

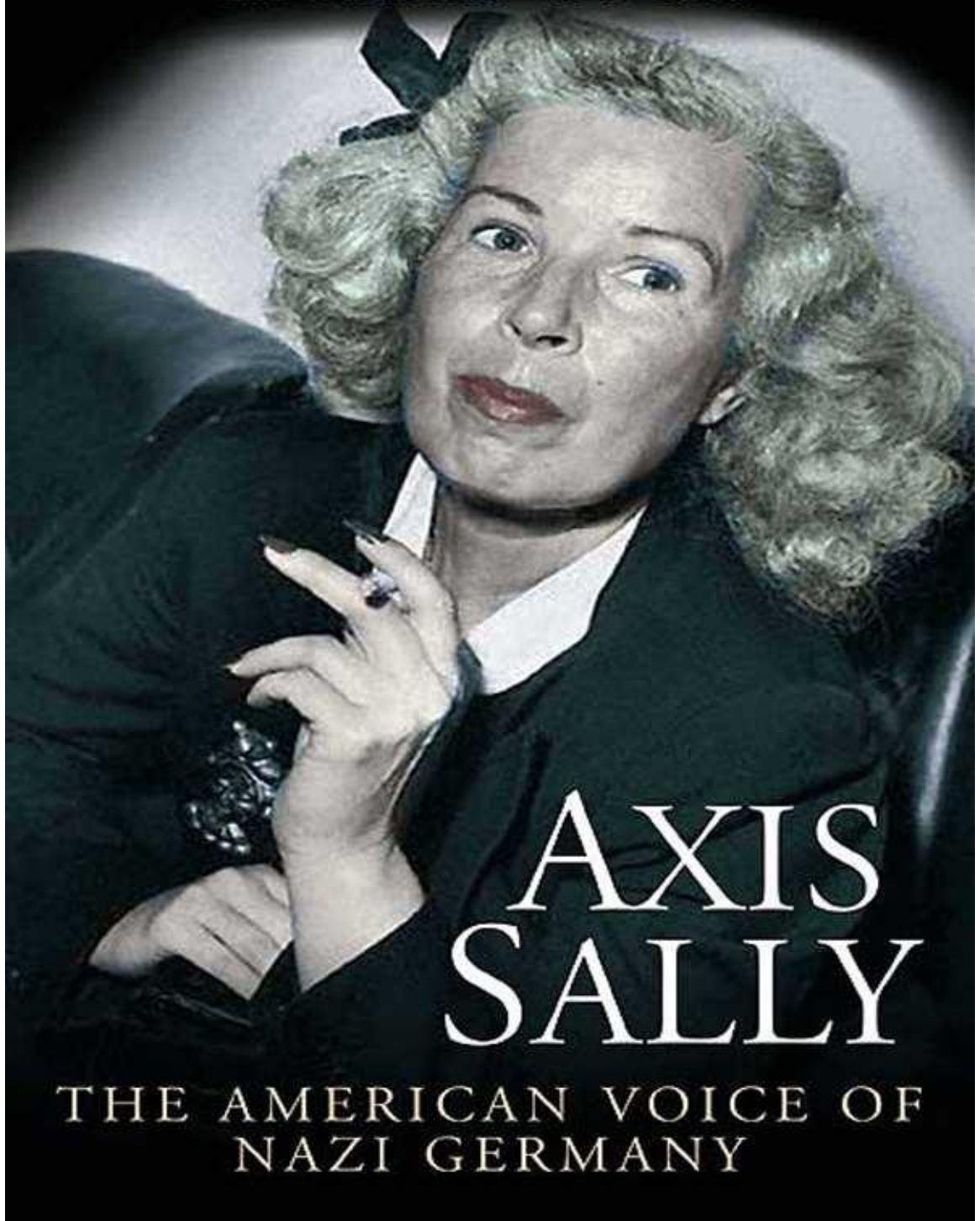
RICHARD LUCAS

A black and white portrait of a woman with voluminous, curly blonde hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white collared shirt. She is looking upwards and to the right with a slight smile, holding a lit cigarette in her right hand. The background is dark and out of focus.

AXIS
SALLY

THE AMERICAN VOICE OF
NAZI GERMANY

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By
RICHARD LUCAS



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Preface

While browsing through a website devoted to rare and historic audio clips in 2003, I first heard the voice of Axis Sally. This woman (Mildred Gillars) was the notorious Nazi propagandist whose theme song *Lili Marlene* became an international favorite during and after the war. Despite her undeniable skills as a broadcaster, the recording also featured a vile anti-Semitism rant. Insinuating that Franklin Roosevelt was a homosexual surrounded by Jewish “boyfriends,” her words were jarring and repulsive. Yet I wondered how Mildred Gillars, who described herself as a “100% American girl,” became a willing mouthpiece for a genocidal regime. How did this woman with middle-class Ohio roots end up on the wrong side of history, convicted of aiding the Nazi regime and betraying her country? I looked for a biography that answered the question, but none existed. Books on the subject of treason mentioned her in passing and tended to focus on her illicit relationship with a former Hunter College professor who served as her “Svengali.” Her *New York Times* obituary in November 1988 focused on the “*frisson*” her somewhat scandalous testimony caused at her 1949 trial.

As I listened to the Axis Sally audio clips that first day, I noticed that one of the recordings featured another woman with an American accent. Her on-air sidekick addressed her as “Sally” but the voice was clearly not that of Mildred Gillars. Aware of the circumstances that led to the conviction of Iva Toguri d’Aquino as the one and only Tokyo Rose (in fact, there had been several other women employed by Japanese radio who broadcast under the moniker “Orphan Ann”), I wondered how many other Axis Sallies there might have been, and whether any of those women were punished as Gillars and d’Aquino were.

A visit to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland to look at the Department of Justice “Notorious Offenders” case files on Axis Sally, as well as a telephone conversation with John Carver Edwards (the author of the excellent 1991 book *Berlin Calling*, about Americans who broadcast for the Third Reich) convinced me to write a factual, documented biography of Axis Sally. Over the next seven years of research and writing, I discovered a deeply flawed but fascinating woman whose thirst for fame led her to the heart of Hitler’s Germany; whose hope for love and marriage convinced her to remain; and whose inner strength compelled her to survive in the death-strewn shelters and cellars of defeated Berlin.

In my younger years, I was a devoted listener to shortwave radio. The radio waves were the battleground of the Cold War in those days. Radio Moscow, Radio Peking, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe were propaganda powerhouses that fought for the hearts and minds of countless millions for whom radio was their only link to the developed world. In the darkest and farthest reaches of the earth, the signal from the shortwave transmitters represented nations and peoples and political ideologies. It was Joseph Goebbels who envisioned the power of the medium long before the advent of the Second World War. By 1940, Berlin’s foreign radio service sang the praises of Adolf Hitler and the new Germany twenty-four hours a day in twelve languages. An unemployed American named Mildred Gillars stepped into that burgeoning radio empire and became, along with William Joyce (“Lord Haw Haw”), one of the regime’s most effective propagandists.

Today, radio is arguably one of the most pervasive means of political persuasion. One wonders how a woman with the innate talents of Mildred Gillars would have fared in her native land in a more forgiving time.

Richard Luc

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Paul Beekman Taylor and Walter Driscoll were extremely gracious as I traced the connections between Mildred Gillars, Bernard Metz and the Gurdjieff movement. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the journalists who tracked the story of Axis Sally. First, the late Ambassador John Bartlow Martin whose papers possessed the only (albeit abridged) copy of the original trial transcript. Helene Ann Spicer generously shared her memories of interviewing Axis Sally. I am most grateful to Iris Wiley, Jim Dury and James Sauer who took the time to speak to me and remember Mildred Gillars' final years.

Most importantly, I thank my wife Sachi for her love and understanding throughout this experience; our two sons, Jordan and Taylor, who no longer have to ask "When will your book be finished?" Jordan, especially, deserves thanks for patiently spending many hours in libraries and archives near and far. Thank you to my parents, Richard and Gail Lucas, for their love and support.

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Prologue

January 1949: The US District Court in Washington, DC is teeming with reporters, photographers and curious onlookers. At the center of the mass of popping flashbulbs and shouting newsmen is a silver-haired former showgirl named Mildred Gillars, better known to thousands of GIs as “Axis Sally.” Facing a possible death sentence for treason, the only crime specified in the United States Constitution, she is on trial for broadcasting radio propaganda aimed at demoralizing American troops in their struggle against Nazi Germany.

The world had changed since Axis Sally made her last broadcast in a besieged Berlin radio studio. Deteriorating relations between the victorious Allies preoccupied the postwar world. Communism and subversion from within was the latest threat to the American way of life. The trial of Axis Sally was front-page news, but it was a front page shared with headlines of the entry of Mao Tse Tung’s forces into Peking and the continuing Cold War crisis over Berlin. Internal scandals had rocked the nation, including former Communist Party member Whittaker Chambers’ revelation that Soviet agents, including senior State Department official Alger Hiss, had infiltrated the United States government and sabotaged foreign policy. President Harry S. Truman barely survived Governor Thomas Dewey’s bid to unseat him and end sixteen straight years of Democratic rule. Faced with an uphill electoral battle, the Truman Administration needed to show that the President knew how to deal with America’s enemies.

Two months before the November 1948 election, two infamous figures of World War II returned to the United States to face trial. One was the Japanese-American Iva Toguri d’Aquino, one of several women who worked for Tokyo radio during the war and called herself “Orphan Ann.” The soldiers and sailors in the Pacific theatre called her “Tokyo Rose.” The other woman was a lesser-known but equally reviled American radio broadcaster who worked for Berlin’s *Reichsradio*. Since March 1945 she had languished in an Allied internment camp without charges or the aid of counsel. On the radio she went by the name Midge, but to the soldier in the field she was “Axis Sally.” Her signature theme song, “Lili Marlene,” was a worldwide hit, and she captured the imagination of the foot soldier with her seductive, lilting voice. Accompanied by a live orchestra playing the GIs’ favorite jazz and swing music, Axis Sally had an audience of literally millions, despite the vile anti-Semitic propaganda she often offered on the side.

What drove the woman who proudly called herself “a 100% American girl” to collaborate with a genocidal regime? What forces made her cut the final tie to her native land and betray an entire nation? Mildred Gillars’ story is one of poverty and hunger—a woman who, like the Führer she served, wished to accomplish great artistic feats but instead thrust herself into infamy. An ambitious female coping with the realities of her time, she was an attractive young woman who said “no” to marriage and instead relied on the good graces of a series of questionable men to achieve her dream of independence and notoriety.

How that reliance played a central role in her descent into the ranks of traitor will become evident as this book examines the circumstances that led her to represent the Third Reich on radio. For the first time, the facts of Axis Sally’s life will supplant the speculation and false claims that have worked their way into her life story over the decades. The myth of Axis Sally—the all-knowing, hate-filled disseminator of military and logistical information—needs to be reconsidered in light

declassified documents from the files of the FBI, the Department of Justice, the Office of Alien Property and the Army Counter-Intelligence Corps, as well as wartime records of the German Foreign Office.

Like Iva Toguri d'Aquino, who bore the punishment for several Tokyo Roses, there was more than one Axis Sally. Infantrymen in the deserts of North Africa and later in northern Europe heard one woman speak from Berlin, while another "Sally"—a native New Yorker—welcomed American troops to Italy from a studio in Rome. The book examines the deeds of Berlin's Axis Sally and the uneven justice meted out in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Not intended to be an *apologia* for a convicted traitor, this book aims to portray a life lived on the "wrong side of history" with compassion and insight.

CHAPTER 1

An Unwelcome Child

On a cold morning in October 1928 a slim, attractive woman walked into the Camden, New Jersey offices of the *The Evening Courier* newspaper. Teary-eyed, she approached the front desk and asked to place an advertisement for that day's edition. She identified herself as Mrs. Barbara Elliott and told the clerk that she was searching for her missing husband Charles, whom she had married only six weeks before. Her husband had left their New York apartment and never returned. A few days after his departure, Barbara discovered that she was expecting a child. A friend told her that he had spotted Charles in Camden, and the distraught mother-to-be had come to New Jersey in search of the man who had abandoned her.

The desk clerk knew a good human interest story when he heard one and called upstairs for a reporter to take down the woman's story. *The Evening Courier* regularly printed melodramatic stories about lucky Ziegfeld Follies dancers marrying wealthy heirs, lonely and lovesick women driven to suicide, and couples finding love against all odds. Because Camden is only a few miles across the river from Philadelphia, some of the stories printed in the local paper found their way to the wire services and the big New York newspapers. In a weary voice, Barbara Elliott told the newsman her sad story in detail.

It all began when a girlfriend invited her on a double date where she was introduced to a "dark, slender, ascetic-looking" man of thirty—a linguist and world traveler who regaled her with tales of his visits to Morocco, Singapore and Baghdad. Barbara was enthralled with the handsome, urbane stranger named Charles Elliott. The two couples danced the night away at a roadhouse in Greenwich, Connecticut. There, Barbara and Charles held hands under the table and were swept away with happiness.

Within twenty-four hours, the two lovers agreed to an "ultramodern" marriage, with the understanding that if either party grew tired of the other—the marriage would end. Barbara explained their pact:

"It's the bonds that kill love. People must be free, untrammelled. Love must not be forced or shackled.... It was a mad thing to do, but to us it seemed so right. We were so much in love. And we agreed never to hold each other back. I would continue my work as interior decorator; he, his as a toy director and linguist. 'When love dies we will part,' we told each other. And so by leaving love free we hoped to keep it always."¹

Two weeks later, it all fell apart. Charles promised to meet his wife for dinner but never returned. Heartache turned to panic when Barbara found out that she was pregnant: "I was frantic when I discovered a few days later that I would become a mother. Then a friend said he had seen Charles in Camden, at least he thought it was he and I came down here to search for him."² That evening, pressed in between articles about the political battle between Herbert Hoover and Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York for the White House, *The Evening Courier* told the shocking tale and launched a citywide search for the missing husband:

MISSING MATE SOUGHT BY COMPANIONATE BRIDE

Anyone knowing the whereabouts of Charles Elliott, last heard of in Camden, will please inform him that he is about to become a father. His wife, Barbara, who is now registered at the Hotel Walt Whitman, pleads with him to forget the circumstances surrounding the marriage and the immediate separation, and believes that for the sake of all concerned reconciliation should be effected.⁴

The next morning Barbara telephoned the *Courier* reporter to thank him for his sympathy and kindness. In a voice choked with emotion and portent, she told him that the money for her hotel bill had been left on the nightstand. “They will understand,” she said and abruptly hung up.⁵ Barbara then called the Hotel Walt Whitman and told the front desk clerk to go upstairs to her room, where he would find something. He did—a suicide note written on hotel stationery:

To Whom It May Concern,

It is not humanly possible to continue any longer this bitter agony of bringing into this poor deluded world another unwelcome child. The few who may give my sorry act any thought at all will probably think only in a conventional way, saying “What a weak thing she must have been.” Who will ever have the perception to realize that I am taking this step because I have an intelligence and soul that are sensitized to the nth degree?

It is the greatest maternal tenderness I can bestow upon my dear child that I end my life with his that he may not be numbered among the hosts of unwelcome children.

Barbara Elliott

Published in full on the front page of the *Courier*, the suicide note thrust Barbara Elliott into the spotlight. (See Appendix I for its full text.) Camden police were placed on alert and county detectives were told to be on the lookout for the deserted bride. A photograph of Barbara Elliott sitting on a wooden chair wearing a full-length fur coat and a hat popular among the flappers of the time was emblazoned on page one under the banner “Suicide.” Although the *Courier* noted that the authorities considered “the possibility that Mrs. Elliott’s unusual actions might be in the nature of a public stunt for a motion picture, play or book, etc.,”⁷ the police decided to err on the side of caution. Dubbed the “companionate bride,” her story spread to the New York newspapers and the wire services. The International Wire Service and United Press sent representatives to Camden to cover the impending tragedy.

At this point, the hard-bitten city journalists stepped in to verify Barbara Elliott’s story. The *New York World* attempted to confirm Barbara’s stated address but had no success. Other New York papers could not confirm details of the story. Nevertheless, the dramatic story took on a life of its own transcending mere details, and the “companionate” bride’s command of the front page was not yet over.

At 7:30 a.m. on the morning of October 19, Officer William Basier of the Camden police department was patrolling the great bridge that spans the Delaware River, connecting Camden with Philadelphia. In the morning mist, the young policeman saw the figure of a woman on the bridge walkway. Within seconds, Basier saw her remove her coat and dangle her foot over the side rail. The bridge was a popular site for suicides, and the patrolman snapped into action.

By then the woman was straddling the rail and Basier grabbed her as she swung 135 feet above the icy river. Pulling her back from the rail, he soon realized that the disturbed girl did not want to be saved. Lashing out at her rescuer, she fought him off vigorously. Several other officers arrived to assist Basier and they soon had control of the flailing woman who screamed, "This is a free country and one ought to be able to do as one wants... If I am not allowed to jump off this bridge, I'll jump off another!"⁸

The officers carried the distraught woman into the bridge's security office. The policemen asked if she was Mrs. Barbara Elliott, the "companionate bride" of the newspaper. She denied it, but after further questioning finally admitted that she was the woman for whom all Camden had been searching. She moaned, "Oh, why didn't you let me carry out my plans?"⁹

Barbara was taken to police headquarters for her own protection where she was met by a inquisitive press. Greeted by popping flashbulbs and peppered with questions, she and her background came under increasing scrutiny. She said she was an interior decorator by profession, and that she had attended the Art Students League and Ohio Wesleyan College. She had lived in a number of cities and claimed to have a number of "influential" relatives in Philadelphia and New York whom she didn't wish to bother with her troubles.

Soon the pressure of the press inquisition in the court hallway began to affect her demeanor. She alternately sobbed and laughed hysterically when confronted with the speculation that her story was nothing more than a publicity stunt. When a *Courier* reporter asked her to comment on the allegation, Barbara was indignant: "You have no right to suggest such a thing to me. I am on the level. I admit I am in great trouble and I tried to take the easiest way out but I guess I've caused trouble for everyone."¹⁰

Ushered into police court, Barbara beseeched the judge for mercy: "It doesn't much matter what happens. I didn't know I was committing an offense. I thought I could do as I wanted to. You have promised that I won't take my life here—I won't say it won't happen again however."¹¹

Crying, she told the judge that she had no money and nothing to live for, and insisted, "I refuse to bring an unwanted child into this world, and I was taking the easy way out."¹² It was Friday morning and the judge decided to put her in protective custody over the weekend. She would remain in jail until she was composed enough to guarantee that there would be no more suicide attempts.

That night, the story of Barbara Elliott was again front-page news. As she sat in a holding cell in the Camden jail, the photograph of heroic Officer William Basier appeared on the *Courier's* front page:

HE SPOILED HER SUICIDE
Deserted Bride, Foiled in Leap into Delaware
Cop Grabs Barbara Elliott As
She Climbs Over Span Rail
Sobs Out Her Story in Public Hearing
Begs to Die and Insists That She'll Leap Off Some Other Bridge¹³

As the story of the seemingly well-bred woman with the cultivated accent spread on the news wire

the press demanded answers about her background and sought verification of her story. That same morning, a wire service reporter received word from his New York headquarters that she should be asked if she worked for a “moving picture producer known to be ready to release a film of companionate marriage.”¹⁴ Mrs. Elliott was unmoved, replying that she had never heard of the company. She stood her ground, “What I have told you and other newspapermen and the police here in Camden is the truth.”¹⁵ Despite the allegations, Barbara received several proposals from chivalrous men willing to marry the distressed mother-to-be.

On Saturday morning, Camden police investigators became even more suspicious of Barbara Elliott’s story when a young man walked into the offices of the *Courier* claiming that he was Charles Elliott. Questioned about his whirlwind courtship and marriage, the police soon discovered that his version of events did not correspond with Barbara’s. Accompanied by several newspapermen eager to witness the ecstatic reunion of two lovers, Captain John Golden, the Chief of Detectives, took Charles down to the detention area. The police captain quietly waited to gauge Barbara Elliott’s response to the obvious fraud. *The Evening Courier* described what happened next:

There, “Barbara Elliott” staged her last bit of realistic acting; she flung herself at “the long lost husband” the moment he loomed up in the corridor. She staged a faint almost equal in intensity to Sarah Bernhardt’s.

“Pretty good, little girl,” commented Captain Golden and newspapermen.

Revived, without the slightest need for first aid methods, she and her “companionate husband” were told plainly how their story had failed of verification in nearly every check-up.¹⁶

“Charles” quickly confessed that his real identity was John Ramsey, a New York writer. After some hesitation, “Barbara” admitted that she was a struggling New York actress named Mildred Gillars. Ramsey and Gillars had been college friends, both members of the dramatic arts fraternity The Alpha Phi at Ohio Wesleyan University. The now-impoverished pair had been offered \$75 each to impersonate an abandoned mother-to-be and her caddish husband by a motion picture producer. The whole incident was a hoax designed to promote a new silent film entitled *Unwelcome Children*.

The phony couple was brought before the court of Judge Bernard Bertman who immediately sentenced them to three months in jail for contempt of court. Dozens of supporters gathered in court to observe the conclusion of the story. Some were “so touched that they had come to court prepared to offer her a home if the judge let her off.”¹⁷

With a dramatic flourish, Mildred Gillars tearfully apologized to the judge. The out-of-work actress said she had taken the job in financial desperation and told the court that neither she nor Ramsey had been paid the \$75 promised to them by the movie company. Judge Bertram suspended their sentences, placing blame squarely on the film’s producers and pronouncing that “the movie men who are back of this ought to be before me.”¹⁸ The relieved 27-year-old rushed to the bench and grabbed the judge exclaiming, “You sweet thing!” Police restrained the defendant from kissing the surprised judge. Ordered by the judge to leave town, Mildred Gillars and John Ramsey did not have even the car fare to get home. Several newspaper reporters pooled their funds to finance their return trip. One of the contributing reporters told the hoaxers, “You did your best to put it over. It was worth \$12.75—car fare back to New York.”¹⁹

After this close brush with the law, Mildred Gillars could not possibly know that one day, far from America, she would assume a name and perform a role far more infamous than that of the “deserted bride”—it would be a name synonymous with treachery and anti-Semitism: Axis Sally.

As Mildred Gillars sat with the producers of *Unwelcome Children* to plan her portrayal of Mrs. Barbara Elliott, she built its foundation on memories of her own unhappy childhood and her desperate need for acceptance and acclaim. It was that same reckless search for fame and notoriety that led the star-struck Ohio teenager to wander far from home, abandon family and friends, and ultimately cast her lot with a murderous and tyrannical regime.

I know so bitterly the awful loneliness of a life without parental love. I have visualized completely the arrival of this baby of ours. I have seen myself watching it through the years. I know the agony I would suffer every time I would catch that wistful gleam in his eye when he saw another child happy in his father's love.

Mildred Gillars, 1972

* * *

She was born Mildred Elizabeth Sisk, the daughter of Vincent Sisk, a Canadian, and Mary (Mae) Hewitson, a 23-year-old seamstress from Fredericton, New Brunswick. Born on November 29, 1900 in Portland, Maine, Mildred was raised with the fierce pride of an Irish nationalist and the anti-British prejudice that came with it.

A strikingly lovely girl with porcelain white skin, dark eyes and raven hair, her early childhood was marred by her father's alcoholism. Vincent and Mae were married on February 21, 1900, slightly more than nine months before their daughter's birth, so it is likely that Mae's pregnancy was the deciding factor in the pair's union.

From the beginning of the marriage Sisk drank heavily, and his recreational pursuits included smoking opium. Mae was a strict Episcopalian from a middle-class Canadian home (her father was a magistrate in Fredericton) and her husband's drinking and drug abuse were unbearable. Sisk was the tough son of a stonemason from rural Bathurst, New Brunswick—a mining and shipbuilding community on the province's northeastern coast. The strapping blacksmith could deliver a punishing beating, and his wife was regularly the victim of his drunken rages.

After almost seven years of misery, Mae took six-year-old Mildred away from their Portland home. It would be the last time Mildred would ever see her natural father. Although Mae would return briefly three weeks later, the marriage was doomed and she would file for divorce in April 1907. Accusing Vincent Sisk of "cruel and abusive treatment," the court awarded full custody of the child to Mae on October 31, 1907.²⁰ While the divorce decree did not mention abuse directed at the child, the terrifying atmosphere in the home must have had a serious effect on the little girl, who was witnessing the effects of alcoholism and drug abuse firsthand in her most formative years. It would also cement a bond between mother and daughter that would be difficult to break.

Throughout Mildred's childhood, Mae was close-mouthed about her ex-husband. As an adult Mildred claimed to know "nothing about my father except his name."²¹ Mae was likely shamed by her status as a divorced woman with a child, and never discussed the dark stain on her past. That she was willing to endure the gossip and stigma that followed a divorced woman in those days is testament to the severity of the abuse. She instilled that same strength and self-reliance in her daughter. Years later, Mildred's stepsister Edna Mae marveled that her mother was "successful in keeping her feelings of a marriage failure from both of us, since neither of us knew this man Sisk was alive..."²² In the face of such an embarrassing family secret, Mae went on to raise Mildred as though her biologic

father never existed.

~~As her marriage collapsed, Mae became acquainted with a Portland couple named Dr. and Mrs. Twitchell. The Twitchells introduced her to an itinerant dentist from Pottsville, Pennsylvania named Robert Bruce Gillars. Gillars, also divorced, began courting Mae in earnest. Less than ten months after the finalization of her divorce from Vincent Sisk, Mae married Gillars in Woodstock, Ontario on July 8, 1908.²³ Dr. Gillars was a markedly improved prospect for the young divorced mother. Educated at the Philadelphia College of Dentistry, he was a hardworking, traveling professional who was in the process of applying for a license to practice in the state of Maine. Three months after the wedding Mae was pregnant again and on July 21, 1909, Edna Mae Gillars was born.²⁴ Although the dentist never formally adopted Mae's daughter, Gillars took the seven-year-old as his own. From that point on, she took the name Mildred Gillars.~~

Despite his boast to state officials that he had “pulled teeth from coast to coast,” Dr. Gillars was denied a license to practice in Maine.²⁵ This reversal forced the dentist to move his family from town to town with breathtaking speed. Mildred attended schools in St. Johns, New Brunswick in 1910, then moved on to Halifax, Nova Scotia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. By 1914, she was enrolled in the Bellevue, Ohio school district. Many of Dr. Gillars' patients were railroad workers and laborers who moved wherever their occupation demanded.

For a short time, Mae and Edna Mae returned to Maine while Mildred, a teenager of growing beauty, was inexplicably sent to a convent. Her stepsister remembered that, “Mildred entered the convent as a child, despite the fact that her mother was not a Catholic. When the family left Maine for their new home in Conneaut, Ohio, she had to leave.”²⁶ By 1916, Gillars had a large ten-room house built at 145 Grant Street in the small town of Conneaut. The town was a central point for Dr. Gillars to attend to his many regular and potential patients. Conneaut sits at the junction of several railroad lines where the Norfolk Southern, Norfolk & Western, Conrail and Bessemer & Lake Erie lines run today.

Dr. Gillars' stepdaughter was a lonely, withdrawn and solitary youngster. A former neighbor recalled the little girl as “a very quiet, overdressed child who was never allowed to play with other children and who had the most beautiful black curls that I have ever seen on a child.”²⁷ Although her younger stepsister idolized the cultured and pretty girl with porcelain skin, Mildred was emotionally distant. Edna Mae sadly recalled shortly before her death in 2002: “When we were kids, I would be downstairs making a racket and Mildred would be upstairs. Our lives never crossed.”²⁸ The two girls were of completely different temperaments, with Mildred leading an almost separate existence from her stepsister. Edna Mae was a tomboy while Mildred was a delicate “little lady.” The younger girl was in awe of her older, more sophisticated sister, fearing even to interrupt her when she spoke. She also recalled that Mildred was so obedient and submissive that, if told to do so, she would sit in one place day and night.

The rootless nature of her childhood shaped Mildred's restless and headstrong personality. It also intensified her need to stand out and gain acceptance, especially with the opposite sex. Nicknamed “Ronnie,” she arrived at Conneaut High School on November 28, 1916 and immediately made a strong impression on her fellow students by wearing brightly colored, stylish outfits that few of her peers could afford. The high school newspaper noted in 1917 that Mildred's favorite song was “Won't You Come and Love Me?” a title remarkably similar to the inviting selections she would play for American troops more than twenty years later.²⁹ A mediocre student, she performed best in English and Domestic Science. Although she would later become a fluent German speaker who could read Goethe in his native tongue, she earned a D in German in her last semester. It was in high school that she developed her interest in the theater and perhaps her unhappiness at home propelled her toward the stage. At the end of her senior year, the high school publication *The Tattler* listed the features that

each student was most known for. Mildred Gillars was noted not for her great love of theater and literature, but her hair.³⁰

After graduation, Mildred briefly studied to become a dental assistant at Western Reserve University, but her love for the dramatic arts led her to abandon that path. Her mother had been assisting her stepfather in the dental office for years, but Mildred had no interest in the family business. In September 1918, she enrolled at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio.

“I chose Ohio Wesleyan because of the excellent dramatic department, and I wished to study under Professor Charles M. Newcomb whose reputation I had already heard of,” she recalled. “I took every course that was possible to take and joined the dramatic club besides, and played the lead in practically every college production that we had.”³¹ The first of a series of intellectual older men whose influence shaped her fate, Newcomb was a charismatic married professor, who had a reputation as an engaging lecturer and drama coach. He grew to be a mentor, and more, to the young impressionable girl with an absent father.

The Painless Dentist

While Mildred had no relationship with and little knowledge of her biological father, the activities and influence of her stepfather raise disturbing questions. Mildred’s stepsister Edna Mae described her father to John Bartlow Martin of McCall’s magazine in 1948 as an “exceptionally brilliant man, but he had a weakness...” Ironically, it was the same weakness that plagued Vincent Sisk—alcoholism. Gillars worked extremely long hours, nights and weekends, visiting patients at their homes as was the custom in those days. She described the dentist with an unwieldy moustache and long beard as a doctor “who worked for the working man” and served railroad families of limited means. Charging 50 cents for a tooth extraction, Gillars was financially successful but not necessarily “an ethical man.” Although Edna Mae considered him a “wizard” at dentistry with an extensive knowledge of medicine, she told a troubling story about his practices.

A woman came to Dr. Gillars demanding that all of her teeth be extracted, claiming that her medical doctor recommended it. Despite the danger of infection in a time before antibiotics, Gillars obliged. The woman soon fell ill and died.³⁴ By the standards of the early 1900s, Dr. Gillars had a thriving business, averaging, at times, \$1,000 per week.³⁵ In 1919, with Mildred at college, the dentist had opened another office in Elyria approximately one hundred miles away from the family home. Upon his arrival in town, he advertised heavily in the local newspaper as:

DR. GILLARS PAINLESS DENTIST

Why don't you have those old decayed teeth removed?

You say you haven't got the nerve. Well, let me tell you, I have the nerve already corked up in a bottle here in my office and it is NOT COCAINE.

You can have them removed without the least particle of pain.
I do all branches of up-to-date first class dentistry and at prices to suit all.

Twenty-five years experience. All work guaranteed.
By coming in the morning you can have your work done the same day.

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