

JEANNINE MERMET

A MEMOIR / UNE MEMOIRE



AS TOLD TO VICKY FUNARI & HILARY BRASHEAR

This memoir was produced as part of the Pool Stories project.

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Pool Stories is a multi-platform documentary project about a group of people who find strength, grace, and community in an aquacize class at a local swimming pool.

I was born in Paris in 1928,

and when I was about three years old my parents divorced. There was a couple with whom my parents were friendly. Very friendly. The man fell in love with my mother, my mother in love with him. And the woman fell in love with my father, and my father in love with her. They were very happy like this, but this was when divorce in France and Europe didn't look very good, especially if you had children. So when they had to go in front of a judge for their divorce, and when he heard their history, the love story of these four people, he ruled that the little girl should go to a convent in the middle of Paris.

That was in 1930, and I was in the convent for a little over eight years. My parents were each allowed to visit once a month and I would spend summer vacations with them. Yes, once a month, and I can never forget it. I never will forget my mother coming. She was very

pretty and she came with a pocketbook that I can describe to this day. A pretty pocketbook, black, and she would open it and inside she would have handkerchiefs and a bottle of cologne, and she would almost bathe me in cologne with her handkerchief. I can never forget that she had tears in her eyes, and I wasn't very happy when she left.

My father had me for the first month of summer, and we always went to Switzerland in Geneva, that's where my grandparents were born and lived, as well as my father. Well, my father had been born on the border of France, and he ended up going to the First World War when he was very young – he was only about 17 when he went into the army. He asked to go the army, he wasn't drafted he enlisted "yes." The First World War was horrible, of course, they all are, and my father was wounded.



Me and my mother, about 1930



Me and my father, about 1930



My parents and me in Geneva, Switzerland, 1931



The convent, 1936,
I'm in the front row, first on the right



The convent, 1936,
I'm second from the left

As his profession, my father was a driver, and he worked for very wealthy bankers and jewelers from Paris and travelled all over Europe.

When we were in Switzerland with my grandparents, I used to drive my grandmother crazy. She had a big kitchen, an old-fashioned kitchen with a big table in the middle. I would get on her nerves, and she would say, "I am going to punish you if you don't stop doing that," and then she would come after me, and I would keep running around the table, and she would never catch me. I was much faster than she was.

Every day we went to a different part of Switzerland, mostly in the mountains. I have the most beautiful memories of all those little voyages we took. My father loved the mountains and I loved them too. The second month of summer vacation I was with my mother in Brittany on the west part of France on the Atlantic seashore, where she was from. I loved it just as much as I loved the mountains. Being with them and having them take me everywhere was so wonderful.

I must have been about 8 or 9

when I came out of the convent. My father came and picked me up, and he took me to friends of his that had a house outside of Paris. I was to stay there, and he would come and visit me, but he didn't want my mother to know where I was. I always thought, when I got older, that my father was still in love with my mother perhaps. We never had a conversation about it, and unfortunately I never asked questions.

The family was a couple that had children, and I remember when one of their children did something wrong, their mother would reprimand them, and they would say that I did it. This is why to this day I cannot stand when somebody says that I am lying because I tell the truth as much as I can. It was very, very, very hard on me to be punished for something I did not do. I wasn't happy at all.

I don't know how my mother found out where I was, but she did. She came and took me to live with friends of hers in a little town outside Paris and I was using her last name as my name in school. Then I was moved to a different Paris suburb. I lived with an older couple with grown children, in a big house with a huge, huge garden in the front, that had fruit and vegetables. I liked it there because they had three daughters and the beautiful big garden. One of their daughters lived in this little house right next to their house with her child. She had a limp because one of her legs was shorter than the other and I can still see her, with her child on her hip, limping to the big house to be with us. The other two daughters



Me at my father's apartment 1934

were about 18 and 19. I liked them because they were happy and loved to get dressed up to go out. I really loved it there, but I was lonely.

I had to walk to school. I loved that it was a long walk, and that I could look at all the different, pretty houses. (I hadn't been outside at all while I was in the convent.) I liked my teacher and did well in that school because she was so nice to me – she must have realized that I was a little bit lost. I was very much an introvert. I hardly talked at all. I don't remember talking in the convent or being a little girl – when I think about it now it's just as if I was waiting to grow up so that I could become someone.

All of a sudden, the Germans were approaching Paris.

On the 3rd of September, 1939, France declared war on Germany and the Second World War began.

Everybody panicked and started running South, away from the Germans who were approaching incredibly fast. This was the exodus. I remember that we were in school that day, and we could hear the noise of the cannons. The Germans were approaching, and we could hear all the arms and the explosions. Everybody panicked. They put us in buses, all the children with the teachers, and we left. It was horrible. That night, we left Paris and went into a school. We had something to eat there, but the

next morning we couldn't use the buses because there was no gasoline – it all went to the war, for the army.

We started walking and didn't know where we were going. We were walking for many, many days, many, many weeks on the roads. The German and Italian airplanes would start flying over the roads because there were some French troops that were going through those roads as well, and they would just kill everybody on the road. They were shooting the farms that we passed and the animals on the farms – they were shooting everything. At night we just slept on the ground, on the side of the road, and then came a time when we had trouble finding anyone to give us food because we were a whole school traveling together. So we would stop in the farms and they helped us as much as they could. It was very frightening – we would hear airplanes arriving and they would just start at one end of the road

and keep going and shooting everything that was moving. We had to quickly run off the road and go into the grass and try to hide, and many of us were wounded.

We went on for so long. I remember we slept sometimes at the farms where they keep the animals, so we had bugs in our hair and

bugs on our bodies. We were like the animals. That went on for a long, long time because we

FRANCE OCCUPIED BY AXIS POWERS
1940-1944



Map of occupation, courtesy of R. Borov.

ended up going all the way down to Limoges in the South of France and very far from Paris. And there we went into school again. We were disinfected and stayed for a long time. We had a good time there, we played. We went to school there. That's when I realized I loved to perform because they would do plays. They were organizing all these things because while most children at the school went home at night, we were there permanently for a couple of months. I just loved doing those plays. We wore gowns, sometimes we danced and sometimes we sang – I loved it.

We came back from Limoges when I was eleven. We didn't know where our parents had

been, and they didn't know where we were. It was complete panic. They put us all in a train going to Paris from Limoges, and every part of France was occupied by the German soldiers. We would stop at stations, and the Germans would come into the train to make sure everything was okay and that it was just children going home. I remember I was afraid of them – they looked horrible with those big boots and their guns and everything. It was very frightening for all of us. When we got back to Paris, my father was there. He took me home with him, and this is where I stayed and I went to school. My father lived about ten minutes from where my mother lived, in the same neighborhood in the Montmartre section.

My father did not want me to see my mother, but my mother found out I was there and where I went to school, and when I finished school in the afternoons she would come and see me, and talk to me, and she would cry and I would cry. I hadn't lived with my mother since I was three years old. She wanted me to be with her, of course.

My father found out that I had seen my mother and was very upset, and I could tell that he didn't want me to see her. It was about the time of my first Communion, and I had taken the dress to be pressed. My father told me to pick it up. It was so close to my mother's apartment that I just made a little stop in there. I was walking back when I saw him walking towards me and I thought, "uh oh!" I knew he knew what I was doing, going to see my mother. So he was upset because, eh, you know, parents. If it was now, I would tell him what I thought. But back then I didn't say anything to my parents. My father was very strict, but I was well behaved.



Me in 1941 for first Communion photo shoot

I wanted to play the piano, so my father sent me to a lady who taught piano in her apartment. I started taking piano lessons and about after two or three lessons I decided was never going to learn how to play it. So instead of going to my lessons I used to walk around my neighborhood, going all around everywhere. As I got older I became more independent.

It wasn't long after that that I got very sick with bronchitis.

I was malnourished because we had no food to eat. If food came into a neighborhood, everybody and my stepmother would start waiting and queuing for the delivery when it was still dark. People would just run to that store, they knew that they were going to get something. Anything. Like rutabaga, a terrible vegetable that I had never seen before, that they were giving to pigs on the farm, not for human consumption. I really didn't like it, but we ate anything we could get our mouths on.

It was so cold that winter. It was a horrible winter. There was no coal, there was no wood, there was no heat in the winter time. And we went to bed dressed with everything we could find to wear. This was also how I started getting very sick. We were so cold and we couldn't buy clothes if we needed more clothes, because there was nothing to sell for the five years we were occupied by the Germans. People did what they had to do in those years. My coat was made from my father's old overcoat, my dress from an old dress of my stepmother's. I remember my father had me sit on a chair and hold an old sweater while he unravelled it so that he could knit socks for me and my stepmother and him. We only had old shoes and I would go to school with holes in my shoes and my father would line them with German propaganda newspapers.

The best place for me to go would have been to go to my grandparents in Geneva, in the mountains. That's where you go when you have



My mother and me on her balcony, 1940s.

problems with your lungs. But we were occupied, so nobody was allowed to leave. But my father, my father really loved me because he did everything he could for me really, he went right to the Commander at the German base. Yes, he went right to the man that was in charge. I don't know how he did it but he ended up figuring out how to have them give me permission for him to send me to my grandparents in Switzerland even though you were not supposed to go.

My father could do anything with his hands, he was incredible. I saw my father working one day taking the flat, little heel off my shoes. He said to me, "Now listen I am writing notes for your grandparents and they are going to be in these heels. I want them to know what is going on." And he said, "Don't ever take your shoes off for anybody and don't ever tell anybody about these shoes."



My friends and I met a group of American soldiers and took a picture together, 1944

loved him, but I needed my mother. I didn't want to go out of my mother's apartment because I was so frightened that my father would see me and take me back. I was afraid of everything when I was little. I was always afraid.

After a couple weeks being with my mother I was no longer frightened, and I felt good being there. Every morning she used to make me a biscuit with butter and she always had jam preserves she would make in the summer when the fruit was plentiful. She always made that every year. My mother was a very good cook yes, I had some wonderful food with her.

I wanted to be a dancer, I wanted to study classical dance, and there was a little theater with a school precisely for that in Montmartre where I lived. I took ballet lessons and I just loved it. The theatre would put on classical operas, and one day they told us that we were going to be dancing in one of the operas. I was so excited when I found myself on stage – it was just like it was meant to be. It was natural to me, even though I was scared silly, I went through it, everything was fine and I just loved it. I just loved it.

I told my mother that I was going to leave for Switzerland and she had tears in her eyes. She said, "You know, if you go I probably won't see you again because the Germans won't let you come back." I became very upset and very frightened that I wouldn't be able to see my mother. So one day I decided that I would just leave to be with my mother. And that's what I did.

One day, instead of coming home from school I went directly to my mother's apartment, and of course she couldn't believe that I was there and neither could I. Being with her was something I felt was right. My father was very good to me – he loved me very, very much and I

My mother took me to school in the neighborhood, and I liked that school very much. I found myself relaxing and really enjoying what I was doing. It didn't take much to make me happy. I did much better in school than I had ever done before, because I had never liked it before. My mother also had me take sewing lessons at the design house of Jeanne Lanvin, and they ended up making my wedding dress, later on. On Sundays we used to go for walks. It's one of those things you do in Paris because it is such a beautiful city and there are so many beautiful places to go.

On one such walk a few years later,

after the Americans had arrived in Paris, I took the subway while visiting a friend of my mother. She was a very beautiful woman. I remember her very well. She put me on the subway to go back to my mother after we finished dinner. I got onto the subway and decided to just stand against the pole next to the door because I wasn't travelling very far. An American soldier came in at the next station. He looked at me and stood opposite on the other end of the door looking at me. I didn't know where to look. How long can you look this way or that way? Sooner or later you have to go either way and then, of course, you face this person who's still just looking at you...

There was something about him. He didn't look like a soldier – he was very handsome, thin, and tall, but not too tall. A beautiful face and very neat, very, very neat. He had his cap off on his shoulder like they did, and I kept looking this way and that way. When I arrived at my station, the minute the door opened I jumped out and I went around the corner to take the stairs to go up to the street, and as I was putting my foot on the first step, somebody right next to me was doing the same thing and I looked and it was him. The handsome American soldier. I quickly looked away, and he started trying to talk to me. I didn't understand him. I was taking English in school at that point, but believe me it was not the English he spoke –



Me on summer vacation in Saint-Dié, France, 1943

American English. It's a big difference to learn the British. He spoke a couple words in French, and he just kept talking to me. I didn't understand what he was saying but he just kept walking beside me. When I got close to my mother's apartment, I put my hand in front of him and I said, "Stop, I'm going home." He asked me if he could meet me tomorrow, a Sunday, and he said something about a theatre in the centre of Paris – it was very, very well known, they had beautiful plays and it was always packed with people, and of course a lot of American soldiers. It's incredible how even when you don't speak the same language as someone you can make yourself understood. So I said "okay" because I thought it would get rid of him. He didn't go any farther. He was very well behaved and that's one reason I liked him, but at the same time I felt like I shouldn't like him.

When I came home, my stepfather wasn't there so I could talk to my mother and tell her what happened. She said, "Well, what

are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm not going to go, of course." She said, "Well, maybe it's better that way." Then my girlfriend who lived in the building came downstairs to visit, and I took her aside and told her what had happened, and she said, "Ohhhh, we have to go!" And I said, "I don't think that would be a good idea, no, no, I don't want to go." She said, "I'll tell you what, we'll go on the other side of the boulevard and there will be so many people that he won't see us."

The next day we went out and walked all the way down there. We were across the street and she said, "Is that him over there, that young man over there?" I said, "Yes, that's him." And she said, "He looks like such a nice young man, let's go talk to him." I said, "Oh no, I can't, I can't, I can't, oh no, I can't do that, it's not right!" And she said, "What do you mean it's not right? We can just say hello to him." After about ten minutes of her practically pushing me across the street, we crossed and he was very happy to see both of us.

So there we were, trying to talk. My friend and I both knew a couple of English words and he knew a couple of French words, and before you knew it we were going to a nice little restaurant where we had some lunch and talked, believe it or not. Don't ask me what we were talking about because it was a lot of work, but we were having a nice time. When it was time for us to leave, he took us back to the subway.

He said that he would like to come and see me again and suggested a time for the next day. The next day I met him and before I knew it, it was like a done deal. Not every day, but he would show up once in awhile, and it was usually around the same time I always went out. I wasn't allowed to go out on my own, except for going to school, I had to go with my friends, so we always met at my mother's apartment with my girlfriends. He had to put up with the friends I was with because I wasn't going to be by myself with him. I was too shy. I hadn't even turned 17

yet. I was close to it though. One day we would go to the movies, one day we would go dancing. There were places to go just for dancing, no drinking or anything, and lots of people would go just to dance.

One day we were alone, the two of us walking, and he was taking me back to the subway again. He was trying to say something to me.

I finally understood that he was asking me to be his wife. Well, I never expected anything like that, I never thought of it. I was young and really innocent, I mean really innocent, I was raised in a convent after all. I didn't know what to say, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings; he was so sweet, so nice. We were just happy being together and dancing and going and eating somewhere. That was December of 1945, and four months later I was married.

I was afraid my father would find out about the wedding because my church was in



My husband, Frank, and me on our honeymoon at the Hotel Negresco in Nice, France, 1946

the same neighborhood as my father's apartment. I didn't know what to do, my mother didn't know what to do, if she should invite him, because they were enemies. So we didn't do anything. We just carried on with the wedding. After the wedding ceremony, when we left the church, my father was outside. I wanted to disappear I was so afraid. But he just asked me if I would come and see him. My father being my father, he decided to learn everything he could about the man I just married. He went to the German army base that had records. When I went to see him to talk to him, he told me that he accepted that I was married. "He comes from a very nice family," he said, and I said, "How do you know that?" And he said, "Well you don't think I would say yes, give your hand to a stranger who doesn't even speak your language without knowing anything about his background, do you?" He said, "I learned everything, he has two sisters and a brother, and the family has a candy business. They also have a restaurant where they sell the candy. And they are very successful and well known in the small town where they live, in Pennsylvania, Schuylkill Haven."

We married, and then he had to go back to the United States. I was to leave in two months. Leaving my mother, leaving my father and my friends and my home. I had finally, finally made a home, my mother made a home for me and I loved her so

very much – my mother with whom I had never lived since I was three years old. But I made a decision and had to follow through because I had a husband waiting for me in America. I loved being in France, I loved my home, I loved being with my mother, I didn't want to come to the United States, all that way – it takes five days on a boat to go there. I wasn't the only G.I. bride on the boat (that was what they called all of us), and I met a few young French women who, like me, were going towards their future. I was anxious about arriving. The first few days after I left I cried all the time. It was such a terribly hard thing to do, it is unexplainable. To this day it is too much for me to talk about it.

He was there waiting for me, my husband in his Army uniform. I came in at New York, and I didn't like it at all. I thought it was ugly, dirty. But I guess when you come on a ship into a big city like New York, it's just a port. He took me to one of those restaurants where you put down money and a little door opens and your food comes out, an Automat. I was fascinated. He showed me around New York, and we stayed there for a night and two days. My husband's family had

sent me a diamond ring and a pair of shoes when we married because there were no shoes to be had in Paris. During the war you couldn't buy anything. We would have to make our shoes and clothes.

So I had my engagement ring and my shoes and



My husband, Frank, and me at the farm in Schuylkill Haven, PA, 1946

Right: Me with a dog my husband got for me, 1946

Below: Frank and I met this couple on a train in France on our honeymoon. Later, they visited us in Schuylkill Haven, PA



Above: Me and my friend Madeleine, 1946, PA

Left: Me in at my in-laws farm in Schuylkill Haven, PA

while we were in New York he also bought me a pale blue suit, so I looked nice. We then started our trip down from New York to Schuylkill Haven in his father's Oldsmobile.

I was so scared to meet my in-laws.

I had learned how to say, "How do you do?" and "How are you?" and "So nice to meet you," and hopefully I was going to remember all that when we got to Schuylkill Haven. My husband had learned French by the time we married and he was absolutely incredible the way he spoke French, that quickly. See, that's what love does, I'll tell you. Love does a lot of beautiful things. I met my mother-in-law first. She was Pennsylvania Dutch and did not appear that friendly to me; I was little afraid of her. She seemed very serious, you know, not too friendly. And then from the back of the house where he was making the candy, my father-in-law, he was Greek – he came in and with one big step towards me he grabbed me and held me and kissed me and was so happy to see me. I loved him from that very moment. He was a wonderful, very handsome man. So nice, so kind, so good, so honest that the family was, I could not have had a better family than my in-laws. I adored my mother and father-in-law. They became my family.

My husband's sister was living in Philadelphia because she was training to be a nurse. That is how I met her in Philadelphia. She was dressed like a nurse and I was in awe of her. I thought to myself, oh my god she is so beautiful, she is so nice, she has such a nice smile and she likes me. It was wonderful, wonderful. Surrounded by this family, who welcomed me with all the love that they had, I became their daughter. I had never experienced that in my whole life, but I was missing my parents so much and I was missing my Paris. I love, love my city so much.

When I first came to this country I wanted to listen to the music. I learned all the songs before I learned how to speak English. My parents-in-law had a very big house on Main Street. They owned the whole building. There were apartments, and downstairs my father-in-law had his atelier where he made his candy. It was a small town, and everybody wanted to see the French lady who married into the Lazos family, that was my married name: Lazos, Greek. Everybody wanted to see me. My husband and I were invited everywhere. We went to so many places, I met the whole town, and I fell in love with that little town it reminded me of when I was young. It reminded me of the little villages in Switzerland I would visit with my father and grandparents, and the mountains in France I would climb with my father when we travelled together.

And then my husband found a job in Reading, Pennsylvania, about an hour away from Schuylkill Haven, so we moved there. We rented a room, and had our own bedroom and a bath. I would walk around all over the place looking at stores, going a little bit everywhere, trying to read the paper and learn English while he was at work. Then every night I had to learn how to speak English with my husband. He insisted I speak English. He would tell me to go to the movies to familiarize myself with the sound of English. Little by little bit I learned how to make myself understood. And then I became pregnant and had my first child, Pat. That was unbelievable. I was such an innocent little girl when I got married. I was 17 – things like this don't happen to people anymore when they are 17. They don't have to get married, they do what they want already. And then I got pregnant again and I had another little girl, my second girl Sherry Anne. I named her that because I thought it sounded French. But if you called her Sherry Anne, she would look at you like what are you saying, that's not my name.



My daughter, Pat, and me just after she was born, 1947

When we moved to Philadelphia, Sherry was only four months old. My husband had left the army to work with his father, but he decided that now that he had children he wanted to go back into the service so he would have a steady job. So, we had to move to Philadelphia. I didn't like Philadelphia at first, but I love it now. It's a beautiful city, but it wasn't always like that. When I first arrived there it was dirty, and the center of the city was horrible.

We moved ourselves, of course we didn't own anything. We found an apartment in someone's house. It was a nice apartment, but they had cockroaches and I had never seen a cockroach in my life. I was so afraid I jumped on the bed with my baby and I wouldn't move. When he came back, I was crying, and I said I don't want to live here, there are big bugs all over the place. Not long after, I figured maybe there were bugs because it was dirty. So, for a week after we arrived I scrubbed everywhere. You have no idea how I scrubbed, I've never scrubbed that hard since. It was awful, and it didn't do any good. So Frank, my husband, found

another apartment that was very, very nice, in a private house, a big old house with three or four bedrooms. A friend of his, who was in the service and who had a wife also and a little girl, lived with us. They took the whole back of the house and we took the front rooms. There was a room for the children, and we had our own bedroom. It was a beautiful old house, a lot of old wood all over, beautiful. We lived there for a few years. That is when I went into show business.

The way I started in show business was rather strange.

My husband knew I liked to dance and sing so he took me to see the nightclub on Market street in Philadelphia, Click, to see if they needed someone to work there part-time. They hired me to work as a cigarette girl and a photographer. It was a



My daughter Sherry, outside our house in the late 1950s

huge beautiful nightclub and they had big names coming there from Hollywood and all over the U.S. So of course I had to stop and talk with the guests. I was terribly shy at the time so it wasn't easy, but I think it helped me overcome that a little bit.

The club had a chorus line to open the show and the choreographer and director, Lee Henderson, asked me one evening, "Did you ever dance?" I said "Yes." She asked, "What kind of dance?" I said, "When I was younger I did ballet. I wanted to be a ballerina, it didn't turn out that way, but I do know how to dance, yes." So she said, "You would be good on the stage." I replied, "But you really don't understand, I am married and I have two children." She looked at me and said, "That's not a problem I have a lot of girls who are married and have children. They still can dance." So I said, "Well, I guess I can then. I'll have to talk to my husband first."

When I told my husband he was delighted – he was not the one who had to go up on the stage for the first time.

"That's what you always wanted to do. Isn't it wonderful?" he said. "Yes! But I've never been on a real stage!" I said. "Oh! You'll be okay, you'll be okay." he said.

I started rehearsing in her studio in Center City Philadelphia. I liked rehearsing. I loved dancing so I went right into it. Then we were ready to open for a show. We were performing in a different club from where I had worked as a cigarette girl. This was years ago when there were lots of nightclubs in Philadelphia, and they were quite nice actually and had well known singers appearing there. The time had come for me to put my costume on, and we were about to enter the stage. I wasn't the first one, thank God, and I wasn't the last one, or nobody would have seen me. All of a sudden I froze, and the girl behind me said, "Go on, go on. Just walk." "I can't remember anything!" I said. "You will." She reassured me. She pushed me a little bit. I had to go. So I put a big smile on my face, and here I was on stage for the first time in my life. I loved it. I absolutely loved it. It was what I was born for. That went on for quite a few years.



Me in the 1950s, PA



In my house in West Philadelphia, 1950s
This gown was designed for me for a performance

In the back of the club they had another big cocktail lounge and a pianist always playing. Between shows you would find me sitting at the piano because I like music and I loved listening. One day someone said "Oh Jeannine, why don't you sing?" And that was how it started. The woman who directed the chorus line heard me, and she told me, "For the next month we're doing a different show and you're going to be coming down the steps, singing." (Oh no, that's not good, I thought!) "You're going to be coming down the steps singing a French song, and then you will join the other girls dancing." (Hopefully... I thought!) So I did it and wasn't that bad. After that people wanted me to continue singing and dancing. I performed in very elegant and well known dinner clubs like The Embassy in Philadelphia and some in New Jersey, I forget names now, but the best ones in the city.

I was very happy when I got home to my babies too. I had an opportunity to tour with the chorus, but I didn't want to do that because my children, my life, was more important than that. It was very hard getting up in the morning. The last show was at 11:00 or 12:00 at night and by the

time I got home it was 2:00 in the morning. Then, I had to get up early to wake up the children for school. It was around this time, when I was dancing in the chorus line, that I became pregnant with my third child. I went on dancing of course. But little bit by little bit they had to keep making my costume looser. But I kept on doing it. I was in heaven. Our nightclub had the best American singers from all over the country, like Johnny Mathis and Leonard Sues and between shows I could look at and listen to them, and after that I would sing on my own.

I was four months pregnant when I had to stop. It was getting too obvious. Then I had my son. I was very happy, I had two girls and a son. I lost my son in 2015 and it's very difficult for me to think about him without being... so I'm going to get back to my story about show business.



My son, Keith, 5th grade portrait

I was so tired that after a while I asked to have someone to come to my house and get the children ready for school so that in the morning I could sleep a little bit. I was still a mother, a mother of three, and breastfeeding and pumping for my son.

There was a man whom I knew very well. He did all the advertisements for the night club on the radio, TV, and newspapers where we were always advertised. One Saturday he called me while I was at home cleaning and washing clothes. I was just a housewife. He said, "Jeannine! Help me, there's something terrible that happened. They are having a competition for girls who are trying to be Miss Philadelphia. But one girl is sick and just called saying she can't come." "Yes?" I said. "Please, please, please come and take over." he begged. "But what do I have to do?" I asked. "Just wear a nice bathing suit. Make yourself up a little bit," he said. "Okay. Where are you?" I said. "We're on a boat. On the river."

He told me where it was, and I quickly got in my car and went there. There I was among all the girls that were trying to be Miss Philadelphia, me, my three children, and my little bathing suit.

I did what they told me to do. I walked back and forth and back and forth, looked this way and then that way and smiled. And that was it. And you'll never guess what happened, I won! I won. I can't believe it. A journalist came to me and said, "You've been selected to be Miss Philadelphia!" I responded, "Yeah, but I'm not a Miss. I'm a Missus and I have three children. I can't be a Miss Philadelphia." I just did it because I could do it. And that was it, I went home. I forgot about it because it was never something that meant something to me. And I only speak about it now because I'm an "old lady" as they say. But I don't feel like an old lady. I forgot to tell people, even my friends. Some friends don't even know I was almost Miss Philadelphia.



Me in the Lee Henderson Chorus Line, 1950s

I continued singing and dancing and raising my children. The children got bigger and they were going to school. My husband and I weren't getting along very well because I was working and in show business. It was a strange life to have really, to have a husband who was handsome and he loved me and I loved him and also to be in show business. It was very hard for him to accept all those things. I had become well-known in Philadelphia. In fact that's another thing I forget to tell people. One day while I was dancing with the line in the club, a photographer took my picture and the next day I was in the newspaper as having the best legs in Philadelphia!

Eventually my husband and I divorced. It wasn't working any more. I was a little girl when

he met me, and now I had become a woman. He wasn't ready to accept me as a woman. He was a good father, a good husband, and a good man. I think about him many, many times to this day.

After the divorce I continued singing and dancing, but it came to an end when Philadelphia changed. Some of the clubs were closing. It wasn't "in" anymore. They were looking towards food, talking about food. Everybody wanted to open a restaurant. Except for me. But, since my life always went the complete opposite of where I was going, I went that way too. Here is how it happened: I was having lunch with a friend one day. There was a French woman running that restaurant. She was a

beautiful woman and her name was also Janine. My name is spelled J-E-A-N-N-I-N-E but her name is spelled J-A-N-I-N-E . She must have learned from the waitresses that I was also French. She introduced herself to me and before I left she gave me her telephone number and address and said to me, "Why don't you come here tomorrow morning while the children are at school and have breakfast with me. I'd like to talk to you." Okay.

She lived just about ten minutes from me. I met her the next day and we had a wonderful conversation. She wanted to open a restaurant. A French restaurant. She was in the business already, but she had



Me and Janine outside our restaurant, 10 South Front Street, Philadelphia, 1966

only just started and wasn't getting along with her husband and he didn't like her having the restaurant (that ended up not turning out so good either). Opening a restaurant! I didn't know if I could do that. "You know how to cook, don't you?" she said. "You're French." "Yes, I know how to cook, because I know how to eat," I said. "You know I think we could be good. They don't have a French restaurant in Philadelphia," she said. "Yeah, but you have a restaurant," I said. "But it's not really French French. I want to open a French restaurant," she said. "Well, I don't see why not. I like food," I said – and I must like to take chances. So we decided yes and from that day on it was food, food, food, food! We became good friends. Which was very nice since we were going to become business partners. We made all our plans and designed some menus. We started going around looking for places to open a restaurant. This was 1966. Somebody wanted to know what to call the restaurant, it was difficult to decide because it had to be easy to pronounce. Then one day somebody said why don't you call it by your names: Janine et Jeannine. So we ended up calling it that. And I thought, we both thought, it was a great idea, and it was.

When I first opened my restaurant, Janine and I, we worked all day. We did all the cooking, all the shopping. I would get up at 5:00 in the morning to go shopping for the restaurant in South Philadelphia. And then we worked all day and all night. But at night before we opened, we'd always wear an evening gown. So we were very quickly known as Janine et Jeanine, the two French women that are so elegant all the time at their restaurant. They didn't realize how hard we'd work, you know?

My children were teenagers when I started, which was quite an experience because I was alone with them, raising them. They had to stay at home by themselves at night, take care of themselves. But as I said they were teenagers, and



Me in the kitchen at Janine et Jeannine taking a break between the lunch and dinner shifts, 1960s

my oldest daughter was supposed to oversee the younger two. Which was not always easy for her I guess. I used to get a lot of phone calls: "Mom, she won't listen to me."

My second restaurant was called Tout Suite which means right away, a fast restaurant, which it wasn't, really. It was really a family restaurant. It had been a restaurant that a French couple had kept for many years. They got older and retired and closed it. So, we arrived at the place and my whole family, we all went in there and cleaned everything and painted everything and decorated everything. It was fun. I did the cooking. We served it family style. And people really loved that.

My partner Janine eventually left for California to be with her children who had migrated there, and I got a new partner. That was a big mistake, but it worked out for years. We turned Janine et Jeannine into La Truffe. And I started to sing there on Friday and Saturday nights. When the people were too loud I thought: What am I doing? I don't get paid for this. I am doing it because I like to do it, and I like to entertain and I like to make people happy. So I gave up Saturday night for a while. I hated Saturday night. But Friday, I loved Friday in the restaurant business. Different crowd. Very appreciative crowd.

I was in the restaurant business for 31 years altogether. I made it for three decades in Philadelphia and I was known by everybody. I closed it 16, 17 years ago. And I still see people, no matter where I go, I always run into people who ask me, "Oh Jeannine, when are you opening your restaurant?" "Not anymore," I say. "I did it for 31 years." That's enough! "Oh, but we miss you, and it was so good."

When I finally went to live with my mother when I was twelve years old, she would take me grocery shopping all the time. My mother was a very good cook. She made such beautiful things, I just loved everything she made, especially desserts. When she took me shopping I would love seeing all that meat at the butchers. I would love the way he would cut something then

– Thunk! My mother would bring back a freshly butchered chicken and flame it over the stovetop to burn all the detritus off, and I would love to watch her do that, I thought it was so exciting to do that with the chicken. She would turn it around and around and explain to me what she was doing when I asked. I loved staying in the kitchen with her. I would take the fish, the meat, I wanted to touch everything. I didn't think too much of it, I just liked it. It was so strong this desire that I had to touch, to touch meat, to touch fish, to touch everything that we were cooking. It's funny that years after that, after I got married and came to this country and happened to meet this other Janine, that we opened our own restaurant. It was the first thing I did for myself for the first time in my life, other than getting married and having children, that was bigger than me. To go and open a restaurant with another French woman. When I did that I became Jeannine. I became myself. I had never been myself. And you know what, since I found myself I like her.



With my father and stepmother at La Truffe, 1973

One day I got into an accident and had to go to a lawyer.

And that is when I met him. It was love at first sight. I don't think either of us quite knew it then, but we both knew that we liked each other very much. When I had to have my tonsils removed and this was the third time (my tonsils liked me so they kept growing back), I was in the hospital for a week in horrible pain. People were calling me, my family, my friends, and that man, Mr. Foglietta, too. "Oh yes, I had my tonsils out," I told him over the phone. "That's what I heard from your daughters," he said. "I can't talk very much," I croaked. "Well, I just wanted to tell you that I've been thinking about you and I hope you're going to be okay. I'll say a prayer for you. I'll talk to you later. I'll call you again." I thought to myself, oh we're getting somewhere here.

When I got better and I was back in my life, he asked me to go out to dinner. When we had ordered our wine and settled at our table he said, "You know, I think I'm in love with you." Oh God, I thought, I think I'm in love with you too but I didn't want to say it out loud. So instead I said "Really?" "Yes, but I want to tell you right now that unfortunately I've been building my career. My parents and grandparents are Italian. We're Catholic." "Well so am I and I'm French. What's the difference?" "The thing is, you have a life already, and I'm building my life. And my parents wouldn't like it very much because you're a divorcee with three children." "Oh, I see."

I eventually met his family. And indeed they liked me and I liked them, but they didn't want me to marry him. Because he was getting



Tom and me in Montmartre, Paris, 1980s

to be known in Philadelphia as someone who could be mayor and was going to run for that. But I didn't care. We were in love. What more could we want? But that's really a French way of thinking, isn't it? I wasn't thinking about getting married, I just wanted to be in love.

It's good he didn't become mayor, because a few years later he ended up in Washington going up and up and up. Bill Clinton chose Tom to be the American ambassador to Italy. He was so excited, as we all were.

I spent a lot of time in Italy with him. In fact, when he went to Italy to start being the ambassador, I flew there with him and when we arrived there we were taken right away from the plane into a private room and offered refreshments. And then when we came out it was like a huge corridor and people! There were dozens and dozens of cameramen! Journalists to greet the new American ambassador to Italy. And there I was next to him and I thought, "I feel like I'm having a Hollywood moment or something."

I would live in the villa with him and his sister. He brought his sister over. It was incredible. I had my own dressing room, very large, three of the walls were closets and the fourth was a window overlooking their private park. I also had my own bathroom and next to that Tom's bathroom and then after that we had a bedroom that was huge, with many windows, also overlooking the private park. We had a chef and a staff that lived there for the Ambassador when he was giving dinners for presidents or other well-known political figures, princes and princesses. And then there were four or five women who took care of the villa and us, personally.

We would often go out to dinners or parties he was invited to and he would say, "This is my lady, Jeannine Mermet." When we would come home I would go to my dressing room, and I would take off my clothes and hang them up outside the dressing room. The next morning they reappeared, cleaned and put back in the closet.



His office was also huge. I had a desk at one end and he had his own desk on the other end, and the chef would come and bring me the menu in the morning and ask me to okay it and I would write out other things Tom would want for the day. It was something that was unreal. I never could have imagined it!

Me and Tom dancing, about 1999

My daughter, Sherry, and I went to the Main Line YMCA,

in Ardmore, together in the early 1990s, because Sherry hurt her knee and wanted to keep active by doing water exercise. We went into the pool, but there was a class that was happening at the time so we thought, "Oh yeah, we will take it!" So we did, and we were holding the barbells, pushing them under the water, and we both looked at each other like, well, it is not as easy as it looks after all! We really liked it, so we went back, and then before you know it Sherry started teaching. Since she was a teenager she had taught gymnastics and land aerobics and things like that. She is very good at it, because she is a very loving person and she cares about everybody. People love her because she loves.

I have to tell you how I feel about the Main Line YMCA. After 26 years being there every week, I feel it was like a second home, and it is a family. I feel very strongly about that, because so many of the people have been

there almost all that time. Unfortunately, we lost two or three women these past few years and we miss them and always will. We really love each other, and when I was there I felt different. I felt like I was always ready to joke or say stupid things. It is incredible that people can feel like that at a Y, but we know everybody and it's a good feeling. You feel bad when some thing wrong happens to one of us. I had a bad fall and I didn't go for months and when I came back everyone asked, "Are you okay? Are you alright? Do you feel better?"

Sherry found an apartment for me in Oak Hill after she and I had looked for months. We were looking and looking at apartments but I have specific desires. I want a balcony. I don't care how big it is as long as I have a way of going outside. One bedroom is fine. As soon as I walked in I knew it was for me because of the French windows in the kitchen and a balcony looking at the trees. I loved that apartment. I lived around there because I'm crazy about nature. I get very emotional when I just look at the trees sometimes.



Sherry and me at the Main Line YMCA, 2013

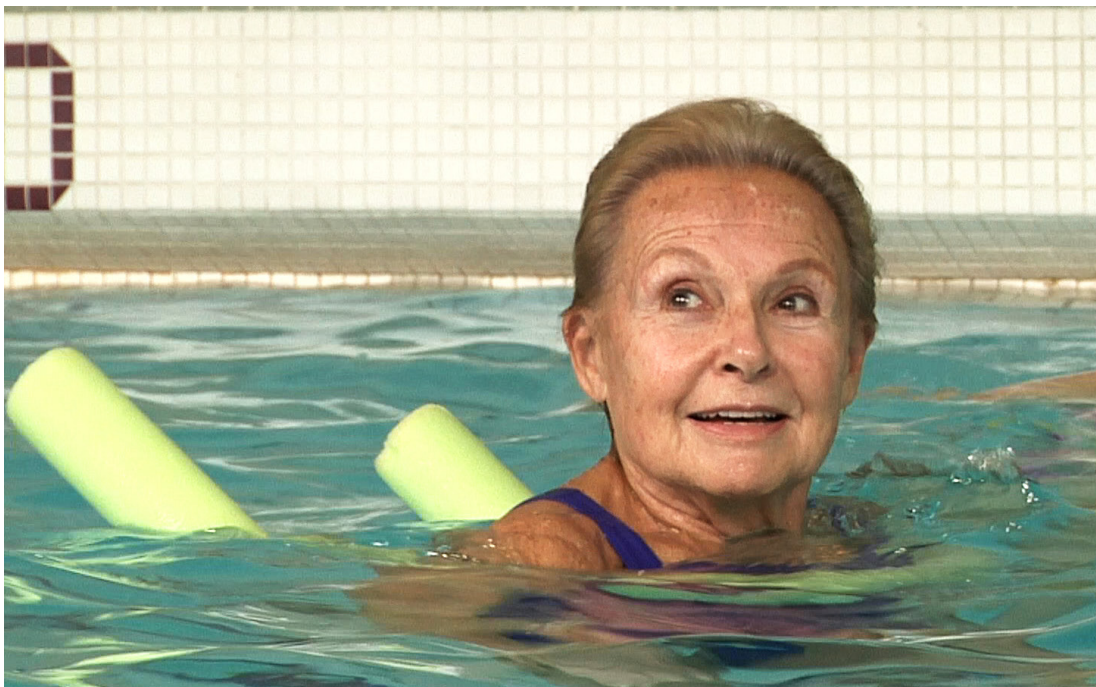
After my son Keith passed away I would sit on that balcony and look at the trees. I would imagine I could see him in between the branches looking at me from the sky. It was a home for me and I was so happy there.

Unfortunately I had to move out because I couldn't afford it anymore. I like my new apartment in Philadelphia but it is not my home like the old one. Boxes are still everywhere – it is a mess! But I have a balcony. I can see a telephone tower in the distance and I call it my Eiffel Tower.

I have three children – only two now – and four granddaughters. No grandson, but I got even: now I have nine great grandchildren, four of them are boys and five of them are girls, so that is more balance. I recently became a great, great grandmother. And now I have three great, great granddaughters. The girls are winning so far – Voila!

My youngest granddaughter, Sherry's daughter, just got married on June 11th, 2016. It was the most beautiful wedding I'd ever seen. It was at the Fairmount Water Works Cafe in a huge tent with 250 people, right on the Schuylkill River. As a wedding present she asked me to handwrite some of my recipes. A few of them are at the end of this memoir.

In the past few years I really have felt like the woman I always wanted to be. I love myself without question. Now I am almost 90. I have trouble with my words sometimes. I know what I want to say in my head and I feel it in my heart but I can't always get it out of my mouth. This is a "new" Jeannine that I am now getting to know.



Me in 2013

Jeannine's Perfectly Poached Chicken

a recipe for: Jeannine's Perfectly poach chicken

ingredients 3 cups of low-sodium chicken broth

3/4 cup dry white wine

1 garlic clove peeled and crushed

1/2 tsp. salt

2 whole boneless + skinless chicken breasts split

Jeannine's Perfectly Poached chicken Breasts

In large saucepan bring Stock, wine, garlic + salt to boil

Reduce heat to a simmer and add chicken breasts

Cover and cook at a bare at a bare simmer 5 minutes

Never let liquid come to a real boil you just want an occasional bubble to break the surface

Turn chicken cover and cook for another 5 minutes

Remove Saucepan from the heat uncover and let

chicken stand in the poaching liquid 30 minutes

Check to ensure the chicken is cooked all the way through

Refrigerate until ready to use, up to 2 days

Use for chicken salad or sandwiches

Preparation Time 1 hr.

Serves 4

Made in China

06716 617390 1445452

© Susan Winget

Q2-12119MM

a recipe for: La Ratatouille Nicoise

ingredients 1 Kilo de tomates 1 Green pepper 1 yellow
4 large white onions - thyme - laurel, some saffron
1 bunch of basil - 1 Kilo long Eggplants 1 red pepper
1 Kilo little zucchini flowers - 4 cloves garlic or more
3 bunches of parsley & bunch of basil - Anchovy paste -
Salt + pepper

La Ratatouille Nicoise

Cut vegetables in slices - lightly slash surface of
Eggplants with pointed knife + leave them to render their
liquide by slightly sprinkling with fine salt
Plunge tomatoes in boiling water, then peel -
Peel garlic & cut in thin slices

In large cast iron pot on hot flame put onions in
olive oil which has been seasoned with 1 soupe spoon
of anchovy paste. Shake in thym + pepper, stir with
wooden spoon. As soon as onions starts to brown and
before it becomes too dark, add the tomatoes which
have previously been pulped, the laurel, parsley, saffron
clove 1/2 lump of sugar and vegetables

Preparation Time about 1 hr 1/2 Serves

Crabs in Red Sauce

a recipe for: **Crab cakes in Red Sauce**

ingredients 8 ounces fresh Crabmeat drained and picked clean of shell
 $\frac{1}{4}$ ^{cup} fresh bread crumbs, (about 2 slices white Bread in food processor) 2 tbs. chopped cilantro 2 tbs. minced scallion 1 tsp. chopped garlic 3 tbs mayonnaise
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. Tabasco - little salt - 2 tbs canola oil (Red sauce ($\frac{1}{3}$ cup mayonnaise 2 tbs. ketchup 2 tsp. fresh lime juice 1 tsp. water 2 tsp. chopped fresh chives 1 tsp. Wasabi in a tube or powder.)

Put Crab meat in a bowl add $\frac{2}{3}$ cup bread crumbs, scallion, cilantro, garlic, mayonnaise, Tabasco + salt Mix lightly until ingredients are well combined
Heat oven to 180 degrees, form the crab mixture into 4 patties, then dip each patty in the crumb mixture until it is coated on all sides

Heat oil in nonstick skillet over medium heat arrange the patties next to one another in the pan, handling them gently because they are soft, cook about 3 minutes on each sides Keep them warm in oven for the sauce
Combine all ingredients in a bowl. At serving time divide the sauce among 4 plates, place a patty in the center of sauce on each plate, sprinkle chives on sauce

Preparation Time 40 minutes Serves 4

Simple Roast Pork

a recipe for: Simple Roast Pork

ingredients 1 $\frac{6}{8}$ pound center-cut pork loin

3 large cloves of garlic Salt & pepper

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup vegetable or corn oil

1 onion

1 cup chicken broth

Have the butcher crack pork loin between the ~~base~~^{bases} of rib bone

cut each clove of garlic lengthwise into two pieces

using a sharp knife make small incisions in the pork

between the bones & insert garlic

Simple Roast Pork

Sprinkle meat generously with salt & pepper.

Pour oil evenly over meat in a shallow roasting pan and rub over surface of meat

Arrange meat fat side down in pan

Split onion in half and place on each side of meat

Bake in a 400F oven 1 hour.

Turn meat fat side up and baste well with pan drippings

Spoon or pour off most of the fat & return roast to oven

Bake $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour. Spoon off remaining fat, add chicken broth. Cook 30 minutes basting occasionally.

Pour sauce into a sauceboat and serve separately with the carved Roast

Preparation Time 1 hr.

Serves 8 to 10

Ragout of White Beans

a recipe for: Ragout of white Beans

ingredients 1lb. great Northern or other small whi. Beans
sorted through and Rinsed

1/2 tsp. salt plus more to taste

1 tbs. olive oil

3oz. lean pancetta diced into 1/4 pieces

1 1/2 cup. chopped onions, 5 garlic cloves peeled & thinly Sliced

2 tsp. minced fresh Thym, 1 tsp. freshly grounds black pepper

2 tbs. chopped fresh parsley

Adapted from Julia Child & Jacques Pepin Book, *Cooking at Home*
1999

Ragout of white Beans

In a large pot combine beans with 6 cups cold water
Bring to a boil & simmer gently partially covered

After 1 hr. taste several beans and check for doneness
They should be tender but not mushy simmer longer if
necessary, while beans are cooking, in large fry pan over
medium heat warm olive oil, Add pancetta toss to coat
with oil & cook 2 min. Stir in onions garlic Thyme and
1/4 tsp. pepper; cook stirring occasionally till done about 10 min.
Remove from heat & Strain liquid. From Beans
Before serving sprinkle chopped parsley over beans

Preparation Time about 1 hr 1/2 Serves 4 or 6

Beef Bourguignon

Beef Bourguignon (serve 6 to 8)

3 lbs. Top round of Beef - place in deep bowl + add
1 Sliced white onion (cut into 2-inch cubes),
2 cups Red wine 3 sprigs parsley 1 bay leaf
1/8 teaspoon Thyme salt + pepper 1 crushed garlic clove
1 small carrot sliced, 2 tablespoons salad oil. Turn
meat occasionally while mixture marinates for 4 hrs
Remove meat, pat dry with paper towels, strain liquid
and set aside. Heat 2 tbsp. butter in Dutch oven or large
heavy saucepan, add meat cooking till well browned
on all sides. Add 1 ~~tblsp~~ ^{tblsp} flour + cook 3 minutes stirring
constantly →

Add, stirring, 1/2 cup consommé + strained liquid
marinade + bring to a boil. Then cover + TURN heat
down to simmer for 2 hours. Meanwhile, melt
1 tbsp butter in small saucepan, then add 1/4 lb diced
salt pork and 24 small white onions cook 10 minutes
or until pork + onions are golden brown, then
add them to the simmering meat along with
1 cup sliced mushrooms fresh, bring mixture
to a boil, cover + lower heat so mixture simmers =
Serve hot delicious with Boiled potatoes - For 45 minutes



JEANNINE MERMÉT

