

FAME AND MADNESS IN AMERICA – CHAPTER ONE

Brenda

I don't deny killing him. Just look at the facts: he was alive one minute, dead the next. My husband of four days departed while dining with me in a dimly lit booth at Go Fish Grill, my favorite seafood restaurant. An autopsy revealed that Shawn Regal had died of a lethal dose of horse tranquilizer. Microscopic remnants of the animal sedative were found on his dinner plate.

Shawn ordered the Chilean sea bass with red wine risotto and tiny white asparagus. I had the steamed cod in bok choy, and we were sipping an expensive, delicate Riesling. I made the decision to finish my steamed cod after Shawn was already dead, and this faux pas didn't go over well with the press, especially Mr. Jack Smith (who always struck me as having a sinister undertone). I'm sorry, but I don't believe in letting good food go to waste. Shawn had already devoured his sea bass, so I calmly finished my cod. I could have ordered dessert, but out of respect for the deceased, I passed. Did the press mention that? Of course not. And let me state in black and white: this restaurant has a tiramisu to die for.

Just before the heartless one's heart stopped beating, his head leaned back on the burgundy leather booth. At first glance, it appeared as if he'd fallen asleep. "Too much wine?" our attentive server Tessa quietly asked, observing the lifeless body beside me. I told her my hard-living husband had had too much everything. When you have too much everything, you begin to think you're invincible.

I became a beaming bride and a grieving widow in less than a week.

Byron, brother-in-law

The bitch murdered my brother. If she couldn't stand him, why didn't she just divorce him? Damn it, I told him to avoid Jewish girls.

Look, I come from a Jewish family so it's not like I'm prejudiced. I just prefer gentile women, like Brenda's friend Veronica Poplin. Veronica and I hit it off at Shawn and Brenda's wedding, but the affair was doomed once the bride poisoned the groom. I mean, how could you date a girl whose best friend murdered your brother, no matter how hot she is?

Veronica, best friend

I've known Brenda Bernstein since we were sophomores at Vassar. That's right, the murderess is a Vassar grad.

We spoke on the phone a dozen times a day, shopped for everything together, and watched chick flicks until four in the morning. I knew Brenda's taste in clothes, books, movies, music, linens, and shampoo. I knew the kind of guys that made her weak (white-collar) and she knew the kind of guys that made me drool (blue-collar with tats). Brenda Bernstein had the warmest heart of anyone I'd ever known. If we saw a homeless person on the street, she wouldn't walk past without putting a five-dollar bill in his tin can. She knew I loathed any form of exercise, yet she managed to convince me to do a 10K run with her for some charity. "I'll make the donation," I told her, "just don't make me do any actual running." But she explained that sweating along with the thousand other participants was an integral part of the experience. And she was right.

When I heard what Brenda had done to Shawn, my jaw literally dropped. For the first time in our friendship, I thought she was lying, not about what she had done but why she had done it. I mean, cheating on your wife while the wedding reception is taking place is pretty vile, but not reason enough to kill the guy. Leave him, sure. Poison him, no way. There had to be something Brenda wasn't telling me.

Estelle, mother

What did I do wrong? It has to be a mother's fault when both daughters turn out bad.

I don't mean to say marrying a black man is worse than killing a white one. The murder is much more severe. Still, when my daughter Fern said to me, "Ronald Epps and I are engaged," I had to consider it a kind of rebellion. But against what? She had a lovely childhood. So they became man and wife, gave me a light-skinned black granddaughter named Dina, and divorced before their ninth anniversary. I certainly didn't celebrate when the interracial marriage ended because you never want to see your child go through hell, but I was glad when Fern married Frank, a Caucasian fellow, even though Frank wasn't as intelligent or considerate as Ronald Epps. And Ronald Epps drove a nicer car. I could barely squeeze into Frank's two-door Toyota, but Ronald's Lexus had so much legroom and such comfortable seats. Leather. Fern and Frank gave me another granddaughter. All white.

Then there's my youngest. I was thrilled when Brenda finally said to me, "Let's go shopping for a wedding dress, Mom." Shawn Regal seemed like a sweet guy. Who could have predicted that four days after the wedding my daughter would poison him to death and wind up at the Forest Hills Correctional Facility for Women?

Fern, sister

When your little sister is on trial for first-degree murder, you stand by her. It's that simple. Brenda stood by me through everything that ever happened in my life. My childhood would've been dreadfully lonely

without her. When we were kids, I was the renegade, the radical. Brenda was always the good girl. Now it seems like we switched roles: I'm the B'nai Brith maven and she's on trial for murder.

We may've been polar opposites, but our bond was always deep as the ocean she wouldn't swim in (because of hazardous chemicals and marine debris).

Brenda

Every morning outside the courthouse a large gaggle of women--all ages, races, and sexual orientations--gathered round and chanted "Free Brenda!" They bravely held signs and banners that read "Prison's No Place for a Princess" and "Acquit or Eat Shit!" I waved to them and flashed the warmest smile I could muster.

It was gratifying to have good people on my side. It made me feel less alone in the cesspool I'd gotten myself into. But I was alone, and nobody was coming to my rescue. I couldn't undo what I had done, not that I would have. If given the chance, I would've poisoned the perverted bastard all over again.

Jack Smith, reporter

Brenda was my story, just like Watergate was Woodward and Bernstein's. I covered it for the paper from day one. Not since the "Octo-mom" gave birth, Susan Boyle sang, Lindsay Lohan did time, or Sully landed the plane in the Hudson had a story captured the public's imagination in such a frantic way. Women looked up to Brenda like she was some cherished icon, and guys wanted to see her get the chair.

Obviously I was with the guys.

Brenda

Most married people have simple mother-in-law problems; I had mother-in-law oppression. Isabel Regal, an Upper East Side socialite always in full hair and makeup, did not consider me worthy of her firstborn.

The condescending bitch put her heartless, repulsive self before anyone else. She maintained weekly appointments at the day spa for detox mud baths and salt-glow body scrubs. She always wore some gaudy new piece of jewelry: a three-tier diamond-in-platinum pendant, an open bangle bracelet. Overdressing to kill in flashy, colorful outfits and studded Stuart Weitzman pumps, she resembled a Mardi Gras float. With hair way too big and much too sprayed, her 'do didn't blow, even in a blizzard. There was a chance I'd be found guilty of murder, but there was no chance Isabel would ever be innocent of sparkle overload.

Isabel's two grown boys, Shawn and Byron Regal, had the world at their feet. One played tennis, the other hockey. One was a lawyer, the other a hotelier. One attended Princeton, the other The International College of Hospitality Management. Shawn was older (by five years) and smarter (by far), but what Byron lacked in brainpower, he made up in beauty. Irrefutably handsome, with a face you'd gaze at like it was a painting, Byron relished the attention. Sometimes I wondered how eyes could be so blue, a nose could be that sculpted, and hair could shine like it was lit from above. In this case, the whole wasn't greater than the sum of its parts. Each part happened to be perfect, but the whole was even more spectacular. It was a relief that I fell for Shawn instead of Byron because being with someone as flawless as the younger Regal would have turned me into a blithering, insecure mess. It was a fact that women flocked to Byron. It was a fact that strangers stared and mega-rich people made bizarre propositions. My self-esteem (the tiny morsel I had) would have vanished in no time, and jealousy would have eaten me alive.

It was obvious that Isabel took pride in her two sons. "They got their looks from my side of the family," she would say whenever the opportunity presented itself. "Certainly not from their father's, that immoral son of a bitch." Their father Murray, a financial wizard, had accumulated a great fortune in ways that were anything but ethical. Several years before I came into the picture, the Regal patriarch had shot a bullet into his brain while seated behind his desk in his plush Madison Avenue office.

No young woman, with the possible exception of some stunning European princess (Audrey Hepburn in Roman Holiday maybe), would've been good enough for Shawn, and here I was, a fairly ordinary Jewish girl, stealing him from Cruella's clutches. Every time the family got together, Isabel scrutinized me from head to toe, and no matter how expensive my dress, how chic the shoes, or how perfect the hair, I never made the grade. I was and would always be the enemy.

Isabel Regal, mother-in-law

I appeared at the courthouse every single morning. If court had been in session on Sunday, I would have shown up. If court had been in session on Purim or Yom Kippur, I would have shown up. And this was no small inconvenience because it's impossible to find a decent driver in this city. Either they have the audacity to speak to me during the ride (after clear instructions to remain silent) or they eat a corned beef sandwich while I'm out of the town car, so that when I get back, it smells like a fucking delicatessen.

One of the reasons I went to court everyday is that I needed to stare at my son's murderer, that rotten-to-the-core slut who watched this magnificent young man breathe his last breath. I knew she felt my penetrating stare sting her the way a bee might sting a harmless child with honey dripping from his little hands.

My darling Shawn could've had any girl he wanted, and he chose this middle-class manslayer. When I think of the wealthy, alluring, young women who threw themselves at his feet I get a shooting pain in

the pit of my gut. Time and time again I told Shawn it didn't matter to me if the girl he wanted to marry was Jewish. What I said was: "She should love you and come from a good family."

"What's a good family?" he'd ask. And I would tell him a respected family, a kind family, a family that owns Manhattan real estate. But my oldest boy preferred Jewish girls, go figure.

So I encouraged him to see Melanie Yindle. I admit she wasn't the prettiest contestant in the pageant, but she had a sweet personality and her father Sol owned a building on Fifth Avenue. Near 10th Street, but still Fifth Avenue. Was Shawn the least bit interested? No. Was he interested in Rebecca Brickman of the Brickman family that owned an apartment tower in Chelsea and a dozen hair salons across three boroughs? Shawn said Rebecca reminded him too much of me. So that idea went down the toilet, and fast. My boy had his heart set on Brenda Bernstein, a nobody who could survive in Manhattan society as well as a mackerel could make it across the Mojave Desert.

The sacred bond of marriage was meaningless to this spoiled sociopath who didn't even have the decency to return the sleek and simple-to-use crepe maker I gave her as a wedding gift. Every day for over thirty glorious years (with the exception of a few humiliating months) I cherished my marriage and treated it with respect, even after that rotten, deceitful, no-good man of mine was caught bilking thousands of employees out of their pensions. Yes, even during those dark hours I stood by him. That's what a devoted wife does.

I knew I wouldn't sleep peacefully until Brenda Bernstein was behind bars with no possibility of parole.