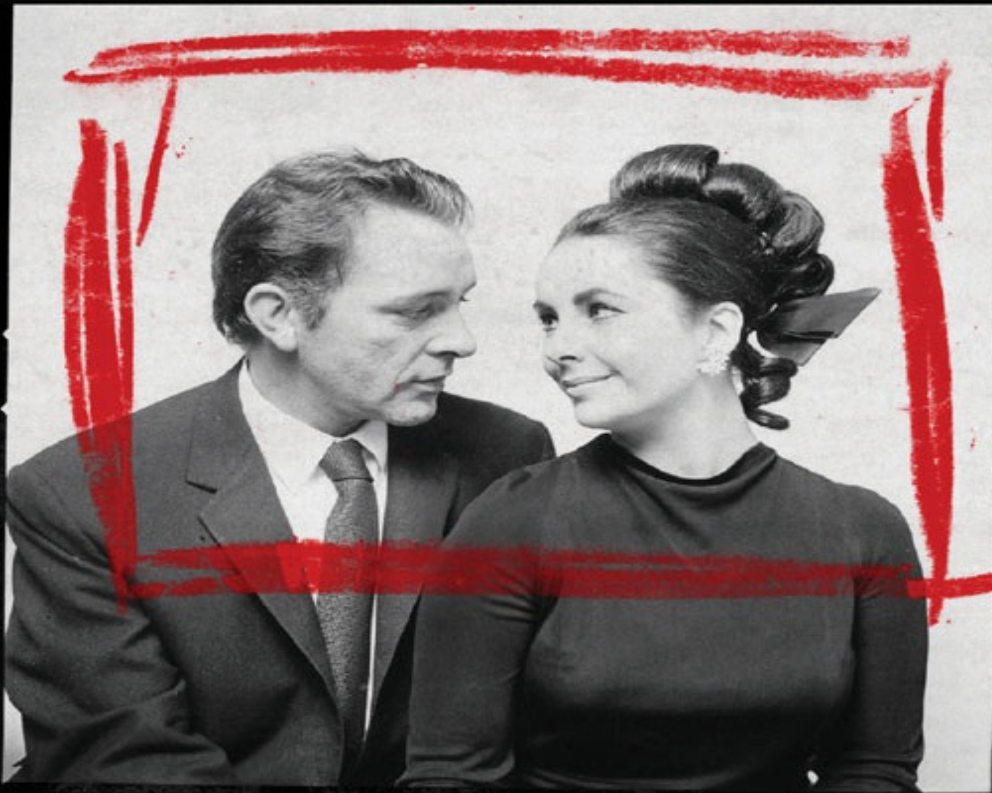


FURIOUS LOVE


ELIZABETH TAYLOR, RICHARD BURTON,
AND THE MARRIAGE OF THE CENTURY



SAM KASHNER & NANCY SCHOENBERGER

Furious Love

Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger

 HarperCollins e-books

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“I am forever punished by the gods for being given the fire and trying to put it out. The fire, of course
is you.”

—RICHARD BURTON

“Since I was a little girl, I believed I was a child of destiny, and if that is true, Richard Burton was
surely my fate.”

—ELIZABETH TAYLOR

When asked by *Time* magazine a few years ago to name the five great love affairs of all time, the Texas-born gossip columnist Liz Smith didn't even have to think about who would occupy first place. The Burtons, of course. Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor “were the most vivid example of a public love affair that I can think of. The Burtons and the Lindbergh baby being kidnapped and Kennedy's assassination—these are the biggest stories of our time. Whenever somebody says, ‘So and so is a big star,’ I say, ‘Have they been condemned by the Vatican?’”

Their thirteen-year saga was the most notorious, publicized, celebrated, and vilified love affair of its day. Indeed, their ten-year marriage, followed by a divorce, remarriage, and a final divorce, was often called “the marriage of the century” in the press. Just thirty years earlier, the Duke of Windsor had embarked upon his own famous marriage, to Wallis Simpson, giving up the throne of England to marry the American divorcée from Baltimore. A nation wept, but the Duke and Duchess of Windsor went on to rule a shadow empire of jet-setters, aristocrats, gigolos, international bon vivants, in a floating world of yachts, dance floors, casinos, and the homes and hotels of the very rich. So famous were the Burtons in the 1960s and 1970s that the duke and the duchess were their only peers, the only other couple who knew what it was like to be pariahs for a time, to pay a high price for their choices, and to live the rest of their lives in isolated luxury. But the notorious Burtons managed to win their way back into the hearts of the American public through sheer talent, hard work, chutzpah, and glamour. “On the face of it,” said columnist Smith, “Elizabeth Taylor was just totally arrogant. She'd walk out in capri pants and her Cleopatra makeup and her kerchief and go off to whatever local restaurant and drink up a storm with Burton. That's part of what excited the public: her vulgarity and her arrogance and the money. Oh God, their love story had everything.”

It also brought us the modern accoutrements of celebrity: the relentless paparazzi, the continuous press exposure, the public airing of private grief. In short, it brought us “Liz and Dick,” a tabloid shorthand that they hated but that stood for everything extravagant and over-the-top about their all-too-public lives.

In fact, you might say there were two marriages: the ballyhooed union of Liz and Dick and the private marriage of Richard and Elizabeth. More often than not, Liz and Dick overwhelmed the private marriage, holding it hostage and ultimately helping to destroy it. The yachts, the glamorous ports of call (Monte Carlo, Portofino), the grand hotels of the world, the fabled jewels, the homes in London, Gstaad, Céligny, and Puerto Vallarta, the hobnobbing with the Rothschilds, Ari Onassis, General Tito of Yugoslavia, and, of course, the Windsors. They were indeed Hollywood royalty. But like any other

married couple, they had to deal with children coming of age during the cultural upheavals of the 1960s—communes, family squabbles, balancing two careers (even if their careers meant making some of the most remarkable films of the 1960s)—in short, the real marriage of two people trying to live their lives together.

If Burton had entered into the pact with impure motives, he quickly found himself utterly bewitched. He discovered in Elizabeth the embodiment of all the women in Wales he had loved or lusted after: from his sainted sister who had raised him to the dark-haired Welsh “tarts” he knew as a randy youth in the towns of Pontrhydyfen and Port Talbot. “My blind eyes are desperately waiting for the sight of you,” he would write to her well into their marriage. “You don’t realize of course, E. B., how fantastically beautiful you have always been, and how strangely you have acquired an added and special and dangerous loveliness. Your breasts jutting out from that half-asleep languid lingering body, the remote eyes, the parted lips.”

For Elizabeth, this was the one true marriage. When she agreed to share with us letters that Richard Burton had written to her in the last few years of their life together, she wanted us to know the place he held, and continues to hold, in her heart. She wrote to us,

Richard was magnificent in every sense of the word...and in everything he ever did. He was magnificent on the stage, he was magnificent in film, he was magnificent at making love... at least to me. He was the kindest, funniest, and most gentle father. All my kids worshipped him. Attentive, loving—that was Richard. The bond with all of us continued until he drew his last breath. We knew he was absolutely there for us no matter what. In my heart, I will always believe we would have been married a third and final time...from those first moments in Rome we were always madly and powerfully in love. We had more time but not enough.

Of the nearly forty letters Richard wrote to Elizabeth, perhaps the most important was written shortly before his untimely death on August 5, 1984, at the age of fifty-eight. He was in the attic study of his beloved house in Céligny, Switzerland, a home he shared with his fourth wife, Sally Hay Burton, when he wrote what would turn out to be his final letter to Elizabeth. He had recently completed work in Michael Radford’s adaptation of George Orwell’s *1984*, ironically the year of Burton’s death, in what would be a brief but powerful performance. His costar, the English actor John Hurt, was staying with Richard and Sally for a few days, but Richard managed to slip away and sequester himself in the study. Surrounded by his treasured thousand volumes of *The Everyman Library*—a gift from Elizabeth—he wrote to her at her home in Bel Air in Los Angeles.

But by the time Elizabeth received the letter, Richard Burton was dead. He had gone to bed with a terrible headache, and sometime during the night he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. Elizabeth was barred by Richard’s widow from attending his funeral in Céligny, for fear of the disrupting crowds and paparazzi that still followed Elizabeth wherever she went. That letter would be her most cherished remembrance of the thirteen years, all told, they spent together in the whirlwind of their grand affair.

But what was in that letter?

“I did not want to be another notch on his belt.”

—ELIZABETH TAYLOR

“How did I know the woman was so fucking famous?”

—RICHARD BURTON

The first time Richard Burton laid eyes on Elizabeth Taylor, he nearly laughed out loud.

It was 1953, and Burton had been plucked from the London stage where he was being hailed as the great successor to Sir John Gielgud and Sir Laurence Olivier, to make three dramas for 20th Century-Fox—*My Cousin Rachel*, *The Robe*, and *The Desert Rats*. He had swooped into Hollywood with his Welsh wife, Sybil, and had cut a swath through willing Hollywood wives, earning a reputation as an irresistible lover, a great raconteur, a rough and randy Welshman, a powerful drinker. At a party at Stewart Granger and Jean Simmons’s house in Bel Air, the twenty-eight-year-old actor outdid himself in drinking and storytelling. It was the Welsh actor’s first time in California, and his first visit to “a swank house,” where he was agog at the suntanned beauties lounging around the largest swimming pool he had ever seen. The hot desert air was cooled by the sound of ice clinking in glasses and Bloody Marys, boilermakers, and ice-cold beer kept the party well lubricated. “It had been a hell of a year,” Burton would later write in his frank and colorful notebooks, his diary entries recorded for a possible autobiography. “Three big movies; drinking with Bogie; flirting with Garbo...” He recalled

I was enjoying this small social triumph, but then a girl sitting on the other side of the pool lowered her book, took off her sunglasses and looked at me. She was so extraordinarily beautiful that I nearly laughed out loud...she was unquestioningly gorgeous...She was lavish. She was a dark unyielding largess. She was, in short, too bloody much, and not only that, she was totally ignoring me.

Well, not “totally.” That cool look took in a man she considered, at the time, swaggering and vulgar. She would have none of it. Besides, she was a year into her second marriage, to English actor Michael Wilding, a close friend of the Grangers. (Elizabeth, for her part, would recall that first meeting as having taken place at her and Michael’s home in the Hollywood Hills; in her memory, she was nineteen at the time.) But Burton was already, let’s say, intrigued. Reliving that first glimpse of twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth Taylor, he later described her as “the most astonishingly self-contained, pulchritudinous, remote, removed, inaccessible woman I had ever seen.... Was she merely sullen? I thought not. There was no trace of sulkiness in that divine face.” And later still: “Her breasts were apocalyptic, they would topple empires...” They would also topple Burton.

He would not meet her again for another nine years.

By the time they met in 1962 on the set of *Cleopatra*—after the production’s lengthy, expensive

delays, a costly move from London's Pinewood Studios to Rome's Cinecittà, and a shuffling of studio heads, producers, directors, writers, and actors—Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton had already lived several lives. Elizabeth had survived child stardom, with all its demands and excesses. Having been wrenched from a bucolic childhood in Hampstead, England (complete with a pony), resettled in Los Angeles by her doting parents to escape the gathering storm of World War II, and thrust into filmhood by her ambitious mother, the former stage actress Sara Sothorn Taylor, Elizabeth found herself famous at the tender age of ten, the diminutive costar of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Lassie Come Home*, and *National Velvet* the following year. (She would always have a fondness for animals, especially horses; since the age of three, she could jump without a saddle.) She learned early the value of her preternaturally beautiful, eerily adult face, though she treated her beauty cavalierly and had almost no personal vanity. She learned how the business worked: the fussing over by wardrobe and makeup and hair stylists and studio publicity agents, the constant fawning, the power struggles, the peaks and valleys of popularity. She became used to, and came to require, an entourage of helpers that would sink most ships. (Her even more beautiful brother, Howard, had wanted no part of it, so at fifteen he shaved his head the day before being hauled into Universal Studios to be tested for a boy-with-horse Western, thus assuring his escape into normalcy.) Elizabeth's rewards—fame, money, attention, studio animals to play with—balanced out her punishment: putting up with relentless control by her mother and her directors and tyrannical studio chief Louis B. Mayer, and a complete lack of privacy and independence. "I was so totally chaperoned," she recalled, "that I couldn't go to the bathroom alone." She was taught how to look and to speak and to walk and to stand and to breathe. But through it all, she learned about power: who had it, how to get it, how to keep it. When Louis B. Mayer once swore at Elizabeth's mother in a fit of rage, eleven-year-old Elizabeth shouted back, "You and your studio can go to hell!" She refused to apologize, and—amazingly—Mayer didn't fire her on the spot. Truly, at that moment, a diva was born.

At her second meeting with Burton, Elizabeth was at the height of her raven beauty but seemed older than her twenty-nine years. She had been married thrice and widowed once. Her first, brief marriage at age eighteen to the compulsive gambler, hotel heir Conrad Nicholson "Nicky" Hilton Jr., was a studio-arranged disaster from the start. When he wasn't jilting her for the gaming tables, he beat her; Elizabeth later claimed that he even kicked her in the stomach when she was a few months into a pregnancy, inducing a miscarriage. The studio had convinced her to marry the attractive but louche playboy as a publicity tie-in to *Father of the Bride*, MGM's 1950 film with Elizabeth as the young bride and Spencer Tracy as her put-upon father. Sara Taylor went along with MGM's plans; she knew it would help her daughter on her way to becoming a star, and, anyway, she'd wanted Elizabeth to marry wealth.

"When I met Nicky Hilton," Elizabeth later admitted, "I was ripe to get married. Dazzled by his charm and apparent sophistication, driven by feelings that could not be indulged outside of marriage, desperate to live a life independent of my parents and the studio, I closed my eyes to any problem and walked radiantly down the aisle." The ballyhooed wedding, designed and flogged by MGM and witnessed by a crush of fans, did what it was meant to do: *Father of the Bride* was a huge success for the studio. The marriage lasted six months.

The brief marriage was ended on February 1, 1952, on the grounds of mental cruelty. Nicky blamed his bad behavior on the goldfish life he had suddenly found himself plunged into. When a legion of reporters and photographers invaded their hotel suite—a frequent occurrence—one of the photographers aimed his camera at Elizabeth and barked at the bridegroom, "Hey, Mac, get out of the way, I want to snap a picture." It was too much for the immature, headstrong playboy to bear. His father, Conrad Hilton, agreed: "They never had a chance...Elizabeth is a princess who isn't allowed to lead a normal life, and those near her are affected, too.... [I]f she had been a counter girl at Macy's

instead of a movie star...”

By the time Elizabeth took up the Queen of the Nile’s headdress in 1962, she was already the mother of three. Her two sons, Michael and Christopher, were born during her second marriage, to Michael Wilding, the genteel English actor who was closer to Elizabeth’s father’s age than her own. had been another marriage encouraged by MGM, to wipe out the bad publicity of her short-lived stint with Nicky, but Elizabeth had been attracted to Wilding, who seemed to offer stability and protection.

Mike Todd, Elizabeth’s third husband, was the epitome of a self-made man: born into a poor rabbi’s family, lacking in formal education, he made money as a peddler and in the construction business before becoming an independent film producer. He turned his considerable publicity skills toward producing one endlessly flogged hit, *Around the World in 80 Days*. He was part showman, part hustler, part genius, and was touted in the movie magazines as “the love of Elizabeth’s life” she had reveled in the manic showman’s macho bluster and outsized personality. He was the complete opposite of her husband Michael Wilding, and thus the complete opposite of her mild-mannered father, art-and-antiques dealer Francis Taylor.

The writer and satirist S. J. Perelman, who wrote the screenplay for Todd’s big movie, ended up with a less than sanguine impression of the diminutive mogul, pre-Elizabeth: “Todd’s living up to his legend,” he wrote in a 1955 letter to his wife, Laura, “standing off from himself and admiring this Napoleonic figure he’s created who’s...producing *War and Peace* and *The Life of Toscanini* at the same time he’s releasing *Oklahoma!* and preparing *Around the World in 80 Days* and sleeping with sixteen dames alternately and flying back from Las Vegas and leaving for Paris tomorrow and returning from London yesterday.” But his ultra-masculinity and total devotion were just what Elizabeth wanted. Having found her life controlled by others—her mother and MGM—she felt protected by his swagger and strength. And, as an independent producer, he could help her win her freedom from MGM. With Todd at her side, she could tell them all to go to hell.

Todd lived on chutzpah and hype and bought Elizabeth magnificent gifts, including a blinding, 27-carat diamond. He dazzled her with attention. He also knocked her around a few times. Her experience with Nicky Hilton notwithstanding, Elizabeth admitted that she relished the caveman attention—had even goaded him into it—because, in the old morality, it meant he was passionate about her. She needed someone who was tougher, more macho, and more in control than she was. She had tried goading Wilding into bossing her around, but he just wasn’t up to it.

One morning, in the third year of her marriage to Wilding, Elizabeth had snatched the crossword puzzle from his hands and challenged him, “Go on, hit me! Why don’t you!” But he demurred, too much of a gentleman. Or too passive. A big part of the problem in that marriage had been not only the age difference but the fact that Wilding’s once-lively career in England as a light romantic lead had dried up in Hollywood, and Elizabeth was virtually supporting the family. But Elizabeth was an old-fashioned girl. She wanted to be the 1950s-era ideal of femininity that her lush beauty promised but her circumstances and commanding personality left no room for. She was born to rule, but she wanted a man’s man, and in Mike Todd, she finally got one.

Tragically, her joy was snatched from her all too soon, on March 22, 1958, after thirteen months of marriage and eight months after the birth of her third child, Elizabeth Frances Todd, known as Liz. Todd had left for the East Coast on a publicity jaunt in the *Liz*, an eleven-seater, Lockheed Lodestar. Elizabeth planned to accompany her husband, but a 102-degree fever kept her at home. The *Liz* encountered a storm over the Nevada desert, ice formed on the wings, the engine failed, and the plane went down in a fiery explosion. Todd, the pilot, the copilot, and Art Cohn, who was writing Todd’s biography, all died in the crash. When the news was brought to Elizabeth, she was inconsolable. She became ill with grief, refusing to eat, and MGM was worried that she would be unable to complete filming her role as Maggie the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the Tennessee Williams drama costarring

Paul Newman and Burl Ives. But she did return to work, and Richard Brooks, her director, coaxed her back to health. The camaraderie of the film set and the demands of finishing the shoot probably saved her sanity and her life.

Soon after Todd's death, Elizabeth turned for comfort to Todd's closest friend and protégé: the crooner Eddie Fisher, who was, inconveniently, Debbie Reynolds's husband at the time. The Fishers were considered America's Sweethearts, and the bust-up of their marriage scandalized the country. Reynolds, whose kewpie-doll cuteness belied her tough-as-nails personality ("She's as wistful as an iron foundry," Oscar Levant once quipped), was now the poster girl for *Jilted Wife*, victim of the *Other Woman*, a role Taylor fit all too well, to the horror of her handlers. After a tremendous hue and cry from the press, Elizabeth and Eddie Fisher hastily married, on May 12, 1959, fourteen months after Todd's death.

Why such haste? It could have been that Elizabeth—who had been surrounded since childhood by a studio full of fawners—simply didn't know how to be alone. And, as the biographer Richard Meryman, who collaborated with Taylor on her 1964 memoir, *Elizabeth Taylor*, once observed, marrying Fisher was her way of holding on to Mike Todd. As Todd's best friend (he had named his son Todd, after his hero), Fisher was a bantam-weight substitute, but a substitute nonetheless, except in the bedroom. By several accounts (including Fisher's own), he was a lusty and enthusiastic lover, often making love to his gorgeous bride three and four times a day. Unlike other movie stars, such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, Elizabeth really *was* a sex goddess—she adored sex, she loved inspiring lust and satisfying it, she loved the attention, she loved the excitement and the danger. (She had always been attracted to danger, ever since she'd learned to ride and to jump at the age of five.) As Fisher later wrote about their relationship, "She was a woman who loved men as much as they loved her, and she wasn't shy about it."

Elizabeth was vilified for breaking up the Fisher-Reynolds marriage, even though it was clear to all three involved that the connubial fires had completely gone out (if indeed they ever existed). Fisher would later admit that his marriage to the effervescent blond actress, whose girl-next-door image clashed with her real-life toughness, was mostly studio-arranged and had never been a love match. She had been Elizabeth's maid of honor at Elizabeth and Mike Todd's wedding, and she had affectionately washed the bride's hair the day before the nuptials. Now Reynolds, not surprisingly, went along with the studio publicity in portraying Elizabeth as a home-wrecker. She even appeared for newspaper reporters wearing diaper pins attached to her sweater, at the studio publicity department's insistence ("What's a diaper pin?" she'd allegedly asked). America definitely sided with the jilted blonde, not knowing, of course, that her marriage to Eddie Fisher had been stage-managed by Hollywood, just as Elizabeth's marriage to Nicky Hilton—and possibly Michael Wilding—had been. At the height of the scandal, Eddie Fisher received seven thousand hate letters a week. Elizabeth was vilified as a harlot, a viper, a Jezebel. One headline announced "Blood Thirsty Widow Liz Vampires Eddie," and she was denounced from pulpits across the country. When the moralizing gossip maven Hedda Hopper got into the act, Elizabeth fought back with the immortal words "Mike is dead and I'm alive!" (echoing the *cr de coeur* of her character, Maggie the Cat, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Hopper, in fact, led the charge against what she perceived as Elizabeth's immoral behavior—an irony considering that the columnist had been crucial in touting Elizabeth as a child star.

The scandal of the Fisher marriage would have a long shelf life, invoked in 1965 when Jacqueline Kennedy was fighting her own public relations war over the publication of William Manchester's *The Death of a President*, commissioned by the Kennedys after the assassination but which Jacqueline, in the end, found too personally revealing. In a publicity battle against the writer and his publisher, Mrs. Kennedy appeared on the cover of *Esquire* with the pull quote: "Anyone who is against me will look like a rat—unless I run off with Eddie Fisher..."

It didn't matter that Fisher's marriage to Debbie Reynolds had never been an affair of the heart. His marriage to Elizabeth brought the actress her first bad publicity. Some even speculated that it had cost her the Academy Award for her work in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a performance she had painfully—and affectingly—delivered from the depths of her grief.

Fisher had begun his career as a popular singer at Grossinger's, a resort in the Catskills, and had an early *Billboard* hit with "Oh My Pa-Pa." A popular recording star, he reached the pinnacle of his success with a weekly NBC variety show, *Coke Time* (named after its sponsor). Besides the bad publicity of his ruined marriage, the era of crooners was giving way to rock-and-roll stars like Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. His career never recovered, but it didn't seem to matter—he was wildly, madly, dangerously in love with the grieving beauty. It was thrilling for him to try to follow in Todd's footsteps, as Todd was everything Fisher longed to be—authoritative, expansive, macho. A waiter at Chasen's in Beverly Hills recalled that when the Todds and the Fishers would dine together, Eddie always ordered exactly what Mike Todd ordered. "If Todd said steak medium rare, Eddie wanted steak medium rare. If Todd ordered sole slightly underdone, Eddie wanted the same thing...Fisher even ate the same way Todd did—fast." Alas, though Todd and Fisher shared similar backgrounds (both came from urban Jewish working-class families) and ambitions (Fisher hoped to be a producer, like his hero), Fisher would prove to be no Mike Todd. But then nobody could fill those shoes—the short, bulldoggish impresario was louder, more lavish, more passionate, more of a con man, more challenging than anyone Elizabeth had ever known.

By the time Elizabeth was ensconced in a fourteen-room villa on the Appian Way in Rome with an entourage of three children, a huge staff, and several pets, preparing for a role she had demanded and for which she had been paid a record \$1 million (plus substantial overages and a percentage of profits), it was probably apparent to her that Eddie was not the kind of husband she needed. Having already stared down Louis B. Mayer and having learned how to handle alpha males like Todd, the last thing she wanted was someone she could boss around. His career as a pop singer in trouble, Fisher was kept on salary by 20th Century-Fox as a producer, really just another factotum hired to make sure Elizabeth showed up on time. His own plans to produce films starring his wife were not catching fire. So he hung on, picking up after Elizabeth's several dogs and sliding into the role of "Mr. Elizabeth Taylor."

Having learned always to get her way and to indulge her enormous appetite for life, in all its forms—food, love, sex, jewels, booze, attention, drama, joy—what Elizabeth needed was someone who could say no to her. Or at least stand up to her. Or at least knock her down a peg or two. Or match her in her Rabelaisian joie de vivre. Fisher just couldn't do it.

But, she would soon discover, Richard Burton could.

The dapper, newly appointed 20th Century-Fox producer Walter Wanger was chosen to produce *Cleopatra* by then-studio boss Spyros Skouras, who believed that a remake of the successful 1917 silent film starring Theda Bara would bring in much needed income to the studio, which had fallen on hard times. Wanger was a successful producer of over sixty pictures, most notably *Joan of Arc* in 1948 and Susan Hayward's tearjerker *I Want to Live!* in 1958. Though his private life had been a tad shaky (he had served time for shooting talent agent Jennings Lang in the groin when he'd discovered that the agent was having an affair with his wife, Joan Bennett), Wanger was up to the task. How hard could it be to add some dialogue to the silent-movie script, hire some attention-getting names, and bring the movie in for \$2 million?

Their dream of a modestly budgeted movie was dashed when their top choice to play Cleopatra—Elizabeth—asked for \$1 million, a fee she came up with because she really didn't want to make the picture. Her typical salary at the time was \$125,000 (close to \$900,000 today, adjusted for inflation). Skouras was outraged and told Wanger to jettison Elizabeth for Susan Hayward. But by then,

Elizabeth had warmed to the idea, and when Wanger called to tell her the studio wouldn't pay her asking price, Elizabeth went into negotiation mode. First she cried. Then she got tough. She ended up with an even better deal—the \$1 million originally offered, a \$3,000 a week living allowance, \$50,000 for every week over the production schedule, and 10 percent of the movie's gross profits. In addition she insisted the movie be shot in Todd-AO, a cinemascope process invented by Mike Todd, which would further enrich her, because, as Todd's widow, she had inherited the rights to the process. She had learned a lot from her third husband—how to ask for the moon and how to get it. The studio agreed. She also demanded director approval. Again, the studio agreed. Peter Finch was cast as Caesar; he had costarred with her in *Elephant Walk*, a jungle drama in which Elizabeth had replaced an ailing Vivien Leigh as the female lead. Stephen Boyd, fresh from his success in *Ben-Hur*, would, for the time being, be her Marc Antony. Wanger then made the odd choice of Rouben Mamoulian to direct the epic—odd, because, though he'd had many successes and was known as “a woman's director”—he had never brought in an epic before. And epic this was going to be.

Elizabeth then insisted on shooting the film overseas, for tax purposes. The studio had hoped to film in Rome, but the 1960 Summer Olympics were to be held in the Eternal City when production was slated to begin, so there would be no hotel rooms available for cast and crew. (It was the 1960 Olympic Games, incidentally, that bestowed the gold medal in light-heavyweight boxing to a young American boxer with a Roman-sounding name: Cassius Marcellus Clay. He would change his name a few years later to Muhammad Ali.) Skouras, however, discovered that he could film in Pinewood Studios outside of London—not only did they have excellent soundstages, they contributed funding to the production in exchange for employing British extras, costumers, hairdressers, and crew and construction workers. So entire sets depicting Rome and Alexandria were built on the Pinewood Studios lot, in a doomed attempt to transform England into Rome.

Massive set construction began, extravagant costumes and props were created, and an enormous cast of extras was assembled. Skouras, Wanger, and Mamoulian, however, didn't anticipate two things: the lousy English weather and Elizabeth Taylor's persistent health problems. The nearly constant rain, wind, and gloom delayed shooting and eroded the sets, which had to be constantly repainted. Living in London's luxurious Dorchester Hotel with Eddie Fisher, Elizabeth contracted bronchitis and missed weeks of shooting, virtually grinding the production to a halt, while extras, actors, and crew all had to be paid. While Wanger was still trying to turn a cold and rainy landscape into sun-baked Rome, Elizabeth's bronchitis turned into pneumonia, which was so intractable that the actress fell into a coma and had to be rushed to the London Clinic, where she famously underwent a tracheotomy to save her life. It left her with a scar visible in close-ups as Queen of the Nile, but it was the luckiest scar imaginable: she credited it with winning her the sympathy vote for Best Actress for her 1961 portrayal of good-time girl Gloria Wandrous in *Butterfield 8*, a picture she'd completed the year before and had loathed. (“I lost to a tracheotomy,” her rival for the award, Shirley MacLaine, bemoaned.) The world waited anxiously as she recovered from her near-fatal illness—one wire service even reported that she had died—and the international headlines finally turned around the bad publicity that had dogged her after her breakup of the Fishers' marriage. Elizabeth learned early how to make the most of her frequently dramatic illnesses and accidents. Sometimes it was the only way she could find respite from MGM's relentless demands on her; other times it was a surefire way to win sympathy in the face of criticism.

By the time she recovered, the entire set for *Cleopatra* had been disassembled and moved to Rome, where it should have been all along. At last, Rome would stand in for Rome, and the warm sun would hasten Elizabeth's return to health.

But problems persisted. Peter Finch and Elizabeth disliked the script, which had been rewritten by Sidney Buchman, Ben Hecht, and Randal MacDougall. Mamoulian agreed, and he demanded a new

script or else he'd walk off the picture. But the production was already behind schedule and horribly over budget. Elizabeth's pneumonia and tracheotomy had brought the production to a halt, costing the studio \$100,000 a day. A year of production had produced only ten minutes of film and had increased the budget to \$35 million. To Mamoulian's surprise, Wanger and Skouras accepted his resignation. Elizabeth—exercising her director-approval clause—asked that either George Stevens, who had directed her so magnificently in *A Place in the Sun* (and had driven her to tears in *Giant*) or Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who had directed her in *Suddenly, Last Summer* two years earlier, be hired to replace Mamoulian. Elizabeth knew how important the right director was, how good she had been in the hands of Stevens and Mankiewicz. Stevens wasn't available, so Mankiewicz got the call while he was vacationing on the island retreat owned by his friend, actor Hume Cronyn. Like Mamoulian, Mankiewicz was an esteemed director, but, also like Mamoulian, he had never before brought in an epic.

Cronyn's advice to his friend? "Don't do it."

A brilliant writer-director, Mankiewicz had won four Academy Awards, back to back, for writing and directing *A Letter to Three Wives* and *All About Eve*; like Mamoulian, he had a reputation as a "woman's director," so the studio thought he would help keep Elizabeth in line. Besides being prone to sickness and accidents, she contractually demanded time off from filming during her menstrual periods. She was chronically, famously late, and she suffered flus, infections, bronchitis, and injuries the way other people caught colds. She once stepped on a wire while dancing at a wrap party, injuring herself and starting a fire. Mankiewicz had already wrestled into submission divas such as Bette Davis in *All About Eve* and Katharine Hepburn in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. He was fascinated by "actresses," whom he regarded (perhaps a tad jealously) as neurotic, fabulous creatures, and he was writing a never-finished tome on the subject. The studio tempted him with a \$3 million payout (over \$21 million in today's dollars) for his services and an offer to buy him out of existing commitments—more money than he had ever received in his long, distinguished career—so he agreed to shoulder the burden, casting his friend Hume Cronyn as Cleopatra's tutor, Sosigenes.

Mankiewicz would prove to have a strong influence on Elizabeth, who would one day describe him as her favorite director. His own view of women reiterated Elizabeth's feeling that a certain femininity was lacking in her life. Mankiewicz, a stocky, pipe-smoking intellectual, was proud of his understanding of the human psyche and was known to have his screenplays psychoanalyzed before shooting. The lines he wrote for Bette Davis in *All About Eve* would later be appropriated by Elizabeth: "I can be an actress or a woman, but I can't be both." Happy, fulfilled women served their men (and were supported by them). With almost every new marriage, Elizabeth publicly announced that her main role in life was to be "Mrs. Michael Wilding" or "Mrs. Mike Todd" or "Mrs. Eddie Fisher." It was good press in the Eisenhower era, but it was also her genuine longing for a "normal" life. On one rare occasion, she railed against her own movie-star status: "Why couldn't they let me grow up like Suzy Smith with a house in the suburbs, a husband who takes the 8:10, and three fat, saucy kids?" Of course, she would have hated that. Too safe.

In some ways, their fates were intertwined. Mankiewicz had been scheduled to accompany Mike Todd on his last, fatal flight on the *Liz*, but his sister-in-law, Sarah Mankiewicz, had had a premonition and warned him not to go. He took a different flight, but he had the frisson of seeing his own death notice when he was mistakenly reported as having been aboard the doomed plane. Mankiewicz lived, he accepted the offer of directing *Cleopatra*, and his choice to replace Stephen Boyd as Marc Antony would change the course of Elizabeth's life. The movie would also change the course of his own: his brilliant career lost all momentum and limped to its conclusion five years later. In the last twenty years of his long life Joe Mankiewicz never directed another film. He would blame Elizabeth and Richard for that.

Mankiewicz replaced Peter Finch (now committed to another film) with Rex Harrison, whom he'd loved directing in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. To replace Stephen Boyd, the studio had to buy Richard Burton out of his successful Broadway run as King Arthur in *Camelot*, paying Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe a lump sum of \$50,000. In addition to that payment, Burton was offered a contract guaranteeing him \$250,000 (\$1.7 million today), plus overages, plus extras, such as transportation for himself and his family, and \$1,000 a week for what 20th Century-Fox's ledgers referred to as "small expenses." He and Sybil and their two girls were also given the use of a villa and household staff, which they shared with Roddy McDowall, Burton's *Camelot* costar and Elizabeth's childhood friend from their *Lassie* days. All of these perks, of course, further bloated the production budget.

Burton, his eye always on the prize and feeling he had botched his earlier attempt at conquering Hollywood (though he had acquitted himself rather well in *The Robe* and *My Cousin Rachel*, two prior Hollywood films), leaped at the chance. He was becoming bored after playing King Arthur, night after night, for nearly a year in *Camelot*'s long run, even though he reveled in the part and had kept libations flowing in his dressing room, which he'd dubbed "Burton's Bar." His final night in the role was September 16, 1961, and by then everyone knew the reason for his leaving the play. His last performance was triumphant, rewarded with a standing ovation. Julie Andrews (who played Queen Guinevere) left Burton alone onstage so he could bask in the waves of adulation that poured forth from the audience. There was the unspoken recognition that this boy from an unpronounceable Welsh mining town had made good, and the audience cherished their last night in his company, relishing each kingly gesture. This would be hard for Burton to give up: the seduction and acclaim of a live audience, fought for and won night after night.

When the houselights came on and the last theatergoer had left the Majestic Theater, Burton found himself in the midst of a farewell party. Among the celebrants was the playwright Moss Hart, who had directed the play, and who had suffered a heart attack ten days after opening. That last night Hart, given to Polonius-like pronouncements, took Burton aside and cautioned him, "I beg you not to waste your wonderful gifts. You must know you have it in you to be one of the greatest stage actors of this century." But for now, the movies once again beckoned. For Burton, that's where real fame—and fortune—were to be made.

Burton generally disliked "tits and sand" epics, like *The Robe* and now *Cleopatra*, that required him to wear togas and tunics. He found prancing around barelegged or in tights decidedly unmanly, which is one reason his Broadway *Hamlet* two years later would be performed in street clothes. But in *Cleopatra*, Mankiewicz costumed Burton in the shortest soldier's tunic of all—a pleated skirt that showcases his muscular thighs and barely covers his manhood. Mankiewicz was impressed with Burton, whose intelligence, wit, and soulful masculinity attracted men and women alike. Like Burton, the twice-married Mankiewicz was given to having affairs with the actresses he directed (and some that he didn't, like a young Judy Garland), but he was dazzled by Burton, joking to the press later on that it was he, not Elizabeth, who was having the affair with him.

Burton exuded virility, but there was something in his past he was ashamed of. He had, reportedly, succumbed to advances by Sir John Gielgud and Sir Laurence Olivier as he made his stellar way through the hierarchical world of the English theater. He would later tell interview hosts like Dick Cavett and the BBC's Michael Parkinson that he had "tried homosexuality" and "it didn't take." It came down to this: men from mining towns don't have sex with other men. In the rugged world of coal miners, rugby players, and world-class drinkers, masculinity was something you earned and you earned it in the eyes of other men. So the encounters of his youth troubled him; they may have fueled his relentless womanizing.

If Skouras and Wanger thought that Mankiewicz would stem the financial bleeding and put the

production on an even keel, they were wrong. In Mankiewicz's hands, the production continued to spiral out of control. First, he agreed with Elizabeth that the script needed a major rewrite, and he felt that he was the only one up to the task. So he set about directing by day and writing all night. In order to both direct and rewrite the script, he began relying on twice-daily injections of amphetamines to keep going, administered by the notorious Max Jacobson, aka "Dr. Feelgood." His ambition was noble: to equal Shaw and Shakespeare in his sprawling, hybrid screenplay. Indeed, in the beauty of his language he sometimes comes close, but the thing was so gargantuan—a whopping 327 pages—and so impossible to wrestle into shape while simultaneously overseeing a vast cast and crew, that it seriously undermined his health. His eldest son, Chris Mankiewicz, who was hired to work on the production, feared his father might suffer a heart attack. The agitated state it left him in not only brought on a skin disorder that caused his fingertips to bleed, necessitating the wearing of white cotton film-cutter's gloves, it also brought about a common result of amphetamine abuse: grandiosity.

Everything about the production—the sets, the dressing rooms, the props, the number of extras, the script itself—took on gargantuan proportions. The entire production suffered from gigantism. The film would eventually take three years to complete, at a staggering cost of \$44 million, close to \$300 million in today's dollars; it's considered the third most expensive movie ever made. And because Mankiewicz was literally writing the screenplay as they were shooting, he was virtually directing his first draft—there was no time for streamlining and honing, and no shooting script was prepared, so they were forced to shoot everything in sequence, a costly process that kept all the actors on salary all the time. Just about everything that could go wrong went wrong. Reflecting back on the Herculean effort to get this story on film, Elizabeth described it in her 1964 memoir as "a nightmare." But what redeemed the experience, at least for her, was falling in love with Richard Burton.

When Elizabeth had first encountered Burton at Stewart Granger's Hollywood party in 1953, she'd disliked him—he talked too much, he was "rather full of himself," and she gave him "the cold fish eye." So she was prepared to treat him coolly on the set of *Cleopatra*, vowing that she would not be another notch on his gun belt.

So they met, for the second time, on the set on January 22, 1962, costumed and in full makeup. Elizabeth was already on her guard, even before meeting the notorious Welshman. She was well aware of his theatrical reputation for having all his lines and even his costars' lines memorized on the first day. She thought of him as not just "a movie star but a genuine actor." Taylor was well aware of her own technical limitations; the one thing MGM had failed to do was to provide her with acting lessons. She was what is known as "a natural," and her greatest talent was that unknown quality that leaps through the camera and goes directly into the audience's heart.

Elizabeth also knew of Burton's legendary conquests—he had bedded many of his leading ladies, including dark-haired beauties like Claire Bloom, and Susan Strasberg (a mere seventeen at the time), all the while married to his plucky and stalwart Welsh wife, Sybil Burton, whom he claimed he would never abandon. Legendary, too, was the Welshman's golden-throated voice, his bonhomie, his love of poetry and language and Shakespeare and liquor. His vibrant sexuality could heat up a room. His face was pockmarked from the testosterone-fueled boils that had plagued him during his hardscrabble youth in the Welsh coal town of Pontrhydyfen, but he had, nonetheless, a soulful and haunted beauty. Earth and air were mingled in him; he looked like "a boxing poet," according to his countryman Emlyn Williams, the playwright and actor whose early interest in Burton had helped launch his theatrical career in *The Druid's Rest* and his film career as the young swain in *The Last Days of Dolwyn*.

So when they first clapped eyes on each other on the oversized set of *Cleopatra*, Richard in his too-short tunic and Elizabeth in her dark Egyptian eye makeup and stunning Irene Sharaff gown, “there was a lot of hemming and hawing.” Burton, the great seducer, tried to ignore her at first, then he edged over to Elizabeth and said fatuously, “Has anybody ever told you that you’re a very pretty girl?” As recounted in her autobiography, Elizabeth couldn’t believe the lameness of that gambit. She “couldn’t wait to go back to the dressing room where all the girls were and tell them, ‘*Oy gevalt*’” (delighted to use the Yid-dishisms she’d learned from Todd and Fisher), “here’s the great lover, the great wit, the great intellectual of Wales, and he comes out with a line like that.” It was actually a brilliant gambit—in a world in which everyone catered to Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton showed he was willing to make fun of her.

In another account, Burton also took one look at her overripe beauty and let slip the words “You’re too fat.” In actuality, he was so shaken by the sight of her looking “so bloody marvelous” that he’d wanted to knock her down a peg. Besides her overwhelming physical presence, Burton was impressed by the fact that she was earning four times his own considerable salary, and that she already possessed the thing that had so far eluded him—movie star status. He was also contemptuous of the hovering presence of Eddie Fisher on the set. A friend had joked with Burton that Fisher only came in third in Elizabeth’s entourage, after her hairdresser, Alexandre de Paris, and her agent, Kurt Frings. Burton had taken in the absurdity of this overpaid, ripe beauty and her doting husband, and had meant to show that he was unfazed.

But fazed he was. And at their next meeting, everything changed.

Their first day of working together, Burton had showed up completely hungover from a night of carousing. “He was kind of quivering from head to foot and there were grog blossoms—you know, from booze—all over his face,” Elizabeth remembered. “He ordered a cup of coffee to sort of still his trembling fists and I had to help it to his mouth, and that just endeared him to me. I thought, ‘Well, he really is human.... so vulnerable and sweet and shaky and terribly giggly that with my heart I *cwtched*’ him—that’s Welsh for ‘hug.’” He then further disarmed Elizabeth when he blew a line. “If it had been a planned strategic campaign, Caesar couldn’t have planned it better,” she recalled.

But their early on-camera scenes together, in Eddie Fisher’s understandably jaundiced view, were underwhelming. Fisher showed up on the set for Elizabeth’s nude bathing scene. (Only a generous glimpse of thigh is actually visible onscreen. Elizabeth was too Old Hollywood to show more.) Elizabeth showed up three hours late, trailing a phalanx of makeup specialists and hairdressers. Fisher took a sip of the bottle of Coke Elizabeth was nursing, only to discover that it was brandy. He sat down next to Mankiewicz.

“Joe,” he said, “what’s going on here?”

“Eddie, she hasn’t the faintest idea what she’s doing.”

After watching the early rushes, Fisher was struck by the difference between Burton’s and Elizabeth’s acting styles; he felt that, “with his big, sonorous voice and her little, squeaky one, their scenes together were ludicrous.”

Burton himself was at first perplexed by Elizabeth’s apparent lack of technique. “She’s just not *doing* anything,” he complained to Mankiewicz, until the pipe-smoking director took him aside and showed him Taylor’s impact onscreen. It took his breath away. Burton—trained to move, to speak, to *act*—was struck by Elizabeth’s absolute *stillness*, and he would later say that he learned an important film technique from Elizabeth: how to tone down his theatrical performances for the camera’s cool eye. From that moment, Burton learned how the visual/spectacle element of film could trump the written/spoken element of theater. Under the influence of Elizabeth, Burton made the transition from stage acting to screen acting on the soundstage of *Cleopatra*. Later, when their relationship began to stagger under the weight of their fame and their excesses, Elizabeth would remind him of that fact.

If it was Burton's vulnerability that first attracted Elizabeth, there was a deeper siren call as well. Truth was, Elizabeth was having her own romance with alcohol, though not quite on Burton's level. At their sumptuous Villa Pappa on the Appian Way, Fisher watched as she took her first drink in the morning, followed by several glasses of wine at lunch, and "who knows how much for the remainder of the day? And as I discovered, she wasn't just drinking at home." She loved Bloody Marys and was in the habit of taking with her to the studio a case of vodka, tonic water, and tomato juice. Their liquor bill could reach as much as \$700 a week (roughly \$4,900 today). Fisher had been a heavy drinker once, but he wasn't drinking in those days, and he tried to curtail Elizabeth's alcohol intake, watering down her drinks as he anxiously watched over her. He had nursed her through her near-fatal pneumonia at the Dorchester Hotel, and her recovery from a tracheotomy, never leaving her bedside. Now he tried to monitor her alcohol intake. But that's not what Elizabeth had signed up for.

"At some point after working with Burton," Fisher later recalled, "I think she began to see me as a jailer. I was spoiling her fun. She didn't need me to monitor her medication and drinks and put her to bed at night." And now, suddenly, Elizabeth would be playing love scenes with this devastating Welshman, made vulnerable by drink, a god brought down to earth, whose need for alcohol translated into a ravishing thirst for life. In this, and in other areas, Burton left Elizabeth's anxious caretaker—whom he would later dismiss as "the busboy"—in the dust.

As for Burton, he reportedly set his cap for Taylor as just one of his usual conquests. He expected to bed all of his leading ladies (with the apparent exception of Julie Andrews, Guinevere to his Arthur in *Camelot*, who remained beyond his reach). At least that's what Jack Brodsky and Nathan Weiss, 20th Century-Fox publicity agents attached to the first incarnation of *Cleopatra*, wrote in their chronicle of the production, *The Cleopatra Papers*. They suggest that her star power was what impressed him most—her million-dollar salary, her fourteen-room villa, the shipments of her favorite food, Chasen's chili, flown in from Los Angeles. He thought an affair might elevate his own status in the industry—and he was nothing if not ambitious—but Burton had no intention of falling in love. "I must don my armor once more," Brodsky and Weiss report him as saying, "to play against Miss Tits. That bit of bravado suggests that Burton had no idea what was about to engulf him.

Protected by his marriage to Sybil, a sane, witty, and intelligent woman who kept him grounded in his Welsh life, Burton felt he could fall in and out of affairs with no possibility of becoming ensnared. His affair with Claire Bloom, begun while they were both still in their twenties and making their names as extraordinary Shakespearean actors at the Old Vic, had probably come closest to threatening his marriage. But Burton needed Sybil and the stability she provided. In his own way, he loved her, though Sybil's prematurely silver hair made her appear, at times, more like his mother than his wife. Burton adored their five-year-old daughter, Kate, and their toddler, Jessica, who seemed to need special care.

And there was this basic fact: Welsh men did not abandon their families.

But the heat and lightning of Burton's scenes with Elizabeth were beginning to be noticed. Burton would later claim that he was first smitten when he watched the scene of Elizabeth naked in her bath, lolling like a mermaid, tended by a bevy of handmaidens. In their first deep kiss, in Cleopatra's boudoir, just after confessing their mutual love, Burton found himself caught up, almost drugged, in her presence. They repeated the scene several times, their kiss lasting longer with each take. Finally, Mankiewicz shouted, "Print it"—but the scene continued. "Would you two mind if I sa cut?" he asked again. And then, "Does it interest you that it is time for lunch?"

Burton didn't have a chance.

It was not just Elizabeth Taylor who was casting her spell over him, it was Cleopatra herself, who

ruled by divine right, descended from the Egyptian goddess Isis. “I am Isis,” she had revealed to Caesar in their first love scene. “I am the Nile. I am worshipped by millions who believe it.” Taylor already identified with Cleopatra. She felt that “Mike Todd...had been to her what Julius Caesar had been to Cleopatra.” Now Marc Antony—Burton—would take his place.

And there were those words of love Mankiewicz had written for Cleopatra and Antony to speak. Richard himself was especially vulnerable to the beauty of words: “From that first instant I saw you entering Rome on that fabulous beast, crowned in gold...I envied Caesar...I envied him *you*,” Antony confesses. And, later, when the destruction of their empire looms, Cleopatra cries to Antony, “To have waited so long, to know so suddenly. Without you, this is not a world I want to live in.” And Antony answers her: “Everything that I want to love or hold or have or be is here with me now.”

When their first love scene finally ended, Burton reportedly called for a beer and Elizabeth nonchalantly handed off her wig and walked away. In his dressing room, where he had resumed “Burton’s Bar” for cast and crew, Burton lunched with a bevy of actors, writers, and adoring females. Suddenly, he called out across the empty soundstage for Elizabeth to join them.

She turned and smiled. She walked into his crowded dressing room, where he promptly ignored her, except to bend down low and whisper an off-color story into her ear, one which made her blush and laugh in delight. Later, when they returned to the soundstage, he dragged her director’s chair next to his, where it would remain throughout the rest of the shoot.

Still, Burton kept his guard up—at first by keeping on hand a girlfriend, Pat Tunder, a Copacabana dancer Burton had met during the run of *Camelot* whom he’d brought with him to Rome. But Taylor had already discovered that Eddie, for all his ministrations and devotion, could not take Mike Todd’s place. She had tamed him, and therefore he was now unchallenging. He couldn’t match her increasingly brilliant star status. It didn’t help Fisher’s case that Burton looked like a younger, taller, and handsomer version of Todd: the squarish face, the broad shoulders, the roughness of skin, the working-class background, the sheer virility.

“Elizabeth was not used to assertive men,” observed Ron Berkeley, Elizabeth’s makeup artist on many of her early films. “Oh, they might put on an act for a while, but they nearly all ended up showing love by deference, paying tribute to her beauty. Only one other man had taken her by sheer force of personality. When she encountered Richard Burton, it must have seemed to her that she had rediscovered Mike Todd.” The moment Burton had shown up, hungover, on the soundstage of *Cleopatra*, Fisher was history. He just didn’t know it yet.

Fisher should, perhaps, have been on his guard. “Even if he hadn’t destroyed my marriage,” he later wrote about Burton, “I would have disliked him.” He claimed that he and Elizabeth had at first made fun of Burton behind his back, put off by his roughness and lack of grooming. “I thought he was an arrogant slob. Elizabeth and I...compared him to the great producer of MGM musicals, Arthur Freed, about whom it was said he could grow orchids under his fingernails.”

Fisher must have been reassured by the fact that he and Elizabeth were in the process of adopting a nine-month-old German girl whose parents could not afford the series of operations needed to correct her crippling hip deformity. Elizabeth’s heart had gone out to this needy infant, whom she and Fisher renamed Maria (after the actress Maria Schell, who had located the child for them). Unable or unwilling to bear more children after her cesarean delivery of Liza Todd, in which she had almost lost her baby, Elizabeth had longed for a child to consecrate her marriage to Fisher. But by the time the adoption papers were signed, Fisher’s days were numbered.

On a few occasions, Sybil accompanied Burton to Villa Pappa, the expansive Italian villa on the Appian Way rented by Fox studio for Elizabeth and her entourage. The pink marble mansion came complete with swimming pool, acres of pine forests, two butlers, and three maids. The entourage included the couple’s two secretaries and Elizabeth’s three children, ten dogs, and four cats. Dick

Hanley, a former secretary to Louis B. Mayer and now Elizabeth's majordomo, was set up in a nearby flat with his companion. In Rome, Taylor lived in Cleopatra-like luxury, insisting that all the beds be made daily with fresh linen. For each meal, full place settings were provided by the maids—complete with a glass for white wine, one for red, one for champagne, and one for water. When she wasn't dining luxuriously, she made sure Hanley had her favorite chili flown in from Chasen's. For dinner parties, the table settings were color-coordinated with Elizabeth's outfit (no doubt to bring out the violet hues in her changeable, blue-violet eyes). Fisher watched his wife's drinking, instructing their servants to stop serving her after five drinks. But the first time Burton dined with them at the villa, the actor surreptitiously refilled her glass. "I adore this man," Elizabeth thought at that moment; with or without Mankiewicz's dialogue, she knew she was falling for him.

At a New Year's Eve party at Villa Pappa to celebrate the impending adoption of Maria, Fisher was surprised to see Elizabeth sitting with Burton on a small couch, whispering and giggling. Feeling excluded, he sat down at the piano and started to sing, to attract her attention, but Elizabeth just glared at him and he left the room.

Elizabeth and Richard probably first made love in Burton's dressing room, and then found stolen afternoons in Dick Hanley's flat near Villa Pappa. What began as a thrilling conquest for Burton quickly deepened into infatuation, then an inexplicable thirst for her. He was a celebrated cocksman with a string of women in his past—and a wife very much in his present—yet in Elizabeth he found a woman who matched him in sexual fire. Later, Burton would pour out his emotions in love letters to Elizabeth, describing how "I lust after your smell and your paps and your divine little money-box and your round belly and the exquisite softness of the inside of your thighs and your baby-bottom and your giving lips & the half hostile look in your eyes when you're deep in rut with your little Welsh stallion..." Rumors of the affair began to swirl around the set, finally reaching Fisher, who confronted her. "Tell me the truth," he asked Elizabeth. "Is there something going on between you and Burton?"

"Yes."

Elizabeth simply couldn't lie—not to herself, not to Eddie. The truth just smacked her in the face—she was in love with Richard Burton. Elizabeth had always been a truth-teller.

Fisher, like Burton, couldn't escape what was happening to him. At one point, he left Rome to nurse his wounds at the chalet Elizabeth had purchased in Gstaad. When he returned to Rome, he was severely depressed, wandering around Villa Pappa all day in his pajamas, drinking vodka and wondering what had happened to his career. At one miserable dinner at the villa in March of 1962, Burton, deep in his cups, had brutally demanded that Elizabeth declare, in front of Eddie Fisher, to name the one she loved.

"Elizabeth," he'd growled in his best theatrical voice, "who do you love? *Whooo do you love?*"

She looked at both men and said to Burton, "You."

Burton then picked up a silver-framed photograph of Mike Todd, Elizabeth, and their daughter, Liza, and he turned to Fisher. "He didn't know how to use her!" Burton shouted, pointing to the picture of Mike Todd. "You don't know how to use her, either! And what's that fucking picture here for?" He continued to rage—all of this remembered and recorded by Eddie Fisher in both of his memoirs—until Elizabeth ran out of the villa in tears. The two men were left alone in the empty room where they continued to fume over snifters of brandy. "Burton did most of the talking," Fisher wrote, "flattering me, insulting me, laying little traps, charming and apologetic one moment, crude and abusive the next."

Unnerved by his encounter with Burton, Fisher sought out Sybil at their rented villa and told her about his suspicions. "Eddie broke the cardinal rule as the cuckold in any affair," Walter Wanger later confided in the producer and agent Edward Heyman. "He called the wife." Sybil admitted that she had known about the affair for weeks. Fisher asked her how she managed to cope with the situation, and

she answered, “Ever since Richard and I have been married, he’s had these affairs. But he always comes back to me. The thing with Elizabeth is over.”

“It isn’t over, Sybil. They’re seeing each other constantly,” Fisher informed her. Sybil, however, refused to believe it. Fisher left, admiring Sybil’s powers of denial. But she wasn’t as sanguine as she’d appeared. Shortly after her encounter with Fisher, she reportedly stormed onto the soundstage and created a scene, which shut down production for an entire day, costing the studio another \$100,000.

Fisher tried to escape the madness by traveling to Florence, where he called Elizabeth at their villa. But it was Richard who answered the telephone.

“What are you doing there?” Eddie Fisher asked Richard Burton. “What are you doing in my house?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Burton answered. “I’m fucking your wife.”

Mankiewicz was also aware of what was happening and was leery of the new complication, confiding in Wanger, “Elizabeth and Burton are not just *playing* Antony and Cleopatra!” Studio publicists like Jack Brodsky tried to suppress rumors of the affair, but it was too late. Hordes of photographers camping out at Cinecittà got wind of it, adding to the general chaos of the production. They hounded the couple, snapping their photo outside Tre Scalini in Piazza Navona, even following them on a brief escape to Elizabeth’s chalet in Gstaad. Whenever the lovers escaped to the fashionable Via Veneto, they were followed by wildly snapping photographers, eager to sell their photos to newspapers and magazines. Their constant buzz inspired Federico Fellini, who was filming *La Dolce Vita* on the streets of Rome at the time; he named his intrusive reporter “Paparazzo,” which means “buzzing insect.” The name stuck.

Wanger saw how “incredibly patient and well informed” the paparazzi were, these young Italian men on Vespas and in low-slung sports cars, their Rolleiflexes slung over their shoulders. They had found out even before the lease was signed just which magnificent villa would house the Taylor-Fisher household, and they climbed into the trees along one of Villa Pappa’s two swimming pools. They seemed to be everywhere, one day disguising themselves as priests boldly knocking on the Burtons’ door, sometimes dropping from the trees to grab a photograph of a startled Richard or Elizabeth or Eddie Fisher, their eyes blinded by the sudden white light of the flashcubes. “It seemed like everybody who worked for Richard or me in Rome made a fortune selling their stories to the press,” Elizabeth believed. “A woman Richard hired for his children turned out to be a fake Italian countess, and she sold her story in America.”

For a time, the two lovers did make an attempt to stay away from each other. Elizabeth couldn’t bear the idea of going through another highly publicized divorce and world disapprobation, so there were occasions when they showed up on the set and barely spoke to each other. But not for long. Their happiest moments were when they managed to escape for a few days, hiding out in a pink stucco villa they had secretly rented at Porto Santo Stefano. She always relished those rare occasions when she could pretend to be an ordinary woman: “We’d spend weekends there. I’d barbecue. There was a crummy old shower, and the sheets were always damp. We loved it—absolutely adored it.” On one occasion, their disappearance sent their beleaguered director into an amphetamine-fueled tizzy. He began searching the hospitals before Burton finally showed up, pretending ignorance. Then Elizabeth suddenly appeared, tapping Mankiewicz on the back. He was furious—but relieved—to welcome them back on the set.

By February, Brodsky and Mankiewicz took Burton aside and pleaded with him to come to his senses, but the real pressure was from Sybil, who was packing her bags for New York. Unable to face the loss of his family, Burton—wracked with guilt and terrified over the intensity of his feelings for Elizabeth—informed her that he would never leave Sybil (nor would he give up his girlfriend, Pat

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