

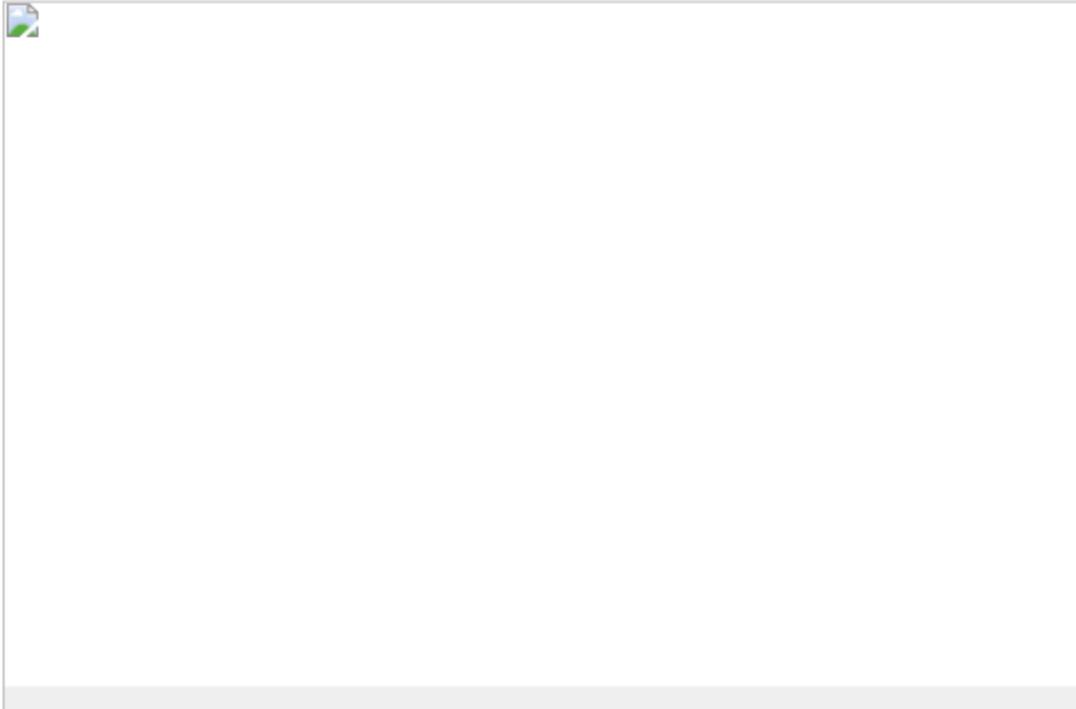
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The Queen's Speech: Eulogy for Annette Siegal



Annette Siegal (1924- 2011).

In today's Guest Diary, Peggy Siegal, New York's uber-Hollywood buzz-maker, long famous here and in the Hamptons for her first showing screenings and premieres of Hollywood films, recalls the life of her beloved mother, **Annette Siegal**, who died this past week at 87.

This was a daughter's eulogy for her mother. Peggy is a ubiquitous character in this world of celebrity and international society and hovers around New York. Hers is a very forthright personality, not always unaccompanied by controversy. She loves her business, however; loves her associations, ongoing and developing, that come her way. And she does everything with an stylish imprimatur; when she gives a party, it's always interesting. For example, some NYSD readers may recall the screening and party reported here that she had more than a year ago at the Plaza for the premiere of *The Last Emperor* (Valentino). Basic New York in lights.

I never met Peggy's mother although I knew she was a very important influence in her dynamic daughter's life. I had the impression that the two women shared the same force of personality. And in a parent-child relationship, that makes for interesting pyro-technics, especially for the mother and daughter relationship. So it was with interest that I read this daughter's recollection of her mother whom she honors.

Eulogy for Annette Siegal

Delivered by: Peggy Siegal on February 24th, 2011

My mother was born 87 years ago, in the Bronx and **Annette Siegal** was raised in Brooklyn, a borough she denied ever having stepped foot in.

She presented herself to the world, as if she were to the manor born. She was part **Lauren Bacall**, part **Babe Paley** and part **Jackie O**. She was tall and statuesque. She had great bone structure and carried herself like a queen, impeccably dressed at all times. Even her voice was elegant and seductive, when she wasn't yelling at me.

As her daughter, this was not an easy act to follow.

Her humble roots began in Russia, where her maternal grandparents, **Isador and Rebecca Kantorwitz** were born and married. In the 1880s, they immigrated to Buffalo, where Isador got a job in a factory, making shoes. This, was way before Manolo Blahniks, and Christian Louboutins.

Rebecca bore Isador six children, in various upstate New York cities. The youngest, being Annette's mother

Mildred, was born in 1900 in Rochester. Rebecca's gritty independence and moxie, provided the super glue, that held these fragile immigrant families together. The family eventually moved to the Lower East Side: another location my mother had, "absolutely no recall."

Twenty-five years ago I wrote a book called *Six Generations: In Search of a Deli*, consisting of photographs, accompanied by interviews, with family members, including my mother. Upon asking her to describe a photograph, of her maternal grandmother, Rebecca, she replied: "She had beautiful hair, that she washed everyday with an egg and wore in a braid." This was the root of Annette's infatuation with good grooming, and a flattering do.

My mother told me that after her Grandpa Isador died, her grandmother, Rebecca, lived alone in a tiny room with a kitchen. Her six children, used to take turns, visiting her every few days. This is where Annette got the idea of visiting rights: the children always came to the mother.

Annette's paternal grandparents, another Rebecca, and **Samuel Weissinger**, were also born in Russia in the 1870s. They lived on Essex Street. Her father **Harry** was an ace basketball player at the University Settlement House, which always made us giggle, because he was so short. He married Annette's mother, Mildred, when she was seventeen, and Harry was a mere twenty.

Harry's parents eventually moved to Coney Island, and entertained an endless array of nutty relatives, with singing dogs who played the piano. My mother



Peggy and Annette Siegal at Peggy's 60th birthday party, July 17, 2007.

always loved going there. Even then, she knew a good party.

Harry went to work on Seventh Avenue, in the garment industry, and eventually, became the president of the Piece Goods Buyers, for many years. He worked for designer **Hannah Troy** and was known and respected by **Norman Norell** and newcomers **Bill Blass**, **Oscar de La Renta**, and **Geoffrey Beene**. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of fabrics, and instilled, in my mother, an appreciation of fashion and design. He dressed his wife, and his daughters, in American couture clothing, with matching shoes and bags, white gloves, and exquisite jewelry.

Gerald, Annette's older brother by six years, was very much like their gregarious mother, Mildred. He had her sparkling eyes, quick smile, generous personality, and a million friends. He was also the first Jew in Brooklyn to ski, play golf in Egypt, and wear yellow cashmere socks, with tasseled loafers, way before **Ralph Lauren**. Her younger sister Barbara was born six years after her.



My father **Martin Siegal**, a 2nd Lieutenant in the army, came home on leave, and met my mother at a cousin's wedding in 1944. He was ten years older, and dashing in a uniform. It was love at first sight. She was the most gorgeous girl he had ever met.

They were married within a year, and moved to suburban Teaneck, New Jersey. My mother gave birth to me in 1947, and **Gary** in 1949. My father, was in the light bulb business, with his father **Adam**, who came here from Warsaw, Poland at the turn of the century. He worked in **Thomas Edison's** original factory. They now had a thriving lighting manufacturing company, which eventually became the third largest in the country.

Mother and daughter at Screening of HOLLYWOODLAND, July 30, 2006.

Gary and I were babies when they joined their first country club. My mother was always a great athlete and took to the game of golf, and the

lifestyle easily. She developed a great talent for Mah Jong, canasta, and around the clock help. She had been a swimming instructor at camp, and as a young child taught me the American crawl, which still remains a cherished memory.

Dinner on trays, in front of the TV was forbidden. She cooked the family meat and potatoes, five nights a week. Thursday, maid's night out, was deli, and Sunday was Chinese.

My brother, dressed as Hopalong Cassidy, shot everyone in sight, using a gun, with smoking ammunition. I struggled through ballet, and ended up in art

class. Every June we were shipped off to summer camp in New Hampshire, and every July, they showed up with bags of salamis and bagels, in case we were starving.

My parents had a wonderful marriage. He adored her. She adored him. She adored being adored.

Martin also had a personality that lit up like one of his light bulbs. He was a world class raconteur, a workaholic and brilliant mathematician. The more successful he became, the more he instilled his work ethic in all of us.

We then moved up the hill to Englewood Cliffs where Gary and I were headed to high school. My mother was looking for something to do. She became the first personal stylist at her country club. Always being one of the best dressed women in town, she began to sell her style. She had her father introduce her to all of the designers. She showed the girls what to wear and when. She took my father's car and driver and a huge hand bag filled with cash to the Seventh Avenue show rooms. She bought hundreds of dresses. She set up shop in the house. There was always a parade of her friends trying on clothes and, of course, paying in cash. It was like Loehmans in our basement.

My father, the financial genius, did all her books and paid her taxes. By now, they had a second home on a golf course in Fort Lauderdale, next door to her brother **Gerry**. My father finally put his foot down, and my mother was forbidden to sell dresses out of the Florida house. He was tired of seeing her friends running around in their underwear.

My high school years with her were noisy, to say the least. I was adventurous and disobedient. One summer, in the 60s I was a volunteer worker at The University Settlement Camp for underprivileged children. I came home looking like a beatnik, folk-singer, **Joan Baez**: no bra, work shirt, dirty feet in sandals and hair, half way down my back. She was horrified, and instantly cleaned me up. The next summer, I got a job modeling on Seventh Avenue. My new get up was a Vidal Sassoon hair cut, thick false eyelashes, and a Chanel suit. I would lie to her, and sneak into the city at night to get a table -- usually near the kitchen -- at Elaine's, where I would watch **Woody Allen** or **Jackie Onassis** eat dinner.

I was also the captain of the flag twirlers for my high school football team. On Halloween, my mother would take my entire outfit, wear it to the country club, and win first prize.

I was such a pain in the ass. The worst thing, she would say to me was, "I only wish you have a daughter like you someday."

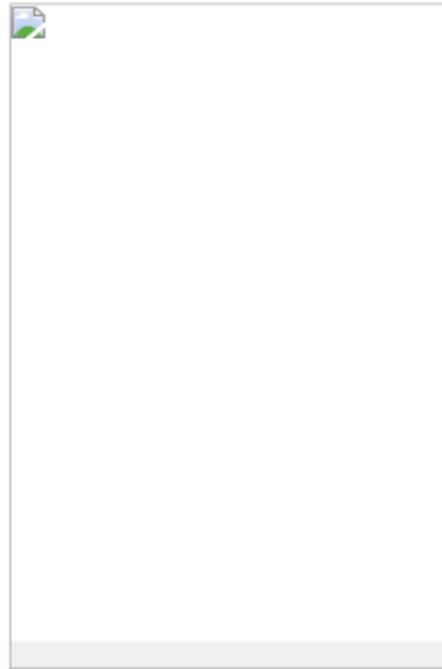
Of course, my brother was perfect. He never gave her one minute of aggravation, or heartache. The one thing that sent her into a tailspin was when he secretly joined the football team, and she went screaming to my father.

Gary and I went off to college, and Annette and Martin moved into a gorgeous stone and glass house on a hill in the woods in Alpine. She loved that house. She was such a neat freak. She would have the gardener come and vacuum her forest.

Her children came home from college. I went straight to Seventh Avenue as a designer, fulfilling her every wish. Except, I wasn't married. She advised me how and who to date, and suggested I show cleavage. My retaliation was: "Unlike all your friend's daughters,: I am not fat, and I am not divorced."

I changed careers, and ended up in motion picture publicity. She was my best customer, attending all of our screenings. After receiving an invitation, her first remark was, "Is it any good?"; then her second comment, "How many tickets can I have?" She always looked for me on the red carpet, saved my press clippings, and loved reading my Oscar Diaries.

Her perfect son went to work for her perfect husband. Then my father got sick. She nursed him through heart attacks, and strokes for six years. She was completely devoted to him. He died, just shy of his 73rd birthday. That was 22 years ago, and her life was never quite the same. Although her lifestyle was still grand, and she was financially secure, she missed him every day of her life.



Peggy with her niece, Mattie.

Gary and **Erin's** daughter **Mattie**, was born three months after my father died. She was named after him. We all felt a little piece of my father had come back through her. My mother adored Mattie, and Mattie's half sister **Elizabeth**. Mattie became an equestrienne at age three and my mother spent years, and hours, standing at the filthy horse shows, watching her talented granddaughter fly over fences, and win ribbons. She once sent Mattie and me to Argentina to buy a jumper, and then refused to pay the shipping fees to get the stallion back to the states.

When I took Mattie on safari twice, to Kenya, Africa, she loved hearing our stories about the Masai, and looking at our photos. She always loved me for looking after Mattie.

She spent the last 22 years of her life in Alpine and Palm Beach, traveling the world with her friends, playing golf and cards, frequenting the Kravis Center, Lincoln Center, and eating in countless restaurants. She had a charmed life, and was adored by her many friends.

Last September, she was diagnosed with cancer, and **David Koch** got her to Sloan Kettering immediately. She sailed through the operation, and later struggled through chemo. She was still active, and driving in December.

On Sunday, January 30th, I called her from Los Angeles, on the way to the SAG awards, to give her an update on *The King's Speech* that had won the PGA and DGA awards, and was about to win the SAG Ensemble.

An hour later, she had a brain seizure, and was rushed to Englewood Hospital. Gary was with her and told me it was a miracle she survived. The following day, an MRI revealed lesions on her brain.

She lived for three weeks, in hospice care. I found myself dressing up, in my chicest outfits, to go visit her, so she would be proud of me. Gary, Erin and I sat by her bedside everyday, and tried to comfort her. I even, prematurely, told her, "Mom, we won the Oscar", which made her smile. It was the saddest three weeks of my life, to watch the most beautiful mother in the world wither away. Although she did not suffer, it broke our hearts to watch her die.

Over this past weekend, I was in the Alpine house looking for her jewelry. I found a letter in her safe, she had written to me on my 50th birthday. It made me cry.

She wrote: "Dear Peggy, Happy Birthday. Fifty years ago today, I had the thrill of a lifetime. A nurse, brought me a tiny bundle of joy. I could not believe this tiny creature, all wrapped in a pink blanket, was my daughter. It seemed like yesterday. I counted the fingers, and the toes. I just kept staring at this bundle. I envisioned a very sophisticated, stunning young lady. I was sure, she would at least, be an editor at Vogue. I wasn't too wrong, as you did grow up, to be very successful stunning woman. I wish you health, and happiness in the next half of your life".

On Tuesday, I went to her bedside knowing she could still hear me, and told her I loved her very much. Tears streamed down her cheek. I held her in my arms. She died two hours later. I will miss my mother, for the rest of my life.
