

# Role Models

by [Alan Swyer](#) (January 2025)



Model Drinking Coffee (Paul Wonner, 1964)

**With no relatives in Southern California,** holiday meals for Neal and Bonnie became opportunities to drive from Santa Monica toward the largely Asian community found in the San

Gabriel Valley. On Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, and the 4th of July, the two of them would invariably find themselves the only non-Chinese diners at a Shanghai, Szechuan, or Uighur restaurant. Without boarding a plane or ship, that yielded the excitement of being in a foreign country.

Those holidays journeys ceased, however, once they became part of a surrogate family that gathered regularly at the home of an elderly couple named the Rosenbaums.

Gracious hosts who had outlived almost all of their contemporaries, Marvin and Doris found a recipe for avoiding loneliness, and remaining youthful in spirit, by replenishing their social circle with younger people. Most, as Marvin liked to joke, were what he called "Strays" –people who were childless, or whose kids were grown and living elsewhere, or who simply had no local family.

More often than not it was Marvin who handled the cooking, then colorfully presided over the table talk. The son of a pioneer film producer who left Brooklyn to make his name first with legendary silent films in Germany, then with talkies in France, and ultimately with Hollywood productions, Marvin was a singular figure. Fluent in French and German, he was also conversant in Hebrew and Arabic, capable in Spanish and Italian, and competent in both Japanese and Russian. Blessed with impeccable manners, he could sweet-talk anyone almost anywhere in the world. Yet he was also forthrightly and proudly a rascal. During the heyday of international film production, he was understandably the Associate Producer of choice, able to book the finest hotels and restaurants, while cosseting the likes of Sophia Loren, Ingmar Bergman, or Robert Mitchum. Plus he had the uncanny ability to facilitate top-of-the-line assignments with local lovelies anywhere from Paris to Tokyo to Rio de Janeiro.

Doris, who often referred fondly to her Korean-American

heritage (though it turned out that she was one-quarter Mexican), provided the perfect complement to her sometimes moody husband with her bubbly personality, her themed decorations for each and every holiday meal, plus her inescapable warmth.

Together they were the connective tissue for a group that, despite few shared or even overlapping interests other than a kinship to their hosts, evolved into a surrogate family.

There was Eileen, Marvin's older half-sister, a self-described Black Widow who had outlived five different husbands.

Plus Judith, Marvin's daughter from a youthful marriage to a one-time starlet, who usually, but not always, arrived with her on-again-off-again consort, a brusque concert promoter named Bruce whose pockets held numerous cellphones that he never hesitated to answer in the middle of a meal.

Another charter member was Elke, a German-born film editor whose kinship with Marvin began while working together on two European co-productions, then grew when she relocated to LA and reinvented herself as an upscale realtor.

Additionally there was Maurice, the gloomy owner of an art gallery who made quarterly trips to New York and Paris.

Plus Arnie, a reformed alcoholic turned ambulance-chaser attorney.

And Betsy, the lovelorn daughter of one of Marvin's long departed friends.

Others joined in occasionally: Sheri, Doris' daughter from a first marriage, who made little effort to hide her antipathy for Marvin, as well as men in general ... Cindy, Judith's childhood friend, at times accompanied by her two teenage daughters ... Plus Ayla, Arnie's Turkish flight attendant lady friend.

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What made Neal and Bonnie's entrance into the group strange was an unfortunate piece of history. Neal and Marvin had initially known each other in passing thanks to a mutual friend named Ron Caputo. Ron, who became a big brother of sorts to Neal, was a colorful storyteller given to regaling Neal with raucous tales. First and foremost were his days in the Army with bunkmates named Keogh, DiPippo, and Tranovich. Then there was his stint as a stunt double for Humphrey Bogart. Most interesting for Neal, who was still relatively new to the world of filmmaking, were the anecdotes stemming from Ron's years as producer and/or director of early sitcoms that wound up on Nick At Nite, followed by the period he spent working with Marvin in Italy for a mogul named Carlo Ponti.

It was only when Neal and Ron were gearing up to produce a reality show pilot called "Real People, Real Problems" that Marvin entered Neal's professional life.

"Mind if we take him on as an Associate Producer?" Ron asked one morning.

"What does he bring?" Neal responded dubiously.

"An extra set of hands," replied Ron with a shrug.

"Which means, if I gather, you're throwing him a bone."

Ron nodded guiltily.

"If it means that much to you," Neal agreed with no great glee. "But only if he does what he's told and makes no waves."

Marvin proved to be on his best behavior until one Wednesday morning when he accompanied Neal and Ron to a meeting with the CEO of the production company.

"I love the cut-through-the-bullshit premise of a psychiatric quick fix," Len Ringwald announced, referencing the show's

concept. "And I'm happy you found a handsome shrink with bestsellers to his name. But you know what whack-jobs can be like. In case one of 'em has an on- or off-camera breakdown, shouldn't we have a nurse present?"

Before Neal or Ron could respond, Marvin spoke. "Why go to that expense?" he blurted. "We can simply find a streetwalker and dress her in a nurse's uniform."

Stealing a glance at Neal, Ron whispered, "Want to fire him?"

"No, kill him!"

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It wasn't until Ron Caputo died suddenly of a heart attack that Neal and Marvin again crossed paths. "We should talk," Marvin said at the luncheon held in their mutual friend's memory. "We're having people for dinner on Saturday. Please join us."

"I thought you never wanted to see him again," said Bonnie and she and Neal were driving home.

Neal sighed. "I agreed out of respect for Ron."

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Despite Neal's fear that the evening would be dutiful or worse, it turned out to be surprisingly enjoyable. Marvin's cassoulet was scrumptious, the conversation was lively, and Bonnie took to Doris as somewhat of a big sister.

"That was great!" gushed Bonnie as she and Neal made their way back toward Santa Monica. "But how do we reciprocate?"

"Since they said they love Chinese, let's take 'em to one of our places in San Gabriel."

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It wasn't just one of their Chinese places to which they wound up driving Marvin and Doris. Their first jaunt was for specialties from Shanghai. The following Saturday it was for dim sum. Two Sundays later it was to introduce them to Uighur fare. Then came a place serving beef rolls and dumplings from Shondong.

With Thanksgiving looming, Marvin asked whether his new friends had plans. That became their initiation into what would quickly become a mainstay of their lives. In the following years, Marvin and Doris' place evolved into a home-away-from-home for Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year's Day, Easter, and July 4th, plus Groundhog's Day and any other day that their hosts deemed worthy of a holiday, real or imaginary.

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It was over a series of lunches without their wives, always at ethnic spots—Persian, Indian, Oaxacan, Ethiopian—that Marvin and Neal developed a deeper bond.

Surprised to learn that Neal had gone to school in France and written the Paris section of a travel guide for the youth market, Marvin insisted that they speak only French. That meant that even when eating *fesanjen*, *sag paneer*, *pollo en mole rojo*, or *doro wat*, they could get away with being bawdy, crude, or even profane. It also allowed the two of them to have fun with antiquated French bromides. *Mefie-toi des courants d'aire* (Beware of drafts) was a favorite, as was *Il ne faut pas piquer une crise de foie* (Don't provoke a liver crisis), and *Je ne suis pas dans mon assiette* (I'm not really myself).

It was at a Persian place that Marvin discussed his sexual initiation by one of his mother's Parisian friends. At an Indian place, he spoke of the night he and Ron Caputo spent at a bordello while working in Rome for Ponti. Dipping a tortilla

into fiery salsa at a Oaxacan spot, he owned up about his brief foray into soft-corn porn, producing a justly forgotten film called "All The Loving Couples."

For Neal, the strangest revelation came at an Ethiopian restaurant when he told Marvin how much he missed Ron Caputo's tales about Bogart, the invention of three-camera shoots for sitcoms, and above all his wild adventures in the Army.

"What adventures in the Army?" asked Marvin.

"With all his wacky friends."

"Whoa!" Marvin interrupted. "Ron never served."

"B-but what about guys like Keogh, DiPippo, and Tranovich?"

Marvin chuckled. "The closest our friend ever came to the Army was directing *Sergeant Bilko*."

Perplexed, Neal studied Marvin momentarily. "Why would he make that up?"

"For the same reason he passed himself off as a New York street kid."

"He wasn't?"

"He spent most of his childhood here in LA.," explained Marvin. "Ron was great. But know why, unless work was involved, he tried to keep friends like you and me apart?"

"Why?"

"Because when he told stories—not about Bogart, or Burns & Allen, or 'Dobie Gillis' —I was the one who knew what was real and what was total bullshit."

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It was in the course of those lunches—in which the two French

speakers began calling each other Monsieur Marvin and Monsieur Neal—that they started comparing their likes and dislikes. In film, Marvin's taste ran to what he called Prestige Pictures—David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Bridge On The River Quai* or William Wyler's *The Best Years Of Our Lives*—whereas Neal preferred the rawness of Godard's *Breathless* and Cassavetes' *Husbands*, plus the leanness of Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep*. In music, Marvin championed Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, while Neal favored Ray Charles, Solomon Burke, and the Velvet Underground. In books, Marvin revered what he termed the classics—Oscar Wilde, Jane Austin, Flaubert—but for Neal the treasures were Raymond Chandler, Nabokov and Pynchon. Another disconnect was attire. Marvin was always meticulous, while Neal lived in t-shirts and jeans. But the greatest chasm was in politics. Marvin, nostalgic about his time in the Marines, referred to Neal as a tree-hugging pinko. Neal retaliated by calling his friend David Duke.

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On a Sunday walk along the beach, Bonnie grew pensive. "I was thinking about Marvin and Doris," she said to Neal. "Screenings. Gallery openings. Lectures. Travel. With all they do, they're the perfect role models for how to age without getting or acting old."

"No disagreement from me," said Neal.

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Bonnie was amazed in the aftermath of Marvin's 85th birthday party, when suddenly his activity level skyrocketed. In rapid succession, he was honored at myriad events both locally and abroad. Among the highlights was being the keynote speaker at a retrospective in Munich of his father's films. Shortly thereafter, at an American Film Institute evening in Washington, he recounted his experiences in the making of *Cabaret*. A month later, he was feted by the French government,



which named him a *Chevalier dans la Legion d'Honneur*.

Because each invitation was for "Mr. Rosenbaum Plus One," Doris proudly accompanied her husband on every trip.

All that hoopla prompted Bonnie to ask a question one evening as she and Neal were headed to their favorite Thai place. "It's great Marvin's getting so much attention," she began. "But why now?"

"He's the last one standing," Neal explained. "According to an old Jazz joke, until you're 45 or so, there's work. But from then 'til 65, unless you're Miles, Ellington, or Basie, forget it. Make it past 65, suddenly you're a living legend!"

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Marvin and Doris' love of travel resurfaced when Neal's documentary about the Latinization of boxing was invited to the Oaxaca Film Festival.

"Okay if we tag along?" Marvin asked.

"If you're up to it, that'd be great," Neal answered.

"Up to it?" Marvin teased. "We'll see who can down more mescal and margaritas."

"But one question," said Neal. "Since when do you have an interest in boxing?"

"Maybe your film will change that."

Despite their advanced ages, Marvin and Doris amazed Neal and his crew members in Mexico. They were on the go nonstop, climbing the Pyramid outside of town, and indulging at the mescal tastings organized by the festival.

Best of all for Neal was when Marvin exulted after the screening of his boxing film.

"*Merveilleux, Monsieur Neal,*" he exclaimed. "*Fantastique!*"

"You're now interested in boxing?"

"Dear boy," said Marvin. "Your film is about race, culture, economics, the immigrant experience... and boxing."

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Two months later, Neal and Bonnie were awakened by a midnight call from Elke, the German ex-film editor. Marvin, she alerted them, had been driven by ambulance to the hospital after suffering a heart attack.

Neal and Bonnie's sleepless night was followed by three days of worrying if their friend would survive.

Though the Marvin they finally got to see in the hospital seemed greatly diminished, he promised he would soon be himself again.

That was not entirely true.

To chauffeur Marvin to medical appointments, and to assist him at home, Judith's on-again-off-again beau Bruce found a Filipino helper named Manny.

Neal's hope that everything would be more or less okay was shattered when he was asked to meet Judith and Elke for coffee.

The problem, they explained, was Doris. Instead of being solicitous, she was impatient with her husband, plus more and more needy.

Despite decades in which Marvin had watched TV news in the living room each evening, suddenly Doris insisted upon absolute silence. On top of that, she complained relentlessly about their house in the hills, claiming that she never had liked living there. Worst, she demanded nonstop attention from

Manny, whose mandate was to help Marvin, not her.

"What do you think this is about?" Judith asked Neal.

"Sounds like she feels betrayed," he answered.

"Betrayed how?" wondered Elke.

"Think what their life has been, especially lately."

"Like trips to Germany and France?" asked Judith.

"Exactly," Neal replied. "She's having trouble accepting that the days of Mr. Rosenbaum Plus One are over. Instead of appreciating the great times, she's thinking he's now failed her."

Elke nodded. "So what do we do?" she than asked.

"We pray," stated Neal, "that it's a temporary thing she'll get over."

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Any hope that Judith and Elke were over-dramatizing disappeared when Neal and Bonnie went to visit Marvin.

Stranded on a hospital bed in the middle of the living room, Marvin was pestered relentlessly by Doris, with her daughter Sheri by her side. "I told you we should never have bought this house," she complained. Then came taunts that he had never taken sufficient care of himself. Worst of all, when Marvin buried his chilly hands under the covers, Doris exploded. "Stop playing with yourself," she hollered, though that was clearly not the case.

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"Whew!" exclaimed a shell-shocked Bonnie as she and Neal made an exit. "Please explain what we just saw."

"A changing of the guard," said Neal glumly. "Unless I'm mistaken, Doris has given up on Marvin and made her daughter the new husband of sorts."

"I wish I could say you're wrong," said Bonnie with a sigh.

"So do I," said Neal.

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Their fears were compounded when Judith called early one Saturday. "It's horrible!" she said tearfully.

"What now?"

"Doris and the daughter are saying that if my father doesn't improve, they'll put him in a home and move to the desert."

"Does he know?"

"Know? They discuss it in front of him as if he's already dead!"

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Instead of calling every so often, Neal took to checking in with Marvin at least once a day. Always in French, sometimes it was to boost his spirits with an anecdote or dirty joke; other times to talk about a current event. But every call ended with Neal promising that once Marvin was up to it, their lunches would resume.

A little over a month later, what initially seemed far-fetched became a reality. With Manny doing the driving, then helping Marvin walk, a get-together took place at their favorite Persian place.

To Neal's amazement, after one bite of *fesanjen*, Marvin seemed to change from frail to frisky.

"Now you're stuck," Neal stated, marveling at the seeming

rejuvenation.

"What's that mean?" asked Marvin.

"Lunch once a week."

That went fine until a Tuesday when Neal called, and Doris answered.

"Okay if I join you guys at lunch?" she inquired, clearly jealous.

"One of the reasons I'm getting him out of the house." Neal fibbed, "is to buy you some peace and quiet."

"Still—"

"We'll do it for dinner soon. At these lunches, it's boys' time out."

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Each rendezvous, at the Persian place, the Oaxacan, the Ethiopian, or others, had the same sequence of events. Marvin would be helped in, looking like a ghost of himself, then spring back to life.

Sadly, that ceased when Neal got an early morning call from Elke, Marvin, she informed him, had been rushed again to the hospital.

"How bad?" Bonnie asked when he hung up.

Neal answered her with a sigh.

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Once Marvin was permitted to receive visitors, Neal went to the hospital as often as possible, sometimes with Bonnie, other times alone.

He chose not to comment the first time Doris was nowhere in

sight. Nor the second. Nor even the third. The fourth time, however, he couldn't remain silent.

"Where in the world is your wife?" he asked.

Marvin frowned. "She's got lots to take care of."

"World peace? Hunger? Homelessness?"

"She's been wonderful," Marvin countered feebly.

"Right, and I pitch for the Dodgers. She should be here with you instead of plotting to send you to a home."

Marvin looked stunned. "You know?" he said softly.

"Yes," Neal said sadly.

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The call Neal and Bonnie feared came four nights later.

"Coronary?" Bonnie asked as her husband sadly hung up.

"And a broken heart," Neal answered.

"The next time I mention role models—" said Bonnie.

"Yeah?"

"Please tell me to shut up."

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As what would have been Marvin's 90th birthday neared, Neal and Elke took it upon themselves to gather the group known as the Strays at Marvin's favorite Persian place.

Without him holding court, the evening was so lackluster that everyone recognized that it would be the last meal of its kind.

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Choosing to focus on the best of the Marvin and Doris days rather than the darkness that followed, Bonnie and Neal started heading once again to the San Gabriel Valley for Chinese feasts on holidays.

Any vestigial tie to the Strays was erased when Bonnie broke the news to her husband that she was pregnant. Some months later, they became the proud parents of a baby boy who thereafter accompanied the two of them on their journeys.

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**Alan Swyer** is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *The Beard* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions. His newest production is called "When Houston Had The Blues."

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