



## Unraveling Anne

An ignominious end can befall anyone—even a mother who twinkled among the bright lights of L.A.'s hippie heyday *by* LAUREL SAVILLE

“Murdered?”

The word always gets repeated—sometimes the whole sentence. “Your mother was murdered?”

As if I could get something like that wrong.

My mother, Anne Ford, was murdered.

It was November 3, 1983. I was a college student in New York. She was a mentally unstable alcoholic living in a classic California bungalow not far from the corner of Sunset and Vine. The house

had once been gracious and charming but, under her intermittent care, had fallen into disrepair. The back wall had been burned. Street people slept on the porch. A family of ducks lived in a tiny pond in the scrap of yard. The local police, who knew my mother as Crazy Annie, found her in a bedroom, stabbed and strangled, her sundress askew, her panties caught around an ankle and her squat-legged, one-eyed dog standing over

her body, growling at the uniformed intruders.

Some of these details I learned at the time of her death; others I learned 10 years later, when the police had reopened the case and, on a lucky break, found her killer. I came from my home in New York to the Hollywood homicide bureau, where I sat on a hard metal chair in a narrow space, flipping through a four-inch-thick black binder, somewhat nervously overseen by an enormous man with a gun on his hip.

At one point, he interrupted me. “Wait,” he said, pulling the book away and skipping to the section that held photos in plastic sleeves. “It’s not that I want to keep anything from you—”

“It’s just that there are some things I do not need

to see,” I interjected understandingly. He nodded, his face grave, grateful. In between the blank spaces where he had removed photos of the “victim” were images of rooms once notable for their elaborate woodwork but now marked by the black haze of smoke damage. A hall badge from my grammar school days peeked out from a pile of torn clothing, costume jewelry, garbage. Pieces of furniture I had napped on as a child were lopsided as if stone drunk.

There was one picture of her, an 8-by-10, full-color glossy. The detective told me it was taken some months before her death, when she had come into the police station to report having been beaten and raped. In the photo, my mother’s face was scrubbed clean, and her black



**ARC OF A SHORT LIFE** (clockwise from top left): Anne modeling in a movie still, as the muse for a John Altoon portrait, in a gown of her own creation and posing in her 1970s Laurel Canyon home.

hair was marked by scattered strands of gray. She was staring straight into the camera lens, her blue eyes faded but her expression proud—defiant, really.

When the picture was taken, my mother had been living on and off the streets for about six years. She had been drinking large quantities of cheap red wine and smoking packs of unfiltered cigarettes for more than 20 years. She hadn't had regular meals, health care or showers for more than five. Her mind was deeply deteriorated from all the ways her life had exacerbated its inherent flaws.

And yet before all this, my mother had been Miss Redondo Beach, a Fiesta Queen, model, fashion designer, artist and glamorous girl-about-town who had dated Marlon Brando. She knew how to take a good picture. And in this picture, she's posing. In this picture, the purples, blacks, blues and reds that in another part of her life might have been makeup came instead from a bruise spilling over her right eye and cheek. And in spite of everything, it showed a handsome woman who looked a decade younger than her 53 years.

I thought, *The most striking thing about my mother is not that she was murdered but that she survived her own life for as long as she did.*

It is also striking that my older brothers and I survived our childhoods with her. My

mother positioned herself in the epicenter of 1960s Los Angeles, and like most parents of that milieu, she thought nothing of bringing her three young children along for the ride.

My earliest memories are of the gatherings that so defined that era. Sometimes we would set out to join a horde collecting for a "love-in." Twisting my body like a cat that didn't want to be held, I would squirm as my mother's boyfriend, Henry, carried me to the car, begging to be left behind, while my mother exhorted me to stop being such a "drag." I didn't want to get flowers and rainbows painted on my face or beads and ribbons plaited into my hair. I didn't want to watch glassy-eyed people twirling in tie-dye skirts and peasant blouses—or without shirts

at all, their thin, bare chests and small, drooping breasts open to the air and sunshine as they tangled together on a blanket or in the mud, their mouths and limbs slack against one another.

If it was the Fourth of July, the party would be on Santa Monica or Malibu beach, and people would set up dozens of multicolored tents on the white sand. Every night, campfires and sparklers lit up the beach, and rockets and fireworks filled the sky. Henry organized a ring of campfire stones outside the flapping door of our army-surplus tent, while I spun sparklers and then collected the spent metal spikes so no one would step on them later.

After the weekend was over and the other tents were taken down, ours would still  
*Continued on page 58*

# AMERICA

WITH ICONIC AMERICAN DESIGN  
INVITE YOU TO EXPERIENCE OUR  
WELL-PRICED



**Mitch  
+ B**

LA 7960 3rd Street One  
323.651.0200 / M

South Coast Plaza Village 1661 W  
714.389.9300 / Mon thru Sat:

Hunter Sofa 100" w x 39" d x 31" h in a crème textured solid (S  
early December), Manning Cocktail Table 58" w x 25" d x 14  
\$1595 (available January), Rubix Lamp 30.5" h in cinnabar \$2

## PERSONAL SPACE

Continued from page 18

stand, alone on the beach, littered with dried-up seaweed, empty shells and cans of beer, a lone sandal, a plastic bucket with a broken handle, damp clothes jammed into corners. Our faces would be glazed, our hair tangled with sea spray, our tans invisible under the salt encrusting our skin. Days later, when the food and booze had finally run out, Henry would drag everything out of the tent, pile it on a blanket and tie the corners together, while my mother sat in the detritus, crying that she didn't want to go back to the dirty dishes, the bills, the bastards downtown.

Other times the party was in the hills above Malibu, at a friend's glass-walled house where nudity was the norm. Sometimes it was at Barney's Beanery, where I wove myself around the barstools, asking again and again when we were going home, my leaden voice drowned out by the din of what my mother called witty repartee. Sometimes the party started down on La Cienega, in an art gallery called Ferus, where adults stood, elbows cupped in hand, discussing things like "white space" and "irony," and I wandered through the scattered forest of adult legs clad in fishnet stockings or white go-go boots, slick pants with flared-out legs or simply skin that disappeared into the faraway hem of a miniskirt.

But most often, the party took place at our own house, a sprawling, stuccoed behemoth at the corner of Fairfax and Sunset, where people arrived with brown bags of Coors, Gallo burgundy and Pall Mall Reds, as well as instruments, sketchpads and stories. They sat around and played and talked and smoked and drank and drew one another playing and talking

and smoking and drinking. An accretion of glasses with rings of dried wine, ad hoc ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts, felt-tip pens with snub-nosed tips, jugs of graywater, tin cans filled with brushes and palettes cluttered with smudges of paint grew on whatever surface was nearby. Hands and arms were in constant motion, filling a glass, wrapping a shoulder, dragging a child into a lap, strumming a guitar, rolling a joint, shaking a cigarette up out of a pack, jogging across a pad of paper.

To me, my mother's friends were just drunks in paint-spattered jeans. But she filled our home with their work, arranging dozens of paintings and drawings against the dark blue walls of our living room, their mere presence a promise that all this was going to amount to something someday.

According to Joan Didion, the era ended with the Manson murders in August 1969. But for my mother, the party never ended. Darkness began to surround us—war, gas crisis, stock-market crash, recession. She became more combative and paranoid. Parties were no longer attended by the up and coming but by a motley group of wannabes and has-beens.

And yet a newspaper reporter who visited her more or less perpetual garage sale in 1970 wrote, "The whole scene is obviously real and not a trip. Anne sparkles...in the July heat." In 1981, an official investigating her habit of starting campfires in a vacant lot and relieving herself on neighbors' property, said: "She was going to turn this into a little Shangri-la...It was the typical thing of the free spirit versus city hall." Up to her last days, she was filling smoke-stained sketchbooks with dress designs and plans for a renovation on her fire-damaged home that counted on "flower children coming down from

the Hollywood Hills to restore Queen Anne to her throne" in a house with a glass roof, "so I'll never feel closed in again."

My mother embodied all the reckless, selfish innocence of the time and place in which she first flourished. It's no wonder she refused to let it go. It's no wonder it was the death of her.

After my mother was killed, there was little left behind other than paintings. Picking through them in a dark garage on a gray day a few weeks later, still encased in the fog of shock, the stories she had told me about each piece drifted back. A painting of surfers rendered in flat blocks of chalky color was by John Altoon, her "first great love," unsigned because she had taken it out of the garbage, where he threw so much of his work. A plaster-of-Paris piece of wedding cake was a party favor created by someone named Claes Oldenburg. A small square with an apple green heart surrounded by bands of blue was by her friend Billy Al Bengston. An accordion book of Sunset Strip photos was made by someone named Ed Ruscha.

As a child, those stories had meant little. But even before her death, I had begun to see these same names elsewhere, printed on little cards stuck on the walls of great museums. The Ferus Gallery is now the stuff of documentaries and coffee-table books. Altoon's drawings go for tens of thousands, and Ruscha's book, which I never tired of stretching out to its full length across our wine-stained and cigarette-burned living-room rug, is now a collector's item.

I had begun to wonder why these men made it and she didn't. My childhood had been filled with a chorus of voices telling me how talented my mother was. Clearly, talent was not enough.

I began to wonder less about the toll the '60s had taken on

To me, my mother's friends were just drunks in paint-spattered jeans. But she filled our home with their work, arranging dozens of paintings and drawings against the dark blue walls of our living room, their mere presence a promise that all this was going to amount to something someday. According to Joan Didion, the era ended with the Manson murders in August 1969. But for my mother, the party never ended.

her and more about what she might have been a part of. I began to want to see her life as more than a headlong tumble toward a tragic death and my own life as something more than an antidote to hers. I began to realize there were three women I wanted to know better: my mother as I knew her, my mother as she was before I knew her, and myself. To go forward, I first needed to go back.

LAUREL SAVILLE, author of several books, numerous articles and short stories, is a corporate communications consultant with an MFA from Bennington College. She lives and works in New York, in a 100-year-old brick building on the banks of the Mohawk River, overlooking the Erie Canal.

Adapted from *Unraveling Anne: A Memoir of My Mother's Reckless Life and Tragic Death*. Copyright AmazonEncore. Used with permission, all rights reserved.

# Crate

