

A MEMOIR

**NOT IF
I CAN
HELP IT**

*A Family Lawyer's Battles for Justice for
Victims of Domestic Violence and the Poor*

MEG GROFF

Praise for *Not If I Can Help It*

“An inspiring, intelligent memoir . . . Each episode carries a tremendous punch, as well as a searing lesson about the failings of society to help those in need. . . . Groff balances her book with warmth and humor.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Groff’s masterful storytelling skills sculpt profound meaning from even the most terrifying of narratives, gifting readers with a deep understanding of what is needed to protect abuse victims and their children . . . Explosive memoir of a family law attorney’s fight for justice.”

—*Publishers Weekly BookLife* [Editor’s Pick]

“Stories of criminal lawyers are common, but stories of those who do the critical unsung work of poverty law are rarely told. In her humble, witty, and compelling voice, Meg Groff shares the inside story of what it is like to be a family law attorney for Legal Aid, including the fantastic victories and traumatic losses that accompany the specialty of representing victims of domestic violence. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to know what doing good by being a lawyer looks like.”

—Joan S. Meier, NFVLC Professor of Clinical Law
and Director of the National Family Violence Law Center
at George Washington School of Law

“Meg Groff has fought for the rights and needs of children and women in the toughest arena, and has lived to tell a heart-warming story.”

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Director of Child and Family Training, and Visiting Professor
at Royal Holloway, University of London

“*Not If I Can Help It* renews your faith in justice and those who fight tirelessly for it, while also breaking your heart. You come away inspired and outraged, with important insight into the terrifying reality of domestic violence.”

—Sasha Drobnick, Appellate Litigation Director,
DV LEAP, Network for Victim Recovery of DC

“Everyone who reads this book will want Groff as their attorney-champion, but for now you will have to settle for her being your storyteller.”

—Danielle Pollack, co-founder, National Safe Parents Organization
and policy manager, National Family Violence Law Center

“The condition of our family court system is a national crisis, and Meg Groff is a bright light in the darkness. *Not If I Can Help It* should be required reading for every judge, lawyer, and law school student in America.

—Tina Swithin, Family Court Advocate, author of
Divorcing a Narcissist, and founder of One Mom’s Battle

“All the understanding, courage, and humor of a veteran warrior in the fight for social justice.”

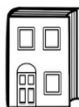
—Terry Bisson, Hugo Award-winning author of *Any Day Now*

ADVANCE EXCERPT FROM

Not If I Can Help It

*A Family Lawyer's Battles for Justice
for Victims of Domestic Violence and the
Poor*

Meg Groff



Rivertowns

BOOKS

IRVINGTON, NEW YORK

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For my mother, Helen Satinsky Splaver,
who badgered me into going to college,
convinced me that I could be a lawyer, and
taught me, from an early age, that we must
never remain silent in the face of injustice

When will justice come? When those who are not injured are as outraged as those who are.

~ Unknown ~

The Golden Rule is of no use whatsoever unless you realize that it's your move.

~ Frank Crane ~

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Preface

Every chapter in this book recounts a case drawn from my career as a family law attorney representing victims of domestic violence, children, and the poor. Some people are identified by their real names, but in many instances—including all of my clients—names have been changed to protect the innocent. Sometimes, physical descriptions of the parties involved and other identifying case details have been altered, but nothing fundamental is fiction; these are true stories about some of the memorable clients I have had the opportunity to represent, and about the battlefield of society and the law on which their cases have been fought. Some readers may find portions of this book triggering, as instances of violence against women and children are depicted.

The stories in this book are from the early years of my career, but the circumstances described and the problems presented remain relevant today. Stories like these continue to occur in great numbers, not only in my home state of Pennsylvania but all across America. Please read the Afterword, “Where Do We Go from Here?,” to learn about where we now stand in the ongoing battle for the rights of domestic violence victims, children, and the poor, and what you can do to help.

Meg Groff
Doylestown, Pennsylvania
February 2025

1. Guardian Angel

The first time I saw the Bucks County courthouse, I wanted to run in the opposite direction. It loomed so large in the county square, and *ten* judges reigned inside. I know now that there are far bigger courthouses with many more judges, but I had been living in a rural county with a one-room courthouse and exactly one judge, so ten seemed like an awful lot of judges to me. It was less than a year since I had passed the bar exam and received my license to practice law, and already I was starting over. And now my new boss, David Tilove, had assigned me a contested custody case that was scheduled for trial in that looming courthouse in only five days.

David was in his early forties when I first met him, handsome in an offbeat way that made you wonder if only you were noticing. I would soon learn that he enjoyed the intellectual challenge of jousting with a hippie rebel who held strong opinions about the pursuit of justice in an unjust world. But in my first week working at the Bucks County Legal Aid Society, all I really knew about David Tilove was that he was Legal Aid's executive director. I had only done a handful of short hearings in that laid-back one-room courthouse in Mifflin County, and I felt sure that going to trial here would be a very different experience.

I needed to talk to my new boss.

I stood at the open door to David's office, but he was deep in thought at his desk and didn't notice me standing there, so I knocked on the wall

to get his attention. He raised his head, still half-distracted, and looked at me quizzically. “Hi,” he said. “What’s up?”

I walked into his office and took a seat. “I want to observe a custody hearing here before I do one,” I stated firmly. “I’d like to take a day off so I can go to the courthouse to do that.”

“Do you really think that’s necessary? You can’t learn to swim without jumping into the water,” he responded.

“I think you shouldn’t jump into water before knowing if you’ll be landing in a tub or an ocean,” I shot back.

That got David’s full attention. He peered at me, and there was a long moment of silence (at least it seemed long to me at the time). Then he asked, “If you got hired for a factory job, would you demand a free day to watch the widgets being made?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” I said, “but people aren’t widgets. If I mess up a custody case, it would matter a lot to my client, her children, and me.”

My new boss smiled broadly. “Good closing argument,” he said. “Take a day off. I insist.”

It turned out that family law cases were not actually litigated in the stately main courthouse, but rather in a small, inconspicuous, grayish building across the street. So I went to family court to sit quietly in courtroom A-9, waiting to observe the custody hearing scheduled that day before the Honorable Edward G. Biester, Jr. I was wearing an old pair of blue jeans and a tie-dyed shirt, with a colorful bandana wrapped around my long red hair. It was 1984; the Sixties were long gone, but I was a dyed-in-the-wool hippie and still looked the part. Because I was only going to be an audience member, I felt no compulsion to be dressed like a lawyer, which I avoided every chance I got. In truth, I still didn’t *feel* like a lawyer, and I disliked having to dress up like one. (Thoreau cautioned, “Distrust any endeavor that requires new clothes.” His warning had nagged at me throughout three years of law school.)

So this was a “come-as-you-are” day when I would sit unobtrusively in the courtroom, quietly observing how custody hearings were conducted. I had gotten there early to ensure a good seat, and I expected to go unnoticed, just one of the crowd. But as ten a.m. approached, only three people straggled into the courtroom. One was obviously a lawyer, an aristocratic-looking gentleman who walked with a cane although he

did not seem to need it. By his side was a short man with a grim face and angry eyes. The third person, a thin, middle-aged woman wearing a threadbare coat and clutching a Bible, was visibly trembling as she took the seat farthest away from the man and his lawyer.

Judge Biester entered the courtroom, heralded by the requisite court fanfare designed to signal the solemn gravity of such proceedings. Taking his seat, he said, "Let us begin."

The three other people in the courtroom came forward and stood before the bench.

"Do you have an attorney?" Judge Biester asked the woman.

"No," she said. "I can't afford one."

"Did you apply to Legal Aid?"

"Yes," she answered, her voice quavering, "but they had no one available to take my case."

When I heard her say that, I felt a storm of guilt. This poor woman—poor in every way—was trembling and alone in a court of law because Legal Aid supposedly had no one available to take her case. Yet here I was, sitting leisurely and carefree, taking the day off.

Judge Biester declared a twenty-minute recess to give the opposing sides an opportunity to talk to each other. "See if you can resolve this matter," he directed as he left the bench.

I rushed over to the woman and introduced myself. I was a new Legal Aid attorney, I explained, and although I couldn't do a hearing, I could help negotiate an agreement on her behalf. Would she want me to do that?

"I've been praying to God to send a guardian angel to guide me," she told me, "and, praise be to God, here you are!"

I looked even less like an angel than I looked like a lawyer, but I determined, then and there, to do the best I could to fill both positions.

The man's lawyer eyed me warily. I went over to him and informed him that I would be negotiating on the woman's behalf. He was clearly not pleased with this turn of events. "Are you her *lawyer*?" he demanded. Perhaps I should have hesitated, but I didn't. "Yes," I said. "I'm her lawyer."

I took the woman to a small alcove down the hall from the courtroom and asked her to tell me about her case as quickly as she could.

There was no time for nuance; the recess was only twenty minutes. I learned that she and her ex-husband were recovering alcoholics, and that they had one child, a teenage daughter, who had lived with her since the parties' separation two years earlier. She had always been the girl's primary caretaker. But her daughter had recently begun getting into trouble at home and at school, including being caught smoking marijuana. At the urging of her AA support group, the woman had "grounded" her daughter for three months in an application of "tough love." Her daughter responded by running to her father. He considered it a validation of his parental superiority and was rewarding the girl with gifts, special privileges, and the attention he had never before bestowed. Now she was refusing to see her mother at all.

I asked the woman if she hoped to have the judge order her daughter returned to her primary custody. She told me she knew her daughter's preference at age 16 would be given great weight, and was glad her ex-husband was finally acting like a father. She wanted her daughter to have the opportunity to continue experiencing that new relationship, but she didn't want to be excluded from her daughter's life.

I asked her what she would think about a proposal that she be given shared legal custody and partial physical custody of her daughter, detailing the liberal custodial schedule such a proposal could include.

The woman began crying. "That would be so wonderful! But my ex-husband will never agree to any of that, and neither will my daughter. She's so mad at me. I just pray that I'll at least be allowed to see her at Christmas time."

"That won't do," I said. I told the woman that I was sure her daughter loved her, because it was obvious how very much she loved her daughter. Maybe tough love had turned out not to be the best approach with a child who was going through enough tough times of her own, but when the two of them had a chance to talk things over, I was quite sure it would all work out.

"Let's see what I can do," I said, as I marched over to her ex's attorney.

The lawyer was in no mood to negotiate with a blue-jean-clad interloper claiming to be a lawyer. He spoke to me begrudgingly and his demeanor was dismissive. "Her daughter hates her. She's sixteen years old.

Judge Biester isn't going to order her to spend time with her unstable mother. There will be no deal." He had nothing more to say. I sensed he expected me to vanish when the recess ended, like an annoying apparition that was just pretending to be there.

The tipstaff, a court official, appeared shortly thereafter, asking whether an agreement was likely. I explained that I was from Legal Aid, taking a day off, and just happened to be in the courtroom. I told him we had tried without success to resolve the matter, whereupon the tipstaff informed us that court was reconvening.

When Judge Biester returned to the bench, he addressed me directly. "I hear you offered to assist the respondent, but no agreement has been reached. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Your Honor," I replied.

"Let's try conferencing the matter," Judge Biester said, and he ushered me and the other attorney into his chambers. I began to apologize for my conspicuously inappropriate attire, but the judge cut me off. "I'm just grateful that you volunteered. Cases are always easier to handle with a lawyer on both sides."

Judge Biester gave each of us five minutes to argue the issues and delineate what we thought his order should be. I assumed he would then tell us his thoughts on the matter, enabling us to negotiate again within that framework, but instead, when our time was up, he abruptly announced: "Okay, then, let's have our hearing!"

I cannot adequately describe how those words hit my brain and my body. But there was no time to think and no safe place to faint. Trailing Judge Biester and the husband's attorney back to the courtroom, I motioned to the woman to sit by my side at the defense table. "We're having a hearing, and you will be testifying," I whispered to her. "All you need to do is answer the questions truthfully. The judge is a nice man. Don't be afraid." I have no idea how I managed to speak, because I am quite sure that I wasn't breathing, but I could hear my voice sounding calm and reassuring.

"I'm not afraid, now that you are here," the woman said. She was no longer trembling and looked utterly serene. I resolved at that moment that my own rising panic would stay banished from view. As we sat side

by side at the defense table, I whispered to her once again, “I’m sorry, but I neglected to ask: what is your *name*?”

I do not recall much about that hearing. I remember that the ex-husband testified, and that I cross-examined him at length, his angry eyes focused on me as he squirmed in his seat. I remember that the woman who had become my client took the stand, and that her sweetness suffused her testimony. I remember that closing arguments were made by the man’s attorney and by me, and that I advocated forcefully for the custody schedule I was seeking for my client. But the details of that hearing are a haze, except for Judge Biester’s final decision. I have, to this day, a crystal-clear memory of the custody order he issued, because it was identical in every respect to the one I had requested.

My client was ecstatic, thanking God, once again, for sending me to her. It wasn’t the forum for a religious debate, so I didn’t argue the point. Besides, I must admit, it felt rather nice to be someone’s guardian angel.

Altogether, it was a joyous occasion, the first of many to come in that courthouse.

As soon as I could get to the payphones in the hallway (it was 1984, after all), I called David Tilove to update him on how my day off had worked out. I could tell he was pleased, not only with me but also with himself. “So you jumped into the water and it turns out you can swim,” he said, just a bit smugly.

But that was not the lesson I learned that day. I have never stopped believing in the importance of painstaking preparation before every court hearing, because people are not widgets. And I didn’t learn that everyone who comes to court deserves a lawyer by their side, because I already knew that. No, the lesson I learned that day was that I really *was* a lawyer—and a good one—whether I looked like one or not.

2. “You Might As Well Be a Lawyer”

I never expected to be a lawyer. After graduating from high school, I swore off any more schooling. I thought graduating from high school was accomplishment enough when it came to formal education, and given how many classes I had cut, it really *was* an accomplishment. The following year, I married Jim Groff, the older brother of my two best friends. And the year after that, our daughter Ruth was born. It was the start of the legendary Sixties, and Jim and I looked and lived like hippies. We moved around a bit, but ended up residing in a little rented house at the top of a steep hill in the backwoods of Pennsylvania. Surrounded by trees and berry bushes, we happily eschewed modern conveniences like electricity and running water, and rid ourselves of extraneous material possessions in favor of what we called “the good life.”

Then, as now, Jim was multitalented—a carpenter, electrician, mechanic, landscaper, and fine craftsman in leather and wood. He could make or fix almost anything. But Jim was picky. Regardless of how much the job might pay, he refused to be hired to make or fix anything that wouldn’t end up being beautiful or functional. He thought there was already too much ugliness and dysfunction in the world without any contributions from him.

My efforts to bolster our household income through gainful employment were even less successful, but for a different reason: I had no marketable skills. As a result, I gradually constructed a résumé of short-lived, low-paying jobs for which I failed to show even a glimmer of ability. My incompetence as a waitress, for example, had earned me a small measure of renown at more than one restaurant. Not that I was sullen or inattentive. Just that I could never remember who ordered what, didn't know one salad dressing from another, and could easily trip over a smudge on the floor.

Once, when we lived in an up-and-coming slum in Philadelphia, I tried to be a taxicab driver. The plan was doomed from the start because it was years before the advent of GPS and I am directionally dyslexic. I lasted on the job for two harrowing days, both of which I spent getting hopelessly lost trying to deliver my passengers to their desired destinations. I still recall my last passenger, who sat patiently in the back seat as I drove down one street after another, searching in vain for a sign that would tell me where in the world we were. When he finally escaped from the cab, he gently suggested that I had not yet found my niche.

But nothing was as catastrophic as my brief stint at the local sock factory, where I managed to get the lower front of my cotton shirt swallowed by a mammoth sock-making machine, leading to a disruption of sock production unmatched in the factory's half-century history.

It was the sock factory incident that changed the direction of my life.

My mother happened to call me a few hours after I fled shirtless from that traumatic scene, and, as she was wont to do, she bugged me about going to college. “If you don't get a higher education,” she said, “you'll be working in sock factories all your life.”

Suspecting such employment might no longer be available to me, I bowed to her bugging and enrolled in college. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was the first step on my way to becoming a lawyer.



I couldn't afford to go to college full-time. The first semester, I took two courses instead of four. Our daughter Ruth, just five years old, became very sick, very suddenly, during the onset of juvenile diabetes, and I had

to reduce my attendance from two courses a semester to one. At that rate, I feared I'd never finish being a freshman. But I kept taking classes and slowly, very slowly, I accumulated college credits.

Several years passed. Then I heard about Goddard's Adult Degree Program, which finally enabled me to speed up the process, largely through independent study, and earn my degree. I had taken many psychology courses, all of which were fascinating, and I thought I wanted to become a psychologist. But that thought shifted in a different direction one night, at about three a.m., when I woke to the sounds of frantic knocking on our front door.

I opened the door to the sight of a tear-stained young woman, bare-foot, dressed only in a nightgown, with disheveled locks of long, blond hair partly shrouding her pretty face. I had never seen her before.

"Please help me!" she begged, before weeping overcame her. Her legs buckled, and she would have fallen if I hadn't caught her. I held her upright in my arms and began guiding her inside.

"What's *happening*?" I asked anxiously as I cradled her. "Are you *okay*?" She was so slight and delicate, she felt almost weightless in my arms. Like a tattered linen doll.

Through gasping sobs she told me, "He took Tad."

"*Who* took Tad?" I asked, wondering *Who is Tad*?

She tried to answer but couldn't stop weeping long enough to form words. I half-carried her to the couch, sat her down beside me, and began reciting meaningless platitudes meant to comfort. "Everything will be all right," I told her, when there was no reason to think that everything would be. The hem of her nightgown rested just above her knees, and below it dark red bruises were blossoming on both legs. When her sobs subsided sufficiently for her to speak, her words poured out in a torrent.

Her name was Lily. She had fled from her boyfriend Bobby two days before, making her escape when he left their apartment after dinner to go to the gym, as he always did on Monday evenings. With the help of her best friend Alison, she had planned the escape for weeks. She couldn't stay at Alison's, because Bobby would know to look for her there. Instead, Alison's brother Abe, who had a car, arrived at the prearranged time to drive her, with her five-week-old infant, the sixty miles to the home of his friends, John and Chrissy Anderson, who had offered them

sanctuary. Lily fled with a few changes of clothes for herself and Tad, all the diapers she owned, and some baby supplies.

The plan had gone well. The Andersons were out of state on vacation when Abe called to inform them that Lily and Tad were on their way, and Lily got to speak to them during the call. "Make yourself at home," they said. "You can stay as long as you need to."

The Andersons knew a lot about domestic violence. Chrissy's sister, her only sibling, had been murdered by her boyfriend years before, when both sisters were in high school. John's father had been a classic abuser. They were glad to give aid to a victim in need.

Abe had stopped at a supermarket on their way, where he paid for the groceries Lily might need until the Andersons returned in a week from their vacation. When they got there, Abe gave Lily his key to the house and showed her the guest bedroom that was waiting for her, with a makeshift bassinet nestled next to the double bed. Abe had a night-shift job, so he couldn't stay long, but before departing he gave Lily five 20-dollar bills and kissed her on the forehead. Through new tears, Lily told me how safe and loved she had felt then, for the first time she could remember. That night, after breastfeeding Tad and laying him in his new bed, she had slept like a baby.

But somehow—Lily didn't know how—Bobby found out where she was hiding. And the next night—*this* night, less than an hour before—he had driven up the Andersons' long driveway, with his car's headlights turned off. Lily was sure of this, because headlights shining through the bedroom window would have wakened her. She was awakened instead by his menacing shouts: "Open the fucking door, bitch!"

Lily told me she was shaking uncontrollably as she hugged Tad to her chest and peeked out the window. She could see Bobby in the darkness, with what looked like a hatchet in his hands. Within seconds, he was plunging that hatchet into the front door.

She grabbed the phone and dialed 911. "He's breaking the door down with a hatchet!" she screamed. "I'm all alone with my baby!"

"We'll send help right away!" the officer on the line told her. "What's your address?"

But before Lily could answer, he asked another question, "Do you recognize the man?"

“Yes! He’s my ex-boyfriend!”

“Oh,” the officer said then (Lily said his voice suddenly sounded very ‘official’). “Why didn’t you say that initially? We don’t get involved in domestic disputes.”

“But he’s breaking the door down with a hatchet!” Lily screamed again.

The officer responded: “Sorry, lady. It’s policy. We don’t do domestics.”

Lily kept pleading. “Please help me! Please! He’s breaking down the door!”

“Well, it’s *his* door, too,” the officer said, then mouthed a brisk “Sorry” before hanging up.

The door was half hacked to pieces when Bobby kicked in a splintered panel next to the frame. Lily watched as his hand reached in and seized hold of the inside latch. “I’ll kill you, you fucking bitch!” he was shouting.

Tad started bawling. Lily ran to hide in a closet, but there was no way to lock it. She just huddled there behind the clothes rack, quaking, unable to breathe, holding Tad tightly as his cries grew to piercing wails.

It took only seconds, Lily told me, for Bobby to fling open the closet door and rip Tad from her arms. Then he kicked her repeatedly in her stomach, legs, and back as she lay screaming, fetal-position, on the closet floor. And then he bolted from the house to his car, Tad pinned under one arm, and sped back down the driveway. He was already at his car before Lily could climb past the shattered front door.

Through it all, Tad never stopped wailing.

In pain and hysterical, Lily called Alison, who instructed her to run to the nearest neighbors for help. Abe worked from midnight to nine a.m. and couldn’t leave mid-shift. He wouldn’t be able to get her until the next day. “Go *now!*” Alison had told her. So Lily ran the equivalent of a city block, to the Andersons’ nearest neighbors—to Jim and me, and our daughter, who was sleeping peacefully in her bed.

Lily was cold. She had stumbled through the chill autumn air in the dark, shoeless, in a flimsy nightgown, and although our coal stove was working and Jim built a blazing fire in the fireplace, she couldn’t get warm. I gave her a pair of socks and a sweater so big for her that it fit

more like a coat, and Jim brought out warm blankets that I wrapped around her twice. But Lily couldn't get warm. I made her coffee and toast and tried but failed to soothe her distress. Throughout the telling of her story, she kept interjecting, "I'm *breastfeeding* Tad," crumpling back into sobs each time she said it. By the end, I was sobbing, too. Because Lily had been breastfeeding her baby, and a dangerous abuser had broken into her hideaway, had beaten her frail body, and had snatched her baby away.

Although Lily was obviously telling the truth, I wondered about her understanding of the 911 officer's response. Surely there must have been some sort of miscommunication.

Lily was exhausted. When she finally fell asleep on our couch, I called the police to report the crime and find out what steps they would be taking to find Tad and arrest Bobby. But this was two years before the first Protection from Abuse Act was passed anywhere in the United States, and the officer's response was exactly as Lily had reported. They didn't "involve themselves" in domestic disputes.

"It wasn't a 'dispute,' " I said angrily.

"Well, that's what we call it."

"What about the fact that he was trespassing on our neighbor's property?"

"The owners of the residence can file a complaint within twenty days of the incident," the officer replied, enunciating each word with exaggerated care, as if talking to someone who had difficulty grasping simple concepts.

"He kidnapped a nursing infant!" I yelled.

The officer had an answer ready for that. It was an answer I would someday become very accustomed to hearing. "It's *his* kid, too, so it's not illegal."

When daylight arrived, I looked in the phone book for a lawyer, calling the first one listed under Attorneys: Criminal. He told me Lily could try to convince the police to charge Bobby with assault, but she'd have to know where Bobby went (which she didn't) so he could be served with a copy of the paperwork. What's more, since the case was "a domestic," assault charges would be extremely hard to prove. As for absconding with a breastfeeding baby, well, it was Bobby's kid, too.

“She could get a family law attorney to file for custody, which she may or may not win,” the lawyer added, “but it sounds like she has no money and lawyers aren’t cheap. Let’s face it. She messed up. She should have gotten further away. Fled Pennsylvania. That’s the only real solution in these kinds of cases.”

Lily stayed at our house overnight. Even in her sleep, she was crying. The next day, Abe came to take her to Alison’s. We stayed in touch, and rejoiced with Lily when Bobby, whose whereabouts had been unknown, finally resurfaced and gave Tad back. A friend of his convinced him to do it, and anyway he had grown tired of being stuck with a traumatized baby. Bobby kept him for five weeks, which was half of Tad’s little lifetime. He was still wailing the day he was returned.

Lily’s experience was my first exposure to the realities of domestic violence. It caused me to reconsider the idea of becoming a psychologist. If I ever managed to graduate from college and had a chance to continue my education, I wanted to be a lawyer. A lawyer that women like Lily could afford.

But I was 37 years old when I finally earned my college degree, and the realization came over me that law school would take another three years to complete. Even if I could go full-time, I’d be 40 years old by the time I was done. Reluctantly, I concluded that law school was a pipe dream. And I told myself I was too old to be indulging in pipe dreams.

My mother listened attentively as I explained the reason I decided not to apply to law school. When I got done talking, she said: “You’re right. You’re 37 years old, and in three years you’ll be 40.” She paused, just long enough for me to think she agreed with my decision. But then she added, slyly, almost as an afterthought, “Of course. . . in three years you’ll be 40, one way or the other . . . You might as well be a lawyer.”

My mother was like that, full of wit and wisdom. So I mailed my application to Temple University’s School of Law, and when the acceptance letter came, I had no lingering misgivings about going to law school. Because the logic was irrefutable: I might as well be a lawyer.

Not If I Can Help It

*A Family Lawyer's Battles for Justice
for Victims of Domestic Violence and the Poor*

Meg Groff

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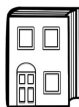
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