



Chapter 1

My second-year curriculum at university includes a couple of anthropology courses with Professor Silverman. I once asked him if there is such a thing as mankind. He paused a moment, then told me he's not sure.

Professor Silverman is a brilliant, cultural anthropologist. Maybe five feet, seven inches tall, he is a true hunchback with thick lips, a large bulbous nose, and a Beatles mop of jet-black hair. The way he teaches his students to analyze and conceptualize captivates me.

From the time I was a baby (I was born in 1955), I've known a few things about myself. I have an identical twin sister named Marla and a younger brother named Jamie. I am Jewish. I have to graduate from a university. I have to have a career. I have to find a husband and get married. These notions were embedded in my childhood psyche by my parents as the principal definition of myself.

A muffled sound interrupts my ruminations about my upbringing when a fellow classmate collides with a column. He careens off it and stumbles to the bar, which was set up for the student-faculty party in the basement of the social science building. Although my inclination is toward introversion, especially in crowds, curiosity moves me out of the shadows. I think the drunk will know what I want to find out.

“Hey.” I nod toward the dance floor and point with my chin at the odd couple. “Who is she?” I can’t believe she’s dancing with Silverman.

Watery eyes follow my gesture. “His wife.”

His boozy breath and his answer hit me at the same time. I half expected the former, but the latter surprises me. Silverman’s wife is a stunner with exotic red lips and long, straight hair. I watch the affectionate way she touches his face and how her hips press against him during the slow songs. From where I’m standing on the sidelines of the low-lit, makeshift dance hall, she looks Polynesian. He did fieldwork over there.

It is the spring of 1975. My current pursuit is a bachelor’s degree at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. Which brings me to the essay due for Silverman and the reason why I have to leave the party early. I came to just check who was here. I planned on drafting the outline of the paper tonight, but most of the research and writing will have to wait. My presence at a wedding more than 120 miles away takes priority. The soon-to-be husband isn’t mine. He belongs to a third cousin on my mother’s side.

The next morning, I dig a suitcase out of the front closet. In go enough underwear, blue jeans, and everyday clothes for the weekend trip home. A little black dress gets folded up, along with a sweater and a pair of black, high-heeled shoes, pantyhose, and a small purse. This is my fancy wedding attire. My sister packed her stuff last night. Frankly, a lot of the clothes I wear were commandeered from her.

Although Marla and I started out at the same place, somewhere along the way I lost my fashion sense. When we were infants, our mother took us clothes

shopping and thought it was cute to dress her twins in identical clothing. As toddlers, we hardly noticed, but by the time we were eleven or twelve years old, we decided it was dorky to dress alike, although exceptions were made for our younger but wiser brother Jamie's bar mitzvah and our sweet sixteen birthday party.

Marla and I figured out that buying two of the same thing limited our options. Then the issue of sharing arose. On any given day, we would inevitably argue about who could wear what. As far as Jamie, who is three and three-quarter years younger, was concerned, our arguments over clothes happened far too often. It was probably the main reason he became a practical joker at the age of ten or eleven.

Once, when I was about to open my closet, I heard a light tap, tap. Fingers appeared at the bottom of the door. I jumped a foot, only to find my brother hiding in the closet. Another time, while my twin and I were sunbathing in our bikinis, a large, hairy spider dropped from out of nowhere and landed on Marla's belly. She screamed and tried to brush it off as I rushed over to help. Then we heard giggles and looked up. It was Jamie, of course. He'd tied a plastic spider on a string and was dangling it out of the open window above us. And then there were a few nights when a bodiless voice haunted my bedroom and called out, "Mmmmyyyrrraaa. Mmmmyyyrrraaa. Mmmmyyyrrraaa." I was in bed, petrified, with the covers pulled up to my nose. As it turned out, Jamie had jury-rigged a microphone, so it would travel from one side of the two-story house, where he was, all the way across the roof to my side, where it hung outside my window.

Jamie's pranks always scared us, though afterwards, my sister and I laughed. We loved him even more because his tricks were successful. However, the verbal fights our parents got into, usually about the lack of money, upset all three of us kids. More often than not, our mother provoked the arguments because our father was not much of a yeller. He was more the passive-aggressive type and hid problems from her until it was too late to really do anything about them. So there was lots of shouting around our house. Over time, my sister and I mostly grew out of yelling. Not our mother. She developed into a full-blown rager and could erupt over anything.

As a result of my mother's ragging, I became confused about my style. Marla was not, so I began to defer to her sense of fashion, her taste, her finely tuned artistic eye. This resulted in my often borrowing her clothes. My favorite item was a pale pink version of the white dress that Marilyn Monroe wore in the movie *The Seven Year Itch*, in the scene where she stood over the subway grate and the skirt flew up to reveal her panties.



Because of our third cousin's upcoming wedding, Marla and I have luggage. Our plan is to take the train rather than hitchhike to Windsor, Ontario, where our parents and brother live and where we grew up. We catch a city bus at the corner near our apartment building and arrive at London's downtown Canadian National Railways (CNR) station. We purchase our tickets, then race onto the wide-open platform, currently bare of people, just as the whistle screeches and the conductor yells out, "All aboard!"

Red-capped CNR porters help us store our baggage, and then, almost out of breath, Marla and I settle into our seats, facing each other, our knees about a foot apart. The train rumbles up to speed and comes to a gentle, rocking motion that lulls us into silence. Looking out the big windows, we watch the cityscape whiz past. Then wild woods outside of town give way to an occasional, colorful billboard that advertises a hotel or an eatery in a small town. We pass forests and lush orchards and the farmers' fields that give southwestern Ontario its nickname, The Fruit and Vegetable Basket of Canada.

Luckily, our car is almost empty. About half an hour into the ride, we begin talking about the upcoming wedding, which leads to reminiscing about our extended family.

“There is Mom’s uncle, the fine artist, who paints huge, modern-abstract pieces,” Marla says. She is currently taking art history courses and fine painting classes at the university. “Mom is fairly deep into Freud and Jung,” she goes on, “and good with numbers too. In her family we have a ballerina, an inventor, and some intellectuals, including a Fulbright scholar.”

“Our brother takes after the smart ones,” I reply, “and you have street-smarts.” I point a finger at her. “There are a few gamblers on Mom’s side too, eh?” This last group of relatives consists of the playful and the petty, and the high wagers with serious problems. I have learned from my relatives to admire both the creative and the cerebral and to have compassion for the confused.

Except when it concerns myself, I am ruthless.

My sister's face looks pensive. "It's kind of lonely in here, eh? Reminds me of your poem, Myra, the one about trains. I think it ended up printed in the school yearbook." She seems to know my thoughts. We can do that.

"Yeah, that's right," I say. "It was in eighth grade, and we were on a school trip from Windsor to Ottawa. The train car was packed with students, teachers, and adult chaperones. I memorized it."

On a train,
From one dead world to the next.
They say be happy.
There is a smile.
But in the inner Soul,
Nothing.

I turn around.
In the prisons of ourselves,
We cast nothing but shadows.
A line is drawn to divide
And here we sit,
With virgin bodies,
Untouched.

"Geez," Marla says, "those were morbid, dark thoughts for such a young person. How old were we? About twelve? About the time those schoolkids we thought were our friends abandoned us in the schoolyard and walked away, the whole group of them, if we got close."

“Yep. They liked us in the morning, but when we went back to school after lunch, they fled like a flock of fevered sheep. Their rejection scarred my soul. It affected me more than you,” I confess. “The same ones were on that train in my poem. Kids can be mean. Calling us names, us being Jewish, the odd ones out.”

My sister flips her hair back and away from her pretty face, a gesture to dismiss the subject. “Do you want to get something to eat?”

Purses in hand, we weave down the aisle toward the bar car, an institution among those university students who travel between Toronto and Windsor and the towns in between. It is not fancy. The last car on the train, it sways more than the other cars and has big windowpanes and vinyl-upholstered seats that wrap around the walls. The atmosphere is usually festive.

We order Cokes and egg salad sandwiches at the foodservice counter, then find a spot where we can sit together and make small talk with our companions in the car. When the train pulls into the Windsor station, we say goodbye and head back to our seats. The earlier tinge of moodiness is all gone.

A couple of days later, my family and I attend our third cousin’s wedding in a suburb of Detroit. A Reform rabbi performs the traditional ceremony under the *huppah*, or canopy. After the blessings are said, the sound of shattered glass fills the room. Most know the groom just stepped on a wineglass wrapped in a napkin. In response, we all shout out, “Mazel tov.”

Why smash the glass? Some rabbinic scholars say the breaking is an act of remembrance, so Jews will not forget the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Others say it signifies the fragility of marriage and the commitment to

care for each other. Most understand it as the end of the marriage ritual and the beginning of the partying.

My family and the other guests spill into the reception room. We talk, drink, and eat appetizers passed around by waiters, and then we search for our name cards at one of the many round tables. As usual, these are set with fine china and silverware and colorful flowers that adorn the centers of the white tablecloths.

As Mom sits next to me and leans over, her favorite Joy perfume wafts by me. “Look over there,” she says. “Look how your cousin walks around the room.” Her voice is soft. “She is so gorgeous.”

There is no need to look. I know who she means. My mother admires her whenever our families are together. It’s a third cousin of mine, but not the one who just got married. My mother’s words are not malicious, yet their effect on me is like a punch to the stomach. A sense of smallness overcomes me. I hunch my shoulders and shrink into the chair. Mom does not intend to hurt me, but her words upset me. Marla can feel the same way. Our mother’s unrestrained adulation of beautiful women, coupled with a sometimes-biting tongue, makes us feel less attractive, less desirable, more worthless. With my propensity for introversion, every day is a fight to overcome my shyness and not withdraw from the world. My mother’s unconscious and inconsiderate words make it harder. Her direct, vicious attacks with a spiteful remark or sometimes a coat hanger make it almost impossible.

But despite the blows or the words, I love Mom and continue to see her wonderful side and the gifts she gave me. So instead of saying something and

risking a scene, I get up from the table and walk over to my bubbe's (grandmother) table. I stoop down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Love your shift dress," I murmur. "Stylish. The pastel yellow looks wonderful on you." Bubbe is a petite woman, and her wedding attire is a change from her usual drab daytime outfit. Now that Grandpa Herman has passed away, she often wears just a bra and a full slip, removes her false teeth, and lets a cigarette dangle from the side of her droopy mouth. It can get humid in the suburbs.

"Thank you, sweetheart." Bubbe's eyebrows crunch together. "And which one are you?"

"Myra."

It wouldn't matter. She can never tell the difference between my sister and me. She's never really tried. Most of her days are spent playing penny poker with her girlfriends. When I was a kid, my grandmother's lack of interest caused me to question my mother. It was before Dad got sick and went bankrupt. It was before Mother's anger started. It was when I still adored her.

"Bubbe hardly pays attention to me," my mother said, rolling her eyes, "and I'm her daughter. You can imagine what it was like growing up. She favored my sister."

When I asked my Aunt Gladys about this, she said, "As the oldest child, I had to take care of all the kids and Bubbe too. She didn't favor me, she just needed me."



Now, from across the wedding reception room, Gorgeous Third Cousin, the one my mother just admired, catches my eye. She saunters over, her body lithe, bringing along a man she introduces as her boyfriend. As a couple, they display the same beauty and the beast qualities as Professor Silverman and his Polynesian wife.

Gorgeous Third Cousin has the cute nose and high cheekbones of our Austrian–Russian forebears, set off by her long, straight, blonde hair. (My hair is dark and naturally curly and has a life of its own.) Her boyfriend is a troll with long, straggly, dark hair, a beard, and a huge, round stomach above spindly legs. It makes him look almost like a Chanukah dreidel.

A few minutes into our conversation, Gorgeous Third Cousin whispers in my ear, “My boyfriend has some stuff to smoke. Just go ask him if you want any.”

I trot over to talk to the Troll, who had found his way to the well-stocked bar, set up for this evening’s celebration. Before I can say anything, he gulps down the rest of the scotch in his glass and smacks his lips together. “Yeah,” he says. “I’ve got some doobies rolled. Let’s go to my car. It’s just out back.”

He leads the way through a maze of hallways and finally pushes a door that opens onto a parking lot. We are now behind the synagogue. The cool, night air feels fresh on my face, and I take in deep breaths as we walk a few yards to his car. Once inside, the Troll reaches into the glove compartment and pulls out a gold cigarette case. He opens it to reveal a dozen perfectly rolled joints.

My eyes pop wide open. “Wow!”

“What do you want? Something super high? Or mellow for this evening?” He sounds like a connoisseur. “I have other choices, but let’s start with these.”

“That is an impressive collection,” I say. “I’d like the hallucinogenic kind, with some aroma, if you have, please.”

He hands me a fat joint and lights it. I take a toke and another puff, and then a sniff of the pungent smell that fills the car.

“Great smoke.” I pass it to him.

He takes a toke, holds it in for a few seconds, and lets out a huge cloud of smoke, then passes the joint back to me.

I take a puff and let it out. “What do you do for a living?”

The car leather squeaks when he shifts his weight and settles into the driver’s seat. He turns to look at me. “I make handmade jewelry. I use liquid silver and gold, heshi stones, precious and semi-precious gems. Trendy stuff.” He takes another toke and out comes another cloud.

“Where do you sell them?”

“In high-rise office buildings. I pick a tall one, somewhere in the Greater Detroit suburban area, start at the top, and knock on doors all the way down to the ground floor, selling my jewelry to the ladies in the offices.”

We continue to toke and talk. The Troll fascinates me.

A short while later, we walk back into the synagogue, where the reception is in full swing. Many guests are on the dance floor, moving to the live band and lead singer’s cool covers of Motown songs. I join Gorgeous Third Cousin at her table, just as her younger sister walks over and sits down next to me and says, “I am pregnant, not married, and have no money.” Her voice is quiet, and there are tears in her eyes.

Her opening statement almost knocks me out of my chair. “Can your parents help?”

“They don’t know.” Her face has the worried look of one who has lost hope.

“Have you tried Jewish Family Services?”

Pregnant Cousin shakes her head. “No. Because then everyone in the community will know.” Her belly will soon show, but it is no use to talk about the obvious.

“You’re not the only one with unusual circumstances in our families,” I tell her. “Our grandparents’ generation immigrated to America from several northern European countries. It was a big family. My bubbe and her group settled in Detroit, but she met Grandpa when she visited his family, also her relatives, in Manhattan. You see, she fell in love with her first cousin.” I place my hand over Pregnant Cousin’s hand and put my anthropological understanding of kinship relations to use. “Their kind of marriage was legal throughout the United States before the Civil War. By the 1880s, it was forbidden in thirteen states. New York considered it a form of incest. Not in Michigan, though. That’s where they got married. They moved back to New York City and lived in an illegal marital status for more than fourteen years. To have her babies, Bubbe would go back to Michigan, where her mother, my great-grandmother, lived. She did this three times, and her children were not considered illegitimate. Those kids were illegally raised in New York until their teens, when the family moved to Detroit and my other uncle was born.”

While I’m talking, Pregnant Cousin starts to glow. Her spirits lift. “Gosh! Incest. I didn’t know that. So I’m not the only bad one.” She lets out a little laugh.

“Yes,” I say, “there is secret, strange stuff going on.”

“Thanks.” She squeezes my hand.

A server places a dessert plate holding a piece from the three-tier wedding cake and a large scoop of ice cream in front of each of us. I must have missed the cake-cutting ceremony when the Troll and I went outside for the toasts. Between bites, I remain silent and mentally absorb my pregnant cousin’s news, coupled with the Troll’s anecdotes about his livelihood.

Suddenly a realization comes to me about the coincidence of this moment.

(Continues.....)