Married at FOURTEEN
A TRUE STORY
Praise for *Married at Fourteen*

“Told with self-lacerating honesty and unvarnished prose that rises on command to poetic intensity, *Married at Fourteen* is the absorbing memoir of a young woman who struggles to find storybook romance and a purpose in life beyond it—and, against cruel odds, succeeds. Lucille Lang Day, only child of an obsessive-compulsive mother and an indulgent but passive father, was gifted with brains and beauty but grew up an unguided missile, willful, reckless, and impulsive in her choice of lovers. Her autobiographical quest transports the narrator across badlands of emotional chaos on her improbable route to domestic serenity and high accomplishments in both the arts and sciences.”

—Richard Kluger, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Ashes to Ashes*

“Lucille Lang Day gives eloquent voice to the teenager she once was—precocious, hungry for love and adventure, disrespectful of conventions, adept at getting into serious trouble. She transports us into worlds of intense experience—having a baby at age fifteen, partying with Hells Angels, dropping mescaline. As Day begins to comprehend her calling to be a writer and a scientist, we watch the development of a fine intelligence and a wise heart. Along the way we meet a bestiary of male chauvinists and a variety of psychotherapists—some helpful, some less so. Those of us who work with young people and their families can learn much from Day’s story. It challenges the conventional wisdom that a teenage mom and dropout has no future and reminds us that rebellious kids who defy authority may become—as has Day—the innovators and creators that our culture needs.”

—Naomi Ruth Lowinsky, Ph.D., M.F.T., author of *The Motherline*

“*Married at Fourteen* catches a social class that is uniquely American but resonates with what I know of working people worldwide. Although the rebellion against mothers is universal, Lucille Lang Day carries it to a new extreme. And yet the tone is calm, upbeat, and humorous, and she emerges a confident, strong woman whose values are tested and clarified in this exceptional memoir.”

—Leo Litwak, author of *The Medic*
“In this compelling memoir, what propels Lucille Lang Day to break free of constraints, internal or external, can be found in a telling insight: ‘I sensed there was something just beyond my consciousness that I needed to know about my life.’ Her illuminating story tracks the search for that expansive terrain just beyond the No Trespassing signs. Married at Fourteen is a testament to the independent spirit and indomitable will of a woman whose reinventions show the way to transformation and hope.”

—Toni Mirosevich, author of Pink Harvest

“Married at Fourteen is the story of the late and somewhat surprising discovery of genuine family by someone who was—in her own terms—‘a bad girl.’ She survives les bas-fonds to become a respected poet, scientist, and educator. The book tells us that a restless, not easily satisfied, constantly questioning intellect may, in the right situation, pull us away from Dropout City towards love, satisfaction, a world—these are the last words of the book—‘alive with offerings.’”

—Jack Foley, KPFA literary host and author of Visions & Affiliations

“The saga Married at Fourteen is many things: both a cautionary tale and a tale of redemption, a multigenerational account of the passing of an era, a parable of the Prodigal Daughter, a gripping narrative rendered from a tenacious memory, a scientist’s precision, and an artist’s sensitivity. Parents should read this book, teachers and counselors, dreamers and seekers, anyone who wants to read a book that once you pick up you’ll find hard to put down. While you will not condone all of Lucille Lang Day’s actions—she does not expect you to—you will understand, sympathize, and perhaps sometimes see yourself more clearly.”

—Adam David Miller, winner of PEN/Oakland’s 2011 Josephine Miles National Literary Award for Lifetime Achievement and author of Ticket to Exile
Married at Fourteen
Married at Fourteen

a true story

Lucille Lang Day

Heyday, Berkeley, California
Also by Lucille Lang Day

POETRY
The Curvature of Blue
Infinities
Wild One
Fire in the Garden
Self-Portrait with Hand Microscope

POETRY CHAPBOOKS
God of the Jellyfish
The Book of Answers
Lucille Lang Day: Greatest Hits, 1975–2000

CHILDREN’S BOOK
Chain Letter

SCIENCE EDUCATION
How to Encourage Girls in Math and Science: Strategies for Parents and Educators (coauthor)
SEEK (Science Exploration, Excitement, and Knowledge): A Curriculum in Health and Biomedical Science for Diverse 4th and 5th Grade Students (editor)
Family Health and Science Festival: A SEEK Event (editor)
For my daughters, Liana and Tamarind
And my husband, Richard
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All of the events described in this book are true, but I have changed the names of many people to protect the guilty. Part I tells the story of my teen years, 1960 to 1967, from my adolescent point of view: I have tried to recapture what I was thinking and feeling then and reveal how, bit by bit, I matured. Part II consists of nine self-contained stories that focus mainly on events in my adult life.

The details of my experiences are unique and personal, but the themes are universal. This book is about men and women, parents and children, how they communicate with each other, and how they fail to do so. It is also about adolescent rebellion and how it can give way to self-discovery, hope, survival, and love.
Many people helped make this book a reality. Special thanks go to Cyra McFadden for providing much invaluable advice and criticism; Herbert Gold for his longtime support of this project; Marcia Falk, Molly Giles, Frances Mayes, and Steven Rood for their insightful feedback on early versions; and Gayle Wattawa of Heyday for helping me identify the weaknesses and build on the strengths of the manuscript. I am also indebted to my daughters, Liana Day-Williams and Tamarind Fleischman Pease, who read earlier drafts and helped me to remember events more clearly and understand them more fully; my father, the late Richard Lang, who believed in me as much as is humanly possible; and my husband Richard Levine, whose love and wisdom are my bedrock. Richard has enabled me to finish what I started long ago and has inspired me to make this into a much better book than it started out to be.

Portions of this book have appeared in the following publications, sometimes in slightly different form:

Excerpts:

_Cadillac Cicatrix_: “The White Swan Motel”
_Eureka Literary Magazine_: “Visit to David”
_The Gihon River Review_: “The White Swan Motel”
_The Hudson Review_: “Worse than a Dozen Kids”
_Passages North_: “Time-Out!”
_Pennsylvania English_: “Will I What?”
_River Oak Review_: “Angel on 24 East”
_Waccamaw_: “Married at Fourteen”
_Willow Review_: “Stalked”
Acknowledgments

Poems:
The Curvature of Blue (Červená Barva Press) and Blue Unicorn:
“Color of the Universe” and “A Blessing in Beige”
Psychological Perspectives: “Birding: A Love Poem”
Wild One: Poems (Scarlet Tanager Books): “To an Artist”

“Stalked” received the 2009 Willow Review Award for Creative Nonfiction.
Part 1
Left: Dick and Evelyn Lang on their wedding day, July 6, 1940.
Right: Lucy at the skating rink, 1961.
chapter 1

“Worse Than a Dozen Kids”

I own a switchblade knife. It has a black plastic handle with two brass buttons. One button is the lock. When you slide this button to its uppermost position, the knife won’t open (a handy feature that prevents it from opening in your pocket). But when you slide the lock button all the way down, then press on the larger brass button in the middle of the handle, the blade pops out with a click, in less than a second, making a clean 180-degree arc.

There is a special way to hold a switchblade so that you won’t cut yourself when it opens: you cradle it in your palm with your thumb on the large button, the tip of your index finger pressed behind the base of the blade, and your remaining fingers curled beside, rather than around, the handle, so as not to interfere with the opening blade. Bill Arthur taught me this when he gave me the knife. He was nineteen, a blueprint delivery boy; I was thirteen, in eighth grade.

I almost had to relinquish the knife not long after acquiring it. I was smoking on the way home from school, and a boy named Ken followed me and threatened to tell. I pulled the knife from my purse, holding it just as Bill had shown me, and pressed the button. When the blade popped out, I waved the knife at Ken and said I’d cut him up into little pieces if he finked on me. He called my bluff and fink he did—not only for my smoking but also for threatening him with a switchblade.

The next day I was called to the office of Mr. Louis Ferry, principal of Piedmont Junior High School, and told that Inspector Lamp wanted to see me at the Piedmont Police Department, across the street
from the school. I stopped on the way to put the switchblade in my locker.

“We have a report that you threatened a boy with a switchblade knife yesterday,” said Inspector Lamp.

“That’s crazy. I’ve never even seen a switchblade.”

“Why do you think the boy said that?”

I pulled my key chain from my purse. On it, I had a fold-out nail file in a unit that also included a tiny knife, less than one inch long. I held the handle and flicked my wrist. The little knife popped out.

Inspector Lamp said, “You’d better give that to me,” and I took it off my key chain and handed it to him.

Then he asked me to empty my purse, which was close to the size of a suitcase (all the better for shoplifting), but only my makeup, brush, comb, wallet, tissues, pencils, pens, chewing gum, cigarettes, matches, and a Hershey bar came tumbling out. He took the cigarettes and matches, then asked if I’d like to see his collection of switchblades.

His were much finer than mine. Some had bone, wood, or mother-of-pearl handles; many had much longer blades. “They’re illegal,” he said. “We don’t give them back.”

Nevertheless, I kept mine, which was tucked safely behind my math and history books in my locker. I wasn’t about to hand it over to any cop. It was a symbol of who I was. It meant I didn’t play by the rules; it meant I made up my own rules. It meant I was a rebel. It meant I was bad.

I’ve had my switchblade now for over fifty years. For two decades I kept it in my desk with other childhood mementos in a pink box with My Treasures stamped on top. Now I keep it in my bedroom in a drawer in an antique oak dresser with other special things, like my gold charm bracelet, my children’s milk teeth, and my Phi Beta Kappa key.
I started seriously looking for a husband when I was twelve. I’d had enough of being a child, enough of being told what to do. I was unhappy at school; I resented homework; I didn’t get along with my mother. Having seen movies like *South Pacific*, *Sayonara*, and *A Summer Place*, I believed in true love. More than anything, I wanted Rosanno Brazzi, Marlon Brando, or Troy Donahue to come rescue me from my childhood. I wanted to be an adult, to be free, and to be loved.

The grown-ups always warned that getting pregnant as a teenager would ruin your life, but I didn’t believe them. I felt that in truth my life would be ruined if I had to live with my mother much longer: her nagging would drive me crazy. And my sanity would benefit even more if I could be freed from boring math drills and stuck-up classmates. A high school diploma? I didn’t need one. I already knew everything I’d ever need to know.

My thoughts on all these things began to crystallize in the summer of 1960, after my sixth-grade graduation from Egbert W. Beach School in Piedmont, California. That summer I went to Camp Augusta, where Piedmont Blue Birds and Campfire Girls rode horses, swam, wove key chains from long strips of colored plastic, and painted daisies on salt and pepper shakers for their mothers. On the bus, which took us from the Piedmont Community Center to the Sierra foothills, we sang “Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall” and “A Hot Time in the Old Town.” But my fun was to be short-lived. Singing on the bus, I had no inkling that once at Camp Augusta, I would spend my time figuring out how to avoid the broom treatment, and that having accomplished that, I would dive headlong into a turbulent adolescence.

The campers were assigned to groups called Tents, each of which included about ten girls. Every Tent had a real tent—a large sturdy canvas one where we kept our belongings, changed our clothes, and slept when it rained. Most of the time, we slept in our sleeping bags on cots outside, under the Douglas firs, sugar pines, and glittering constellations.

Every Tent also had a broom for sweeping the tent. Only this isn’t how the girls in my Tent used it. After breakfast my first morning at
camp, I found out how the broom was really used. When Marlene and I, the only beginning swimmers in our Tent, went back to change into swimsuits for our lesson, the rest of our tent mates followed. As soon as Marlene, who was beginning to get breasts and curly black pubic hair that matched the hair on her head, was naked, one of the girls grabbed the broom and ran after her, threatening to swat her unless she ran outside, which she did, as everyone laughed and cheered.

The broom treatment, as the girls called it, was administered whenever someone was changing her clothes and no counselors were near. My refusal to chase anyone with the broom and my strategies to avoid nakedness in the tent (changing my clothes in my sleeping bag or in the lavatory, wearing my underpants beneath my swimsuit) did not win me any friends, nor did my decision to wear shorts and blouses instead of cut-off Levi’s and sweatshirts like everyone else wore, even when the temperature was over one hundred degrees. I spent a lot of time sitting on my cot, watching the squirrels and jays clean up the peanuts and sunflower seeds dropped by the campers and trying to figure out how to get out of Camp Augusta.

On the fourth day I limped to the infirmary, threw myself writhing onto a cot, and moaned, “I have a terrible stomachache. I want to go home.”

“What kind of stomachache?” asked the nurse.

“The kind that hurts here.” I put my hand on my abdomen.

“Is there anything special about this stomachache?” she asked, leaning closer.

“No.”

She sent tan, freckled Janet Driscoll, the favorite counselor of the campers, in to see me.

“Hi kid. How’re you doing?”

“I feel sick.”

“You don’t look very sick to me.”

“I have a stomachache.”

“Listen, I know it’s hard sometimes to be open with people you don’t know very well,” she said, sitting down beside me on the cot
and leaning so close I could count the flakes of peeling skin on her sunburned nose, “but believe me, we’re all your friends here. You have nothing to be afraid of. All of us know how it feels to….” She paused and looked at me knowingly before continuing, “…to have cramps.”

I started crying. “I’m not afraid; I’m just sick. Please call my mom and dad. I want to go home.”

An only child, I usually got my way. My parents arrived the next day. I had no intention of telling them about the strange puberty rite I had witnessed. If I told my mother about the broom treatment, she would tell the camp director, who would confront the girls. I did not want to be a tattletale.

As we pulled onto the highway in my father’s blue-and-white ’55 Oldsmobile, my mother, who had argued against my going to camp, said, “Lucille, I told you that you shouldn’t come here. You should’ve listened to me. This was an awful drive for your father and me.” She wiped her forehead with a handkerchief, brushing back her brown hair, which was starting to turn gray. “You’re worse than a dozen kids,” she added emphatically. “You don’t know what a nuisance you are.”

“Are you feeling any better?” my father asked. His face was flushed, his hair matted with perspiration. He was forty-two, seven years younger than my mother, but he wasn’t holding up any better in the heat. My parents were overweight and always had a hard time in hot weather.

I was about to say, “I’m feeling okay now,” when I realized that I actually did have cramps. “No, I’m feeling worse. I’d like to stop at a gas station.”

Several miles down the road, when we pulled into a station, I was feeling quite uncomfortable. No acting was necessary as I walked, slightly bent over, to the restroom.

Back in the car I tried to sound casual as I said, “We have to stop at a drugstore. I need some Kotex.”

My mother looked at me disgustedly. “You made us drive all the way up here for that! I knew it! That’s what everyone at the camp
said it was.” She rolled her eyes and raised her voice. “That’s nothing, you hear me, nothing! You didn’t need to come home for that. Lucille, sometimes you just don’t use your head.”

This was mild criticism from my mother, who had been telling me ever since I could remember that I was nothing but a troublemaker and would be sorry when she was ten feet under and pushing up daisies. I was sick of it. I didn’t want to listen to her nagging anymore, nor did I want to wear the Piedmont Junior High and High School uniform—a black or white pleated skirt, a white blouse with sleeves and a collar, and bobby sox with saddle shoes, tennis shoes, or oxfords—with the girls from Camp Augusta for the next six years.

I’d heard many times that my Aunt Liz’s cousin met her husband at Dimond Roller Rink when she was eighteen. Maybe I could find a husband there too. “I want to go skating at Dimond,” I told my parents when we were almost home.

My mother said that I absolutely could not go roller-skating and break my neck, but my father and I talked her into it. So it was that on a Friday night, I put on pink-and-blue plaid pedal pushers and a white ruffled blouse, tied my long golden hair back with a pink satin ribbon, and took a long look at myself in the mirror, wondering if I looked like a woman someone would want to marry. My best friend, Eileen, who was coming along, said, “Hurry up! Don’t be so vain.”

After skating around the rink a couple of times, I asked my father to leave. I continued to glide around the rink, surprised I could do so without falling, since I’d never been skating before, until the lights went dim and the announcer said, “Couples only.” Everyone cleared the floor except one boy, who remained at the center of the rink, practicing leaps, spins, and figures. By far the best skater there, he was either totally oblivious to everyone else or showing off for us. I was awed. “Couples only,” the announcer said again. The skater, who was in midair, landed, spun around on one foot, and skated directly toward me. I did not attach any significance to this until he held out his hand and said, “Would you like to skate?”

The world turned in the palm of my hand. I had never imagined that finding a man would be so easy. He was tall and slender, with
a high forehead, brown hair, lively brown eyes, and a terrible complexion. The complexion didn’t bother me: I was sure it would clear up in time.

“My name is Woody,” he said. “What’s yours?”

Could I tell him my name was Lucille? I’d hated the name even before the kids in elementary school started calling me Lou the Seal. He was waiting; I had to think quickly. I said, “Lucy.”

He would be a senior at Oakland High School in September, he was an artist, and he hoped to win a scholarship to the California College of Arts and Crafts. Could I tell him I was twelve years old and starting seventh grade? “I’m fourteen and going into ninth grade at Piedmont High,” I said.

Woody asked me to skate every time the announcer said, “Couples only.” At the end of the evening he asked, “Are you coming back?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

I didn’t pause a nanosecond. “Tomorrow night.”

Eileen kept muttering, “You lucky bum,” as we changed into our shoes.

I went skating every Friday and Saturday night for the rest of the summer. During the week I spent most of my time making skating skirts with felt, corduroy, and floral-print cottons. For some skirts I simply cut the fabric in a circle, made a hole for my waist, and added a waistband; for others I stitched together multiple panels that were narrow at the top to make a snug fit across my abdomen, but flared at the bottom to make the skirt full.

I felt like a woman and I wanted to look like one. I started curling my hair (no more pink ribbons!) and wearing green or purple eye shadow, bright pink lipstick, black eyeliner, and black mascara. My mother, who didn’t wear makeup, screamed, “You’re a disgrace. You look like a flapper!” every time I left the house.

Woody and I were a couple. We always skated together during “couples only,” and sometimes even during “all skate.” When we weren’t skating, we sat under the high windows on a scratched and stained wooden bench on which many couples before us had carved
their initials. As we drank Coke and watched the other skaters, he always put his arm around me, and sometimes I turned my head just to admire his hand resting on my shoulder. After skating, he walked me back to meet my parents at my Aunt Ethel and Uncle Dick’s house, two blocks away. I didn’t want my parents to talk to him, though. I was scared to death my father would say something embarrassing like, “You know, she’s only twelve years old.”

One night toward the end of summer, when the last “couples only” period was announced, Woody said, “Let’s leave.”

“Why?”

“So that we can have some time alone before I have to get you home.”

I led him to my cousin Jan’s playhouse in my aunt and uncle’s backyard. He wanted to sit on the floor, but I didn’t want to get my skating skirt dirty, so we stood in the middle of the room. He put his arms around me and pulled me close. I knew he wanted to kiss me, so I looked up at him and smiled.

His mouth felt very hard against mine. This wasn’t at all what I’d imagined kissing a boy would be like. I remembered reading about a girl’s first kiss in a Beverly Cleary novel: “She had never thought a boy’s lips could be so soft.”

“Your lips are soft,” I said, because I wanted this moment to be like the one in the book.

“Well, what did you expect?”

“I didn’t know what to expect. I’ve never kissed a boy before.”

He leaned forward to kiss me again.

... 

On a Saturday in August, my father took Eileen and me to the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. We rode the Ferris wheel, the roller coaster called the Giant Dipper, and the Wild Mouse, which felt at every turn as though it would fly off the track. Then we entered an arcade where there were rows of rectangular red fortune-telling machines the size of toasters. You put a penny in, asked a question with a
yes or no answer, then pulled a lever. The answer popped out on a little card. I put my penny in, asked, “Will I marry young?” and pulled the lever. The answer popped out: “I will be truthful—signs say yes. Genius may have its limitations, but stupidity is not thus handicapped.”

All too soon, summer ended and I entered the dreaded Piedmont Junior High, the only public school I had ever heard of that required girls to wear uniforms. That year the uniform had been updated: tennis shoes and blouse styles other than middies were now allowed. To the best of my knowledge, these were the only changes that had ever been instituted. Except for the tennis shoes and blouses, the uniform was no different from the one my mother and her twin sister, my Aunt Ethel, wore in the 1920s. But it wasn’t only the appearance of the uniform that bothered me. I was also angry that girls had to wear this awful costume, while boys didn’t have to wear any uniform at all. They could even wear shorts in hot weather.

I splashed Coke and orange juice on my skirts to keep them at the cleaners as much as possible. I cut holes in my tennis shoes and complained that oxfords hurt my feet. One morning I wore a black blouse and a tight green-red-black plaid skirt with a fringed hem underneath my uniform, and on the way to school I peeled off the hated garments and threw them into a Dumpster in front of a typical Piedmont home: a Jacobean mansion, complete with guest cottage, swimming pool, bathhouse, greenhouse, rolling lawns, and a Greek pavilion overlooking the tennis courts.

My family wasn’t rich. The school and mansions were up in the hills, but I lived in “lower Piedmont,” in a nondescript three-bedroom, one-bath white stucco house near busy Grand Avenue. I had strong mixed feelings as I walked past the mansions each day. Sometimes I was simply disgusted that anyone should have so much. Other times I felt that the people who lived in these houses weren’t important or real, that the real people were the families living in crowded apartments in nearby Oakland. Still other times, I fantasized that I would be rich and famous someday, not just rich enough to buy one of the mansions for Woody and me, but rich enough to buy three