



Reluctant Press presents:

THE TRANSFORMATION AND LOVE OF
ERICA

E. B. Stevenson



A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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THE TRANSFORMATION AND LOVE OF ERICA

by **E.B. Stevenson**

One

When I came into the world on October 6, 1966 on a U.S. air base in California, no one really knew what course my life would take. I was given the name Eric Robert Bunsen when I was born. My father, Major Edward Bunsen, flew transport planes out of Rhein-Main, helping to supply U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. He had entered the Air Force right out of high school in Duluth; he fought with honor in the Korean Conflict. He missed serving in World War II by six months when he enlisted in 1946. My mother, Mary Ellen, had spent her entire life as an Army brat. He waited until he was 29 to get married; my mother was eight years younger. I had an older brother, David Edward, who was eight years old at the time, and a sister, Mary Heidi, who was five and a half.

Just after I was born, my parents returned to Germany, where they were based. He was in California on a business trip. When I was eight months old, my father was transferred to Okinawa, where his unit was flying supply runs between there and Saigon. He was recommended by his lead pilot from Korea, Colonel Albert Eric Bentley. My father was best man when he took his wife, Janet, in 1955; he waited until he was 37. He had four sons of his own: Eric was only one day older than I. His other three sons are Jerry, who was eleven years old, Donald, nine years old, and Terry, two. My kid brother, Dennis John, was born on Okinawa on December 29, 1968.

It was January 7, 1970. My father was on another mission; he was headed back to Okinawa from Saigon, taking food and medicine to the troops on the ground. My mother was hosting Carmelita Jackson, the wife of Staff Sergeant Cedric Jackson, one of the payload

specialists on board. "I'm sure you worry enough about Ed as it is," Carmelita told my mother.

"Do you worry enough about Cedric?" she asked her.

"Not only him, but also my two children. Our fourteen-year-old son Zach is the only one in our family that can speak fluent Japanese, so he gets to break up the fights between the kids on base and the locals. When our ten-year-old daughter, Paulette, doesn't have any homework, she just reads too many books or watches too much television," she replied.

Eric and I were playing Chutes and Ladders with Mary in the next room. "Isn't it time for you to get home? Your father could bust our father down to First Louie if you don't get home," Mary said to him.

He suddenly looked at his watch, and realized he had to get home. "I'll see you tomorrow, Eric," he said to me.

"See you," I said before the doorbell rang. Mary and I walked out to the living room. My mother saw that it was Colonel Bentley. We dreaded some bad news. He asked his assistant, Lieutenant Sandra Johnson, to take Eric to the awaiting staff car. "Mrs. Bunsen, I'm afraid it's bad news," he informed her with a look of sadness on his face.

"What is it, Al?" my mother asked, shedding a tear.

"The plane that your husband was the pilot of crashed an hour ago. He reported a problem on one of the engines, and was trying to make an emergency landing in Taiwan in very poor conditions. The plane slammed into a mountain near Taipei. It appears there was only one survivor of the crash," he said.

"Who is it?" asked Carmelita.

"Your husband was the only survivor, Mrs. Jackson. He's been airlifted to a hospital in Taipei in serious condition. He bravely tried to save the rest of the crew; he and Major Bunsen were the only ones who made it to the hospital. Major Bunsen died on the operating table ten minutes ago. I would like to extend my deepest and most sincere condolences on your loss, Mrs. Bunsen." Carmelita breathed a sigh of relief as my mother began to cry. David came to console her; Mary and I both cried. Our father was forty-two years old when he was killed. We were informed that the Air Force was taking care of the arrangements to bring my father's remains back to the States for a proper burial.

On January 10, we accompanied our father's remains back to Minneapolis for the funeral. Even though he was a major in the Air Force, our family had plenty of social standing in Minnesota, as his father, Eric Philip Bunsen, Sr., had amassed a huge fortune with his produce distribution business. My mother stood to inherit my father's part of the family fortune. My father was smart enough to start a fund for each of his four children before he went on his final mission. The funeral was January 15 in Minneapolis; our father was laid to rest at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

We returned to Okinawa on January 17 in order to settle issues there before returning to the United States. When we were packing our personal effects, my mother noticed several pictures, taken with an instant camera, among Mary's personal effects in her bedroom.

Mary was just outside the door, helping David pack his personal effects. "Would you like to come into your room?" she asked her.

"What is it, Mom?" Mary asked.

"Who is the little baby in the pictures, wearing the pink satin and white lace dress?" my mother asked her with a touch of suspicion in her face and tone of speech.

"That's Eric," she replied.

"When were these taken?" my mother angrily asked.

"They were taken when he was six months old. It happened while you and Dad were in Washington. Grandma Redding was in charge of us, and I had this crazy idea. I happened to have a pink satin and white lace dress that I wore when I was six months old, and put it on him. I put a pink bow around his head, and took twenty pictures of him in that dress. I thought he made just as cute of a little girl as a little boy," she explained.

"I thought that was an insane thing to do, especially behind my back," my exasperated mother added.

"I also have to admit; I've also dressed Eric in my old dresses when we play dress-up. He didn't care whether he wore a pair of Dad's old fatigues or one of my old dresses; he just went along with it," Mary then added.

"I don't know where this will lead to, but I hope this won't happen when we get back to Minnesota. Uncle Eric has given us several rooms at his house in St. Paul; we're staying there until we can get squared away," my mother informed her.

We left Okinawa for good on February 14, 1970, and arrived in St. Paul the next afternoon, where we moved into Uncle Eric's huge house. He was thirty-two years old at the time, and in charge of our family's warehouse in Minneapolis. He was already one of the most eligible bachelors in Minnesota. Our mother got a job at his warehouse as a file clerk, while my brother and sister entered new schools. With David in his early teens with an athletic build, the girls would be going crazy over him. Mary was just nine years old, and doing things most girls her age did. We were thankful that Mom's niece Andrea was nearby to keep an eye on Dennis and me.

It was into the second year of our stay in St. Paul that I decided to dress myself up as a girl. It was February 20, 1972; my mother was working late, while Uncle Eric was at a social event with his new girlfriend, a young debutante named Rebecca Elwood. David was at the house with several of his friends, playing roller hockey in the huge garage. Mary was playing board games with her friends, while Dennis was sleeping in the next room. I was upstairs in my room. While I still had a red striped shirt and blue jeans on, I walked over to the storage closet, and looked in the box with Mary's old clothes. I found a white flower girl's gown that she wore to Aunt Tanya's wedding four years before. I also found a pair of white panties and white flats, along with a wig of my mother's, and walked back to my room. I then took off my boy clothes, and put on the girl clothes. For me, I had felt so much better as a girl than I did as a boy. I looked at myself in the mirror, and thought: "I think I'm a pretty girl!" I lounged about in the dress for over an hour, before Mary caught me. "All right, why are you wearing my flower girl's dress?"

"I just wanted to see myself in it," I replied.

“Let me grab my camera,” Mary said before running across to her room to get the instant camera. She took about ten photos of me in her flower girl’s gown before I took off the entire ensemble, and got into my boy pajamas to go to bed. Needless to say, I did look much prettier as a girl than I did as a boy.

When my mother got home from work around nine-thirty, she went right up to her room to go to bed. Uncle Eric arrived home around midnight, and went straight to bed. The next afternoon, my mother saw the photos Mary took of me in her flower girl’s gown. When she got home from school, she asked: “Mary, may I talk to you?”

“What is it you want to talk to me about?”

“Did you dress up Eric in your clothes last night?”

“No, he put my clothes on last night, not to mention your brunette wig. He had them on for an hour before I caught him.”

“I don’t know if this is leading to something else, but I’d like for you to stop this at once!”

“Do you mean you don’t want me to dress him up in my clothes anymore?”

“I’d like for you both to refrain from doing this.”

“I must admit that he does make a pretty girl, Mom.”

“I saw the pictures you took. He did make a convincing girl.”

My mother came into my room while I was reading a book. “Eric, may I have a word with you?” she asked.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“I saw the pictures Mary took of you in her flower girl’s gown. I just hope this is a phase that you’re going through, and that you will outgrow it. I would like for you to stop dressing in Mary’s old clothes, before it gets to be a problem.”

“I’ll try not to do it.”

My mother’s views on crossdressing did not change until Aunt Myra came visiting her from California in the summer of 1973. “Mary Ellen, I hear that Eric has been dressing up as a girl,” she said to her.

“Yes, Myra, Eric has been dressing up as a girl, sometimes on his own, and sometimes on a dare from Mary.”

“Could I enlighten you on the subject?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“I work at a women’s shop in West Hollywood. Where I live, crossdressing is more accepted than it is here in Minnesota. We have men coming in to try on dresses for costume parties and female impersonator shows all the time. We’ve even have had men who dress as women all the time among our regular customers. I think you’re being very hard on Eric for his wanting to dress up as a girl.”

“Well, my brother-in-law is getting married in February, and he already has asked Eric to be the ring bearer. Becky is such a beautiful girl; he couldn’t have picked a better one for his wife. They marry on Valentine’s Day.”

“What name would you have given Eric had he been a girl?”

“I would have decided on Erica, after my cousin.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’m planning to get married this summer. I was wondering if you could allow Eric to be Erica, my flower girl.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“I’m getting married in July; I’m looking forward to it.”

Aunt Myra’s decision to ask my mother to make me her flower girl when she married my soon-to-be Uncle Jake was a decision that was daring for her, given the fact that the California lifestyle and attitudes were more relaxed than the straight-laced life we had been used to in the Air Force.

Two

Uncle Eric and Aunt Becky married on February 14, 1974 at his residence in St. Paul. At the time, he was thirty-five years old and Becky was about to turn twenty-two. I was the ring bearer in the wedding, which would be my last social appearance as Eric. About the same time, my mother was offered a job at the women’s clothing store where Aunt Myra worked. We would be moving out to California in June. It would also be a time of change for me. Before we moved out of Uncle Eric and Aunt Becky’s house, I finally confided in my mother and my sister about my secret. It was June 11, 1974; my hair had already grown down to my shoulders by that time.

“Mom, Mary, can I have a word with you?”

“Sure, Eric, what’s on your mind?” asked Mary.

“Remember when you caught Mary with photos of me in her flower girl’s gown when I was five?”

“As a matter of fact, I still do,” my mother replied.

“I spent a long time in that gown. It gave me a feeling that I looked very pretty. As a boy, I’m not much to look at, but when I dress as a girl, I feel like the prettiest girl around. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I feel like I’m really a girl. I hate being a boy.”

“You really want to be a girl?” asked Mary.

“Yes, I do.”

“Would you like to kiss boys?” my mother asked.

“Yes, I would love to kiss boys.”

“Would you like to wear dresses and skirts every day?” Mary asked.

“Yes, I love wearing dresses and skirts; I would love to wear them every day.”

"As soon as we get out to L.A., we're going to see a psychiatrist," my mother informed me. "I must admit, Mary, I wanted another daughter."

"I often wanted a sister, too, Mother," added Mary.

We left St. Paul for good on June 13, 1974; we would move into our new home there on June 17. It was that day that my mother took me shopping for girls' clothes; she and Aunt Myra bought me many dresses, skirts, blouses, and other clothes that most seven-year-old girls wear. When we got back to our new house, I took off the boy clothes for the final time, and began my new life as a girl.

After I got into a pink top and a matching skirt, along with a pair of pink tennis shoes, my mother asked me: "What name would you like to call yourself?"

"I would like to call myself Erica."

"Well, Erica, this is the first day of the rest of your life," she said before she walked back downstairs to discuss the situation with David, Mary and Dennis.

"The reason why I've called you down here is to tell you something. Mary had been dressing Eric up as a girl off and on since he was six months old. Something told me that something was up. Well, before we moved here, Eric told Mary and me that he wanted to become a girl. We've been out shopping all day, buying a new wardrobe for your new sister. We're going to see a therapist, and find out what's making her this way," she explained.

"This is something that's quite shocking; anyway, he, or she, has my full support," David informed her.

"I love Eric, regardless of whether he's a boy or a girl," added Dennis.

"I'll be giving our new sister my complete support, if that's the direction she wants to go," Mary added.

Mother walked back to my room, and asked me to come downstairs to be introduced to my brothers and sister. "David, Dennis and Mary, this is your new sister, Erica."

"Wow, you are such a pretty girl!" David exclaimed in awe.

"This is what you've always wanted, to be a girl. You're so much prettier as a girl than as a boy," added Mary.

"I don't know what to think of this, but I think Erica's cute," snapped Dennis.

Two days later, my mother set up an appointment with Aunt Maria, who had become a well-known psychologist and psychiatrist. My mother chose my new baby blue dress for the appointment. When I arrived, I sat down and crossed my legs in a feminine fashion. When I got into her office, Aunt Maria asked me several questions concerning how I felt about myself from a gender identity standpoint. When my mother was asked to come in, Aunt Maria had the diagnosis that she was looking for.

"Mary Ellen, I have been listening attentively to what Erica has been saying. Having her sister dress Eric up as a girl at the age of six months is one thing. But, when it comes to his...excuse me, her, gender identity, she has expressed her hatred for being a boy, and really wants to be the girl she feels she should be. She is a girl trapped in the body of a boy. Erica is the youngest person I have ever conferred a diagnosis of gender dysphoria

on. She has a strong desire to change her sex. In other words, Erica is a transsexual. I am going to recommend a schedule of therapies and surgeries for her, especially when she begins the onset of puberty. You have yourself a very pretty new daughter," Aunt Maria explained.

"What does that entail?" my mother asked.

"Erica, I'd like for you to step out of the office for a few minutes," Aunt Maria told me. I went back into the waiting room, where I shook my long, strawberry blonde hair, sat down and crossed my legs in a feminine fashion.

"Mary Ellen, what this entails is that Erica will be placed on a regimen of hormone treatments; she will be treated with female hormones as she gets older. In order to cease the production of male hormones, a castration, or what we call in the profession an orchidectomy, will be performed. Her testicles will be removed. The female hormones will allow her to grow breasts and have more pronounced hips and buttocks. The last stage will be a sex-change operation, which we don't recommend being performed before she turns twelve. In this procedure, the male genitals are removed, and female genitals created."

"It's going to take some time to prepare for, but I'm ready to go through all the details she'll need to go through to become the girl she needs to be, Maria."

"There's one more thing. You're going to have to file to have her name legally changed from Eric to Erica. I have an attorney friend who deals with the legal issues transsexuals face."

Two days later, my mother met with Gina Low, a friend of Aunt Maria's, to get the papers drawn up for my legal change of name from Eric Robert Bunsen to Erica Renee Bunsen. I would have to have my name legally changed so I could enroll in school as a girl. The legal change of name would be granted just a week before Aunt Myra's wedding. So, I would be listed on the wedding program as "Flower Girl: Erica Renee Bunsen, niece of the bride."

I was really looking forward to Aunt Myra's wedding. On the afternoon of the wedding, I was sitting in my room, wearing nothing but a pair of bright yellow panties and a white crinoline. My hair was still hanging down on my shoulders, while I waited for my mother to arrive with my gown and tiara. David and Dennis were already in their suits, while Mary wore a pink satin dress. When my mother knocked on the door, I let her in; she had the most beautiful bright yellow gown for me, along with a rhinestone tiara. "Are you ready to put on your gown, Erica?" she asked me.

"You know I am, Mom," I replied.

She put the gown over my head, and made sure the skirt clung to my crinoline. She then zipped up the back of the gown, and proceeded to do my hair in an upward fashion, with sausage curls extending down my neck. She then put on a pair of satin flats, dyed in bright yellow. "You are such a princess!" my mother exclaimed in awe.

The limousine picked me up to take me to Aunt Myra's place, where I joined her bridesmaids for some candid photos before we went to the park where we were having the outdoor ceremony. When the time came for the walk down the aisle, I went down first,

on the arm of my eight-year-old cousin Wally, who was the ring bearer. The bridesmaids came down next, all in their pink gowns. Then, Aunt Myra came down the aisle, on the arm of my maternal grandfather, retired Brigadier General Martin Redding. She was in a beautiful white wedding gown that my grandmother wore when she married my grandfather following the end of World War I. It was a beautiful wedding; we had a fantastic reception at my grandparents' place in Malibu. My grandparents and aunts and uncles were amazed at my transformation into a girl so far. When the reception was starting to wind down, my seven-year-old cousin Felicity wanted to talk to me.

"The gown you have on is so pretty. I wish I could be a flower girl, like you, Erica," she said to me.

"Yeah, you look so pretty in that dress, yourself," I added.

"So, you've just moved out to L.A."

"I came out here last month, Felicity."

"You have just your mommy. What happened to your daddy?"

"You mean your Uncle Ed? He gave his life in the service of our country a long time ago, when I was three."

"Did you kiss my brother yet?"

"Speaking of Wally, here he is."

"What brings you here, Wally?" asked Felicity.

"I wanted to do one thing," he replied before I got up and wrapped my arms around him. He hesitated for a moment while the photographer and Mary were getting ready to aim their cameras. Wally and I both closed our eyes as we shared a smooch. It was my first kiss.

"That was cute," Mary added.

I walked around to my mother's table, where I sat down and crossed my legs in a feminine fashion. "I got my first kiss, Mom," I informed her.

"Whom did you kiss?" she asked me.

"My cousin Wally; he made me feel so much like a girl," I replied.

"Well, Erica, how do you like kissing a boy?"

"It felt so good to kiss a boy."

"Congratulations, Erica...you've arrived at girlhood," added Mary.

"I'll be getting more kisses from boys in the years to come," I added.

All the way home, I thought about the kiss and my social debut as Erica. My mother's relatives accepted me as the girl I have become. Even my grandparents accepted me as their new granddaughter. I was on my way to becoming a total girl, and I loved it. This would be just the first step on my road to becoming a complete girl.

Three

In September of 1974, I started the second grade; this was my first year I would go to school as Erica. It was a new feeling, to go to school as my true self. I decided to wear a blue dress and a pair of girls' tennis shoes for my first day of school as Erica. I was sitting at my desk in my second grade classroom as a blonde-haired girl sat down at the desk next to me. "What's your name?" she asked me.

"My name is Erica Bunsen," I replied.

"My name is Alisa Sanchez," she added.

"What brings you to California?"

"My mom took a job out here. I've lived all over the world in my short time on this earth."

"Where have you lived, Erica?"

"I was born on a U.S. Air Force base near San Francisco; I also lived in Germany, on Okinawa and in St. Paul, Minnesota before coming here."

"I've lived all my life in L.A. My father is from Mexico, my mother is from Nicaragua."

It was lunchtime when Alisa and I walked out onto the playground, and jumped rope with the other girls. By the end of the day, I had made friends with two more girls, Jenny Smith and Beth Chen. The school was a short walk from our house; my new friends lived down the street. When I got home from school, I went to my room to do my homework before dinner.

My mother walked in the door around five-thirty, as Mary was cooking hamburgers and macaroni and cheese. Just as I was finishing my math homework, she knocked on my door. "May I come in, Erica?" she asked.

"Come in, Mom," I replied.

"How was your first day of school as a girl?"

"It went great. Everybody was nice to me today; they looked at me as the girl I am. I also made a few friends today; Alisa, Jenny and Beth."

"Are you going to play with your new friends after dinner?"

"Jenny is coming over tonight to play with our dolls."

"I'm glad you're making friends, Erica. You were always such a loner when you were a boy. I hope things will get even better for you as time goes on."

I came down to the table around six o'clock; Mary and Dennis were with my mother and I. David was trying out for the track and field team at school, and was getting home late. "I'm surprised to see that your classmates have accepted you as the girl you are," Mary said.

"None of them know that I was born a boy," I added.

"Your teacher knows that you were born a boy," my mother then added.

"I'm sure they'll know soon enough. But, we're keeping it a secret until they get older. Besides, this is the only place where transgender children are anywhere near accepted," added Mary.

Jenny and I played with our dolls for an hour after dinner, before it got dark. Just as night was falling, I asked her: "Would you like to bring Alisa and Beth over tomorrow?"

"Let's see how much homework they have. We'll have a ball playing house," Jenny replied.

"See you in school tomorrow, Erica."

"See you tomorrow, Jenny," I said as her mother walked down the street.

Once her mother came to take Jenny home, I walked into the house, where I got into the shower. After I freshened up a little bit, I got into a lavender pair of panties and matching nightgown. Before I went to bed, I got a pink top, a pink flowing skirt and a pair of pink tennis shoes together for the next day. My mother came up just as I was climbing into my bed.

"Erica, I'm happy you have made some new friends today. But, I'm going to tell you that some people won't be as nice to your situation. Changing from one sex to the other is not widely accepted yet, especially among people your age. Most people usually wait until their all grown up to change from boys to girls. I'm happy you were able to open up to me before we came out to L.A., and you will always be my princess," she explained.

"I expect some people not to like me, Mom," I added.

"Good night, Erica, my darling girl."

"Good night, Mom," I said before I gave her a kiss.

As the year progressed, I was gaining more friends as Erica, mostly among the girls. We would always get together and engage in the kind of girl talk that most eight-year-old girls did. I continued to wear skirts everywhere during my first school year living as a girl. It really made me feel good and feminine at the same time.

Four

Between second and third grade, my mother got me scheduled for my castration. With the castration, I would not be able to produce male hormones, and would be able to wear girls' pants. I went in for my castration on June 13, 1975; the first anniversary of the beginning of my life as Erica. When I went in for my surgery, my mother told me: "Erica, this is your next step on the road to being a total girl."

Five hours later, I woke up in my hospital room, feeling a stinging sensation in my genital area. There was a pair of incisions where my testicles used to be. I also had plenty of skin left over, so I could tuck what's left of my male parts in. I would be hospitalized for five days before I was released, and continued my recovery at home. I would still be wearing skirts and dresses until my mother bought several pairs of girls' pants for me, as well as more additions to my wardrobe. Before I started the school year, I got my ears pierced. I started third grade feeling better about myself, for I was becoming a very happy girl.

Mary was reaching adolescence; her body began to take on more of a feminine shape. With the hormone therapy, this was what I would be looking forward to when I got to be her age. David was a junior in high school, and a star on the track team. He had already had his first girlfriend. For me, all I was worried about was the stuff most eight-year-old girls were worried about; school, friends and family. My friends and I were in our own little girls' world; we thought of boys as something we could giggle at.

My mother decided to plan a formal birthday party for my ninth birthday; all girls, no boys allowed. I was fitted for my gown a month before the event; it would be a ball gown. Every girl who was invited was fitted for her gown. Even my mother, my sister Mary and Alisa's mother, Juanita, had to be fitted for a gown. We decided to have the party indoors. David took Dennis to that afternoon's high school football game, and would later go to a friend's house to catch the baseball playoffs on television, so that the house would be left entirely to the girls.

The party was in the evening. So, I spent the latter part of the afternoon taking a long bubble bath. I washed my hair while I was in the bathtub; when I got out, I got into a pink pair of panties, before getting into a white crinoline. My mother had my gown ready on the bed. It was a pink satin ball gown with pink lace all over, puffed sleeves adorned with a bow tie on each sleeve, adorned with a pearl. My mother also put a wrapped gift on the bed. I opened it, and found a felt-lined box. I opened it to find a pearl necklace and matching earrings. She came in after I opened my present, and helped me into my gown.

"May I help you with your necklace, Erica?" she asked me.

"Yes, you may," I replied.

While we were engaging in girl talk, my mother put on my new necklace. After she put my necklace on, I went to the mirror to put my earrings on. It was the first time I would be wearing dangling earrings. "Every girl will admire you tonight, Erica," she complimented.

"I'm sure they will," I added before putting on my lipstick. My mother helped me with my eye shadow.

"I've got to help Mary get into her gown; she's also helping me get into mine," she informed me as she was leaving the room. Mary chose a bright yellow satin ball gown for the occasion; my mother chose a deep purple ball gown with white lace overlay. It was almost six o'clock; Mary had to be at the door for the first guests to arrive. When the doorbell rang for the first time, it was Beth Chen and her mother, Tanya. Beth was in a pink ball gown; Tanya was in a cream-colored ball gown.

"Come in, Beth and Mrs. Chen," Mary said in a welcoming fashion.

"Thank you, Mary," Beth said to her.

Over the next several minutes, more of my friends showed up. Jenny showed up in a beige ball gown, accompanied by Alisa in a white flower girl's gown she wore to her uncle's wedding that summer, and her mother, Bianca, wearing an antique white quinceañera gown. Two of my new friends, twin sisters Renee and Rachel Browne, showed up wearing identical style ball gowns, except that Rachel's was red and Renee's was royal blue. They had plenty of presents for my ninth birthday; the second one I spent as Erica.

It was six-thirty when my mother came to my room. "Erica, it's time," she whispered to me. I got up from my chair, spread out the skirt of my gown, and walked to the top of the stairs. My mother went down first; I followed close behind.

"There's the birthday girl!" Mary exclaimed as I walked into the living room. We sat down to a catered chicken dinner. After we finished our dinner, Mary went into the kitchen to bring the birthday cake into the living room. We all sang a chorus of "Happy Birthday" before I blew out all nine candles. The girls and I each ate one piece of cake, before the time came to open the presents.

"The first one is from me," informed Mary. She then handed me a large package. I opened it to find a box from a department store; in it, I found a white purse, a bright yellow dress, and several pairs of earrings. "Thank you, Mary," I said with a smile.

Alisa handed me another gift. "This is from my mother and me," she said to me. I opened it to find a gold necklace with my name in gold on the end. "Thanks, Alisa. I'll wear this as often as I can."

Jenny handed me a large box. "My mother helped me select this," she informed me. I opened her gift to find assorted nightgowns, a rhinestone necklace and a pair of earrings with rhinestone heart pendants. "Jenny, I really needed the nightgowns; I'm down to three now. Thanks for the earrings, too!"

Beth handed me her present next. "I'm sure you're going to like this one," she said. I opened it to find a gold necklace with a Chinese character in gold, and a Japanese kimono. "What does this mean?" I asked Beth, looking at the pendant.

"It's the Mandarin character for 'love'," she replied.

"The kimono is from my mother's side. My cousin is married to a fifth-generation Japanese-American," added Tanya.

Renee brought her present over to where I was sitting. "Erica, I think you would look great in this," she whispered to me. I opened it to find a peach-colored dress. "This is absolutely beautiful!" I exclaimed in awe.

Rachel also brought her present to where I was sitting. "I think this would make you look more feminine as you sleep," she whispered. I opened it to find several baby doll nighties in assorted colors. "These will come in great on warm nights. Thank you," I said before I gave her a hug.

"This present is great for making you look even more beautiful," Mary said before she gave me her present. I opened it to find plenty of makeup. "I'll definitely need this when we have another formal event. Thank you, dear sister," I said to her.

"And I'm so happy you're my sister. I love you, Erica."

"I love you, too, Mary."

"We all love you, Erica," added Jenny.