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Note on Sources and Structure

This book relies on personal memory, newspaper clippings, research on contextual history, and interviews. Chapter 1 begins with my childhood memories of my mother's first run for local elected office; chapters 2–8 rely extensively on newspaper clippings my father cataloged during Mom's mayoral years, after I moved away from home; and chapter 9 relates to my mother's post-electoral life. The chapters move chronologically from 1959 to the present.

Distinct from the chapters are Flash Forwards, which are interspersed among the chapters and focus entirely on Mom's 1986 campaign for governor. I call these "flash forwards" because they transport the reader forward in time to moments in my mother's race for governor. The Flash Forwards include my snapshot memories after I joined her campaign for governor. After each Flash Forward the reader returns again to a chapter account of an earlier chronology along Mom's political path. The one exception to the Flash Forward sequence is the Flash Backward ("Roots—All Greek to Me"), which appears between chapters 4 and 5; as its name suggests, the Flash Backward goes back in time to my parents' family roots rather than forward in time to the 1986 governor's race. The specific time periods covered in the chapters, Flash Forwards, and Flash Backward are noted as each begins.

Asterisks (*) within the text indicate further explanation or commentary that can be found by locating corresponding page numbers and asterisks in the Notes section at the end of the book. The Notes section contains both the explanatory notes (marked with asterisks) and the sources for quotations or information in the book.

I interviewed, both locally and nationally, thirty-five people with a range of personal perspectives on my mother's political life, and their interview quotations are spread throughout the book. And, of course, I interviewed my mom and dad for their reflections and insights in framing the story to add to my view as a daughter.

Introduction

Traveler, there is no path. The path is made by walking.

—ANTONIO MACHADO Y RUIZ

I have known my mom for fifty-nine years. Perhaps I should subtract two or three of those that I cannot now remember, but I knew my mother even during those years. I knew her in the way most children, even grown ones, know their mothers—as a being whose purpose is my well-being.

Granted, as children mature we develop a slightly less egocentric, one-dimensional view of our mothers, but my appreciation of my mother remained skewed by her devotion to me. How can you be objective about the person who is your ultimate cheerleader, who loves you unconditionally, who believes you can do no wrong? The short answer is, you can't.

I knew when I set out to write this book about my mother that attaining objectivity about her would not be possible. But that was not my goal. My quest sprang from a desire to know more of the whole woman, not only the mother parts.

Familiar to me were Mom's political accomplishments, unusual for a woman of her era: elected city council member in Lincoln, Nebraska, my hometown; mayor and chief executive of Lincoln; first woman president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors; and Democratic nominee for governor of Nebraska in the country's first two-woman gubernatorial election. But I wanted to walk that path alongside her—to grasp more fully the twists and turns of struggle, joy, disappointment, satisfaction, frustration, and triumph that she encountered along her way.

And I wanted to understand what kept her going on the path that was not a path before she walked it. What illuminated her next uncharted steps, renewed her strength after falling, nourished her determination? Was she graced with a special set of qualities, or did she learn what she

needed along the way? Is she unique, or one of us? Can one not only admire her example but also find the same within? Can I?

You see, I wrote the book for myself. I chose the moments that most intrigued me, my own cups of tea. My mother's own story, were she telling it, would be different. For one thing, Mom will undoubtedly think the book is too much about her and not enough about those who supported her, especially my dad.

But this is my story, my version of one woman's remarkable journey—a woman who is also my mother.

Flash Forward

Calling Me Home

March 1986

An unfamiliar voice at the other end of the phone asked, “Is this Mary Beth?” Immediately the question engaged my Nebraska self—Nebraska, where I was known for eighteen years as Mary Beth before going off to college, where I was M.B., and eventually dropping Mary altogether by the time I married. Mary Beth had always sounded southern to me anyway, though I liked being named after my grandmothers, Mary and Bertha (Beth and Bertha are the same in Greek: Panayiota).

This disembodied phone voice was calling me by my familial, familiar, Nebraska name—and not my grown-up name, Beth. Who was it? “You don’t know me. My name is Neil Oxman and I’m working with your mother’s campaign.”

“Oh hi,” I managed to interrupt the increasingly emphatic, eastern-accented caller.

“Look, you don’t know me. I don’t know you. But everyone I’ve talked to here in Nebraska agrees that you need to come home. Your mom needs your help and people say you’ll know what to do. Besides, you’re the only child, so it’s up to you.”

I sat at the kitchen table, surrounded by stacks of unread memos for my Evanston City Council meeting that evening, feeling both assaulted by and drawn to this stranger’s insistent tone. I don’t remember the rest of the conversation, just that I hung up with a vague promise that I’d see what was possible at my end.

A week later, I stepped off the United plane in Lincoln with Christopher and all the baby paraphernalia that accompanies a two-year-old.

Christopher's older brother, Michael, stayed home with his dad to go to kindergarten. As Chris and I heaved ourselves out of the jetway into the waiting arms of my dad, I didn't know that this would be the first of many commuting trips between Chicago and Lincoln, and that my life for the next seven months would be bifurcated.

As we arrived in Lincoln that blustery March day in 1986, I still felt torn about leaving home but clung to my husband Max's parting words: "Of course you have to do this for your mom . . . it's one of those once-in-a-lifetime things . . . you don't question, you just do it."

In Lincoln I had to race to catch up with the status of the governor's race. Mom hadn't had a moment to fill me in on her campaign. All I knew was that it had ejected from the launch pad at the eleventh hour, just like all her earlier campaigns.

But this time the lateness of my mother's decision to run for elected office was not of her making. Nebraska Democrats were in disarray when the popular governor Bob Kerrey stunned the state by announcing his decision not to seek a second term. In late October 1985, a year before the end of his first term, Governor Kerrey made his surprise announcement, saying he no longer had any desire to hold the office. One reporter speculated that Kerrey's absence from the race would be good for the Democratic Party because he had been "indifferent" to the party—his party affiliation had not appeared to be important to him or to play a significant role in his administrative appointments. Some political leaders thought the absence of the "charismatic and sometimes controversial bachelor" from the governor's race would drain excitement from the contest.

Not long after Governor Kerrey's bowing out, speculation about likely gubernatorial primary candidates began. On the Democratic side, Omaha mayor Mike Boyle and state Game and Parks director Gene Mahoney were viewed as banner carriers for conservative Omaha Democrats, including organized labor. Lincoln liberals hoped to persuade Lincoln's former mayor Helen Boosalis—my mother—to enter the race, although state senators Chris Beutler (Lincoln) and Vard Johnson (Omaha) were also potentially acceptable to Lincoln Democrats. On the Republican side, early speculation identified state GOP chairman Kermit Brashear, who had been busy bashing Kerrey after studying his record and vulnerabilities; Nancy Hoch, an unsuccessful U.S. Senate

candidate the year before; U.S. representative Hal Daub; and state treasurer Kay Orr.

In the wake of Kerrey's unexpected October announcement, the cast of potential candidates shifted throughout the fall. Mayor Boyle removed himself from consideration early. My mother responded to pressure to run by saying that she would probably not decide until January 1986 to allow time to judge her depth of support and ability to raise money. Several other Democrats were quick to fill the vacuum and jumped in the race early, including Norfolk attorney David Domina and state senators Chris Beutler and Marge Higgins (Omaha).

In December 1985 Mom and Dad flew to Chicago to spend the holidays with us, and Mom "did all the motherly and grandmotherly things—baked cookies, played in the snow." As always, she jazzed our boys' bedtime with her elaborate and hilarious stories. She let them cover themselves and the kitchen in flour as they clumsily used the rolling pin and sprinkled colored sugar on Christmas cookies.

During their holiday visit I don't remember Mom agonizing or even mulling over her decision to run for Nebraska's top elected office. I wonder if self-absorption with my own hectic life as a parent and a first-term city alderman obscured my view of the magnitude of her imminent decision. Perhaps she deliberately kept her own counsel and used the geographic distance from the roiling political waters of Nebraska's wide-open governor's contest to take a break and just enjoy her family. In any event, my mother returned to Nebraska ready to resign her cabinet position in the Kerrey administration—she had decided to run to succeed him as governor.

On February 3, 1986, Mom made her formal announcement to enter the Democratic gubernatorial primary race. She had planned to launch her campaign in Lexington in rural Dawson County to emphasize the importance of the state's farm communities, then fly to communities across the state—Omaha, South Sioux City, Grand Island, Kearney, North Platte, and Scottsbluff—on a whirlwind two-day announcement trip. But thick fog blanketed the Lincoln area that morning, and the pilot of the twin-engine plane nixed the day's plans. Undaunted, Mom and her campaign group piled in a van before dawn to cover as much of her original announcement tour as possible.

In the rush of changing plans and the excitement of the mission, no one had eaten breakfast. About thirty miles southeast of Lincoln the van stopped in Unadilla, population 291. The fog may have thwarted the travel plans of the eager campaign group, but they lucked into breakfast at Horstman's Café, where the special was sausage gravy and biscuits—\$1.25 for a huge plate, and a half order for 75 cents. While others in her group worked their way through their bountiful half orders, Mom worked her way with exuberance through the café's Formica-top tables, shaking hands and receiving a warm welcome from Otoe County farmers and a solitary banker. Although unplanned and unscripted, the breakfast in Unadilla proved an inspiring start to my mother's campaign for governor.

On home turf in Lincoln later that day after campaign stops in Omaha and South Sioux City, Mom announced her gubernatorial candidacy at Isco, a homegrown scientific instruments company founded by family friend Bob Allington, who grew the business from his garage and basement into a global enterprise. Then, after two days of news conferences and appearances across the state by the newest Democratic primary candidate, the nascent Boosalis for Governor campaign held a large rally on February 5 at Lincoln's Cornhusker Hotel. My mother told the jubilant crowd jammed in the ballroom, "You are going to give Nebraska its first woman governor, Helen Boosalis!" Coincidentally, attending the annual dinner of the Association of Commerce and Industry that same evening in the hotel's adjoining banquet room were two other women who also had hopes of becoming the state's first woman governor—Republican primary candidates Nancy Hoch and Kay Orr.

With the primary only three months away, pundits predicted the winners to be Republican Nancy Hoch and Democrat Helen Boosalis and anticipated their parties' campaign strategies. Prevailing views were that Democratic candidates would be forced to concentrate their campaigns in Omaha, Lincoln, and larger Platte Valley towns where the most Democratic votes lay, with Omaha being the major battleground. Because Republican voters were not as concentrated in population centers and major news media markets, Republican candidates were predicted to fan out into heavily Republican rural areas without relying as much on media coverage in the primary.

A month after her announcement, Mom named campaign co-chairs to expand her bases of geographic and political support: Omaha attorney Ben Nelson, former state insurance director and Nebraska co-chair of President Carter's reelection campaign; and Maurine Biegert of Shickley, former Democratic National Committeewoman in the Third Congressional District (rural western Nebraska) and active in the successful campaigns of Democratic governors Frank Morrison, J. J. Exon, and Bob Kerrey.

By the primary filing deadline in mid-March 1986, seven Democrats and eight Republicans had filed to run for governor, setting a gubernatorial primary record of fifteen candidates and surpassing the previous state record of fourteen in 1934. In most non-presidential primaries fewer than 50 percent of registered voters go to the polls. Nebraska had a total of only 850,000 registered voters (42 percent Democrats and 51 percent Republicans), and state law allowed election of primary nominees by a plurality of votes rather than a majority. The fifteen candidates for governor would surely have to scour the state for every vote if they hoped to emerge as primary winners.

Such a crowded field made it difficult to distinguish singular voices from the chorus of candidates putting forth their programs for economic development, agricultural assistance, school financing, streamlined government, and a host of other state issues. One reporter viewed the primary campaign as a "performance overflowing with actors and actresses all trying to play the lead."

How to pull away from the pack was each candidate's dilemma. An *Omaha World-Herald* poll at the end of March, only six weeks before the primary election, showed both parties facing close three-way races. On the Republican side, Nancy Hoch led with 26 percent of those polled, but Kermit Brashear and Kay Orr were in a close fight for second with 17 and 16 percent, respectively. The Democrats were even more closely grouped, with my mother and Chris Beutler tied at 17 percent and David Domina at 12 percent. Although Mom may have enjoyed strong name recognition and an early lead, some questioned whether her campaign was being too cautious given that the largest percentage of Democratic voters seemed to be undecided and that her Democratic support in Omaha—the Second Congressional District battleground

and must-win for any Democratic gubernatorial hopeful—appeared to be weaker than in the other two congressional districts.

In the crowded primary field, endorsements played some role in distinguishing one candidate from another. As sitting governor, Bob Kerrey declined to choose publicly his favored candidate among the seven Democrats running in the party primary. Former governor Frank Morrison eagerly endorsed my mother, saying, “The Democratic Party has several candidates who are competent, but none has the experience that Helen has.” On the Republican side, former state governor Nobby Tie-mann endorsed Nancy Hoch in the primary and suggested that “voters take the opportunity to retire Kay Orr, an ‘againster,’ from politics”—leading some to speculate that a rift between the conservative and more progressive wings of the Republican party was reemerging.

In its endorsement of my mother, the *Lincoln Journal* noted that the former Lincoln mayor had “earned . . . permanent foes” for “her insistence on putting public concerns before individual private interests, as a councilperson and as mayor” and praised her for her “amazing store of personal energy and an astonishing empathy with and for people.” Somewhat inconsistently, the *Journal* admitted that its “single greatest concern about Helen Boosalis is her age. Being governor is an energy-draining, non-stop job.”

While none of the candidates blatantly focused on the age issue, news stories often referenced Democrat David Domina, age thirty-five, as potentially the youngest Nebraska governor to be elected in seventy years, and Helen Boosalis, who would be sixty-seven before the general election, as potentially the oldest governor to take office. My mother’s response: “I know people who are old at 30 and young at 85.” Had anyone asked, I would have told them of my dream to catch up someday to Mom’s energy level; instead, I had to accept her ability to run circles around me when I was eighteen, twenty-eight, thirty-eight (my age when she ran for governor). Even now her stamina confounds me.

With tight races in both parties heading into the home stretch before the May primary, statewide advertising became critical. “This may be more of a contest between ad agencies or shoe leather than a struggle of ideas,” one reporter said of the crowded field of primary candidates. “Voters may be left to choose . . . the one with the most, or the best,

tv ads.” Prior to the close *Omaha World-Herald* poll results published on March 30, only Democrat Domina and Republicans Brashear and Orr had run television ads; my mother and Republican front-runner Nancy Hoch had yet to advertise on tv, with only six weeks to go before the primary election on May 13.

Before my hasty last-minute trip to Lincoln, toddler in tow, I was in the dark about most of these campaign details that had transpired in the period after my folks’ Christmas visit, Mom’s announcement of her candidacy in February, and the heating up of the crowded primary campaign in March. The phone call from Neil Oxman had interrupted my self-absorbed young adult life of marriage, family, and career and persuasively commanded my attention to Mom’s campaign for governor. Now I was stepping off the plane and into the fray.

On the short drive to my parents’ home from the Lincoln airport, my dad seemed distracted and somewhat edgy. We didn’t even play our usual game from my childhood: when returning from annual family trips to Minnesota, the three of us—Mom, Dad, and I—strained to be the first to glimpse Lincoln’s majestic capitol building rising from the plains, thereby winning a nickel from the other two. Instead, Dad spoke of the tightening primary race for governor and his concern for Mom’s well-being and her stressful campaign schedule.

After settling Christopher with a babysitter that afternoon, I headed for Mom’s campaign headquarters in downtown Lincoln, a warren of small offices and cubicles in a good location off O Street. Once inside I was bombarded by the boisterous buttons, banners, posters and signs, all screaming the name—my name—BOOSALIS. People were cordial but busy—no, frantic—with the May primary election less than two months away.

An imposing, chain-smoking woman commandeered the under-sized reception desk, managing to give me a fragmented welcome between incessant rings of the multi-button phone, “Boosalis for Governor. Please hold. . . . Boosalis for Governor. One moment.” Between rings I took in the room, seeking signs of order in the chaos. Boxes and placards and pamphlets were stacked in corners, under tables, behind doors. At one end of a long table a woman instructed volunteers on the fine points of stuffing envelopes. Glancing down the hallway of offices

leading from this circus ring, I heard the receptionist tell someone I had arrived.

Then I met the voice—the voice from my kitchen phone call a week earlier. Neil Oxman came striding out of one of the offices down the hall. Big, I mean really huge, with black curly hair and an intensity in his gaze and his movements that made you feel like you'd been caught taking an afternoon nap. I knew little about him—I'd picked up only scraps of information in the nanosecond conversations with my mom as I rushed to make preparations to leave Illinois and answer this stranger's siren song.

Before getting Neil's call, I knew almost nothing about the hectic weeks after my mother's announcement of her candidacy—nothing about assembling from scratch a full-blown campaign viable enough to defeat the other six Democratic candidates in the primary: prepping for candidate forums, outlining issues, leasing office space, organizing volunteers, scheduling speeches, choosing colors and logos and slogans to sling, finding and hiring professionals who knew how to run a statewide, not local, campaign—and, of course, raising the money to make this overwhelming challenge somehow attainable.

On that March day I arrived in Lincoln, all I knew about Neil Oxman was that his firm, the Campaign Group, was the Boosalis campaign's "media consultant," but I had almost no idea what media consultants do. I had some vague notion that they are the ones who make political ads for tv, some kind of thirty-second-spot producers. I was right, but only about a portion of Neil's broad-ranging role in the campaign.

I was to learn, painfully, that in a statewide campaign, unlike local, grassroots efforts, the ability to get the candidate's message on tv effectively and frequently—to feed the voracious, insatiable media monster—is the campaign's major driving force. Sometimes you can feed the monster table scraps of news stories with hopes of getting free media coverage, but that won't satisfy the beast's relentless hunger for large wads of cash in exchange for ridiculously little advertising airtime. And that was Neil's job—to feed the media monster.

I didn't know all this at the moment of my introduction to the campaign, when Neil strode in. All I knew was that Mom and her campaign manager, Marg Badura, after a few harried days of interviewing, had