

# ‘MY LIFE HAS BEEN GOOD, BAD, PAINFUL & TRAGIC’







Actress **LINDA GRAY** has had almost as many ups and downs as her *Dallas* character Sue Ellen. Here, for the first time, she reveals how it took her two decades to leave her emotionally abusive husband ►

INTERVIEW *Elaine Lipworth*  
PHOTOGRAPHS *Barry J Holmes*



**O**n the patio of a hip Los Angeles café, Linda Gray is talking about sex. ‘With the right man it’s great, but I don’t just jump into bed – I’m very selective,’ says the actress who made her name playing Sue Ellen, alcoholic wife of JR Ewing in the iconic 1980s TV show *Dallas* – and who, incredibly, is now 75. ‘People think we have no interest in sex as we get older but they are totally wrong. We can enjoy it just like we did when we were 25. Maybe more, because we don’t have to worry about kids running into the bedroom.’

Sex is just one of the topics Linda explores in her riveting new book *The Road to Happiness is Always Under Construction*, part practical self-help guide to ageing gracefully, part brutally honest memoir. Still glamorous and slim, in a beige silk top and J Brand jeans, she could pass for a woman in her 50s, her huge brown eyes sparkling, auburn hair swept up in a bun. I believe her when she says she has never had plastic surgery; her face is lined and full of character. ‘I’ve had nothing done because it scares me,’ she says. ‘I once tried Botox,’ she touches her forehead, ‘and I looked ridiculous.’

The book relates the tragedies and triumphs of her life so far: how she was temporarily paralysed by polio as a child, how she lost her younger sister Betty to cancer – and how, for over two decades, she was trapped in a deeply unhappy marriage. It also includes fascinating insights into the TV show that turned Linda into a global star: ‘A mogul’s wife with a shiny outside and a pickled liver,’ is how Linda describes her career-defining character, who was forever engaged in roller-coaster battles with her Machiavellian, philandering husband.

But fans of the soap were unaware that, off-screen, Linda was herself in an emotionally abusive relationship with her husband, art director and photographer Ed Thrasher (designer of album covers for musicians such as Frank Sinatra, Jimi Hendrix and Joni Mitchell), whom she had married at 21. Linda realised she had made a mistake the first night of her honeymoon in Acapulco. ‘Because I had sex I thought, “Oh now I’m really an adult, a woman,” but I didn’t feel loved and nurtured.’ Instead, she felt abandoned. The next morning Ed left her alone in the hotel all day while he went out taking photos, establishing an emotionally cold and controlling pattern that would continue throughout their marriage. ‘It tore me apart but I just thought, “Well, I can make this work somehow.”’ Which, somehow, she did. ‘It took me 21 years to leave my marriage,’ she says now.

Part of the allure of marriage, Linda admits, had been getting away from home after a



**From top: Linda (far left) with her mother, sister Betty, father and friends, 1947; with Betty in 1945, just before being diagnosed with polio; in *Dallas* with Larry Hagman, 1981**

challenging childhood growing up in Culver City, Los Angeles. Aged five, she contracted polio and was quarantined for months on end in her bedroom. She made a full recovery (‘I just have to stretch my hamstrings, which get a little stiff’), but she and her sister Betty then had to deal with the heavy drinking of their mother, Marge, a former ballerina and artist, who liked ‘Rose’s lime juice and vodka gimlets – it was the *Mad Men* era, everybody had cocktail hour,’ says Linda. Marge Gray ‘wasn’t falling down drunk – there was never any yelling, she wasn’t mean – she was just blurred, in her own world; she would forget to buy food. So I started doing the cooking. My sister and I didn’t like her.’

How much did her mother inform her portrayal of Sue Ellen? ‘Not at all. At first I thought, “How am I going to do this properly and not embarrass her?”’ But the role was a gift. Mum got to see me portraying a character with a disease, she saw that she had a real problem and

it ended up being very healing.’ Eventually, her mother, aged 60, went to Alcoholics Anonymous and stopped drinking.

In retrospect, Linda believes her mother’s drinking was the result of frustration, disappointment and suppressed creativity, and she was determined to avoid a similar fate. ‘I felt that if I didn’t pursue my career that could happen to me.’ Her father Leslie, a jeweller, provided stability. ‘He was wonderful, he

reminded me of the Dalai Lama, everyone loved him. He didn’t offer emotional support though,’ she adds, ‘he was just kind of there, like a piece of furniture, but then this was a different time. You didn’t go to Dad with boyfriend problems. God forbid! But he was supportive of my career.’

Linda originally had ambitions to study medicine, but growing up close to MGM film studios meant that she was soon drawn to acting and Hollywood. She and her friends would hang around the studios after school and collect autographs from stars such as Spencer Tracy, Stewart Granger and Tyrone Power. She started modelling in her teens – for companies including Noxzema skincare, L’eggs hosiery and various airlines.

But marriage to Ed seemed to put paid to a promising career, as the role he expected of her was that of wife and mother. Making the best of things, as she had decided to do, Linda had two children, Jeff (now 50) and Kehly (48), and the family moved to a large ranch in Santa Clarita, north of LA – where she still lives. Ed, says Linda, ‘was kind of like my dad, he didn’t say much’. Instead, he would leave notes pinned to the fridge every morning with chores for her to do, ‘like I was a maid. It was horrible: “Iron my shirts, wash the car, feed the chickens, take the dog to the vet.”’

In the early 1970s, frustrated and disappointed, she attended group therapy: ‘I wanted to find out, “Who are you, Linda Gray?”’ She even persuaded Ed to attend one session, after which the to-do lists stopped. But what Linda calls the ‘subtle cruelty’ continued. He did not approve of his wife going out to work but did consent to part-time jobs. ‘He’d say, “we need a pool,” or, “we need a tennis court”. So I’d do a TV commercial to pay for it.’ Among her lesser-known credits, she was paid \$25, aged 27, as Anne Bancroft’s body double in the publicity poster for *The Graduate* (1967) ➤





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◀ with Dustin Hoffman. It is Linda's shapely leg that appears in the iconic image. (In a twist of fate, she ended up playing Mrs Robinson in the 2001 West End stage production of *The Graduate* when she was 61, which included a full-frontal nude scene.)

It wasn't all bleak – despite her frustrations, she enjoyed being a mother and looking after the ranch. But she also wanted to perform. When she decided to take acting classes, Ed wasn't happy. 'He said, "Why don't you become an actress when the children are in college?"' But she went ahead anyway, starting classes at the age of 37 alongside much younger students. Encouraged by the actor Dennis Weaver (star of *Gunsmoke* and *McCloud*), who spotted her talent, she won her first acting job as a guest star on the TV series *Marcus Welby MD* in 1974.

Then, at 38, came her big break, when she auditioned for the role of Sue Ellen and landed the job that would change her life. It meant moving to Texas for two months at a time to film, leaving behind her children aged 11 and 13. 'I could have turned it down, leaving children at any age is tricky, but I did the best I could to juggle everything. I made 60 plus frozen casseroles so the family wouldn't be starving.'

The show, also starring Larry Hagman as JR, Patrick Duffy and Victoria Principal, ran for 14 seasons from 1978 to 1991. It broke viewing records around the world, but Linda felt guilty about the time spent away from her children. She missed her son's high school graduation (he now owns an environmental IT company with a friend) because she was filming a crucial scene, and her teenage daughter Kehly (now a married businesswoman with two children) started playing truant from school and getting into scrapes with the police. 'She had this pain-in-the-ass mother who was a TV star, who should've been home making cookies and going to PTA meetings. I was getting all this adulation, everyone wanted my autograph – that is hard for a teenage girl. The rebellious spirit has to come out. She would take my car, go out with her friends and run out of petrol. She probably was drinking, too. A cop would pull her over and say, "Why are you going so fast?" I'd go to the police station and sign glossy photos [of myself] to get her out.'

But as her career soared, Linda's marriage deteriorated. In 1981 she was nominated for a best actress Emmy. She recalls the anticipation: her

famous hairdresser José Eber created a new waved style for the glitzy occasion. Then Ed arrived to pick her up in a limo. 'I thought I was so pretty, but he just looked at me and said, "You look like a hooker". I was devastated. I thought I was going to die on the spot. That was a bad night. My theory was that he wanted to take me down a peg – he cheered up when I lost.'

She pauses to pour tea. 'My kids still don't know any of this.' They must have known you had a bad marriage? 'I think they saw what they wanted to see. He was a good father to them.' Did she consider her husband's behaviour to be abusive? 'There was not such a term then, I just felt like I was being pulled through a knothole, I just felt like sh\*\*.' What would her reaction be if her daughter found herself in a similar situation? 'That would be like, "Divorce papers right now!" But women are growing in leaps and

bounds, and I hope nobody has to go through what I went through.' That said, she doesn't see her experience as entirely negative. 'I was meant to be on the planet in 1940,' she says, 'and experience all that stuff I went through, good, bad, painful and tragic.'

Linda finally left Ed in 1983, two years after the Emmy incident. 'As Sue Ellen grew, I did, too. I gradually felt stronger, and one day I said to myself, "I don't need to put up with this." I told him, "I can't be married any more." I was weary, beaten down, overwhelmed, just raw, raw, raw. He barely reacted. "OK," he said. "Do what you have to do." His words had the usual tinge of condescension,

like he was indulging his wacky wife in her little escapade. I think he was in denial. He assumed I would come home with my tail between my legs.'

The divorce was a relief but also painful. 'The neighbourhood wives treated me like a disease,' she says (although their husbands offered to come and give her a shoulder to cry on!). It was Larry Hagman and his wife Maj who provided genuine support. 'They wrapped me up in their arms, it was so nourishing and loving, they cared about me.' She moved to Malibu while the lawyers sorted out the divorce, then returned to live at the ranch after Ed moved out.

I wonder why Linda waited 21 years before ending her marriage? 'Oh God, I don't know. The best idea would have been to not have married him and to have had him as a friend.' He was charming and funny socially, she says – just not in

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From top: the *Dallas* cast in 1979; Linda with husband Ed on their wedding day, 1962; a retro family portrait from the late 60s used as a Christmas card with son Jeff and daughter Kehly







Clockwise from above left: a mod look for a 60s photoshoot; modelling in London; with Larry Hagman and his wife Maj, 1986; with her parents on the *Dallas* set, 1979; with Jeff as a toddler in 1965; with Ed on Emmy night, 1981



From top: an 80s portrait by Harry Langdon, one of Linda's favourite photographers; Linda was Anne Bancroft's body double on the poster for *The Graduate*, 1967, for which she was paid \$25; with Kehly and Jeff in the early 70s



the marriage. 'But there are no regrets: I grew as a human being.' (In fact, she helped to support her ex when he was diagnosed with colon cancer, and was with him when he died in 2006.)

Her confidence was also growing at work. She gave her flimsily written character in *Dallas* more weight. 'I remember looking at JR and thinking, "Who in hell would marry that idiot?" Then realising, "It's you, babe. What are you going to do about it?" Sue Ellen could have been a bitch, the way the part was written, but I decided to throw in some vulnerability. I fought with the writers and producers to get her out of the drinking and the affairs - I didn't want to be stuck in that rut.'

A decade after the show's launch, Larry Hagman and Patrick Duffy were directing episodes of *Dallas*. Linda was keen to get behind the camera, too, but executive producer Leonard Katzman refused to let her direct. 'I pushed really hard...and I got fired. Then Larry came to my defence. He said, "If she goes, I go." I knew Larry well enough to know that he wouldn't have gone,' she smiles, 'but it sounded good.' The threats worked, Linda's job was reinstated and, smashing her own glass ceiling, she directed four highly rated episodes of *Dallas*. 'I absolutely loved it and I was proud of myself for pushing through.' How much has changed since then? 'I think it's inching towards getting better. But it's still hard for women.'

But her directing debut in 1986 was tinged ►





**Mother's Day this year with, from left, grandson Jack, Kehly, Jeff, son-in-law Lance and grandson Ryder**

◀ with sadness, because she discovered that her sister Betty had breast cancer; seven years after the trauma of losing her 17-year-old daughter [Linda's niece] in a road accident. 'I had all this excitement, and then I heard the news about my sister; but I had to direct the next day.' Betty died three years later; aged 43. 'I miss my sister every day, because she and I grew up in that wacko, dysfunctional family but we got through it.'

Since the end of *Dallas*, Linda has appeared in *Melrose Place* (1994), the short-lived *Models Inc* (1994) and *90210* (2008) as well as the 2012 *Dallas* relaunch. Still busy working, she plays 'an eccentric old lady who drinks wine and smokes' in an upcoming comedy, *Wally's Will*. 'I've had a magical career; but I'm not done yet.'

She hasn't remarried: 'I'm having way too much fun, I love my freedom. When *Dallas* was rebooted we had to move to Texas. Larry and Patrick brought their wives. Me? I brought my cat. When I did panto [*Cinderella* in Wimbledon] last year; I didn't have to ask anyone if I could go. But I would live with somebody,' she says. 'Age is irrelevant. If I meet a 40-year-old who is boring, dull and flat, I have no interest. If I meet somebody my age who wants to laugh and go to movies and go swimming and eat great food... bring him on! I don't ever ask how old they are. And if they ask me how old I am, they're toast. Damn Google!' she says with a twinkle.

Devoted to her children and grandchildren (Kehly's sons, Ryder, 23 and Jack, 12), Linda describes her life now as 'absolutely delicious' and says gratitude is the key. 'I get up in the morning, feet hit the floor; and I say, "Thank you".' In her book she cites 60 as a landmark, the age that she chose to be happy. 'I think I felt I knew who I was, I had a grasp on what it felt like to be a woman. And I had this lovely awakening, like lightbulbs turned on.' There are no fears of dying. Does she believe in an afterlife? 'Oh sure, I believe in it, I want to see all my friends and relatives and have hugs and dance around. But I think people have got to pay attention to the present. Sitting here having breakfast with you is beautiful. Then I am going home to grill wild salmon and courgettes for a friend. Life is for living right now. End of story.' ▼

NANCY ELLISON



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## LINDA'S FAST-TRACK TO HAPPINESS

### SECRETS OF STAYING YOUNG

● **STOP COMPARING** All women are susceptible to jealousy, comparisons and envy. Those words are detrimental to our growth and happiness. You will never look like a 17-year-old model from Slovenia, but that is the standard we are asked to achieve. Please don't compare yourself to an unobtainable ideal – your genetically gifted best friend, your daughter or yourself 20 years ago. Compare equals despair. Instead, embrace who you are in this moment.

● **BE GRATEFUL** In my travels, I heard a lot of complaints from women about how their skin has changed, the spots and dryness. What happened to springy? By only seeing flaws, they forget how beautiful they are, and how beautiful it is to be alive. We're here on this planet, and not for very long. Be grateful for everything you've got, including the wrinkles.

● **CARE LESS** That's the real secret to great beauty, the yummiest part of life. The only person who cares if you're thin and unlined is you, and you don't have to care, either.

### HOW TO BE KIND TO YOURSELF

● **BUY YOURSELF FLOWERS** Yep, you are worth it. It doesn't have to be a massive bouquet, just one that makes you smile. Today I went out to my garden and picked a beautiful display. Into the house they came and were plopped into a vase. Done. Happiness in an instant.

● **TAKE A LONG BATH** I know it doesn't seem feasible when we are rushing to get everything done. But try to carve out some 'me time'. Turn off the lights, light a candle and put a few drops of scented oil in the water. The bathroom doesn't have to be fancy. Trust me, I've been on location in some not-fancy bathrooms. When I turn off the light, light that candle, and drop in my lavender, voilà! The room transforms into a paradise. Put on some relaxing music and let the mind drift wherever you want.

● **GET RID OF CLUTTER** I always say that my eyes need a break from looking at 'stuff' – piles of paper, magazines, make-up, laundry, books. Clear it away and see how you feel after giving your eyes a rest.

### DO THE RIGHT THINGS FOR YOUR SKIN

● **AVOID SUGAR, WHEAT, ALCOHOL AND COFFEE** All are either dehydrating or are digested in such a way that the collagen in our skin becomes rigid and less bouncy. My diet rules are to keep it clean, simple and true.

● **GET OUT THOSE WALKING SHOES, PUT THEM ON, AND TAKE A BRISK STROLL** If you can't get outside or don't have the time, jump on the rebounder (the small trampoline) for 20 minutes while you watch the news. Dry-brush your skin, shower and go!

● **SLEEP** Oh, yes! Get it! Wallow in the time restoring 'you'. You worked hard today. Take a bath, jump into clean sheets and dream away.

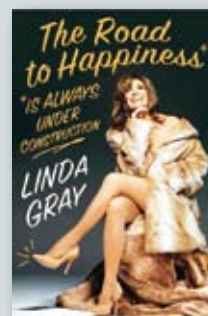
### THE DANGERS OF SLOWING DOWN

● **NEVER STOP TRYING NEW THINGS AND DOING SMALL MUNDANE TASKS** – and appreciating your ability to do them.

Otherwise, life really does become a waiting game, but you're not waiting for a train or an appointment. You're waiting for nothing, the void. Get up and do something, anything that gets you moving and in the world.

● **YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING** In fact, it's better if you don't. We all know what it's like to travel and get lost on your way to the restaurant recommended in the guidebook. You stumble upon a hidden gem that turns out to be more memorable than the place you intended to visit. Or you go into a store to buy a dress and wind up finding a cosy sweater you treasure for decades. Be open to the unexpected. Serendipity is everyday magic. You can help it along with a sense of adventure.

● **STAY OPEN TO NEW OPPORTUNITIES** Don't get locked into anything. When you venture out, turn left instead of right. Get lost and you might come home with a miracle. Go to the circus. Play in the sandbox. Laugh until champagne comes out of your nose.



■ This is an edited extract from *The Road to Happiness is Always Under Construction* by Linda Gray, to be published by Regan Arts on 17 September, price £19.99. To pre-order a copy for £16.99 (a discount of 15 per cent) until 20 September, visit [you-bookshop.co.uk](http://you-bookshop.co.uk), 0808 272 0808; p&p is free on orders over £12