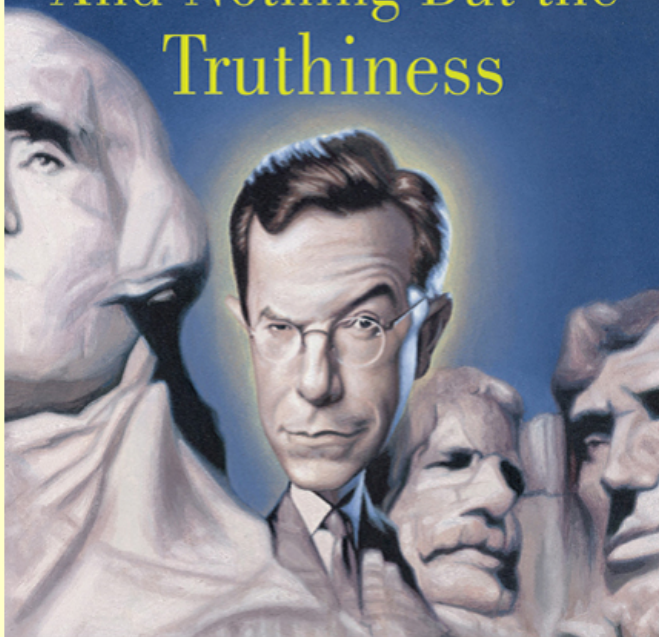


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And Nothing But the  
Truthiness



THE RISE (*and further rise*) OF  
STEPHEN COLBERT

LISA ROGAK

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS.  
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# CHAPTER 1

WHEN STEPHEN TYRONE COLBERT was born, he was the youngest of eleven children—as well as the last—and the first new baby to arrive in the household in five years, which was an eternity considering that his parents brought seven of those older children into the world in just under a decade.

From the day he was brought home from the hospital, his siblings regarded Stephen in the same way they would a new puppy. “My three sisters had a live baby doll: me,” he said.

“He had lots of attention paid to him and was carried around,” said his mother, Lorna. “They used to do little tricks with him.”

“I was very loved,” he said. “My sisters like to say that they are surprised that I learned to walk and that my legs didn’t become vestigial because I was carried around by them so much.”

His sisters weren’t the only ones who spoiled him; in the Colbert household, Lorna served dinner from the youngest to the oldest, so Stephen was the first to eat. “That way, I’d also be ready for seconds first,” he said.

“Being the youngest, I always got a lot of attention,” he said. “It became an addiction. I need attention.”

But the youngest Colbert soon discovered that being cute and cuddly didn’t automatically win him points where it *really* counted in the family: being funny.

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## “It became an addiction. I need attention.”

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“I grew up in a humorocracy where the funniest person in the room is king,” he said. “There was a constant competition to have the better story and be the funniest person in the room, and I wasn’t a particularly funny kid.”

One time, Stephen eavesdropped on his mother while she was telling his siblings that they had to listen to his stories, even though they complained that he was boring. “And to this day I sort of feel like if I’m doing well with an audience, then Mom’s gotten to them and said, ‘You *listen* to him.’”

Even today, when the family of Colbert adults gets together, Stephen still takes a backseat. “I’m definitely not the funniest person in my family,” he said. “I think my brothers and sisters are so much funnier than me. When we’re together as a family, I just listen to them, but I have stolen from them over the years.”

He still doesn’t think he’s as funny as his brother Jay. One example: “He used to do an impersonation of a squirrel taking a shit while it walked, leaving a trail behind him,” said Stephen. “He swore there was a squirrel that did this in the parking lot when he was in college, and my sister Lulu would get so incredibly embarrassed when he did the impersonation in a public place, but it’s my gold standard when it comes to humor.”

Lorna Elizabeth Colbert was born on November 6, 1920, to Andrew and Marie Fee Tuck. Andrew was a lawyer and had previously served as a major in the army, while Marie was a housewife who had been educated by nuns. “The Ladies of Loreto, who are very hoity-toity French Canadian nuns,” her grandson Stephen would say years later. “You had to be of means to be educated by them.”

Lorna joined a three-year-old sister by the name of Mary, and Andrew

III would arrive two years later. The Tuck family lived in a spacious apartment at 130 Claremont Avenue in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, a relatively prosperous area near Columbia University that overlooked Riverside Drive. They were wealthy enough to have an African-American woman named Eliza Hart serve as their live-in maid.

The neighborhood was filled with white-collar professionals and artists: musicians, writers, and lawyers filled the apartments. The Juilliard School—founded in 1905—was right next door, at 134 Claremont Avenue. Although in Manhattan, the neighborhood was still considered rural for the time; anything north of Central Park was considered to be the country, yet it was easy enough to commute to a downtown office.

The 1920s were booming economic times, and there was much work for an ambitious lawyer with a new family to support. Attorney Tuck did so well in his practice that he moved his family to Westchester County, purchasing a house at 54 Chatsworth Avenue in Larchmont, a growing suburb seventeen miles north of the city; in 1930, the house was valued at \$30,000. Their neighbors were engineers, business owners, and bookkeepers, with a few secretaries and apartment superintendents thrown into the mix. The Roaring Twenties brought great wealth to the growing families of the new Victorian and craftsman-style homes that lined the leafy streets of the bucolic village.

The Tucks attended Saint Augustine's Church, a few blocks away from their house, and shortly after her confirmation, Lorna was sent away to a convent school in Providence, Rhode Island.

Boston Post Road passes through Larchmont, which had once served as a summer resort town where upper-class New Yorkers could escape the oppressive heat of Manhattan. Once the roads connecting Larchmont to New York City were developed and improved in response to the growing popularity of automobiles—by 1925 over two million of the ubiquitous Model T Fords were sold each year—an increasing number of summer residents decided to make Larchmont their home year-round. Located on Long Island Sound, the village's several pleasant beaches made it an even more attractive place for upper-class families to settle.

Larchmont also beckoned as an attractive address for celebrities of

the day: the playwright Edward Albee and the silent movie stars Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford all chose Larchmont as their home.

Fifteen miles away, in the New York City borough of the Bronx, James William Colbert, Jr., was born to James William Colbert and Mary Tormey on December 15, 1920, along with a twin sister, Margaret. The twins were the Colberts' first children.

The family lived on Jerome Avenue, surrounded mostly by families whose mothers and fathers were born in Russia, Hungary, and Ireland, and whose first language was not English. By contrast, James Sr. was born in Illinois, and Mary was born in New York.

As a sales manager who sold glass bottles for Owens Illinois Glassworks, James hustled to provide for his family, and he did very well. "He evidently had a misspent youth, because he was very good at cards and very good at pool," said his grandson Stephen years later. "He knew some dicey characters."

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**“ [M]y grandfather] evidently had a misspent youth, because he was very good at cards and very good at pool.”**

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As was the case in the rest of New York City—and the country, overall—the 1920s brought bustling times to the Bronx in the aftermath of World War I. The New York subway system was extended into the borough, which helped ease some of the overcrowding in the traditional enclaves where immigrants first settled, like the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. Many new large tenement houses were built, especially along the Grand Concourse, and some immigrants headed north, where they could live in New York City but easily commute to their jobs.

The Grand Concourse was the name of a street largely regarded as the “Park Avenue of middle-class Bronx residents,” according to the *WPA Guide to New York City*. “A lease to an apartment on the Grand Concourse is considered evidence of at least moderate business success.” Indeed, in planning its design, the French engineer Louis Risse used the Champs-Élysées in Paris as his model for the thoroughfare that ran four miles in length when it first opened in 1909.

Once the first subway line was brought to the neighborhood, it set off a construction boom given over to stately six-story apartment buildings built in a suitably grand art deco style in the 1920s and 1930s, including uniformed doormen and elegant lead-glass elevator doors (those touches weren’t seen on the Jerome Avenue that the Colberts knew).

Nevertheless, James was doing well, so in the mid-1920s, the Colbert family moved from Jerome Avenue to a larger apartment at 2877 Grand Concourse, where they paid about a hundred dollars each month for rent.

At the same time, the Concourse was also a magnet for upwardly mobile Jewish families. In fact, by the mid-1930s, Jews would make up about 45 percent of the total population of the Bronx. Since the Colberts were devout Catholics, they belonged to a distinct minority in the neighborhood. “When [James Jr.] turned thirteen and didn’t get Bar Mitzvahed, he knew he wasn’t Jewish,” his son Edward Tuck Colbert would relate years later.

The Catholic population in the Bronx was small and tightly connected. In the 1920s, prejudice against Catholics was commonplace, from Protestants, who viewed Catholicism as a pagan brand of Christianity, to the Ku Klux Klan, who believed that since Catholics answered to Rome, they would never put America first. The 1928 presidential campaign featured the first Catholic candidate of a major party, Al Smith, a Democrat from New York. His religion was cited as a major factor for Republican Herbert Hoover’s landslide victory; Hoover carried forty states, Smith only eight.

Sometime in the early 1930s, New Yorkers began to get restless and uncertain as the roots of the Depression began to take hold. Irish Catholics began to leave the Bronx, despite the fashionable Grand Concourse

address, and headed for the relative calm of the developing suburbs in Westchester.

In the early 1930s, the Colberts joined the first wave of Irish-Americans to leave the Bronx, and James and Mary moved their family to Monroe Avenue in Larchmont, just a few blocks away from Lorna Tuck's house. James Jr. enrolled in junior high at Saint Augustine's School in Larchmont, where he also served as an altar boy. He later attended Iona Preparatory School in nearby New Rochelle. But Saint Augustine's was where he would meet Lorna Tuck.

Lorna spent most of the year at convent school in Providence, Rhode Island, but whenever she came home for vacations or weekends, she kept her eye on the altar boy at Mass. Though they'd occasionally see each other around the neighborhood, their exchanges were mostly limited to greetings in passing and mutual glances during church services.

They finally met for more than a brief moment at a dance class in 1932, when both were just twelve years old. Lorna was invited to the co-tillion ball, a gala coming-out event for young women. Despite the economic strife of the Great Depression, they were still in fashion and held regularly throughout the New York metropolitan area among the upper classes. Debs and their potential escorts took classes in the finer arts of polite society, from table etiquette to dancing lessons.

Lorna and a girlfriend invited young men to classes so they could practice their dance steps. Her girlfriend just happened to bring the altar boy from Saint Augustine's. "I brought a very nice, handsome guy who was a monitor in my school," Lorna remembered. "He was very tall and good-looking, but Jim Colbert was a much better dancer, so that's what stuck with me."

Afterward, the young couples headed for a neighbor's house for cupcakes, and Jim made sure to sit next to Lorna instead of her girlfriend. They talked for several hours. Lorna had to return to the convent in Rhode Island for school, but she kept her eye on Jim. She liked the fact that Jim was an optimist and that he always had something good to say



compared with other boys, who always had something negative to say about the continuing economic misery afoot in the world—despite the fact that in the rarified world of upper-class Larchmont, many families had managed to hold on to their wealth; both the Tucks and Colberts were relatively unscathed by the Depression.

Her crush intensified during high school. When Lorna came home from school, she and a friend would ride down to the beach on their bicycles, and she'd make a point of passing by Jim's house on Monroe Avenue. But she'd get so nervous that she wouldn't look for him when they pedaled by. "I'd ask, 'Was he there, was he there, did he look at me?'"

Lorna also liked that Jim put his studies first. As a straight-A student, it was obvious he had a brilliant mind and was destined to go far in life, though he rarely flaunted it over others. "He was always bookish but he didn't mention it that much to me because I wasn't so bookish," said Lorna.

She dreamed of becoming a singer and actress, and Jim also proved to have an artistic streak. His son Jay later remembered seeing a drawing that Jim did of a nautical scene, which he'd entered in a high school art contest with an honorable-mention ribbon on the back.

Despite their mutual attraction, they weren't officially a couple and would only see each other at church or on the street. "There wasn't a big to-do with the parents," she said, "but they weren't really alike. They're both very nice, very lovely, but they just weren't the same type of people."

One day when Lorna was around fifteen years old, she decided to take charge. She was scheduled to return to Larchmont for a few days, so she asked her mother to call Jim and ask for a date when she came home. The Tucks belonged to the Westchester Country Club, and Lorna invited him to have a drink at the bar, where she ordered a scotch and water and he ordered a sarsaparilla, a popular health tonic of the day.

In 1938, Jim graduated from Iona Prep and proceeded to the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts. While he was in college, he weighed different career tracks, and even though he loved philosophy and would have preferred to pursue that path, he decided to enroll in medical school at Columbia University.

"He really didn't want to be a doctor," said Lorna. Though his parents

wanted him to pursue a profession, he didn't want to become a lawyer, so he turned to medicine as a default move, and because, as his daughter Margo would later say, "It just seemed to be the thing to do at the time."

His relationship with Lorna quickly intensified during college, and he graduated in 1942 with a bachelor's degree in philosophy. That fall, Jim enrolled in the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University with a focus on immunology and infectious disease. A year into the rigorous program, he asked Lorna to marry him. She told him yes, and they began to plan their wedding.

Lorna's younger brother Andrew was serving as a first lieutenant paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division in World War II and couldn't make it home for the wedding. He wrote a letter to Jim where he sent his regrets. "I wish terribly that I could be there to 'hold the ring' for you," he said. "I'll be proud to call you brother. It's just as well that I'm over here, I'd probably trip in the aisle, lose the ring, and get disgracefully pickled at the reception."

They married on August 26, 1944, and Jim and Lorna moved into a third-floor walk-up apartment at 630 West 168th Street, right around the block from Columbia's medical school. It was only two miles away from Lorna's first apartment on Riverside Park, but it might as well have been a world away since it was a definite step down from what she was used to. "It was just a terrible apartment, with a fire escape outside the window that blocked the view," she remembered.

Within a few months of the wedding, Lorna was pregnant. She had little to do all day since Jim was off at medical school, sometimes for days at a time—he'd sleep in one of the dorm rooms upstairs from the medical school where students and residents slept when they were on call or between rotations—and besides, she missed her friends back in Westchester. The couple soon moved back to Larchmont, and after a brief stint living with Lorna's parents, they moved to an apartment a few blocks away, at 12 Chatsworth Avenue.

In the spring of 1945, Lorna was only a few months away from giving birth to their first child when Jim graduated with an MD from Columbia. During World War II, medical schools crammed four years of education into three because they expected that all new physicians would be

shipped overseas as soon as they graduated. When the war was declared to be over in June 1945, the couple was thrilled that Jim could stay close to home for the birth of their first child. However, their euphoria was shattered when news arrived that Lorna's brother Andrew had died. He had made it through the Normandy invasion and the Battle of the Bulge, only to be killed in a car accident in Austria at the age of twenty-two, just a month after the war had officially been declared over.

For Lorna, it was almost too much to bear. She was near-term and had been cautioned to stay off her feet for most of her pregnancy, so she decided to spend the summer at the family vacation home in Seventh Lake Inlet, in the Adirondacks Mountains of New York. There, she could rest and grieve the loss of her brother. Jim stayed with her but commuted to the city, where he would start his internship at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. James Colbert III, their first child, was born on September 1, 1945, at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

After Jim completed his internship in 1946, he signed up to serve for a year with the U.S. Army Medical Corps. Lorna decided to stay at the vacation home in his absence, but before he left, Lorna became pregnant again. Their second child, Edward, was born on January 20, 1947, while Jim was overseas.

When he returned from Germany in the spring of 1947, the Colberts packed up and headed for New Haven, where Jim would do his residency at the Yale University School of Medicine. There he began to develop a specialty in infectious diseases and immunology. Thus began a fast track for Jim and his career.

Mary Colbert, their first daughter and third child, was born on January 1, 1949, in New Haven. That same year, Jim re-upped with the army and headed back to Germany, but this time his family would come with him for the two years he'd be stationed overseas. He specialized in hepatitis research and headed up the lab at the German epidemiology hospital. While he was still in Germany, he was named an instructor of medicine at Yale and then an assistant professor of medicine. And he and Lorna would have another child while in Germany; Billy was born on May 12, 1950, in Munich.

No matter where they were living, Jim liked to take some time off each summer so that he could give his growing family his undivided attention. However, he couldn't seem to stay away from the hospital. Instead of his usual research and study, he liked to use the time to see patients since he didn't have time for clinical practice the rest of the year. Even here, he made an impression.

One summer, he was treating a patient with a rare fungal infection that was fatal for patients with compromised immune systems. However, the patient was rude and uncooperative, and though Jim prided himself on getting along with almost anyone, this patient sorely tested him. Lorna remembered that Jim would come home after dealing with the patient and say, "I'm just so inclined to just let him have this disease."

Remembering the Hippocratic oath, Colbert kept his mouth shut and treated the man, who fully recovered. As it turned out, the patient was the first man to actually survive and be cured of the disease.

Jim later found out that the man had been so hostile to him because he was an anti-Semite and for some reason thought that Dr. Colbert was Jewish. A few months later, when he found out that he had made medical history, the patient had a change of heart and joined the Israeli army because Colbert had cured him. "He said he was so grateful to him that he wanted to do something for his people, so he went to Israel and joined the army," said his son Edward Tuck. When Jim found out, another doctor recommended that he tell the patient he wasn't Jewish after all, but Jim disagreed. "There's no point," he said. "Don't ever tell him."

Shortly after the family returned to New Haven in 1951, Jim was appointed assistant dean of the Yale School of Medicine. As usual, Lorna was pregnant, and they needed to move to a bigger apartment. But there was one big change: Now with four kids—and pregnant again—she no longer was picky about how fancy an apartment was or if there was a fire escape blocking the view of a window. All she cared about was making a good home for her family and protecting her kids. Besides, she had already moved several times since the birth of her first child, so she had the routine of packing and unpacking cribs, furniture, and clothes down to a science.

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