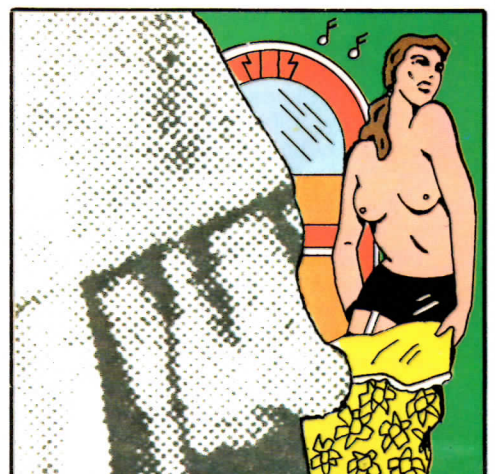
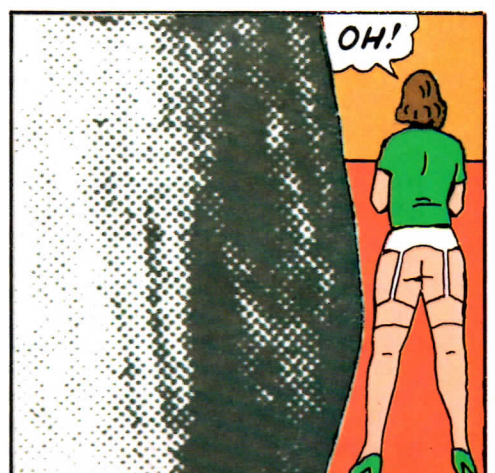


The Jewish American Princess Is Alive and Living in a Loft in SoHo



By Bette-Jane Raphael
Illustration by Lou Brooks



Once upon a time, long ago, even before 1960, there lived a princess. Not only was she a princess, she was a nice girl, too. She lived with her parents, the Pas-trami King and the Dairy Queen, in a vast kingdom bordered on the North by Shaker Heights, on the West by Beverly Hills, on the East by Scarsdale, and on the South by Miami Beach. And she was called the Jewish American Princess.

Now, such is life that you are who you're told you are. A prerequisite to being a Jewish American Princess was having a set of parents who not only could afford to give you all the pleated skirts you wanted, and were disposed to do so, but who were also of the religious persuasion that you were the most beautiful, wonderful, and special person ever born. Furthermore, they were prepared to follow the rituals of that religion, the most important being that of telling you of your wonderfulness, beauteousness, and specialness at the moment of your birth and on every day thereafter. (Talmudic scholars vary in their opinions of how this ritual was to be carried out, but most agree it could be done obliquely and still fulfill devotional requirements. A mother did not necessarily have to say: "You are special, wonderful, and beautiful." Instead she could say something like: "Mrs. Laub thinks you look just like that girl on 'The Mouseketeers.'" And a father could fulfill his daily requirement with a phrase like: "Barbara, take your hair out of your eyes. They're too beautiful to hide." In both cases the parents would not only fulfill their religious func-

tions, but educate as well—the mother by enlarging the child's perspective, and the father by giving her a grooming tip.)

Once a girl was recognized as a princess, magic followed. Born beautiful perhaps she wasn't, but *made* the fairest in the land she most certainly was. If she had a nose like a kreplach, at the age of fifteen or thereabouts it suddenly became small and neat. Hair which one day looked like the seat of a very old grass skirt magically became sleek and silky the next. Where there were too many or too prominent teeth, they quickly came into line. Dermatologists, beauticians, electrolysists, orthodontists, all flocked about like the twelve fairies on Sleeping Beauty's birthday, and from a face that might have been reminiscent of a lox there emerged a picture of true royal loveliness.

All this came to pass to facilitate the *raison d'être* of the King and Queen: that one day some man favored by God would take (with proper awe and humility) the hand of the princess in marriage, at which time, she would graduate to Queen and be treated as such forever after.

For those whom allegory confuses, let me put it more simply. A Jewish American Princess of those bygone days was a girl who grew up in comfort, both material and emotional, taught to believe that, being secretly of royal blood, the pampered state she enjoyed throughout childhood would continue for the rest of her life. (If she had any suspicion that these beliefs were somehow unconnected to reality—that if she was so wonderful,

then why were her hips so big—she kept her doubts to herself, and sometimes, depending upon the course her life took, she never had to face them. Sometimes, of course, she did, and that wasn't a happy time. But more about that later.)

Along with this well-padded feeling of ease, the true princess came equipped with a complete and matching set of middle-class values. She believed that poverty meant a semi-detached house in Queens, that to walk on floors not covered by wall-to-wall carpeting was to walk on knives, that shopping was an honorable profession, and that if a woman didn't have a wash, set, and manicure once a week her sensibilities were probably suspect and there was really no point in trying to be friendly with her.

And finally there was the question of virginity. (There always is.) Until a ring was placed upon her finger by that favored-by-God young man willing to support her for the rest of his life and beyond, the princess's virginity was her treasure. (Or, as my grandfather put it on the day he learned I was leaving my parents' home and moving into my own apartment: "A girl is like a diamond—one scratch and she's worthless.")

Actually, when it came to sex the real princess was a true daughter of capitalism. And she knew that sex was her inventory, the merchandise she had to offer on what, in 1955, was a seller's market. That merchandise was always well fortified against loss or injury. The princess (hereafter known as "vendor") armed herself with everything short of breast plates: panty girdles, padded bras, crinolines—all those undergarments which served to insulate her body from her own knowledge and the touch of others. Moreover, she kept her legs so tightly closed together when in the presence of a likely transgressor, that sitting next to a date in the movies could qualify as an isometric exercise for the thighs.

Her sex life consisted mainly of a series of battle-like skirmishes from which she might sometimes emerge confused, but always unsullied. (Thinking along strict capitalistic lines, she understood that sex was something to be carefully bartered, like giving beads to savages.) The encounters were as enjoyable as buying peds, or conducting any other routine business transaction. Boys were important for social rather than sexual reasons. They were a means of getting to parties and a device for impressing friends. And among them (who knew?) might be the Prince Consort, the queenmaker, merely disguised as a pimply frog to fool and test her. It was always possible that his B.O. and his acne would vanish and that, under the princess's influence, he would eventually emerge as a gorgeous aluminum-siding mogul.

What the princess didn't know—what nobody in 1955 knew—was that the sex market wasn't stable. It was fluctuating,

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And those favored-by-God young men, the Jewish American Princes, the supposedly up-and-coming building contractors and fancy frock-makers, were fluctuating along with it. In the few short years between the mid-fifties and the mid-sixties, sex underwent a drastic devaluation. By 1965 or thereabouts, a hymen was worth about as much on the open market as 3-D glasses. And there, in the middle of the sexual revolution—standing in a jumble of lycra and spandex—was the Jewish American Princess, confused and betrayed.

Now, if she had been betrayed merely by the people who made Ortho-Novum, perhaps she could have understood it all. But something more insidious was going on. Not only was her stock going down, her image wasn't doing too good either. And who was responsible, who was ridiculing her values and expectations, who was turning her into an object of derision and scorn? I'll tell you who: the Jewish Princes.

Yes, those nice button-down boys who were supposed to become good providers, it turned out, provided nothing but heartache. Because with the exception of a few holdover lawyers and doctors, they all became smartass writers. And the first thing they did was start tearing into their mothers and their sisters and the girls they went out with in high school. Pretty soon the Jewish American Princess became the Jewish American Mother/Martyr, the Jewish American Cock Teaser/Castrator, and the Jewish American Glutton/Slob. (Courtesy of Dan Greenberg, Philip Roth, and Bruce Jay Friedman, respectively. May they get polyps in their noses.) And why was all this abuse heaped upon her head? I'll tell you why: simply because she had refused to go all the way all those years.

Now, for the princesses who got married right after high school or during college, all this devaluation didn't mean too much. They would be taken care of no matter what. That they knew. Even if they later meandered into the divorce courts, they would still be taken care of. They would get to keep the car and the carport and the carpet, and not much would change regarding their comfort and self-esteem. (Feeling ill-used is not the

same as feeling self-doubt.)

No, it was the maverick princess, the one who for whatever mental aberration or plain contrariness, and over her parents' dead bodies, had never gotten married, who faced the revolution in the front lines. It was, she found, a guerrilla action. Seemingly nice dates camouflaged in flannels and turtle-neck sweaters (and later on in dungarees) ambushed her in one-room apartments. Marriageable-looking men at parties got her alone on a fire escape, and then sprang at her with passion and the news that they were married. Men she thought loved her for her mind and good grooming asked her not to marry them, but to live with them—an arrangement that, she knew, was not the promised passport to Queendom. And the most horrible thing about it all was that if she "won" the skirmish (i.e., if she came out of it intacto hymenus), her opponent didn't seem to mind or care too much. He just left.

What was going on here? Wasn't she a princess? Wasn't she, as she had been taught, wonderful, beautiful, and special? Wouldn't any man consider himself lucky just to buy her dinner and a wrist corsage? Who were these men, this new breed who didn't expect to date her, who wanted to lay with her without practically any initiation period or obeisance?

Well, whomever they were, the princess recognized that if she wanted to have men around she had to deal with them. And deal with them she did. For here, actually, is where the Jewish American Princess showed her mettle. Here is where her royal stature, like some inner menorah, came shining through.

Because she survived. She survived the sexual revolution and overcame the princes' revolt, and rather than giving up her kingdom, she wound up enlarging it. She learned that sex, like brisket, could be its own reward. She learned that other women weren't always simply illegitimate pretenders to her own throne, but could actually be spoken to as equals, even pals. She learned she could create other things besides bills. And finally, she learned how to disguise herself in what had become an alien environment, so that now, except for a few pockets on the South Shore of Long Island and elsewhere, she is virtually unrecognizable. You might mistake her for a shickser. With the help of amphetamines she dieted so viciously that her hips threw in the towel. She gave up Herman Wouk for Kate Millet, Mantovani for Midler, Ceil Chapman for Levi Strauss.

She survived—values bent but unbroke, a functioning, useful member of society. And if once in a while she sulks or throws a tantrum because she is no longer treated with the deference her rank deserves; if occasionally she stares longingly for a moment into Bergdorf's window or Sutter's Bakery, I, for one, cannot bring myself to censure her. 