I was outdoors, walking behind the bleachers of a sports stadium, and the top- and back-most row was level to the ground I stood on. The bleachers were filled, and as I walked along I met Barbra Streisand. She was sitting in the back row—she seemed to be directing a film there—and we came face to face. I spoke to her: “You have been very important to me,” I said. She answered by talking rapidly about something, I don’t remember what. Then she put her head down and fell asleep. A young woman came along and kissed her on the forehead. Barbra awoke, and they began to speak, excluding me from their conversation . . .

Then I awoke.

I

It wasn’t until I turned nineteen and had gone five thousand miles away from home, to spend my junior year of college at the University of London, that someone directly asked me the question that I had never dared ask myself before, so self-evident, or so elusive, seemed the answer:

“What is it exactly about Barbra Streisand that you love so much?” my friend Jenny asked me, as if the question were something we could profitably discuss in the way that we might, say, discuss Virginia Woolf, or Anton Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard (fig. 6).

Because she had theories about everything, I imagine that Jenny had one about why I loved Barbra Streisand—perhaps that “many men like Barbra Streisand because they are attracted to strong women.” She may even have said that men liked her (Jenny) for the same reasons, even though she also spent a lot of time feeling underappreciated and overlooked by men and by people in general (by all accounts, like Barbra herself).

I could see why. Jenny wasn’t easy to like. She talked incessantly, to
the point where if you wanted to respond to the things she said, you had to interrupt her. She had strong opinions on the most trivial of subjects (like whether it was better to visit Hampton Court on a cloudy or a sunny day), and she made sweeping generalizations about people and things, implying a knowledge of the world and a power of insight into human nature that, if they were founded on experience, would have been amazing in someone so relatively young. So I vacillated between thinking she was brilliant and thinking she was just crazy.

She seemed to have an almost tragic confidence in herself. She wore lots of makeup, she dyed her hair orange, and she overdressed for class, as if in costume, making her creativity and intelligence seem parodic instead of the real thing. Most of our classmates found her unbearable, as I did some of the time. (Likewise, the audience "didn't know whether to laugh or groan" at the sight of Barbara Streisand when she appeared
in a talent contest at the Lion, a New York City West Village gay bar, in May of 1960: “On top of her head she had bobby-pinned a Dynel hairpiece that looked, in the words of a friend, ‘like a cheese Danish.’ From under it her real hair fell stringily to her shoulders. She wore a short purple sheath and a jacket festooned with purple ostrich feathers, which the thrift shop clerk told her had once belonged to a countess. With feathers wisping around her shoulders and the audience ready to pounce, Barbara stood stock still under the spotlight, closed her eyes, and dramatically drew back her head as Patty [the bar’s pianist] tinkled out her introduction. Someone in the audience muttered ‘Oh, boy’” [Spada, Streisand 66]. And a few nights later, the gay comedian Michael Greer recalled, “she looked like she had dressed herself from a garage sale. As I remember she wore a tiny high-heeled shoe in her hair because she liked the rhinestones in it” [qtd. in Spada, Streisand 67].

But Jenny entertained me and made me feel special, like I was a particularly important friend. One day she invited me over to her room for tea for no other reason than that she just wanted to spend time with me. She played a Mozart piano concerto on her stereo, a cheap rickety thing that she’d had ever since she was five, she told me—she had inherited it from some relative or friend and she was always threatening to replace it but it kept on working, and so why get rid of it, she didn’t need the latest in stereo equipment in order to appreciate music; after all, she said, if the music’s really good, does it matter what kind of stereo equipment it’s playing on? I’d never thought of it that way—but before I could respond, she launched into a tirade about her classics professor, how she disliked him even though he was a genius, and I should read Juvenal and Heinrich von Kleist because, Jenny thought, I would like them, and she was writing a term paper about Juvenal. And then there was the whole complicated story of her friendship with Sally Ann, and how they fought all the time even though everyone thought they were best friends, and how hurt she was by Sally Ann, how angry Sally Ann made her, and how I should be careful of Sally Ann because she would pretend to be my friend but it would really only be because she was trying to use me to get back at Jenny. (Likewise, the columnist Liz Smith recalls how Barbra Streisand’s insecurities were revealed by her rambling, self-referential discourse: “At night we would sometimes go to her house for dinner. And later she would show us still pictures of herself from Funny Girl, which wasn’t released yet. She would ask me what I thought of each one. I knew she needed a more astute opinion than mine, and she would get exasperated when I’d say, ‘That one is okay, that’s nice,’ and on and on. It was too bizarre. It was all her. The idea that you are so fascinating that people would be happy to stay up until three in the
morning looking at pictures of yourself, seemed so strange to me; sort of like Norma Desmond'" [qtd. in Considine 139]. However, *Hello, Dolly!* producer and screenwriter Ernest Lehman [who also wrote the screenplay for *The Sound of Music*] thought differently of Barbra's behavior during this period: "Barbra wasn't full of herself; she didn't have an ego. I think just the opposite. If she were full of herself she wouldn't have been so concerned about everything being just right. She's never been a person who feels her own perfection. She was a very insecure person, doubting her own worth, especially interpersonally."... Doubtless this affection led Lehman to welcome—and to miss, on the rare occasions when they didn't come—the dozens of late-night telephone calls from Barbra during the filming. ... 'When she didn't call I'd think, Call and harass me, please!'" [Spada, *Streisand* 218–19])

The last I remember, Jenny was applying for jobs in banking (she majored in German literature), and I wondered why she wanted to work in business when she obviously had so many other, more artistic talents. Maybe she didn't have a family like I did and, so, needed to start supporting herself. Gradually I stopped spending time with her, partly, I think, because she reminded me of some former version of myself that I was trying to escape. Like Jenny, I had a knack for drawing a lot of negative attention to myself at home and at school when I was a kid. Everybody noticed me—because I had red hair; because I had a bald spot; because I had buck teeth; because my voice sounded sissy; because I was the only one in the class who got an A; because I was the only one in the class who couldn't hit the baseball; because I was the only boy in the class who had female friends. I wanted to be noticed, but I also wanted to be liked.

I don't remember anything of my conversation with Jenny about Barbra Streisand. All I know is that she asked the question.

II

Although I cannot precisely recall the first time I saw, heard, or started loving Barbra Streisand, I remember seeing the comedienne Marilyn Michaels impersonate her on *The Kopycats*, a comedy show that aired on TV briefly in 1972. Now I forget how the sketch ran, but it must have involved someone making a list of all the things that come a dime a dozen—generic things; things that come in great quantities; everyday, ordinary things (something like, "there's more than 1 city named Athens, 3 persons in the Holy Trinity, 57 varieties of Heinz ketchup, 88 keys on the piano, 101 reasons why the chicken crossed the road"; I might have added, "5 bossy older siblings, and 60 boring first cousins")—because it ended, by contrast, with Marilyn Michaels done up as Barbra
Streisand, sitting at a dressing room mirror, wearing a big floppy hat with feathers, turning to the camera and saying, "...but there's only one Barbra Streisand!"

This wouldn't have been the first time I'd heard her name or seen her face. My parents owned a couple of her early records from the mid-sixties, including The Second Barbra Streisand Album (the cover photo of Barbra made me uncomfortable because she had bare shoulders, suggesting that she'd been photographed topless, and she gave you a knowing look that said, "I know what you're thinking ...") and My Name is Barbra, Two. And I have a dim memory (which may actually be a composite of two separate incidents) of being in an arcade with my siblings in Ocean City, New Jersey some time during the early seventies, and while they played ping pong or pinball, I turned over the Broadway cast album of Funny Girl (the photograph of Barbra on the back, singing, made her look incredibly odd with her large, misshapen mouth and her Chinese eyes) and strained to hear the music coming faintly out of the speakers. (But what arcade had a stereo for anyone to use, and record albums that anyone could pick up and handle?)

I remember being drawn to Barbra Streisand's voice and acting talents when Funny Girl (1968) was shown on TV in the early seventies. Actually, I was drifting in and out of the room during the movie, but several other people in my family were watching it intently (it might have been my mother and a couple of my older sisters, probably Mary Jo and Suzanne, and maybe some other adult who was not a member of my immediate family—my mom's sister Rita?—perhaps, because Aunt Rita has always been a big Barbra Streisand fan). Partly I was compelled by the fact that here was a group of women doing something together and I wanted to be a part of the group (if it had been a group of men watching TV—you can imagine that scene—you can imagine that scene—my reaction would have been just the opposite: get me out of here!), but then at a certain point something in the movie itself captured my attention and I forgot about the people watching it with me and I became transfixed by what was going on in the movie. I remember someone saying that this was a movie about the life of Fanny Brice, and from the look of it (dirty old city buildings, funny old clothes) and because I didn't know who Fanny Brice was ("she sang in the Ziegfeld Follies," someone said, "she was a comedienne"), I wasn't all that interested at first. But then there was this young woman (Fanny/Barbra) and she was wearing a brown dress with what looked like little brown Christmas tree balls all around the chest and shoulders, and she had her brown hair wrapped up in a pretty, shiny bouffant with a braid running around the middle (which made me want to touch it), and she had alluring Egyptian eyes, and everyone who was watching the movie kept de-
bating whether or not she was pretty and they said one moment she was and the next she wasn’t (someone called her “homely,” a word I’d never heard before, but I immediately understood that it meant not pretty) but they all agreed that she had incredible talent. And she was talking to a dark-eyed man dressed in a tuxedo (Nick Arnstein/Omar Sharif) on a city sidewalk in front of a short flight of stairs—it must have been a poor part of town because I had seen front stoops like that when we would drive through downtown Reading. And it was nighttime and they had just come from a party, and it was clear that this was one of the most exciting moments of her entire life because here she was, walking and talking with this dark, handsome man. But it was also sad because for some reason he was going away and she might never see him again, and so no sooner had her dream come true than it was being snatched away. And then she began to sing a song—a beautiful, sad song about how people need each other and how lucky you are if you need someone, and it was so sad because she needed him and he was leaving and she was singing about how lucky she was and I wondered, how could you be lucky when your heart is breaking? Wouldn’t it be better to love someone and to have them love you in return? Didn’t needing someone mean that you didn’t have the thing you wanted? And so how could you be lucky not to have what you wanted? But as the song continued and the camera circled around her as she stood alone on the stairs, leaning against the railing, her head thrown back, her eyes closed, accentuating her exotic, heavy eye makeup, her hands twitching in front of her, lost in the tender song she was singing, I felt as taken by her as he did when he finally said: “Fanny, you’re an enchanting girl. I wish I could get to know you better.”

“So give me six good reasons why not,” she says.

“Just one,” he says—he has to catch a train for Kentucky in the morning, and then maybe on to Europe or the coast after that—“I never have definite plans. They make me feel too tied down,” he tells her as her heart is breaking. She’s heard it all before—men letting her down for one reason or another. He kisses her good-bye and leaves.

Now in a high-angle long shot from across the street, we see her drift along the empty sidewalk like a lonely kid with too much time on her hands. Her arms outstretched as if she were balancing a tight rope, she tiptoes along the edge of the sidewalk, begins to hum the melody of the song she had been singing a few moments ago (“People”), and restlessly drops her arms down at her sides. Next, she wanders over toward the front stoop, listlessly running her hands over the railing, singing in the shadows, her head turned away from the camera (which, all the while, has been slowly approaching her, descending from above). She walks toward a lamppost, singing, still half in shadow. Coming into the
light, she grips the lamppost and sings, her song rising to its dramatic peak, the camera pulling in for a closeup, "But first, be a person who needs people!" and she tilts her head forward on the word "needs," then throws it back with abandon on the word "people." One moment she sings with full-chested gusto, then suddenly she speaks the words of the song with a quiet laugh, and then again she sings in her purest head tones. Once she has stopped singing, she looks pensive for a few seconds, still enveloped in the emotion of the song, but then catches herself, realizes with a touch of embarrassment where she is and what she has been doing (singing her heart out on a deserted city sidewalk), and rushes back to the party around the corner at her mother's saloon.

By this time I knew that no matter how miserable her life was, it was better to be her—better to look like that and talk like that and walk like that and sing like that—better to be her than anyone else in the world. For even though a part of her went with him when he left, something remained that no one could take away from her: she had an inner life. And it was only after he'd gone that her inner life came fully out into the open. It was only after he went away that the movie turned its full attention to her, and in that moment she became sensational! At that moment, it didn't matter what she looked like on the outside, didn't matter whether she was pretty or not, didn't matter what people said about her. All that mattered was, all of this was going on inside of her. In that moment, she made it supremely okay to be cast out. Because of her, being rejected acquired beauty and dignity. She became someone to turn to, someone to emulate.

But for some reason I didn't stay to watch the rest of the movie. I kept wandering in and out of the room until I was, again, drawn to the television set as she ran down a corridor with a big bouquet of yellow roses in her arms and a suitcase in each hand. She was singing about how she was determined to have him after all and no one was going to stand in her way—the music was catchy and pulsating—and then there was a train belching smoke as it wound around the side of a mountain and the camera descended from high above, all the way down to a window of the train, and there she was, inside the train, singing about how "nobody is gonna rain on my parade," and I thought it was funny that there was no real parade and no rain—it was all about her feelings and she was as exciting as a parade, as all-encompassing as a rainstorm. And then suddenly the music stops and a loud, honking horn blows, and you see a light-blue tug boat chugging its way across New York Harbor in front of the Statue of Liberty, and although you can barely see her from this distance, standing at the prow of the tug boat, the sound of her voice fills the harbor and sky. And now the camera flies inexorably toward
her, closer and closer, until she belts out the last, breathtaking notes: “Nobody, no nobody is gonna rain on my parade!”

What struck me about this scene was, first, its resemblance to the opening sequence in The Sound of Music, where the camera zooms in from far away to a close-up of Julie Andrews singing on top of a mountain. Then, it was the way Barbra Streisand sang those final words. Disobeying all the rules of pronunciation, she drew out the first “no” in “nobody” and then took a breath before singing “body”; and she sang all seven syllables of “gonna rain on my parade” on the same note rather than following the notes of the melody as they were meant to be sung—as if, instead of singing a song, she were hammering a nail or firing a machine gun: pow pow pow pow pow pow pow! The music was jazzy, unlike the lilting, noble songs of Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Barbra Streisand’s singing was unpredictable and unorthodox, unlike the clean, clear, often perky, always proper singing style of Julie Andrews.

The movie that permanently sealed my love for Barbra Streisand, however, was not Funny Girl, the film that made her a legend and won her an Academy Award, but Hello, Dolly!, one of Barbra’s least regarded films, even among her most ardent fans. I had seen it as a child when it was first released in December of 1969, but I don’t recall much of that first viewing (except: I couldn’t take my eyes off of Barbra Streisand’s hair—an elaborate, shiny, thick roll of [fake] red hair, meant to evoke an 1890s topknot, surrounding her head like a halo and bursting, like a surprise, with feathers of green and gold). By the time it premiered on television in the early seventies, however, I was primed for fully self-conscious enjoyment. I already knew every note of the original Broadway cast album of Hello, Dolly! starring Carol Channing, and for several years until I saw the film version on TV, it was my favorite album (along with the soundtrack to The Sound of Music). I couldn’t wait to see and hear the Broadway show brought to life on screen—for so I experienced the movies as more real than “real life.”

At first, I was disappointed by Barbra Streisand’s portrayal of Dolly Levi because it was so startlingly different from Carol Channing’s. In the first number on the Broadway cast album, “I Put My Hand In,” Dolly introduces herself in song: “I have always been a woman who arranges things.” The music had a rattling, rousing, tin-can, hurdy-gurdy feel to it, and Carol Channing squawked out the notes in her endearing, alternately babyish, baritone voice. But in the movie, Barbra Streisand sang those same words in a smokey, sultry, creamy voice; she quivered on the second syllable of “always” and of “woman” and on the word “things,” as if those particular words contained untold richness. Carol
Channing invested the lyrics with the personality of a dottering old lady, bird-brained but warm-hearted, feeding her mangy old cat; Barbra Streisand's rendering of them, however, evoked the image of a seductive, buxom young woman lounging by herself some late afternoon on a cushiony pink-and-yellow-striped sofa in the swank parlor of an elegant French chateau, with thick satin drapes hanging at the floor-to-ceiling windows and expensive flowers bursting from proceline vases on gilt and marble tabletops—all wrong for the character of Dolly Levi, the irrepressible, middle-aged matchmaker of good ol' New York! (Barbra sounded here the way she looked in the film: “... her look was designed by Dan Striepeke, head of the Fox makeup department. Striepeke recalls, 'The whole thing that we were trying to create between Ernie Lehman, [director] Gene Kelly, and myself was a John Singer Sargent type of look, the way he painted his ladies of that era. They were very milk white...'” [Riese 271]) But then Barbra launches into a song written expressly for the film and for her, “Just Leave Everything to Me,” a fast-talking, hard-driving, syncopated list of all the things Dolly can get for you: a husband or wife, girlfriend or boyfriend, or how about a babysitter, couturier, masseur, sex therapist, plastic surgeon, architect, animal breeder, or French teacher? And that's just naming a few. Here was the Barbra I knew from Funny Girl—urban, ironic, outspoken, down to earth, a real New Yorker (the shift in tone from her svelte introduction to her staccato song was a jarring one, although it was clear she had a daringly broad range), and quick as a boxer—but still, as different as could be from Carol Channing.

The moment that got me hooked on the film version of Hello, Dolly! played another twist on the original Broadway cast recording. Early in the film, Dolly travels from New York City to Yonkers to do some business with Horace Vandergelder, the man she wants to marry. Singing “Put On Your Sunday Clothes,” she then escorts Vandergelder's niece, Ermengarde, to the Yonkers train station to catch a train back to New York, where she will chaperon Ermengarde for the day. Dolly, Ermengarde, and Ermengarde's boyfriend Ambrose come out onto the second-story porch of Vandergelder's hay and feed store, descend the stairs leading from the porch to the sidewalk, take another two steps from the sidewalk to the street, and then join a crowd of people dancing along the brick pavement, all heading toward the station. On the Broadway cast album, Dolly and chorus sing, “there's no blue Monday in your Sunday clothes!” But in the movie, Dolly and friends don't just sing that line, they sell it: “There's no blue Monday in your Sunday—/No Monday in your Sunday—/No! Monday! in your Sunday clothes!” It was exactly at this moment that I let out a laugh. It wasn't the kind of laugh you laugh
when someone tells a joke. It was a quieter, more interior laugh, the kind you laugh when all at once you feel complete surprise and exquisite joy. A laugh your heart makes. From then on, whatever differences there were between the Broadway version and the movie version of *Hello, Dolly!*, a big part of the thrill for me of watching the movie was noticing and responding to those differences, always with the certainty that, no matter how unusual, whatever Barbra Streisand did was wonderful—because difference itself was wonderful! And it wasn’t until *Hello, Dolly!* that I began to grasp just how different Barbra Streisand really was.

The scene that impressed me most of all was the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant scene at the climax of the film, where, after an absence of several years, Dolly is greeted with open arms by her friends, the maître d’s, chefs, and waiters. From what I could tell by the photographs on the cast album and in the souvenir booklet my parents bought when they saw *Hello, Dolly!* on Broadway in 1964, the set of the Harmonia Gardens in the Broadway production was good-looking enough: a large, central arch with lights around it (giving a carnival atmosphere to the place, a bit like the Moulin Rouge), a couple of swank booths on either side, and a straight and narrow central staircase at the top of which was a narrow doorway hung with drapes. On the back of the album there was a picture of Carol Channing, her face beaming as she comes down the stairs, her right hand on the railing, her left extended as if expecting it to be kissed, wearing a red dress, and with red feathers in her hair. But in the film, the Harmonia Gardens was more than just another setting—it was a whole world unto itself, a Beaux Arts dream palace so vast, so intricately designed, and so elaborately decorated that, like the old Penn Station or the White City of the 1892 Chicago World’s Fair, like the Paris Opera or the second-century Baths of Caracalla, you couldn’t take it all in at a glance (fig. 7).² When Vandergelder’s employees, Cornelius and Barnaby, arrive at the restaurant with their dates, Irene and Minne, like country bumpkins they stand atop the grand stairway all agog over what they see down below: a waiter pushes a food-laden cart along the red-carpeted runway clear across the dance floor on the other side of the restaurant; dignified men and women promenade along the runway and up and down the central staircase; waiters pass through the human traffic holding silver-domed trays aloft on one arm; and crowds of beautifully dressed people sit at tables and mill around the perimeter of the dance floor, where dancing couples whirl around and around the circular space, the music bobbing them along on its friendly current. This was no ordinary interior—in fact, it didn’t even feel like an interior. Inside and outside had been gloriously confounded, so that standing at the top of the stairway of the Harmonia Gardens, you felt as if you were breath-
ing the dizzy air on top of a mountain, looking down and all around at the peaceful, shining valley below.

It's true, there were plenty of differences between the Harmonia Gardens scene in the Broadway show and the one in the film that took some getting used to (figs. 8 and 9). For one thing, when Barbra's Dolly finally arrives, she's dressed in gold, while Carol Channing famously wore red: "[The film's costume designer Irene] Scharaff had designed a startling red gown. Michael Stewart, the librettist of the Broadway show, asserted that Dolly's scarlet gown was symbolic of life returning to her. Photographs of Channing wearing the plush, vivid, figure-molding crimson gown had proliferated the media, and she had sung the title song in costume on several television variety specials. Streisand refused to wear a gown of that color and fought onerous battles with Sharaff and Lehman over the design. One day she refused to leave her dressing room unless it was agreed that a new design in gold would be forthcoming. Sharaff
compromised and designed a richly beaded topaz dress that pleased Streisand" (Edwards 261). Once I got used to Barbra’s gown of gold, the question became, Is there a pattern in it, or is it just solid gold? For there were times when you could see starbursts within the gold material, and so I wondered how intricate and extensive they were.

The other big problem was the staircase. In the film, it was at least twice as wide as it was on Broadway, with low risers and deep treads making one’s movement up or down the stairs stately and ceremonial (which would have been fine, except that “stately” and “ceremonial” were not normally the words that would best describe Dolly or the raucous song she and the restaurant staff sing when she arrives). The Broadway staircase had handrailings, just like the railing we had on our staircase at home, but the movie staircase had thick, low, marble, scroll-work balustrades that were only for show, not for holding onto as you came down the stairs. On Broadway, Dolly came down the stairs holding the railing; in the movie, she came down a rather lonely figure, her arms hung down at her sides, not touching anything or anyone. Whereas in the Broadway production the staircase was a discreet thing jutting out from a second-story doorway (not unlike the little flight of stairs they prop up against the door to an airplane to let the passengers out), the imperial staircase in the film sat like a great piece of sculpture.
in the middle of a vast open space, fully but ambiguously embedded into the surrounding architecture. And the top and bottom of the stairs that Dolly descends in the film weren’t even the real top and bottom; the “top” of the staircase was, in fact, only a large landing, at which point the staircase bifurcates into two staircases going further up in opposite directions (like the staircase in the entrance foyer of the von Trapp mansion); and the “bottom” of the stairs was, in fact, only another landing—actually, a runway around the perimeter of the dance floor—from which the staircase continues six more steps until it reaches the dance floor. (I didn’t realize all of this the first time I saw Hello, Dolly! on TV; it took several years of looking at movie stills wherever I could find them and several showings of the movie on TV for me to piece it together.)

I found the architecture of the movie staircase somewhat disturbing because the whole purpose, it seemed to me, of having Dolly come down a flight of stairs at the climax of the film was to make the point that whereas before she had been away, now she was unequivocally home. But the set design of the film belied that message by blurring the “before” and “after” of Dolly’s return. Yes, Dolly comes down the staircase in the film, but she only enters it midway (at the landing), and then she
doesn't come down all the way—she only comes down as far as the runway, not all the way down to the dance floor. So in a sense, it was as if she hadn't really come home again. Or at least, she hadn't necessarily come home to stay. When she and the waiters sing "Dolly will never go away—/Dolly will never go away—/Dolly will never go away again!," (and then Louis Armstrong shouts out, "One more time!") and they do it again, the subtle contradiction between the insistent message of the song and the excessively complicated architecture of the restaurant made me question, if only half-consciously, the sincerity of the film.

Still another problem was that in the film, Dolly doesn't really make an entrance at the Harmonia Gardens so much as an appearance. For several minutes, the restaurant staff dance for joy in anticipation of her arrival. But then at a certain point they realize that she has been standing there quietly at the top of the stairs for we don't know how long, waiting for everyone to notice that she has come—the camera slowly pans up the stairs, then up her body, then cuts to a closeup of her face as she looks in silent amazement at her friends below. Total silence reigns for a second or two. Then she takes her first step down the stairs and the orchestra beats out the brassy introduction to the "Hello, Dolly!" number. This was okay, but I thought it would have been better if Barbra had made a more emphatic, thrusting entrance—if she had flung open a pair of curtains, say, or if maybe a spotlight had suddenly shone on a door, and there was a sizzling drum roll, and she had suddenly, theatrically burst open the door! But there were no curtains here and no door for her to come through. Just vast, untended, rather unframed space.

But the more I thought about the set of the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant, the more its complexity and ambiguity came to fascinate me. What it didn't give me at first glance I tried to figure out by looking more closely, and what I couldn't figure out on close inspection I made up for myself in my imagination. One day while I was just bouncing the basketball on the driveway and shooting baskets, feeling, as I often did, a little lonely and a little bored, I started thinking seriously about the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant. I tried to figure out how it was layed out: where, for example, did the staircase go, exactly, once it split in two and went up in opposite directions? Was there another circular runway above parallel to the one we see in the film, I wondered? And if so, what was holding that runway up? Pillars of some kind? What would those pillars look like? Would they be thick or slender? How many of them would there be? (The youngest of six children, I was always thinking in one way or another about sets of things and the fate of any individual member of the set.) Where would they be placed? Would there be arches connecting them, like an arcade (like the gallery of arches in the von Trapp
foyer)? Or not? Which would be better, right angles or curves? (Curves, definitely.) What about the runway down below: from how many places could you enter the dance floor from the runway? Would you have to walk down a short flight of steps to get onto the dance floor? Yes, because, remember, the central staircase continues six more steps from the runway down to the dance floor, so it would have to be like that all around the perimeter of the dance floor. Would there be railings on either side of these tiny flights of stairs? And what would they look like? Would they be kin to the thick, marble balustrades on either side of the main staircase, or should they be a different species altogether? (Was I the offspring of my parents in the same way that my older siblings were their offspring, or was I some kind of different species altogether?) Should I aim for variety or consistency? (Hard to say.) Or could I have both? And what would the dance floor look like? Should it be made of marble? Or perhaps tile? If it was made of tile, what kinds of patterns would the tile make? What if the floor was a mosaic?! Wow! A dance floor made out of thousands and thousands of little pieces of colored glass, like a stained glass window—imagine, a stained glass window on the floor! And maybe the dance floor could light up, so that at night it would blaze with color and light, like Lite Brite! Imagine hundreds of couples dancing around the dance floor while underneath their feet, rays of colored light flickered, illuminating their feet and the lovely steps they made!

And then what about the red carpet? It shouldn't be just an ordinary red rug—no, it should be richer and more full-bodied and more expensive than that: I decided that if you looked very closely, you could see, woven all over into the red pile of the carpet, a precious second fabric, a blood-red embroidery, an arabesque of deeper red.

III

One afternoon not long after I'd seen Hello, Dolly! for the first time on TV, my mom and I were sitting together in the living room—she was doing needlepoint, I'm not sure what I was doing—and she asked me, "Why do you love that movie," meaning Hello, Dolly!, "so much?"

I was flattered by the question because rarely, it seemed, was anyone ever curious about the things I took most seriously. Despite the hesitant note in my mother's voice—as if she were afraid to hear the whole Gothic truth about why I loved Hello, Dolly!—I paused, and thought for a moment. Scenes from the movie passed through my mind. It occurred to me that there was always something else going on in the background. Early in the film, for example, Dolly stands in front of Horace Vandergelder's hay and feed store in Yonkers, watching his buggy dis-
appear down the road. Before her stretches a tableau of late-nineteenth-century, sun-dappled suburban life: a dalmatian lies contentedly on the summer grass while a man gently prods him with a stick; three boys play with a hoop; a man stands talking to a child; a couple of boys ride by on a bicycle built for two, ringing its bell, ding-a-ling! ding-a-ling!; a man and a woman stroll across the lawn, the woman holding a parasol; a horse and buggy trots past the store; a girl walks by, also carrying a parasol; a sailboat glides quietly by on the Hudson River. All of this is going on as Dolly sings about her plan to "gently lead [Horace] where fortune can find him"—that is, to make him marry her. Every scene in Hello, Dolly!, it seemed, overflowed with riches like these.

"I love Hello, Dolly! because it's spectacular," I answered my mother. "I love the sets, and all the crowd scenes. I love the restaurant scene. I wish life was like that. I wish I could have lived back then, in New York City in the 1890s."

Not without respect for what I had just said, my mother responded, "You know, I read a great book recently called The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible!, and she proceeded to tell me how New York City was never the way they show it in Hello, Dolly!—how there were pigs and horse manure in the streets, and women would have had it all over their clothes, their long dresses dragging in it, and there would have been no singing and dancing of course, not like in the movie, and there were no toilets. Can you imagine Dolly wearing that gold dress, with feathers in her hair, and no toilets?!

In The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible! (1974), Otto L. Bettmann tries to tear down the myth of a golden past as a way of arguing that the present—the early 1970s—is better than commonly admitted:

I have always felt that our times have overrated and unduly overplayed the fun aspects of the past. What we have forgotten are the hunger of the unemployed, crime, corruption, the despair of the aged, the insane and the crippled. The world now gone was in no way spared the problems we consider horrendously our own, such as pollution, addiction, urban plight or educational turmoil. In most of our nostalgia books, such crises are ignored, and the period's dirty business is swept under the carpet of oblivion. What emerges is a glowing picture of the past, of blue-skied meadows where children play and millionaires sip tea. . . . we have to revise the idealized picture of the past and turn the spotlight on its grimmer aspects. This more realistic approach will show us Gay Nineties man (man in the street, not in the boardroom), as one to be pitied rather than envied. He could but dream of the Utopian miracles that have become part of our everyday life. Compared with him we are lucky—even if dire premonitions darken our days and we find much to bemoan in our society. Proceeding
from such convictions, this may be called a missionary book, a modest personal attempt to redeem our times from the aspersions cast upon them by nostalgic comparisons. (xii–xiii)

“But I guess Hello, Dolly! is a wonderful fantasy world for you,” Mom added. She was right. Once I started trying to figure out scenes from Hello, Dolly! and other movies for myself, I was amazed at how the time flew by on the basketball court or up in my bedroom or out in the schoolyard. I would go outside to shoot baskets with plenty of afternoon light still in the sky, and the next thing I knew the sky was dark and Mom was calling me in to dinner.

But fantasy set me on the road to a new kind of reality. For in Hello, Dolly! I had found something to occupy my mind, not just my imagination. Soon I became preoccupied with the difference between the Broadway stage versions and the Hollywood film versions of several musicals, Hello, Dolly! chief among them, as well as with the supposed inferiority of the latter, which I couldn’t assent to. I started picking up books on the subject at Waldenbooks in our local mall (around the same time, I discovered a book of photographs of young naked men called Les Hommes, and I thought that “Les Hommes” was a guy named Les, as in “short for Lester,” but then I couldn’t figure out which of the — incredibl beyond words — men in the photographs was Les).

I bought Barbra: The First Decade (1974) by James Spada (as Nick Pul­lia has described it, “for many fans . . . the see-Dick-run of Streisand’s career” [34]), an oversized book with lots of pictures, snippets of reviews, and background information about all of Barbra’s theatrical performances, records, TV appearances, and movies. There I discovered, to my disappointment, that not all critics spoke highly of Hello, Dolly! Spada quotes, for example, Pauline Kael’s review in the New Yorker: “the songs are dismal affairs, with lyrics that make one’s teeth ache, and the smirky dialogue might pass for wit among not too bright children. . . . The movie is full of that fake, mechanical exhilaration of big Broadway shows—the gut-busting, muscle-straining dance that is meant to wow you. This dancing, like the choral singing, is asexual and unromantic. . . .” (173). Kael’s comments about the set of the Harmonia Gardens, which Spada does not quote, are even more vicious:

[T]he interior of the Harmonia Gardens is a gratuitously, vulgarly opulent set in beer-barrel rococo—full of upholstery and statues and fountains and chandeliers, like a storeroom of all the garbage left over from the Alice Faye-Don Ameche musicals. This set, redolent of every bad operetta ever written, makes all the action in it look unnecessarily ugly—and the director, Gene Kelly, and the choreographer, Michael Kidd, perhaps in-
spired by the set, have staged in it their most tasteless "show-stopping" dance. There were big, terrible production numbers in thirties movies, too, but they had redeeming qualities—a grandiose, crazy frivolity . . . and sometimes, as with Busby Berkeley's ambitious, strange ideas, a native American eccentric's invented form of surrealism, as perplexing in its way as the Watts Towers. It's apparent why Kelly and Kidd decided to avoid trick camera effects and the bird's-eye views that infatuated the thirties choreographers, and stay within the giant-stage concept, but the dancing itself needs some freedom and folly. The excesses of the thirties choreographers were naive and funny (even at the time); the excess here is of anxiety and strain, and it's rather painful. (Kael, "Keep Going" 57)

Further, in a Mad magazine lampoon of Barbra that Spada reprints, one cartoon actor on the Dolly set says to another, "Isn't this 'Hello, Bubby' set corny and old-fashioned?" The other actor replies, "That's nothing! Wait'll you hear the score!" (187; bold face emphasis in the original). And Spada reprints a passage from Vincent Canby's New York Times review: "Miss Streisand's obvious youth and real sexuality obliterated any sense of nostalgia in the 'Hello, Dolly!' number and add a curious ambiguity to other aspects of the role, including her speeches directed to Mr. Levi, her late husband. (I had the odd feeling that she must have been married to him at the age of 8 and lost him at 10.)" (173) Tellingly, Canby begins his review (in a passage that Spada omits), "this may be the most superfluous film review ever written, with the possible exceptions of the notices for 'The Sound of Music.' . . ."

Browsing other books about movie musicals, I discovered a wall of critical opinion that said that, starting in the late 1950s, musical films had been suffering from overproduction; impossible pressure to succeed financially; the misguided casting of bankable stars in their central roles instead of the performers most suited for those roles (the casting of Barbra Streisand as Dolly Levi was always mentioned as the prime example of this sin); an undue reverence for the Broadway originals that stifled the right kind of creative adaptation to the screen; and the introduction of new widescreen processes that, ironically, seemed antithetical to the proper staging and filming of musical numbers (Sennett 317). I remember that one critic titled his chapter on musicals from the sixties and seventies "Overweight and Undernourished," and there, underneath the title, was a still from Hello, Dolly! (The consensus remains the same: at a June 1996 gathering of musical film actresses to raise money for the restoration of classic film musicals, the common wisdom was that "the downfall of the musical was signaled by such box-office disappointments as 'Hello, Dolly!' [1969], 'At Long Last Love' [1975] and 'A Chorus Line' [1985]" [Weinraub 16].)
My mom and I would occasionally talk about the relative merits of Hollywood and Broadway musical productions. Mom thought the movie version of *Hello, Dolly!* was okay but not the greatest. She would often say how she liked Barbra Streisand but really wished that Carol Channing had repeated her stage performance as Dolly Levi on screen. “They always make a mistake when they try to get somebody big to star in the movie, and they do it to make a buck. The same thing happened with Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady.* Now you know I love Audrey Hepburn, but Julie Andrews was so good in that part on stage. Your father still says that was the best night he ever spent in the theater. You came out of that show, and honestly, Pat, you just knew that every song was going to be a hit, and you were just humming the songs! They had to dub Audrey Hepburn’s singing voice in the movie, and Julie Andrews has such a beautiful voice. Don’t misunderstand me, it’s not that I don’t like Barbra Streisand, you know I do. Now, I thought Julie Andrews was much better in the movie version of *The Sound of Music* than Mary Martin would have been—Mary Martin did it on stage—so I guess sometimes they do make the right choice when they make the movie version.”

One time my mom and I almost got into a fight over the issue of Hollywood versus Broadway. Soon after I first saw *Funny Girl* on TV, Mom took me to the mall to buy the soundtrack album. Once we got to the record store, however, she somehow persuaded me that we should get the *Funny Girl* Broadway cast album instead of the soundtrack. “Broadway orchestras are so much more intimate than movie orchestras,” Mom said, “because Broadway theaters are quite small. You’d be surprised how small they are, Patrick. I love the feel of a Broadway orchestra. I think you’ll be much happier with the Broadway cast album of *Funny Girl.* It’s the same music, it’s just a much better sound.” I took her advice, but when I got home and listened to the thing, I was horrified: it wasn’t what I had experienced in seeing the film at all! There were songs I didn’t even recognize that they had cut from the film, and on the songs that they kept for the film, Barbra’s voice sounded so different—younger, more raw, less pretty, grittier. *Ugh!* I hated it! I wanted to relive what I experienced from seeing the movie; I wanted to feel the exact same tension and excitement when Fanny sings “Don’t Rain On My Parade,” and I wanted to feel the exact same pang in my heart when she sings “People.” I *had* to have the soundtrack album, that’s all there was to it. I made my mom rush me back to the mall the first thing in the morning to buy the soundtrack, and as soon as we got home I raced upstairs to my room and listened to it over and over and looked at the pictures on the album jacket and read the liner notes (“A member of the crew told a friend: ‘When she did *People* for the first time, I cried. But she came out
Love Barbra

of the booth and was upset. The phrasing was off and she wanted something else from the orchestra. She, [musical director Herbert] Ross and [conductor Walter] Scharf worked for hours, did it again, and I couldn’t tell the difference. But they did it twelve more times and I could tell the difference between 1 and 14. Unbelievable!” [Brodsky]), and tried to recreate the whole experience of the film in my head.

IV

For as long as I can remember, my obsession with Barbra Streisand was more or less tolerated within my family. Typically, I would be playing by myself in the basement or up in my room when I would hear my name shouted—I recall my mother’s voice—in a panic: “Patrick! Come here, and hurry up!” I would race to the den where we had the television to see the last ten seconds of an advertisement for the TV premier of one of Barbra’s films: “... you won’t want to miss one spectacular minute of the incomparable Barbra Streisand as the irrepressible, chain-smoking coed Daisy Gamble in the CBS Sunday Night Movie, On a Clear Day You Can See Forever, directed by Vincente Minnelli ...” I was riveted, and counted the days and hours until Sunday night when I would feast my eyes for three luxurious hours on Barbra Streisand. I would always want my mom to watch it with me. At first she would demur, saying that she had some other things to do, she had the wash to fold, and it was such a long movie, tomorrow was a busy day for her. But then, just as the movie was starting, she would come into the den and sit next to me on the sofa, and we would watch the whole thing together, and laugh at all of Barbra’s jokes, and then I would race to the kitchen during the commercials to get bowls of chocolate ice cream and orange sherbet mixed, which was one of our favorites.

When I went to see What’s Up Doc? (1972), I sat between my mom and dad. During the opening credits, Barbra sings Cole Porter’s “You’re the Top.” When she got to the line, “you’re a melody from a symphony by Strauss,” and started to sing out as the music got louder and the full orchestra chimed in on the word “Strauss,” my mom leaned over to me and whispered in my ear with a laugh, “Here she goes!”

Just about everyone in our town who knew my family also knew that I loved Barbra Streisand. For a little while, my sister Sue had a boyfriend named Paulie who was also a Barbra Streisand fan (!), and whenever he would come over to our house somehow the subject of Barbra Streisand would come up, and pretty soon he and I would be trading stories. And when his younger sister, Sandy, graduated from high school, she and all the graduating seniors published their “last wills and testaments” in the
school newspaper, and she willed me all of her Barbra Streisand albums. It was an especially remarkable thing for her to have done because most seniors willed things to other members of the senior class or at least to underclassmen, but I was still in seventh or eighth grade at the time, so no one would even have heard of me. All they would have known about me was that I was a Horrigan and that I liked Barbra Streisand.

Not long after I discovered Barbra Streisand, my parents went away on a three-week European vacation, and my Aunt Pauline baby-sat for us (actually, she was my Grandfather Ermentrout's sister, so she was more like a grandmother than an aunt). One night Mary Jo and I were up in my room listening to the soundtrack of *Hello, Dolly!* and for some reason I started lip-synching—and not just to the words but also the instrumentation. Mary Jo almost died laughing and called for Aunt Pauline to come up and see what I was doing. Aunt Pauline thought it was funny too, and pretty soon I was doing it for everybody in the house. As soon as my mom and dad walked through the door upon their return, Mary Jo and Aunt Pauline ushered them into the living room and said, “wait till you see what Patrick can do! Go ahead, Pat, show them!” And I proceeded to lip-synch “Before the Parade Passes By,” to the point where I was flat on my back on the living room floor, mouthing Barbra’s record-breaking last note (“... passes byyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!”), my arms spread out on either side of me, imagining that my position somehow mimicked the crane shot in the film where the camera pulls up and away from Barbra Streisand as she holds that last, long, breathtaking note, while rows and rows of marching musicians and baton twirlers and Civil War veterans stream past her, like waters rushing around the sunken tower of a bridge, down Fourteenth Street.

I have no memory of my parents’ response to my performance. I think if they had disapproved of it, I would remember that. I do remember dimly, when I was around four years old, dressing up in my sister Mary Jo’s grade school uniform—a blue, black, and green plaid pinafore—and coming downstairs excitedly to show everyone. There were a bunch of people in the den watching TV (I don’t remember now exactly who was there—for some reason, I seem to recall my sister Mary Jo and my Aunt Pauline, but I may be conflating this incident with the later one during my parents’ European vacation), and when I made my entrance, together they shrieked, “Patrick, take that dress off! You’ll ruin it! Go upstairs right now and take off that dress and put away those shoes!” So I can only conclude that my performance of “Before the Parade Passes By” for my parents was somehow okay with them. (The only other excitement during the three weeks while my parents were away was when Aunt Pauline was boiling frozen corn on the stove for dinner one night,
and the lid got stuck on the pan. When my parents phoned from Europe to see how everything was going, Aunt Pauline shouted in her heavy Pennsylvania-German accent, “I can’t get the lid off the goddam corn!” We always loved Aunt Pauline because she wasn’t afraid to say things like “goddarn.”

For sure, it didn’t always go smoothly in my family with me and my love for Barbra Streisand. For example, in September of 1979 when I turned sixteen, my sister Betsy bought me tickets to see Carol Channing in *Hello, Dolly!*, which was playing at the National Theater in Washington, D.C. (at the time, Betsy was a sophomore at Georgetown University). It was a perfect birthday gift and I couldn’t have been more excited—until I found out that the same night we were supposed to see Carol Channing in *Hello, Dolly!* the movie version with Barbra Streisand was going to be shown on TV. Of course there was no question of not going to see Carol Channing, but at least I hoped that after the show we could rush back to Betsy’s house and maybe, just *maybe* I could catch the last hour of the movie, or at least just see the big production number at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant (too bad Betsy’s TV set was only a tiny, old black-and-white thing—did one of her housemates have a bigger color TV, I wondered?). Betsy was indignant: “I can’t believe you’d rather see a stupid Barbra Streisand movie that you’ve already seen fifty times than go see a real live show! You know something, you are really nuts. I’m never gonna buy you theater tickets for anything again, I can tell you that much!”

Another time my brother, John, and I were having an argument over his new stereo system. We shared a bedroom at home, and we didn’t always make such a harmonious pair, especially the older we got (for one thing, while I was mostly into Broadway show tunes, movie soundtracks, and Barbra Streisand, John’s musical tastes were harder to categorize: he had a couple of Supertramp albums; an Emerson, Lake, and Palmer; one by Todd Rundgren; one by Dan Fogelberg and Tim Weisberg; an Allman Brothers album; and several by Neil Young). The argument may have been over how often I was allowed to use the stereo and how if I wasn’t careful with the needle on the record player he was going to kill me—something like that. I started to say, “You know, the way you can test the quality of a stereo system to find out if it’s really good is to put on a Barbra Streisand record because the range of her voice—” but before I could even finish my sentence (which, however, John immediately and correctly understood to be an insult to him, his taste in music, and his fancy new stereo), he shouted back at the top of his lungs, “Why don’t you shut the *fuck* up, I don’t give a *shit* about Barbra Streisand! You don’t know what the *fuck* you’re talking about!” (Once John went
away to college, I learned to like pretty much all of his records and even started branching out into new territory of my own.)

And around the time that *Funny Lady* was released in 1975, my mom and I were at the gas station and she gave the gas station attendant her credit card, and a minute later he came back and said it wasn’t the right one, and she said, “Oh I’m sorry, I made a mistake. Here, why don’t I just give you cash?” Both my mom and I noticed that the guy seemed annoyed at the confusion. In order to express my solidarity with her while at the same time acknowledging the gas station attendant’s frustration, I said as we drove away, “I guess he kind of thought, ‘Screw you, lady!’” My mom was aghast.

“Patrick, don’t ever say a thing like that! Where on earth did you learn that?”

“From *Funny Lady,*” I said. It was a long story, but she wanted an explanation, so, I thought, here goes: “When Fanny Brice catches Billy Rose in bed with Eleanor Holmes, at first she’s upset, but then she forgives him because she realizes that he was just jealous because she was getting back together with her ex-husband, Nick Arnstein, in Los Angeles. So she tells Billy, ‘I figure what happened is I called you from L.A. and told you I was going to see Nick. And you got sore and thought, well, screw her.’”

“Well honey, you mustn’t ever say things like that again, please! My goodness!” I don’t think she explained why I wasn’t supposed to say things like that—things like what? What was so bad about “screw you”? Anyway, I never said “screw you” in front of my mom again.

Then things really fell apart on Christmas day of 1976, the day Barbra’s rock remake of *A Star Is Born* was released. I awoke that morning, as I always did on Christmas, around six o’clock, dying to rush downstairs with the rest of my siblings and tear into all the presents Mom and Dad had bought us. After we finished with the presents (which, for me that year, included three Barbra Streisand albums—*The Barbra Streisand Album, A Happening in Central Park,* and *What About Today?*), I went quietly into the kitchen to look at the entertainment section of the newspaper (quietly, because I didn’t want anyone to think that I could be so ungrateful for all my Christmas presents as to wish for something more, even though I did want more—I wanted to see *A Star Is Born* as soon as possible); I turned to the movie page to look for the ad for *A Star Is Born,* thinking I might be able to go see it that night, and I froze in horror to find out that it had been rated R: RESTRICTED: UNDER 17 REQUIRES ACCOMPANYING PARENT OR ADULT GUARDIAN. I was only thirteen.

“I’m allowed to go if you take me,” I said, hoping against hope that my mom would agree.
"I'm sorry, honey, but we're not taking you to see an R-rated movie."
"But Mom, I've been waiting so long to see this!"

"Patrick, you're not going to see an R-rated movie. Now I'm sorry, but that's final. Barbra Streisand or no Barbra Streisand, you're too young."

I was outraged. My mother continued: "You know, it makes me mad that she did this" ("she" meaning Barbra Streisand). "Why do they have to make R-rated movies? What's so important in the movie that they couldn't cut it out and have it be a PG rating? We'd have no problem with you seeing a PG movie, but no R's."

I protested and pleaded. All pointless.

"I'm really annoyed," she said. "I want to write her a letter and tell her, 'I hope you're satisfied that you just lost one of your biggest fans' " (meaning me—was she kidding?). "I think she could lose a lot of support for this." (A Star Is Born would go on to become Barbra's top-grossing film, though critically it was one of her most disastrous.)

One day not long after this, I went along with my mom to pick up my sister Karen, who was two years older than me, at the movie theater.

"What movie did you go see?" I asked Karen when she and her friend, I forget who it was, got into the car (for there were three or four movies showing at the theater, including A Star Is Born).

"Rocky," she said.
"How was it?" I asked.
"It wasn't that great."
"Why not?"
"Oh, I don't know."
"Why don't you know?"
"Just 'cause."
"'Cause why?"
"No reason, just because."
"Because why?"
"Because none of your business."
"Why is it none of my business?"
(Imitating me) "Why is it none of my business?"
"Why not?!" I shouted.
"Hey, that's enough, you two," my mom interrupted.
"Why won't she tell me why she didn't like the movie?" I said.
"Why do you care?" Karen said.
"Karen, don't tease your brother," Mom said.
"I'm not teasing him, he's bugging me."
"He's interested in your movie! Can't you be civil to each other?"
"I'm being civil, she's not," I piped up.
(Again, imitating me) "I'm being civil, she's not," Karen said.
"Karen, that’s enough!” my mom said firmly.

Through all of this, I began to suspect that Karen had gone to see *A Star Is Born* and that she wasn’t telling me about it because she knew I would get hysterical if I found out (although I’m not sure why Karen would have been permitted to see an R-rated movie—after all, she was only fifteen at the time). It would, of course, have been supremely unfair if Karen of all people had gotten to see *A Star Is Born* instead of me because she didn’t care about Barbra Streisand at all, and she even, on occasion, enjoyed teasing me about my devotion to Barbra, saying, for no reason at all, just to upset me, “Oh, she’s so ugly. How can you stand her?” I also began to suspect that my mom was in on the deception. I decided to try and pry it out of them.

“So who was in the movie?” I said to Karen.

“I don’t know,” she answered.

“Why not?”

“I don’t care about who the actors are, you’re the only one who cares about all that stuff.” (In a mock upper-class British tone of voice) “Oh, the acting was *superb*, darling!”

“Why don’t you know any of the actors’ names?” I persisted.

“I do know, but I’m not gonna tell you.”

“Because you don’t know who they are.”

“That’s what I said the first time. *Duh!*”

“Do you know who played Rocky?”

“Yes, Sylvester Stallone.”

“Uh huh, and who else was in the movie?”

“Why don’t you go find out for yourself?”

“Why don’t you tell me? Is it because you went to see *A Star Is Born* instead?”

Karen let out an evil laugh.

“What makes you think that?” she said.

“Because I know that’s what you saw.”

“Well, don’t worry, it wasn’t very good. You wouldn’t like it anyway,” Karen said breezily, knowing full well that I would like it.

“All right, you two, I said *enough!* When I say *enough* I mean *enough!!*” Mom shouted.

My mom, at least, has pretty much come back around to sharing my interest in Barbra Streisand with me. A couple of years ago she sent me a present—a large, full-color, hardback picture book entitled simply *Barbra Streisand*, by William Ruhlmann—for no special reason other than that she was just thinking about me and wanted to give me something (she’s always keeping an eye out for anything that one of her children
or grandchildren might like, gift giving always having been one of her favorite hobbies). What really thrilled me, though, was that my mom had gone through the book herself page by page and put Post-it notes with little messages written upon them (all of which I've saved) on all the pictures that she particularly liked. On a March 1992 photograph of Barbra at the Forty-fourth Annual Writers Guild Awards, Mom attached a Post-it that says, “good picture!” In this picture, Barbra's hair looks about the color of my mom's hair, which she disparagingly calls “mouse brown” (Mom says she always wished her hair would turn white, like her Aunt Hilda's, because she thinks it looks so distinguished, but over the years her hair has pretty much stayed the same color, grayish brown). On another picture, Mom has placed a Post-it that says, “a great picture!” This one is an oddly out-of-focus 1963 black and white photo in which Barbra stares coldly straight-faced, with eyes like saucers, into the camera, looking like a visitor from another world. On one page, Mom has flagged two candid shots that might easily have gotten overlooked in a book filled with mostly gigantic glamor photos: one, a picture of Stephen Sondheim hugging Barbra from behind during the making of The Broadway Album (1985), both of them smiling warmly (Mom writes, “another favorite”); the other, a picture of Barbra with Leonore Gershwin, the widow of Ira Gershwin, at the 1986 Grammy Awards where Barbra presented Leonore with honorary awards for Ira and his brother George, again both of them looking happy to be together (a lovely woman who looks to be in her seventies, Leonore wears her hair and glasses not unlike my mother: “One of my favorite pix,” Mom writes).

Barbra Streisand was more to me when I was growing up than an occasion for bonding or coming at loggerheads with various members of my family, and more even than one of the primary touchstones for my blossoming aesthetic sensibility. She was also an escape, my consolation prize for the world's unkindness to me, for everything that made the world an awful place to be. As the 1970s wore on and the closer I got to puberty, in many ways the more unhappy I became. I wasn't well-liked in school; there was always some boy who made me dread going there day after day. And it wasn't just boys; for a while in fifth grade it was fractions. I used to pretend to get sick during math class because I hated fractions, I had a hard time doing things with them, and I was afraid of what Sister Carina would say in that caustic tone of voice if I gave her the wrong answer. My parents eventually became so alarmed by what they considered the poor quality of teaching and the bad attitude
of some of the nuns in our Catholic grade school that, in seventh grade, they transferred me to the local public school.

I enjoyed my classes much more in public school than in Catholic school, but the kids in public school were as bad as the ones in Catholic school, and some of them were even worse. My archenemy in eighth grade was a boy who lived down the street from me named Pat Holleran. Now I don't remember if there was some specific reason why he hated me so much—I mean, other than the usual reasons. As a rule, guys hated me because I had female friends, I was a sissy, and I was a top student. There may have been other reasons (something about my family's class status, something about the way I inhabited my body) but I wasn't aware of them at the time. What I do remember about Pat Holleran was that he was unkempt, skinny like me, around my height, cute in a mongrelish sort of way, and a mediocre student. He also had a reputation for being a druggie, and he liked to brag about how much sex he had with girls. There was a rumor that a girl in our class gave him a "blow job," and I didn't know what that was, but then someone said that she unzipped his pants and pulled them down and gave him a blow job and so obviously it involved doing something to his penis, but I still wasn't sure what (did she "blow" on it? What was the point of doing that?). One night he and a couple of his friends went down to the bus stop, and he wrote in chalk on the street in big huge letters PAT HORMIGAN YOU FAG and then they all pissed on it. Since I wasn't there when it happened, I'm not sure how I knew that they pissed on it—did Pat himself tell me afterward? Was Steve, another neighborhood kid, with them at the time, and did he report this to me? And if in fact they did piss on it, why wasn't the chalk washed away? Nor do I remember the entire series of events that followed, but there it was at the bus stop the next morning for everyone to see. My mother now tells me that my dad went down to the bus stop the following day before dawn with a scrub brush and a bucket of water and got down on his hands and knees and scrubbed the graffiti off the street. I don't remember my dad or my mom or any of my siblings having any kind of conversation with me about this at the time (although I do have a very dim memory of someone at some point saying to me, "Do you know what 'fag' means?").

I did have a number of female friends, but I knew they didn't count as friends and I felt guilty about having only female friends. One evening around the same time as the graffiti incident, I was up the block visiting my two friends named Lisa who lived next door to each other. We were just sitting around on one of their driveways and for some reason I started to feel unwelcome. Eventually and without much of a good-bye (they didn't seem to notice my leaving), I rode my bike back home and
Love Barbra

went into the garage and closed the doors and sat down on one of the milk crates and started sobbing. I wanted to tell my parents how awful I felt, but I didn't exactly understand what I was crying about and I didn't think there was any way that I could explain it to them to make them understand. And anyway, I figured they would just blame me for my sadness. They were always saying things like, "Why don't you go outside and mix with the other guys in the neighborhood? We know you like to play alone indoors, and that's great; we've always said whatever makes you happy makes us happy. You have a wonderful imagination, you play the piano so beautifully, you love to build things, and we're not telling you to stop that. You're very creative, and God knows your father and I don't have the gifts you have. But you need some companions, or life will be terribly lonely for you."

Barbra Streisand entered my emotional world exactly here. To me, her music and films were always, in one way or another, about being lonely and learning how to cope with it. For example, in *Barbra: The First Decade*, James Spada describes the unanticipated moment when Barbra's voice wins her the recognition that, as yet, her acting talent has not:

Truly discouraged by all the rejections she had encountered at auditions, Barbra renounced the theatre, saying, "They'll have to come to me." Although she hadn't given much thought to singing, she knew she had a good voice and thought perhaps she could at least make some money at it. In the spring of 1961, primarily due to economic necessity, she entered a talent contest at the Lion, a bar and restaurant on Ninth Street in Manhattan. . . . She chose the ballad "A Sleepin' Bee." After practicing it, she tried her rendition out on several friends. "I was so embarrassed, I couldn't sing in front of them, so I asked if they wouldn't mind, I'd sing facing the wall. When I finished, and turned around, I remember I couldn't understand why they had tears in their eyes." (13)

I could. I used to wonder who those friends of hers were and what they were feeling at that haunting moment when they heard Barbra sing for the first time in their lives. I envisioned three of them: two young women and one rather effeminate young man. They couldn't see Barbra's face, her expressions, so they were free to imagine her for themselves, according to their own needs. They saw what they already knew: the young, skinny, awkward, "homely" girl, lonely, driven, fatherless (Spada maintains that "more than any other event in her life, the death of her father set the stage for the person Barbra Joan Streisand was to become" [*Barbra 9*]), a failure, ambitious, shunned at school (her classmates called her "big beak" and "crazy Barbra" [*Barbra 9*]), facing a blank wall, her voice emerging as the desperate, yearning sound of a
child who longs to be recognized and accepted unconditionally—a voice that plumbed and pierced the sadness of their souls. When they cried, they cried for themselves.

Again and again, Barbra Streisand’s films uncannily restage this primal scene. Her entrance in *Funny Girl*, for example, is structured according to the same drama of concealment and revelation as the “real-life” scene in Spada’s biography. The opening credits end with a shot of New York’s New Amsterdam Theater, with “Ziegfeld Follies” and “Fanny Brice” in lights over the marquee. Seen only from behind, Barbra/Fanny walks into the frame wearing a leopard coat and hat, looks up at her name in lights, and walks away from the camera toward the stage door through a narrow passageway to the left of the theater entrance. She opens the door and enters. Cut to a close up, still with her back to the camera, as she opens another door and walks down a short flight of stairs on her way, presumably, to her dressing room. She pauses at the threshold of a hallway leading to the stage area and decides to go in that direction instead. Walking toward the stage, she pauses again before a mirror on her left and turns to look at herself in the mirror; the camera turns as well to reveal her reflection in the mirror. Now we see her face for the first time: she pulls her collar down from around her mouth and says to her reflection with a smile and a quiet laugh, “Hello, gorgeous.” (In his review of *Funny Girl* for the *Village Voice*, Andrew Sarris disapprovingly describes this sequence as follows: “Barbra slithers into the very first frame of the film through a slightly overhead angle shot from the rear of a creature in a leopard skin coat. The camera follows her with portentous persistence and suddenly there is a mirror and Barbra-Fanny greets her reflection with the sardonic salutation: ‘Hi, Gorgeous.’ Thus Barbra is allowed to capitalize on the laughter of self-mockery after an ego-building entrance that would have been considered too gaudy for Garbo in her prime.” [53])

A little later in the film, just after Fanny meets Nick backstage at Keeney’s Music Hall on the night that she has sung her first solo on stage (and wowed the audience with “I’d Rather Be Blue over You [Than Happy with Somebody Else]”—on roller skates!), Nick invites her to dinner with some friends, but, nervous, shy, feeling she isn’t pretty enough to socialize with him and his attractive women companions, with a lump in her throat, she declines:

**NICK:** Look, we’re going to Delmonico’s for supper. Won’t you join us? We’d be happy to wait while you change.

**FANNY:** [turning her self-hatred immediately into a winning joke] I’d have to change too much. Nobody could wait that long.
In a sharp-focus medium shot, Nick leaves through a door, which Fanny closes behind him; cut to a soft-focus close-up shot of the back of Fanny's head, leaning face forward against the door, and we hear but do not see her singing, in high-pitched head tones, "Nicky Arnstein, Nicky Arnstein." She turns toward the camera, with an expression of anguish and yearning, and continues singing, "I'll never see him again," then with a shrug abruptly skates away, and the scene ends.

And in *Yentl*, the 1983 musical film Streisand produced, directed, co-wrote, and starred in, about a girl who dresses as a boy in order to study the Talmud, the last scene of the film begins with a shot of an adolescent girl reading the Talmud. The camera moves off to an old woman who appears to be smiling at her, and then it continues to wander through a crowd of East Europeans, sitting in groups, huddled together, some sleeping, some gesturing as if talking to each other, some laughing, some playing chess. It becomes clear that these people are seated on the deck of a steamship, bound, one presumes, for America. All the while we hear Barbra's voice, but we do not see her, singing. The camera floats off the deck, revealing another deck down below, where Barbra/Yentl is now seen, alone, her back to the camera, standing at the ship's stern. The camera approaches her and circles around her from behind, gradually revealing her face, as she sings to the sea and wind.

To begin with, these scenes and others like them in many of Barbra's films imbue her with an aura of solemnity (the camera often sweeps around her in 180-degree pan shots as if she were a sacred, sculptural object) and suspense (you never know when she'll turn away or reappear); they insist, first and last, upon the significance of Barbra Streisand as she plays not to her costars but, rather, to her audience—she sometimes looks directly into the camera, reminding everyone that she is Barbra Streisand, despite the encumbrance of the role to which she has been assigned. And they toy with the seeming contradiction that a voice of such power, beauty, and range belongs to such an unconventionally attractive woman.

More importantly, each of these scenes is a little lesson in the anatomy of loneliness. They open it up, examine its constituent parts, and put it back together; but in so doing, they make loneliness dramatic. And once your solitude has turned into drama, in a way you're no longer alone; someone is always bearing witness to you, even when no one else is around, because at least you are bearing witness to you. You become your own best friend. You fall in love with yourself (something Barbra Streisand is frequently accused of). You become, finally, like Barbra Streisand, significant: "One evening [Barbara's roommate] Marilyn Fried was in the bedroom of their small apartment and Barbara was in the
living room with [another friend, Carl] Esser. 'He was strumming a gui-
tar,' Fried recalled. 'I suddenly heard this remarkable voice coming out
of the living room. My immediate reaction was to go to the radio and
find out who was singing so marvelously. But the radio was not on. I
realized there must be someone in this tiny apartment who had this
magnitude, this power. I went into the room and asked Barbara, 'Who
was singing?' She said, 'I was'" (Edwards 85).

I didn't cry the first time I heard Barbra Streisand sing the way her
friends did, but her spirit entered inside of me and changed me none-
theless. After seeing one of her movies, for the next several days I would
walk around the house feeling possessed by her. Rarely did I imitate
her in any superficial way—I became her on the inside. She made me feel
that nothing I did was insignificant—going to the bathroom, search-
ing through the cupboard for a snack, choosing what I would wear for
school tomorrow morning, then making my way down the street to the
bus stop, boarding the bus, finding a seat, watching as cars and trees and
houses and telephone wires and clouds passed by on the way to school
(I always envied people, like my mom, who didn't have to go to school—
imagine what it must be like to stay home all day doing everything you
liked!), thinking of whatever was coming up today—a test, or gym class
(ugh), or art class (Miss Yoh always said I had real talent and hoped I
would keep on pursuing it, but all the guys hated Miss Yoh because she
was such a "wimp," they said, and they thought art class was bullshit).

Soon I began to imagine that my entire life was a movie, a very long
movie in which nothing happened except exactly whatever it was I hap-
pened to be doing at any given moment, and whatever I happened to
be doing, it would be, invariably, fascinating—just as everything Barbra
Streisand did, no matter how insignificant, seemed fascinating to me.
The movie's time scale would follow the time scale of my everyday life,
down to the second. So, for example, I would be sitting in church, but
in fact it would be a movie of me sitting in church. Or I would be walking
down the hall at school, holding my books in my arms, wondering what
would happen today in the cafeteria at lunchtime, and would somebody
punch me in front of all the other kids and would I have trouble find-
ing someone to sit with and if so, what was it going to be like sitting and
eating my lunch alone?—It was enough to make me want to skip lunch
altogether even though I was so hungry—but in fact it would be a movie
of me walking down the hall, thinking, wondering, worrying. I made be-
lieve that audiences were amazed and alarmed at how long these movies
of my life lasted—they went on for years at a time. Imagine an audience
sitting in the dark of a movie theater for seven years in a row—but some-
how they just couldn’t get enough of my life, and so they stayed and stayed and kept wanting more. I liked to imagine at what point the movie would end and the closing credits start to roll. I would pretend that, for example, as I waited inside the car some stiflingly hot afternoon in July while my mom was busy doing something or other at the bank, the camera would portentously begin to rise and pull back from the roof of our station wagon and gravely serious music in a minor key would come up and the credits would start to roll and the audience would suddenly realize that, without any warning, the movie they had been watching for years was over, and they would be angry and cry out in protest, because now they were never going to find out how well I did in the upcoming piano recital, or they weren’t going to get to see the big First Holy Communion scene, and it would just be such a disturbing way for a movie to end (but only in vain would they cry, for the screen couldn’t hear their complaints, and the movie was beyond their control). But then a whole new marathon-length movie would begin, say, a week later, and things would pretty much pick up where they left off.

One of the reasons *Hello, Dolly!* meant so much during my adolescence was that, as played by Barbra Streisand, Dolly Levi was, like me, young, brimming with life, and lonely. After she has introduced Irene and Cornelius to each other and taught them how to dance, Irene tries to persuade her to join them at the Fourteenth Street parade. Dolly says she’ll be along in a minute, but now, for a little while, she wants to be alone. Sitting on a park bench, she thinks of her own life and how lonely she has been since her husband’s death. She speaks to him:

Ephraim, let me go. It’s been long enough, Ephraim. Every night, just like you’d want me to, I’ve put out the cat, made myself a rum toddy, and before I went to bed said a little prayer thanking God that I was independent, that no one else’s life was mixed up with mine. But lately, Ephraim, I’ve begun to realize that for a long time, I have not shed one tear, nor have I been for one moment outrageously happy. . . . But there comes a time when you have got to decide whether you want to be a fool among fools, or a fool alone. Well I have made that decision. . . . I’m going back, Ephraim. I’ve decided to join the human race again. And Ephraim, I want you to give me away.³

Dolly wasn’t overtly unhappy—her sadness was undetectable (“I have not shed one tear”), but, nevertheless, she was suffering inside (“nor have I been for one moment outrageously happy”). It was as if Dolly had gone numb and needed to do something about it—marry Horace Vandergelder? That wasn’t really the answer. Later in the film as she dresses for dinner, she sings that “love is only love”—not violins and fireworks but,
rather, a silent awareness of the other person. Though she loved Horace, she wasn’t “in love” with him; marrying him was only one part of a much larger scheme to bring herself back to life. She didn’t so much need to do something about her loneliness as she needed to learn to think and feel differently about it (“No, it won’t be like the first time,” she sings as she imagines married life with Horace, but then she affirms that it doesn’t need to be).

As a kid, I understood Dolly Levi’s predicament. She was in a rut like me. The immediate answer to her problems was to break away and march down Fourteenth Street and sing about how she was going to “raise the roof and carry on” so that she wouldn’t have to look back one day and regret all the things she didn’t do with her life. In other words, “to be a fool among fools.” For me, the solution was just the opposite: I thought about the way Dolly breaks away and marches triumphantly down Fourteenth Street, and I thought about it in detail. I became “a fool alone.” Feeling cast out in the world, I chose my aloneness in return.

So it didn’t matter, say, if I got dragged along to my sisters’ high school field hockey games, as I so often did. Once I got bored with just standing there with my mom and watching the game (a game whose rules I neither understood nor cared about), I would drift off to the adjacent track to be, like Dolly, by myself. The track ran the perimeter of the football field and it was divided up into ten narrow lanes. Around and around the track I would walk, all the while imagining, instead of my blue pants and white sneakers, the long, purple dress Barbra Streisand wore when she sang “Before the Parade Passes By,” billowing across the pavement; instead of chalk marks on the dirt, iron trolley tracks running stripes down the broad, cobblestoned street; instead of the bushes and trees and chain-link fences of suburban Pennsylvania, billboards, banners, signs, shops, restaurants, bars, apartment buildings with awnings at the windows, a church with its steeples impaling the sky, a train station swarming with people coming and going, horses and carriages rushing, rushing, and city sidewalks filled with people, all kinds of people; instead of the damp, heavy clouds of an October afternoon, the clear, unblocked sunshine of a day in June.

VI

One night in June of 1989, I saw Vito Russo at an ACT UP meeting and I decided to tell him how much I’d enjoyed his essay on Judy Garland in the first issue of Out Week magazine (“The death of Judy Garland in London in the summer of 1969 coincided with the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village. It was also the year in which Mart Crowley’s The Boys
in the Band was brought to the big screen, making it the first Hollywood film in which all but one character was gay. These two events symbolically hammered the final nail into the coffin of gay self-hatred, as well as the pre-liberation world of star worship on a grand scale" ["Rebellion" 42]). Nervously—for here was a real live "star," the famous author of The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies (1981), which I'd read in graduate school the year before—I said, "Vito? Hi, my name is Patrick and I just wanted to tell you I really loved your piece on Judy Garland in OutWeek." And he said, "Oh, you did, thank you," and he turned away, and I rushed off, hoping I hadn't said something stupid.

The following fall at Yale University's third annual Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference, my best friend and then boyfriend Gary Lucek gave a talk entitled "Out on Vinyl: Readings Between the Grooves in Gay Male Pop Music." The thing that most excited me about his talk was its autobiographical aspect:

My talk today is about culture and about gay men. About expression and transmission and engagement. About gay men talking to gay men—and to other people, like I'm doing right now.

[...]

But first, let's talk about me.

I am twenty-eight years old and grew up in an upper-middle-class, Polish-Catholic nuclear family in suburban New Jersey. My parents had and still have a stereo console but have never much used it. The records they had when I was in grade school are pretty much the same ones they have today. They occasionally listened to polka music and my mom went through an Engelbert Humperdinck phase in the early seventies. Together we would watch The Lawrence Welk Show (my favorite performer was the token black tap dancer, Arthur Duncan) and even made a pilgrimage once to the Lawrence Welk Estate and Country Club outside San Diego. My older brother and sister shared a box of 45s which included hits by the Beatles, Leslie Gore, the Supremes, Bobbie Vinton, the Shangri-Las, the Dave Clark Five, and Herman's Hermits. Before I could read I associated the songs that I liked with the colors and patterns of the labels.

I became a full-fledged pop music consumer in the mid-seventies. Already a postmodernist, my first 45 was "Rockin' Robin" by the Jackson Five, which my brother disparaged as "a remake" and hence not "original" and valid. My first album was either a Three Dog Night LP or The Divine Miss M by "Betty" Midler (I couldn't say "Bette" yet) which I bought because I loved her single "Do You Wanna Dance?"—another remake. In general, I remember feeling different for liking "black" music (my peers had a worse name for it) and also, God forbid, "disco" music. Liking disco music, I learned, was not an avenue toward popularity in my junior high school. The Rolling Stones, the Who, Paul McCartney and Wings, the
Grateful Dead, Traffic, the Kinks, Rush, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Genesis were all bands that meant absolutely nothing to me. Indeed, by high school, my sister, her new husband, my brother (who had come out as gay by this time), and I were practicing “The Hustle” in the living room to the tunes of the “First Lady of Love,” Donna Summer, Hamilton Bohannon, and Van McCoy. Other late-adolescent formative experiences included seeing Sylvester and Two Tons of Fun on The Merv Griffin Show and watching the Village People perform “In the Navy” on a Bob Hope special on board a U.S. naval battleship, two good examples of U.S. culture’s propensity to let homosexuals get out of hand. But there I was, soaking it all up. When my friends all got practical things like typewriters or stereos upon graduation from high school in ’79, my parents came through for me with the gift of two Donna Summer double-albums, Bad Girls and Live and More. What better calling card than eight sides of Donna to take with me to New York City, where I was enrolling at Columbia University in the fall of 1979?

I remember thinking during Gary’s talk, This is the kind of writing I want to do. I could write an essay on Barbra Streisand that captures the pleasure I take in her work and that seeks to analyze her work, situating it in some larger context. I could explore what Barbra Streisand means to me as a gay man. I could try to explain why she appeals to other gay men as well. (Everything else about Gary’s talk, however, was a disaster—it was way too long, no one could hear his soft voice beyond the first few rows, the slide projector wasn’t working, the room was overheated, and when it was all over I just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible and go back to our hotel and take a nap, which is what I did. This made Gary justifiably angry with me, and for at least the next year, whenever we would get into any kind of argument, invariably my bad behavior at Yale would come up: “Well, if it was so overwhelming for you, can you imagine how I was feeling? I was the one giving the talk, I was having to cut out all this important material from my talk because I was going overtime, and all you could think about, AS USUAL, were your feelings—how frustrated you were! Would you just listen to yourself? How self-centered can you get? It’s really shocking to me how insensitive you can be sometimes, Patrick. If things had been reversed, I would have supported you. And if I hadn’t, you would have been furious with me. I never would have heard the end of it from you. You at least could have come up to me afterward and told me, ‘Hey, Gare, great talk in spite of the technical difficulties,’ but you said nothing. You just left. How do you think that made me feel?”)

A year later, I again saw Vito Russo at another ACT UP meeting, and this time, now in the midst of writing an early draft of the essay that has become this chapter, I asked him if we could get together or maybe just
Love Barbra

talk on the telephone at some point about Barbra, about divas, and just about things in general. He said sure, he'd love to, why don't you come over next week? In the meantime, he suggested, I should speak to Larry Kramer, who had recently been negotiating with Barbra in the hopes that she might direct a film version of his 1985 play about the founding of Gay Men's Health Crisis, *The Normal Heart*. Vito said that apparently Barbra had asked Larry, "Why do so many gay guys like me?" and they had had a conversation about it. So Vito gave me Larry's number, and that night I gave Larry a call.

He answered, sounding a little groggy. I figured I had caught him at a bad time. I introduced myself: "Hi, my name is Patrick Horrigan. Vito Russo suggested I call you because I'm writing an essay on Barbra Streisand and her relation to gay men for a course I'm taking in the graduate program at Columbia University, and he said that you—"

"Vito shouldn't have given you my number," he interrupted. "He knows better than that. What is this for?"

"I'm writing an essay about why gay men seem to like Barbra Streisand, and Vito told me that you and she had spoken—"

"Gay men don't like Barbra Streisand. Her fans are a bunch of straight kids out in California."

I wasn't sure at this point if I should just drop it or persist a little longer to find out if he might have something interesting to say. For all his hostility, it seemed like he might in fact talk to me—maybe this was just his usual way of getting warmed up.

"If this isn't a good time to talk, I could try you again some other time," I offered.

"Why are you writing this? What are you, a journalist?"

"No, I'm a graduate student in the English department at Columbia. It's for a course I'm taking on—"

"I can't believe Columbia gives you credit to write about Barbra Streisand. What a stupid subject to write on. Don't you have anything better to write about? Why don't you write about something important? You should be writing about AIDS. You know, there's a war going on—that's what you should be writing about."

I didn't know what to say.

"I don't want to talk to you anymore," he said and hung up.

When I arrived at Vito's apartment, the first thing I noticed was that the entire north wall was made of exposed brick, and the ceiling seemed very high, which made the otherwise tiny space feel like a large elevator or even an empty tower. All around the apartment there were photographs of Vito with this or that celebrity. I wanted to look carefully at
each one of them but I also didn't want Vito to think I was interested in his celebrity status instead of in his ideas, so I just stole a glance here and there—wasn't that a picture of Vito and Elizabeth Taylor together?! And it was signed, too, probably by Liz herself, in the way that stars always sign things; you couldn't tell what it said, but there were a few little words at first, then a whole lot of swirls and curls and circles, which was probably supposed to be her name—probably "Elizabeth" for Vito, because he was a special friend, I imagined.

"Did you call Larry?" he asked.

"Yeah, but he wouldn't talk to me. I think I woke him up or something when I phoned."

"You might have. You never can tell with Larry. Was he mean as the devil?"

"Practically."

"Too bad. Sorry about that."

"It's okay . . . your apartment is really wonderful," I said. But Vito acted as if my being there was as natural and unremarkable to him as the huge, steel-framed poster on the wall—a few years old already—advertising a star-studded benefit concert for AIDS with all the stars' signatures scribbled like graffiti from top to bottom: "Liza Minnelli," "Mandy Patinkin," "David Cassidy" (David Cassidy?!), "Dionne Warwick," and what seemed to be dozens more.

Vito said he would show me a few film clips of The Judy Garland Show from October 1963 when Barbra was the guest star—one of Judy and Barbra singing a medley of duets ("After You've Gone," "By Myself," "Lover, Come Back to Me"), and then another of just Barbra singing "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered." Vito said he'd never seen her perform more sensationally than this. I expected to disagree with him on that point. Unlike most people I know, I enjoy the late Streisand as much as, sometimes even more than, the early Streisand, partly because I didn't even discover Barbra Streisand until around 1972 when her "early" period was already over; I was only one month old when she appeared on The Judy Garland Show, and doesn't aesthetic judgment have an awful lot to do with who you are, when, and where, anyway? Meanwhile Vito was fiddling with the reel-to-reel projector, and after twenty minutes of taking it apart and putting it back together, it was clear the thing was broken. "I'm sorry babe, this is not my lucky day." He told me to come back next Saturday—the Saturday of Gay Pride weekend it turned out—and he'd have the projector all fixed and ready to go.

As I was heading for the door, "Oh wait!" he said, pulling out a large program from a concert Barbra gave in Philadelphia in 1966. Wow! I knew so little about those early concert years. He said the concert got
rained out on the first night it was scheduled, but he and his friends—all of them young, starry-eyed gay men—went to her trailer and knocked on the door anyway, not thinking she'd answer but hoping just the same.

And lo and behold, she opened the door and came out.

"Hi everyone!" she said in a friendly, joking manner.

"We love you!" they all shouted.

"Oh thank you! Come back tomorrow night! Did they give you your money back?"

And they all laughed and said yes and that they would come back tomorrow.

"What a great audience you would have been. I'm sorry we couldn't do the show."

And then she said, "Well, I have to go now. Good-bye."

And with that she went back inside her trailer.

I handed the Streisand-concert program back to Vito, but he said, no, I could keep it. "You probably love her more than I do," he said. "You keep it and enjoy it."  

VII

Ever since I started loving Barbra Streisand when I saw her on TV in Hello, Dolly! my initial reaction to each new album she cuts or movie she makes has been to feel a little let down; she never quite lives up to my dream of how wonderful she might be. But disappointment has never been the end of the story with me and Barbra Streisand. After the initial letdown, I have always pretty much come around to seeing things her way. For example, my sister Karen had told me I wouldn't like A Star Is Born, and the shocking thing was, at first she was right. My friend James and I got his mother to drive us to the movie theater where it was playing, under the pretense that we were seeing something else. For some reason, we had no trouble getting in (a number of people assured me that they never check your age at an R-rated movie, unless it's something really rough like The Exorcist, but I had always been too afraid to find out), and anyway this time my need to see A Star Is Born outweighed my fear of being anything less than perfectly obedient. We arrived late, about twenty minutes into the film (I don't remember why—my punishment for being disobedient?), at the point where Barbra/Esther and Kris Kristofferson/John have already met and they're flying by helicopter to a concert he's giving at a huge outdoor stadium. I felt nervous during
the entire film: Barbra had gone bad; so, apparently, had I; and the whole thing left me feeling guilty and dirty.

I could see why the film was rated R, and I wasn't happy about it at all. In one scene, John is pushing Esther out on stage against her will, and she calls him, underneath her breath, a "fucker," a word I'd never heard escape Barbra's lips before. And, even worse, when Esther visits John's mansion for the first time, they start having sex, and while straddling him on the floor, Esther takes off her belt and pulls her blouse up over her head. For a split second, I thought, you could see a few inches of the bottom curves of Barbra's bare breasts. I couldn't believe she would ever do such a thing! (This wasn't the first time Barbra had tried to update her image by playing "dirty." In The Owl and the Pussycat [1971], her first nonmusical film, she plays a foul-mouthed prostitute named Doris who goes around wearing an outfit with hands painted over the breasts and a little heart over her crotch. But I never got to see this movie when I was younger. When The Owl and the Pussycat premiered on TV, I had the very same fight with my mom that we had over A Star Is Born. Forbidden to watch it, I snuck down to the basement TV to see it in secret, but after a few minutes, my mom found me out and made me turn it off and come upstairs.)

Although my first reaction to the partial, fleeting sight of Barbra Streisand's naked breasts in A Star Is Born was a negative one, it wasn't long before I started having fantasies about making movies with Barbra in them in which she would show all of both breasts for a long time—in which she did "adult" things like stick her breasts through holes in a wall or where her male costar would accidentally find himself, say, sitting across a restaurant table from Barbra with her bare breasts flopping on the table, and then he'd be so distracted by them that he wouldn't be able to eat his food, and it would all be so funny that the audience would laugh and laugh, the way that I laughed so hard at the sight gags in What's Up Doc? Only the sight gags I was now imagining were for grown-ups only, they weren't for kids anymore.

More recently, I felt let down at first by Barbra's Thanksgiving 1997 interview on The Rosie O'Donnell Show. Rosie has always been outspoken about her love for Barbra Streisand, and so here was a fan's dream come true: an opportunity, finally, to talk to the star, to tell her how you feel about her, to ask her everything you've always wanted to know, to ask her the things that only a fan would think to ask (I might have asked: Can you name one of your least favorite movies or albums and explain why it's your least favorite? How would you describe the changes in your singing/acting style over the years? What do you think of the myth that
gay men have a special affinity for you?). In almost every way, the interview seemed to me a wasted opportunity. Rosie talked too much:

BARBRA: I wasn't frightened when I was twenty-one. I'm more frightened now...

ROSIE: [interrupting her] Really?

BARBRA: . . . to tell you the truth. Yeah, there's more to live up to now.

You know, how do I fulfill your fantasy of me?

ROSIE: Can I just say this? My fantasy of you is always rooted in truth. With your—with the statements that you make—the speech that you made at Harvard, and—you know, it's not just a kid impression—as I grew into be [sic] an adult woman—and your directing and all of those things—it's—it's reality-based, there's no illusion. It's you, you know, as a mom, and as—as—everything.

BARBRA: Oh that's good.

She asked questions that led nowhere: “Can I just ask you, do you like snacking? 'Cause first of all you're so gorgeously fit. . . . What’s your favorite snack? . . . Do you bake, like, cookies and stuff around the holidays?” And even when she asked a question that might have led Barbra to say something interesting (“Do you have a favorite movie of yours?”), she didn’t pursue it far enough (when Barbra responded “Funny Girl, The Way We Were, The Prince of Tides,” rather than finding out why these are Barbra’s favorites, Rosie hurried on to another question).

Barbra was inexplicably nervous; throughout the interview, she kept touching her hair and, even more bizarre, pushing down her sweater to reveal her bare shoulders. She also seemed unusually distant. When Rosie asked her, “Is there anyone when you were a kid that you felt this way about?” Barbra paused for a moment and then said, “I don’t think so.” The answer garnered a laugh from the audience, but that didn’t make up for the evasiveness of the answer. (Barbra’s adolescent response to movies and actors seems at least to have been more complicated than she let on in the interview; James Spada claims that “by the time she reached her early teens, Barbara began escaping her drab existence more often than just at the Saturday movies. She created her own fantasies at home, usually re-creating the roles she had just seen played out on the screen. ‘I was a character in the movie,’ she says. ‘Not the actress, but the character. Not Vivien Leigh but Scarlett O’Hara. I loved being the most beautiful woman kissed by the beautiful man’” [Barbra 9].)

But then I thought some more about the Rosie O’Donnell interview. For one thing, Rosie’s clumsy behavior began to seem entirely appropriate given her impossible predicament—having to confront the “reality”
of the star in all her limitations. Also, it must have been a peculiarly unreal experience for a fan like Rosie because, as Barbra says to her early on in the interview, "You probably know more about me than I do about me," and it appears, as Rosie listens to Barbra throughout the interview, that she's heard everything before, that she's speaking to someone she knows intimately, even though in some ways the opposite is true. I began to feel touched instead of annoyed at the way Rosie blathered on and on about herself, even to the point where she serenaded Barbra with her own rendition of "People." She was nervous; what fan wouldn't put her foot in her mouth under those circumstances? In a way, Rosie's performance was a stroke of genius: daring to make the star feel the presence of the fan. There may even have been some anger in Rosie's behavior, as if she were saying to Barbra, not so much "You have been very important to me, you saved my life" (early on in the interview, Rosie testifies, "You were a constant source of light in an often-dark childhood, and you inspired me and gave me the courage to dream of a life better than the one I knew, and I am profoundly grateful to you in so many says"), but rather, You've stood in my way, and now I must be rid of you.  

And I started to appreciate Barbra's aloofness and apparent insecurity. According to Walter Matthau, Barbra's Hello, Dolly! costar, "the thing about working with her was that you never knew what she was going to do next and were afraid she'd do it. . . . I was appalled at every move she made" (quote in Edwards 264). Despite his hostility, Matthau has inadvertently identified what makes Barbra Streisand such a thrilling performer. One day she'll come out on stage and sing the roof off (as she did during her 1994 concert tour), the next she'll act like she's forgotten how to sing (when receiving a Grammy Living Legends award in February 1992, she sang the words "you'll never know how much I love you" to the audience in an uncharacteristically breathy, almost Marilyn Monroe voice—just that much and no more—as if she hadn't sung in a decade). From one angle she looks gorgeous; from another, not great. She'll make a spectacular directorial debut (in Yentl) and then follow it up with weaker directorial efforts (The Prince of Tides [1991], The Mirror Has Two Faces [1996]). Today, she'll say something smart: in a June 1992 speech she gave upon receiving the Dorothy Arzner Award for women in film, she said,

Language gives us insight into the way women are viewed in a male-dominated society. Take the entertainment business, for example, though I'm sure this would hold true for women in positions of power in any field.

A man is commanding—a woman is demanding.
A man is forceful—a woman is pushy.
A man is uncompromising—a woman is a ballbreaker.
A man is a perfectionist—a woman’s a pain in the ass.
He’s assertive—she’s aggressive.
He strategizes—she manipulates.

. . . All this to say that, clearly, men and women are measured by a different yardstick and that makes me angry. Of course, I’m not supposed to be angry. A woman should be soft-spoken, agreeable, ladylike, understated. In other words, stifled . . . Come to think of it, a lot of things make me angry.

Tomorrow she’ll sound like an airhead: in the liner notes to her rendition of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Some Enchanted Evening” on her 1993 Back to Broadway album, she writes, “‘Some Enchanted Evening,’ from the Pulitzer Prize winning show [South Pacific], was suggested by my A&R man, Jay Landers . . . and I thought ‘. . . ehh, I wasn’t ever crazy about that song.’ But David Foster took it home to see what he could do with it, and came up with a beautiful concept. Then Johnny Mandel did the most incredible orchestration, and I absolutely adore it now. 1993 marks the 50th Anniversary of Rodgers & Hammerstein’s collaboration. They gave the musical theater some of its most enduring and heartfelt music” (ellipses in original). (Does she really believe that Rodgers’ and Hammerstein’s music is “enduring and heartfelt” when, in order for her to sing one of their most famous and, by most accounts, gorgeously operatic songs, she has to have it rewritten for her? And then, in what sense is “Some Enchanted Evening” “enduring” when, in her view, it must suffer such revision?) For these reasons, many Barbra Streisand fans feel abandoned by Barbra. They wish she were just like she was in the mid-sixties—a kooky beatnik, an upstart, a fresh interpreter of B-string standards. They wish she had never gone Hollywood (or at least, never stopped playing Fanny Brice once she got there), never gone frizzy-haired, never gone blond, never tried disco or folk, never bothered with classical, never taken herself so seriously as an actor and director and even, with her two rather self-important return-to-Broadway albums (The Broadway Album and Back to Broadway), as a singer.

But I’m fascinated by Barbra’s unevenness, because in that unevenness there’s a restlessness and an irreverence. Often, the irreverence takes the form of a disrespect for the past, including her own past. No doubt some of her revocalizations (her now-classic, slow rendition of “Happy Days Are Here Again”) are more appealing than others (the Turkish-Armenian version of “People” on Barbra Streisand and Other Musical Instruments [1973]), but what stays constant in her work is the force of revision itself. Take the Back to Broadway album: she leaves no standard well enough alone; she turns duets into solos (“Move On” from Sunday
in the Park with George), solos into duets ("The Music of the Night" from The Phantom of the Opera, sung as a duet with Michael Crawford), re-writes harmonies ("Some Enchanted Evening"), adds salsa to what was once simply up-tempo ("Luck Be a Lady" from Guys and Dolls), restores long-discarded verses and bridges ("Children Will Listen" from Into the Woods), creates medleys where there were none (she synthesizes "I Have a Love" and "One Hand, One Heart" from West Side Story), expands and contracts at will. She's acting here on some of the same impulses (call it "bad taste" if you must) that made her put a shoe in her hair at the Lion in 1960, that made her sing "nobody is gonna rain on my parade" against the melody, and that made her so entertainingly, refreshingly unconventional. In an article on Barbra's recent album of spiritual music, Higher Ground (1997), the Village Voice critic Simon Frith argues, correctly I think, that "as Streisand's voice swells one can hear the thought in it, her consideration of one sound rather than another. There's an intellectual arrogance in Streisand's music at its best, a contempt for too easy melodic indulgence" (87). After all, it's precisely this kind of "arrogance"—this tendency toward aberrant interpretation—that ultimately attracted me to Barbra's film version of Hello, Dolly!, which was so different in so many ways from the famous and beloved Broadway original.

And Barbra's sometimes crass self-ignorance about her complicated, upstart relation to the past can seem, I think, somehow life-affirming. In her 1986 "One Voice" concert, for example, she prefaces her spectacular rendering of "Over the Rainbow" (in which she sings "somewhere" as a seven-syllable word!) with this faux-offhand disclaimer: "Recently I've been doing some research for an album that I'm planning to do, and I came across what is one of the finest songs, I think, ever written. But I thought I couldn't sing it because it's identified with one of the greatest singers who ever lived. But the lyrics felt so right, so relevant tonight, that, what the hell, I decided to sing it." It's as if she's saying, Judy Garland's life and death were wonderful and horrible, but they weren't the end of the world. Not only is tomorrow another day, but so is today.

It's too easy—too easy for me, at least—to feel abandoned by Barbra Streisand. And too easy to abandon her in return. So I've learned how to keep on forgiving her, to keep coming back to her, to let her change her mind, let her slip, go fuzzy around the edges, and then come back like a locomotive. Fearing abandonment myself, I've refused to abandon Barbra Streisand. It's a good partnership.

The day after the release of Just for the Record . . . (1991), Barbra's four-disc, thirty-year recording retrospective, including a good deal of never-before-issued material, I was describing the CD set to my therapist. At
first, I hesitated to bring it up. Why talk about Barbra Streisand now? I wondered. Don’t I have more important things to worry about? (For example, problems with my Herman Melville professor—how we were always disagreeing, and how I was thrust into the role of devil’s advocate although I was saying things that I believed, I wasn’t just saying things to get him angry, and how it was clearly a contest of wills. I would go into the class with a lot of ambitious ideas and with the hope that this time it would be different, but it wouldn’t be long before I felt utterly abused and reduced by his narrow agenda and his ability to fein ignorance and the way he forced people into silence and cut them off. And the thing he hated the most was whenever I would try to produce any kind of gay interpretation of the text—and I mean, come on, Herman Melville! Wasn’t it staring him right in the face? But I worried that my participation wasn’t encouraging other students to speak who may also have felt silenced by him for their own reasons and that I was, instead, just creating more and more animosity in the classroom. And then there were all the problems with my roommates—the drinking and fighting and all the mess they made whenever they would get into a fight, and how I hated to be in the middle of other people’s arguments. And problems with Gary, who by this time had left New York and moved to San Diego and wasn’t speaking to me because I had gotten furious with him the week before when he told me he had just tested negative for HIV, and how he’d said what a relief it was because he had been practicing unsafe sex and now he knew that everything was okay. And he said, “Why aren’t you happy for me?” and I said, “Gary, what you’re telling me is that you’ve been having unsafe sex. How can you expect me to be happy about that? Why don’t you take better care of yourself? Do you want to be alive or don’t you?” And what would my life be like, I wondered, if something should ever happen to Gary? How would I survive without my best friend? And all the problems with my family—my sister Suzanne was getting married, and why did I have to go to the wedding? Why must I be subjected to another heterosexual wedding? What would my family think of me when I told them that this time I wouldn’t attend? Would this be the last straw? Would they cut me off forever, never speak to me again? Would Suzanne understand that it wasn’t because I didn’t care about her? It was hard for me to explain why I couldn’t go to the wedding; all I knew was, I just can’t do it, I can’t go, I can’t put myself through that.)

But *Just for the Record* . . . had been on my mind a lot since the day before, and there was something I wanted to say about it, I wasn’t sure what—something I needed to feel. The best two things about it, I said, are the first and last cuts. The first is the earliest extant recording of Barbra’s voice, made in 1955 when she was thirteen, where she sings
"You’ll Never Know" to the accompaniment of a simple, plaintive piano. Then on the last cut, the fifty-year-old Barbra sings the same song as a duet with the recording of her thirteen-year-old self, now accompanied by a full, lush orchestra. I began to recite the words of the song: "You went away and my heart went with you. / I speak your name in my every prayer. / If there is some other way to prove that I love you..." I started to cry. "... I swear I don’t know how." I wept now wholeheartedly and couldn’t understand why. Except that my tears told me, there must be a reason. My therapist whispered consolingly, "Patrick... it sounds like a lovely duet... the voice breaks in a child that age... so there’s a forgiveness in the duet... and granting the child her own voice at the same time... think of a bar mitzvah, where the child is thirteen, and he
Figure 11. Barbra Streisand and her nineteen-month-old son, Jason Gould, on the set of *Hello, Dolly!*, July 1968. (Reprinted by permission of UPI/Corbis-Bettmann)
becomes a member of the community for the first time . . . or the First Holy Communion rite, where it's as if the child is alone before God, and receives the host on his tongue . . . I remember when you told me not long ago how your mother once said to you that one of the happiest and most important and memorable days of her entire life was the day of her First Holy Communion, as important as the day she got married, and the times she gave birth to you and your sisters and brother . . .”

“You'll never know if you don't know now,” the adult Barbra sings, holding, at last, her former, broken, bewildered, unknowing thirteen-year-old self close in her arms, collapsing the distance between them with the power and still-fresh innocence of her soaring, keening voice; “Darling, you'll never know if you don't know now . . .”