

Annabelle

There are a lot of things that I could have been. If my toes hadn't turned in, I could have been Martha Graham. If I wasn't so bad at math, I could have been a physicist. If I wasn't so lazy, I could have gone to Harvard. But that's not so surprising; everyone thinks they could have done anything, if only those "if's" hadn't been there. That's the entire principle of *American Idol*, why those thousands of people show up every year; "If only I could sing, I would be so famous." Well, you can't. It's healthy to accept your limitations. But that doesn't mean you need to be down on yourself. Sure, there are a lot of things I suck at, but there are tons that I can do, and if I do say so, do them as only I can. I make the best rugelach outside New York City (including the Boroughs). I can make a Halloween costume out of nothing in 20 minutes. I'm the only person who can stop Janie from crying all night when she has a bad dream. Of course there are more, but that's what I'm famous for.

It's not all I'm going to do, though. Don't think that my greatest ambition is to basically be a Jewish grandmother, which is what I sound like sometimes, although if I ended up like my Jewish grandmother, it wouldn't be the worst thing. She was smart, on a lot of different levels. She always looked smart, not nerdy, I mean, but put together like she could step out the door and go somewhere respectable at any minute. She knew a lot, too, because she always read. At the dinner table, she would tell my sister and me an interesting fact, like how there are no birds in Guam, and then say, "What do you think about that?" She wanted us to analyze the information and ask her questions; she had this thing she would say, "Analyze, synthesize, and...." something else, I can't remember. Maybe it came at the beginning. Anyway, she was big on truth and getting to the heart of things. That's why she was so smart about people, too, because she saw right through them to what their real problems were. I don't know if she would have called herself a Freudian but he would have been lucky to have called himself a Vivian.

I think she would have been all right with the way my life is going, even though I'm a Mary Kay rep and Vivi (it's what we always called her, except for sometimes when we would yell "ViviNan, I need more juuuuuice!" when we were sick) didn't really care for that sort of thing. Like I said, she always looked nice, but she wasn't a fussy dresser and I think I maybe saw her wear makeup once in my entire life. She always said, "You

should never feel like your clothes are wearing you” and that applied to makeup too once I was in middle school and people were dressing like the Spice Girls with the glittery eyeshadow all up to here and pigtails held with feathery rubberbands. Vivi wouldn’t let me go to school like that except for Halloween. She told me that all those frills and furbelows (she had the craziest vocabulary, loved old-fashioned words) wouldn’t do me any good in the long run and that I was better off working on my character. I think I would have been better off working on my unibrow but I still minded her words and that’s why I am a singularly amazing individual to this day.

The unibrow is definitely gone now, though, because I work for Mary Kay, like I said, and I wouldn’t make a single sale if I still looked like an unkempt seventh grader. I basically go from door to door selling makeup to people who don’t really need it. Or, I guess, it’s not what they really need. A lot of the people I end up talking to are women who stay at home even though their kids are in school because they don’t need to work and probably don’t have any job skills any more, anyway. They’re usually nice people, just sort of bored and looking for a break from routine. I try not to make it seem like a sale, more like a slumber party makeover or a department-store beauty consultation, depending on how much fun the customer seems like. You can tell which one she is by how carefully she’s done her hair; if it’s come within five feet of a blowdryer, I make it more upscale. I’m good at what I do because I know people and I know the products; I took some cosmetology classes in high school so I didn’t have to go to Gym, so I can make a customer look her best before closing in on the sale. I thought about applying for a job at one of the more high-end beauty supply retailers, like Sephora or M.A.C., but I knew that it wouldn’t work out. I’m not vain (well, not usually, and not more than a little at a time) but I’m not exactly bad looking, and I know how to improve upon nature. The women who go into M.A.C. and Sephora expect that they will be waited on by beautiful girls, but they resent them for it; they’re there to re-capture what the cosmeticians seem to have effortlessly. It’s always the less-pretty girls who make the best sales at those kinds of stores. A Mary Kay woman is someone who wants all that back and is willing to believe that she’ll get it by buying what the pretty girl tells her to buy. I sometimes feel bad, but I really do help them pick what’s best for them. And if I don’t always wear the products myself, well, hey, any woman knows that no brand is ever a perfect fit.

Eventually I want to move up to a corporate position so I don't have to worry about living off of commission. Don't get me wrong, I'm doing all right, and the hours are convenient since Janie is still so young, but it would be nice to have a little job security other than people's insecurities (I almost made that joke at a corporate meeting but managed to shut myself up in time). I think my prospects are pretty good, or will be in a few years. I won the regional contest once, the sort of mini version of the big one the company does where the top five sales people win a pink car for two years. In this one, you only got it for a year, but it was still pretty great. Only I had to trade mine in for the grey one after I dropped Janie off at school the first time because people were asking her which I was, a stripper or a drug dealer. (Honestly, what kind of world are these kids growing up in when that's the first place their minds go?) Apparently there was nothing derogatory in the question, though, and Janie had a blast from the attention. I don't think she's ever had quite so much fun at school and I'm happy for her, but I still think that parents should have been worried less about the MTV generation and more about the kids the MTV generation would be spawning.

That makes me sound like my grandmother again, but I stand by it, considering I'm raising one of those kids born of one of those other kids. My sister Izzy was a smart girl but God, was she dumb. She's what my grandmother called "light of heart and light of skirt" and I think she stole the phrase from her grandmother but it still applied. Maybe some people would call her free-spirited and liberated but high-schoolers aren't so progressive usually and they just called her a skank. I was three years younger but I still heard the talk, especially when I got to the High since it was so small. I think the problem with my sister was that she just didn't take anything seriously, even herself, so even when she could be bothered to care about something, it never lasted long. I was 18 when she got pregnant with Janie, which apparently happened when she went out to celebrate the big 2-1. I've always thought it was funny, that she drank illegally all through her teens and never once got knocked up but as soon as she did it as an adult... Well, not funny. Ironic, though, at the very least. We were both still living with Vivi and since I wasn't going to college right then anyway, it wasn't so bad. At first Janie felt like a doll and it was weird, like Izzy and I were little kids again playing with our toys, only obviously we couldn't dye Janie's hair with Tabasco or take out her batteries. I don't know if Izzy ever

really realized that on a more fundamental level because when Janie was about two and starting to develop an actual personality, Izzy took off and I haven't heard from her since. Vivi and I were left to raise Janie and there were times when I thought we were better off without Izzy because she was pretty much useless when it came to the practical stuff. I don't know if Vivi would have said the same because in truth she did most of the child-rearing while I was at work, but I think we were happy.

Vivi died when Janie was four and I was 23. It was pretty sudden, a cold that went bad practically overnight, or so it seemed until the doctor said that she had pneumonia and that's not something that just shows up out of the blue. I don't know why Vivi didn't get herself to a doctor sooner, but I didn't have time to think about it then and I haven't wanted to since. She left me the house, which she had owned free and clear since the '70s, and I sold off a few of the antiques I knew she didn't care about because we needed a little extra money and frankly, they weren't my style anyway. So for the past few years it's just been Janie and me and I sometimes tease her, saying it's a good thing the house is so small because she's such a peanut that otherwise I'd lose her, rattling around in a bigger place. It's a nice house, just big enough for a few people who don't mind being close to each other. It's where I grew up and so far things don't seem to be going badly for me. Janie will be fine here for a little while longer, until I can go back to school and get my degree, which I don't think I really need but it never hurts to be able to whip it out to shush the naysayers. Eventually, I'm going to move up to a corporate position, by the time Janie is old enough to have makeup parties and I can bring her samples that I don't have to pay for myself. I'll leave a forwarding address in case Izzy comes back, but I won't hold my breath. One of the things I learned from Vivi was that letting go was a sign of maturity, and I may look young (thanks to Mary Kay TimeWise Line Reducer©) but I know when to accept things and when to just keep moving on towards something better.