Chapter 1

TOUGH GIRL

On August 4, 1913, it was the hottest ticket in New York City. Hammerstein's Victoria Theater, a vaudeville palace in the heart of Times Square, had stolen a march on every other theater in town. So proud was its manager, Willie Hammerstein, of his triumph that he instructed his sign painters to blazon the attraction in four-foot-high letters. "Modern Ballroom Dancing," screamed the marquee, "Performed by EVELYN NESBIT THAW."[1]

Even the most cloistered New Yorker knew who Evelyn Nesbit was. A former chorus girl and artist's model, she had coquetted her way into one of the biggest sex scandals in the city's history when on a summer's evening in 1906 her husband, Pittsburgh millionaire Harry Thaw, strode into the Roof Garden Theater atop Madison Square Garden, aimed his pistol, and killed her former lover, eminent architect Stanford White. The resulting trials gave the public a lurid view of New York high society: of White, the city's leading arbiter of taste, revealed as a sensualist and a seducer of young girls; of the demented Harry Thaw, who enjoyed beating Nesbit as well as protecting her, and whose rage at her premarital affair with "that beast" had become an obsession; and of the renowned beauty herself, "betrayed," as she put it, at age fifteen, when Stanford White

posed her in a red velvet swing and served her a glass of drugged champagne.[2]

After seven years in seclusion Evelyn Nesbit had surfaced, and to anyone who knew anything about New York City theater, it came as no surprise that Willie Hammerstein nabbed her. In his ten years as the Victoria's manager he had made it synonymous with unabashed sensationalism. Under his guidance the Victoria became New York's top-grossing vaudeville playhouse, renowned (or notorious) for its garish attractions—in Hammerstein's phrase, for its "freak acts."

These freak acts took many forms. Some were transparent humbugs, sleazy curiosities that Hammerstein promoted with the panache of a sideshow barker. There was Shekla, Court Magician to the Shah of Persia (in reality an Indian he discovered in a London music hall)[3]; Abdul Kadar, Court Artist to the Turkish Sultan, and His Three Wives (Adolph Schneider, music hall player from the Swiss "small time," and his wife, daughter, and sister-in-law)[4]; Willard, "The Man Who Grows—Seven-And-A-Half Inches Before Your Eyes!"[5]; and Mademoiselle Fatima, Escaped Harem Dancer: "Two years ago, during the Turko-Italian War, she fled from the palace of PRINCE ABDUL HAMID in Constantinople and has since been appearing in all PRINCIPAL CITIES OF EUROPE. She has a distinctive Turkish personality and dances with original movements all her own, accompanied by her two Eunuch servants."[6] But more compelling than these physical and geographical oddities were the freaks of publicity, the city's most notorious inhabitants, men and more frequently women who had made names for themselves through their links to New York's criminal and sexual underworld, in headline-grabbing vice raids, "love nest" scandals, and murders.

"Anything's a good act that will make 'em talk," Willie Hammerstein said, and his Victoria Theater had been provoking comment for years.[7] It was virtually a three-dimensional tabloid, giving New Yorkers a face-to-face glimpse of the infamous stars of the urban panorama. The emphasis was on sexual scandals, especially those featuring young, attractive women. Evelyn Nesbit was only the most show-stopping example. The theater had already presented Nan Patterson, a showgirl who shot her boyfriend in a Manhattan taxi, and Florence Carman, the wife of a Long Island doctor, who shot her husband's mistress and who entertained the audience with a demure rendition of "Baby Shoes."[8] In 1911 it headlined Lillian

Graham and Ethel Conrad, chorus girls then out on bail after shooting Graham's wealthy lover in the Veruna Hotel. Hammerstein brought them to vaudeville with true sensationalist flair, billing them as "Those Two Girls" and "The Shooting Stars," and promoting their appearance with posters so lurid they were used in court to damage the women's reputations.[9] So great did the vogue for female killers and near-killers become that "every pawnshop gun sold to a woman practically carried the guarantee of a week's booking," wrote one vaudeville old-timer.[10]

With Evelyn Nesbit the theater had snared what one commentator called "the freak act of all time."[11] No one could match her sensational appeal. New York's newspapers had written of little else for days, and by curtain time on opening night, the largest crowd in the Victoria's history had pushed its way into the theater's roof garden. Occupying every inch of available floor space were underworld gunmen and blasé Hammerstein regulars, shoulder to shoulder with society ladies and gum-chewing readers of the popular press. When the orchestra sounded and the curtain went up, the crowd strained forward as one. But first they had to endure several opening acts, definitely some of Hammerstein's lesser lights—The Three Ambler Brothers ("Sensational Equilibrists"), The Three Gertzes ("Acrobatic Marvels"), Dainty Marie ("Venus in the Air")—all facing the unenviable task of diverting an increasingly restless audience, tensely awaiting its first glimpse of the most notorious woman of the twentieth century.[12]

Far down on the Victoria's bill that evening, struggling to make an impression on the sweltering multitudes, was another little-known performer from Hammerstein's stable, "Popular Comedienne" Mae West. At nineteen West had just begun as a vaudeville "single," but she had served a long apprenticeship in cheap theaters, variety troupes, and stock-company melodramas. Playing Hammerstein's was potentially a big career breakthrough. Plenty of acts had begun at Hammerstein's and gone on to national stardom—vaudevillian Eva Tanguay, for example, currently the top attraction on the "big time," as the highest ranks of the vaudeville world were known to performers and fans.

But Mae West got nowhere on that hot August night. She tried every trick she could think of—a low-cut dress, a few provocative songs, an assortment of raunchy bumps and grinds—but her viewers were not to be swayed.[13] They had come for Nesbit and Nesbit

alone. Most of the newspaper critics ignored her too, though one, Joshua Lowe in *Variety*, did notice how hard she tried. "Mae West," he commented, "sang loud enough to be distinctly heard in the rear."[14]

There is something deliciously apt in Mae West's futile labors in front of the Victoria's footlights in 1913: the woman later mythologized as a "sex bomb," the woman whose racy quips scandalized a nation, totally upstaged by a seductress still remembered, thanks to E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, as the emblem of Gilded Age sexual indulgence. This episode illustrates more vividly than any other I know West's most significant contemporary context. Like Evelyn Nesbit and the Shooting Stars, she was trying to make her way in a time-honored style of performance, a tradition of commercial amusement with deep roots in New York's lower-class culture. One might call this tradition urban sensationalism: popular theater that catered to prurience by lifting the veil on metropolitan vice.

As a young performer West was instantly drawn to that sensationalist tradition. In time she would develop her own brand of "freak act," giving vaudeville audiences an unfettered portrayal of a hard-boiled, sharp-tongued, sexually adventurous woman—a "tough girl," in the parlance of the times. That she adopted this performance style had everything to do with her youthful experience as an immigrant's daughter growing up in working-class Brooklyn at the turn of the century.

It's not easy to root the young Mae West in her contemporary context. She herself always discouraged the attempt. West was reluctant to discuss her childhood. She refused to give interviewers precise dates and addresses; she muttered vaguely when faced with reporters who pressed her for details about her background. In her autobiography she was no more forthcoming, describing her parents in the most hackneyed of Gay Nineties clichés. Her mother might have doubled for Lillian Russell; her father was a rough-hewn, mustachioed brawler.

West's vagueness made perfect sense. She had no interest in being too specific, in allowing outsiders to see the social forces that shaped her. At the heart of her public mythology was the assertion that she created herself. She was *sui generis*, unique and unprecedented, by nature an erotic free spirit. No other performers, no the-

atrical traditions helped her to assemble her style. She simply appeared at the age of seven on a Brooklyn Elks Club amateur night, already flamboyant and imperious. Right from the start she was "Mae West":

> I stepped out on the stage, looked up angrily at the spotlight man in the balcony, stamping my foot. "*Where* is *my* spotlight!" I stamped it again and the spotlight moved across stage onto me and caught me in the act of demanding my light. The audience saw me and laughed and applauded. The angry expression on my little face as I impudently stared up at the spotlight man, and my exasperated stamping of dancing shoes, explained my delayed entrance. . . .
>
> With the spotlight on my shoulders like white mink, I went to center stage and sang my song, "Movin' Day." I did my skirt dance without missing a word or a step. Instead of having stagefright I was innocently brazen. My angry mood overcame any nervous doubts I might normally have felt. I've never had stagefright in my life.
>
> I was a hit with the audience. They were fine in their applause. I received a gold medal from the Elks organization. Papa was proud.[15]

Since she portrayed herself as a larger-than-life sex goddess, naturally she gave herself mythic beginnings, springing to the stage with a completely formed persona, a modern-day Venus strutting full-grown from the sea. The real story of her origins is more complicated, though many details remain elusive, with primary documents woefully sketchy and West so adept at rewriting her past.

One fact, however, is incontrovertible: Mae West was a child of plebeian culture. Born in Brooklyn on August 17, 1893, she grew up immersed in the sights, sounds, and smells of the rough-edged immigrant community of Greenpoint, with its mix of Irish, Italians, Germans, and Poles.[16] A down-at-the-heels industrial district, Greenpoint was famous as the most insular of Brooklyn's working-class neighborhoods and notorious for some explosive nightlife.[17]

Mae's father, John Patrick West, fit comfortably into this milieu. Born in 1866, of Irish extraction, he earned a living as a boxer and then as a bridlemaker until automotive technology made his trade obsolete. He seems to have drifted between jobs thereafter. Over the years, doubtless with considerable invention, West described him variously as a chiropractor, a realtor, a physician, a livery stable

owner, and, in what must have been an unguarded moment, a bouncer in a Coney Island dance hall. Among his later occupations, he ran what his daughter termed a "private police force"—which seems to have meant that he worked as a bodyguard for local racketeers.[18]

West's father can be glimpsed through the cracks as a onetime craftsman on the margins of Brooklyn's underworld. Her mother remains so thickly veiled in West's mythologies that she's even more difficult to make out. Matilda Doelger was born in 1871 in Wurttemberg, Germany, emigrated to America in the 1880s, and never lost her German accent.[19] She married John West around the end of that decade and bore a daughter, Katie, who died in infancy. Three other children arrived at intervals: Mary Jane, soon nicknamed Mae, in 1893; Mildred, who renamed herself Beverly, in 1896; and John Edwin in 1899.

As her daughter described her, Tillie West was a paragon of female decorum: elegant, charming, with a delicate beauty. She was firm yet soft-spoken, aloof yet tender; above all, she was genteel. "There was a power and a vitality about Mother that made a man melt before her glance," West recalled. "She was sexy, but refined, see?" West repeatedly retouched the one surviving photograph of Tillie, adding thick layers of lipstick and eyeshadow to produce an immaculate, lifeless maternal ideal.[20]

The Wests' Brooklyn neighbors painted an earthier portrait. The Tillie West they remembered was shrewd, hardheaded, and immensely ambitious, a tough-minded stage mother. Unhappy and isolated in her own marriage, she discouraged her daughter from romantic attachments and cheered her every attempt to perform. She urged Mae early onto the stage and often neglected her housekeeping duties in her zeal to further her daughter's career. In return for her unswerving support, West showed her mother a wholehearted devotion that she would demonstrate for no other person, certainly no other woman, for the rest of her life.[21]

The ambition Tillie West passed on to her daughter was broadly shared among turn-of-the-century working-class children. But those children differed dramatically in how they expressed it, and within plebeian communities, as the Wests' neighbors might have put it, one distinguished the "rough" from the "respectable" on precisely this point. Respectable plebeians sought advancement through education. As the labor unions and workingmen's societies counseled,

the dogged pursuit of intellectual achievement was the surest road to mainstream success.

Though West insisted on her family's upstanding morals, it's clear that she had little use for the tradition of sober self-improvement that marked the respectable working class. At the age of seven she left school for good. Taking to the stage before her eighth birthday, West took up New York's working-class youth culture, a world whose racy theater, gaudy fashions, and suggestive dance styles had become the bane of local social reformers. West's experience of that world would shape her future, eventually leading her to the stage of the Victoria, where she vied for an audience with sideshow oddities and murderesses, gun molls, sex-scandal luminaries, and freaks.

From 1900 to 1911 Mae West apprenticed in the urban popular theater. After her professional debut at seven she joined a shabby East New York stock company run by Brooklyn actor Hal Clarendon, who specialized in "blood-and-thunder" melodrama. West worked with Clarendon's company for nearly four years, playing in such standards as *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which she played Little Eva. In her teens, too old for child parts, she took work where she could get it, tap dancing, singing, and performing acrobatics in New York theaters geared to burlesque and small-time vaudeville.[22]

The venues of West's early years were situated far down the theatrical hierarchy, well below Manhattan's "legitimate" showplaces and first-class big-time vaudeville palaces. With dime museums and nickelodeons, they formed a low-rent amusement network centered in working-class immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Lower East Side. New York's social workers, who loathed these places, called them the "cheap theaters"—a description that from their perspective suited not just the price range but the moral tone too.

Cheap theater flaunted a distinctive style that stood in sharp contrast to the tradition of genteel uplift, the hallmark of middle-class drama. From the garish productions of melodrama to the blatant sensationalism of burlesque and vaudeville, cheap theater bypassed heart and mind to grab hold of the body, to assault the central nervous system. Its lure was openly, unashamedly visceral: flamboyant costumes that dazzled the eye, vivid special effects that excited the pulse, raucous dancing that stimulated desire.

West's first training ground, Hal Clarendon's stock company, exemplified this style. As part of what was called the "ten-twent'-thirt' " circuit (ten, twenty, and thirty cents was the range of admission prices), it produced rowdy melodramas, all straining for the utmost in garish appeal.[23] This was not called blood-and-thunder theater for nothing. Specializing in hair-raising visual effects—fires, earthquakes, runaway horses—and lurid displays of violence and seduction, it gave West her first lesson in how to draw audiences. She recalled:

> There were sassy things with music in which any excuse to get the girl into tights and drawers was all right, if they showed their lacy derrieres. Murder, rape, forest fires, wrecks of famous river boats, crooked jockeys and forged wills also served us.[24]

Fast-paced, expressive, above all sensational, ten-twent'-thirt' was also localized and timely. Its playwrights, who often doubled as journalists, crafted quick cheap dramas out of press scandals, usually within days of the event hitting print. (One frequent play topic, unsurprisingly enough, was the tale of Evelyn Nesbit and Harry Thaw.) One writer of melodrama, Owen Davis, remembered:

> If a particularly horrible murder excited the public, we had it dramatized and on the stage usually before anyone knew who was guilty of the crime. Frequently I have had a job of hasty rewriting when it became evident that my culprit from real life was an innocent and perfectly respectable citizen.[25]

Cheap theater openly catered to prurience, flaunting sex, crime, and scandal, all that was salacious in urban life. Jane Addams, respected social worker and reformer, viewed it as yet another blight on the city landscape, another means of exploiting the poor. In her 1909 treatise *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, she attacked its "trashy love stories," straight from the pages of the Sunday supplements, and its songs and numbers set to "flippant street music," celebrating such spectacles as "the vulgar experiences of a city man wandering from amusement park to bathing beach in search of flirtations."[26] Reveling in the city's random excitements, cheap theater mired the audience in the sensual drives that made urban streetlife so very degrading.

Other reformers, like Cleveland's Robert Bartholomew, agreed. Cheap theater provoked and aroused its audiences through sexual display, as Bartholomew's account of a local stage performance emphasized:

> Many verses of different songs have been gathered which would not bear printing in this report. Dancers were often seen who endeavored to arouse interest and applause by going through vulgar movements of the body. . . . A young woman after dancing in such a manner as to set off all the young men and boys in the audience in a state of pandemonium brought onto the stage a large python snake about ten feet long. The snake was first wrapped about the body, then caressed and finally kissed in its mouth.[27]

To Addams and her fellows, this was not theater at all. It violated their fundamental convictions about the purpose, the social importance, of drama. Middle-class children of Victorian parents, urban social reformers followed their elders in valuing theater as a means of "self-tillage," an opportunity for personal cultivation. Its job was to educate and uplift the viewer, to engage the heart and develop the mind by illuminating moral and spiritual truths. Only by attuning the mind to the realm of the spirit could one hope to conquer the pull of the body, to elevate oneself above the sensual stimuli that social reformers deemed both vulgar and dangerous.[28]

Cheap theater most definitely did not elevate anyone. For that reason, social workers considered it unsuitable for all, but particularly for the lower-class young people who formed its largest and most loyal audience. Uneducated, impressionable, and already the victims of a "hyperstimulating" urban environment, city youth lacked the inner resources, or so the reformers argued, to cope with its garish, frenetic stage spectacles. By agitating their senses while leaving their spirits untouched, cheap theater corrupted their youthful exuberance and aroused sex urges beyond their control.

The result, Jane Addams argued, was ominous: a population awash in unthinking pleasure, for whom sensuality was "merely a dumb and powerful instinct without in the least awakening the imagination and the heart." One need only examine urban America to see the corruption that inevitably followed. "Every city contains hundreds of degenerates who have been over-mastered and borne down by [the sex impulse]," wrote Addams. "They fill the casual

lodging houses and the infirmaries." From that perspective, cheap theater was as pressing a threat as the saloon or the brothel, unleashing a force of sufficient power to work "as a cancer in the very tissues of society and as a disrupter of the securest social bonds."[29]

To the seven-year-old Mae West, taking her first steps on the stages of the blood-and-thunder showplaces, such arguments would doubtless have seemed remote. But it was precisely the style Jane Addams abhorred, the style reviled as lewd and low-class, that West herself was fast absorbing. Her years in the cheap theaters gave her a love of sensationalism that would color her work for the rest of her life—a gut sense, which she never fully discarded, that the way to grab an audience was to shock and arouse them, to titillate them with the lurid life of the streets.

If West took her lessons in performance from the cheap theaters, she learned about sex on the working-class streets. By all accounts, her own and her acquaintances', Mae West was a sexual adventurer early. She had her first intercourse before her first period, with a dancing instructor in the basement of her family's home. "I wasn't frightened," she recounted years later. "What was there to be frightened of, for god's sake?"[30] Thereafter she eagerly sought out encounters with dancers, musicians, and backstage admirers. None remained her single focus for long, as one early lover, ragtime musician Joseph Schenck, could attest: no sooner had she started sleeping with him than she began working her way through the rest of the band. Pregnancy she avoided with primitive but evidently effective contraception: a water-soaked sponge tied on a silk string.[31]

One might well marvel at this teenager's boldness and nerve. Her behavior flew in the face of turn-of-the-century middle-class culture, which exalted female purity. Venerated as men's moral superiors, women gained respect in that culture by displaying distaste for the body: by speaking with decorum, dressing with modesty, and refraining from sex before marriage. With her multiple lovers and saucy looks, West displayed sheer indifference to middle-class standards. But then she was not a middle-class product. She learned about sex from the world she grew up in, and in Greenpoint her brand of behavior, while by no means acceptable, was widespread enough to be familiar to all.

West's neighbors had a name for young women like her. She was a tough girl, a rowdy and flamboyant young woman who flaunted an aggressive erotic style. In the era of West's adolescence tough girls were a controversial modern phenomenon. They sprang out of, and thrived on, the industrial city. Jobs as shopgirls and factory workers gave them a bit of extra money to spend, and the patriarchal mores of immigrant families sparked a fierce desire to escape their fathers' control. They sought that escape in the city's new commercial amusements. Dance halls and cheap theaters drew them in droves. There they found freedom from prying parents, a space for pleasure on their own terms—terms that left many contemporary observers troubled. As social workers like Jane Addams saw with dismay, for many immigrants' daughters the contest between Old World traditions and the lure of the city was no contest at all.[32]

Tough girls were wild and made no secret of it. They decked themselves out for their nights on the town in uninhibited attire: low-cut dresses in gaudy colors, flamboyant feathered hats and cheap costume jewelry, elaborate pompadours filled out with artificial hairpieces, and an abundance of powder and paint. They moved their bodies on the dance floor in a fashion called "spieling," a "tough" style that stressed vigorous pelvic movement and blatantly alluded to sexual intercourse. Off the dance floor they bantered freely with men, trading provocative quips. No man could match them for coarse, graphic humor. A social investigator in a Brooklyn saloon heard a tough girl deliver the following toast: "Here's to the girl that smiles so sweet, she makes things stand that never had any feet."[33]

To social worker Lillian Wald, tough girls constituted a recognizable subculture—and a distinctly worrying trend. Their "pronounced lack of modesty in dress, . . . their dancing, their talk, their freedom of manner," she wrote, "all combine to render them conspicuous."[34] As a middle-class lady Wald veiled her language. What made tough girls "conspicuous" was their handling of sex—or more precisely, the attitude toward sex that their appearance and behavior seemed to connote. Their bold manner, loud clothes, and garish cosmetics had always been the marks of the prostitute. Whatever their private sexual behavior may have been (and social workers who knew them reported that it varied), they took pride in a scandalous public persona. They relished their bodies, their men, and their good times, and they appeared to be sexually proficient.

The tough-girl phenomenon appalled social reformers. And the fact that these girls were everywhere—in the audiences of the popular melodramas, strutting through the grounds of amusement parks, spieling and shouting and gyrating in dance halls—was damning evidence of the corruption cheap amusements brought in their wake.

Tough girls *had* been corrupted—of that the reformers were certain. The girls were naive dupes of dance hall and theater managers who preyed on their innocent hunger for pleasure and perverted their untutored tastes. "Let us see the amusement exploiter just as he is, for he lies in wait for the spirit of youth at every corner," argued social investigator Richard Henry Edwards. "He is not a playful person. . . . He buys youth's freshness of feeling in return for sundry ticklings of sensation, and blights its glad spontaneities with his itching palm."[35]

Social workers could only see tough girls as victims. As middle-class men and women shaped by their parents' Victorian values, they viewed sexual purity—and the appearance of purity—as the basis of female power and dignity. No sane woman would choose to abandon it. Tough girls, by these lights, were victims, and entertainment entrepreneurs no better than white slave traders, luring gullible young women into their clutches and degrading them into a vicious life.

Yet in attempting to minister to their charges, social workers bumped up against one immovable obstacle: too many tough girls, Mae West included, simply did not see themselves as victims. Relishing sex as a source of pleasure and power, they embraced New York's gaudy nightlife and scorned the new, wholesome civic recreations—the folk dancing clubs and dramatic societies—established to rescue them from their plight. Over time such defiance would provoke harsher and harsher critiques. To mental health experts in the 1910s, tough girls appeared "psychopathic," "moronic"; to social investigators, increasingly, they were not victims but "deviants," indistinguishable from prostitutes in their sexual aggression and physical flamboyance.[36]

This hostility was undergirded by fear. Tough girls were an ominous sign of things to come, a frightening indication of how women of all classes might elect to behave, might choose to handle their sexuality. This was no groundless speculation. By the 1910s there was already considerable evidence that the tough-girl style was spreading to urban daughters of white middle-class parents,

"respectable" women, who were beginning to patronize the dance halls too.

At the turn of the century the debate was only beginning, but over the next thirty years female patronage of commercial amusements would become a hotly contested cultural issue. How to protect the female audience, how to prevent its corruption by "amusement exploiters," would occupy the minds of key moral guardians. And it would help provoke a furor around Mae West when this authentic tough girl became not just a consumer but a producer of popular entertainment.

As a child performer and a sexual adventurer West was shaped by sensationalist working-class theater and by the controversial subculture of tough girls. Since she was clearly a wild young woman, it is intriguing to learn that she took one brief step in the direction of respectability. On April 11, 1911, in a civil ceremony at Milwaukee City Hall, Mae West, not quite eighteen, married a twenty-one-year-old jazz dancer, Frank Wallace.

They had met in 1909, when West was touring New York's small-time vaudeville houses as a girlish comic in a "Huck Finn" act. Wallace quickly caught her eye. Born Frank Szatkus, the son of a poor Lithuanian tailor, he was thin and wiry, with an intense, cunning face, and his eccentric dancing won over audiences. At West's suggestion they teamed up in a song-and-dance act. They made a good pair—her sultry voice complemented his high-spirited footwork—and were soon getting regular bookings in small-time theaters around New York. In 1911 a bigger break came their way: they were hired as a juvenile couple for *The Sporting Widow*, a small-time playlet, which set off on a tour through the Northeast and Midwest. Heretofore their relationship had been strictly professional, but by the time they reached Wisconsin they were lovers—although West, true to form, was working her way through the rest of the cast too.[37]

Like most touring companies, this one was filled with veteran performers, a clannish assortment of older men and women who took a dim view of wild behavior. West's conduct soon created a stir among them. In Milwaukee Etta Woods, a German character actress, took West aside and informed her that the company was shocked by her antics. More pointedly, she warned of the danger of

pregnancy. At least if West was married, Woods concluded, she could preserve some veneer of respectability. West was shaken enough to agree to go through with it—but only after swearing Wallace to secrecy.

To be sure, this was West's account of the incident. Wallace, who gave his story to a reporter in 1935, portrayed her as a dewy-eyed, infatuated young girl. But here, for once, West seems more reliable, since only her version makes sense of the whole tangled story. And even Wallace did not dispute West's account of the wedding's immediate aftermath: within a matter of days, she violently recoiled from what she had done.

As the company made its way through the northern Midwest the young newlywed was dallying with more men than ever. The end of each evening's performance saw West locking her husband in their hotel room, slipping out to a local nightclub, and returning, disheveled, at 3 A.M. Her carousing was not lost on the rest of the troupe. In Buffalo lead actor Hugh Herbert angrily told her that the whole company resented her treatment of her husband. West, bristling, retorted that she was just having fun.[38]

Once the tour ended, West's mind was made up: the wedding had simply never happened. She returned alone to New York and moved back in with her parents, flatly denying all rumors of marriage, even when confronted point-blank by her mother. As for Wallace—who certainly seems to have loved her, if complete submission to her wishes should be taken for love—he dutifully returned home to Maspeth, Long Island. Loyal despite West's cavalier treatment, he kept quiet about the marriage for the next twenty-five years.

On April 21, 1935, a Milwaukee Works Progress Administration worker who was indexing the city's marriage records unearthed the 1911 certificate issued to Mae West and Frank Wallace. By then an international star, West had always insisted that she was single. The news flashed to wire services around the country, and the press beat a path to Wallace's New York City door.

Even then, at least initially, Wallace equivocated. He claimed not to be certain whether they were married or not. He came out with the truth several days later, but only after West had hurt his feelings, truculently insisting the story was false and adding, "Wallace? I never hearda the guy." His decision may also have been influenced by more pressing financial matters. In 1935 West was a millionaire; Wallace was languishing in what was left of vaudeville. Though he

had never asked her for money before, he quickly made up for lost time, commencing a nightclub tour as "Mr. Mae West" and suing his estranged wife for maintenance payments. West, who did not admit the marriage for another two years, finally granted him a bit of money and divorced him in 1943.

Most accounts of West's marriage treat it with humor, and it did have its comic moments. But what strikes me about its place in West's life is how painful the episode seems to have been. West fled from her marriage as though for her life. She avoided divorce simply because she preferred to pretend that the marriage had never happened. In later years she pushed Frank Wallace firmly out of her mind. By the 1960s she routinely told interviewers that she had been single all her life. As is not the case with all of West's misstatements of fact, one senses that she'd come to believe this herself.

It's not hard to see why the memory was painful. In marrying Wallace West had betrayed herself: she had given in to external pressure, to the force of community scorn. In the cloistered world of the touring company her sexual adventures provoked a scandal, and her co-workers demanded that she conform to convention. Not yet eighteen, far from familiar surroundings, West was sufficiently unnerved to succumb.

Mae West's dilemma was by no means unique. To be a tough girl at the turn of the century was to be subject to unceasing contempt. Deemed unruly and wild by parents and neighbors, immoral and deviant by social workers and clergy, tough girls were constantly admonished to shed their rough manners and flamboyant ways. For West giving in to that pressure proved a disaster. Yet all the same it was a productive disaster, one of those momentous events that shake up one's whole life and starkly illuminate the way forward. On the verge of adulthood West was about to yield to the demands of social respectability, like countless tough girls before her. She was preparing to abandon her independence, her pleasure in hedonism, and behave as the community dictated. But no sooner had she begun than she knew she could not go through with it. Her decision to dump Frank Wallace without a backward glance marked a critical turning point: West would remain defiantly tough and would never be so easily cowed again.

As a sexually active working-class woman Mae West was treated with scorn and exclusion. In the years that followed she learned not to care. Building a wall around herself, she shut out her fellow per-

formers' contempt. Over time she came to relish her backstage notoriety. "She kept to herself," one fellow vaudevillian told her biographer George Eells, "but she gloried in the stir she caused wherever she went."[39]

Stirs never failed to surround her: West encouraged them. Rather than hide her carousing, she paraded it before her like a shield. She came to delight in preemptive strikes, buttonholing likely antagonists, often well-bred young women, with bawdy descriptions of her sexual prowess, disarming potential critics before they could launch an attack of their own. In 1918, in a small role in the Broadway musical *Sometime*, West pounced on Helen Ford, a patrician young dancer, sparing no details of her sexual exploits, clearly enjoying her genteel listener's embarrassment. "That kind of talk continued until I learned not to blush," Ford told George Eells. "Then Mae lost all interest in me and never said more than hello or good night."[40]

West learned, in short, to use sex as a weapon. She wore her disreputability like a suit of armor, a source of protection and personal power. Just as important, she grew supremely confident in using sex as a tool onstage. Beginning on her eighteenth birthday, shortly after leaving Frank Wallace, she set out for stardom as a featured performer in vaudeville, determined to make her mark with a raunchy expressive style. Over the next few years she took on the role she would play to the hilt—the hard-edged, slangy, rough-talking tough girl, glorying in her sexual allure.