

Craig Fishbane

Molly Webber Has Arrived

When Debi Storm first contacted Charlie Epstein last month, he could never have imagined that it would lead to the chain of events that would get him kicked out of a charity auction, banned from an art gallery and threatened with legal action by a well-known actress. He certainly never pictured himself—a flabby four-eyed couch potato—having to all but carry a grown woman through a parted crowd and get her seated in a taxi that had been hailed by a security guard. All things considered, Charlie figured that he had gotten exactly what he deserved for inviting this woman to be his first date since his wife had left him.

“I’m afraid I made quite a spectacle of myself,” Debi Storm said, running pale fingers through strands of shoulder-length hair, each lock dyed jet black. Several wrinkles were visible through layers of rouge as her lips curved into a thin smile. “I admit I have a bit of a flair for the dramatic.”

She moved haltingly as she led Charlie up the fourth and final flight of stairs to her apartment. Even in her current state, she managed to look fabulous: a ruined beauty to be sure, but beautiful nonetheless. Her red dress accentuated the curvature of her hips as long legs continued towards the landing, black pumps clicking on one step after the next.

“Throwing the champagne was a bit much,” Charlie said. “But I guess I should have expected it.”

“You may not believe this,” Debi Storm said, “especially now that I’ve ruined your evening, but I’m truly flattered that you invited me tonight.”

“What choice did I have?” Charlie replied, brushing salt-and-pepper bangs from tortoise-shell glasses. “It’s not every day you meet the woman who could have been Jan Brady.”

Her name was a footnote in Charlie’s self-published trivia guide, *Don’t Play Ball in the House: The Untold History of The Brady Bunch*, available on Amazon for two dollars. Her story earned a place in the final paragraph of chapter two. Debi Storm was one of six actors who might have become TV stars if only their hair had been the right color.

Before Robert Reed and Florence Henderson were cast as the Brady parents, no one knew whether the boys or the girls would, as the theme song put it, have hair of gold. So the producer, Sherwood Schwartz, picked two sets of children to be available for the pilot.

The first group featured the kids who went on to become celebrities, faces familiar to generations of fans. The second group—consisting of three blonde males and three dark-haired females—had been all but forgotten, lost in the vagaries of the production schedule.

“Don’t mince words,” Debi Storm said. “I *should* have been Jan Brady. Wait until the world hears the sordid details. We’ll have a best-seller.”

Charlie grimaced. He was no author. He was an accountant at a cable company. The book was his way of filling time since the divorce. His shrink told him it was a way of returning to the safe memories of childhood afternoons spent in front of the television.

Charlie was a connoisseur of vintage reruns: *The Partridge Family*, *Gilligan’s Island* and, most of all, *The Brady Bunch*. Although he was well aware of how cheesy these shows seemed in retrospect, he would never

deny how the characters from each series had once been his friends, his babysitters, even his role models. During post-divorce therapy sessions, he agonized over whether it had been more difficult to live up to the expectations of his actual father or those of Mike Brady.

His marriage had been the typical sort of relationship that people like Charlie often found themselves in. His wife was the caretaker who was looking for someone to mold and he was the lump of inert clay looking to be animated. She got him to move out of his parent's basement and pursue his associate's degree. He helped her to relax and enjoy quiet nights in front of the TV.

For over a decade, this had been enough. Then came the fights, the arguments over everything from his lack of ambition to her desire for children. After a winter of marriage counseling and nights spent mostly in separate rooms, Charlie finally came home to an empty house. The note from his wife was discretely placed on the DVD-shelf between the special editions of *The Brady Bunch*, seasons one and two.

He spent the next several months working on his book and then started a blog to promote it. Charlie had assumed it was a practical joke when Debi Storm contacted his twitter account. He discovered that she had left five-star reviews on both Yelp and Good Reads. Their relationship progressed from direct messages to texts to long midnight telephone conversations, where she assured Charlie that he was the man who would tell the world the truth about her stolen destiny.

"I don't blame you for holding a grudge," Charlie said as he stepped onto the fourth floor landing, "but did you really have to toss an entire flute of champagne in Eve Plumb's face?"

He knew it wasn't a good idea to bring them together: the woman who aspired to be Jan Brady and the actress who got the part. Eve Plumb would be signing autographs at a charity auction at a downtown art gallery. Charlie had won two free passes at last month's Brady Mania convention in Detroit. Debi Storm sent

two or three texts a day, imploring Charlie to take her as his guest until he finally gave in. The evening had been a heady whirlwind of flirtatious banter until the announcement went out that Eve Plumb had arrived. Debi Storm rushed to the bar for the glass of sparkling wine that would lead to their early exit.

“It isn’t like I tried to kill her,” Debi Storm said.

She reached into her handbag for a key and then unlocked her door. The apartment was heaped with what seemed to be the detritus of every *Brady Bunch* convention Charlie had ever attended. Piled on tabletops and wooden shelves and even on the cushions of the sofa, there were unopened containers with plastic figurines of Greg and Bobby, cups and mugs with color photographs of Cindy and Marcia, metal lunch boxes with cartoon drawings of the six Brady kids and even a cardboard cut-out of Alice the maid propped-up against the back wall.

“Nice place,” Charlie said, lingering at the threshold.

Debi Storm waded through the waves of accumulated memorabilia. She dropped her handbag on the coffee table and pulled out a disk from beneath a pair of stockings on the love seat. She inserted the disk into a DVD player and then gestured for Charlie to join on the sofa as a familiar theme song began to play.

“I thought we might share a bit of ancient history,” Debi Storm said. “My one appearance with the Brady family.”

“Molly Webber,” Charlie said as he stepped into the apartment. “The plain Jane that Marcia Brady made over into prom queen material. Season 3, Episode 22.”

“My finest taste of life in front of the cameras. It’s been a struggle ever since.”

Moving gingerly past an oversized plush version of Tiger, the Brady family’s dog, Charlie approached the sofa and squeezed next to Debi Storm. She took Charlie’s hand and sighed.

“Do you know what I hate most about these actors?” she said. “They give us a glimpse of heaven and then mock our desire to join them.”

Charlie glanced at a poster of the Brady sisters framed on the wall behind the television. Their golden locks had been replaced by crude strokes of black magic marker.

“We still have to discuss the terms of our partnership,” Debi Storm said.

Charlie took a deep wheezing breath.

“You still want to work on the book?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Charlie adjusted his glasses.

“Debi Storm has a house in Florida and a restaurant in Dallas,” he said. “She had a successful career as a TV extra.”

Debi Storm’s lips curved into a precise smile.

“I see you’ve been investigating my life,” she said. “You know you can’t believe everything you read on the internet.”

“It was the official website.”

“How long have you been conducting your research?”

“Ever since you first wrote to me,” Charlie said.

“I’m not sure I understand. Why would you lead me on?”

“Lead you on?”

“Why would invite me to meet Eve Plumb tonight if you had so many doubts?”

Charlie lowered his head.

“Because I couldn’t find anyone else to go with me.”

Charlie braced himself for a slap on the face. This was what he deserved for following the advice of his therapist, who had instructed Charlie to ignore his concerns. After all, the reasoning went, it had been years since Charlie had been on a date. He should just go and enjoy himself, questions about her identity be damned. Charlie would have to fire his shrink as soon as he got home.

Debi Storm did not seem angry, however. She gazed at Charlie with a kind of compassion that bordered on condescension, pinching him gently on the cheek.

“You poor boy,” she said. “So confused. If you let me, I can help you. We still can come to an understanding.”

“What kind of understanding?”

“A little conspiracy against the established order of things. We don’t need those faces on the screen to tell us who we are. It’s time we take control of the script.”

Debi Storm held both sides of Charlie’s face with perfumed palms.

“I need your words to confirm the validity of my narrative,” she said.

“I wish I could help.”

“Then why are you stopping yourself?”

Charlie couldn’t believe she was going to make him say it. He kept waiting for her to send him on his way, to preempt this episode before it came to its inevitable awkward conclusion. But her pale fingers kept pressing against his throbbing temples until the words emerged from Charlie’s lips.

“Because you’re not Debi Storm!”

Canned laughter erupted from the television. Debi Storm narrowed her eyes as a splash of organ music indicated the transition from one scene to the next.

“You do realize that saying those words won’t make them true.”

Debi Storm reached for her handbag.

“So disappointing,” she said. “I thought you would be different from the others.”

Before Charlie could move, Debi Storm had pulled out a pocketknife and brandished it in front of his face.

“Not quite as pretty as Eve Plumb,” she said. “Not quite so much to lose.”

Charlie briefly considered what might have happened to Eve Plumb’s champagne-soaked profile if the security guards had not arrived so quickly. Debi Storm thrust the blade towards his left cheek and he blocked it with his elbow, knocking the pocketknife onto the carpet. Charlie reached for the handle an instant before Debi Storm made her own desperate lunge. The blade penetrated just above her wrist, slicing a thin red line a centimeter beneath the base of her thumb.

“I’m not going to make it,” she cried, sprawled out on the floor next to a day-glow t-shirt embossed with the slogan *It’s Going to be a Sunshine Day*. Charlie climbed down from the sofa and squinted at her wound. It didn’t look much deeper than a paper cut. He began wrapping the shirt around her hand.

“You’re going to be fine,” he said.

“I’m not going to make it,” Debi Storm insisted. “I’ll never be invited to 4222 Clinton Way.”

Charlie nodded at the recitation of the Brady home address. As he had noted in chapter seven of *Don’t Play Ball in the House*, the address was first mentioned in season one, episode seven. The story featured

Jan, naturally enough. She received a gift in the mail from a mysterious secret admirer: a golden locket that became precious to her until she lost it.

“4222 Clinton Way,” Debi Storm intoned. “The Clinton Way of the Mind. There’s always a swing in the patio, a seat at the dinner table, a space in the family room. 4222 Clinton Way, I return to you every night, but no one hears me knock.”

Charlie finished tying the t-shirt around her hand and then reached for the knife. He picked it up by the handle and stared at the bloody smudge on the tip.

“I suppose you’re going to look for your next victim now,” Debi Storm said.

“Victim?”

“You like to think you’re sweet and innocent but you’re not,” Debi Storm said. “You build your women up, make them think they’re a star. You give us a taste of the glory we all crave. And then when you discover that we’re not what you think we are, you kill us.”

Charlie got to his feet and stumbled towards the kitchenette. The sink was filled with dirty dishes. Charlie turned on the faucet and began washing the knife.

“You don’t want to be with us unless we’re television characters.” Debi Storm said, her voice fading to a whisper. “I can’t fathom how someone lives such a dishonest life.”

Charlie winced. He had heard such accusations before. He remembered his ex-wife lamenting during one their counseling sessions that he would never pay as much attention to her as he did his blessed reruns. She cried when he told her that at least his television shows made him happy every night.

“I think you know a thing or two about dishonest living,” Charlie said.

“You’ve probably figured out by now that Eve Plumb was just one in a long series of betrayals,” Debi Storm said. “There wasn’t any one episode that brought me to where I am today. Some of us are fortunate enough to emulate the actors who succeed. The only part left for me to play was the one who failed.”

Charlie dried the knife with a paper towel and placed it in his shirt pocket.

“Before you leave me,” Debi Storm said, “I need to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any doubts I would have been a fabulous Jan Brady?”

Charlie turned off the faucet.

“I don’t have any doubts at all.”

Debi Storm closed her eyes and smiled.

“Thank you for the marvelous audition,” she whispered.

The only sound remaining in the room came from the television. Debi Storm—that other Debi Storm—was portraying Molly Webber in her moment of glory, sporting a striped polo shirt unbuttoned at the collar. She had been transformed by Marcia Brady into one of the most popular girls at Westdale High. Her makeover was so successful that Molly Webber was now competing against Marcia to be the hostess of the senior banquet. The eldest Brady sister could not believe the ingratitude, but her raven-haired rival would have none of it.

“It doesn’t make any difference how I got here,” Molly Webber said. “The point is I’ve arrived.”