

Send Yourself Roses

Kathleen Turner

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Extract

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Chapter One

The best role is always ahead

I am exhausted. Wonderfully, joyfully exhausted, and filled with such extraordinary happiness and gratitude.

Those were my feelings after the two closing London performances of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* on May 13, 2006.

People ask, 'How can you do that – two grueling three-and-a-half-hour performances one right after the other?' The four of us actors – Bill Irwin as George, Mireille Enos as Honey, David Harbour as Nick, and me as Martha – joked that it's actually one six-act play on days when there are two shows, since we're all on stage during most of the show. I liken the energy and the skill this takes to being an Olympic athlete. Which is quite a feat for someone whose feet have sacrificed most of their toe bones to rheumatoid arthritis. That's why I padded around the stage in those funny soft little slippers.

I never feel tired when I'm onstage. Offstage before and after, I wonder how the hell I did it. But onstage, it just doesn't happen. The exhaustion doesn't hit me until the very, very end when I, or rather Martha, is on the floor and George asks, 'Are you all right?' and Martha says, 'Yes . . . *No*.' Then I can allow myself to feel the body pains, to feel the mental pain, to feel the heart pain, of the character.

There's a moment in the curtain call after we've all taken the first bow together. Bill and I step back and Mireille and David take their bow. Then Bill and I step forward to take ours. The sound crescendos; it comes in this huge wave. It feels as though it pushes me back physically. It's such an amazing feeling that it takes my breath away. And I just start to beam. I feel so grateful, so grateful, to us, to them, to me, to God, that we have this incredible experience in our lives. All of us: the audience, cast, and crew. Even the critics – everyone says it's the first time the London theater critics have all agreed and given rave reviews to any play. The audiences jumped; they were on their feet applauding us almost every night. It has been a tremendous, absolutely amazing reward for the effort we have all put out and, yes, somewhat of a redemption for me.

I look out at the audience and return the waves of their love and appreciation with a full heart.

When I first read this play in college, I knew I wanted to play Martha someday. I was thrilled by Martha's recklessness, how she has no thought of consequences. Like the way she slices through George, contrasting his inadequacies in sharpest detail to her own 'necessary greater strength.' She's dangerous as hell but also very exciting and rather endearing.

Or at least I was convinced *I* could make her endearing. Even

back then, I was sure I had the skill to make audiences love the characters I played. Heavens, I was twenty, and I believed I could do anything and that Martha would be a fitting challenge for me when I turned fifty. I always kept this idea in my mind.

Fearlessness at twenty springs from not knowing what challenges lie ahead. Fearlessness at fifty comes from having wrestled with life's challenges and learned from them.

Many challenges good and bad, steps I've deliberately planned or opportunistically seized, choices I've made, risks I've taken, came between the idea and the reality of playing Martha. Each of them helped to form me, to teach me, to prepare me.

The right moment to tell my story

People say to me all the time, 'Oh, you're such a regular person.' And I wonder, *As opposed to what? An artificial construct?*

Just before I left New York for the London run of *Virginia*, this book started – as many good things do – over tamales, jicama salad, and a margarita (light salt) at Zarela, a favorite Mexican restaurant. Gloria, who has been a good friend since we worked together at Planned Parenthood Federation of America – she as its president and CEO and I as chair of its Board of Advocates – said she wanted to write my biography. She told me I had a lot to say. I was rather embarrassed at first by the thought of that much emphasis on myself. It seemed too egotistical.

Then I thought about something I'd heard, that the object of our lives is the growth of our souls. And I feel that my soul is finally in a place where I can contribute. This particular moment in my life is a good time to take stock of all that. So I said I would like to be the practical, regular person that I am, and share my

life lessons that might be of service to others. Finally we both figured out that I couldn't share my lessons very well without telling my story too.

I feel about this book like I feel about my acting roles. *Send Yourself Roses* is my truth as I see it. But every story has many truths. Take from mine whatever you will.

I do have stories to tell, and I believe in the power of sharing them. Many come from my film and stage work. I'll explore how my roles have broken new ground for women, how they've spanned sexuality from a femme fatale to a woman playing a man playing a woman. I want to share my passion for service. And I've had personal tragedies, rocky relationships, out-of-control drinking, and snarky critics to contend with. I've come back against all odds from a debilitating illness and being told I'd be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, to which I said, 'Go fuck yourself.' I've experienced the joy of motherhood and the sadness of infertility, a happy marriage that eventually became a necessary separation. I've learned from it all.

But what you know isn't enough, babe: what counts is how you use it going forward.

I like where I am now and what I have achieved. I'm doing the best work of my life. I can see all that has come before: the obstacles overcome, the risks I've taken, the choices I've made, the great, great opportunities I've had, and the lessons about life, love, and leading roles that these experiences have taught me.

I don't want to be twenty again. I'm having that creative surge women often get when we pass fifty. I feel at the top of my personal and professional life.

So I'll take it from the top. Not the beginning, but now, smack

in the middle of my life, or so I expect, since the women in my family have good longevity. It's the perfect vantage point to look back at what I've done so far and to look forward to see exciting possibilities I might create for my future – and those that might come my way.

The freedom to go on

I gave myself a special treat the day after *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* closed in London. I checked into the Lanesborough. It's a beautiful spa hotel, with wonderful service, near Hyde Park. I booked a facial and a massage in my room. I went to the hotel, washed my face, put on a robe, and that was it for the rest of the night. I didn't go back out; I didn't put on makeup or get dressed again. I watched a movie, had dinner in the room, read a book.

I melted into the bed. Maybe the exhaustion sharpened my perceptions because I felt so vulnerable to my feelings. They poured out of me, as though I'd removed my skin with my stage makeup.

I feel different, better, about my personal life as well as my professional life. So much confidence comes simply because I have reached this very good age. Women my age today are forging new ground. Society stops defining us by our reproductive capacity, sexual attractiveness, or other traditional measures, so we become liberated from stereotype. We are freed to grow into our full selves.

I couldn't have allowed myself to feel so positive in the past. When I was at the height of my film career, I didn't have the kind of respect I now have from the theatrical community. I

hadn't yet proved that I have the chops for the stage. But now I have a stature I've never before enjoyed.

Virginia Woolf herself observed that when her Aunt Mary left her enough money to live on, her financial independence meant she 'need not hate' or 'flatter any man.'¹ She said this was of even more value to her freedom and autonomy than the right to vote.

True enough. I feel fortunate to be in a generation of women who have had the opportunity to support ourselves and be in control of our own finances – with or without Aunt Mary – throughout our adult lives. Our mothers might have defined themselves as working wives if they had careers outside the home. We have been working *women*. And I think we're much more interesting after we've been out in the world, even if we've been a bit battered by it from time to time. No, we're more interesting *because* we've taken our knocks and learned from them.

I feel optimistic about my life today because I've taken chances over the years. I've taken my own dreams seriously enough to act on them. I've accepted opportunities that have come my way without having to plan or plot for them. But I also have a long-term idea of what I want, and then I take chances on doing the things that seem to fit my talents when they come along. I take chances that move me toward my goals.

That openness to fortuity would drive other people mad. They'll say, 'Okay, what will Kathleen be doing this time next year?' Well, I don't know. I don't know what I'll be doing. Maybe it's not written yet, or maybe I'll feel like doing something else for a while. I have learned to wait until the choice becomes inevitable. I used to drive my soon-to-be-ex-husband, Jay, rather crazy because he'd always want to know the shape of the time to come. And I could never give him that.

I was brought up not to think too much of myself – that wonderful WASP tradition. So it knocks me out when an actor I respect – for example, Donald Sutherland or Dame Judi Dench – comes up after the show and says, ‘That was one of the most extraordinary performances I have ever seen.’ I don’t know what to say. It is just staggering to me. I’ve admired their work for so long, it’s difficult to think they accept me as one of them.

So I say, ‘Thank you.’ I’m much too polite to reject a compliment like that – my God. It’s a thrilling thought; it makes me smile out loud. And it does change things.

Acting is the study of human behavior, but you don’t have to be an actor to share these experiences. And there’s absolutely no end to the study, because every year you learn more, you build on the information, the understanding you’ve achieved. This study of human behavior is just fascinating to me. And to find the qualities or the elements that strike chords within me and others is endlessly interesting.

Soaking in the elegant tub at the Lanesborough Spa, I looked back at all these things that came before in my life. I looked forward to my future with the excitement of embarking on a new stage of life. I felt the satisfaction now . . . and the freedom to go on from here.

And then I got up at six the next morning to catch my flight back to New York.

Kathleen Turner is a verb

I’m happy to be back in my city. I’ve been identified more and more with New York over the last few years, though I’ve been here since I drove here from Baltimore, straight out of the

University of Maryland, in 1977. I'd skipped the graduation ceremonies and told them to send my diploma to my mother in Missouri because I was going on to my future. I had a whole hundred dollars in my pocket, and I thought I was rich.

There are so many things I love about New York: I leave my apartment early to walk over to the gym, about seven-thirty a.m. The same garbage men are there who have seen me since I moved in to that apartment. They know I've had two knee operations since then, so they're used to seeing me with a cane or crutches or walker. They ask, 'How's it goin', how ya doin', how's your leg? You don't have a cane – this is great.' I say, 'I'm healing, everything's terrific.' Then I walk on up toward Broadway, and while I'm waiting at the light, the 104 bus stops. I take that line often because it goes up and down from the theater district. The driver swings open the door; he goes, 'Yo, Turner, you're lookin' good. How ya doin'?' I say, 'I'm doing great, thank you.' And I'm thinking, *Okay, garbage men love me, bus drivers love me* – it's just fantastic. New York is like a small town, because people, all kinds of people, are so friendly and it makes me feel like they're proud of me.

Being back home, routines become comfortingly normal again. I like the little things. I like grocery shopping. I like going to the pharmacy; the pharmacist is my friend. He's known me for ten years. These are the same stores I've been going to year after year after year. Makes me feel at home. I like planning meals and cooking for family and friends and for myself. I *do not* like cleaning. I'll vacuum if I have to, but that's about it. I don't like people fussing about me, though. All this business about having a car standing by for when you might need it is just another person to take responsibility for. I'd rather go out and

get my own taxi and not have anybody else tied up in it. I think that's a real waste of my energy, and I don't want people handling my life, always knowing where I'm going, what I'm doing. It's none of their business. In fact, I'm downright stubborn about that. Stay out of it – I'll handle it, thank you. Please, for heaven's sake, I'm a New Yorker.

From my bedroom I can see both the sparkling Hudson River and the lights of the city. I wake up every morning to this beautiful light on the buildings and I think of what a magnificent accomplishment New York is. Since 9/11, my connection to the city has become even deeper. I think people associate me with New York more strongly too because of my involvement with the 9/11 rescue and cleanup efforts. I felt it was my responsibility to do what I could. I actually flagged down a fire truck and convinced the firemen I could be of use. So they took me to where I could help organize the clothing for the rescue workers, and I made myself available to speak to the media when they needed me to tell people what supplies and volunteers were needed.

As soon as I got back home from London, I started on a new fitness program. I had gotten out of shape and gained weight there, where I didn't have my normal workout regimen. The eternal struggle, you know. It gets to be more of a challenge each decade. I call my trainer 'my little Italian Nazi.' Her name is Suzie Amatuze. The new program is an incredible workout. I've only been doing it four days and I already feel like I'm 50 per cent back.

'I already feel like I'm 50 per cent back.' Now, that's a real Turnerism! I waste no time.

And I had no time to waste even if I'd wanted to. It's been a

rapid-fire week since I returned, between spending time with my daughter, Rachel, catching up with friends and the charitable organizations I support, and slipping back into my household routine in my apartment. I love having an apartment where I can see so many facets of the city I love. The busier rooms – my office and the living room – are all in the west part of the apartment, with the calmness of the river affecting them. My grandmother's deep blue parlor rug is in my living room. It was just like new when I got it because she never let anyone into her parlor, but I use it constantly.

After Jay and I separated and he moved out last year, I had the walls painted colors, some that excite me, some that give me a peaceful feeling. I delight in the vibrant blue, gold, and red furnishings of my slightly chaotic apartment.

It's always slightly chaotic with a teenager in the house. The minute I got back to New York, my daughter got sick. Usually when I finish a long run or a big job, I break down and get sick. But I haven't this time and I think it's because my kid needed me every day. When she gets well, I know I'll go under.

'You know, kid,' I said to Rachel this morning, 'you are really busting my chops here. Every day it's something.' And she goes, 'Well, it's not my fault.' I said, 'Well, no, it's not your fault. You got sick. And then you twisted your knee. But you know what – I've been waiting on you for days now. Taking care of you. Making your food. Bringing you water. Honestly. Getting you to the doctors, getting the doctors to you.'

It was a funny thing, though. Last night she said, 'I can't believe how painful this knee is. Next time you say your knee hurts, I'm going to do anything you want.' I said, 'Yeah, sure, thanks, kid. That'll be a cold day in – August.' But I know she

means it. She's a great kid: bright, funny. She has a good sense of humor. It's a marvel to me that we have raised such a great young woman and that she's so ready to be launched into the world.

My shrink told me she wants me to start dating soon. I'm not ready for that yet, even though Jay and I have been legally separated – after twenty-one years of marriage – since before I left for London in January. But then, I haven't had sex since last August. Geez, so maybe I should think about this.

I have spent the week making the rounds to see all of my many doctors. My family doctor, Bert, is a wonderful, blunt, rather nasty-minded guy I've been going to for years. Always giving me trouble. He said to me, 'So, you're over fifty now, huh? Well, let me ask you something. You've done everything you set out to do with your life, right? You've had an international career, you're highly respected, you have a wonderful kid, you have had a long marriage. But you've got another fifty years ahead of you. What the hell are you going to do now?'

At first my heart just plummeted: 'I've done everything I set out to do? That's crazy. And I don't know what I'm going to do next. So there!' But then Bert said something rather wise: 'So now, honey, it's not about proving anything. It's about the quality of your life.' And I thought, *Yeah. Yeah, that I can live with.* There will always be an element of having to prove things because I have the need to constantly prove myself, even if only *to myself*. But truly, it is about the quality of my life from here on out. I don't need to prove anything to anyone else. This realization is very liberating, very exhilarating.

Taking risks, making choices, looking forward

Soon I'm going to do a TV role in Los Angeles, one written for me in the sitcom *Nip/Tuck*, about plastic surgery. I will play a very successful phone sex operator – no, excuse me, she regards herself as a phone sex *artist* – Cindy Plumb, who 'can make you come in English, Spanish, Japanese, or Mandarin. You may be alone, but you're not on your own.' But alas, Cindy's voice is getting lower as she gets older and her clients don't like that. So to get back her girlish voice, she is seeking a vocal cord lift. It's a comedy, of course, yet it sets me to thinking about how voice is such an apt metaphor for women in this world.

And then I'm going to a spa in California for two weeks to really zero in on the body work. 'Listen, honey, you might have to travel with me this summer,' I tell Gloria, who is trying to corral me to work on this book. 'Come with me to the spa; we can get a lot of work done there.' Gloria says, 'Sure we will.'

I'll also try my hand at directing at the Williamstown Theater Festival later in the summer to build my experience as a director. But I like not knowing everything that will happen next in my life even though I have many strong ideas about what I want to do. I like taking chances. Risk is what life is about to me. The main thing is, I don't like to repeat my successes.

Jay and I will be selling our beach house in Amagansett, toward the eastern end of Long Island. Until then, Rachel will want to be there off and on. Her idea of a great time is to play guitar all day. I have to drive her to her appointments this week because of her knee. She's not supposed to drive. So that will knock out the massage I'd planned. Well, all right.

When I'm gone, Rachel can stay with Jay. Or he'll stay with

her at my place and I'll come back to dog hair all over the place and broken dishes. Jay got the dog. He asked me if I would mind. I said, 'Are you kidding? Take him!'

Rachel will be going away to college this fall. I'll be back in time to help her choose things to take, pack up, and move to school. I'd love to do that. And then I get to clean out her room. Oh, God, you wouldn't believe this room. It's appalling. I said, 'Anything you leave – it's gone.'

Sometime after I take Rachel to college, I'll go check out Italy to see if I want to live there part of the year. I'd like to have an outpost in Europe, where they have far greater respect for older actresses than in the United States, not to mention better roles. And I'll teach my course at New York University, which I call 'Practical Acting: Shut Up and Do It!'

After I have worked so hard to get here, I find it wonderful and amusing at the same time that it seems to me as if it took a long time to become known and accepted as an actor. But to the outside world it seems as if it happened all of a sudden.

For in acting as in life, there is no real test with a scorecard of your ability, of your skill. If you write, if you paint, if you play music, there's a definitive sort of test. You have to be able to master the instrument or produce a product. You can't follow a score unless you know how to play that violin or trombone. But there's no such criteria that so easily defines the capability or the skill of an actor. I mean, somebody likes you, somebody doesn't. It's all very subjective – so anybody can say he or she is an actor, and many do. This makes many actors doubt their own absolute ability and their own real worth.

You gain confidence from the doing of it, as you successfully communicate through your acting time after time after time

with your audience. And you learn how to give yourself affirmations for the work that is meaningful to you, despite what others might think or say. That's the kind of confidence I've been feeling since we opened *Virginia Woolf* in New York. I can finally accept that I am extraordinarily skilled at this job. I have earned my place.

But I do wish I had half the sense of security in my private life as I have in my professional life about my choices and priorities. When I'm acting, I know with certainty whether an action is right or wrong: Is that the right tone of voice? Is that the right gesture? Is that the right emphasis on the thought? Am I building the character successfully in terms of the movement of the story? I can be absolutely sure that, yep, that's perfect. Leave that just as it is.

And then I can come offstage and not know how to talk to my child. Should I have a firm voice here or should I use an understanding one? Do I put my foot down or do I let it go?

When I make decisions for a character, things are always very clear to me. When I make decisions for myself, my personal life, I often don't feel sure at all.

Except about this: The best role is always ahead.

Chapter Two

Every step is forward

Soon after I returned from London, I went to the luncheon that is always given before the Tony Awards for the nominees and other people involved in theater. It was held at the Rainbow Room high above Rockefeller Center. There is no press so it's very relaxed. Oh, it was such fun to see so many actors and old friends and colleagues that I hadn't seen in ages since I'd been out of the country for the past five months.

Bill Irwin rightfully won the Tony last year for his portrayal of George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in New York. So this year he got to announce all the nominated leading and supporting actresses. And I announced all the male categories. Bill and I did our routine: I said, 'All right, your turn, Bill,' and he said, 'Yes, dear.' So we were still carrying on with our George and Martha routine, and we had a very good time with it.

I did not go to the Tony Awards themselves, though. They called me up two days before the event and said, ‘We need you to present something.’ Evidently they were having trouble getting people to come. At the luncheon I was standing in for Cherry Jones, who won best leading actress last year, because she wasn’t able to be there, which was fine. It was a bit of a nod to me since I was nominated but didn’t win.

But calling me up Friday morning to ask me to do the big televised awards show on Sunday – well, I thought that was rather rude. I was insulted, actually. If they wanted me, why hadn’t they asked me two weeks ago at the luncheon? Or before that? They knew how to reach me in London. They knew when the event was and what my dates were. So when they asked me with just two days’ notice, I said, ‘A little late, isn’t it? It’s just a little late! No, I will not. No. I think I’m going to be having a massage at that time.’

Someone asked me whether I was angry that I didn’t get the Tony last year for my performance as Martha even though the pre-Tony buzz predicted I would win. Cherry won it for *Doubt*, and what she did when she went up to accept the award was quite stunning. She said that Kathleen Turner was the most amazing actress in her role as Martha. God knows she didn’t need to do that. I wrote her a letter thanking her for her graciousness.

I’ve had lots of nominations – Golden Globes, BAFTAs, Oscars – and I’ve won some awards. It would be nice to have that little Tony statue. But I have the certificates of nomination framed in my office. They’re a pretty good recognition. After all, Cherry got the Tony, but I got the role.

It's more fun to play a bad girl

I went about getting the role of Martha step by step, because I found her character so compelling from the very first time I read the play. I suppose I chose age fifty as my goal with the idea that she would be past childbearing age. Because the truth is, the play is not really a tragedy unless you know that Martha will never be able to have a child. If she's young enough that it would be possible for her still to hope for a child, then her character is not as deeply tragic as it could, should be. So I had fifty set in my mind. In this day and age, we think in terms of in vitro and other variations on the usual way of becoming pregnant. And we value women for attributes other than motherhood. But I think about Martha in 1960, when the play was set. Life was so different for women then, so much more restricted.

She is intelligent, ambitious, energetic. As she confesses, she worships her father, who was the president of the university. She so desires to please him. Her father has crippled her by not seeing who she is or what she has to offer. She had briefly married 'the lawn mower,' as they referred to the gardener at the boarding school she attended; that made her a damaged person to her father. If it were today, she could have aspired to be a university president herself, or to some other career of her choosing. That would have given her life a whole new purpose, a whole new meaning. But it's 1960, so her ambitions had to be channeled, funneled, achieved by a man – her father before she was married and thereafter, her husband.

As much as she and George love each other and always have, it's been a terrible disappointment to her that he has shared none of her ambitions and certainly will not be the heir to her

father's presidency. After twenty-five years, George is still an associate professor. You have to work hard to fail that much.

And without children, what does she have? She gets to be on committees of faculty wives, to have a spring Easter egg hunt or a Christmas party or crap like that, which means nothing to her. She doesn't have any standing other than as her father's daughter or as her husband's wife. She's not a mother, can't be a baby maker, so she doesn't have that title of respect. Today, we women tend to have more options, not fewer, as we get older. Martha had almost none as she approached her fifties. This time of life that to me is so freeing, to Martha must have been terribly stifling.

So she sits in the empty house day after day and she starts drinking. Which I think many would do, frankly, in that situation. I think I would if I were sitting around with all that ability but no way to see that I could do something fruitful with it, or do something that used my abilities or challenged my mind. It would be dreadful. Anyone would feel defeated and might overeat or drink or do drugs.

Perhaps some exceptional women would have found another private outlet such as writing that they could control on their own. But I think that would be the exception, and that they would have been seen as abnormal by the rest of society. Martha chafes at the irrational boundaries, but not in a political way. Her behavior has no boundaries. She has no limits physically or vocally. She just throws herself around without any thought as to the proper behavior.

Poor woman, I started out feeling very angry with her and quite disgusted, and I thought, *Oh, stop it! Pull yourself together – this is rubbish*. But then more and more I began to empathize with

her. This happens to me often with characters, since I play so many awful ones. They turn out to be more interesting than the good girls. You always know what a good girl is going to do. You never know what a bad girl is going to do. It's much more fun.

I didn't see the whole film and I've never seen a stage production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Knowing always that I wanted to do Martha, I would never willingly want to have someone else's performance in my head. But in my readings of it, I always thought it was extremely funny. I saw big laughs. I never understood why no one spoke of it that way. I like a hard-edged humor, and that's definitely *Virginia Woolf* to me. The little I saw of the Richard Burton–Elizabeth Taylor film I disliked immensely, but I think that's because it was performed with acceptance of the culture of the time rather than a questioning of it. It seemed to me that their George and Martha were just two drunks screaming at each other and tearing each other apart for a night. I didn't understand this at all. Because my perception reading the play had been so very different.

With most characters, I find I go through stages where I truly dislike them, and then I start to find the reasons for their behavior – then I start to have sympathy for them and then empathy, and then I feel they're totally justified. Somebody says, 'How could she do that?'

Because she had to, okay?

And I *had* to play Martha.

Jumping into the fear

Fear tries to overtake me when I am between jobs. I had just finished the Broadway run of *The Graduate* and was looking

anxiously to what I would do next. I am inclined to try to overcome fear by jumping right into its face, to do that which I am afraid of doing. I decided to ask directly for what I wanted most – to play Martha.

By the time I was forty-eight, I was on a comfortable standing with most of the major Broadway producers. I'd done enough work that was very good so I could speak with any of them if I wanted to. I set out to get the role I'd been coveting since I was twenty.

Liz McCann has been Edward Albee's producer for years. He doesn't allow anyone else to produce his plays. So I had to get to Liz. Fortunately, she's a great friend of the Nederlanders', who own theaters in which Albee's plays have been produced, and Jimmy Nederlander Jr. is a great friend of mine. I asked Jimmy and his fiancée, Margo MacNabb, also a dear friend, to set up a dinner with Liz and Jay and me. Just social, you know.

During the course of the evening, I told Liz that I wanted *Virginia Woolf*. 'I want Martha,' I said. And Liz said, 'Well, I don't think that's going to happen.' Edward had not allowed the play to be performed in New York since 1975. Liz told me he didn't express any desire to do it; he'd had some readings over the last few years with other actresses but had not approved any of them. And career-wise, he was still writing new plays. *The Goat* had come out that year. He didn't want to be known just for his old material. All of which was completely understandable.

I pressed on. 'Yes, but you have no idea how well I would do this. I really need – no, you really need me to do this.' 'No, no, no, no' was her response.

I kept after Liz for weeks after that. *I want to talk to Edward. I want to meet with Edward. I want to see him.* Finally she set up a

lunch and the three of us got together. This was before the presidential election in 2004. Edward and I are on the same side politically, and we share a great number of concerns. It was a very interesting, challenging conversation over lunch. The man is absolutely brilliant. We never even got to the play; we just talked politics and everything that goes with that. But I'm told that I *became* Martha during the course of the lunch.

Finally, as we were leaving the restaurant, Edward said, 'All right, what do you want?' I said, 'I want to read Martha.'

When I met with Edward after that, I said, 'Look, I'm funny and we'll get a funny George. I think the dark humor in the play has never been realized.' He said, 'Oh, you don't?' I said, 'No, I don't think anybody's seen it created as the comedy it could and should be.' He was skeptical but said, 'Oh, fine, right.'

So what did I want, he asked again. Again I said I wanted a reading. We agreed to put together the reading.

Then we started desperately thinking of who we would get as George. Bill Irwin's name came up and I thought, *Oh, that's brilliant*. He is a great comedian and an inspired clown, and talk about your timing – that boy has got it. Yeah, he's got it. He has the clear, clear intelligence that needs to be demonstrated by George. And he'd just played in Albee's *The Goat; or, Who Is Sylvia?* in London for a time. I thought, *Oh, this is a stunning idea*. There were many other leading actors who wanted this reading, but once Bill's name came up, that was it for me. I said, 'Yes, we've got to get him in here.'

Next I took the extra step to make sure my own reading would be the best it could possibly be. I got together with Anthony Page, the very talented British director who has done many of Albee's plays, and he worked with us before we did the reading. Anthony

later said he thought I looked like Martha, strong and somewhat plain, and unpretentious, as though I'd really lived. Ha! Is that a compliment? At any rate, working with Anthony in advance of the reading was a real plus in my preparation.

When we did our read-through, Edward was there along with the director, the producers, and a number of other people. Edward started laughing soon after we began. And let me tell you something: he doesn't laugh easily.

Now, everyone can see that in this production, there are huge laughs throughout the first act, every three or four lines. In the second act, there are fewer, and the third act, fewer still. But even in the most difficult parts, Albee sets up big laughs that previous productions have not generally made the most of. Even at the very end, when Martha says, 'Show me the telegram,' and George says, 'I ate it.' My God, it's a shock laugh, yes. But the physical action of laughing releases a great deal of tension in everyone. It allows you as an actor to build the tension back up again and to keep the audience with you.

That humor is a part of the characters' deep, deep hurt. They make each other laugh and they make each other laugh at themselves. Martha tries something and doesn't pull it off, George caps her, and she appreciates his effort. It's cool. It's part of their relationship. Honestly, I never understood why people didn't understand how funny this was.

At the end of the reading of the first act, Edward came over to me and he said he hadn't seen anything like it since Uta Hagen performed the role. And I said, 'Well, thank you. We have two more acts to go. Hold on, baby.'

In the break between the first and second act, everybody was just beaming. We were like Cheshire cats. We finished the

reading around two in the afternoon. I went home thinking, *It'll probably be weeks before we have a decision on whether or not this will be a go*. And I was soon to turn my witching age of fifty!

They called at five-thirty that same afternoon and said, 'So, do you want it?' I said, 'What do you mean, do I want it? What, are you crazy? What the hell have I been saying for the last two years?'

I got the role of Martha just before I turned fifty.

And then I was really scared. I thought, *Oh my God – is there a real plan here? It's not all random? All these steps I took really made it happen?* No, I do not think it is random. My friends would say I 'Kathleen Turnered' it. I can't seem to keep from taking action when I want to get something done, even if I am afraid.

I literally got the shakes once I knew I had Martha. I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to pull off all my boasts. It was a huge undertaking. A huge test.

My last show on Broadway had been *The Graduate*, which was commercially a huge success but the critics were very tough on the play. Tough on me personally too. Ben Brantley, the *New York Times* theater critic, called the play 'weary' and my performance as Mrs. Robinson 'little more than a stunt,' more appropriate for *Xena: Warrior Princess* than the Broadway stage.²

And of course there had been many other jokes about my twenty seconds of nudity onstage. Maureen Lipman, the brilliant British writer, actress, and comedienne, was doing a one-woman show when I was doing *The Graduate* in London. She sent a letter to one of the newspapers saying that she would be performing her show in glasses and socks so that one may see what a real forty-something-year-old woman looks like. And then she wrote me this note: 'My ticket sales went down.' The

whole thing was a joke. My great friend Maggie Smith was doing Alan Bennett's play *Lady in the Van* at the time, and she said to Alan, 'Kathleen's doing such wonderful business over there, I'm thinking that perhaps in the end scene when the lady rises, we should do that in the nude.' She said there was this long pause. And she said, 'Alan, I'm joking. I'd look like a Ubangi.' It was very funny. Women, you know, don't take this as seriously as men. At least, actresses don't.

But I knew I had some tall mountains to climb to be given a fair evaluation as Martha.

The Graduate, 2000–2002

Drifting college graduate Benjamin becomes trapped in an affair with the older Mrs. Robinson. To complicate matters, Ben then falls in love with her daughter, Elaine.

Adapted and directed by Terry Johnson
Produced by John Reid and Sacha Brooks

Kathleen Turner as Mrs. Robinson
Jason Biggs as Benjamin
Alicia Silverstone as Elaine

Mrs. Robinson: *Would you like me to seduce you?*

Getting myself back

But if I hadn't done *The Graduate*, I could never have done *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

One of the problems of having started my career as a younger beautiful woman known for sexuality – a woman whose characters have been sexy, I should say – is that there's an inherent dismissal of her as an individual. It probably extends to beautiful young men, but certainly to young, beautiful women. There's a sense of these women being quite interchangeable, not unique or individually necessary.

These days I face a different hurdle: People assume a woman my age is not supposed to be attractive or sexually appealing. I get very tired of that and relish opportunities to counteract it. Playing the role of Mrs. Robinson, who in her midforties seduces a young man less than half her age, was one of those stereotype-busting choices. But it had a deeper personal meaning to me too.

I started performing in *The Graduate* at forty-five. Performed it at forty-six in London. We brought it to New York when I was forty-eight. I don't think people in the audience doubted that Mrs. Robinson was capable of seducing Benjamin or that she had the allure, the power, and the sexuality to entrap this much younger man. That's greatly a matter of having the confidence and projecting that confidence to others.

Appearing nude on film was not easy when I was twenty-six in *Body Heat*; it was even harder when I was forty-six in *The Graduate*, on the stage, which is more up close and personal than film. After my middle-aged nude scene, though, I unexpectedly got letters from women saying, 'I have not undressed in front of my husband in ten years and I'm going to tonight.' Or, 'I have not looked in the mirror at my body and you gave me permission.'

These affirmations from other women were especially touching to me because when I began *The Graduate* I'd just come

through a period when I felt a great loss of confidence, when my rheumatoid arthritis hit me hard and I literally couldn't walk or do any of the things I was so used to doing. It used to be that if I said to my body, 'Leap across the room now,' it would leap instantly. I don't know how I did it, but I did it. I hadn't realized how much my confidence was based on my physicality. On my ability to make my body do whatever I wanted it to do.

I was so consumed, not just by thinking about what I could and couldn't do, but also by handling the pain, the continual, chronic pain. I didn't realize how pain colored my whole world and how depressive it was. Before I was finally able to control my RA with proper medications, I truly had thought that my attractiveness and my ability to be attractive to men was gone, was lost. So for me to come back and do *The Graduate* was an affirmation to myself. I had my body back. *I* was back.

But I still had some other important body work to do to be ready to play Martha. Rheumatoid arthritis eats up your joints. I knew I had to have my right knee replaced in order to physically do the play. And once that was really clear to me – because you don't want to rush into things like replacing joints in your body – I immediately had the surgery. I had only about eight weeks to rehab and get back into shape to do the play.

And I did it. I did it. The surgery probably saved my left knee too because neither of them was very good. Martha could wear cushy padded slippers to cope with the pain in my feet, but she had to be very physical in the fight scenes and her body language throughout the play. It wouldn't have been fair if I'd been unable to go on because of the pain. So I had to have the surgery. But that added a great deal of stress to the already intense stress of taking on Martha.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, 2004–2007

Married couple Martha and George drunkenly spar in front of a younger couple. Their savage battle of wits unravels and reveals a couple who provide each other not only unending misery, but unending happiness.

Written by Edward Albee

Directed by Anthony Page

Produced by Elizabeth Ireland McCann, Daryl Roth,
Terry Allen Kramer, Scott Rudin, Roger Berlind,
James L. Nederlander, and Nick Simunek

Bill Irwin as George

Kathleen Turner as Martha

Mireille Enos as Honey (New York and London)

Kathleen Early as Honey (U.S. tour)

David Harbour as Nick (New York and London)

David Furr as Nick (U.S. tour)

Martha: *I'm loud and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in the house because somebody's got to, but I am not a monster. I'm not.*

And so when *Virginia* opened in New York to great reviews, and when Edward Albee wrote me a very kind note, which I had framed, telling me I made him happy to be a playwright, and when the critic Ben Brantley apologized in print for underestimating me, for assuming that because I'd made the choice of

playing Mrs. Robinson before, I wouldn't be capable of playing Martha now, I wept.³

Oh, yes, this felt far better than winning a Tony ever could. Brantley saw exactly the points I wanted people to see, saw that I had been able to communicate with the audience exactly what I had intended. Even better, he really saw Martha:

At 50, this actress can look ravishing and ravaged, by turns. In the second act, she is as predatorily sexy as she was in the movie 'Body Heat.' But in the third and last act she looks old, bereft, stripped of all erotic flourish.

When she sits at the center of the stage quietly reciting a litany of the reasons she loves her dearly despised husband, you feel she has peeled back each layer of her skin to reveal what George describes as the marrow of a person. I was fortunate enough to have seen Uta Hagen, who created Martha, reprise the role in a staged reading in 1999, and I didn't think I would ever be able to see 'Virginia Woolf' again without thinking of Ms. Hagen.

But watching Ms. Turner in that last act, fully clothed but more naked than she ever was in 'The Graduate,' I didn't see the specter of Ms. Hagen. All I saw was Ms. Turner. No, let's be fair. All I saw was Martha.

Aah, I thought to myself, *well, now*. People can say, 'Maybe she was cute or sexy and she took her clothes off then,' but they'd have to add, 'Just look at what she can do now.'

Who's afraid of the next role?

I used to think I had the stage line drawn absolutely – now I'm onstage, now I'm off – but I've been informed by friends and family over the years that that's not exactly true. Sometimes it is hard to separate from being Martha during the rest of my day offstage. This character has such personality . . . so much intensity. I know that if I find myself playing a role such as I did in *Indiscretions*, of a weakened, vulnerable, self-pitying character night after night after night, I feel less capable. I feel: 'Now, would you do this for me, please?' And, 'Well, you can't expect me to handle that.'

When I am playing someone like Martha, who is so brash and bold, I might laugh louder. I embarrass my daughter more. Rachel will say, 'You're so loud, Mom!' I don't sound loud to me, but there are certain characteristics that, because you have to slip right back into them every day at seven o'clock, are more easily triggered throughout the day. I try to be aware of it. If something sparked my anger, especially when I was doing Martha, 'Hold it,' I'd try to stop and ask: 'Is this something I'm actually angry about? Or is this one of her kick-off points, one of her buttons that got pushed?' I don't carry out the agenda of my characters in my life. Just their mannerisms.

Still, I had an increasingly ominous feeling in my personal life, especially in my marriage: I felt worse about myself inside my own home than I did outside of it. It came to a head during *Virginia Woolf* here in New York but was not caused by it. Just the opposite; my professional life gave me the balance I needed to get through the personal crisis that had been brewing for some time.

I knew I was doing great work. I mean life-changing work, both for myself and for the people who came to the show. It was an incredibly demanding role and schedule. Meanwhile, I'm getting up at seven o'clock every morning with my kid to get her off to school. I'm running the apartment, the house, making sure there's food. Trying to juggle all of my responsibilities and, I think, doing it well. While I was hearing from friends and professional colleagues day after day what an extraordinary talent I have and what an admirable person I am, I would go home and feel so belittled and so undercut. I felt as if I were two different people altogether. I couldn't reconcile the two views. They didn't seem as though they could be the same person: the person inside the home who was told that she's an awful, ungiving, uncaring person and the one outside who seemed to be so incredibly capable. I felt like I was split in two.

In many actors and I know in myself, there's a great fear of failure. Every time I take another role, it carries with it the possibility that I might fail, and publicly at that. You're right out there for all to see, baby. Yet without that degree of risk, you don't grow enough. So I don't mind the thought of failing, but I have an insecurity about it. God knows, this insecurity is not something only actors experience. I suppose most people have that feeling about taking on new roles, new jobs, new challenges.

And I think insecurity can lead to a sort of self-destructiveness, so that you're no longer just taking risks in order to grow but you're getting hooked on the rush of it and you start to undermine yourself. That's when you see really dangerous behavior, like people who go out and party all night knowing they've got two shows the next day. And I certainly have my

bouts of self-destructiveness. But in the end, I'm pretty solid and stable.

Some of that comes from what has always been inside of me, and some of it comes from the circumstances I've been forced to deal with in my life. So when I did finally get to the point at which I could believe that I really was these positive things people outside my home were telling me I was, that's when I said, 'Okay, it's time to take a risk.' And that's when Jay and I decided to separate.

I'm glad that we came to that decision. Because I like the person that people say is wonderful and great and talented. I think I'll stay her. And I want my life to get larger, not smaller. Now that I have fewer home responsibilities, I'd like to explore more choices. I won't be sitting in the background, waiting for somebody to need me. I'll be taking a fresh look at the future and contemplating the great roles that lie ahead. The author Gail Sheehy⁴ calls this age the 'feisty fifties' and Suzanne Braun Levine's saltier description of the 'fuck-you fifties' is just how I feel.⁵ I am like so many women who have fulfilled their career responsibilities and their child-rearing responsibilities, are able to be financially independent, and now at midlife are choosing to change their careers or to start new businesses or to reinvent themselves in other ways. Maybe not reinvent, because that sounds as if we weren't satisfied with what we had, but rather to expand our lives.

Because in truth, everything that brought us to this point in our lives is valuable to the next part. Every step really is forward. We learn as much from mistakes and setbacks as from successes. Not all of my steps have been as dramatic as those I took to persuade Edward Albee to revive *Virginia Woolf* with me as

Martha. But each and every step has been important.

Thinking back, though I knew I wanted to play Martha from an early age, the path to that goal was not obvious, not assured when I was a twenty-year-old aspiring actress. There were many twists and turns as I took steps forward, much life to be lived and much to be learned.

In fact, early in my life, it wasn't even a given that I'd be an actor. I encountered strong resistance from the man who mattered most in my childhood: my father.