

## **Vegas Lies: Confessions of a Second-Grader**

In 1969, when I was eight years old, our family of nine moved from our farmhouse by the railroad tracks in southern Minnesota into the bunkhouse of a thousand-acre ranch in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The hot pink bunkhouse was quirky and small, with only two bedrooms and a tin roof, but living on a ranch was a great adventure for my six brothers and sisters and me. We spent the summer mostly outdoors, exploring the unfamiliar cowboy terrain. We rode horses and pretended to be pioneers and prospectors, pocketknives at the ready in case we encountered a rattlesnake.

When fall came, my dad had to drive us five older kids to the nearest town to catch a school bus to the *next* town. We'd pile in his pickup truck, two kids deep — no car seats in those days — and he'd drop us off at the bus stop before heading to work. It was a little intimidating to start second grade in a new school, two towns away from where we lived. The teacher introduced me on the first day, but most of my classmates had known each other since kindergarten or even before, and already had their friendships and alliances mapped out. Maybe that's why, when a bunch of kids came up to me at recess and asked me if I knew Dean Martin (the Dean Martin Show was popular at the time), I said without hesitation, "Yes, he's my dad."

The kids seemed to mostly not believe me, but a tiny wave of something, maybe respect, rippled through the group. It was just enough of a positive response for me to add, "And — my mom is one of the Ding-a-Ling sisters." I immediately regretted making this crazy assertion, but the moment didn't seem propitious to reframe the whole thing as a joke. Now nervous, I mentioned that we had considered moving to Nevada, to a ranch right next

door to Wayne Newton (which, strange as it sounds, was completely true) but no one seemed to know who Wayne Newton was and the conversation moved on to other topics, much to my relief.

Days and weeks passed. I made friends at my new school and none of them mentioned my Vegas connections, real or imagined, again. Maybe they were being kind, or maybe it wasn't a big part of their lives — but as my birthday approached, my outlandish tale was on *my* mind, and I was nervous. My mom would be bringing treats for my class, so I asked her, in what I hoped was a casual way, if she would wear one of her fancy card party outfits for my school celebration. I didn't say anything about Dean Martin or the Ding-a-Ling sisters, since we weren't even allowed to watch the show and I was pretty sure my mom would not appreciate being billed as one of Dean Martin's skimpily dressed back-up singers. I told my mom what kind of birthday treats I wanted and tried to put the entire thing out of my mind.

When my birthday arrived, I was outside digging in the dirt during afternoon recess when I saw our family's wood-paneled station wagon pull up in front of the school. The driver's side door opened, and my mom got out. Her thick brunette hair, usually pulled back in a practical ponytail, cascaded past her shoulders. She was wearing a powder blue fitted pantsuit, white high-heeled sandals, pink lipstick, and her movie-star style prescription sunglasses with blue frames. In her hand was an ice cream bucket filled with unfrosted chocolate cupcakes. (My favorite.)

All the kids around me stopped talking. My mom looked like a movie star. She was *waay* better than any of the Ding-A-Ling sisters, plus she had two dozen chocolate cupcakes for me to share with my friends. As I stood up to go meet her, I heard someone say, "Whose mom is THAT?"

I turned around, brushed my hands off on my pants and said to everyone within earshot, "That's *my* mom."