

# PART

A decorative flourish consisting of two symmetrical, stylized leaf-like or scroll-like patterns flanking a central vertical line.





## APRIL - NOVEMBER 1980

ONCE, I REMEMBER, IN AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT WORLD, I interviewed that East Coast photographer who made a good living taking pictures of people as they jumped. He asked if he could take a picture of me, and I jumped! I put everything into it! I took a look outside of his white studio into the grimy New York streets below; I thought of how I'd jumped from a ratty house with a tired mom, past two husbands, one sad, one mad; hopscotched with kids and lovers and ended up—here? In *New York*! I sized up the directions of the room, tried to find east. I started out from there, ran a maximum of ten heavy steps, and jumped—not far, not far enough by a long shot—and came down hard.

The photographer winced. "Try it again," he said.

So I went back to the far corner, ran, defied gravity, jumped. This time I held up my arms, held up my chin, grinned. His camera clicked. "That's it."

"That's it?"

"You only have one jump in you," he said. (I found out later he said it to everybody.)

That wasn't fair. But maybe it was right. I began to notice—I date it from that day, not that it was new material—most of us have just one story in us; we live it and breathe it and think it and go to it and from it and dance with it; we lie down with it, love it, hate it, and that's our story.

About that time I noticed something else: There was a ratio involved here. Just as those poor woolly headed American nigras only got seven-tenths of the vote (after the Civil War, if and when they got the vote—I can't really remember), so, too, there was a basic inequality in the country I grew up in and lived in. One man, one story. For women, it generally took two or even three to make one story. So that in shopping malls you sometimes saw two fat women waddling along, casting sidelong glances at one another's fat. Or two pretty girls outprettying each other. Two femmes fatales, eyeing each other's seductions.

This is partly the story of Lorna Villanelle and me; two ladies absolutely crazed with the secret thought that they were something special. But if you think you aren't going to care about this story, hold on. It's the most important story in the Western world!

Believe me.

Take this for a story. It's four in the afternoon: 1950 something. A chunky thirteen-year-old walks home after school, kicking at leaves with heavy shoes, up the buckling sidewalks of Micheltorena Hill, in the parched and arid heart of Los Angeles. She dawdles, she doesn't want to get there. Her father's gone, there's no joy here, or ever, maybe. At 3:45 she drifts down through a small "Spanish" patio and into a house that perches precariously on the side of this hill—crackling with dried and golden rye grass—bangs the door, clumps down the tiled hall to the sunken living room, where she sees her mother crying. Her mother looks up, twists her tear-stained linen handkerchief, and says, with all the vindictiveness a truly heartbroken woman can muster, "*Must you always be so heavy?*"

The thirteen-year-old, her face flushed from the sun, the walk, and pure shame, walks on tiptoe without speaking, past her mother to the picture window, which faces diagonally west.

She doesn't think to look below, to the patio perfect for parties they'll never give, but only *out*, out to the horizon where, past twenty miles of miniature city, the ocean—thin strip—catches the afternoon sun, and blazes. Ah!

"Don't put your head on the window!" her mother snaps, and the girl lurches back as if the window burned, but her forehead mark, brain fingerprint, remains.

After the day of the clumsy jump I realized I wasn't built to live in New York. It was the greatest city in the world, but I couldn't get on its pretty side. I'll go further and say that after several short trips to Paris, Madrid, Rome, I realized that I'd been going in the wrong direction; the further east you got the further back *in* you were. By now I could look at my life as a series of sterling wrong choices: a marriage to an exquisitely handsome artist that had yielded up nothing more than a princess of a daughter, beautiful as the dawn—hence her fancy name, Aurora—and another marriage to an Australian on the make, who'd seen *me* as a meal ticket (poor deluded mate!), and that marriage had given me an emerald tomboy. Her dad, Dirk Langley (his name eventually to be spelled—incorrectly—on theater marquees in both hemispheres), wanted to call our baby "Denny," but I'd insisted on the sleepy and elegant French, Denise. . . . I'd majored in the wrong things in college, lived precariously in Manhattan's wrong sections. Now I wanted, so much, more than I can say, to get out.

And so, at the age of thirty-eight, I came back to L.A., I came back. I would live a gentle mimicry of my mother's story, alone with my two girls. I planned to earn my own money, and never to cry, and never to lay about with the cruel weapons of spite. I would take accounting courses. I would become a person who knew about riches, so that when people heard my name (when I became famous) they wouldn't hear "Edith Langley," who made two bad marriages and had to make her own way (or even, isn't she the *heavy* one who made the house shake when she came home from school?), but Edith Langley, whose name meant money, and money meant power.

Los Angeles, in 1980, was a different city from the one I'd left. I drove far out, to Santa Monica, found a bad motel, with two double beds and a television that worked. Then, after a day or two, I put Aurora and Denise in the back seat of the old Porsche and went house hunting.

I drove with the kids one dreadful morning into the San Fernando Valley and felt that if there had to be a nuclear war, certainly it might do some good in this area. I drove through Topanga Canyon, fifteen miles from the Valley to the coast (like Switzerland after the A-bomb, some friend of mine had said years before), hands sweating on the steering wheel as I took the curves, and had to think that maybe I wasn't ready for the Canyon; maybe I just didn't have the nerve. I braked at the Pacific, knowing that Malibu was north and no way could I afford it yet. I turned south, looking for Venice . . . and headed—like a gerbil in a cage—back downtown.

They say L.A. is large, but they lie. It's true there are a zillion places no one in his right mind would like: Lakewood, Torrance, Brea, Compton, Carson, no one *real* lived there, any more than real people lived in those grey asphalt boxes that line the roads between New York's airport and its island. "Real" L.A. had its thick, coiled root downtown, and on the east, little underground rootlets; obscure Mexican restaurants. Then a thin stem, the Santa Monica freeway, heading due west and putting out greenery, places in this western desert where you'd love to live—if things went right.

I headed west again: Echo Park, old houses, fine artists in them. I didn't like the neighborhood; it was too close to where I'd started. Further west and to the right, the Hollywood Hills with the sign and all, and Aldous Huxley's widow tucked in just below the H. The *air* was still too thick for me. Sixty miles an hour and ten minutes later, there was Westwood to look at. A pretty town, safe, and rich, and if the kids wanted to go to UCLA, perfect for them. But the rents started at \$800.

Hard to please? Got it from my mom. A charmer? Well, three lone souls out of four million might agree. I wanted the beach, so bad. I got back on the stem, ever closer to the great

Pacific. So! North along the coast again, just for the ride, and something made me turn in again at steep, sparsely populated Topanga Canyon.

It was late in the day, maybe four o'clock, on an April afternoon. I'd driven through eastern sleet to get here, and "unseasonal" snow in the Rockies, and heat like a flat plate in the High Desert. But here, it was . . . perfect. April is the time for ceanothus in the Canyon and great banks of bright blue I'd find out later were lupin. There was even, if you can believe it, a waterfall, a long silver string dropping casually off a high stone abutment. The trip inland started out shallow, against low hills. After a half-dozen tricky twists and turns we hit a half-mile straightaway, starting at the bottom of what seemed (that first time) like a thousand-foot-high cliff, and climbed steadily, hugging the northwest side of the canyon wall. My hands started sweating, slick on the wheel, and Aurora, my older daughter, lay down in back. "Tell me when it's over," she whispered.

But I've thought many times that, though I'd taken those early curves at a cautious twenty-five miles an hour, I resisted *even then* the temptation to speed up on the straightaway between the coast and the town, that piece of bad driving that forever separates the Canyon from the city dweller.

At the top of that half-mile run (which, I found out later, had to be rebuilt every five years as the rains washed it out) the road curled into three or four really spellbinding curves: How easy, I thought even then, to keep going straight when the road turned left, to arc out into *nothing* for one last carnival ride.

Ten minutes later I drew up, trembling, to a small stone building. We were in mountain country, for sure. Was this what I'd been looking for as I pressed my damp head against my mother's polished picture window? Do you think—*might* I have seen these fragrant cliffs from there?

"I'm going to throw up," Denise, my younger one, said. "I mean it. And I'm hungry!"

We stopped at a place called the Discovery Inn (Innkeeper, Marge Dehr). The inside smelled of dried flowers and old hamburger.

"What do *you* want?"

"Are you the hostess?"

"What if I am?"

"Could we . . ."

I remember myself: tired, rasping voice, dirt brown hair frizzed out like that black woman's whose name I forget, my first diamonds—three-quarters of a carat (bought at what price!) jammed in my ears, eyeliner, dirt under my nails.

"We need a place to live."

"Don't you think it's a little fucking *late in the day*?"

"I thought . . ." I didn't know what I thought. "I just want to be sure that I get the kids back down before it gets dark . . ."

"The *kids* don't care! Sit down and eat. Order a Swinger. They're the best. Anyway, if you can't get *down* out of here, there's no point in coming *up*."

I couldn't argue with this logic. We ate, then groped our way back down the mountain to our crummy motel room. I watched the girls' faces as they watched television in one double bed; it's clear, or should be, that they were dearer to me than five hundred crates of diamond earrings in five hundred solid gold pick-up trucks.

The next morning we drove back up—those curves almost a snap by now—loving that pure *climb* into the sky and the feeling that once you got up there, in those mountains north of Santa Monica, you were safe; they couldn't get to you. (And later I learned that during Prohibition outlaws from all over California vamoosed to Topanga, because all the overlapping city limits that made up Los Angeles had left one lawless hole.)

In the cool morning air, with theatrical wisps of ground fog drifting up and over the harsh mountains from the Pacific, we rendezvoused at that ratty restaurant. Marge Dehr came slouching out, introduced us to a "realtor" who whisked up in a powder blue Ferrari. He drove us around all through the day, up one dizzying unpaved road after another. On one cliff you might see great grim stretches of that modern midden the San Fernando Valley, and on another rocky outcropping you might climb, creaking, out of that guy's cramped little cockroach of a car,



walk ten steps down a dusty incline, and there see a sturdy *blue world*, a blue saddle shoe, light on top—that would be the sky—and on the bottom more dark blue than you could ever imagine in one place, the vast Pacific. Of course the houses with that dizzying prospect, mostly three-story, white stucco, and a million dollars apiece, were a little out of our range. But down in the strange dank hollows and washed-out deltas in the bowl of the canyon itself—an indentation of about five square miles, I'd guess, where clothing stores perched on creek banks and welfare mothers with sunny smiles watched their naked kids slushing in the mud—you could rent a trailer for thirty-five dollars a week.

As we drove, Aurora and Denise, usually impatient or droopy or long-suffering, began to get a dreamy look. The morning lengthened into hot, aromatic midday. "That's dodder, that orange stuff on the bushes," the house tout might say, and in the next breath he'd try out, "Of course a carpet like this is going to be unusual in the Canyon," or "You don't see a chandelier like this every day, up here." We even drove as far back west—down the canyon—to hit the "Gulch," a low, flat, damp place just across the highway from the ocean itself. Down in that low wash fifty people must have dumped their cars where the Topanga Creek seeped into swamp, and yards of trailing morning glories had turned each one of them into a blue mountain.

"D'rather go *up*," Denise said, slapping at mosquitoes.

"I think," I said to them, "I must have been to a party here once, years ago. I'm sure of it . . ."

But the man shrugged impatiently and, zipping us back up the steep slopes back to the dead center of this ever-better world, said, "Think we'll turn left into Old Canyon this time. Some people say this is the *tough* part. Some people say this is the *desert* part. Other people like it. *I* couldn't say." Then, glancing at me shrewdly as his jeweled and tan hands on the wheel expertly took these curves, shrouded on either side by beige stone and nothing else, "This road we're on is always the first to go out in winter when the rains come. Have to get out by horse through here. When the fires come, they take you out by helicopter. Most people stay though. Save their houses. Take a few trash

cans, fill 'em with water, beat out the flames with rug scraps." Then, jerking his head, "Indians used to fish in the creek here. They used wild cucumber to float their nets . . ."

The house sat out on a wide raw crescent of cut and fill. That half-moon of dirt hung, just hung there in the air, over another one of those astonishing cliffs above nowhere. Across the chasm from what might be our "backyard" were stones the size of skyscrapers. Due east, a wilderness of bougainvillea and eucalyptus, sage, rosemary, mint, and a couple of blazing yellow acacias. We might have been in Australia with just a couple of aborigines for company, but instead we could hear Van Morrison, the Doors, windchimes, barking dogs. We smelled marijuana with the rosemary, and the house tout said, sizing us up, "If this section of the canyon caught fire, the city'd be high for a week. They say." And in the next breath talked about the wonderful elementary school.

Two stories, made out of fresh new cedar slats on the outside, California white-sheeted clapboard on the inside (no fireplace, a definite minus in the Canyon, where once every decade or so it had been known to snow great flakes), and all this only forty minutes away from downtown L.A.! There was no yard yet, this was a new place, just golden dust all around. Our neighbors "next door"—a shack a hundred yards up the grade—said later that we'd be living in rattlesnake heaven, but listen! Past where the bulldozers had roused out those fiendish vipers, the *real* view started!

For years I had a picture of my daughters from that time, standing by a yucca taller than they were. They both had that dreamy look, the kind that used to make people in the city say that everybody up here was on drugs, but what it meant was that they were happy.

I'm not saying it was easy! God forbid. Do you think it's easy for a single mother who has "financial consultant" printed on her business cards to get credit in the greater Los Angeles area? My husbands found out I was back and put in some mean-spirited phone calls, the more so because I suggested they might like to kick in a little child support. And sweet spring rapidly turned

into a summer so outrageously *fucking hot* that by some paradox it turned the inside of our new house a luminous black. We'd already found that the lady in the restaurant owned this rickety house and paid Mr. Slicko in his ill-gotten car something like a thirty percent commission to get it off her hands.

There came a day in early September, down in the old market at the Center of the Canyon, where, barefoot, I stood in line, holding my brown rice and hamburger, dreaming New York dreams, thinking, Oh, God, *another* wrong turn? I'd already gained maybe thirty pounds from smoking the days away with those guys next door and then putting together vast casseroles liberally seasoned with all that indigenous fragrant stuff. I stood in the dark store, sweating, fretting as always, that half my life was over but really, all my life was over, I'd *had* it, when over by the antique gumball machine that stood by the rusting screen door—pushed out over many years by how many heedless customers—I heard and saw two filthy little boys scrambling against each other on the sticky cement floor. "It's mine, assbite motherfucker, I saw it first!" "Shit if it is, stupid shithead, I had it first and then I dropped it!"

Stolid and benumbed, I stood in line with other sweltering residents as the two kids gouged each other's noses and eyes, pulled hair, for what I sadly supposed would be a gumball. They dove together, under the machine, and each came up with one end of a very distressed snake, who, until that moment had probably thought of himself as no more than three feet long. For an eternal moment they hauled in some frantic tug-of-war with the snake, who said a silent snake-*awk!* Until the man behind the register said, "Get out of here with that, willya?" and they disappeared out into the 120-degree heat. A sigh from behind me. It came from an artist with a national reputation, wearing shoulder-length hair left over from the sixties, bald pate slick with sweat. "Kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

Only two months later, when November turned the air crisp, I was down in that same center, thin again, in a restaurant this time, drinking champagne for breakfast, picking at chicken livers and sour cream, when in this crowded, jovial, cozy place we

heard a sound like a siren. A few of us went outside to see what was up, and there, in front of that same ratty grocery store, was a young man dressed all in white, doing a morning mantra. "Oooh," he sang, all on one note, "hooww beautiful is the Canyon in the morning!" He'd picked a note that made some of the parking-lot dogs crazy. One in particular danced about the guy, trying to put his paws around the singer's neck, howling happily on the same note. The singer had a girlfriend, or a devotée, who, since the singer definitely wasn't going either to stop or change his tune, undertook gently to shoo the dog back with a leafy branch. For minutes we stood out there, that Sunday morning, the breath coming in steam from our smiling mouths, watching boy, girl, and dog, hearing that song. Then went back in to finish breakfast.

If you think finding the right place just happens, you've got another think.

I bought an answering machine and a ream of business stationery. And in a few weeks—after we'd settled in—I took another long L.A. drive. What I noticed—as they used to say on this coast—*what I noticed*, was that there were very few regular what you'd call *businesses*. No raincoat makers. No soup manufacturers. Yes, there were sweatshops in downtown L.A. and I remember a ceramics factory out in Glendale, but they soon went out of business. What was really out here was the *intangible*. When you drove you saw buildings, often windowless. They were either television stations or movie studios (or ingenious, semi-successful combinations of the two) or death factories where they made missiles, or think tanks where they thought them up, or ingenious combinations of those two. Who was I to give any of the people behind those walls financial advice? I, who was thirty-eight years old and divorced (twice!)? I ended up doing something, it seems to me now, everyone in Los Angeles did then: I made myself up half hour by hour. I rented myself out to silicone chip places. I got myself a weekly financial column at the city's "second" paper, which got me to parties, which got me to cute guys, which got me to some financial meetings of small busi-

nesses, and little by little I was able to build up a fairly decent portfolio.

I changed my hairstyle, wore it straight to my shoulders, frosted blond. I bought a new silk shirt a week. I knew grey flannel was for New York only, but wouldn't raw silk pass as the flannel of the desert? I began to buy, once every month or so, another \$500 suit, boxy tailored jacket, soft skirt. I began to switch from pumps to expensive sandals. Some spring days I'd wear one bright hibiscus in my hair.

But mostly, when I'd go out with some man who owned yachts in the marina, or a cute ARCO executive, or that lowest of the low out here, an "independent producer," he thinking he'd get a little free help in his wine futures, I'd say, right up front, "Hey! you want advice? Don't think your *dick* is going to pay me for it! I'll take semiprecious stones. Or gold would be better!" Usually they were good sports about it. I got some nice amethysts I *still* wear (and I mean *now*) and pearls, of course, and finally those one carat don't-fuck-me-over flawless diamonds that I stuck in my ears and *never* took out—you'll notice, I still wear them. My girls each kept one of that flawed but brave first pair.

In the late seventies there was still a lot of personal chaos around: I don't mean "love," I don't mean drugs. I mean, when you got up in the morning it was hard to know what style of underwear to put on, what style of breakfast to eat. (Really!) Should it be "nutritious" the way that poor Adele Davis used to say? If so, why did she die so horribly of bone cancer, and why did it hurt so much? Should it be *quesadillas*? (A recent study had said coffee and cheese caused cancer.) Should it be fruit? (What about insecticide?)

When you went out with men in those days, young or old, married, single or divorced, there was a terrible helplessness in them: What *next*, was in their every gesture, their every remark. Do we get married, or see a movie, or just have sex, or do errands? Are we supposed to be friends, or what is this *intimate* stuff they're talking about? Am I supposed to be cool? Do you want some cocaine? Do you like hockey? Do you want to meet my kids?

So you can see boxy jackets with loose skirts like the lady in the *Story of O*, and a forthright request for jewelry was a definite godsend for some of them.

I began to take my own advice. I diversified my investments. I took a couple more extension courses at the great universities, and even then I began to see that, since the country itself was running at such a huge deficit, a single woman might easily make her mark in the world by staying out of debt and building up a pound or so of rubies or a small safe deposit box of those sweet little gold ounce ingots from Macao, stamped with the sign of the bat—bad luck over here, but over there it meant long life and prosperity.

Wealth! To me it began to seem like the only constant. Husbands and lovers came and went, and God love them! And sure, Aurora and Denise were my real wealth, but on the great conveyor belt of life, my children were sliding past me and away. Once I pushed rocks in my ears they were there forever. No one offered courses with that belief system at UCLA: no *stand firm*, keep the house in case of a divorce, avoid credit cards like the plague, hold that money close to your vest and buy *stones*. Finally, after about six months out here in this fairyland, my hometown, I took what seemed to me the quintessential L.A. step and began offering my own seminars. I took my jeweler's glass, or "diamond loupe," my briefcase, and two dozen good stones to an extension lady's home—out of UCLA, of course—and spoke to a class of affluent matrons. Ah, I *loved* it. I had a twentieth, a thirtieth, a fiftieth of what their husbands owned, my flimsy house in the Canyon was at the whim of any hot breeze or carelessly struck match. They lived in brick and stucco palaces cheek by jowl in the overwatered lawns above Sunset. Their *marigolds* were worth more than my poor rubies! But I could hold my wealth in my hand or in the tasteful burgundy briefcase under my arm. When I drove up in my ten-year-old Porsche, the ton of metal was in my name and my name alone.

Picture this then: Ms. Langley drives up, stamps up the brick pathway, 11:30 A.M., to a Beverly Hills mansion. Knocks on the door, smiles, waits, is ushered by a servant into the "den."

Folds her hands in her lap, talking to the lady of the house. In an extension course, if the class doesn't fill on the first morning, it's goodbye Charlie and come back next semester. But usually a dozen ladies show, between the ages of twenty-seven and sixty. They've taken absolutely every other course: the American and British contemporary novel; interior decorating to avoid allergies, and interior decorating if you *don't* have allergies; conversational French and Spanish, and even the History of Ideas. Let's be straight about it, they all, each and every manicured matron, have a hundred times better education than I. But they have nothing to do, so they show for the class, "because a woman is teaching it," they say.

We sit and chat and, after a few preliminary remarks about American fiscal policy in general, how it is in AT&T's *interest* to make you believe those pieces of paper they called "stock" are valuable—all the while they're looking at me pityingly, because I have to work for a living and they don't—after, as I say, the first twenty minutes, I take a tiny yellow envelope from my decent black purse and shake a half-dozen stones out on the table.

Consternation and more pity. Poor working woman with her pitiable red and green and yellow rocks! (Because, remember, this is Beverly Hills, and these ladies, even on a Wednesday morning, are apt to be decked out like—as my sainted mother used to say—Astor's pet horse.)

But then I screw my loupe in my eye and talk about each stone: the opals the Australian surfer gave me, and how opals exist on art and personal taste alone—in the same category as those pieces of sweet paper AT&T tried to make you believe were money, while *they* kept the money. More glances from the ladies. Don't their husbands have successful investments? And don't they have husbands?

But then I would pick up a great square-cut garnet and talk about polishing, and depth of color, and begin a little rap about what it must have meant to the first caveman when he came upon a stone that glistened, and how, *no matter what happened*, that stone would always glisten. And how that must have been