

## Queen for A Day

“How would YOU like to be *Queen for A Day*?”

The host of the show was Jack something... Jack ... Jack Bailey! Yes, Jack Bailey. And that was the question he asked at the start of each show. Leaning forward into the camera, almost into your living room, his dark hair slicked back, his eyes twinkling, microphone in hand...”How would YOU (emphasis on the “you”) like to be *Queen for A Day*?”

It was, without a doubt, the absolute tackiest show on television. Everyone’s mother hated it. “Turn that crap off!” Ellie’s mother would call out whenever she caught Ellie and her brother, David, watching Jack Bailey. Mom was in the kitchen, putting away groceries or getting something out of the freezer to defrost for dinner. Ellie and David were in the den, around the corner and down the stairs from the kitchen, but when it came to *Queen for A Day*, Mom was a regular bloodhound. She always seemed to know when they were watching it.

“I mean it! Turn that junk off now!”

“Okay, okay,” Ellie would call back, and then she or David would turn the sound down as low as they would get it and still hear it and move in closer to the television.

Jack Bailey was an okay-looking kind of guy. Kind of middle-aged. Maybe in his late 30s or early 40s. Ellie had no idea. He was a grown-up and all grown-ups were kind of the same to her. Not young, but not old, either. He looked like someone’s dad, like the kind of dad who barbequed in the backyard on weekends and sold cars or insurance for a living. Not like Ellie’s dad, who was a teacher and a definite non-

barbequer. Ellie tried to imagine her father leaning into a television camera, almost into your living room, microphone in hand, a babe with long, blonde hair on either side of him, yelling "How would YOU like to be *Queen for A Day?*"

No way.

Ellie's dad was definitely more of a Walter Cronkite type.

Although a lot of people thought he looked a lot like Ben Casey.

Ben Casey was the dark-haired brain surgeon who always needed a shave. He was brusque and arrogant as opposed to Dr. Kildare, who was blonde and gorgeous. Ellie was madly in love with Dr. Kildare. Ben Casey, she could take or leave.

Of course, Ben Casey was probably more of her type. He looked like he came from Brooklyn or the Bronx and even though he was so incredibly brilliant, you could tell he had not had an easy time of it. He probably had to work his way through medical school. Ellie could picture the younger Ben washing dishes or ushering at a movie theater or cleaning up spilled guts in the morgue. He would take the subway to class, hunched over, mashed in with future, prospective patients. He probably slept on a fold-out couch in his mother's living room. His father was a drunk who disappeared years before. Poor Ben was the sole support of old Mrs. Casey and maybe a sister with clubfoot or something like that.

On the other hand, it was perfectly obvious that Dr. Kildare came from California. His father had been a doctor, also, so he probably had no trouble paying for medical school. Classes in the morning. Surfing in the afternoon. Ellie could picture him driving to class in a convertible, his perfect blonde hair blowing in the breeze. His sister was the president of her sorority.

Oh yes, Ellie was absolutely mad for Dr. Kildare, but even he, with his blue eyes and blonde hair and perfect California life, did not bewitch her quite as much as Jack Bailey and his microphone and the sad, sad ladies who vied to be *Queen for A Day*.

This was the way it worked.

The show had contestants. Hard luck women who stood before the camera and told their tales of woe. With Jack Bailey urging them on, these women told stories of lost husbands, children with mysterious, lingering diseases, houses blown away by tornados, blind grandmothers in need of operations. Then each contestant would ask for something. Some little thing to make her miserable life less miserable. A car so she might go visit her husband clinging to life in an iron lung in a hospital 50 miles away. A washing machine and dryer so she might take in laundry and earn a minimal living for her six children, including the daughter with clubfoot who needed an operation to walk. A new set of tires for the now immobile mobile home in which she and the six kids, including two in wheelchairs, lived.

All of the stories were spectacularly sad.

So, how did one of these women get to be *Queen for A Day*?

The audience voted, and the votes were registered on a meter. As the contestant stood there, blinking into the television lights, the studio audience would applaud and a meter would appear on screen with a needle waving back and forth that measured the level of applause. The person whose misery elicited the most applause was....

*Queen for A Day!*

"I thought I told you to turn this junk off."

Mom stood in the doorway, glaring at Ellie and David.

“Oh, come on,” Ellie pleaded.

“This has got to be the worst show on television,” Mom argued, “and anyway, it’s such a nice day. Why don’t you go outside and do something?”

“Like what?” Ellie asked.

“Anything,” Mom said. “You, too, David.”

“I’m not watching this,” David looked up from his book. He always brought a book with him when they watched *Queen for A Day*, That way, he could always deny he was watching the show. Oh no, not David, He was reading. *Queen for A Day* just happened to be on at the same time.

“Well, go outside and read,” Mom said.

“In a few minutes,” David replied.

It really burned Ellie up the way Mom always fell for David’s crap. She knew he was watching *Queen for A Day*, but for some reason, she never pursued these things with David. If Ellie had been there alone, even with a book, Mom would have turned off the television and stood there until Ellie gave up and left the room. But she never did that to David. Life was so unfair. But, of course, Ellie knew all about life’s unfairness. She was a devoted watcher of *Queen for A Day*, wasn’t she?

Ellie had never seen a kid her age compete on *Queen for A Day* and as far as she knew, there was no junior version of the show. No *Princess for A Day*. But if there had been, well, she could see herself standing center stage, the television cameras only six inches away from her, just out of sight of the home audience. All they would see on their television sets was Ellie looking back at them, her eyes filled with sincerity.

“Maybe my story isn’t so original,” she would begin. “I suppose a lot of teenagers have been through the same things.”

She could see Jack Bailey nodding his head sympathetically. A modest beginning was good, Ellie knew. People liked a modest contestant.

“I tried to please my mother,” Ellie continued. “I really did, but it’s almost as if nothing I did was ever right. We argued and fought all the time and finally I just left home. I thought it would be better for everyone.”

“But it wasn’t better for you, was it?” Jack Bailey leaned in toward Ellie, his microphone in his hand.

She paused, too choked up to answer and then nodded bravely, a lone tear trickling down her cheek.

No maybe not. The tear was probably too much too soon.

“Folks, Ellie found a cold, cruel world awaited her,” Jack Bailey said to the audience.

“It’s true,” Ellie said. “I lived on a park bench and then in an alley behind a supermarket. I ate garbage. I opened fire hydrants in the middle of the night to take a shower.”

“But all the time, she kept going to high school, didn’t you sweetheart?” Jack Bailey asked.

“And I was on the honor roll every marking period,” Ellie said.

“I won a full scholarship to college,” Ellie continued,” and I am supposed to leave for school on Friday. But I can’t go.”

The audience gasped.

And then Ellie slowly opened the coat she had wrapped around her, a dirty, tan raincoat a couple of sizes too big, and revealed her tattered dress.

“Yes, folks,” Jack Bailey said in his sexy, excited voice, “this little gal has overcome every obstacle and hardship but she still isn’t going to college, not unless you make her *Princess for A Day* and give her a brand new wardrobe!”

The applause meter appeared on the bottom of the screen. Ellie smiled bravely over her rags and through her tears – always cry when the applause meter is going – and the meter’s arm waved back and forth wildly and the applause grew louder and louder ....

She would become an Oscar-winning actress, a world-famous poet, the muse of the greatest painter in the world and find a cure for cancer in her navy blue Villager shirtwaist and matching Pappagallo flats.

“Shut up trailer ho!”

“Trailer ho! Trailer ho! Trailer ho!”

Ellie shut her eyes for a moment and opened them again. She was sitting in her home office, off the living room, the blank computer screen staring back at her. Time travel was something Ellie did quite often, but even she was a bit confused today. And then it all fell into place. She was the mom now, sitting in her home office, waiting for inspiration to hit her and fill that blank computer screen. Nina and Joanna, her two daughters, were watching *The Jerry Springer Show* on the television in the living room. The audience had once again taken offense at the foibles of one of Jerry’s guests. Ellie knew without looking that the guest was an overweight woman with a pony tail who lived in a trailer with four kids from three men and she had, no doubt, just confessed that her

next child has been fathered by her own sister's or cousin's or best friend's own husband or fiancé or boyfriend.

There was no applause meter on *The Jerry Springer Show* – only the disapproval meter, which registered not applause but jeers and insults, such as the aforeheard and often invoked “trailer ho” meaning “trailer whore.”

I wonder when a whore became a ho, Ellie mused idly, and then forced herself to snap to attention.

“Turn that crap off,” she heard her mother's voice saying.

But it wasn't her mother. It was Ellie, herself.

She had turned into her mother.

Now, where was Jack Bailey when you really needed him?

Ellie and her brother David used to invent *Queen for A Day* stories. David's stories were much more flamboyant than those Ellie came up with, and he had a wider knowledge of bizarre medical conditions.

“My husband was eaten by a crocodile on our honeymoon in the Amazon,” one of David's narratives began. “I got pregnant on our honeymoon and I had twins nine months later, so I was all on my own with two babies, and one of them had St. Vitus' Dance and the other one had leprosy.”

Ellie was filled with admiration for David's powers of imagination. She, herself, was totally fixated on clubfoot -- ever since she had seen *Of Human Bondage* with Bette Davis and Leslie Howard on the Early Show one afternoon -- and she had never thought of twins or a crocodile as a means of disposing of the hapless husband. Ellie's husbands tended not to die, but to disappear leaving the wife in a state of limbo –

married but not married.

But St. Vitus' Dance! Leprosy! You had to hand it to David. Those things had it all over clubfoot any day of the week.

"I was supposed to be the writer," Ellie told Jack Bailey, "but my brother seemed to have a better imagination than I did. Livelier, anyway. Was that fair?"

Jack Bailey shook his head sympathetically.

"And that's not all," Ellie continued. She hesitated a moment and then decided to lay it all out for Jack Bailey.

"David is thin," she said solemnly.

'Hmmm," Jack Bailey said.

"Well, maybe that's not as tragic as having a tornado blow your house away or having your husband fall out of an airplane and land impaled on the tip of the Eiffel Tower (another one of David's *Queen for A Day* stories) but my brother is thin and my cousins all are thin, and they eat whatever they want and they never exercise, and I can never lose any weight no matter what I do," Ellie whined.

"That sucks," Jack Bailey said.

Flashing forward forty years, Ellie did have to smile to herself just a little bit. Yes, David was still thin, and she still was not, but she did have a glorious and extensive mane of blonde hair while David's forehead had grown so large, he sometimes, it seemed to Ellie, resembled one of those brainiac aliens from *Star Trek* – creatures whose thinking was so advanced, they had developed enormous foreheads to accommodate their superior brains. Oh shit, Ellie suddenly thought. Having a superior brain would be a good thing, wouldn't it? More important than a lot of hair. So, even in

her own reveries in which she was supposed to win and David lose, she still was the loser.

The kids had turned off the television. Ellie glanced into the living room and saw Joanna standing in the middle of the room, talking into a hairbrush.

“He’s my man and you better step off,” she shrieked in a vaguely Southern accent.

“I say he’s mine,” Nina yelled back.

“He don’t need you. I take care of him real good,” Joanna insisted.

“Trailer ho!” Nina yelled.

“Trailer ho!” Joanna yelled back. She dropped her hairbrush microphone and tackled Nina and the two of them rolled across the living room floor.

Sometimes Nina and Joanna played with a little girl who lived on the first floor. Amanda was ten years old, right between Joanna’s eight and Nina’s twelve. She was a nice enough little kid, but strangely obsessed with candy and television, two things she was not allowed to have in her own home.

“I think television stifles children’s creativity,” her mother Marjorie explained to Ellie one day in the park.

But through the years, Nina and Joanna had introduced Amanda to all kinds of imaginary games and Amanda never could think of anything to play.

“It’s not television, it’s genetics,” Ellie’s husband Vin commented when Ellie repeated Marjorie’s philosophical observation.

So, my kids are creative because I am creative,” Ellie thought. But Nina’s favorite game was something called *Darkness and Neglect* in which the children sat

under black umbrellas, orphans hiding from the storm. And Joanna's favorite game was ... well, anything pretty much as long as she was able to wear a cape and work sword fighting in somewhere.

I watched *Queen for A Day* and made up sad stories, and Nina invented a game called *Darkness and Neglect* and now she makes up Jerry Springer stories. Vin was right, as always. Somewhere in the DNA squiggles they shared was some kind of genetic indicator or marker or pre-destinator that caused this line, however faint, but definitely traceable from mother to daughter to grand-daughter and on and on. Ellie know, from her own childhood memories, that her grandmother had been addicted to radio soap operas, and her mother had been watching *All My Children* on television for years, although she tried to hide it from them.

We are connoisseurs of fictional misery, Ellie thought, the keepers of the flame of a long, long trail of sad-eyed ladies.

"Tell us your story," Jack Bailey said.

"I can't stop time traveling," Ellie said. "And my mind makes all kinds of connections that are stupid but seem full of meaning to me. I think I miss the point of things. I get lost in the connections. I forget what I was thinking about because all of a sudden, I'm somewhere else..."

"Trailer ho! Trailer ho! Trailer ho!"

Ellie stared into the audience. Their faces were flushed and red, their right arms upraised, their right hands balled into fists that came forward in a chopping motion as they chanted."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ellie protested.

“He’s my man!” A heavy-set woman with a greasy brown ponytail, wearing a black tee shirt and skintight jeans yelled at Ellie. She stood up and threw her chair across the stage and then grabbed the bottom of her tee shirt and pulled it up, revealing a dingy-looking white bra several sizes too small into which her enormous breasts had been shoveled.

Ellie stood up and blinked her eyes rapidly several times.

She could hear Jack Bailey’s familiar cackle in the background. She opened her eyes and saw that she held a scepter in her right hand. She lifted her left hand to her head and felt a crown there. But the ponytailed woman was still in front of her, coming towards her, yelling something ...it was so loud that all Ellie could hear was sound, no words.

She turned her head and in an instant, they all were gone – the ponytailed woman, Jack Bailey, the audience. It was quiet and still and there was nothing to see except the blank computer screen in front of her.

*I am a time traveler, she typed. I see connections where none exist. I lose my place in the grand scheme of things, taking the right fork instead of the left, moving past the light into darkness and neglect, I see a thin, balding boy, a den around and down from the kitchen, a chair flies by, a scepter and a crown, and I am Queen for A Day.*