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Three Hearts, Three Souls, in Perfect Harmony

Richard F. Corrigan

Imagine, three women deemed beautiful by the movie and television industry, sitting in their favorite breakfast nook, and it is their inner beauty that lights the room: their love for God, each other, and their families.

No other earthly triad is more in harmony than Ruth, Audrey, and Judy Landers. Their hearts have the same beat, and their souls intertwine. They even finish each other's sentences. Yet, they are separate individuals with separate personalities, looks, voices, mannerisms, thoughts, talents, and lives; but when they are together, the power of their simpatico is overwhelming.

Ruth was born in Germany. "My father was Jewish and we're German, so I guess we're German/Jewish. My parents lived in Germany during the war. Then they moved to China. My early years were spent in China."

"My father died when I was three years old. So my second father was more my father than my natural father. I was eleven when we came to the US. And then a year later, my stepfather died. My mother had a rough road. She was a nurse, and he was a doctor. And her second husband was a doctor, too. Well, it was wartime; they died of tropical diseases."

Even then, she was beautiful, and was always encouraged to enter - and ended up winning - numerous beauty contests.

"I won a beauty contest when I was thirteen years old: Miss Philadelphia."

Back then, because of the popularity of such petite contemporary stars as Gina Lollobrigida, Natalie Wood, Marilyn Monroe, and Debbie Reynolds with heights between 5'1" and 5'4", Ruth fit right in as a sought-after model. For a time, she reigned as Miss Polaroid.

She began in modeling, but out of necessity, she had to earn an income without jetting around the globe.

"While I was modeling, I was traveling all over, and I had my girls and my nanny with me. I could go to France on a day's notice, or go to Germany, or wherever; and I could take them with me wherever I went. Now, all of a sudden, Audrey started school, and what was I going to do? So, I said, Ruth, get a job in the real world. And I did; and before long, I started my own company - an office research company - and it was a very successful company and was able to finance us all these years."

"I got married very young; he was a wonderful man, but we grew in different directions. And when it started interfering with raising the children, we decided to part. That was at a very early age. The girls were five and seven."

Audrey and Judy were born in Philadelphia, PA, both beautiful, both talented. Ruth never remarried. Soon they moved to New York and things began to happen. When Audrey was twelve years old, she was written into a show, Secret Storm, on CBS. And when they found out that she sang -

"Do you remember that?" interjected Audrey. "They wrote me in, and I got my script usually two days ahead of time, and this day, I opened my script, and it said - Joanna - the character, sings and plays the guitar! I didn't play the guitar! So, I quickly got a guitar. My mom bought me a guitar, and that night, I stayed up and wrote a song with three chords that I figured out how to play. And then two days later, I performed the song, singing and playing the guitar. So, I learned those three chords, and it went over so well, that it continued. So, I really did learn to play the guitar."

This one incident was a prelude to the more than 250 songs written by Audrey and Judy for The Huggabug Club and the songs written by Audrey for her Dallas character, Afton Cooper. Everything that Afton performed, Audrey wrote. So, you'd think, because of the intense competition in the performing arts industry, that the Landers sisters would be tough and aggressive.

Audrey: "I sometimes wish that I were a little more aggressive. I have great enthusiasm, but I don't have, I don't think, aggressive -"

Judy: "We used to call it, when we were first pursuing our careers 'killer instinct.' We never had that."

Audrey: "I never had enough killer instinct, I felt that. We'd see girls definitely with that killer instinct."

Ruth: "That comes from having a need. I think that both of my girls had the need to succeed at something for themselves. And their need was never related to anything financial or material."

Audrey: "Our need was a creative need, it was a need to have that outlet - the need to express your creativity."

Judy: "Our mom did instill in us our work ethic, though. She told us, you never give up."

Audrey: "That's perseverance, not killer instinct."

Judy: "We're gentler than that, we just are."

Ruth: "We've always been professional in the sense that, no matter what, we do our jobs."

Judy: "My first job that I got cast in, ever, my first tiny little part, I think I had one line to say, I got one line in a film, and I woke up, I was fifteen years old, I woke up that morning with the flu - but there was no turning back, there were no options. I had to be there six in the morning."

Ruth: "You had one line; somebody else could have done it."

Judy: "Mom said, 'Okay, do your best, Honey, come on, we're going.' And, I proceeded to do my one line - "

Audrey: "- and getting sick in between with a bucket next to her - "

Judy: "- the whole day."

Ruth: "It was one of those twenty-four-hour things."

Audrey: "When I was fifteen years old, I was doing the soap opera, and I woke up with chicken pox. And we called in just to make sure everyone was okay with it, that they all had it, I was not contagious to anybody else. They said okay, I could come to work, everybody's clear. I came in with the dots on my face, and they rewrote the scene a little bit: instead of me running around the apartment, I was lying in bed watching TV, and being served chicken soup. Fever, chicken pox, the whole thing, it didn't make a difference, that's called a work ethic."

Judy: "When I was competing in the NY State Gymnastics championships, in warm ups, I landed funny and jammed my finger, really badly, and this was before the competition. Normally, they would have taken me to emergency, but my mother said, 'You know, you've been working for this a long time - '"

Ruth: "She was thirteen years old, and there was no girls' gymnastics team."

Judy: "Our coach let us compete against the boys."

Ruth: "She walks in, looking gorgeous, and the boys laugh, and Judy said, 'I'll show them.' Five minutes before she was on, she totally jammed her finger. I looked at it, and I said, Judy, I'm going to call the paramedics, it's broken. But let me explain something, it's going to hurt like hell, but the paramedics aren't going to get here for ten or fifteen minutes; go out there, win the medal, and move on, it will hurt either way. I'll ice it for you."

Judy: "She just stood with me in the bathroom with my hand under the ice-cold water until they called my name."

Ruth: "And I said, you know what, if you miss it now, the next time you can compete in this event is four years from now, and you won't want to do it. So she went out there, she won the championship, and the paramedics were waiting for her."

When they were little, I used to say to them, you know what, you can only get sick on weekends, because if mommy has to take off from work, then we won't have any money. So, go to school, you're healthy during the week, and if you want to be sick - "

Audrey: "Save it for the weekend."

Audrey was attending Columbia University as a premed student, attending Julliard in the evenings for music theory and composition, and on the soap while Judy attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and doing various acting gigs. But they felt it would be better to pursue an acting career on the west coast. So, Ruth secured an apartment for her daughters in LA. It was wonderful and elegant, with a swimming pool on the roof, and neighbors like John Travolta, Jeff Conaway, Marilu Henner, and others who were just starting out as actors. Ruth would come out every Friday after work and leave Monday, catching a redeye at midnight and arriving in New York at six in the morning. And she made sure she had someone watching over them the four days she was gone.

The Landers agree that their talents are God given, and with hard work and no compromises along the way - there has been success.

Ruth: "No personal compromises, and I think it was partly because we had this team, there were the three of us. We were never in a position where we, 'Oh my God, we'd better take this job because we need to eat.'"

Audrey: "So many people in Hollywood have to do that. They have bad experiences because they have to compromise their values."

Judy: "We had a support group."

Audrey: "We always had somebody to go home to and say, 'Oh Jude, I had this opportunity, but I didn't go along with such-and-such, and I didn't get the part.'"

But sometimes when actors start out, they have to take garbage roles. And the Landers sisters had an unusually strange situation happen while they were in Germany. Audrey is a very popular singer in Germany, having received fifteen Gold and Platinum albums. When she, Ruth, and Judy were touring they were asked to help a student film company with one of their projects. As a show of kindness, without remuneration, they all agreed they would help.

It was truly a student project. No sound was even recorded. When they arrived in the park for the last scene, they discovered that the director had become lost. They had to leave the next day so Ruth, with her directing experience, gave permission to proceed. They shot the footage and went home.

Sometime later they found out that somebody dubbed their voices, released the film, sold it, and for fifteen years has been making money - millions - none of which has fallen into the Landers' pockets.

Yet, when they tell the story, their faces remain angelic, even though they have been used and abused.

"We were going to do a sequel to Ghost Writer, but then we got so involved in the Huggabug Club," says Ruth, changing the subject. "We may still do it."

But that is when the Huggabug Club was conceived.

Ruth: "We were in between two films. We had been producing films on our own, the three of us."

Audrey: "It was June. We sat down at our favorite little breakfast spot to have a story meeting about another film we were going to do and all of a sudden - "

Ruth: "The night before, I was babysitting Judy's children and watching the same program - some video tape, over and over. Kids like to do that."

Audrey: "Ruth said, 'I can't look at that show again.' She mentioned how awful the tape was, that she was so sick of watching the same thing, and the three of us looked at each other, and we knew instantly that we were going to develop something for children. It just happened. We said, we can do something better. It was June of 1995. And there was a very short window of time for us present this video. And at that moment, Judy and I went home and started writing."

Judy: "We never stopped."

Audrey: "It just came out, it flowed. We wrote the first pilot and eighteen songs in one month. And we filmed it, I remember in July, and that was the summer that we took one month to write it, produce it, and Ruth then shopped it at the convention that was in August in Vegas."

But when Ruth tried to shop it, she discovered that no one wanted to buy just one video. Everyone was telling her that she needed to make a series, and should interest the Learning Channel or PBS in the project. She met with representatives from PBS, and they began filming in February.

How does Sarasota fit into all this?

Ruth: "We always do things in threes. We make mutual decisions. It's not like I can say, okay, I'm sick of LA now."

Judy: "We discuss with each other. We all lived in Beverly Hills within a mile of each other, and we all decided we wanted to get out of LA."

Ruth: "Actually, Judy decided first. After the last earthquake we had, she had her children getting ready to go to school, and she said, 'Oh my God, suppose these kids were in school and this highway broke down the way it did, how would I get to them? I would go crazy.' And all of a sudden, we said, she's right."

Audrey: "My children were babies. I was still attached to my children; they weren't walking yet. But I think that we felt we needed a different environment to raise our children."

Judy: "It was the earthquake, the air quality, it was overcrowded. We wanted to raise healthy children."

Ruth: Family always comes first with us. Career is very important, but not at the expense of our families."

Judy's husband was retired from professional baseball and was content to play a few rounds of golf a week. And Audrey's husband had a business in the Northeast and was commuting on weekends to LA.

They decided they were going to move to Scottsdale, Arizona. They were all set to move. It was a beautiful area with attractive houses and good schools - all the things they were looking for and one additional thing - it was only a half-hour commute to LA. So, they were all set to go; they had already chosen the area, the lots, and the neighborhood.

Ruth: "We had already been filming the Huggabug Club in Tampa, FL (1995). This was 1997, we already had two seasons in the camera. We'd never been to Sarasota. But we were asked to do the Van Wezel, live, with the Huggabug Club."

Audrey: "We're here to do the Van Wezel. We get off the plane, and Judy and I look at each other as we're riding in the limo -"

Judy: " - and it was just like, why don't we live here? This is the place. We knew."

Ruth: "We sold Judy's house first and bought this one, and everything worked out great. It was like it was meant to be because the timing worked out perfectly."

All three moved within six months and continued to inject their personal funds into the first fifty episodes of the Huggabug Club. Ruth had been able to strike a fair deal with the WEDU facility in Tampa to film the Huggabug Club, but that was only a small savings. The Club has now been on WEDU for five years, but the episodes have run out, and so have the Landers' funds. There just isn't another multi-million dollar lump of money lying around. Old episodes are being run on Sky Angel, the Christian satellite network.

With all the awards, including the Parent's Choice Award and the Dove Family Approval Seal, the Huggabug Club (www.Huggabugclub.com) is ripe for a philanthropic sponsor to take this national, children's public television series to the next level of "industry-excellence" recognition.

Ruth: "And I know it's a bad thing to say that you live your lives through your children, but it can be interpreted in a positive sense, and a negative sense. I think all the things I really wanted to do, I did with my children as soon as they were old enough. It's like my best friends in the world were born to me. The three of us have been inseparable from the day they were born."

Audrey: "And we were lucky we had the same dreams too, it's not as if Mom imposed something on us, it was never anything like that. We all had the same dreams."

And the dreams continue: dreams about a television series, dreams about the Huggabug Club.

