# Love Affair

The Memoir of a Forbidden Father-Daughter Relationship

Leslie Kenton

Published by Vermillion,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

Extract

Leslie Kenton

# LOVE AFFAIR

The Memoir of a Forbidden Father-Daughter Relationship

Vermilion
LONDON

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 2010 by Vermilion, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
A Random House Group Company



The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library


The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

Hardback ISBN 9780091935061
Trade Paperback ISBN 9780091910532

To buy books by your favourite authors and register for offers visit www.rbooks.co.uk

The author would like to thank the following for permission to use copyright material: OUP Oxford for material from *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* edited by Richard L. Gregory (Second edition 2004). The extract from 'The Stan Hardly Anyone Knew' by Noel Wedder appears on
www.home.comcast.net/~noel.wedder/kentonindex2.html

*For Stanley*
*with all my love*

# PREFACE

Thousands of feet of 8mm film beckon to me from their dusty containers. It is time for me to explore the celluloid images they contain of two lives lived more than half a century ago. I know I need to pay attention to them but I am uneasy – not sure what to expect. I thread the projector and turn it on: a man is holding a small child against his bare chest. Uncertain what to do with his package, he seems both entranced by and frightened of it. I fast-forward five years or more the way film so easily lets you do. Now the man wrinkles his nose at the child, then grabs at her body as though reaching for a tempting morsel to eat. The girl looks up, pulls away, sticks her tongue out at him. He buries his knuckles in her sides tickling her. She squirms. They laugh.

Fast-forward again . . . now I am watching a birthday party in a garden. The girl is wearing a pink floral dress and her first pair of white high heels. I can tell this since she moves as awkwardly as a foal trying to plant its feet upon the ground without falling. He circles her, smiling. Almost predatory, he grabs hold of her waist, draws her to him and kisses her. She smiles what looks like an embarrassed smile then moves away.

Spellbound, I watch as they circle each other. Like strands of DNA trapped in the force field of a double helix, the circling becomes almost balletic. One moment they laugh. Then, a turn of a head, a shift in a body, and their playfulness is replaced by something darker. I sit viewing all this in an abstracted way, rewinding the movie again and again, vaguely aware of a fascination in me tinged with both fear

and excitement. Suddenly, the spell is broken. What I thought I could watch from a safe distance – records of decades of my life with my father – is no longer *them* but *us,* no longer *then,* but *now.*

From such beginnings this book was born. I had little idea that day where the writing of it would take me. Often we think we have 'handled' challenges in our life. Then we find ourselves doing the same stupid things over and over again. I certainly have. And wonder why. Why does one or another part of our life never seem to come right? Why do we feel helpless to change that?

Or maybe we have come to a place of relative comfort, as I thought I had. We have wonderful friends and loving family, and many blessings to celebrate. Without ever articulating it – even to myself – I had come to feel that, like a magic carpet on which I could ride, the good life I had created would continue to keep me safe for ever. Then something unexpected occurs – maybe somebody dies or flashes of long-forgotten memories come to the surface, or perhaps we get sick or badly injured. Suddenly the magic carpet is ripped out from under us. We find ourselves tumbling through the sky and we wonder, with a strange detachment, if it is going to kill us.

In my case, it was not just revisiting lost memories that brought such things to the surface when I began to write *Love Affair*. Something mysterious within me had awakened. I could not name it but it seemed to be present with me day and night. An unseen threat? A benevolent guide? A dark shadow from my past? I didn't know.

When my work on this book began, I did not realise I had access to masses of research materials, inherited on the deaths of my father, my mother, their parents and our ancestors before them. I had never looked at most of them: diaries, medical records, itineraries, thousands of photographs, dozens of reels of 8mm and 16mm film documenting my family's lives and revealing much about my parents and their ancestors – especially on my father's side. Some had only come into my hands two years before when, as a consequence of a

stepfather's death, my mother's private papers, personal notes, books and journals were sent to me by his lawyers.

Letters, many yellow at the edges, had been dutifully stuffed back into envelopes. Some written long before I was born told of frustration, love, excitement and despair in the lives of those who wrote them. They were tied with string or held together by rubber bands long past their use-by date. When I tried to slide them off, the rubber bands disintegrated in my hands.

The papers, including the letters, were often so descriptive that, together with my father's itineraries, and the reports of dozens of people whom I interviewed for the book, the task of pinpointing when and where various events took place turned out to be easier than I had anticipated. I began by reading and dating them according to the postmark.

Going through all these materials took me back more than a century, plunging me into another time, another world. As I read, vivid memories began to surface – smells and sounds, fragments of events and places. Slowly I began to pull them together. I felt like I was trying to mend a broken mirror or staring at the jumbled pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Gradually, I began to gaze into that jigsaw puzzle, then to live in it. As this happened, my whole life was turned upside down. I had looked on the task of writing this book as a mechanical process of gathering together intricate and demanding information, creating a certain order out of it all, and producing a narrative of events about what had happened to me and my family. The more I came to live in this broken-mirror world, the more I came face to face with the shattered depths of my own life and the lives of others who make up this story – my parents, their parents before them and back and back. Intricate patterns emerged – variations on bloodline themes, as one generation gave birth to the next. They were unmistakable.

If I have learned only one thing from the years between my birth and my father's death it is this: we are each of us perpetrator and

victim, the rapist and the raped, the torturer and the tortured. For us to become who, at the core of our being, we truly are, we must be willing to dive deep into our own darkness and illuminate it. Darkness longs for light to bring it comfort. Light is drawn to darkness to deepen its compassion and reveal its value.

It is my prayer that the writing about what follows will bring comfort and peace to all who participated in its making.

# PART ONE

# INNOCENCE

# 1

# TWO BIRTHS

WHAT FOLLOWS IS a true tale of innocence, blood and grace. It begins with two births and ends with a death. It tells of the man who was my father and of the daughter who loved him. It journeys into the darkness of isolation and unknowing that, sooner or later, each of us is called on to enter – a borderland of being, where known rules and structures no longer apply. When I began to write, I believed this story was personal to me. Now, as I near the end of my work, I see that it is a tale belonging to all of us and to these dark times in which we live.

Each of us enters the world as an innocent. We arrive on earth, take pot luck, and hope to survive – maybe even to thrive. For some, my parents among them, innocence lasts way beyond childhood. Timid yet headstrong, passionate yet terrified of life, my mother was still adolescent when she gave birth to me at the age of twenty-six. The letters she wrote are filled with young girl preoccupations: clothes she wants to buy, parties she is going to, how drunk she plans to get. My father was as innocent as she. Smart yet naïve, gifted but with little belief in himself, he was an awkward 'country boy' driven by a powerful need to make his mark on the world and a terrible fear he might never manage it.

Fate, choice, providence – who knows what – managed to turn the three of us into a family. At times each of us was singular, as isolated from each other as three animals of different species. At others, together and crazy, we swam with sharks, slept in the back of cars (or forgot to sleep at all), smuggled whisky into dry states, drowned in

seas of screaming brass and blundered our way across the Americas year after year – from the insanity of Hollywood to the sultry streets of New Orleans and snow-covered peaks of the Andes.

I, Leslie, was born at the Queen of Angels Hospital in Los Angeles – a Catholic edifice of vast proportions where Dr Alfonso McCarthy, head of obstetrics, reigned supreme. On a warm June day in 1941, Dr McCarthy stood by, holding my mother's hand through an agonising, endless, gas-filled labour.

My mother's name is Violet. She curses so loud that incense-laden, black-robed priests, floating down corridors to chant last rites for the dying, are stopped in their tracks by her shrieks and her profanity. 'Stanley, remind me never to do this again!' my mother will say to my father for years to come.

But my father is nowhere near the Queen of Angels Hospital while his wife of six years struggles to bring me into the world. She has been left to sweat it out alone in a dreary little room, until finally I emerge, scarred and bruised by the metal forceps used to get me out. I am not a pretty sight; at least according to my paternal grandmother, Stella. When she sees me a few hours later, Stella takes one look at me and declares, 'This child cannot possibly be a Kenton. She is far too ugly.'

The phone call comes from the hospital in the late afternoon of 24 June. My father, Stanley Kenton, a six-foot-four, lanky piano player with size 13½ AAA feet and ambitions to match, is rehearsing for the night's performance in the Rendezvous Ballroom in Balboa, California: my birth has taken place the same month and year that my father has pawned everything he owns (and it isn't much) to start his own jazz band. 'The Stanley Kenton Orchestra' consists of fifteen men and its birthplace is the Rendezvous. At this time, my father has no track record for success. Nor does he see himself as a leader. Shy and self-deprecating, he had tried hard to find someone else to front the band. When that failed, stuck with the job, he got on with it himself.

'Mr Kenton, congratulations, you have a strong, healthy daughter,' says Dr McCarthy.

Stanley tells no one at first. No cigars are handed out. No celebration takes place. After the job that night, he and two friends – a woman named Audree Coke and her fiancé, Jimmy Lyons – wander over to a nearby bar, the Bamboo Room. There, huddled over drinks and empty glasses, he confides, 'Violet has given birth to a baby girl.'

Back at the Queen of Angels, the hospital staff take me from my mother, place me in a glass cage and stick a bottle in my mouth. They say this will give her a chance to rest and regain her figure after the messy business she has been through. My mother never deals well with messiness. It does not belong in her world.

While there was general agreement that my own birth was best forgotten, the other Kenton issue – the birth of the band – was greeted with great celebration. Even so, it plunged my father into a morass of anxiety. 'How am I going to pay these guys? Oh my God, have I done the right thing?' And, 'Jesus Christ, why is Violet in that hospital instead of here with me when I need her?'

That first summer my father worked like a man possessed. Each night when the job was finished, the guys in the band would head for the Bamboo Room to jam or wind down: Chico Alverez, Red Doris, Howard Rumsey, Jack Ordean, Marvin George and the rest. Stanley remained on the bandstand. Alone in the now empty ballroom, hunched over the piano, every night he composed and arranged the music he wanted to play the next night. Two or three hours later, when his musicians passed by again on their way home, he would still be sitting there, playing chords and scribbling on sheets of paper.

The Kenton sound was like nothing anybody had heard before. Kids got high on it. As for Stanley himself – he mesmerised them. All his life – even towards the end when he was ill, incontinent and too weak to move centre stage to conduct – my father's presence on a bandstand was something wondrous to behold.

I can see him now as he strides centre stage, spreads his arms like

a commanding angel, pounding the floor with his right heel so hard that the whole ballroom shakes. This signals the downbeat. Jazz reviewer Del Bodey once wrote: 'What Toscanini does with his head in conducting, Kenton does with his whole body.'

As the first strains of my father's theme song, 'Artistry in Rhythm', burst forth, mouths would drop open. People stop breathing. Screaming brass, drum rolls, offbeat syncopation. They give way to lush piano sounds, changing tempos, changing time – always surprising, yet somehow forever the same. As a young child, I was to spend most of my life on the road with the band. I would hear 'Artistry in Rhythm' three or four times each night. Over the years Stanley orchestrated more than a hundred permutations of it. Each time I heard it, the hairs on my arms rose to attention. Chills ran through my body. They still do.

My parents loved to tell stories. While I was growing up they told me endless tales – about my birth, about our ancestors, about how they met, who said what to whom – about what Stanley did, what Violet did, what I had done. Many of their stories were repeated so often that they became etched deep into my memory bank. Sometimes when I close my eyes, images dance out of the darkness as though they portray events in my own life. Like the way my parents met.

A shining, scrubbed, wholesome blonde, my mother had not been an easy catch for my father. He first spotted her in 1934 at the Rendezvous Ballroom where he was playing piano for the Everett Hoaglund band. She liked music. She loved dancing.

'When she moved,' my father always said, 'she stood out on the dance floor like a gem in a swirl of pebbles. I was far too shy to go near her. So I watched, I hoped and I waited.'

One evening, this man-who-would-one-day-be-my-father trotted home to his mother, Stella, and announced, 'I've just seen the girl I'm gonna marry.'

'Oh, really?'

'Yeah.'

'Who is she?'

'I don't know yet. But I'm gonna find out.'

Weeks passed. Every time Violet showed up at the ballroom, he watched her from afar. She hardly noticed the gangly piano player who had already made up his mind she would spend the rest of her life with him. Every Saturday night she showed up on the arm of a different man. There was never a shortage. To her they were all the same: OK so long as they danced well. If one of them tried to get serious about her, she just moved on to the next in line.

One night, after hours on the dance floor, my mother's suitor-of-the-moment drove to the top of a mountain, parked his car overlooking the romantic lights of Los Angeles and swore eternal love for her. Then he asked her to marry him.

'No,' she said.

'Why not?'

'I don't love you.'

He pleaded. To no avail. Hurling himself from the car in tears, the young man staggered towards the edge of the cliff. 'If you won't marry me, I'll kill myself!' he shouted.

'Jump,' was her reply. Needless to say, he didn't.

I remember when this story first came alive for me. I was sixteen and beginning to find my own way into the dating scene. I was so impressed by the way my mother had handled the guy's blackmailing melodrama. If it had been me, I would have promised him anything just to get us down off that mountain. Then I would have run away as fast as I could. Not my mother. She could be sharp as a stiletto – a woman who brooked no nonsense.

After weeks of my father watching Violet from afar, one night their eyes met. By all accounts – and there are many of this event – it took place just like it does in the movies, but almost never in real life.

He is playing piano. She is dancing with the latest beau. Suddenly she stops and stares up at him. His fingers switch to automatic pilot

on the keyboard. Everyone around them disappears. Alone in this huge room, woman and piano player meet right here, right now. This is it.

Leaving the piano, Stanley jumps off the bandstand and asks her to dance. She accepts. But he has forgotten something. Since, like most musicians, he has spent most of his life on a bandstand, he has never learned how to dance. Together they stumble around the floor for five minutes. Embarrassed, he suggests she might like to 'sit this one out'. She is quick to agree. He buys her a Coke. They talk.

He tells her how he dreams of doing 'something great'. An inveterate dreamer herself, she drinks in his words. 'His innocence and awkward charm disarmed me,' she always said. 'But there was something else too. Some kind of energy that flowed from him. He was radiant – like a beacon of light.'

As far as he was concerned, she was the most wonderful creature he had ever met. It was not just her looks that grabbed him either. In her he sensed something he had not encountered before. He never could describe it, but whatever it was, he wanted more of it.

While courting my mother, my father did everything he could to spend as much time as possible with her. He wanted to enchant her. He played songs he thought she might like. He got to know her favourites. High on the list was 'Sophisticated Lady'. He always let her know whenever he was going to play it so she would know it was just for her. He searched her out at every intermission. He asked if he could drive her home after the job. Sometimes she said yes.

That night in 1934 when they first spoke marked the beginning of a lifetime of animated conversations between them; eventually between all three of us. Stanley and Violet talked in the car, in the shower, at meals, from early morning to late at night.

My father often spoke about his work, his dreams, the hassles he was forever getting into with managers, promoters and musicians. When I was older, he would invite me into his inner world, the secret repository of all the energies that fuelled his ambitions. Sometimes he

would speak with passion and determination. Others, his words would be dipped in sadness, like when he spoke of his longing to compose 'great music' – music that would take audiences to places in the Universe they didn't know existed.

Most often my mother talked about what was beautiful. She loved paintings, especially the works of Rembrandt. All her life she wanted to go to Berlin so she could see, first hand, *The Man with the Golden Helmet*. She never did. She too spoke of her longings, but they were different from Stanley's. She ached to live in a magnificent house and to wear fabulous clothes. She wanted to visit Paris and Rome and Rio.

A lot of Violet's words were designed to encourage Stanley, to bolster his confidence, to help him solve his problems. Again and again, she urged him to hold on to his dreams. 'One day,' she said, 'they *will* come true.' She was sure of it.

My mother's belief in her husband, coupled with his own all-encompassing commitment to fulfilling his dreams, made them a formidable pair. Come hell or high water, at the time of my birth they were riding the rising wave of creative optimism they sensed all around them. The excitement was palpable. Stokowski and Disney had brought *Fantasia* to birth. CBS had demonstrated the miracle of colour TV and begun experimental broadcasts from the top of the Chrysler Building in New York. A search for 'Rosebud' was on, to wild acclaim, as Orson Welles made his Hollywood debut with *Citizen Kane*. Meanwhile, 400,000 coal miners in Harlan County, Pennsylvania, ended a protracted strike for a $1 pay raise, elated that they would be earning $7 a week from now on – before taxes of course. These were *hopeful* times.

When my parents first met, my mother was living in a small apartment with her lifelong friend Nona La Force and Nona's sister Rae. Violet and Nona had known each other since high school when they shook pompoms and cheered together at ball games. Like most young

women in the 1930s, they went dancing every chance they got. Their favourite dancing spots were the Rendezvous in Balboa, where my mother met my father, and the Biltmore Bowl – an extravagant dance hall in Los Angeles' Biltmore Hotel, where the Academy Awards were held each year. The Biltmore held tea dances every Sunday afternoon. Violet, Nona and Rae seldom missed one. Saturday afternoons they usually spent at the Coconut Grove discussing men, clothes and parties, always on the lookout for fun wherever it might present itself.

My mother was devoted to glamour. This was not so much out of vanity as from a frightening belief – at least it frightens me – that a woman's worth is determined by physical beauty alone. Yet Violet had the potential to be far more than beautiful. Her vibrant, unstable spirit came packaged with some amazing talents: like the gift of making beautiful everything she laid her hand to. And her ability to see right inside people and know what was real and what was bullshit. In her late twenties, she shimmered with a passion for just being alive. It was as infectious as her laugh.

Given her devotion to the high life, it may seem curious that she had been briefly married to a truck driver; a marriage Nona disapproved of and which was swiftly annulled. When Stanley came along, following Violet's long line of what Nona and Rae looked on as 'boring young men', they celebrated his presence: 'He was interesting, awkward and shy,' says Rae, now in her nineties. 'He was easily the most charming man any of us had ever met. They looked great together as a couple.' And looks mattered a lot.

At the time, my father was no more than a hired musician in somebody else's band. But he was smart so his responsibilities had already grown far beyond piano playing. Now he wanted to get married.

Violet was not so sure. Then, on the morning of 25 July 1935, with no word of warning, she woke up and went out to find a minister. She and Stanley were married in the late afternoon, and Stanley went to work as usual in the evening. Neither her family nor his showed the

least interest in the event. No gifts were forthcoming – neither pots and pans nor money to wish them well. The two of them were on their own.

That night, when Stanley returned from work, he told his wife of several hours that he had just lost his job. It was the middle of the Great Depression. They set up house in a one-room apartment in Hollywood, for which they paid $25 a month. It had a pull-down Murphy bed and little else. There they struggled to survive on a mere 25 cents a day for food. Stanley hustled work with studios and at the Musicians' Union.

'We ate nothing but Boston Baked Beans,' my mother always said. (I have always assumed that is how she learned to cook the best baked beans I've ever tasted.) 'We ate them and ate them until we got so sick of them we couldn't swallow another mouthful.'

Stanley's mother, Stella, continually interfered in their lives. She would arrive uninvited in the early morning, to find them still in bed. When she discovered they slept in the nude, she was horrified. When she learned they took two showers a day, she raised hell. 'That's dangerous,' she warned. As for their sleeping with the windows open, together with all those unnecessary showers, it was bound to make her son catch his death of cold.

On one of Stella's endless surprise visits, she took Stanley on her lap, fastened his arms around her neck, and told my mother, 'Violet, you are taking my baby boy away from me.'

Stella was superstitious. She used to tell Stanley, 'You gotta protect yourself from misfortune. It lurks at every bend in the road.' 'Don't wear clothing to a funeral then wear it again,' she would say, 'else you'll bring misery upon yourself.' And never mention a disease. It might make you catch it . . .

Stella tried her best to teach Violet what was necessary for her son's protection. I don't think my mother even understood what she was on about. To Violet, life was simple: you have a dream? Make sure it's a *beautiful* dream, then follow it with all your might. Sooner or later it'll

happen. She had no proof of this, of course, but she cared little for 'proof'. My mother was never a woman to be dissuaded from her beliefs by mere facts.

She had been surprised to discover how many of Stella's weird notions had been passed on to Stanley. Some of her superstitions, such as 'to milk a cow being sent to market brings bad luck', meant nothing to him, since he had not been brought up on a ranch as Stella had. Others, which Violet found equally ridiculous, Stanley paid attention to: 'step on a crack, break your mother's back', was one. Or 'A yawn is a sign that danger is near' and even 'a horseshoe hung in the bedroom keeps nightmares away'.

When it came to hanging horseshoes on the wall of their one-room flat, Violet put her foot down. Nonetheless, my father performed daily rituals designed to keep misfortune at bay. Shoes had to face in a specific direction before he went to sleep. He ate the vegetables on his plate before touching his meat.

'Stanley was always seized by strange fears,' my mother said. 'Out of the blue, he would announce he'd been cursed so he would never do the things he wanted to do. He'd become overwhelmed by guilt for no reason. "I've got the guilts," he would say. "About what?" I'd say. "I don't know, I just feel it." Each time he left the apartment, he'd have to check three or four times to make sure he'd locked the door.'

While I was growing up, my parents frequently disagreed with each other. They were always highly vocal about it. But my father always treated my mother with kindness and respect even when, in the midst of one of her not infrequent hysterical outbursts, her actions were unpredictable and outrageous: climbing artificial palm trees in cocktail bars, preaching uninvited sermons or showering voluminous praise on strangers.

My mother was an enigma – not just to me, not just to Stanley, but to everyone who got close to her. To those who did not know her well, she could appear haughty or cold. A few of the guys in the band

believed she thought herself superior to them. It's true that she never turned on the 'ordinary guy' personality that so endeared Stanley to people. She was a woman who did not make close friends easily but the few she chose to befriend remained loyal to her all their lives. Even they could never fathom her. She found it hard to share with others what was going on inside her. I think this was mostly because much of the time she didn't know herself. At times she could seem a woman of great strength. Forceful in her opinions, she did not seem to care if they caused offence. Then, without warning, she would visibly shrink from an encounter with anything or anyone for no apparent reason.

Like my mother's behaviour, her feelings were unpredictable; not so much a response to what was happening around her, but the result of something going on deep inside her. Like a slumbering volcano, they could rise unbidden from somewhere so deep neither she nor any of us understood what was going on. She would leap into a rage with little or no provocation. She would shout at a saleswoman who didn't bring her what she had asked for, or spit fire at a policeman for accusing her of going through a red light. So intense were some of these outbursts that the poor offending policeman might end up apologising to her for having interfered with her journey. Just as unpredictably, her rage could turn to laughter or to tears.

I think my father worshipped the beauty of my mother's spirit. The letters he wrote her – many of which passed on to me at her death – are full of fumbling gentleness and sincere adoration. During the fifteen years of their marriage I never saw him treat her harshly. He looked on her as his *light*, his *compass*, his *home*, and he told her so.

'Stanley was the most tender person I have ever known,' my mother insisted. Years after they were divorced, she was shocked to learn that he had been violent to his second wife, Ann. This was not the Stanley she knew.

What surprised Violet most about Stanley was his lack of belief in himself. She never realised the extent of this until after they were married. His talent as a musician, composer and arranger was blatantly obvious. So was his innate vitality, his passion and his drive to succeed. 'Stanley was not only gifted; he was willing to withstand whatever difficulties presented themselves – including sleepless nights, illness and poverty – to make success happen,' she said. 'Yet, no matter how well he played piano, no matter how skilfully he composed, it was *never* good enough to satisfy him.'

Perhaps this is why he leaned so heavily on my mother, asking her to supply the faith in him which he could not find in himself.

Violet had many gifts of her own. Perhaps the greatest – or maybe it was only the one she made best use of – was her ability to recognise talent and draw it forth from anyone. When it came to helping Stanley, she marshalled all her love, imagination, practicality and devotion in the service of turning his dreams into realities.

And such dreams they were. Forget all those castles in the air: together they would build concert halls. He would lead the most outstanding jazz band of the century. It wouldn't only play in ballrooms, it would play Carnegie Hall and celebrated concert halls throughout Europe and America. He would write a new kind of music: music that would integrate the vitality of American jazz with twentieth-century classical. He loved Stravinsky, Ibert, Respighi, Bartok, Debussy, Ravel. He wanted to do what they had done early in the twentieth century, but for *now*. My mother not only dreamed his dreams, she held them in her heart, and took practical steps to make them happen. Money? They had none. She went out and bought a calendar bank which you had to slip a quarter into each morning to make the date change. They would soon be on their way. She knew it.

Violet was Stanley's impresario, his caretaker and his protector. She knew how to handle his 'night events'. Both before and after I was born, my father would wake from a dream, shouting and thrashing

about. She always straddled him, pinning his wrists to the bed until he calmed down. 'Stanley, it's all right. Everything is all right,' I used to hear her say. She never knew what caused these night terrors and they frightened her. 'I lay awake at night, afraid he might harm himself,' she said. 'Sometimes I was scared he would die. He was always so frightened that he would never amount to a hill of beans. I knew he would. We just had to keep going.'

And keep going they did. After all, they had each other and they shared the same dream. She scraped by while he looked for work.

After a couple of false starts, Stanley received the offer of a piano-playing job that seemed to answer all their prayers. Since the 1920s, Gus Arnheim had led a polished dance band. It had appeared at the Los Angeles Coconut Grove with well known singers like Bing Crosby. Now, in 1936, Arnheim wanted to get into jazz and he needed Stanley to help him. This was not only because Stanley was a skilled musician; Arnheim knew that he could draw on his knowledge of jazz, his connections with other jazz musicians and his expertise in arranging.

The Arnheim job meant, for the first time, that my parents would be going out on the road together, away from what Violet called 'cow country'. They would be moving into the big time – Chicago, St Louis, New York – dream cities they had only heard about. Fascinated by the scent of freedom, my parents followed it wherever it took them. They loved being on the road, from endless diners where they ate 'home-cooked' meals, to tacky tourist attractions in the middle of nowhere: 'Meet Paul Bunyan and his Big Ox Babe'. When at last they arrived in New York, they climbed the Statue of Liberty, racing to see who could get up her right arm first. They sailed to the top of the Empire State Building on the world's fastest elevator. They took the Staten Island ferry, planning their future while the wind tossed their hair. They renewed their vows to each other during that first trip East and refreshed their dreams.

Being on the road with Arnheim was by no means one long holiday. They had their first taste of what it feels like when, after weeks of one-nighters, you're so worn out you don't even know what's going on.

One morning in a hotel room in the Midwest, Stanley awakened crumpled up in pain. Violet told me she rang the room clerk: 'We need a house doctor. NOW!'

Fifteen minutes later a man arrived. He looked like a dwarf who'd spent his life under a giant toadstool. He poked around in Stanley's stomach, then announced, 'Mr Kenton, you have a mild case of appendicitis.'

'A *mild* case of appendicitis?' my mother shrieked. 'That means surgery, doesn't it?'

'Not necessarily,' the doctor told her, wiping sleep from his eyes and lowering the pitch of his voice so it sounded as reassuring as he could manage. 'I will leave you a bottle of medicine, Mr Kenton,' he said. Then, turning to her: 'Make sure he takes one tablespoon of this followed by a glass of water every four hours.'

By evening Stanley's pain had eased off enough that he was able to go to work, even though he still felt pretty sick. After the job that night, he went straight back to the hotel, climbed into bed and fell asleep. Two hours later, Violet woke up to the sound of him retching in the bathroom. She rushed to his side.

There he stood, stark naked, a bottle in one hand and a tablespoon stolen from the hotel coffee shop in the other. 'Urgh,' he said, a shudder passing over his body. 'This stuff is disgusting!'

She looked up to find the bottle of medicine, still standing unopened on the glass shelf above the washbasin. 'My God, Stanley, what have you swallowed?' she screamed, snatching the bottle from his hand.

He had been gulping down the white shoe polish she used to clean her two-toned spectator shoes. The two of them collapsed in laughter on the bathroom floor. 'We laughed so loud that the house detective came pounding on the door, threatening to throw us into the street if we didn't shut up,' said my father.

'This made us laugh even more,' my mother said. Twenty-four hours later, the bottle of medicine had disappeared and the pain with it.

Stanley stayed with Arnheim for a year. By all accounts it was a wonderful experience. By the time the band broke up in Los Angeles, my mother's belief in my father's future, coupled with the closeness that had developed between them, had brought Stanley to a place where even he was starting to believe he might be able to write the music of his dreams and convince people to listen to it.

'We decided to live on a little money we'd put away, plus whatever we could scrape together by playing the odd studio job,' my father explained. 'That way I'd be able to forget the idea of finding another job and look for a good teacher of composition.'

He found it in Charles Dalmores. 'Dalmores spoke eleven languages, was a virtuoso on French horn, piano and cello, and knew more than anyone I ever met about harmony and counterpoint,' said Stanley. Seventy years old, Dalmores became a father figure to him – someone he could worship and emulate. Thirty years later, whenever Stanley spoke of the months he spent studying with Dalmores, his eyes filled with tears and he would have to clear his throat.

In the next couple of years my father made good use of everything he learned from his mentor. In 1939, he began to compose. He worked on freelance film scoring and played for various bands. But by the autumn of 1940, he had become disenchanted with the cynicism of the Hollywood music scene. He hated what he described as the dog-eat-dog commercialism. 'The musicians I worked with didn't give a damn about music,' he said. 'What the hell, I figured. I guess there is nothing left for me to do except start my own band.'

'Do it,' Violet insisted. 'Do it now.'

He quit his job and began to write. Living on savings plus $18 a week unemployment, they had to go back to eating baked beans. They didn't care. Their excitement about the new band mounted by the day.

Then the bomb dropped. One morning, at the end of September in

1940, my father confessed that he had fallen in love with one of the 'most beautiful girls in the world' at Earl Carroll's on Sunset Boulevard, the Ziegfeld Follies of the West Coast, where my father had found work as a pianist and assistant conductor.

'I don't know what to do,' he said. The woman was almost six feet tall and dark haired – completely stunning. (My father showed me a photograph of her when I was ten years old.)

Ironically, he chose to confess his infidelity the very same day that Violet had her own announcement to make: 'Stanley, I'm pregnant.'

Years later, my mother confided, 'He wanted me to have an abortion. There was no way I was going to do that. I said to him, "You go your own way. Do whatever you want. I'm going to have this child."'

In the end Stanley did not go his own way. He turned his back for ever on the dark beauty. He and Violet moved back to Los Angeles, reaffirming their commitment to each other and to 'success' on three fronts: marriage, band and baby.

'It felt like we were starting all over again,' he said. 'We decided to go for broke and make it happen.'