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NEW YORK

BESS AND THE MESS

MYERSON'S
SLIDE INTO
SCANDAL

BY PATRICIA
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BESS MYERSON DOES NOT KEEP A NEAT POCKETBOOK. She's dumping the contents of her purse onto a couch, and little scraps of paper—quotations she's scribbled from books—are everywhere. They look like fortune-cookie messages that should have been thrown out with the chopsticks and the extra packets of soy sauce. "I keep them to reassure myself," she says. Myerson, 62, searches through the pile until she finds the one she wants. "She has learned softness from the privilege of failure," she reads. "'God knows, she has bitten the bullet. She's had failures and that has made her more tender.'"

She stares at the message for what seems like a very long time. "Look," she says finally. "I'm a target. I'm interesting. People like to read about me. They like to imagine themselves in my life."

It's doubtful many people would care to trade places with Myerson right now. She is the subject of a special city investigation because of her involvement with contractor Carl "Andy" Capasso. Myerson calls Capasso "a man of tremendous personal integrity"; unfortunately, the federal government doesn't share that opinion. Next week, on March 30, Capasso will confront a prison sentence for tax fraud. Myerson says that what Capasso did was "inappropriate, but that's what businessmen do.... Look at Mr. Helmsley."

On January 13, Myerson temporarily lost her \$83,000-a-year job as cultural-affairs commissioner. At

the moment, it's being filled by Diane Coffey, Ed Koch's chief of staff, while Myerson takes a 90-day leave. "I will return as commissioner," Myerson says. Others aren't so sure. "I can't imagine she'll come back," says one person at City Hall. "It's too much of a mess. Who needs it?"

Certainly not the mayor. In the past year, he's been overwhelmed by scandal. And now there's Myerson, the woman who helped get him elected, the city's unofficial First Lady, his close friend. In December, Myerson took the Fifth Amendment before a federal grand jury investigating Capasso—and she didn't tell Koch. WNBC's Mike Taibbi did, on the six o'clock news. "It was an unfortunate oversight," Myerson says. "But I don't regret it."

City investigators are now looking into two areas: whether

Myerson used her influence to get Capasso a \$53.6-million city sewer contract and whether she abused her authority by giving a job to Sukhreet Gabel, the daughter of Judge Hortense Gabel, who handled Capasso's divorce.

Myerson vigorously denies any wrongdoing. "Mr. Capasso got the job because he was the lowest bidder," she says. "I had nothing to do with it." She is a bit more tentative about Sukhreet Gabel. At first, she claimed she didn't know Judge Gabel was handling Capasso's divorce; then she said she knew "Horty" Gabel was handling it but that she herself had no interest in it. She did, though, give the judge's daughter a job while the judge was in the mid-



VICTORY NIGHT, 1977.

"THE REASON THIS IS HAPPENING," SHE SAYS, "IS THAT I'M A WOMAN, I'M A MISS AMERICA, I'M QUEEN OF THE JEWS."

dle of ruling on Capasso's alimony payments. "The girl spoke six languages," she says. "How could there not be a place in the department for someone like that? She went to *Oxford*."

Whether Myerson had any influence on the sewer contracts or the divorce will be decided by city investigators within the next several weeks. But there are other fundamental questions about Myerson's behavior as a city official and about her relationship with Capasso as a city contractor. Patrick Mulhearn, the mayor's counsel, says he can't venture an opinion on the specifics of the Myerson case. He does, however, say that city officials have "gift guidelines" that generally prohibit them from taking things of value from people who do business with the city. The exception is those in long-standing social relationships. "They're lovers," he says of Myerson and Capasso. "How can you regulate gifts when people are in a loving relationship?" (Mayor Koch would not discuss the Myerson case with *New York*.)

Myerson says the issue is meaningless in any event, since she accepted no gifts. "Mr. Capasso never paid for anything," she says. A variety of eyewitnesses say that's not the case.

QUEEN BESS VERSUS BESSIE From the Bronx: The two sides of Myerson's personality have been at war for years. Most people prefer Bessie—she's a nice Jewish mother who can joke about her modest beginnings and who takes a healthy pride in her accomplishments. She's also very warm and supportive. "If you're a friend, she'll kill for you," says writer Marilyn Funt. "If you're an enemy, she'll kill you."

That's where Queen Bess comes in. She sometimes flaunts her authority and acts like a spoiled adolescent. A perfectionist obsessed with details, she throws tantrums in front of employees and makes cutting remarks behind their backs. Because Queen Bess is also Bessie, she has difficulties with money. Even though she's worth over \$3 million, she lives as though she's on the brink of financial disaster. "Bess organizes her life based on how little she can spend," says a longtime friend. "It's more than being cheap; it's practically a sickness."

Until 1980, Queen Bess and Bessie managed to keep each other in check. But that was before she met Andy Capasso and before the city corruption scandals. Within the period of Capasso and Myerson's six-year relationship, Donald Manes, the man who introduced them, would become the subject of a

federal investigation and commit suicide; Stanley Friedman, their friend and tennis partner, would be sentenced to twelve years in prison; Capasso would be facing prison; and Myerson would become the subject of a city investigation.

"Bess always had difficult relationships," says an old friend. "But this time, she hit the pits."

When Myerson met Capasso, he was a sewer contractor and she was a candidate for the United States Senate. He was 35, with a wife, five children, and a net worth of approximately \$12 million. She was 56, twice married (both husbands have died), and had a history of turbulent romances. He volunteered to help with her Senate campaign, and she took him up on the offer.

During 1980, according to sources, Capasso pulled in a lot of favors from contractors and raised money for Myerson. He

gave her office space at Nanco, his contracting company in Long Island City, and let her use the phones, postage meters, and a Nanco limousine.

Soon Capasso and Myerson were seeing each other regularly. He is said to have paid for her groceries and dry cleaning and to have given her Nanco credit cards. He even let her use a \$41,000 midnight-blue Mercedes owned by Nanco and gave her a mink coat.

The relationship didn't stop when she became cultural-affairs commissioner in 1983. The month after she was appointed, sources say, they were both in Caneel Bay. She continued to use a Nanco limousine as well as the city car. Six months after Capasso filed for divorce, in January 1983, she moved into his house in Westhampton Beach. Herb Rickman, Koch's special assistant, practically moved in, too. They would often take the Nanco limousine to the 23rd Street pier, on the East River, and then board a rented seaplane.

In the meantime, Capasso had just won a \$53-million city contract and was in the middle of an ugly divorce. His wife, Nancy, blamed the new cultural-affairs commissioner for destroying their marriage. She made cracks to the newspapers about Myerson's age, and said Myerson looked like "Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*."

Myerson's side of the story is quite different. She claims she never had a relationship with Capasso until he was legally separated; at first, she denied ever working out of the Nanco offices, then admitted she had—but only after she lost the Senate race. She says she only used the Mercedes a few times, and that there was no mink. She blames Nancy Ca-

In 1945, few people seemed to want a Jewish Miss America to endorse anything.



MISS AMERICA, 1945.



MYERSON AND CARL
"ANDY" CAPASSO IN 1984.

passo and the press for spreading "vicious lies." "The reason this is happening," she explains, "is that I'm a woman. I'm a Miss America. . . . I'm Queen of the Jews. . . . I'm a commissioner. I'm the perfect route to the downfall of this administration."

IT'S A FRIDAY NIGHT IN EARLY FEBRUARY, AND BESS Myerson is on the telephone. "I don't mean to tell you what to do," she says, "but there is no story here. There is no premise. Mr. Capasso never paid any of my living expenses. No man has ever paid my expenses. I'm sure everybody you've spoken to has said a lot of negative things. They're eyeing my job. They're jealous. So what have they said about me?"

"They've said you were very complex."

"Well, that's nice. I hope when you get to be my age they'll say the same thing about you. There's nothing worse than being simple."

A few days later, Myerson calls at around nine in the morning. "I hope I didn't wake you," she says, and then launches into a monologue that lasts nearly eight hours. Her theme is jealousy. She thinks Nancy Capasso wants to ruin her reputation because she's a celebrity.

"The idea that Mr. Capasso and I would be together is totally irrational," she says. "He's so much younger, and we come from such dissimilar backgrounds. After I lost the Senate race, his kindness just showed through. But basically, we just had a telephone relationship. She wanted a divorce. I was the public accusation. She used me and attacked me because of my celebrity and my name."

And what about the Mercedes?

"There is no car in my life," Myerson says. "Maybe a few times I used his car in Westhampton to buy a container of milk, and sometimes I used his bicycle. So what? I will not be defeated by these accusations that are lies. There's a great deal of jealousy because most women haven't achieved what I have and because they don't have more men in their lives. . . . By the way, have you spoken to any of my lovers?"

By 5:15, the receiver is digging into my ear. Myerson is still talking about animosity and jealousy. "I am not the type of person to go after men," she says. "Men go after me. And I choose among them."

"Is it possible to continue this in person?" I ask.

"No," Myerson says. "My lawyer told me I'm not supposed to talk to the press."

A few weeks later: Bess Myerson in person. "You don't look anything like I imagined," she says. "But of course, you have an advantage because you knew what I would look like."

Myerson is tall—five feet eleven inches in stockings—and has always been described as an Amazon. But by today's standards, she doesn't

seem *that* tall. She does, however, have an imposing personality. She walks around the room like a mother superior about to scold the bad boys for having impure thoughts. "Who have you been talking to?" she asks. "Who? Who?"

Today, she is in the office of her friend Esther Margolis, the president of Newmarket Press. Margolis is publishing an account of Myerson's year as Miss America. "I don't know who you've been speaking to," Myerson says, "but they aren't my friends, because they would have told me everything. I would really like to know who you've been talking to."

We sit down on opposite ends of a couch; the couch is missing a leg, so every time one of us shifts, it goes up and down like a seesaw. Myerson pulls out a photo album filled with pictures of herself taken with politicians and celebrities. "These were authentic things for me," she says. "When I use the word 'authentic,' I think of authentic people. Some of the people you've been talking to are not authentic people. They're plastic people. . . . So who are they?"

I mention the names of a few of her friends. "Oh," says Myerson, "they're authentic. These are women who have had hard lives. Nancy Capasso doesn't *begin* to know how difficult life is."

She turns back to the book. "These are authentic experiences," she says. "Here's Golda, Golda Meir. Do you know who she was? And here's Moshe Dayan, and Ben-Gurion, and Begin, and Jinx Falkenburg. They used to call me the Jewish Jinx Falkenburg. I've had a wonderful life." Myerson continues to look through the scrapbook, flipping past Isaac Stern, Pinchas Zukerman, Pat Moy-nihan, Tip O'Neill, Frank Sinatra. . . .

And what about Sukhreet Gabel? "I didn't think this girl should be prejudiced against because she was Hortense Gabel's daughter," she says. "She came highly recommended. Should I have thrown her out of the office? In retrospect, it was an unfortunate decision, okay?"

"Look, I don't know who you are talking to," she says. "Some poor souls in my department. All you are hearing is riffs and *National Enquirer* popcorn. I've always had people who have done things through jealousy that have been deliberately injurious to me."

"Why do you think that's the case?"

"Why?" Myerson asks. "Don't people do that to you?"

"Not on a regular basis."

"Listen, my dear, I can take segments of your life and just flip the coin and arrange it in a way that you won't even recognize it. This happened and that happened, and the interpretation could be totally false."

We talk for a few minutes about Myerson's tendency to get involved in messy relationships. Didn't she think about the consequences?

"Listen, Patricia," Myerson says. "Maybe that's why you're not married. You don't take enough risks. Think about that."

"Men go after me," says Myerson, "and I choose among them."



KEEPING IN SHAPE IN 1980.

Myerson's marriages to both Wayne and Grant were on-and-off affairs and ended in acrimonious divorces. Yet now she says, "All my marriages had happy endings."



WITH HUSBANDS ALLAN WAYNE IN 1956 AND ARNOLD GRANT IN 1962.

BESS MYERSON WAS BORN IN THE SHOLEM ALEICHEM housing project in the Bronx, the middle daughter of Louis Myerson, a housepainter, and his wife, Bella. Myerson's parents were Russian immigrants; the family lived in a small one-bedroom apartment and spoke mostly Yiddish when they were together.

Myerson describes her childhood in somewhat simplified terms; it's almost the equivalent of Ronald Reagan's early "Huck Finn" days in Illinois. She says the family was poor but happy, and what she didn't have in material goods she got in love. She remembers going with her father to jobs and watching him run his hand over the clean, flat surface of newly painted walls. "He took such pride in his work," she says. "He used to get so mad when reporters would describe him as an interior decorator. He'd say, 'I'm a housepainter.'"

Her mother, Myerson says, was the "first feminist." She insisted that her three daughters study music so they could support themselves by giving lessons. But Bella Myerson was also strict and demanding; she had lost an infant son to pneumonia, and Myerson says she was "never the same after that." Myerson practiced long hours at the piano and never heard a compliment from her mother. "Years later, when I played at Carnegie Hall," Myerson says, "my teacher said, 'She was wonderful,' and my mother said, 'I don't know why. She never practiced.'"

Though Myerson would later become Miss America, she was "Olive Oyl" to the kids at school. Tall and gawky, she suffered from being a "big girl" in a society that equated femininity with being small and helpless. "It was such a handicap," she says. "A lot of the poignant parts of me have to do with my height. I had to protect myself because other people wouldn't protect me. Even today, I'm always amazed at how people observe me. There's always great strength attributed to me. But inside there's a little girl trying to get out. Sometimes I just need someone's arms around me."

Myerson graduated from the High School of Music and Art and went to Hunter College, where she majored in music. As she

moved beyond the Sholem Aleichem housing project, she became increasingly aware of her family's limitations. Her mother never learned to read and write English and didn't understand the world beyond the immigrant community in the Bronx. "I remember Bess saying to me, 'You're so lucky to have your mother,'" says Pam Chanin, who worked with Myerson on the Koch campaign and on Myerson's Senate race. "My mother was from Russia, too, but she adapted to the new world. Bess's mother never did."

Myerson entered the Miss America contest to win scholarship money for graduate school. By the mid-forties, the G.I.'s were returning from the war, and most of the avail-

able money was going to them. Myerson didn't think she was all that pretty, but 1945 was the first year the pageant offered a scholarship. She took her older sister, Sylvia, with her to Atlantic City for moral support. "I was the only one without a mother," she says. "She wouldn't have fit in."

Myerson didn't fit in, either. She was the only Jewish contestant, and pageant directors wanted her to change her name to Bess Meredith. But Myerson had spent her whole life surrounded by other Jews, and the concept of anti-Semitism was foreign to her. "She was very naïve and innocent," says Barra Grant, Myerson's daughter, who has co-written a TV movie about her mother's year as Miss America.

Nineteen forty-five was not the best time to be a Jewish Miss America contestant. News of the concentration camps was filtering out of Europe, and American Jews were shocked at the reports. They also had to contend with anti-Semitism at home; some parents who had lost sons in the war blamed the Jews for starting the whole thing. "In a way, the Holocaust came in on my mother," says Grant. "The Jews said, 'She's got to win in order to show that we're not just nameless victims.' It became more than a beauty contest. The Jews in New Jersey called one another, and they all came to Atlantic City that night."

Though the pageant directors never dreamed Myerson would win, Miss New York became the new Miss America. "When my mother walked down the runway," says Grant, "the Jews in the audience broke into a cheer. My mother looked out at them and saw them hug each other, and said to herself, This victory is theirs."

Usually, the Miss America title carries lucrative endorsements. But few people wanted a Jewish Miss America to endorse anything. Myerson was banned from certain country clubs and veterans' hospitals. Her appearances were canceled. "I couldn't even stay in certain hotels," Myerson says. "There would be signs outside that read, NO COLOREDS, NO JEWS, NO DOGS. I felt so rejected. Here I was, chosen to represent American womanhood, and then America treated me like this. It was shattering."

MEN IN THE AUDIENCE DIDN'T WANT A MISS AMERICA WITH TALENT. THEY'D SHOUT, "WHERE'S THE BATHING SUIT?"

Myerson cut the tour short after a month and returned to the Bronx. "The experience almost destroyed her," says Grant. Luckily, she was contacted by the Anti-Defamation League, and she went on a six-month lecture tour. Instead of traveling around the country for the Miss America pageant, she spoke out against racism and bigotry for the ADL. Her speech was called "You Can't Be Beautiful and Hate."

Myerson never publicly criticized the Miss America Pageant; in fact, she was the host of the show several times with Bert Parks. But she always had a low opinion of the pageant, and once referred to Atlantic City as "the Toilet of America."

Between her speaking engagements for the ADL, she played the piano with D'Artega's All-Girl Orchestra and even got to Carnegie Hall. But eventually, Myerson says she realized she wasn't talented enough for a professional career. She told a friend, "When I was onstage at Carnegie Hall, a little voice in my head said, 'You don't belong here.'"

She then tried vaudeville and played "Malagueña" and "The Ritual Fire Dance" on the flute and piano. Unfortunately, the men in the audience didn't want a Miss America with talent. Halfway through the performance, they'd shout, "Where's the bathing suit?" Myerson would usually wait for the finale and then reappear, in the suit. By the end of the tour, however, she didn't even bother with the music. She just walked onstage in the bathing suit.

She got 2,000 marriage proposals; the Medical Corps voted her "The Girl Whose Appendix We Would Like to Take Out." Though she got offers to go to Hollywood, she wanted to use her scholarship money to get her master's degree in music. But on October 19, 1946, she married Allan Wayne, the general manager of a company that manufactured dolls. They had met after he had returned from fighting overseas and had known each other for about nine months. He gave her a white orchid on their first date, and later a doll in a wedding dress. Myerson proposed, and they eloped to White Plains; afterward, they honeymooned at Grossinger's.

Barra was born a year later, and Myerson dropped the idea of a music career. Instead, she became "the Lady in Mink" on a daily game show called *The Big Payoff*. Basically, she was the Vanna White of the fifties; she modeled minks and announced the prizes.

A picture in an old newspaper account shows the beautiful Myerson with her pretty blonde child and handsome husband. But the Waynes' domestic life was far from glamorous. Wayne was an alcoholic who suffered from what Myerson

says was a posttraumatic stress disorder. "He would suffer flashbacks from his experience in the Pacific," she says, "and wake up in the middle of the night screaming."

Friends describe Wayne as a man with a weak ego who derived his sense of importance from being married to a former Miss America. He failed at his businesses, from dolls to lingerie, and Myerson supported the family. Eventually, Wayne's drinking got out of control, and he began to beat his wife. "My father had a real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality," says Barra. "He was obsessed by my mother and didn't want to lose her." Grant sometimes had to hide in a closet when Wayne went on a rampage. "My mother physically protected me," Barra says. "Her main focus was that I survive."

THE COUPLE SEPARATED IN 1956, AND MYERSON WON custody of their daughter. They reconciled about six months later and then split up again a few months after that. Stories appeared in the papers after Myerson claimed her husband burst into her bedroom, tore off her pajamas, and tried to strangle her.

Myerson filed assault charges against Wayne and then got a State Supreme Court action demanding an accounting of more than \$100,000 of her money that he had allegedly misused. "She's a bird, that one," Wayne's mother told reporters. Wayne died in 1962; some of Myerson's friends call it a suicide, but Myerson says he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage.

Soon after the divorce, Myerson got a job as a panelist on *I've Got a Secret*. Myerson also did a lot of fund-raising for

Israel. At a dinner for the ADL, she met Arnold Grant, a flamboyant entertainment lawyer who was sixteen years older. He had created the concept of deferred compensation and was brilliant, eccentric, and wealthy.

"Arnold was the most-sought-after bachelor on both coasts," Myerson says. They were married on May 2, 1962, and she moved into his nine-room triplex at 25 Sutton Place. Grant, who had two grown children from his previous marriage, adopted Barra. He was very active in the Democratic party and had a dazzling array of friends. "His parties were just amazing," says Henry Morgan, who was a panelist on *I've Got a Secret*. "He always had incredible guests, like Salvador Dalí. I remember once Johnny Carson was there and was absolutely speechless."

Friends describe Grant as Myerson's Pygmalion. "He brought her into another social milieu," says a man who knew her at the time. "Bess

My mother physically protected me," Barra Grant says. "Her main focus was that I survive."



WITH DAUGHTER BARRA GRANT IN 1980.

MYERSON TALKED THE CITY COUNCIL INTO PASSING SOME OF THE TOUGHEST CONSUMER LAWS IN THE COUNTRY.

adapted pretty well. She was always upwardly mobile. Even when she was younger, she got rid of the Bronx accent. She was a very quick learner."

But she was still plagued by self-doubts. Though she was a TV star and the wife of an important man, she thought of herself as Bessie From the Bronx, the awkward young girl with the mother who didn't read English. Unfortunately, Grant didn't do much for her self-esteem. He criticized his wife for the slightest lapses in etiquette; he'd throw a fit if the oyster forks weren't placed properly. "Arnold would always complain about Bess not being a proper hostess," says a friend of Myerson's. "It really bothered him."

They split up in October 1965 but were back together again in May 1966. The reconciliation lasted eight months, and by January 1967, Myerson was in Mexico getting a divorce. Myerson got an apartment on East 75th Street, but even before she moved in, she was back at Sutton Place. She and Grant lived together until their remarriage in May 1968. The second time around, Grant made Myerson sign a prenuptial agreement; she gave up rights to alimony, maintenance, and support.

In 1969, Myerson was named commissioner of consumer affairs by John Lindsay. Following the lead of Lyndon Johnson, who had hired Betty Furness as his special assistant for consumer affairs, the mayor recognized the media potential of having a glamorous woman in the job. Myerson didn't think she could handle it, but Grant encouraged her to give it a shot. They went away for a month to Palm Springs, and Grant brought along books on consumer law. He made Myerson read them, and then he tested her.

Though many people thought Myerson would turn out to be a figurehead, by most accounts she did an excellent job as commissioner. She was smart enough to surround herself with top legal talent and photogenic enough to attract the media. "Bess was terrific," says Bruce Ratner, who worked with Myerson at Consumer Affairs and later became commissioner himself. "I remember doing investigations that Lindsay didn't necessarily like, but she never let that get in her way."

Philip Schrag, who teaches law at Georgetown University, gives her high marks, too. Schrag, who was the department's first "Consumer Advocate," says that Myerson was "brilliant" at her job. He denies the frequent charge that she was simply the front while others made policy. "She mastered all the information," he says, "and she made final decisions and judgment calls. I was awed by her gutsiness and intuitiveness. She was a great hero."

IN A WAY, MYERSON WAS IDEALLY SUITED TO be commissioner of consumer affairs. She loved the media attention and felt comfortable in the role. This time, it was okay to be Bessie From the Bronx; the public enjoyed hearing Myerson scold fraudulent merchants and rail against "shamburgers" (hamburgers that weren't 100 percent beef) and baby rattles with shrapnel inside. Suddenly, Myerson's mother was being described as "the first consumer advocate." Bess often told the following story: "My mother would go into the local vegetable store and say, 'Sam, how much is that grapefruit?' And he'd say, 'It's two for 15 cents,' and my mother would tell him, 'Fine, I'll take the one for 7.'"

Within her first eight months in office, Myerson had talked the City Council into passing some of the toughest consumer laws in the country. "Bess is the most persuasive person I know," says Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, who worked as her deputy. She later established open dating and unit pricing in supermarkets, and over \$5 million was repaid to defrauded consumers.

Her relationship with Arnold Grant wasn't as successful. The second marriage wasn't working any better than the first, and Grant filed for divorce in July 1970. He changed the locks to their apartment on Sutton Place and reserved a room for Myerson at the Hampshire House. She got the separation papers during a meeting at City Hall.

Myerson claims she walked away from her marriage without asking for anything. But according to court records, she wanted \$3,500 a month in alimony as well as the Sutton Place triplex. There was also a battle over who would get such items as a Kleenex box, a cotton-ball holder, a potato baker, a Pyrex double boiler, a "paper bag of miscellaneous old clothes and laundry," and "a number of pieces of sheet music left on radiator behind drapes in living room."

Myerson gave up her demands when Grant discovered her diaries. Along with details of her relationships with other men, he found a love letter from someone who wrote, "I have little or no illusions about you, Bess, for I know you more than in the Biblical sense. There is nothing delusory in my love for you."

If that wasn't enough, Myerson also wrote that if Grant "would die I would have the safety + security of a house . . . and I would then reach out to new experiences." Grant, wrote Myerson, was "more like a thing—I must manipulate."

Grant threatened to go public with the diaries, and Myerson

One co-worker says Myerson was "brilliant" at her job. "I was awed by her gutsiness. She was a great hero."



AS LINDSAY'S CONSUMER-AFFAIRS COMMISSIONER IN 1969.

decided to forget about the Sutton Place triplex and the potato baker. The divorce records were sealed. (Myerson still denies the diaries exist. "There are no diaries," she says. "All my marriages had happy endings.")

Grant and Myerson didn't see each other again after the divorce. He was deeply upset by the diaries, and his behavior, which had always been eccentric, was becoming more erratic. Eventually, he was hospitalized for what Myerson says was Alzheimer's disease. He died in November 1980.

"If I had known he was sick, I would never have left him," Myerson says. "That's the type of person I am." During fund-raising luncheons for her Senate campaign, Myerson would often talk about the horror of seeing her husband in a straitjacket. But Myerson never visited Grant in the hospital, and hadn't seen him in years.

IN 1974, BESS MYERSON HOPED TO RUN FOR the U.S. Senate but canceled her plans when she learned she had ovarian cancer. "It was my time," she says regretfully. "My time."

It might well have been her best chance for elective office. After her consumer-affairs work, she was at the height of her popularity. Nelson Rockefeller commissioned a poll that gave Myerson a 90 percent approval rating. "Poor Mr. Rockefeller," she says. "He said, 'What am I going to do with this poll?' And I said, 'Why don't you sign it and autograph it to my mother?' He wrote, 'To Mom. . . Congratulations! Nelson.' Of course, my mother didn't know who Nelson was."

Myerson told only a few people that she had cancer. "At that point, there was a real stigma attached to it," she says. "People were afraid to invite you to dinner." She had chemotherapy for a year and a half. "When I was having chemo, I never went to bed," she says. "Every time I had a dose, I made sure I had an appointment right afterward. I didn't want to give in to it."

Myerson became a consumer consultant for Bristol-Myers and Citibank. Both jobs paid very well, and Myerson says she needed the money badly. Yet for most of the sixties, she had made a six-figure income from her TV work. When she split up with Grant in 1970, he claimed she had gross assets of nearly \$1 million. "I think Bess was always afraid she'd wind up poor and back in the Bronx," says a friend. "Even before she had cancer, she always felt her life was precarious."

In 1977, Myerson lent her political strength to a little-known congressman named Ed Koch. They had been friends since her days at Consumer Affairs, and they came from similar backgrounds. Myerson introduced Koch to media consultant David Garth, who agreed to handle his campaign. "Koch wouldn't have won without Bess," Garth says. "She was the most important factor."

Myerson was a tireless campaigner; she greeted people outside subways and walked the beaches. She ate knishes and joked with shopkeepers. She was Bessie from the Bronx, and the people loved her. And because they loved Bessie, they took a second look at the baldish man next to her. Myerson's visibility was particularly helpful in dispelling a whispering campaign that Koch might be homosexual. She was pictured with him everywhere—even on his campaign poster. It was probably the first time a woman who wasn't a running mate or a spouse appeared next to a candidate. They were always walking hand in hand down the street. Reporters started wondering in print when the happy couple would set a wedding date.

Myerson became livid when anyone questioned Koch's sex-

"Koch wouldn't have won without Bess," says media consultant David Garth. "She was the most important factor."



CAMPAIGNING FOR KOCH IN 1977.

uality. She remembered her Miss America days and the ugliness of confronting anti-Semitic remarks. She called it the Big Lie. Pam Chanin remembers an incident during the last week of the campaign. "We were on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx," Chanin says. "It was Bess, Ed, Carol Bellamy, and Dan Wolf and his young daughter. People got nasty. It was the old kike and homo thing. The crowds started to move in on us, and the cops, who were behind them, couldn't get through. Everybody was scared to death. With one hand, Bess grabbed Ed, and with the other, she grabbed Dan's daughter. And she started to walk through the crowd. She began shaking hands with people, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea. It was incredible."

Once Koch was elected mayor, he and Myerson had dinner together often. He'd swing by her apartment in the city car and they'd go out for Italian food and a movie. "She'd go to Gracie Mansion," says a friend, "but only if she knew the guest list ahead of time. Bess has a very low tolerance for people who aren't interesting or powerful."

She also got very friendly with Herb Rickman, who has been with Koch since the beginning of his administration; they'd run around town shopping, and she liked to listen to him sing Yiddish songs. "Bess really felt comfortable being part of the mayor's inner circle," says a friend who has known her for fifteen years. "She didn't have to pretend to be something other than what she was."

During this time, Myerson dated a variety of men. "There's a side of Bess that's hard to picture," Funt says. "She's a vulnerable female who came from a traditional Jewish background, where you needed a man to protect you. From the time of her divorce from Grant, she's always had a man in her life."

For a while, she went out with a lawyer who was ten years younger. Then she was seen around town with millionaire Ben Lambert, who helped raise money for her Senate campaign. He had recently been married to a singer named Rommy Hunt, although they had separated just months after marrying. Raoul Felder, who now represents Nancy Capasso, handled the divorce for Hunt. Myerson was named as one of the correspondents.

MYERSON WORKED HARD FOR THE SENATE. "I THINK SHE REALIZED THAT IT WAS 1980 OR NOTHING," SAYS A FRIEND.

Myerson said she and Lambert were "just friends... one of my many friends." She told the *New York Post's* "Page Six" that the last time she'd seen him was at a "meeting at his house about rehabilitating slum areas." Of Hunt, she said, "I just think the lady is obviously very upset and very angry." This would later become her refrain with Nancy Capasso.

Then there was the multimillionaire stockbroker who lived at the Carlyle and owned a Mercedes that one person says Myerson often borrowed. They went out for about four months, until Myerson discovered he was seeing two other women. "He appeared to be really enamored of Bess," Funt says. "When she found out about the other women, she was shocked." Myerson now dismisses the stockbroker as "sadistic" and a "plastic person."

BY 1978, MYERSON WAS GETTING TIRED OF BEING A political bridesmaid. She had campaigned for Koch and, to a lesser degree, for Pat Moynihan and Hugh Carey. She was in her mid-fifties, and time was running short. Myerson had never held elective office, and she couldn't trade on her consumer-affairs experience forever. "She wanted to be a senator very much," says Funt. "But she was terrified by the prospect of campaigning."

She asked David Garth to help, and after months of hesitation, he agreed. "I didn't think she could win," he says. "And I told her." By this time, she was worth about \$4 million and had vowed to spend as much as she needed to win the Senate primary. "I think she realized that it was 1980 or nothing," says a friend.

Myerson worked very hard as a candidate. "She absorbed the issues," says Garth. "She studied like hell." Always extremely self-critical and fearful of being unprepared, she didn't like to make any speeches unless she knew the text by heart. "I remember once that Bess was called upon to make a few off-the-cuff remarks," says a man who advised her during the campaign. "And she got really angry. Bess just didn't have a lot of confidence in her own natural intelligence."

But she did have an almost spiritual conviction in her ability to touch people and move crowds. "I have a rapport with an audience that's really remarkable," she says. During the early days of the campaign, Myerson was often caught off guard when asked to discuss specific issues. Instead, she talked about her "magic" and how she could sell New York like she could sell cereal. She brought up her days in the Sholem Aleichem housing project, and told voters in the boroughs that "my life has been very much like yours."

But it wasn't like theirs anymore. She talked about being a daughter of New York, a mother of New York, yet she came across as somebody's rich aunt from Scarsdale. People joked that she was "the Lady in Mink" while opponent Liz Holtzman, whose background was more privileged, was "the Lady in the Cloth Coat."

Myerson walked the beaches in Brooklyn and chatted with the shopkeepers, but it wasn't the same as when she was campaigning for Koch. This time she was selling herself, and a lot of people didn't buy it.

Andy Capasso did. When he met Myerson in spring 1980, he was looking to get more involved in politics. He earned his living as a sewer contractor, and he had already become friendly with Donald Manes. At one point, Capasso and Manes were going out to dinner at least three times a week to a place on Queens Boulevard. Manes introduced Capasso not only to

Myerson but to former Bronx Democratic leader Stanley Friedman. (Later, Manes, who once boasted about his ability to bribe anyone in the city, would be linked with Friedman in the Parking Violations Bureau scandal.)

Capasso, who was handsome in a heavyset kind of way, had jet-black hair and dark-brown eyes. He had married his wife, Nancy, when he was 26. At 31, she had three children from her previous marriage and was considerably more sophisticated than Capasso. "In the beginning, I never saw two people so much in love," says a friend. "They were just wild for each other." The Capassos had been married for nine years and had two children together. As the relationship progressed, it got stormier. "They're both very hot-tempered people," the friend says. "They had huge fights and then passionate reconciliations. But I couldn't imagine them without one another. It was a funny marriage, but it seemed to work."

Though Capasso's grandfather and father had been in the sewer-construction business, he started his own company from scratch in 1968. His wife says he named it Nanco after her; by the early seventies, Capasso was doing so well that he bought a large home in Old Westbury, near reputed mob boss Matty Ianniello's. They later became close friends. "I used to drive Capasso and Ianniello around together a lot," says a former Nanco employee.

AT FIRST, CAPASSO AND MYERSON MAY HAVE seemed an unlikely couple. But as a friend points out, "Andy was always looking to that next step on the social ladder. He was impressed by her." He seemed to be most impressed by her Miss America title. "The first time I saw her," says James White, Capasso's former chauffeur, "Andy said, 'This is Miss America, and she's got the same pretty legs.'"

Soon after they met, Capasso and Myerson were seen having dinner together at places like Tre Amici and the Palm Too. "I'd take them to a restaurant and then bring them back to her apartment," says White. "I'd wait outside until two or three in the morning, and then I'd take him back to Old Westbury."

Capasso, according to Nanco employees, let her use office space at his company, and she sent out her mail using its postage meters. "She had secretaries typing letters for her," says a former Nanco employee. "She had the run of the place."

Myerson says that Capasso did not help her in her campaign, and that he went to only two fund-raisers. Stanley Pantowich, her campaign treasurer, says he doesn't remember Capasso at any of the fund-raisers he attended. Others who worked on the campaign with Myerson say they weren't even aware of her connection with Capasso. "I don't know when she would have been at Nanco," says one person. "We were with her all the time."

But people who worked at Nanco claim that Myerson was there in 1980. "Andy helped her get a lot of money for her campaign," says one person. "He had contractors send money directly to us." White says he used to take Capasso around to pay special visits to the contractors to get campaign contributions.

Myerson was also being chauffeured around town in a Nanco limousine. "I was taking her everywhere," says White. "I even brought her to one of the debates." White says Myerson never had any money with her and was always borrowing it from him. According to White and another man who worked at Nanco, Myerson had several Nanco credit cards, including American Express. White bought Myerson groceries with his Nanco spending money and was reimbursed by Capasso. Ev-



ery week, White would take her dry cleaning to a place in Long Island City, and Capasso paid for that too.

By fall 1980, Capasso had bought a duplex on Fifth Avenue, and while it was being renovated, the family stayed in a hotel. "It was Andy's idea to move into the city,"

says Nancy Capasso. "He said that way he would be home more." She claims she had no idea her husband was involved with Myerson, and that she had met her only a few times, once at a Democratic fund-raiser in Queens.

"Nancy walked over to me," says Myerson. "She was very excited about my running for the Senate. I think she had followed my career. I'm a person whose career women followed, because I've been a woman of achievement with a tremendous recognition factor." (Nancy Capasso says this isn't true, and that the only thing she knew about Myerson was that she was a former Miss America.)

Despite the talents of David Garth, endorsements from Koch, Carey, and Moynihan, and a \$1-million campaign, Myerson lost the Democratic primary to Holtzman. What made it particularly painful was Holtzman's lead among Jewish voters. As the self-proclaimed "Queen of the Jews," Myerson felt let down. But she rationalized the whole thing by blaming Holtzman for turning the Jews against her.

"It was the Big Lie all over again," she says. "Look, it started with the Holocaust. People were vilified as destructive to the human race. That was the biggest of all the Big Lies. And then Ms. Holtzman said I was anti-Israel because I had been a consultant for a company that followed the Arab boycott. But I had fought that boycott intensely. I was defeated by these accusations, these lies."

"Bess was really devastated by losing the race," says Funt. "When she heard the news, she just broke down and cried like

She was convinced she could move crowds: "I have a rapport with an audience that's really remarkable."

RUNNING FOR THE SENATE IN 1980.

a child." Pam Chanin remembers the night Myerson had to deliver her concession speech. "Her personal stylist was trying to do her makeup," she says, "but Bess was crying so much, the stylist had to keep on doing it over and over again."

Myerson had stopped crying by the time she took the podium. She greeted her supporters carrying a bouquet of American Beauty roses. They cheered wildly and Myerson smiled, and then she threw the roses one by one to the crowd.

THE DAY AFTER THE ELECTION, MYERSON BEGAN THE process of starting over, and Capasso was there to help. "Andy was this gallant gentleman running to Bess whenever she needed him," says a friend who was close to her at the time. "She'd complain to him, 'I owe a million dollars. My life is a mess.' And he'd take over. It was like, 'Don't worry, Daddy's here.'"

Though Myerson had already been spending time in the Nanco offices, she moved in completely that fall. She set herself up in the conference room next to Capasso's office, and several times a week, they would work out together in the company gym. Myerson had taken out several large loans during her campaign, and while she was at Nanco, she was making arrangements to pay them back. "I called up my stockbroker and said, 'Help, please get me some money,'" Myerson says. According to Stanley Pantowich, Myerson had her money manager at Neuberger & Berman liquidate her stocks, and she wrote out a check for \$840,000. ("Did I take out loans?" Myerson asks. "I don't remember.")

During conversations with Myerson, she initially denied ever working at Nanco. Later, she admitted Capasso had given her office space for a brief period after the election. "Why

"SOMETIMES ANDY WOULD GET UP AT FIVE AND GO OVER TO MYERSON'S APARTMENT," SAYS A NANCO EMPLOYEE.

shouldn't I work there?" she says. "I had 40 cabinets, desks and chairs. I was paying an enormous amount of rent for my [campaign] office, and I was accumulating more of a debt. He was very kind. I remember saying to him, 'You are just so generous, I'd walk under a bus for you.'"

"After the election was over," she says, "everybody in my campaign ran to the other candidate. When you lose, people don't know what to say to you, so they don't call you. This man was the only person who picked up the phone."

Early in 1981, Myerson collapsed while working at Nanco. She was rushed to Lenox Hill Hospital in an ambulance and admitted under an assumed name. Capasso followed in a Nanco limousine. While the car was waiting outside, Nancy Capasso happened to walk down East 77th Street on her way to an appointment. She worked as a real-estate broker at Sotheby's International Realty, and her office was two blocks away. "Nancy came over to me and said, 'What are you doing here?'" says White. "I said, 'I'm having lunch.' She said, 'Come on.' Then I saw Andy coming out of the hospital, so I said, 'Here's your husband. He'll tell you.'"

"Andy told me, 'I was just visiting a sick friend,'" Nancy Capasso says.

Andy Capasso went to the hospital every day to visit Myerson. She had suffered a mild stroke and had difficulty speaking for several months. "It was a really terrifying time for Bess," says Funt. "Nobody knew if her memory would be all right."

"I met Andy for the first time at the hospital," says a close friend of Myerson's. "There was nothing to lead me to believe that anything was going on between them. When I found out, I said to myself, 'She's used bad judgment before, but this time, she's really lost it completely.'"

Myerson recovered and got a job at WCBS as its consumer reporter. She didn't use the Nanco offices as much, but she continued to use the limousine, according to a former Nanco employee.

Myerson's stint as a reporter wasn't totally successful. "She had no idea how television worked," says a man who produced some of her segments. "As with any reporting job, you get on the phone and try to make contacts. But she was an incredible prima donna. She had a big fat phone book that she carried with her everywhere. Once, we were doing a story on IRAs and she dramatically opened her book and said, 'Let's call Walter Wriston.'" (Wriston was then the chairman of Citicorp.)

"It was a disaster," says another former WCBS producer. "She was late for shoots and impossible to work with. We were using up tremendous manpower just to get her on the air. She blamed everybody else and never took the responsibility for her own failures. She savaged her assistants in front of people. Unfortunately, it was difficult to fire someone like Bess Myerson."

NINETEEN EIGHTY-ONE WAS A STRANGE YEAR FOR Nancy Capasso. She was living in a ten-room duplex designed by architect Robert A.M. Stern that was later featured on the cover of *Architectural Digest*. Besides the apartment on Fifth Avenue, she had a new \$870,000 home in Westhampton Beach with a guesthouse and pool, a separate condominium in Westhampton Beach, and two condominiums in Palm Beach. The family also had seven cars, including two limousines, two Mercedeses, and a Corvette.

The only problem was that she didn't see her husband much anymore. According to people close to him, Capasso had a histo-

ry of extramarital affairs, but they were brief. Now he told his wife he was out "at meetings with the boys" almost every night. "By the fall, I really started to get worried," says Nancy Capasso. "We went to the closing of the Westhampton house, and he wouldn't put anything in my name." She consulted divorce lawyer Irving Erdheim, who said, "So what do you want to do?" Nancy Capasso didn't know, so she decided to wait.

Meanwhile, Capasso, who had just paid close to \$2 million for two new homes, was making sure he wasn't going to waste money on the IRS. He created an elaborate scheme whereby bogus liability claims were made in the names of people who lived near Nanco construction projects for the city. (He got the names using Cole's directory, which lists people by address.) Capasso paid the claims from company funds and then charged them as expenses incurred on city contracts. The checks were then endorsed by Nanco employees and the money was returned to Capasso.

"Anytime you'd walk near his office, somebody was telling you to sign a check," says a Nanco employee. "We knew something was up, but we weren't sure what." Capasso also billed to his company \$337,555 in architecture fees for work done on the Fifth Avenue apartment.

NOW THAT CAPASSO WAS LIVING IN THE CITY, IT WAS even easier to get together with Myerson. "Sometimes Andy would get up at five in the morning, and then he'd go over to Myerson's apartment," says a former Nanco employee. In the evenings, he'd drive them to Nanni Il Valletto or SPQR. When he wasn't with Myerson, Capasso would often have dinner with Manes or go to the Columbus Club, an Italian social club on the Upper East Side.

Often, Myerson would bring along several of her friends to restaurants, and Capasso would always pay the bill. "He'd leave the American Express receipts in the back of the limousine," says the former employee. "And sometimes they would be \$300 and \$400."

But even Capasso's generosity had its limits. Around Christmas, he stored bottles of liquor in a closet to use as presents. "He told me, 'Don't let her get near them,'" says the former Nanco employee. "But sure enough, Myerson got the key and started taking the bottles to give away as gifts to her friends." The employee says Myerson was still sending out mail from Capasso's office.

Nancy Capasso says that after the family went away to their Palm Beach condominium, she found out that Myerson was at the Breakers Hotel, next door. "Andy was always running down the beach to 'important meetings,'" she says. Myerson was in Florida when her mother died, and the Nanco limousine picked her up. She rode in it in the funeral procession.

"Once she got the limousine with the car phone, you couldn't get her out of the car," says the former employee. "She'd use the phone every ten minutes. Before that, she used to borrow quarters from me, and she never paid me back."

ON JULY 22, 1982, CAPASSO GAVE MYERSON THE USE of a blue Mercedes 380 SL that was charged to the Nanco Equipment Corporation. Myerson says it wasn't her car, although she did go to an automobile showroom to pick it up. "Mr. Capasso asked me to go over and see it," she says.

Myerson drove it when she went to stay with the Capassos in Westhampton Beach for the weekend. "I guess I was really

dumb," says Nancy Capasso, "but who would have thought he was having an affair with Bess Myerson? Andy asked if she could come, and I said okay."

"It was Nancy who invited me out for the weekend," says Myerson. "She said, 'I'll call Andy and get you a car.'"

Myerson drove the car everywhere; she would sometimes park it in Capasso's garage on East 77th Street, or else leave it on the street. Once, the car was stolen from outside her apartment, and Myerson went up to the precinct on West 100th Street to pick it up. "I think Mr. Capasso was busy that day," she says, "so he asked me to go to the precinct for him." It was stolen again, and Capasso bought a second one.

That spring, Barra Grant was married to Brian Reilly, a writer, at a ceremony at Harkness House. Myerson walked down the aisle with her daughter. "I gave Barra away," she says. "It's al-

gether at Fortune Garden. In September, she went to see Raoul Felder. "It was a lot of fuss over one Chinese dinner," says Myerson.

Capasso had never been particularly discreet about his relationship with Myerson. He had taken her to all the same restaurants he went to with his wife. Capasso denies going out to eat with Myerson. "I never went to a restaurant with the lady until 1983," he says. Myerson offers a slightly different version. "Well, maybe we had a few late-night bites," she says.

Once, when his wife was in Florida, Andy Capasso even brought Myerson upstairs to his Fifth Avenue apartment to show her around. But now that his wife was confronting him directly, Capasso started to get very nervous. "He threatened people at Nanco," says a former employee. "He was getting paranoid that we were feeding information to Nancy. Andy could be very charming, but the next minute he'd turn around and start acting like a dictator. Frankly, I was scared to death."

But Capasso didn't stop seeing Myerson, and he even gave her a mink coat. "He got it from some guy who used to hang out in a restaurant in Long Island City," says another former Nanco employee. "The guy brought three coats to Nanco, and then Andy told me to take one of them to Bess. I think he got a couple for his mother and sister too."

Myerson denies that Capasso ever gave her a mink. "As a matter of fact," she says, "six months ago, I bought a mink myself." Says Capasso, "Why would Bess Myerson need Andy Capasso to give her a mink? She's the Lady in Mink."

During this time, Myerson is said to have used a Nanco employee to deliver cash periodically to 919 Third Avenue. "She told me the money was going to her broker or something," says the man. "The cash was always in an envelope, and there was plenty of it." (Myerson denies this.)

ON NOVEMBER 5, 1982, THE WAR between the Capassos officially began. It started with a few words in the kitchen and ended with Nancy Capasso on the floor upstairs. According to a witness, Capasso had been drinking heavily that night and was getting increasingly agitated. At one point, he went upstairs to get ready to go out and was confronted by his eight-year-old daughter, who asked, "Where are you going? Out with your girlfriend?"

Nancy Capasso went upstairs, and some words were exchanged. Capasso grabbed his wife, threw her over a table, and kicked her repeatedly. Capasso's shoes left large, grapefruit-size bruises on his wife's body. After the assault, he was seen getting into his limousine and going to Myerson's apartment. "Mr. Capasso is the sweetest, gentlest of men," says Myerson. "She obviously provoked him."

In December, Nancy Capasso took her husband to Family Court. Judge Bruce Kaplan characterized the incident as a "vicious beating," and he granted Nancy Capasso a court order that kept her husband out of the house. In return, Capasso filed for divorce. "He never wanted this," Myerson says. "This is not the kind of man who would leave his wife and children." Capasso got a room at the Westbury Hotel; Myerson would also stay there.

At this point, Nancy Capasso hired a detective: he followed

Nancy Capasso caught her husband with Myerson at Fortune Garden. "It was a lot of fuss over one Chinese dinner," says Myerson.



NANCY CAPASSO.

ways been just the two of us. No man has ever been as important."

Among the guests were Andy and Nancy Capasso. "When I saw them there, I couldn't believe it," says a friend of Myerson's. "By this point, everybody knew she was involved with Andy, and to invite Nancy was just the ultimate in bad taste. All during the reception, Bess was going over to people and telling them, 'Be nice to Nancy.'"

Nancy Capasso says she finally started putting everything together. "He knew all of Bess's friends," she says. "I said, 'How could this be?' I didn't know these people."

They had a big fight, and then Capasso, according to his wife, bugged the Westhampton house to see if she was consulting a lawyer. Nancy Capasso got hold of the tape and, she says, heard her husband confessing his love to Myerson over the telephone. In January 1982, she had caught them to-

"WOMEN TAKE OUT THEIR VENGEANCE ON ME BECAUSE THEY THINK I HAVE IT ALL," SAYS THE COMMISSIONER.

Capasso and Myerson sporadically, but mostly got shots of the couple going out of separate doors at the Westbury; in one picture, Myerson is seen with Capasso on the balcony of his condominium in Palm Beach.

In February, Nancy Capasso claims, her husband broke into the Fifth Avenue apartment. She called the police and then locked herself in the bathroom. "When the police got to the building," she says, "Andy answered the intercom. They said, 'Is everything all right?' and Andy said, 'Fine.'" She stayed in the bathroom until he left. "This whole thing was a horror," she explains. "For years, I felt like I'd been gaslighted. I just couldn't believe he was carrying on like this."

HENRY GELDZAHLER left his post as cultural-affairs commissioner in December 1982. Randy Bourscheidt, the top deputy, was expected to assume Geldzahler's job, but the mayor wanted a celebrity for the spot. Koch and his aides interviewed as many as 30 people; they approached Jacqueline Onassis and Beverly Sills, but both declined. Finally, Koch offered his old friend Bess Myerson the job.

For a while, the relationship between Koch and Myerson had been strained. She had wanted to become deputy mayor for economic development, but Koch didn't think she had the experience. "Ed really owed Bess," says a man who knows them both. "She was in pretty bad shape after she lost the election, and he could have helped her out. But he didn't."

A few weeks after Myerson was named commissioner, she went on a vacation to Caneel Bay with Capasso. Pretty soon, "Page Six" items started referring to the "newly named Cultural Affairs commissioner" and her "frequent escort Andy Capasso." Myerson blames Nancy Capasso for planting them. "When she went to the papers, that threw us together," she says. "It made me more supportive of him, because I'm supportive of friends. She just threw us to the wolves. But I'm used to that. Women take out their vengeance on me because they think I have it all." (Nancy Capasso denies ever calling "Page Six." Adds "Page Six" writer Richard Johnson, "We talked to Bess Myerson a lot more than we talked to Nancy Capasso.")

By April, Myerson had moved into the Cultural Affairs office at 2 Columbus Circle. She was in a difficult spot. Some people were resentful that Bourscheidt hadn't been given the job. (He stayed on as deputy commissioner.) And Myerson's "tough love" style, which might have been effective in her consumer

days, didn't go over well at Cultural Affairs. "At the very first meeting, she came across as really suspicious," says a former employee who had been in the department for six years. "She talked about all the fraud and corruption at Consumer Affairs, and what she did to her employees who didn't work hard enough. She said she put them in the basement and made them slave away in little rooms with no windows. We all sat there completely shocked."

Though Myerson has stated repeatedly that she was not involved in helping Capasso get city contracts, she did nothing to prevent the appearance of a possible conflict of interest. In the spring of 1983, Nanco won a \$53-million contract for work on

Friends say Capasso pleaded guilty as a "noble" gesture to stop the publicity surrounding Myerson.



CAPASSO, LAWYER GOLDBERG AFTER GUILTY PLEA.

the Owls Head sewage-treatment plant in Brooklyn. By this time, Myerson had practically moved into Capasso's house in Westhampton Beach. Nancy Capasso's belongings were thrown into the garage; the Capassos' queen-size bed was traded in for a king-size one. Deputy Mayor Herb Rickman moved in some of his clothes, too. But, as he later told reporters, "I was a generous guest. I cleaned my room and did the cooking when the servants allowed me."

ON SATURDAYS, Capasso and Myerson often played tennis with Donald Manes and Stanley Friedman. According to *The Village Voice*, Capasso retained Friedman for unspecified "legal services." The *Voice* also points out that Friedman was closely tied to two top deputy commissioners at the Department of Environmental Protection. (The DEP gave Capasso the

majority of his city contracts.)

Myerson often left for Westhampton on Thursday at eleven in the morning. A Nanco limousine would bring her to the 23rd Street pier, where she'd get on the rented seaplane. Myerson usually returned on Monday at around 11 A.M. Even though Cultural Affairs provided Myerson with a car, she continued to use a Nanco limousine as well as the Nanco Mercedes.

Other times, she'd use the city car to go shopping and a Nanco limousine to attend city functions. (Myerson denies this.)

"There was one time when she had to go to the Hilton for something official," says a former Nanco employee, "and she was late as usual. The entrance to the park on 72nd Street was closed. She got out of the car and moved the police barricades herself. Then she said, 'Okay, let's go.'" ("I would never do that," says Myerson. "It's unladylike.")

DIVORCES ARE NEVER EASY. THE CASE OF *Carl A. Capasso v. Nancy Capasso* was especially hard. There was about \$15 million involved; the wife felt betrayed; and the husband had lost face when he was evicted from the apartment. Capasso tried to settle for \$2-million, but Nancy Capasso felt it wasn't enough. In June, Judge Hortense Gabel awarded Nancy Capasso \$1,850 a week in alimony and child support. "It was a generous award," says Raoul Felder. "Frankly, we were delighted."

Capasso and Myerson spent July 22 to August 8 in Europe. "Mr. Capasso was extremely distressed by the divorce," Myerson explains. "All these reports that I stole this man—I was appalled by it. I could just see the tension in his face. So I said, 'I'm going to Europe. Would you like to come?'" They spent a week cruising around Sardinia on a yacht with real-estate developer Arthur Fischer and his wife, and the other week in the south of France. At the lobby of the Hôtel du Cap in Cap d'Antibes, they ran into Nancy Capasso, who was on vacation with a friend. Myerson says Nancy Capasso had followed them; Nancy Capasso says it was an "unhappy coincidence."

During this time, Myerson says, she tried to get Capasso to reconcile with his wife. "I've always encouraged the men to reconcile themselves to the other women," she says. "Mr. Capasso and I didn't have any kind of relationship. She wanted to use me and attack me. For him, it came as a real jolt. He was an extraordinary husband and father. And the absence of gratitude on her part is unbelievable. She had a lot of fun in that marriage. She lived a very hedonistic life-style. She got offered a lot of money, but she turned it down. She had become vindictive. She wanted to ruin him."

Soon after Myerson returned from France, she hired Judge Gabel's daughter, Sukhreet, as a "cultural affairs assistant" for \$21,000 a year. A month later, Judge Gabel cut Nancy Capasso's alimony from \$1,850 a week to \$680. Sukhreet Gabel, who was 34, had been married to the Dutch ambassador to Indonesia. "Sukhreet had just moved to New York," says a woman who met her at the time, "and I think she was a little lost." Gabel worked at Cultural Affairs for about eight months.

Myerson says it was just a coincidence that she hired Gabel, and that she never discussed the divorce case with the judge. She also claims she never discussed it with Capasso. "I was completely disinterested in it," she explains. "Why should I care if Mr. Capasso gave his wife \$6 or \$6 million?"

But a former Nanco employee claims he delivered all the divorce papers directly to Myerson's apartment. "I heard her talk to her friends about the divorce on the Nanco car phone," he says. "She was talking to everybody about it."

Considering Capasso, Myerson, and Rickman were together almost every weekend, it seems unlikely that the divorce never came up in conversation. Judge Gabel told reporters she thought her friend "Herbie" Rickman somehow had a role in getting her daughter a job. Rickman said he had had lunch with Sukhreet Gabel but never discussed it with Myerson.

Myerson says Nancy Capasso planted the information about the Gabel connection with "Page Six" to cause more trouble. (Nancy Capasso denies this.) Felder claims he didn't know anything about Sukhreet Gabel until he was contacted by the *Post* to comment on the item that ran on October 18. He says Judge Gabel asked him if he wanted her to step down from the case, but he declined the offer. "It's a serious thing for a judge to recuse herself," he says. "Besides, she had a good reputation, and initially she'd given Nancy a generous award."

Subsequently, there were at least two other rulings that went against Nancy Capasso. Gabel awarded Andy Capasso a \$200,000 Cy Twombly painting to "improve his cash flow." Capasso was now starting to complain that he had no money. "He owed me about \$700 in expenses," says White. "He told me, 'Sorry, I'm broke.'"

But another former Nanco employee says Capasso bought

Myerson a sapphire-and-diamond bracelet from R. A. Maselli Jewelers at the Doral hotel. He also bought an apartment at 563 Park Avenue and charged \$220,000 in renovations to Nanco.

As the divorce proceedings continued, Myerson and Capasso seemed to grow closer. Barra Grant had recently had a baby, and Myerson took care of it for weeks at a time while Grant was living in California. "Andy and Bess were wonderful with the baby," says Esther Margolis. In the reverse of her relationship with Arnold Grant, Myerson got a chance to play mentor to Capasso. "Because Andy's livelihood was sewage construction, he had been meeting people on a certain level," Funt says. "I think he was flattered to be in Bess's company. And Bess had reached a certain age when she wanted someone who would appreciate the 'Bessie' side of her personality."

Though one prominent hostess reportedly refused to let Myerson in the house with Capasso, most of her friends liked him a lot. "You couldn't help but like him," says Sandy Stern, who once placed first in a Bess Myerson look-alike contest. "He's got a zest for life, and a real sparkle." Margolis agrees: "He's got a strong sense of who he is," she says. "He is intuitive and instinctual; they're wonderful together. He calls her Bessie."

Myerson and Capasso spent a lot of time with Dr. Theodore Rubin and his wife, Eleanor. Dr. Rubin, who wrote *Lisa and David*, also admired their relationship. "With Andy and Bess," he says, "there is no pretense. They're both very earthy, and they come from the same socioeconomic class." Rubin says that a woman like Myerson "doesn't lead a simple life with men. I think it's been hard for her to meet her equal. Andy has grown tremendously since he's been with her."

Rubin suggested books for Capasso to read, and later they would discuss them. "Andy liked Thomas Wolfe very much," Rubin says. "He also read *Our Inner Conflicts*, by Karen Horney. Afterward, we talked about neurotic pride. Andy is like a sponge; he just picks up everything. If things had been different, he would have made a wonderful philosophy student."

WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR YOU... TO STOP this threat that may put me in jail for God knows how long?" Capasso screamed at his wife in the summer of 1984. Nancy Capasso had taped their phone conversations, and her husband pleaded with her not to "run to authorities and put me in jail for 400, 500 years." Capasso was concerned about turning over business records to his wife's divorce lawyers because he might have done something "criminal."

Since Capasso had evaded a considerable amount in income tax, and this information was likely to come up during the divorce proceedings, it's strange that he didn't try harder for a settlement. But Myerson says she told Capasso not to "give in to his wife's demands." By doing so, she may have unwittingly paved the way to Capasso's eventual conviction for tax fraud. "She's vindictive and morbidly dependent," Myerson says about Nancy Capasso. "She wanted her husband in jail."

While this little drama was being played out, Mayor Koch went to dinner at Capasso's house in Westhampton Beach. "Andy ordered fancy steaks from Lobel's," says a former Nanco employee.

In between counseling Capasso on his divorce, Myerson was busy at her job at Cultural Affairs. Between 1983 and 1987, the department budget grew from \$67 million to \$123 million. Myerson had good political instincts and a strong commitment, but several people who worked in the department say that wasn't enough. "Myerson didn't have any clear policies besides waving the flag for the arts," says a former Cultural Affairs employee who worked closely with her. "I don't think she really liked the job. It's very slow, and there's a lot of administrative work. Both she and Randy Bourscheidt were good

MYERSON IS BUSY WORKING ON A MISS AMERICA BOOK. "MY LIFE IS ALWAYS FILLED WITH HAPPY ENDINGS," SHE SAYS.

'outside people,' but neither had the interest in setting policy and strategy.

"She was very insecure," the former employee says. "It had nothing to do with her being too tough. If she'd been tough and followed through, it would have been great. But she was very arbitrary. She would get bogged down with minutiae and do the craziest things."

At one point, Exxon donated money for a conference, and Myerson wanted the Carnegie Deli to cater the luncheon. "I made the mistake of suggesting it should be more elegant," the person says, "and Myerson hit the roof. She didn't want to hire professionals to set the luncheon up, and she made the secretaries come in on their day off. It was crazy because Exxon had given us the money, but Bess spent endless hours trying to get it done in the cheapest way."

Several people in the department commented about Myerson's erratic behavior. She went through several secretaries and chewed out her employees in public. "It shouldn't be legal to treat people like that," one former Cultural Affairs employee says. "It was real psychological warfare. She couldn't tolerate anybody else's weaknesses. She was particularly rough on the women. She'd take someone who was quiet and shy and say, 'You've got to be pushy. It's tough for women in this world. They all get trampled on by men.'"

The Capasso divorce trial started in July 1985 and continued into December. By then, Judge Gabel had been rotated to another section, and Judge Andrew Tyler heard the case. When Capasso was asked in a deposition if he had ever let Myerson use a Nanco limousine and Nanco credit cards, he answered, "Not that I recall."

At the end of the trial, Nancy Capasso, who was now represented by Herman Tarnow, got \$2 million—about \$4 million less than she wanted. Judge Tyler removed Capasso's construction firm from the divorce proceedings and said Nancy couldn't share in the profits. (Capasso claimed that Nanco wasn't really named for Nancy, but for Naples.) She got the condominium in Westhampton Beach, and the proceeds of the sale of the Fifth Avenue apartment were to be shared. Nancy Capasso's half, however, was determined by the 1983 price, and not its current market value.

IN 1986, JUST NINE DAYS AFTER THE START OF THE NEW Year, Capasso's friend Donald Manes was discovered in a car near Shea Stadium. He was bleeding from the wrist and leg, the result of a botched suicide attempt. Capasso was one of the few people who saw Manes while he was recovering. Later, Manes succeeded in killing himself by driving a kitchen knife into his chest. The FBI had discovered his role in a bribery ring that would eventually involve Stanley Friedman and other political leaders and city officials. Within the year, eleven men were convicted or pleaded guilty to charges related to the scandal.

At another time, Myerson's connection with Capasso might have been overlooked. But U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani decided to investigate the \$53-million Owls Head sewage contract to see if Capasso had used political influence to win the bid. Giuliani's office subpoenaed Capasso's divorce papers, as well as Sukhreet Gabel's employment records. Meanwhile, a state grand jury began investigating allegations of fraud in Nanco's hiring of minority subcontractors.

In July, Nanco was indicted on state charges of evading rules requiring it to give a piece of its city-road-repair work to companies owned by minorities and women. Capasso was not

named in the indictment, but John Mikuszewski, a Nanco vice-president and friend of Capasso's, was indicted on several charges, including fraud, perjury, and attempted grand larceny. Jay Goldberg, who represents Nanco, claims the charges are groundless. He says Nanco paid \$220,000 to Santop, a contracting company allegedly owned by women, but was forced to hire another company because Santop couldn't do the work. "It was run by a housewife out of her apartment," says Goldberg.

Rickman, who went down to Giuliani's office to volunteer information, said he had ended his friendship with Capasso after reading about the alleged minority scam in the paper. "I'm concerned about appearances," said Rickman.

In December, Myerson was called before the grand jury. "She discussed it with me," says Dr. Rubin. "We talked about it in my office. She was concerned about what she should do." At this point, she had been with Capasso for over five years, but didn't have normal spouse protection under law. From the government's point of view, she was an ideal witness. According to Myerson, Fred Hafetz, her lawyer, advised her to take the Fifth, and she followed his advice. "He said the process prevented leaks," she explains, "and that no one would find out."

After the story broke, Myerson called Koch to explain. He had gone on record saying that his appointees could be subject to dismissal if they took the Fifth, and according to a source at City Hall, he was absolutely "furious."

ON JANUARY 13, MYERSON TOOK AN UNPAID 90-DAY leave to allow the city to investigate her refusal to cooperate with the grand jury. The next day, Capasso was indicted on federal charges that he had evaded \$774,600 in corporate and personal taxes. Giuliani said it was the first result of a continuing investigation into Nanco.

In a surprise move, Capasso pleaded guilty to the tax-evasion charges on January 22. He didn't plea-bargain or even notify the prosecution. In his statement, he denied that any improper influence, bribery, or bid-rigging was involved in obtaining contracts. He also said that "any claim that Bess Myerson exerted influence with the City or State of New York on my behalf is totally false. She is an extraordinarily dedicated and honest public servant."

Friends say Capasso pleaded guilty as a "noble" gesture to stop all the negative publicity surrounding Myerson; others speculate that Jay Goldberg knew the judge had a lenient reputation, and that he didn't want to take a chance with somebody else. When Capasso is sentenced next week, he will face up to 37 years in prison and a maximum of \$1.5 million in fines.

The story doesn't have a happy ending for the Capassos. Nancy is still appealing her divorce award. For now, she's living in the huge apartment on Fifth Avenue, which friends have dubbed "the mausoleum." "I keep on thinking this whole thing is a nightmare," she says.

Undoubtedly, her ex-husband shares this opinion. He's now getting ready to face prison. Two weeks ago, he returned to New York after a brief vacation; he looked tan but had deep circles under his eyes. Then he went off to Aspen to spend time with his children before his sentencing on March 30. "Andy is a little worried," says a friend. "But he's making little jokes about going to jail, and trying to look on the bright side."

As for Myerson, she's busy working on the Miss America book. "My life is always filled with happy endings," she says. "I'm like a phoenix. I rise from the ashes."