BETTY ROLLIN INTERVIEW
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Betty Rollin
NBC News Correspondent
Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
Date of Interview: September 6, 2022
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 10 minutes and 20 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Betty Rollin

Correspondent, NBC News (1973 - 1982)

CREW:

Make sure Betty's very comfortable…

BETTY ROLLIN:

I'm fine.

CREW:

I guess we could adjust this… Betty Rollin, take one.

NANCY STEINER:
Are we ready? Okay.

Betty Rollin
Correspondent, NBC News (1973 - 1982)

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NANCY STEINER:
So how would you describe your childhood?

BETTY ROLLIN:
Odd. My childhood was odd. I was an only child of a very ambitious mother and a very contented father. My father was from Ukraine and he didn't come to America until he was 20 something, and he loved America and he loved me and he really was happy with life. My mother, on the other hand, was a warrior. She was happy with life too, but she always wanted more, especially out of me. So, you know, that was good and that was bad for me. I mean, she loved me, but she wanted me to be as much as I could be. I mean, she researched what would be the very best schools in her opinion, that would be Fieldston Ethical Culture and Sarah Lawrence College. And she, when I was really too young, she brought me to a place on 5th Avenue where there was some kind of makeup lady. And I mean, I wasn't a child then I was teenage but I mean, what mother is going to take you to a makeup lady on 5th Avenue so

that you know how to do that right? And she sent me to sewing school so that I would possibly have a need for that and that would be covered.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

And on Saturday, when other children were playing, we were living in a section of Yonkers called Lincoln Park, kind of suburban place. I got on the train with my mother and once we were on the train, she had me looking at the ads so that she could teach me grammar. And then we got to our first stop, which was my ballet class, which was hard. The teacher was a Christian scientist so she didn't, she ignored pain. She was dear, though. And then right after that, I would go to the dramatics class. Am I telling you more than you want to know? And then at the dramatics class I learned to speak and act and do all of those things. Although when a talent scout came to look at the kids and was interested in making little professionals out of them, my mother said to the teacher, "If you tell Betty about this, she's leaving this class," so my mother was not interested in a stage child. She was just doing this because she thought it would enrich me somehow. So then we went to the drug store on the corner and I had an American cheese sandwich and I would say, "The regular, please," to the guy behind the counter, which I just loved doing so much.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

So, that was the fun of my day. And then in the afternoon I went to a place called the Studio for Gifted Children, where I painted. And then at the end of

that, it was about four o'clock, my father would pick us up in the car and he would take us out to our … it's amazing, I remember the name of the place, it was Addie Valens and I'd have a big ice cream sundae. And that was my Saturday. And oh on Sunday, my father drove me to my piano lessons in the Bronx with a Mr. Inkerman.

NANCY STEINER:
So it sounds to me like you were really the manifestation of the American dream for your parents. Certainly for your mother, she was putting a lot of energy and thought into making sure that you had every possible opportunity.

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BETTY ROLLIN:
Yes she did. And she was a mix of all of it, as I describe her doing all those things at me, and for me and to me. She may sound awful, but she was actually … The remarkable thing about my mother is that on top with all of that push, push, push, push, she was a kind, loving person. She cared about other people. She would talk to me about other people and what they cared about. So I learned to be, I hope, a person who is interested and cares about other people. I mean, I got that from her. If I have that, it was from her and it was sort of a funny mix; that ambition of hers, on the one hand, and her sweetness and her heart. I mean, at a certain point in my adolescence, I fought back. I liked all the lessons and all that stuff, but I felt that I was being … I didn't want so much attention. And by the way, that isn't all the attention

I got because my mother herself was a career girl at a time when one's mother, you know, this was the early … I was born in 1936.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

So this was a time when mothers were home, and my mother didn't want to be home. As much as she loved me, she hired a lady, a very peculiar wonderful lady. But of course she was peculiar because everything in my life was a little peculiar. She was a woman who was about to go into a nunnery. And somehow my mother found her. I don't know how. From an agency, she must have been looking for a job. And my mother hired her full time to live with us and be my nanny. While my mother went out and worked as a school teacher, she had a teaching degree. Then she got a job somehow as a … running the office of the man who ran, I don't think he owned it, but he ran Horn and Hardart. He was living next door to us in Yonkers, and she became his great friend. And he thought she was so smart that he got her away from teaching to work for him. And then he used to go around saying, "Your mother's the smartest Jew I ever knew," which was weird. But I thought, I guess that's a compliment. You know, and my mother thought, I guess that's a … it was a little odd, the whole thing.

NANCY STEINER:

So it sounds to me that your curiosity was, in a sense— Your curiosity about people can be directly aligned with your mother and perhaps your zest and your drive also could be attributed to her. What incidents or experiences

from your early years stand out in terms of how you developed as a person?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Not one incident. I mean, it doesn't work like that. It was just this, this nutty mother I had and nutty, wonderful mother. Mixed bag mother. It was all her, coming from her really in the ways I've described. I mean, she just made me her … she had jobs, she was working, but I was really her main job. I think she would've said that … with a little laugh, but I wasn't laughing.

NANCY STEINER:

Yeah. How would you describe yourself as a child?

BETTY ROLLIN:

How would I describe myself as a child? I would, as a child now we're talking under 12, is that ... ? As a child, I would describe myself as generally happy child and loving child. I was interested in boys. I was good at school, teachers liked me. I mean, I was like my mother saw to it that I — My mother used to have all the kids in the neighborhood who were mostly Catholic and had lots of siblings and I was alone. She would have them in to our backyard so that I would have friends in the neighborhood and company. So, you know, my mother wasn't only pushing me, she was– she was trying to please me. So, I mean, I kind of had a happy childhood. It was odd, but I certainly, if I had been asked at the age of 10, "Are you a happy child?" I would've said, "Oh, yes."

NANCY STEINER:

Ok. You wanted to be an actress.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Well, I wanted to be an actress because somebody saw me in a play at Sarah Lawrence, the college that was very near New York, and— an agent— and put me up for a part and I got the part. And I went to work as an actress the day after graduation. So, did I want to be an actress? What did I know? I mean, I thought, well, this is fun, but I got sucked into it kind of. And then, I luckily, in time discovered what an awful profession that is. Horrible. I mean, you're constantly trying to get jobs and please people and look good or look the way you're supposed to look for this part. I mean, I just found the whole thing … the work was fun. I mean, I played opposite Farley Granger at one point, and that was nice.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

And I was in a show with Gloria Swanson and all kinds of people. I mean, I did amazingly well for somebody who didn't want to— Well, at that point, I guess I still wanted to do it. But then I was saved from it by a little job I got doing research for a writer. An uncle of a classmate of mine was a writer and needed a researcher. And somehow she mentioned it to me and somehow I thought I could do that. And once I did that, I turned. I was on my way to writing at that point. Not— Without knowing it really.

NANCY STEINER:

And when you first became a writer, how did that actually manifest itself? What was your early career like as a writer?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

After I'd started doing research for writers, I thought, "I'm going to try this myself," and a friend of mine… A friend of mine's uncle worked at McCall's, and so I had a connection there. And she made an appointment for me with the editor of McCall's. Very put— It was just because of the little connection, um, that I saw the editor of McCall's. But I came in with a whole bunch of ideas for pieces, and they were ideas that I thought I could handle. And the one they chose was I thought I would do a piece for them on women who do commercials. I wasn't interested in women who do commercials, but I figured for my first piece, I was smart enough to figure out, do something, you know, something about. I was an actress after all, had been. And so I worked on that piece for months. I mean, it was so hard because I didn't know how to do a magazine piece. I was teaching myself, but anyway, it ran, the piece was published. And once that first piece was published, I was on my way. I then did another piece for somebody else, and suddenly I was a writer and I was…

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Again, through someone I knew, I heard that Joan Didion, a very wonderful writer, was leaving her job at Vogue Magazine. Vogue Magazine apparently had a, in addition to all the fashion, they had a features group, a little group of

writers who wrote articles that had nothing to do with fashion. And Joan Didion was one of them and there were two others, and she was leaving her job. And I— Somehow I got an interview for that job. And somehow they hired me… on the basis of that piece from that one piece I had published in McCall's. Writing for Vogue magazine was an amazing experience because the editor of that department was a stern, little old, not old, a little lady who decided to improve my writing and she did. She just took it upon herself to teach me as, you know, what I needed to know, and I absorbed it. And I became a better writer under this woman. And I wrote for Vogue, all kinds of pieces that were really good pieces. They also sent me to the Vogue parties, I was the reporter for all the Vogue parties, and I worked under the society editor who didn't much like me because I don't think she thought I was anybody. But I learned from her and I got kind of good at that.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

And then there was a problem because I went to a party— I was covering a party with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were there and I found myself talking to them for a while, and oddly the Duchess wanted to know all about me and what I was doing in my life. It was extremely strange because usually people you interview, of course, is thinking about themselves as they should. So, I wrote the piece and I described this place that we were all in as darker than the backseat of a car. And the society editor, who was kind of annoyed with me for spending so much time at the party with the Duchess, didn't like my phrase, "darker than the backseat of a car," and she wanted to cut it out

and I fought her.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

And suddenly it was an issue at Vogue Magazine, whether I was allowed to write, "darker than the backseat of a car" at a party with the Duke and Duchess. I mean, this is life at Vogue and I won. It stayed in, and that was a happy moment for me. But eventually, I was fired by this wonderful editor and she said, “You're a wonderful writer, dear, but you don't know enough.” And I said, “I think you're right. And I'm going to thank you, Miss Talmey.” And I cried a little and left Vogue, but she taught me how to write more than anybody.

NANCY STEINER:

Can you tell me her name please?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Allene Talmey. The end of my story with Allene Talmey is that, after being fired and years later, I wrote a book called *First, You Cry*, and she reviewed it in Vogue and she gave it the most wonderful review I had, and I had a lot of really good reviews for that book. And that was very moving to me.

NANCY STEINER:

Tell me about your experience, how this happened, where you found yourself with John Lennon.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Okay. My next job at a magazine was at Look Magazine, and I was hired… Again, you see, I didn't have much competition among women then. It was in the '60s, early— women were still getting married after they went to college and I was too neurotic to do that. I wasn't finding anybody who I could marry, and I was very worried about that. So I kept getting these great jobs, like at Look Magazine, where I was hired because they liked what they had seen of my writing. And somewhere along the line, I became a senior editor, which just meant a senior writer, and they wanted me to go to London and do a piece on— The first piece that had been in an American publication, on John Lennon and Yoko Ono. And as it happened, Yoko Ono was my classmate at Sarah Lawrence. So that didn't hurt, in terms of my getting the assignment. Although, I don't think they knew that, but Yoko knew that. And we had been friends. I once gave her a dress.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

And so, I went to London to do the story on John and Yoko. And when you did a story in those days for a magazine, you didn't just do an interview and go home. You hung around for five days. So the photographer and I, photographer Susan Ward, who had also gone to Sarah Lawrence, we just hung around John and Yoko for five days, and you get to know people when you do that and you talk to everybody around them. And long story short, I found Yoko had changed and become a kind of odious person at that point, to

me. I'm sure she's much nicer now because often one gets nicer with age, but I wrote an honest story and it was the cover story for Look Magazine, and created a bit of a rumpus.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

So I wrote this story about John and Yoko and kind of did a bit of unpleasant writing about Yoko. The next thing that happened was letters from readers. The thing after that that happened was Yoko and John came to America and appeared on the Cavett Show. And Dick Cavett asks them about my piece and— which he knew they didn't like, and as I remember, Dick Cavett did like, but John said, "I'm not going to say anything about the piece, but I'm going to say something about Betty Rollin." And I'm watching this at home, and he looks into the camera and he says, "Betty Rollin's legs." And everybody went, what? Is something wrong with Betty Rollins' le- you know, it was that kind of thing. So the truth is that John Lennon was so wonderful and so observant that when I was with them, he noticed that I didn't like my legs because my skirts were a little longer than was the fashion then. And he was smart enough to pick that up. So he wanted to say something that he thought would really get to me.

NANCY STEINER:

Did it?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

No, I didn't because at the moment, I wanted to find somebody to love. And what I remember feeling was, oh, he must love her so much to defend her that way. And I just felt… because I thought, nobody's going to… It isn't as if he said Betty Rollin is horrible. I mean, I would have minded that, but nobody's going to really understand that, except me. So no, it didn't really bother me.

NANCY STEINER:
Betty, what was it like to be a woman in what was a man's world at that time?

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BETTY ROLLIN:
Lonely. There were very few women. I mean, at my first job, Vogue of course, there were plenty of women that was Vogue Magazine. At Look Magazine, there were practically no women writers. Was I the only one? No, there was another, but there were no women senior editors, except maybe one other. And senior editor meant senior writer. There was a woman in charge on this, not in charge, but on the second level. And she was my friend, her name was Pat Carbine, and she gave me stories to write that grew out of her sisterhood. For instance, I wrote a story that turned out to be a bit of a bombshell for Look about saying that you didn't have to have children. And there were a lot of canceled subscription. It was also a cover story. And she supported that story big time.

NANCY STEINER:
Would you describe yourself as a feminist? Do you think that your career fell

in line with the women's movement at all, or was affected by it?

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BETTY ROLLIN:
I benefited, oddly, from the lack of a women's movement because when I was looking for jobs after college, I got such great jobs because I had so little competition. So in a sense, I benefited from this because I was so neurotic, I hadn't gotten married when I was supposed to, and I got these great jobs and it was all because there were no women competing with me, hardly. So in an odd way, I benefited.

NANCY STEINER:
How did you shift from print to television?

BETTY ROLLIN:
How did I switch to television? I arrived at Look Magazine one day and there were cameras. The cameras, it turned out, were there because Look Magazine was about to die. And I thought, well, I guess I'll get another job at a magazine. And then I thought, if Look Magazine is dying, and I knew that the magazine world was not healthy because of television, news particularly, and just television in general, maybe I ought to think about going to television. And I lived across town on the cross town bus line from NBC news, from NBC. And so, I thought that would be a good, convenient place to work. So at that point, I think I managed to marry somebody, but it wasn't a good marriage, but I was, nevertheless, a bit more settled. I went, I made an appointment

with the president of NBC News and he hired me on the spot because at this point, at Look Magazine, I had a column of my own.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I was a bit of a known writer. I looked okay. I could speak. Remember, I'd been an actress for five minutes. And he just hired me. And I said, "But I don't know how to do this. I should tell you that." And he said, "Yeah, well we'll teach you." And they did. They taught me. They hired me, they attached me to a local news anchor. I wish I remembered his name. And I followed him around New York doing stories and I picked it up, and then they decided to make me the theater critic. Well there, for the first time in my life, I had a job that I felt I could do. And so, suddenly I found myself going to the theater every night and going on the air immediately afterwards and saying my review, which was sometimes terrifying because I didn't always know what I thought, but I figured it out once I started to talk. Happily, that ended after a year, and then I went on to be on the network. And I remember the first story I did, as I say, I had married by then, a writer, and I had breast cancer, had had breast cancer. That changed my life. So there I was, a correspondent for NBC News, very nervous correspondent for NBC News. And immediately, they put me on a magazine show anchored by Garrick Utley. I forget what it was called, but I was always good at ideas for stories.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

So I thought, well, I'll come up with an idea for them. And the idea I came up

with was quick divorces in Haiti, which I had just had from Arthur Herzog. So I just experienced a quick divorce in Haiti, and I mean quick, 10 minutes. And I thought, it's a story. So the following week I found myself in Haiti with a lot of people. They don't do that anymore. I mean, there was of course a cameraman, a sound man, a lighting man, or men. And a producer and me doing this story that I felt confident about since I had just had this divorce. And that worked out well for this magazine show that I seemed to be on all of a sudden. And that was my first piece for NBC News, and it got harder after that.

NANCY STEINER:
Why did it get harder after that?

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BETTY ROLLIN:
Because that piece was something I knew about. Everything that followed for about 20 years was something I didn't know about and I had to learn on the spot. And I had to learn on the spot that would allow me to write a piece, look at all the film of the piece, and get the piece written and on the air that night. And that was just terrifying. I mean, I was a wreck the entire time I worked for NBC News because I just never was comfortable doing— acting in such a rush, which writing wasn't like that. And I never— I was really at heart a writer, but I did it somehow. You know why? Because producers, the producers I worked with helped me. They got me through it.

NANCY STEINER:
How would you describe the difference in cultures between the world of television and the world of print?

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BETTY ROLLIN:
Well, of course, television has something to do with showbiz and writing has nothing to do with showbiz. Writing is in your head completely, and your heart. And I realized, after a long time doing television, that I'm a writer, not a television person, but I got through it somehow. And I mean, I had a very interesting time on television. I mean, I certainly had adventures that I wouldn't have had if I just sat home writing. Huge adventures. I mean, interviews with crazy people, murderers, wonderful people. You know, just every kind of human being that I never would've known.

NANCY STEINER:
What do you think, when you say, but I got through it somehow. What do you think that somehow actually is?

BETTY ROLLIN:
I think I got through television mainly because I was smart enough to know what I didn't know and I asked for help and I got it from the wonderful producers I worked with. And that's the truth. I mean, obviously, I had some ability to learn, but I think that's really the story.

NANCY STEINER:
And then cancer came along, which changed everything, including your marriage.

BETTY ROLLIN:
Yep.

NANCY STEINER:
Tell me about how cancer intersected with your work and how you navigated your life.

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BETTY ROLLIN:
I went to the doctor one day and he felt a lump in my breast and he said, "Come back in a year. It looks like something." I said, "Okay." And then before a year, I was on television doing a report on the breast cancer of Betty Ford and Happy Rockefeller, and I realized that I had this lump in my own breast. And I thought, maybe I should, it's not a year, but maybe I should return to the doctor. And I returned to the doctor and it turned out I too had breast cancer, which might not have been caught in time, but it was, and it all happened very fast. I was rushed to the hospital. I had a mastectomy. I woke up, there was one breast entirely gone. I was in a daze. I wasn't crying, but I was kind of… in a daze. And I remember going home, my parents picked me up. My mother said it was the only time she ever saw my father cry, which I did not see, but that meant a lot to me because I was so much my mother's

daughter and I was glad to hear he cried over me.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

And—Well, let me just say that when I got breast cancer, I realized I couldn't be married to Arthur Herzog, who has since died, because he was such a child. And I wound up running off with another man who wanted to marry me and who I felt good about. And it turned out he was a bit of a fake, as my new psychiatrist said, and I accepted that definition of him. And so, I wound up leaving him and I returned to work to be a correspondent at NBC News. It was one New Year's. They took me back and I had this rubber thing in my bra that was masquerading as a breast. And I continued my life as a correspondent.

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And— And that worked for me. My mother thought I should buy an apartment. My mother was still in the picture. She said, "Buy an apartment." And I said, "It's too expensive." At some point, after I went back to NBC News, my book *First, You Cry* was published. It was about having breast cancer. Nobody wanted to publish it because it was about cancer. And in 1976, no publisher wanted cancer. Nobody wanted cancer in any form. Nor did I, but I had had it. And I wrote about it in a way that made one Chinese editor at a small publishing house fall in love with the book. And she said she fell in love with it, mainly because it was about cancer and it was funny, and she made them publish my book.

NANCY STEINER:

I have a question. At that point, the cancer had not returned?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

No.

NANCY STEINER:

Okay. So *First, You Cry*...

BETTY ROLLIN:

Was about cancer number one.

NANCY STEINER:

Number one. Okay. Got it. Now, there's a quote that I like where somebody said Betty Rollin made cancer funny.

BETTY ROLLIN:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

NANCY STEINER:

How is that even possible?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Oh yeah. I guess my way of dealing with difficult things is to laugh, or at least

see the joke if I possibly can. And there's very often a joke where you would not think there would be a joke. And so, there are funny parts of *First, You Cry*, and one of the most wonderful things that happened to me as a result of those jokes is that, of course, I heard from many women who had breast cancer and some of them sent me their jokes. "Oh, my dog just ate my prosthesis." Hilarious. And I was so happy for them that they were finding funny stuff and I felt… And they made me, they thanked me and that was very nice because I wasn't writing this book to help anybody but myself, but it turned out it did. And that was really nice.

NANCY STEINER:
You were way ahead of your time with *First, You Cry*. You were incredibly frank about your health and your medical procedures. You came to the forefront of the culture speaking out about your experience with breast cancer. What motivated you to do this?

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BETTY ROLLIN:
I was a writer and something bad happened to me, and I had been psychoanalyzed, so I was comfortable talking about myself and I knew a thing or two about myself. And I felt there were also some laughs there, and that it was really a good story because there was also a romance in there. I mean my wonderful Chinese editor used to tick these things off and say that's why she fought so hard for the book. And then she'd say, "And you look good." She was a very close friend in my life.

NANCY STEINER:
I want you to describe for me the romance in this.

BETTY ROLLIN:
Well, when I was writing *First, You Cry*, I thought I was about to live happily ever after with this person I had run off to Boston with. And so, there was a little romance in the book, which as my editor said, didn't hurt. And the romance failed, but the book made it. And it was a movie, too. Yeah.

NANCY STEINER:
So it didn't just make it, it was a runaway bestseller. What do you think made the book so enormously popular and impactful?

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BETTY ROLLIN:
I guess *First, You Cry* worked because, first of all, it was the only book I knew of that was about a woman who had breast cancer and who was writing honestly about herself, and also who was weirdly funny about it, and also was having a romance. And somehow, that became a big seller. And then what didn't hurt was that Mary Tyler Moore, who was a very big star at that time, decided she wanted to make a TV movie of *First, You Cry* starring herself as me. And I remember how I found out about it because I was living with my mother at that point, my father had died. And the phone rang and a voice said, "Hi, this is Betty Rollin." And I said, "What?" And she said, "I'm joking.

It's Mary Tyler Moore." And a deal had been made and she thought it would be fun to call me.

NANCY STEINER:
Wow.

BETTY ROLLIN:
And that was fun.

NANCY STEINER:
What was that like for you? What was it like to see your life in the form of a TV movie?

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BETTY ROLLIN:
Well, there was Mary Tyler Moore being me in *First, You Cry* on television prime time. And it was very odd, first of all, seeing someone being me. And, of course, I didn't see her as me, but I appreciated the performance. And I thought at one point she's better at being me than I am in this role. I mean, she was really good. She got the laughs, she got the cries. I think she did it just right. And wasn't I lucky? And by that time I had married my dream boat, second husband. And so life was wonderful at that moment.

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NANCY STEINER:
What did having cancer teach you or even give you?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I had cancer, actually, two and a half times. I had one breast, and then nine years later the other breast, and then I had a growth in my neck somewhere. I forget exactly where. And— But I happen to recover. So lucky. It taught me that you can be lucky in life. That's what it taught me. And frankly, I didn't pray. None of that. I was lucky. And I had a wonderful surgeon, who died of course long ago. And it taught me that good things can come out of bad things because I really feel good about my book, *First, You Cry*. And I wouldn't have written that book if I didn't have breast cancer. And it taught me that I could laugh about the cancer. I also learned that not all diseases have pain involved. Amazingly, the breast cancer that I had, which did not include chemotherapy, did not involve pain. I mean, I had the surgeries. When the surgeries were over, I felt groggy, but it was not a painful experience, which I wouldn't have guessed that.

NANCY STEINER:

As a two and a half time cancer survivor, has your sense of time changed at all? Your appreciation for every day? Is time more precious to you as a result? Anything like that?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I definitely am the most grateful person there is, except for one thing in my life, which is recent, which is the death of my husband. But that happened

very late in my life, so I'm trying to be a good sport. So it sounds stupid to be grateful for cancer and I won't say I'm grateful for having had cancer. But it gave me a lot, oddly. Cancer gave me a lot. It gave me, since I survived it so easily in a way, it gave me a kind of gratitude I never would've had, certainly. And it gave me a good book. And it gave me a keener sense of what sickness is, which I had no experience with before. And I was able to understand sick people, and there are a lot of them, better than before.

NANCY STEINER:
Let's talk about how fear has or hasn't been an overarching experience for you. When were you most afraid and how did you get past that?

00:46:29:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
I've had a lot of fear in my life like everyone. And I think I feel that I learned from the fear and that the fear made me solve certain problems in my life that I wouldn't have otherwise solved. Fear of the sense of how short life can be made me better at it. Made me— It Impr– Cancer improved my taste in men. It definitely did because after I had cancer, I really didn't want any more punishment of any kind.

00:47:16:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
And I think I had been previously a bit of a masochist. There are women like that who fall for men who kind of hurt them. I wasn't totally crazy in that department, but I mean, I had some of that. I lost it after cancer. And the

proof of that is I married the most wonderful person I had ever met in my life, which I didn't quite know when I first married him. But I must have known it somewhere inside.

NANCY STEINER:
How have you been able to heal yourself?

BETTY ROLLIN:
I guess I try to heal myself when I have pain or discomfort or anxiety. I guess I try to step back and be reasonable about it and if I can see the humor. It doesn't always work. It is not working for me now with my husband's death.

NANCY STEINER:
So let's go to Ida for a minute.

BETTY ROLLIN:
Ida. Okay.

NANCY STEINER:
Later on, Ida developed an incredibly painful cancer. How did your experience with your own illness help you and help her through this?

00:48:40:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
After I married my prize husband, whom my mother adored, um, my mother

got cancer, a bad cancer. She went through the treatments, heroically. They were horrible at the time. Horrible. And then the cancer came back. And when the cancer came back, she was given six months to live. And she told me very clearly, which was her way, that she thought she had had a wonderful life but that now it was over. She had been very lucky, she told me. She had a wonderful husband, a wonderful daughter, a prize son-in-law, even a nice boyfriend at the end of life. She didn't mention him, but I knew he was on the list. And she was finished and I had to help her get out of this. That is to say life. Ed, my husband, was there when she said this the second and third time, and fourth and fifth times.

00:50:10:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
And we decided that we had to help her get out of life because it was so reasonable. It was long before there was any law, which there is now. And not nearly enough states that people like my mother who are near death can get out of life with help. So we managed to help her die. Which was dangerous. It was dangerous not only for us in terms of breaking the law, it was dangerous for her in case it didn't work. We were horrified by that possibility. We were terrified. That's all we thought about. But it did work. And she died looking at, I'm embarrassed to say it, my baby pictures. And looking at us. She closed her eyes and went to sleep and then died. And then I wrote a book about that.

NANCY STEINER:
How did you help her die? What exactly did you do?

BETTY ROLLIN:

Well, there was a doctor advising us on the telephone, who was very brave and very good. I mean, good-hearted and good in terms of knowing what to do. So he told us… I guess it was, first, apple sauce and then a little drink of water and then a drink of something else. And then the pills, which she had managed to get.

00:52:05:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

Times were different 30 years ago and you could get drugs that you can't get anymore. My mother managed to get Nembutal by telling her doctor she needed it for sleep. And we were able to get it from the drugstore, which is impossible now. And it worked. And she died happily, peacefully, successfully because I've had a lot of mail from people who've tried to do this and it hasn't succeeded. And those are terrible stories. Doctors are needed to help because they know how to do it and we don't. Even with the right drugs.

NANCY STEINER:

So you actually helped your mother die. And in another radically forward thinking move, you wrote a book about it-

BETTY ROLLIN:

Yes.

NANCY STEINER:

… Called *Last Wish*.

00:53:16:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

After some time passed, I decided to write a book about my mother's death and helping her die because I thought it made so much sense. And I thought there must be other people out there who want what she got and who are unable to get it. And I'm going to tell her story. And of course my lawyer said, "Don't tell the story." But I decided to tell the story. I figured it was worth it. I mean, I certainly didn't want to go to prison nor did Ed. And we got some assurance that we, from another lawyer, we just changed our lawyer, the other lawyers said, we could just say we made it up.

00:54:12:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

So once I decided to write a book about my mother's suicide, it was easy to get a publisher because I had had successful books and because it was shocking, in a way, for the wrong reason. However, I didn't care and it was another big publishing house and they were going to put a lot into it. And on top of that, a movie. Patty Duke wanted to make a movie and Maureen Stapleton. TV movie.

NANCY STEINER:

Tell me about the grief that you suffered. How did you get through your mother's death in terms of your own grief?

00:55:03:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

To be really honest, I did not grieve for my mother. I missed her. I miss her now. But I didn't grieve for her because I saw her get a death she wanted, and it worked smoothly. She didn't suffer in the dying. But she was saved from the suffering she would've had, had she remained alive.

NANCY STEINER:

That is one of the best sentences I have ever heard. First of all, not only is it unbelievably powerful, but it's so beautifully articulated and expressed.

BETTY ROLLIN:

Thanks. It's true, of course.

NANCY STEINER:

Yeah. But sometimes you just end up speaking like a writer and it's very amazing to me. So you never second guessed yourself?

00:56:01:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

No, I certainly never second guessed myself about the rightness of helping my mother die. We were both afraid of getting arrested, even though the lawyer thought we wouldn't. Of course, the notion that we might get arrested did a lot of good for the book, ironically. I mean, suddenly I became a maybe felon, nice little Betty Rollin who's on the news.

NANCY STEINER:
How has your own mortality affected your attitude about life as you get older?

BETTY ROLLIN:
So I think about dying a lot. I think about the many ways we do it wrong in this country and everywhere. And one of the ways we do it wrong is that we don't respect the wishes of sane, good people who are very sick and dying and who want to die now, not after a few months of continuing torture that they are going to have. So I'm very active now in an organization called Compassion and Choices, which is trying to get the law changed so that my mother, people like my mother would be able to die without my husband and I having to go through what we went through.

NANCY STEINER:
You've thought about your own death.

00:57:42:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
I have thought about my own death. And frankly, now that my husband is gone, I'm not interested in life the way I used to be. But it would please me if I got something quick and painless and just died sometime maybe after the summer, because I like the summer. And I mean that because I've had such a wonderful life, but it's kind of over for me, I feel. And I say that not sadly. I do

say it sadly because I miss my husband so much, but I don't say it sadly in terms of not feeling lucky. I feel totally lucky and pleased with the life I have had. And I don't really feel that I need anymore, but I'll take it for a while.

NANCY STEINER:
Would you be willing to take your own life if you could?

00:58:55:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
I would like the ability to be able to do that. Yes. I think sane people, actually, not only sick people, but very, very sad and old, at least oldish people, sad people should be able to do that, but that's not going to happen. The most, I hope, is that sick, dying people, suffering people can, for heaven's sake, get out of life sooner than the end that will come naturally, which will torture them.

NANCY STEINER:
I read a quote of yours from a few years ago and it goes like this. “If I'm sitting here and I'm 90 years old, then I'll say cancer really perked up my life. And not just because I sold a lot of books.” Well, here you are. You're not 90.

01:00:01:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
Not, I'm almost.

NANCY STEINER:

But what would you say now?

BETTY ROLLIN:
Oh, cancer. I'm grateful to cancer in a funny way, of course. I'm not grateful that cancer exists because of other people, but it, in a way, worked well for me. It didn't hurt me. I got a good book out of it and it gave me a sense of perspective, and it gave me a certain kind of wisdom I didn't have before cancer. So I feel grateful for it in a kind of weird way, but I do think it's weird.

NANCY STEINER:
When you look at your life, what have you learned above all else?

01:00:42:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
I guess what I've learned about life is that what matters more than anything, two things matter. Love and work, I would say in that order.

NANCY STEINER:
You so well understand, personally and professionally, the tremendous value of storytelling about one's life. How would you describe that? How would you describe the incredible value of, you know, life storyteller?

BETTY ROLLIN:
I've had a lot of response from readers about the books I've written, and it has taught me that people want company in their misery. They want to be

released from the pain of not only having misery, but of hiding it or of being ashamed of it, or being not allowed to have it in some way… or not telling the truth about it, all of those things. And when you write honestly about your own pain with some humor, it does help people, I've found out… to release them. And I feel very good about that. I feel very good about that.

01:02:27:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

So when people hear about other people's stories, their sadnesses, their misery, their lack of love, about all the tortures of their lives, it makes them feel less alone. People don't want to just hear or read about sadness and misery. That's not a comfort. They want more than that. They want to hear and read about some recovery in that misery, some… victory in that misery, some learning from that misery. When I hear other people tell stories about their lives, if they're well told, I benefit. I feel that I benefit and I learn even still, even as an old lady, I'm still learning and I'm still comforted by others in their writing. And I'm still a big reader. And that's how I get my information about people. And from my friends. I'm a big question asker. And I benefit from that and I learn from it, and I'm grateful for it. I'm grateful when people share what's happening with them, whatever it is.

NANCY STEINER:

When did you find out about this? Tell me about Ed's-

01:04:21:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

About Ed. All right. I have a lot of unhappiness right now as it happens because of my husband's recent death. And that's because my husband didn't have to die. That is, he had a colonoscopy and the doctor missed the cancer that was there and he wound up Stage IV and he was told that he had two years to live, which turned out to be correct. I had the most wonderful husband imaginable. He was a brilliant mathematician. He was smart. He was funny. He was kind. He was generous. He was interested in other people and funny. And he loved me and I loved him. And we came home from learning that he had two years to live. And I said, when we sat down in the living room which had darkened, "I'm going to write to that doctor now." And Ed said, "You are not going to write to the doctor. I'm not going to write to the doctor. We are going to forget about the doctor. We are going to be as happy as we can for two years until I die."

01:05:54:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

And that's what we did. He did it. I pretended. But it was an amazing thing to see a man who knew he was dying, who was dying, who had much good relief from hospice. So he had drugs, but he suffered. And by the way, on the way to his death, he wrote a book which will be published soon about math.

NANCY STEINER:

What did you do with your anger?

01:06:32:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

My anger, unfortunately, is festering right now. I am not doing well with it. I confess that. But I feel that I have no right to it because obviously, first of all, I'm old. He was old. We had a great life together, 42 years. How can I be anything but grateful? And I wish I were only grateful and I am grateful, but I'm also very sad and upset about how it happened. I don't feel that I have a right to be angry and upset as I am because I've had so much, and I read the newspaper and I watch the news, and how can I be angry and upset at my own admittedly sad situation? But I had so much. Part of my misery now is that I'm miserable and I don't think I deserve to be.

NANCY STEINER:
What do you think it would be like for you to reframe that in any way and say, "I'm pissed and I can be okay with that. Because I miss him so much and it sucks if I really miss him and I'm sad and who wouldn't be and that's okay."

01:08:07:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
It's not okay. I don't feel it's okay.

NANCY STEINER:
Do you think that your will is part of your… part of your resilience?

01:08:22:00

BETTY ROLLIN:
Well, I am stubborn. I'm my mother's daughter for sure. How could I not be? And so that means I'm stubborn and a whole lot of other not so great things,

but I'm— I'm trying to do better with this anger and misery I'm feeling now. I'm trying to do better with it. I went back to a psychiatrist because that's how I know to make things better, the way I grew up and I'm trying. But I'm— And I can enjoy moments in life and I enjoy other people. And I love hearing other people's stories, like the driver who brought me here today, who had a wonderful story about his life. And I can still enjoy things, but there's this other deep sadness. And maybe just more time, although it's been, I'm supposed to be over it by now.

NANCY STEINER:
Says who?

BETTY ROLLIN:
It's supposed to be a year, it's over a year.

NANCY STEINER:
Betty. I mean, that is some sort of self-imposed or I don't know where you got that one from, but there's no time piece to grief.

BETTY ROLLIN:
Yeah. I guess not. Thank you, Nancy. I appreciate the kindness of people, still.

END TC: 01:10:20:0