brother's ship, the USS Franklin, had been hit by a kamikaze pilot on March 19, 1945, killing Walter and over eight hundred other men. We had just come through a world war in which millions died and millions more saw their lives destroyed. In 1950 the Lily Playhouse closed, or more accurately she was demolished. The city was making room for the Port Authority Bus Terminal. In fact, our entire neighborhood was torn down. Peg said, **"Resist change at your own peril, Vivian. When something ends, let it end."** Marjorie Lowtsky and I had become best friends. She suggested that we join forces in the world, by living together and working together. Her plan—was to make wedding gowns, custom tailored. Classic. Marjorie and I made sublime wedding gowns

together for decades; we earned enough money to support ourselves comfortably; we took care of each other like family; and I live in that same building to this day.
Then in 1955, Marjorie got pregnant. Moreover, Nathan her son was not easy. He was colicky and underweight, and it was a struggle to get him to take the bottle. Time passed and Nathan grew older but not much bigger. He was such a squirt of a thing— we realized that we could not possibly enroll this kid in public school. He was without a father and very fearful.

In late summer of 1965, the Navy Yard would soon be closing down forever. Before it closed, however, the Yard would host a ceremonial reunion, in celebration of all the Brooklyn workers who had labored there so heroically during World War II. It was the twentieth anniversary of the end of the war. After the ceremony a uniformed patrolman approached me. “Did I hear you correctly when you said your name is Vivian Morris?” “That’s right, sir.” “You said your brother was killed in the war?” “That’s correct.” “Your brother was Walter Morris, wasn’t he?” he asked. I’m Frank Grecco, “I met you back in 1941. I was the guy who drove you home to your parents’ house.” This was the guy who had called me a dirty little whore, right in front of my brother. And that, Angela, is how I officially met your father. **The field of honor is a painful field. If you wish to be a person of character, I’m afraid this is the only way**. Eventually, all of us will be called upon to do the thing that cannot be done. That is the painful field, Angela. All those predicaments that we humans find ourselves in—**predicaments that we never see coming, do not know how to handle, and then cannot fix**. Due to the burns Frank received from the kamakazi attack he couldn’t be in an enclosed space, and he couldn’t sit still. And he couldn’t be touched.

Of course I fell in love with your father, Angela. We could not possibly have been more different. But maybe that’s where love grows best—in the deep space that exists between polarities. He was a devout Catholic, a police officer, and a veteran who had been through hell in service to his country. There was nothing of the sensualist about him. We had spent one dreadful day together, back in 1941—a day that had left the both of us shamed and scarred. Why would that day have led us to falling in love, twenty years later? We told each other everything about ourselves. In the attack on his ship, he had very nearly been burned alive. And the physical pain was the least of it, to hear him tell it. While recovering in Pearl Harbor at the Navy hospital with third-degree burns over half his body, he had been served with a court-martial order. Captain Gehres, the captain of the USS Franklin, had court-martialed every single man who’d ended up in the water on the day of the attack. The captain claimed that those men had deserted, against direct orders. Those men—many of whom, like Frank, had been blown off the ship in flames—were accused of being cowards. This was the worst of it for Frank. The branding of “coward” burned him more deeply than the branding of fire. And there was no way he could go back to college now. He couldn’t sit in a classroom anymore. He tried to finish his degree, but he constantly had to leave the building, run outside, and hyperventilate. (“I can’t be in rooms with people,” as he put it.) And even if he had been able to complete his degree, what kind of job could he have gotten? The man couldn’t sit in an office. **He was disgusted with himself that he couldn’t sit still, or sleep through the night, or be touched, or have a proper career**. Frank was

burned over 60 percent of his body. Nobody else with burns as severe as Frank's had ended up surviving. It had been almost five years without seeing you or your mother. She wanted to have more children. But of course that was now impossible, because Frank could not bear to be touched. They never bickered. They were never at each other's throats. But after the war, they barely ever spoke other than to make arrangements about the family. **They were married in name only**. And with he and Rosella—things were never bad. **They just lived separate lives**. "You come back, everyone expects you to be the same guy you were before you got blown up. But **I don't have enthusiasms anymore**. After a while, people learned to leave me alone. Now it's like I'm a ghost, when I walk down those streets."

As for me, I never married. "I've found many other men, Frank. More than you could count. I've slept with a lot of men. And I will be sleeping with a lot more men in the future, I expect. Sleeping with men—lots of men—that's more or less my way of life." We wanted to be honest with one another without coming into judgment of the other. "I'm too old to hide who I am, Frank. And I'm too old to be made to feel ashamed of myself by anyone. We think there's a way that things have to be. **We try to live straight. But the world doesn't care about your rules, or what you believe.** "The world ain't straight, Vivian. Never will be. Our rules, they don't mean a thing. The world just happens to you sometimes, is what I think. And people just gotta keep moving through it, best they can." "Sex makes me satisfied, Frank," I replied. It's like this: I believe I have a certain darkness within me, that nobody can see. It's always in there, far out of reach. And being with all those different men—it satisfies that darkness." This hidden part of me could only be reached through sexual intercourse. Curiously, it was in that place of dark abandon where I felt the least sullied and most true. "You asked if it makes me happy. I don't think so. Other things in my life make me happy. My work makes me happy. My friendships and the family that I've created, they make me happy. New York City makes me happy. Walking over this bridge with you right now makes me happy. But being with all those men, that makes me satisfied, Frank. And I've come to learn that this kind of satisfaction is something I need, or else I will become unhappy."

I have never loved the people I was supposed to love, Angela. Nothing that was ever arranged for me worked out the way it was planned. My parents had pointed me in a specific direction—toward a respectable boarding school and an elite college—such that I could meet the community I was meant to belong to. But apparently, I didn't belong there, because to this day, I don't have a single friend from those worlds. Nor did I ever really feel like I belonged to my parents, or that I was meant to reside in the small town where I grew up. But then I moved to New York City, and I came to know my Aunt Peg, an unconventional and irresponsible lesbian, who drank too much and spent too much money, and who only wanted to cavort through life with a sort of hop-skip-tralala—and I loved her. Far more than I loved my own mother or father. Then I met Marjorie Lowtsky —an eccentric Hell's Kitchen teenager whose immigrant parents were in the rag trade. She was not at all the sort of person I was supposed to befriend. But she became not only my business partner, but my sister. I loved her, Angela, with all my heart. Then came Marjorie's son, Nathan—this weak little boy who was allergic to life itself. I'm telling you all this because I want you to understand that—over the next few years—I

came to love your father just as much as I loved any of them. **Love like that is a deep well, with steep sides. Once you fall in, that's it—you will love that person always**. A few nights a week, for years on end, your father would call me at some odd hour and say, "Are you awake? Do you want to go for a walk?" It didn't take us long to walk every neighborhood in Manhattan, and so pretty soon we started exploring the outer boroughs, as well. I never met anybody who knew the city better. The city was not a safe place back then, but we walked through it as though we were untouchable. There was a clarity about Frank—a deep and unshakable integrity. It was soothing to be with a man who never boasted about himself (so rare, in men of that generation!). **There was nothing I could ever tell him about myself that he would judge or criticize. My own glints of darkness did not frighten him; he had such darkness of his own that nobody else's shadows scared him**. Most of all, though, he listened. He was never going to leave his wife and daughter. I knew that, Angela. That's not who he was. And I was never going to lure him into bed. Lastly, I can't be certain that Frank and I would have shared the same depth of love and tenderness for each other, had sex ever been part of our story. **Sex is so often a cheat—a shortcut of intimacy. A way to skip over knowing somebody's heart by knowing, instead, their mere body**. So what were we to each other? What would you call it? We were something more than friends—that was certain. Nothing about us was normal. What were we? We were Frank and Vivian, walking through New York City together, while everyone else slept. That's when he turned to look at me. "I can't live without you, Vivian," he said. "Good. You'll never have to." And that, Angela, was the closest your father and I ever came to saying I love you.

Frank was not upset that you were dating a black man, Angela. Not for a minute. I hope you know that. More than anything, he was awed by your courage and confidence, to bring Winston to South Brooklyn. He saw the looks on the neighbors' faces. It brought him satisfaction to see how uncomfortable you had made the neighborhood—and **to see that other people's judgments would not stop you**.

In the twelve years of our relationship, there were places within me that Frank alone could reach with his listening—and I would never be able to reach those places on my own. So you have waited a long time for your answer, Angela, about what I was to your father—or what he was to me. Angela: your father and I never embraced, we never kissed, we never had sex. **He was the only man I ever really loved, though, with all my heart**. And he loved me, too. That said, I do want to tell you that over the years, your father finally reached a **point of ease with me** where he could rest the back of his hand on my palm without flinching in pain.