

EXCERPT FROM

FAIRYBOY

Growing up Gay and Out
in Pre-Stonewall New York
and Beyond

by Garrett Glaser

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MURIEL



**Muriel Glaser and her dog, Daisy,
in front of Ffolio 72, circa 1967.**

My parents divorced when I was five, in 1958. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, my father faithfully came to visit every Saturday or Sunday. He was a steady presence in my life.

My mother was Dad's second wife. His first was a Mexican-American woman named Juanita Tipper, about whom I know nothing. They were married briefly in the 1940s during World War II, when Dad was in training in San Diego, but the marriage was annulled a short

time later. Dad joked several times that the reason was that Juanita had cooked a rabbit he had given to her as a pet. I couldn't tell if he was kidding and didn't ask him.

In 1959, Dad married for the third and final time, to Muriel Imbrey Kunstler. Muriel, whose nickname was Moo, was a Manhattan divorcée who had grown up on Park Avenue. Everyone agreed that she was exceptionally stylish—always beautifully dressed. She was funny and generous when sober, but wicked mean when drunk, when she had a mouth like a sailor. Unfortunately, she was drunk much of the time. (Although an alcoholic himself for much of his life, Dad was not an abusive one. He discovered Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in the early 1970s and, as far as I know, never took another drink.) Having worked for years in luxury retail, Muriel sensed I was gay before I did. She confronted me about it when I was fourteen. It was December 25, 1967, at their annual Christmas Day party—for Jews mostly—in the living room of Dad and Moo's apartment on East 68th Street.

Moo enjoyed referring to herself as The Wicked Stepmother, and she certainly was one that day, shouting across the living room past the dozen guests, the Christmas tree, the gifts near the fireplace and into my corner. I was wearing a new navy blazer with gold buttons. She used my nickname.

“Gabby,” she screamed, “you’re a fag! Did you hear me? Listen to me, Gabby!!!”

I said nothing. Just gazed in her direction as she sat in a small, upholstered chair near the chintz sofa.

Oddly, I displayed no anger or signs of shame during her attack. I was numb. Soon, in her raspy smoker's voice, my sloshed stepmom went in for more, emphasizing the word “fag” in case anyone misunderstood.

“Gabby, you are gay!” she screamed. “I can tell! You don’t know it yet, but I know many queens; and believe me, you are definitely a FAG!”

The volume of conversations dropped, but the guests still chatted and managed to hear each other above her rant. Perhaps they figured if they carried on determinedly, all of the unpleasantness would disappear. Alas, it did not.

Finally, Muriel took a breath and paused. By then, all conversations in the room had ceased. I looked around, but no one met my gaze. They were looking here, there, and everywhere but not at me.

A longtime family friend, Alfred Gordon, approached my father, who was standing just a few feet away clutching his Dewar’s Rocks. Alfred leaned in and whispered, “Ah, Bernie, Muriel’s riding kind of rough on Garrett.”

Could it be? Had Dad not noticed? Not heard any of it? Amazingly, I didn’t think Dad *had* noticed. Over the years, he had become skilled at ignoring Muriel’s drunken explosions. In an instant, though, he “came to” and shouted at her, “Knock it off, Muriel!” He picked up a book of matches from the mahogany table next to him and flung it at her as hard as he could. The matches bounced off her shoulder and, if she felt them, she didn’t let on. I figured she was too wasted to notice.

Actually, Muriel was wrong when she said that I didn’t know I was gay. I wasn’t unaware of the feelings I was having about boys. I simply wasn’t sure what they meant. At fourteen, I wasn’t prepared to have an honest conversation with myself about the meaning of my sexual attraction to other boys at school. Eventually, though, I came to suspect—deep down, in my deepest heart – that yes, I was homosexual. After all, I would soon be in tenth grade and girls still held no allure for me; boys did.

My reactions in these sorts of scenarios were problematic. They were invisible. Even before puberty, a purposeless grin had become my default for processing trauma. Whenever I witnessed a fight of any kind, even an embarrassment or awkward moment, I would simper rather hollowly, occasionally adding, in the faint hope of smoothing things over, what I hoped would read as a witty remark. I needed to reassure myself that, no matter what ugliness had occurred, everything would turn out fine. At the time I didn't realize that I was developing a pattern of reacting to trauma and conflict this way. My mantra seemed to be, "Don't panic. It's all right. Everything will be normal again."

I eventually realized that Muriel thought the words fag, gay and queen were identical and, therefore, interchangeable. After all, working at Bendel's on 57th Street, she'd been around homosexuals for years. In fact, there was usually a sprinkling of gay men at the gatherings she and Dad threw during the year.

Some of these gents, especially the ones with artsy jobs, were markedly effeminate. They could afford to live out of the closet and did. But others in more serious careers, attorneys and physicians and such, were confined by familial or cultural norms, often legally married to women and decidedly more conventional in appearance and demeanor. These were the great undeclared with no interest in living life in the sunlight. These were mostly the gay men I met growing up with my family in Manhattan.

I quickly learned to categorize the "queeny" ones.

I'd say to myself, "Oh, he's gay."

I understood them. But those other, more closeted men my parents and stepparents knew didn't seem a bit effeminate to me. In some cases, they were married, sometimes with children.

When they visited, usually on Sundays, they'd watch football with my dad and seemed in all ways "regular" guys.

Those were men living a lie, deeply in the closet to all but themselves. I didn't recognize it for a number of years. Despite all the progress toward societal acceptance, millions of men today still live their lives with a toxic lack of honesty. They still find it preferable to keep all parts of their sexuality hidden from the world.

Daddy and Moo's apartment at 315 East 68th Street was unit number 12-E. Two bedrooms, two baths, a dining room, and kitchen. It was the unit occupied by the building's developer when "315" went up in 1931. Lined with built-in bookshelves, glass brick, and indirectly lighted display spaces. The fireplace was real and I enjoyed watching my father arrange logs in it on winter Sundays.

Their books were serious hardcovers, mostly. Steinbeck. Hemingway. Sinclair Lewis. *New Yorker* magazines. The upholstery was mostly chintz: polished cotton in bold, striking floral designs of the early twentieth century. There were also fascinating *objets*, like large, confrontational African masks and vintage brass-fitted butlers' tables of dark mahogany. All the serving pieces were in Muriel's pattern, Wedgwood's Old Castle. Fittingly, a large oval-shaped antique tray played a major role in lubricating social events here. Atop it stood fifths of Johnny Walker Red, Dewar's, Gilbey's, Smirnoff, Beefeater, other distilled spirits, and a few decent reds. And in the refrigerator—always—plenty of Rheingold Extra Dry lager, a New York mainstay and the first truly delicious beer I ever tasted.

Ever the *quaintrelle*, Muriel became convinced it was only a matter of time before the world stampeded to blindingly bright home furnishings. She just knew it, intuiting it from perusing the trades—Fairchild rags mostly, like *Women's Wear Daily* and *Home Furnishings*

Daily. Soon, the cream-colored walls in the living room were chartreuse. (A boyfriend I brought there some years later pulled me aside and confided that the green in the room was so bright, he was nauseated. He was serious when he said he was going to throw up. We left.)

Moo favored Rodier couture and big, extraordinary jewelry, so stylish that it defined her. She wore heaps of it. Her huge pearls shimmered. She carried her Chanel “2.55” daily—the classic, double-flap black leather shoulder bag designed in 1955. It was the juxtaposition of that elegant appearance with her drunken outbursts that made Muriel Glaser, um, unforgettable.

For more than a decade, Muriel was part of the first-floor team at Henri Bendel and its celebrated “Street of Shops.” At first, she ran the stationery department there but was soon promoted to first-floor merchandise manager, overseeing pretty much everything. In the late 1960s, Muriel left Bendel’s to open her own store, Ffolio 72, at Madison and 72nd, across from the old Rhineland mansion (later, Ralph Lauren’s flagship store). It offered bookbinding, stationery, writing instruments and assorted pricey stuff for the desk.

I learned an important lesson working at Ffolio while in college. If an item didn’t sell, Muriel didn’t mark it down. She marked it up! Usually, that worked. Customers figured if an item was that expensive, it must be special. Ffolio did well despite Muriel’s occasional thunderous spats with clients on matters of taste, loudly directing them to “leave my store!” In one such row after the client left, Moo announced to no one in particular, “If they have *that* kind of taste, I don’t want them in here!”

Despite her neuroses and acute alcoholism, Muriel grew to become a respected force in the stationery industry, regarded as a true innovator. A growing number of her colleagues had high regard for her concepts—personal notepads in brilliant colors, using kraft stock for

letterhead stationery, handsome note cards with witty sayings in huge type, among others. All a far cry from the usual stuffy engraved vellum that had long been the standard in fine stationery.

When she retired, Moo's best friend, Doris Blau, a thoroughly wonderful and prominent antique rug dealer (Doris Leslie Blau Gallery, 5 East 57th Street, "The Soul of the Apartment is in the Carpet"), organized an industry tribute to Muriel at the St. Regis Hotel. It was the week of the National Stationery Show at the Javits Center, so *tout le monde de la papeterie* was in town. I was there on the big night and heard a speaker say, "Mrs. Glaser changed this industry's design standards." And it was true. You couldn't simply dismiss her as an aggressive shrew.

When I was thirteen, I casually mentioned to Muriel that my cousin Brian and I had gone into Tiffany & Co. at 57th Street and Fifth Avenue on one of our after-school jaunts. We had seen the huge Tiffany Diamond they had on display and wanted more, so we checked out all the men's rings they had on display. Some looked very expensive. We thought they were cool. We got to chatting with the salesmen there, who couldn't have been more patient with us. They didn't mind our asinine questions, like, "Are all sapphires blue?" and "Is there really such a thing as *white* gold?" It was then that I made the mistake of telling Muriel that Brian and I thought it might be cool to actually *work* at Tiffany & Co. because then we'd be surrounded by beautiful objects every day. That's when Moo started screaming at me: "NO SON OF MINE IS GOING TO BE A GODDAMN RING SALESMAN AT TIFFANY!" Whenever she was riled, Muriel would switch from using "stepson" to just "son."

After I thought about it, I realized that I'd breached what Muriel saw as a firm class boundary. She had long insisted that I was going to have a much more "serious" career than a job in retail. Of course, Muriel had worked in luxury retail for much of her adult life and done well at it, but, to her, ring salesmen at Tiffany were basically showgirls, and worse, fags of a

decidedly lower class. Who knew? Certainly not me. I'd never really thought about it. At the time, I didn't realize it, but it was the potential violation of *two* class boundaries that so riled her: gay *and* "lower class."

Five years after my father's death in 1981, when I'd worked my way back to New York and was anchoring a daily five-minute entertainment news segment on WABC TV Channel 7 *Eyewitness News*, I'd occasionally visit Muriel and bring along my boyfriend at the time, Michael. One evening after work, we met her out for dinner at a Second Avenue cafe called The Beach, at 70th Street. Muriel brought her friend Seema. When we walked in at about 7 o'clock, Moo was already quite drunk.

Our conversation soon turned to the high number of AIDS-related deaths in the city, much in the headlines in the early 1980s, but even more so in 1987, just before the drug AZT was introduced in March. She brought up the topic of "staying safe."

"So, what do you two *do* together?" Muriel asked loudly. "You'd better be staying safe!"

Michael was unaccustomed to discussing this sort of thing with anybody, much less parent-types. He slid down in his chair – actually, so far down that only his eyebrows remained visible above the tablecloth.

"You're oral, right?" Moo asked. "Do you suck each other's cocks? Are you cocksuckers?"

"My Harold likes that," Seema chimed in.

"I never met a man who *didn't* like it!" replied Muriel.

I took all of this to mean that these two stylish old New York broads, each now close to 70, were reveling in getting down and dirty with us young ‘uns. What they were really trying to show us was, “Aren’t we modern?”

Muriel paused, and then, without making eye contact with Seema, told her, “Actually, I always thought your Harold was a little on the faggy side.”

“What!!” gasped Seema. “Harold’s not that way, Muriel!”

“Well, I mean with those Gucci loafers,” Moo continued, “and he wears *red* socks, too.”

Hardly prescient, but I could still tell that the exchange wasn’t headed anywhere good. I saw an out.

“Ah, we’re going to head out, ladies. It was great seeing you tonight and thank you for a swell dinner.” Soon, we were home.

Moo’s tirade on Christmas Day, 1967, was one of several, over two decades, that I endured at her hands. When sober, she would praise my intelligence, or sense of humor, or the performance of my “characters,” like Victor, the Puerto Rican hairdresser. I had a collection of stream-of-conscious personalities I’d created at a young age, and they were entertaining, if stereotypical. Sometimes, being the center of attention, being “on,” simply felt comfortable to me.

Moo once confided after I’d offered some truth or other about a friend’s neuroses, “Garrett, you’re unusually insightful for a boy your age.”

But as I've pointed out, when drunk, Moo could turn brutal. People who witnessed those moments always sat quietly and let her finish. Rarely did anyone interrupt Muriel. My father occasionally confronted her, but it was never enough to stop her from behaving heartlessly—like the time she berated Dad's best friend, Phil Doyle, at the dining table. Phil's elegant wife, Marianne, had passed away a month earlier. Cancer. Phil was really missing her and had mentioned her several times over dinner. Suddenly, Muriel exploded at him and screamed, "Oh, shut up about Marianne! I'm sick of hearing her goddamned name!" For good measure, she slammed the large serving tray onto the table and then got up to go into the kitchen, ordering, as she left, "Talk about something else." Phil began bawling loudly. My father tried to comfort him.

It wasn't until years later while at the office of my psychotherapist that I realized something important: as loving and steadfast as Dad could be, he failed to protect me from his crazy wife. In his pre-AA years, Dad's inaction was understandable to me, but long after he "worked the program" and stopped drinking, my father continued to tolerate the significant verbal and emotional abuse I suffered thanks to Muriel. He was somehow never there to "nip it in the bud." I don't think Dad's passivity was intentional. It was just easier to make believe she wasn't there.



Muriel and Garrett, New York. 1988.

In the 1990s, living in Southern California, by then a decade after my father's death, I occasionally returned to New York to do a story. Sometimes I'd visit Muriel at the apartment. On one visit, which had actually been going well, she seemed to come out of nowhere with, "You know, Garrett, it wasn't the cancer that killed your father. It was your being gay."

I had matured enough by that time to no longer feel intimidated by Muriel. In fact, I still loved her enough to honor her with the truth.

"Well, if that's true, Muriel, if it was that important to him, I'd say he didn't have much of a life, did he?" I asked calmly.

Moo was shocked!

"How dare you say that about your father!"

But I chose not to engage. Strangely, given her fag-baiting, I don't think Muriel was trying to be nasty. She was expressing what she actually believed, deluded as it was. I loved my dad and thought he'd lived an amazing life. I knew he was proud of me, and he frequently said as much.

From my difficult relationship with Muriel, as well as from earlier distressing incidents in my teenage years, I learned something: I could file away memories of life's confrontational moments in their own "drawer." I grew skillful at pretending they had never occurred.

Being laughed at on the baseball field or called "fairyboy" on the school bus became distant memories. It was only after years of therapy (which I had initiated with great skepticism) that I began to think about how the clashes with my father's wife affected me. At long last, I disabused myself of the notion that there had not been any long-term psychological impact. Those moments were indeed a force in my life—traumatic episodes that marked me.

By the time I graduated from high school, I understood the importance of standing my ground, of believing in myself and of refusing to disappear into the "sad twilight world of the homosexual," as Mike Wallace so sweetly put it in CBS' infamous 1967 primetime documentary, *CBS Reports: The Homosexuals*.¹

I knew early on that I would refuse to live a life of secrecy. Too much trouble! Even at fourteen, I realized I was a good person: smart, kind, and resilient. I slowly came to realize that I was deserving of respect in the world, even if I couldn't get it from my stepmother.

¹ At the time of this writing, *CBS Reports: The Homosexuals* is available for streaming at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY7Lh8cD2e8>.