

BY THE AUTHOR of the BESTSELLING
SIN in the SECOND CITY

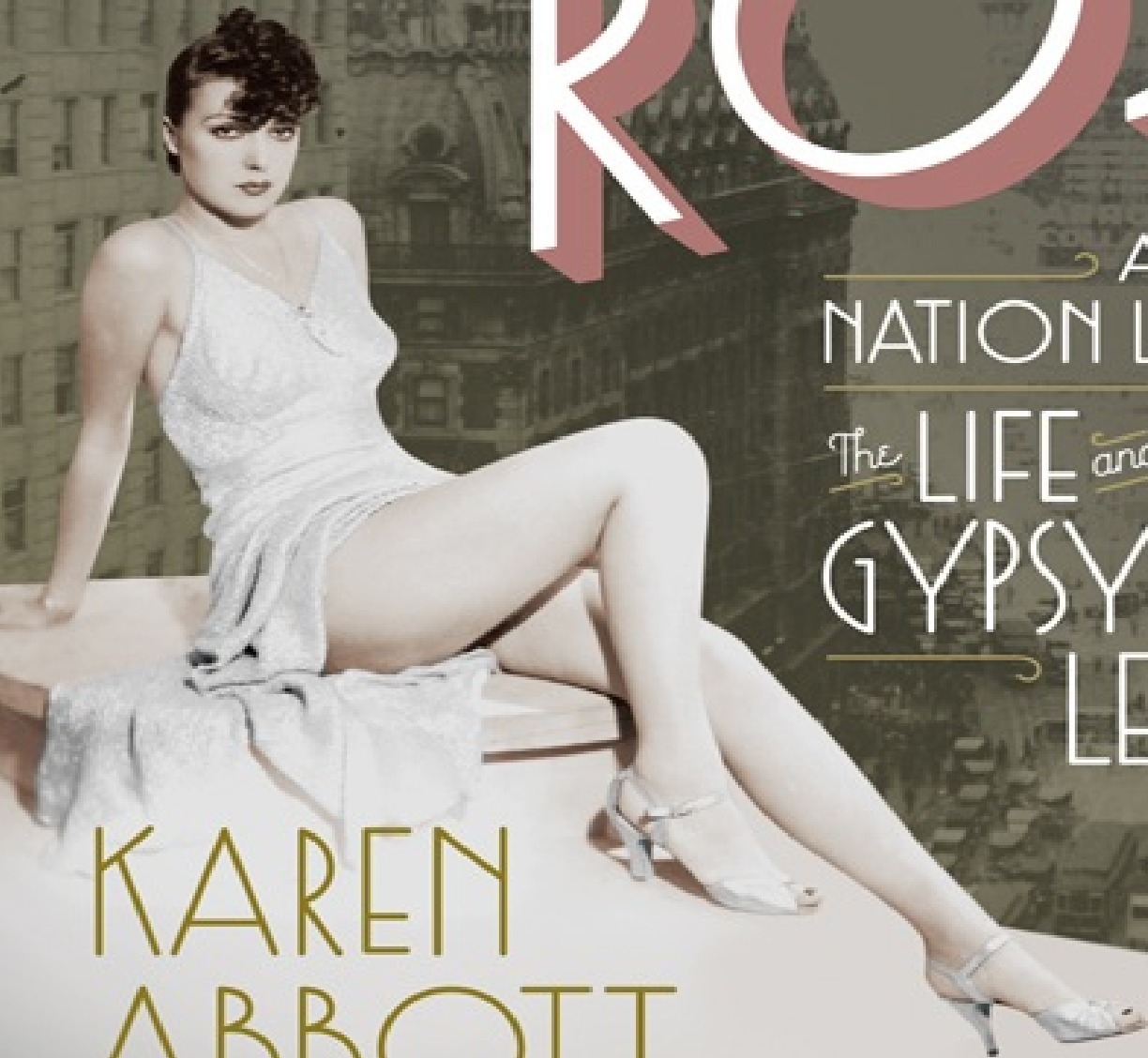
AMERICAN ROSE

A
NATION LAID BARE

The LIFE and TIMES of
GYPSY ROSE

LEE

KAREN
ABBOTT



ALSO BY KAREN ABBOTT

Sin in the Second City



(photo credit i.1)

*American
Rose*

A NATION LAID BARE,
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
GYPSY ROSE LEE

KAREN ABBOTT



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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FRONTISPIECE: Rose Louise Hovick posing as “Hard-boiled Rose.”

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For my grandmother,

*Anne Margaret Scarborough,
another indomitable lady of the Depression*

Genius is not a gift, but the way a person invents in desperate circumstances.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

May your bare ass always be shining.

—Eleanor Roosevelt to Gypsy Rose Lee, 1955

Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Epigraph

Author's Note

Chapter One: New York World's Fair, 1940

Chapter Two: Seattle, Washington, 1910s

Chapter Three: New York City, Late Spring 1912

Chapter Four: New York City, Fall 1940

Chapter Five: Hollywood, California, 1916

Chapter Six: Paris, France, Summer 1916

Chapter Seven: Brooklyn, New York, Fall 1940

Chapter Eight: Seattle, Washington, and on the Vaudeville Circuit, 1917–1920

Chapter Nine: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 1940

Chapter Ten: New York City, 1917–1920

Chapter Eleven: Chicago, Illinois, 1941

Chapter Twelve: On the Vaudeville Circuit, 1920–1924

Chapter Thirteen: New York City, 1942

Chapter Fourteen: New York City, 1920–1924

Chapter Fifteen: Gypsy's Country Home, Highland Mills, New York, August 1942

Chapter Sixteen: On the Vaudeville Circuit, 1925–1928

Chapter Seventeen: Highland Mills and New York City, 1942–1943

Chapter Eighteen: New York City, 1925–1928

Chapter Nineteen: On and Off the Set of *The Naked Genius*, 1943

Chapter Twenty: On the Vaudeville and Burlesque Circuits, 1928–1930

Chapter Twenty-one: New York City, 1943

Chapter Twenty-two: New York City, 1928–1930

Chapter Twenty-three: Hollywood and New York City, 1944

Chapter Twenty-four: On the Burlesque Circuit, 1930–1931

Chapter Twenty-five: New York City, 1930–1931

Chapter Twenty-six: England, 1952

Chapter Twenty-seven: New York City, 1931–1932

Chapter Twenty-eight: New York City, 1931–1932

Chapter Twenty-nine: New York City and Nyack, New York, Winter 1953–1954

Chapter Thirty: New York City, 1932–1936

Chapter Thirty-one: New York City, 1932–1936

Chapter Thirty-two: New York City, 1956–1959

Chapter Thirty-three: Hollywood and New York City, 1937–1940

Chapter Thirty-four: New York City, 1958–1959

Chapter Thirty-five: New York City, 1969

Chapter Thirty-six: Los Angeles, California, 1969–1970

Chapter Thirty-seven: New York World's Fair, 1940

Acknowledgments

Notes and Sources

Bibliography

Author's Note

My interest in Gypsy Rose Lee stemmed not from the movie or play based on (part of) her life but from television—reality television in particular—a medium and genre that didn't even exist when the girl named Rose Louise first talk-sang lyrics on a stage. In our current cultural norm, where the route to fast (if fleeting) fame is to package and peddle moments once considered in the private domain, there is something compelling about a woman who achieved lasting, worldwide renown without letting a single person truly know her. The “most private public figure of her time,” as one friend eulogized Gypsy, sold everything—sex, comedy, illusion—but she never once sold herself. She didn't have to; she commanded every eye in the room precisely because she offered so little to see.

Trying to discover Gypsy the person, as opposed to Gypsy the persona, became the sort of detective story she herself could have written. Her memoir contains nuggets of truth—the rotating collection of pets, the struggles during the Depression, the family's wary views of men—but these were tempered throughout by invention and fantasy, whatever Gypsy decided would best benefit the character she so meticulously created. It was fitting that *Gypsy* the musical—a production Frank Rich of *The New York Times* called “Broadway's own brassy, unlikely answer to ‘King Lear’ ”—was and is billed as “fable”: Gypsy had always preferred stories that favored ambiguity over clarity, humor over revelation.

I spent many hours thoroughly engrossed in Gypsy's archives at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and after a while even the most prosaic bits of information (or lack thereof) became suspect: Were the New Year's goals listed in her diary (“Speak well of all or not at all,” “I will try to live each day as tho I'm meeting god that night,” “To be right too soon is to be in the wrong”) written honestly in the moment, or with an eye toward posterity? Wasn't it odd that she spent a month detailing her mother's hospice care, yet recorded her death in four succinct words (“Mother died at 6:30.”) Wasn't it odder still that she was similarly terse in noting the death of Michael Todd, the one great love of her life? (“Mike was killed in a plane [crash] at 4:30.”) And how could an icon sex symbol write a memoir without once mentioning her own sex life?

So I read and reread and fact-checked everything I could, tasks that helped me clarify supporting characters and timelines but did little to unravel the layers of Gypsy's mystique. To that end, I was incredibly fortunate to connect with the two persons who knew Gypsy best: her only son and her only sister. The relationship a woman has with her child vastly differs, of course, from the one she has with a sibling, and the intensely personal anecdotes and insights Erik Preminger and June Havoc were kind enough to share went a long way toward revealing parts of Gypsy I would otherwise never have seen. From Erik, I gathered that his mother was an array of complexities and contradictions: a “madly self-assured” woman who hid her nerves and insecurities; an avid student of Freud who disdained introspection; a “fairly sad person” and “wounded soul” despite a desperate need to “keep her head close”; an authority figure capable of inspiring awe and exasperation and loyalty and fury and love often within the very same moment.

June's memories are darker and more melancholy, which I attributed partly to the fact that she expected to die relatively young, just like her mother and sister before her. It is hard to fathom that the brave, brilliant girl she knew as Louise has been gone, now, for forty years—nearly half of June's

remarkably long and wonderfully rich life. I first met June in March 2008, exactly two years before she passed away, hoping she would guide me through Gypsy's mythology, peeling away the punch lines and fanciful digressions to reveal a core of truth.

When I arrived at June's Connecticut farm I found her lying in bed, her hair done up in pert white pigtailed, a snack of Oreos and milk arranged on a side table. Her eyes were a bold shade of blue and painfully sensitive to light; she couldn't go more than a few moments without moaning and clenching them shut. She was ninety-four years old, give or take (her mother, the infamous "Madam Rose," was a prolific forger of birth certificates), and the legs that once danced on stages across the country were now motionless, two nearly imperceptible bumps tucked beneath crisp white sheets. She painted a deceptively frail picture, I learned soon enough; this wisp of a woman had retained her survivor's grit, her cannonball voice, her savvy instinct to question any stranger prying so deeply into the past. A part of me believed, all physical evidence to the contrary, that, if so inclined, she could leap up and strangle me with quick and graceful hands.

But she was welcoming and funny (lamenting a life steeped in "rumorsville"), and genuinely appreciative of my gift—a video of her four-year-old self performing in a 1918 silent film. She gave canned answers to certain queries—answers I'd heard or read elsewhere that nevertheless seemed illuminating when delivered face-to-face, by that deep and resonant voice. If her sister had shown any talent at all, she, June, would never have been born. Her vaudeville audience was like a "big, warm bath," and the closest thing she had to family. Her mother was by turns tender and pathetic and terrifying, broken in a way that no one, in that time or place, had any idea how to fix. The musical *Gypsy* distorted her childhood so thoroughly it was as if "I didn't own me anymore." The tone of her fan mail changed overnight, from sentiments of "loving affection" to "what a little brat you must have been." June realized her sister was "screwing me out in public," and that, in the end, there was no stopping either *Gypsy* or Gypsy; the play was both her sister's monument and her best chance of monumental revisionism.

It took another visit for June, just as private as Gypsy, to share bits of memories she'd never written about or pressed into a scrapbook, memories that defined her life even as they long lay dormant and unspoken. Money was Gypsy's "god," and she would do anything to anybody, including June, to make more of it—and not just with regard to the musical. Gypsy did in fact do things, not only to June but to herself—"terrible" and "awful" and "shocking" things, things beneath her sister's formidable intellect and keen wit, things that made June believe, to that day, that love (even love fraught with competition and jealousy) never existed between them at all.

I asked and listened, for as much time as June gave me. I asked until her patience wore thin and her eyes watered with the effort to stay open.

"I hope I didn't upset you today," I whispered, bending down to her ear. "That's not my intention."

"I know," June said. Those startling eyes found their focus, settling on mine. "I know you're on a story ... and I'm sorry I couldn't be more open about some things. Some things are just ... I'm still ashamed for her. I'm still ashamed. I wish they hadn't happened."

"Would Gypsy wish the same?" I asked.

"She had no shame."

A pause, and I said, feebly, "You were a good sister to her."

One of those quick and graceful hands emerged from the sheet. She coiled long, blade-thin fingers around my wrist.

"I was no sister," June said. "I was a knot in her life. I was nothing."

She retracted her hand, gave her eyes permission to close. I kissed her cheek and crept out the

bedroom door. I was grateful she let me inside—even on the periphery, even briefly—and I suspected she was saving her own questions for the day she reunited with the sister she did profess to love, the one she still called Louise.

What follows is my story of the legendary Gypsy Rose Lee and the people lucky enough to have known her, in any capacity. These pages relate tales of deception and betrayal, triumph and tragedy, ambition and failure and murder—much of it sensational, and all of it as true as I could tell. Anything that appears in quotation marks, dialogue or otherwise, comes from a book, archival collection, article, journal, government report, or interview. When I occasionally slip inside Gypsy's head, I do so using the most careful consideration of my research, and with the tantalizing, agonizing knowledge that there is certainly more to the story. Gypsy Rose Lee, herself a master storyteller, knew better than to give everything away.

KAREN ABBOTT
NEW YORK CITY
MAY 2010



The “City of Light” was the world’s largest diorama, containing four thousand buildings that stretched three stories high and filled an entire city block. During two seasons of the 1939–1940 World’s Fair, the exhibit drew more than 11,400,000 visitors eager to observe the cycle of the city (“the great stone skyscrapers,” E. L. Doctorow wrote of the experience, “the cars and buses in the streets, the subways and elevated trains, all of the working metropolis, all of it sparkling with life”) compressed into twelve-minute intervals—a meticulous and spectacular illusion, just like Gypsy Rose Lee herself. ([photo credit 1](#))

Everybody thinks it's all so easy. Sure. Mother says I'm the most beautiful naked ass—well, I'm not. I'm the smartest.

— GYPSY ROSE LEE

New York World's Fair, 1940

In late spring, across a stretch of former wasteland in Flushing Meadows, Queens, a quarter-million people pay 50 cents each to forget and to dream. In the last decade they lost jobs and homes and now they face bleaker losses in the years to come: fathers and sons and husbands, a fragile faith that the worst has passed, the hope that America will never again be called to save the world. They come by boat and train and trolley and bus, hitchhike across four states in as many days, engagement rings tucked deep inside pockets along with every dollar they own. Not one inch of the fair's 1,216 acres betrays its inglorious past as a dump, Gatsby's valley of ashes come to life, where towering heaps of debris meandered in an ironic skyline. Instead, beyond the gates, a "World of Tomorrow" beckons offering flamboyant distractions and bewitching sleight of hand, a glimpse of fantasy without the promise that it will ever come to pass.

They have never seen anything like the Trylon, its gaunt steel ribs stretching seven hundred feet high, carrying bodies skyward on the largest escalator in the world. They chase salty scoops of Romanian caviar with swigs of aged Italian Barolo. On one soft spring day they admire Joe DiMaggio as he accepts the Golden Laurel of Sport Award. At the Aquacade exhibition they watch comely "aquabelles" perform intricate, synchronized routines, the water kept extra cold so as to stimulate goose flesh and nipples. They hear Mayor Fiorello La Guardia boom with optimistic predictions: "We will be dedicating a fair to the hope of the people of the world. The contrast must be striking everyone. While other countries are in the twilight of an unhappy age, we are approaching the dawn of a new day." The Westinghouse Time Capsule, to remain sealed until A.D. 6939, contains fragments of their lives: microfilm of *Gone with the Wind*, a kewpie doll, samples of asbestos, a dollar in change. At night, when fireworks begin, they fall silent watching the colors crisscross overhead, hot tails branding the sky, imprinting a patchwork of lovely scars.

They wait in lines for hours to glimpse a reality that seems both distant and distinctly possible. Revolving chairs equipped with individual loudspeakers transport them through General Motors Futurama exhibit, a vast model of America in 1960, where radio-controlled cars never veer off course on fourteen-lane highways and "undesirable slum areas" are wiped out. They witness a robot named Elektro issue commands to his mechanical dog, Sparko. They marvel at an array of new inventions: the fax machine, nylon stockings, a 12-foot-long electric shaver. One thousand of them watch the fair's opening ceremonies on NBC's experimental station, W2XBS. "Sooner than you realize it," advertisements for the telecast predict, "television will play a vital part in the life of the average American."

But this World of Tomorrow can't obscure the dangers of the world of today, despite the fair's committee's efforts. The new official slogan, "Peace and Freedom," is absurdly incongruous with the

hourly war bulletins that blare over the public address system. Visitors who brave the foreign section find only a melancholy museum of things past. The Netherlands building is dark and vacant, the Danish exhibit downsized into smaller quarters. Poland, Norway, and Finland still have a presence, but they fly their flags at half-mast and display grim galleries that show photographs of demolished historic buildings and list names of the distinguished dead. The Soviet Pavilion is razed and replaced by an open space called the "American Common," complete with "I Am an American Day." Fairgoers line up to see the Belgium Pavilion when that nation falls to Germany, as if waiting to pay their respects at a wake. They wish this slim wedge of time between troubles past and future could pause indefinitely, but they understand that New York is capable of everything but standing still.

On May 20, thousands of them—a crowd larger than the turnout for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie combined—find temporary solace at the Hall of Music, where they wait to see Gypsy Rose Lee in her World's Fair debut. A forty-foot-tall billboard flaunting her image looms above the entrance, those skyscraper legs and swerving hips a respite from the hard lines and stark angles of this futuristic fantasy. She wears an expression both impish and imperious, a baited half smile that summons them closer yet suggests they'll never arrive.

Inside her dressing room, Gypsy reclines on a chaise longue and holds a glass of brandy in shaking hands. The smoky-sweet scent of knockwurst drifts over from her hot plate, but her appetite is gone. She can hear them, the dull thrum of their expectations, the drumbeat chants of her name. Gypsy Rose Lee, voted the most popular woman in America, outpolling even Eleanor Roosevelt. Gypsy Rose Lee, who boasts that her own billboard is "larger than Stalin's." Gypsy Rose Lee, the only woman in the world, according to *Life* magazine, "with a public body and a private mind, both equally exciting." Gypsy Rose Lee, whose best talent—whose *only* talent—is becoming whatever America needs at any given time. Gypsy Rose Lee, who, at the moment, is as mysterious to herself as she is to the gathering strangers outside.

She sips her brandy, lights a Murad cigarette. The voices beyond these four tight walls grow louder, still, but can't overtake her thoughts. At age twenty-nine, she stands, precisely and precariously, on her own personal midway, cluttered with roaring secrets from her past and muted fears for her future, an equal number of years ahead in her life as behind. A half-dozen scrapbooks are fat with clippings from vaudeville and burlesque, her first marriage and Hollywood career, her political activism and opening nights; a half-dozen more, blank and empty, wait for her to fill the pages. Not a day passes without her retelling, if just to her own ears, the densely woven and tightly knotted story of her own legend, and not a day passes when she doesn't wonder how its final line will read.

She senses that the next chapter might begin with Michael Todd, the man who said he'd give her the right ball to hire her, who granted her the Stalin-sized billboard and a second chance with New York. Earlier that afternoon, he banged on her dressing room door, and she took her time letting him in.

"What's the matter in there?" he asked, pushing his way inside. "Can't you read?" He pointed his cigar toward a sign on the notice board: NO COOKING BACKSTAGE.

"Of course I can read. It saves money," Gypsy said in that inimitable voice. She's worked for years on that voice, scrubbing the Seattle out of it, ironing it smooth, tolling her words like bells: "rare" became *rar-er-a*. It is both charming and affected and, when either raised a decibel or compressed to a whisper, positively terrifying. It makes babies cry and one of her dogs urinate in fear.

"On your salary," Mike responded, "I can't afford to have you stinking up the theater."

Gypsy invited him to try her knockwurst, and he sat down across from her. She smiled at his singular philosophy about money and success: "I've been broke but I've never been poor," he told her. "Being poor is a state of mind. Being broke is only a temporary situation." She noted his gracefulness.

fluid movements, strangely at odds with his features: rectangular, filet-thick hands dead-ending in tubular fingers, a head that sat atop a brick of a neck. He nearly licked the plate, and afterward ripped down the sign.

A cheapskate, Gypsy thinks, but not a hypocrite. Just like her, on both counts. She suspects they work well together now and in the future, since they both understand that ambition comes first and money matters most.

She sets her brandy down on her vanity, making room amid a *Roget's Thesaurus*, millipede-size pairs of false eyelashes, an ashtray, a typewriter. Whenever she's not performing she plans to work on her novel, a murder mystery set in an old burlesque theater; the book counts as one bold step into the blank and waiting future. She's told favored members of the press about her literary ambition confessing that she's lousy at punctuation due to her limited schooling and sharing her theories about storytelling. "I don't like poison darts emerging from the middle of the Belgian Congo," she says "and I think there is no sense having people killed before the reader is acquainted with them."

She doesn't mention that she has a few authentic, true-life murders in her past, or that the person responsible has recently resurfaced, sending a terse, cryptic note that concludes: "I hope you are well and very happy."

Which, coming from Mother, signals another gauntlet thrown.

The four syllables of her name thrash inside her ears. It's time, now, and she makes her body comply. One last review in the full-length mirror, a slow turn that captures every angle and inch. She knows the crowd outside doesn't care who she plans to be. They want the Gypsy Rose Lee they already know, the one whose act has remained unchanged for nearly ten years; they delight in the absence of surprise. They'll look for her trademark outfit: the Victorian hoop skirt, the Gibson Girl coif, the plume hat slouching over one winking eye, the size 10½ brocade heels, the bow that makes an exotic gift of her long, pale neck. They'll wait for the slow roll of stocking over knee, strain to glimpse a patch of shoulder. They'll beg for more and will be secretly pleased when she refuses. She knows that what she hides is as much of a reward as what she deigns to reveal.

The curtain yields and admits her to the other side. She senses the spotlight darting and chasing, feels it pin her into place. Voices circle one last time and collapse into silence, waiting.

"Have you the faintest idea of the private life of a stripteaser?" she begins, caught between her personal, unwritten World of Tomorrow, and deeper and deeper yesterdays.



Rose Thompson Hovick, “a beautiful little ornament that was damaged.” ([photo credit 1.1](#))

Do unto others before they do you.

— ROSE THOMPSON HOVICK

Seattle, Washington, 1910s

No matter what Rose Hovick tried—hurling herself down flights of stairs, jabbing herself in the stomach, refusing food for days, sitting in scalding water—the baby, her second, would not go still inside her. A preternaturally stubborn little thing, which she should have taken as a sign. She wanted a boy, even though men did not last long in her house. Her first child, Ellen June, was a chubby brunette twelve pounds at birth, tearing her mother on her way out. The house had no running water, and the attending midwife washed the baby clean with snow. A caul had covered her face, which meant she had a gift for seeing the future as clearly as the past. But she was clumsy, too, and by age three already diluting Rose's dreams.

Ellen June's new sibling arrived early and when it was most inconvenient for Rose, during a trip to Vancouver, but the baby was instantly forgiven—even for being a girl. This second daughter had a sprig of bright yellow hair and blue eyes with dark circles etched beneath them, as if she were already weary, and her head seemed tiny enough to fit into a teacup. She could spin perfect circles on her toes before she could talk, and Rose decided that since the girl had refused to be destroyed, she might consent to being created.

STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF HEALTH
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH

Record No. **193**
File No. **1388**

PLACE OF BIRTH
County of **KING**
City of **SEATTLE**
Town of _____
No. **4314 Frontenac Str.** St. _____ Ward _____
FULL NAME OF CHILD *Ellen June* **Hovick** If child has not named, make supplemental report, as directed.

Sex of Child Female	Twin, triplet or other? _____	and	Number in order of birth _____	Legitimate? Yes	Date of Birth Jan. 8, 1911 (Month) (Day) (Year)
----------------------------	-------------------------------	-----	--------------------------------	------------------------	--

FATHER		MOTHER	
Full Name Jack O. Hovick	Residence SEATTLE	Full Name Rose Thompson	Residence SEATTLE
Color White	Age at last birthday 25 (Years)	Color White	Age at last birthday 19 (Years)
Birthplace (State or Country) Minn.	Occupation Adv. Solicitor	Birthplace (State or Country) N. D.	Occupation Housewife

Number of child of this mother **1** Number of children, this mother, now living **1**

CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDING PHYSICIAN OR MIDWIFE.

I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, and that it occurred on **Jan. 8,** 1911 at _____

(Signature) **V. G. Gardner,** (Physician) **SEATTLE**

* When there was no attending physician or midwife, then the father, householder, etc., should make this return.

Give name added from a supplemental report _____

Address **SEATTLE** Filed **Jan. 14,** 1911 *J. B. Beckton* Registrar.

THE SEAL OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON
1889 WASHINGTON 1909

Rose Louise Hovick's birth certificate, amended to read "Ellen June." (photo credit 2.1)

Rose would give the baby everything—even things not rightfully hers to give—including her old daughter's name, the first and favorite name. From then on the original Ellen June was called Rose Louise, Louise for short—a consolation prize of a name, half borrowed from her mother. It was the first of many times she would become someone else.

In the beginning the family lived in a bungalow on West Frontenac Street in Seattle, built of crooked wooden slats and a sloping shingled roof, squat as a bulldog, four rooms that felt like one, the kind of dank, dreary home that looked inviting only in a rainstorm. A porch jutted from the front, supported by columns where Rose could string wet laundry, had she been that kind of housewife. The place had a single grace note: the tiny square of Puget Sound visible from one window.

No matter where Louise or Ellen June (nicknamed "June") hid, their mother's voice could find them. "Her low tones were musical," June said, but "her fury was like the booming of a cannon." Rose had married John "Jack" Hovick in 1910 at age eighteen, one month pregnant with Louise, and by 1913, when her dainty baby June was born, she had already left and returned to her husband half a dozen times. She vowed to memorize his offenses, real or imagined, so that when the day came she

could recite her lines in just one take.

Rose got her chance in the summer of 1914, when she placed her hand on a Bible in a King County courtroom, a box of tissues by her side. Your Honor, she began, her husband, Jack Hovick, forced her and their daughters to live in an apartment on Seattle's Rainier Beach that was "damp and full of knotholes"—unacceptable, especially for a woman suffering from the grippe and weak lungs. Their new apartment was no better, what with its "bad reputation" and tenants of questionable character. She and her husband separated, reconciled, separated again. Rose so feared for her and her daughters' safety that she had applied for a restraining order against Jack, and nailed shut the door and every window. He had threatened to steal Louise and June, never to bring them back. "If I could only get the kids back," he'd said, "it is all I would want."

She wept for a moment at the horror of the memory. The courtroom quieted, waiting for her to compose herself.

Once, Rose continued, Jack broke through the glass, trashed all the furniture, and stole the bedrails, leaving her to sleep on the floor. He also "struck and choked" his wife and once beat Louise "almost insensible, slapped and kicked her and put her in a dark closet on account of some trivial matter."

Her husband made \$100 a month as an advertising agent for *The Seattle Sun* yet refused, during all of their married life, to buy Rose even one hat or a dress suit or "any underwear to speak of." He never gave her money to spend on herself or for "any purpose whatever"—including private dance lessons for Louise and June, although she omitted this last grievance from her public testimony. Rose would have used the girls not to escape a life she'd never wanted, but instead to access one that had always stood just out of her reach.

No longer, though. That life crept closer the day she took her daughters to a group lesson at Professor Douglas's Dancing School in downtown Seattle. Four lines of girls bobbed up and down to the sounds from the professor's piano, thumpy renditions of "Baby Shoes" and "A Broken Doll," and not the most talented one in the lot. Especially not Louise, always a half beat behind, swatting at the air rather than stroking it. Rose stood on the sidelines, making elegant butterfly swoops with her arm and pointing her toe, hoping Louise would follow her lead. June stood nearby, grasping the ballet barre, watching, if hypnotized. She toddled toward the line of dancing girls and they parted, making room. "I cannot recall the compulsion that led me out onto the floor," June said, "but I can close my eyes and still thrill to the memory of being there."

Rose understood compulsion and recognized its worth. Compulsion, along with indomitability, had propelled her family through generations of misery, failure, and boredom; it was by far their finest trait. She shared with her daughters a favorite bit of family lore. Their great-great-grandmother emigrated from Norway and set out for the West Coast in a covered wagon. She made it as far as the Sierra Nevada mountains when her party was stranded by a blizzard. Most of the party died, frozen or starved or devoured by wolves. Rescue workers whisked Grandma to the nearest settlement and undressed her, discovering what appeared to be horsemeat strapped around her body, hidden from the other survivors. She alone appeared plump and healthy. On closer inspection, the rescue team discovered that it wasn't horsemeat after all but rather the flesh of her less fortunate companions. It was a fairy tale, Hovick style, in which drama trumped veracity and the women always won.

On that afternoon in Professor Douglas's studio, Rose's eyes shifted from Louise to June. She watched June lift up until her tiny feet were perpendicular to the tile floor, and then her baby's body let itself fall, legs parting into a split, seamless as opening scissors.

Professor Douglas pulled at his beard. "In a few years," he said, "bring her back to me."

“What’s the matter with her now?” Rose asked.

~~“Mrs. Hovick, here you have a natural ballerina. But let me implore you to heed my warning. Do not buy her a pair of toe shoes until she is at least seven years old. You will ruin her.”~~

But Rose wouldn’t—couldn’t—wait, she told Jack that night. June was double-jointed; any child who could stand on her toes and do splits *had* to be. It was a gift, couldn’t he see that?

“We simply haven’t the money for private lessons,” Jack said. “I have faith in the future, but right now I am forced to be frugal.”

“Frugal!” Rose yelled. “You’re Norwegian, that’s what you are. I should have listened to my mother. She tried to save me from throwing my life away.” The marriage was over, Rose declared. She would leave and take the girls with her.

Jack Hovick told a different story. Instead of dance lessons he bought his daughters a kitten, and watched them pet the soft length of its belly as he left the next morning for work. When he came home, he found the pet’s body, the sweet little face severed from the torso and cotton fluff of its tail. A bloodied hatchet stood propped in a corner, mute testimony to what his wife had done, and what she might be inclined to do.

He fled that evening and never returned.

Rose was finished with Jack Hovick, but not yet with men. Seattle had stretched from a sleepy frontier town into a bustling city, home to upward of a quarter-million people. Would-be millionaires from around the world passed through on their way north to the Klondike fields, hoping to find gold. Rose knew her strengths. Men noticed her bonnet of shiny brown curls and her striking eyes—nearly violet with feathers for lashes. She had a compact, curvy figure and a flash-beam smile she used at her discretion. She was a proper lady, uneducated but ruthlessly shrewd, by turns vulnerable and witty and savage. In her own words she was a “jungle mother,” and knew to evaluate the worth of a thing or person before bothering to stake her claim.

She decided that Judson Brennerman, a traveling salesman from Indiana, would be her new husband. Surely someone in his profession would understand how rare her baby was, and agree that June needed an act, and an audience, as soon as possible.

Rose and Judson were married at the First Unitarian Church in May 1916, on the same day newspapers reported that Seattle had surpassed Reno, Nevada, as the divorce capital of the United States, averaging twenty-five splits a week. Rose told the girls to call her new husband “Daddy Bub.” The following September, Daddy Bub bolstered the statistics by filing for divorce from Rose. He alleged that she was “cruel in many ways,” causing him to “suffer personal indignities ever since his marriage, rendering life burdensome.” The judge ordered Brennerman to pay Rose \$200 in cash immediately, and \$500 more over the course of the year.

“Men,” she told her daughters, “will take everything they can get and give as little as possible in return.... God cursed them by adding an ornament here.” Rose pointed to between her legs. “Every time they so much as think of a woman, it grows.... Why girls, when I married Daddy Bub he promised me faithfully that he would educate my two little baby girls, I would run his house, and we would just be good friends. The very night we were married, he tried to enter my room. He had no intention of just being friends! That’s why Daddy Bub is no longer with us.”

Rose ended this lesson by telling the girls exactly where they’d come from: she’d found June tucked inside the petals of a lovely red rose, and Louise had been plucked from a cabbage leaf.

Rose took the settlement money and paid for more dance lessons, even for Louise. The girls had

never brushed their teeth or seen the inside of a classroom, but they were ready for their first dance recital at Professor Douglas's school. The professor, at Rose's repeated insistence, let June wear toe shoes and kept any thoughts about her potential ruin to himself. June was no bigger than the dolls she longed for in toy store windows, spinning circles in slow-motion perfection, a music-box dancer come to life. Louise jerked her arms and wobbled on her kicks, self-conscious until she realized that not one eye was on her.

Rose took the girls to stay with her family at 323 Fourth Avenue, in West Seattle. Her father, Charles Thompson, owned the house, but the women he lived with ran it. His wife—Rose's mother—was Anna, but Louise and June called their grandmother "Big Lady." She had a glorious pelt of thick dark hair and was tall enough to look down, literally and figuratively, on her husband. She had never wanted to marry him, especially not at age fifteen, and wanted her four children even less. Rose's only brother, Hurd, accommodated Big Lady by drowning when he was nine.

A search party discovered Hurd's naked body trapped beneath a sunken log in the middle of Lake Union. The neighbors whispered about the strange circumstances: everyone knew the boy had been petrified of water, and why were his clothes folded neatly by the bank? But the mystery was buried along with Hurd, and the Thompson women took some solace in the fact that the boy was spared from becoming a man.

Rose's older sister, Mina, died of a drug overdose when she was just twenty. Afterward the youngest sister, Belle, clung to Rose, absorbing her philosophy, noting the patterns of her behavior. Big Lady's mother, Dottie, rounded out the crew. She, too, shared the family penchant for marrying young men, wedding Big Lady's father at age fourteen and then simply losing track of him. Big Lady, Rose, Louise, and June knew nothing of their father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. "Of course, he was only a man," June said, "so it didn't much matter."

Big Lady often fled her dull, untidy life in Seattle and ventured out to San Francisco or Juneau or Tonopah, lugging a trunk of hand-sewn corsets and garters dotted with beads and jewels. Undergarments were her specialty. On the backs she embroidered hearts and across the fronts naughty angels who cracked jokes in bright, cursive lettering. In Goldstream, Nevada, the prostitutes were among her best customers. But she catered to all kinds, even embroidering an altar cloth for the nuns of Sacred Heart Convent.

Once, after Rose, Louise, and June moved in, Big Lady took an extended trip. Rose asked her to knit an afghan throw rug while she was on the road. Months passed, and Rose wondered when it would be finished. "Dozens of tiny squares don't knit themselves together, dear," Big Lady told her. Rose accepted this, and kept sending her mother money for yarn.

Meanwhile, Rose described the project to a few neighbors in West Seattle, who told her that they, too, were waiting for this same afghan. They'd also sent money for yarn. Next time they spoke, Rose accused her mother of running a scam.

"Now, Rose," she explained, "I keep track of every penny sent by each person, so when I finish knitting I'll add up the score. You see, darling, the one who has paid the most gets the prize. It's a sort of auction, only it's private and it goes on during, not after, I make the afghan."

Impressed, Rose told the story to her daughters. "There's nothing ordinary about your Big Lady's girls," she said, and only hoped she could pass on such valuable lessons.

During Rose's childhood, Charlie Thompson quietly tolerated both Big Lady's long absences and her brief appearances. His hair was bone white by the age of twenty-seven, and he held the same job his entire life, working as a cashier for the Great Northern Railway. He escaped only as far as his own backyard garden. There, at least, nothing talked back or disobeyed or seethed with disappointment.

Rose didn't care to pass her time at Seattle's Alki Beach with neighborhood girls, stringing "Indian necklaces" made of wild rose seed pods. Instead she longed to be on the stage, and Charlie Thompson indulged her, but only for one summer. He had no choice, really; each night the child cornered him with tales of vaudeville routines past and present, and she wasn't alone in her fascination. "Vaudeville was America in motley," wrote one historian, "the national relaxation ... we flocked vicariously to don the false face, let down our back hair, and forget."

Variety, as the entertainment was originally called, had its roots in Europe, where itinerant performers trouped from town to town and village to village. Later in the century, "vaudeville" became the more popular term, derived from *vau-de-Vire*, the valley of the Vire River in Normandy, where locals gathered on mild nights to show off whatever odd or remarkable talent they happened to possess. Similarly, it had always been American tradition to enliven a play with entr'acte performances by singers, dancers, magicians, and acrobats. George Washington, in black satin court dress, always preceded by an usher carrying lighted wax candles in silver candlesticks, used to stroll down the aisle of the old John Street Theatre in lower Manhattan. From the decorated presidential box Washington reportedly saw *The School for Scandal* no fewer than three times, but not because he enjoyed the play. "His Excellency," confessed one colleague, "seemed greatly charmed with Mlle. Placide, the lively tight-rope dancer from Paris, who appeared in most gracious diversions between the acts."

Vaudeville became a community enterprise, cheap entertainment for new immigrants, offering something for everyone: skits, jugglers, singers, minstrel acts, and "coon shouters" (the most famous of whom was a Jewish woman named Sophie Tucker, who donned blackface and sang "Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, but Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love"), gymnastics, animal and human tricks, comedy sketches, choreographed brawls, innovative dancing (in one popular number, a woman spun and leapt and pirouetted among two dozen eggs, never breaking a one), and bluntly ribald humor. A perennially popular skit, "The Haymakers," began with a group of harvesters, boys and girls, working on a farm. Eyebrows waggled, bawdy quips were exchanged, and each boy lined up to visit the same girl behind the haystack, shocked expressions and disheveled appearances betraying their indiscretion.

Dime museums, such as P. T. Barnum's famous place on Broadway, staged 10-cent shows in divided buildings—one for freak exhibitions, the other for variety acts—showcasing fat ladies, bearded women, pickled embryos in jars, Bertha Mills and her nineteen-inch feet, Laloo and the parasitic, headless twin sprouting from his stomach, Down syndrome children passed off as "Aztecs," and a few entertainers who would go on to achieve legitimate success, including comedians Weber and Fields and magician Harry Houdini.

For years Houdini was the highest-paid vaudeville star in the country, and crowds flocked to see him, hoping to learn his secrets. One renowned songwriter, Gerald Marks, recalled following Houdini from show to show. Every time the magician appeared wrapped in heavy chains and prepared to submerge himself, upside down, into a tank of water, he warned the crowd, "This is a very dangerous thing I'm about to do, and I don't know if I'm going to come out alive. I always kiss my wife good-bye." With that, Bess Houdini rose solemnly from her seat in the front row, approached the stage, and embraced her husband. One night the songwriter discovered the secret: Bess, too, was an illusionist, distracting everyone with her sweet, stoic smile and then slipping a key beneath Houdini's tongue.

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