

## The Long Road Home - Prologue

"Modeh Ani l'fonecha, melech chai v'kayom, sheh heh hezzartaw be neeshmawsee bechemlaw rabaw emoonah sechaw.

I give thanks before you, my living and eternal King, for you have returned my soul within me with compassion. Your faithfulness is abundant.

Rayshees chochmaw years Hashem saychel tov l'chol o'sayhemt'heelawso omedes la-awd. Baruch shame kavod malchooso l'olawm va'ed.

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of Hashem. Good understanding is given to all their practitioners; His praise endures forever. Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever."

As I open my eyes, the words flow from my lips automatically, almost without thinking; the prayer one says upon awakening in the morning.

I have many reasons to be grateful; my life, my health, my husband, my children, and most of all, my belief in the Almighty. It would be many years before I would find my way home.

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 1

The basement in our four-family house is filthy. It hasn't been cleaned in well over a year. The windows are thick with dust. I am eight years old and I climb on the boxes beneath the window in order to see if it had started raining. If not, I would get the scooter my grandfather had made for me and go to my friend Carol's house.

Without thinking, my hand moves toward the window and I begin making circles in the dust, then letters, and then some of the Hebrew letters my grandmother has taught me. A picture of the scooter flashes through mind, the orange crate scooter that is popular with kids these days, like the one my grandfather made me. I can't wait to go to Carol's.

The sound of voices approaching breaks my concentration. I look up from my doodling and see Debbie and Naomi, the other two-thirds of our "Musketeer Group" as we call ourselves. Debbie and Naomi are on their way to Hebrew School and have to pass my house in order to get there. I wave as the girls approach the window. They're wearing their Hebrew School uniforms; a white blouse with a navy blue jumper and shoes and socks to match. Each girl carries a brown briefcase that contains textbooks, notebooks, and pencils. Each has her blond, in contrast to my brown, hair in a ponytail. I, too, am out of my regular school clothes, and wearing jeans, or dungarees, as we call them, a pink tee shirt, my favorite color, and saddle shoes. The saddle part of the shoes is blue. I prefer brown, but the store is out of brown in my size, when we go to get them.

"I see you're going to Hebrew School," I yell to the girls, through the closed, dirty window.

"It's Wednesday. We always go to Hebrew School on Wednesday. You know that," says Debbie. Carol goes to Catholic School on Wednesday from one o'clock to three o'clock. Only I seem to have no religion.

"I know. I wish I could go with you," I say, the deep blue pools set beneath my dark brown lashes beginning to overflow.

"Why don't you ask your mom again?" says Naomi. "Maybe if she knows how much you want to learn about what it means to be Jewish, she will let you go."

I began twisting a long, brown curl around my finger. "No, it's no use. She won't change her mind. You know my mom and dad don't believe. I'm so confused. I don't know what to do. Mom and Dad can't be wrong!"

"What about my mom and dad," say Naomi and Debbie in unison? "I don't think they're wrong," adds Naomi.

"But, they take care of me, they buy me clothes, toys, my dad plays ball with me and my mom always makes spaghetti and meatballs, my favorite supper, every Friday night. But my grandma says there is a G-d, and that He watches over us. The tears start flowing more freely. "Who am I supposed to believe?" I say.

"I'm sorry, Sandy," says Debbie. "But we have to go now or we'll be late. My parents don't like me to be late for Hebrew School. The girls turn and leave.

I watch the girls disappear from sight and can't remember feeling so alone. Each tear finds its way to my mouth. I stick out my tongue to catch them and taste what appears to be my salty life.

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I begin absentmindedly fingering the Jewish star my aunt and uncle gave me for my last birthday. They had come over early that Sunday morning and handed me a small, neatly wrapped box with a pink ribbon on it.

My eyes bug open when I see the package. Never one to tread carefully, I rip off the paper and tear open the box. Neatly nestled on top of a piece of soft, white cotton was a gold Jewish star. I try to say "thank you" to my aunt and uncle, but my silence says more.

My aunt bends down and carefully puts the chain around my neck as I throw my arms around hers.

"Thank you," I manage to choke out.

"You're welcome, sweetheart."

"Mom, can Aunt Bea and Uncle Ted stay for breakfast?"

Mom shoots Aunt Bea a sharp look. "I think they have somewhere else to go. Maybe some other time."

I did not find out until I was an adult that my parents had had an argument with my aunt and uncle about the Jewish star. They were very much opposed to my having one and would never have allowed my aunt and uncle to buy it. But now, they couldn't very well take it away from me.

Aunt Bea shoots my mother an equally sharp look, and turns around and leaves, followed by my uncle.

"Sandy," my father says, "Why don't we go to the grocery store and buy your favorite rolls and pastries for your birthday breakfast?"

"Okay," I say, and run to get a thin jacket.

As we are walking down the street, I turn to my father, smile, and say, "You know Dad, with my Jewish star on everyone will be able to tell I am Jewish." Dad gets this weird look on his face. I shudder. Suddenly, I don't like my birthday present so much anymore, but I don't know why. I begin twisting one of my curls with my right forefinger.

The following year, Mom and Dad buy me a little heart shaped locket for my birthday. The Jewish star is all but forgotten.

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My mother's voice brings me back to the present. "Sandy, I've been looking all over for you. What are you doing down here in the basement?" Please come upstairs. It's damp and musty and you'll catch a cold.

"I'm going to ride my scooter to Carol's house."

"It's raining outside. You're not going anywhere."

"Okay," I say, and follow her up the basement steps making as much noise as possible, and into the hospital -white kitchen in our apartment. Only the deep, solid oak table and chairs are in contrast with the walls and appliances. The kitchen set was a wedding present from my paternal grandparents to my parents. The tall, straight backs on the chairs force you to sit up straight when you eat. And the table makes nice designs when you put a piece of paper on it and go over it with a crayon. While Mom is making dinner, I usually sit there and color. I pick out a crayon and start going over the paper with various different strokes, on various parts of the table.

"What's for supper, anyway," I ask Mom.

"Pork chops," Mom says.

I look at her, pleadingly.

"Don't start that again," Mom says with her green eyes wide open. "We've been through this a hundred times already. Your father and I have done a lot of research on religion. All these superstitious laws are outdated. You know we want no part of it. I don't know how, intelligent, thinking people can believe in such nonsense. Religion is a crutch for weak minded people. Besides, we cannot teach our child something we believe is wrong."

My cheeks turn flame red. I don't want Mom to think I'm "not too bright", as she says of a lot of other people. But, how can I deny what I feel so deeply inside myself?

I quietly eat my supper, fork in my left hand, right index finger twirling a long, brown curl, trying to avoid the meat as much as possible. I finish most of what is on my plate. "May I be excused, please?" I'd like to go to bed and read a little."

"Okay," Mom says. "Lights out at 7:30. Good night, sweetheart."

I go to my room and unbutton my pants. The waistband is getting a little tight. "I'm fat," I think. [I didn't realize it at the time, but that was the beginning of my obsession with my weight.]

I have a nice, big room, which had originally been my parents' bedroom. They now sleep on a high-riser in the living room. Green floral paper covered the walls and the floor had matching carpet. Everything was green! My mother loved green! When I got married, I would never have anything green in my house! I also have a large collection of dolls, games, and coloring books that sat on the shelves Dad had built for me.

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My paternal grandmother's father was a Rabbi. I had seen a picture of him. He had kind, gentle eyes like Grandma, wore a big European yarmulke and his payos (side locks) curled upward in the shape of a letter "U". But my paternal grandfather was a rebel. He was not a believer, and he raised his children, including my father, as such.

My grandparents would never have married in the old country. But, here in America, young immigrants were looking to build new families to replace the ones they had left behind. And, when my grandfather found my grandmother, he was not about to lose her, despite their religious differences.

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I think back to when I started learning to read Hebrew.

"What are you reading?" I ask Grandma one rainy Tuesday, after I come home from kindergarten. I'm always at Grandma's. They live across the street from me, and my grandmother and I are inseparable.

"Tehellim," Grandma says.

"Tehellim?" my nose scrunches at the sound of the unfamiliar word.

"Yes, shayna maidala" (pretty girl). "In English it is called Psalms. King David wrote them and they are all about singing praises to G-d."

"Will you teach me how to read Tehillim, Grandma?"

"Come sit on my lap mamala. We will say Tehellim together."

Thus, I am reading Hebrew before I am reading English. Now I have my own sefer Tehellim, with an English translation. It is this that I crawl into bed with every night. In the morning I put my Tehellim away with all my other books.

Grandma has no idea how her loving undercurrent would eventually pull me in and save my life.

I slip into the pajamas Grandma made me, grab my favorite doll, along with a flashlight and my Tehillim and find sanctuary under my comforter.

I spend the night wrapped in Grandma's love, enveloped by a hug that would comfort me until morning.

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The next day at school, I talk to my friend Sarah, who goes to the same Hebrew School as Debbie and Naomi. Sarah has deep blue eyes like mine and her brown hair is combed in bouncy curls just like mine. The curls are half-way down our backs, and bounce when we walk. Barrettes placed on either side of our heads keep the hair from flying in our faces.

"How was Hebrew School yesterday?" I ask Sarah.

"Good. We learned about Noah and the flood and how he had to take two of every animal into the ark because G-d was going to destroy the earth because the people were very bad."

My right forefinger begins to twirl a brown curl. "I wish I could go with you."

"I have an idea," says Sarah. "You know my father is a Rabbi. Why don't you come to my house for supper tonight? Maybe my father can talk to your father and explain how you feel."

"Are you sure it's all right?" I ask.

"Sure it is. We're always having people over for dinner, especially on Shabbos, (the Sabbath)."

I run home as soon as school lets out. Now that I am in third grade, I am allowed to walk home from school by myself.

"Mom, Mom," I yell as I open the door and run into our apartment. "Can I go to Sarah's house for supper tonight? You know the family. They're really nice people".

"Okay," says Mom. "But first I want to give you a bath. This way we won't have to do it when you come home later tonight. Dad will come for you at seven-thirty."

"Thanks Mom," I say, surprised that I was given permission to go without having to answer a million questions first.



## The Long Road Home - Chapter 2

At five-thirty I run down the block towards Sara's house. I ring the bell and wait. The door is opened by a tall man with a slight build, perhaps my father's age. A yarmulke partially covers his receding hairline and his long, brown beard is flecked with gray. His eyes remind me of my great-grandfather's eyes.

"How nice to see you, Sandy. Please come in," Sarah's father says. "Supper is all ready. We just have to wash."

"Oh, I already took a bath," I say.

Sarah's father smiles. "That's not what I mean." His kind, hazel eyes crease with a smile. "We must ritually wash our hands and say a blessing before we eat, when bread is served with the meal. Come, I will show you."

Everyone else has already washed and is waiting for us so we can say the blessing over the bread.

I follow Sarah's father into the kitchen. "We have a special cup with two handles that we fill with water. We then pick up the cup with our right hand, switch it to the left hand, and begin pouring water on each hand twice. We then say "Al Natilas Yadayim" which is the blessing regarding washing the hands."

I dutifully follow the Rabbi's instructions. I am feeling something I cannot explain. Is it strange because it is new to my physical being, or because it is not new to my soul? It would take time to put all this into perspective. At this time, I am one very confused little girl.

"I can read Hebrew," I then proudly announce.

Rabbi Kaplan smiles again and puts his finger to his lips, indicating that I should not speak, and leads me to the table. "He says "HaMotzei," which is the blessing before we eat bread from the earth, and then he gives everyone a slice of the delicious home-made challah. Everyone says "Amen" and bites into his or her soft, doughy slice.

"Now we can talk," says Sarah. "When we say a blessing for something, we are not allowed to speak until after we do it. That is part of the 613 commandments in the Torah that Jewish people are supposed to obey."

"Mmm, this bread is delicious." I say.

"Thank you," says Mrs. Kaplan. It is called challah. We usually serve it on Shabbos, but we thought we would serve it for this special occasion since you are our honored dinner guest. When I make the dough, I roll it up in three strands and then braid it the same way you braid your hair. Then I brush eggs that I have beaten, on top of the challah to get it nice and shiny. We also drink wine and grape juice on Shabbos. Maybe you would like to come to us for a Shabbos and see what it is all about.

"My Grandma gets challah from the bakery on Saturday. It's good, but not as good as this challah."

I quietly look around the dining room. It is a long room, with light green walls, not nearly as green as my bedroom. The upholstery on the chairs is light brown, and has small, green leaves that match the walls. The long dining room table is covered with a white, linen tablecloth. Mrs. Kaplan has also taken out the fine china. It's simple pattern, with a gold border, complementing the thin lines on the silverware. But, this is nothing compared to the feast sitting on the table. The meal consists of roast chicken, pot roast, potato kugel, noodle kugel, tossed salad and cranberry-walnut salad. There are a lot of people around the table. Sarah is one of six children. My house is only this full when we have company.

"Let's eat," says Mrs. Kaplan as she piles my plate full of all the different foods.

"Mountains of food, just like at my house," I say. "My mom is a good cook."

"Ma," said Daniel, "Michael is in my seat."

"Well," said Michael, "Daniel took my fork."

"Quiet down, both of you. We have a guest." Mrs. Kaplan is a typical Jewish mother, if there is such a thing. She is small in stature, a few pounds overweight,

no doubt due to her own good cooking, and she dotes on everyone who comes into her home. Her light brown shaitel (wig) is combed in a pageboy style which flatters her high cheek bones and almond-shaped, blue eyes. She has a ready smile and a quick wit, and spends many hours a week volunteering at the local nursing home. But her greatest pleasure is feeding her family, body and soul, which she does with great aplomb.

"Make sure you leave room for dessert," Sarah said. "I helped Mom make the brownies."

"Really," brownies are my favorite. I help my mom bake, too."

After everyone is done with dessert, Rabbi Kaplan takes out the bentchers. "After we eat, we say special prayers to thank G-d for providing us with all this wonderful food. We will start on page two and read until page six."

"I can do that," I say proudly, and I am even prouder that I can keep up with the Kaplan family. It wasn't until years later that I found out my gracious hosts had slowed down their pace considerably on that memorable evening.

My emotions begin welling up in me. To everyone's surprise, including my own, I start to cry.

"What's the matter, dear?" asks Mrs. Kaplan.

"Dad," says Sarah, "Sandy wants to go to Hebrew School but her parents won't let her. They say it's all nonsense."

"Come with me to my study," says Rabbi Kaplan. I follow him out of the dining room and into a small room across the hall. The walls are ceiling to floor bookcases filled with Hebrew books. The highly polished hardwood floors make the room feel cozy and official at the same time.

Rabbi Kaplan sits down in a large, swivel chair. I am standing in front of him.

"Tell me now," he says soothingly, "My Sarah'la says that your parents don't want you to learn about the Jewish religion. Is that right?"

I stand there, frozen on the spot, afraid to speak, and not sure I had done the right thing in coming to Sarah's house for supper. My right index finger starts twisting a long brown curl.

"Do you have a Jewish name, maidala?"

"Shaindy."

"Well, Shaindy, what do you want?"

"I don't know...I...I..."

Just at that moment, my father walks into Rabbi Kaplan's study. The two men shake hands as they greet each other. "Mr. Abrams." "Rabbi Kaplan."

"Sandy and I are discussing Judaism. It seems she is very interested in the topic and would like to go to Hebrew School."

"Look," my father says, "We are Jews and we are proud of it, but we are not into organized religion. We will just have to respect each other's differences."

I look back and forth from my father to the Rabbi and begin to cry again when I remember the question Rabbi Kaplan had asked me. I could not defy my parents.

"I want to go home," I say, and run out the door.

My father runs after me and scoops me up in his arms.

"Sandy," he says soothingly, "When you grow up you'll see, we are right. And if you feel differently then, you can do whatever you want. But for now, you must listen to us and trust us. We are your parents and we know what is best."

My father carried me all the way home and put me to bed. The crying continued as my parents rubbed my hair and stroked my cheeks, but no stroking could touch that part of me that was so desperately reaching out for help.

I cried myself to sleep that night. I had a very strange dream. In the dream, I was a princess. Mom and Dad were not my real parents. My real parents had given me to Mom and Dad to care for until it was safe for me to return home. I didn't know why I had been given away but I desperately want to go home where I belong.

### The Long Road Home - Chapter 3

When I wake up the next morning, I felt very strange. "A Princess!" I do not know what the dream means. It would take years to sort it out and make sense of it.

I look at the clock. It's seven-thirty. I have a half hour to loll in bed before I have to get up and get ready for school.

The smell of coffee is teasing my nostrils. Maybe I'll find a few leftover drops in Dad's cup.

"Coffee will stunt your growth. When you're grown up you can have coffee. Meantime, drink your milk." I hate milk! It's not fair that my parents get to be grown-ups and I have to be a kid and listen to them. Nobody tells them what to do!

Eight o'clock. Mom's in the shower. I walk into the kitchen.

Dad is finishing up his usual breakfast: a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, a slice of toast with cream cheese spread as thick as the bread, a three-minute egg, and a cup of coffee. The loose egg whites make me gag. But, oh, how I wish I could have some of the coffee.

"Good morning, Sandala," says Dad. "How did you sleep?"

"Okay, I guess. Dad?"

"What, sweetheart?"

"Do you think I'm a princess?"

"Of course you're a princess. You're my princess and you always will be."

"No. I mean, really?"

"Sandy, I don't know where you get all these ideas of yours, but, you're still my princess." I get my usual peck on the cheek, pat (pat) on the behind, the breakfast dishes go in the sink, and Dad's gone for the day.

I slowly walk over to the sink and peek in the coffee cup. "Aha!" There are a few drops of coffee left. I pick it up, hold it to my nose, and inhale the intoxicating aroma. Then slowly, I tilt the cup upward and let the coffee spill into my mouth and roll down my tongue, one delicious drop at a time. I suck out every bit and savor every moment. When I grow up I'm going to drink all the coffee I want and no one will ever be able to stop me. I quietly put the cup back in the sink.

"Sandy, I'm going to give you your clothes," Mom says when she gets out of the shower. "What would you like for breakfast?"

"I guess I'll have a six- minute egg and toast with cream cheese. Mom?"

"What, honey?"

"Do you think I am a princess?"

"Of course! You're our princess."

"No. I mean, really!"

"Here are your clothes, Sandy. I'm going to make your breakfast. Of course, you're a princess."

I get dressed and go into the kitchen. My breakfast waiting for me on the table.

"Finish up or you'll be late for school. Do you need your homework signed?" \

"Nope. Not today. Mom, when you were my age what did you used to like to do when you came home from school?"

"Mostly I played with my friends, why?"

"What did you play?"

"Mostly with our dolls. You know I was never allowed to have a bicycle. I wanted one so badly but my mother was afraid I would fall and get hurt. The only reason I got skates was because my sister made such a fuss that your grandmother had to give in. And when we went skating, Grandma would watch from the window and tell us to be careful and not to fall and get hurt. Mom started twisting her finger around her light brown hair. And Grandma used to ride horses in the old country! Bareback! She left her parents behind, you know. She came to this country when she was nineteen. Her parents were old and sick by then and she was their baby. Grandma said they didn't want her to leave and they made her feel very guilty when she did. You're named after Grandma's mother Shaindel, you know. And Grandma didn't want us to leave, either, my sister and me, even when we got married. I felt so guilty. I had to call every morning at ten o'clock. If I didn't, I would feel even guiltier, because she said she thought something terrible had happened to me." Mom's voice was cracking. "I tried so hard to please her, to show her I could do things. But, she wouldn't let me. I never had to do any chores. I could have, you know. When you were born, Grandma said she didn't trust me to take good care of you. I take good care of you, Sandy, don't I?" Mom's demeanor suddenly changed. She sat up strait in her chair. "See how lucky you are! I would never do that to you!"

Tears fill her eyes. I am eight! I don't know what to do. Poor Mom! Did her parents understand her?

She looks at her watch. "You need to leave for school soon or you'll be late. What should I make you for lunch?" (In the 1950's in Brooklyn, elementary school children went home for lunch).

"Um...a...hamburger."

"Okay. Button your coat up all the way and make sure you wear your hat, scarf, and gloves. It's cold outside. And make sure you look both ways before you cross the street. Don't run, but walk fast, don't talk to strangers, and don't stop until you get to school."

"Yes, Mom, I know."



"Now, come give me a kiss. I'll see you at noon. Have a good morning."

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By eleven-thirty, I am starting to get hungry. The art teacher is due in our classroom any minute. I hate art. I can't draw anything. I like it better when we have cut and paste projects. At least I can do that.

"Good morning, class," says Mrs. Gold, the art teacher, as she walks into the classroom. "Today we're going to make collages for the upcoming holidays.

Those of you who celebrate Christmas will get red and green construction paper and those of you who celebrate Chanukah will get blue and white paper."

As Mrs. Gold passes my desk, she hands me two sheets, one white, and one, blue.

"I don't celebrate Chanukah, Mrs. Gold," I say.

"Aren't you Jewish, Sandy?"

"Yes, but we don't celebrate Chanukah. We celebrate Christmas. We don't have a tree, but we don't have a menorah, either. My grandparents give me Chanukah gelt, (money) but my parents give me Christmas presents and I bake Christmas cookies with my mother. I want red and green construction paper."

"Very well," says Mrs. Gold, as she reluctantly hands me the colors I request.

I carefully cut the green paper into the shape of a Christmas tree and the red paper into balls to decorate the tree.

At five to twelve, Mrs. Gold collects all the papers and dismisses the class for lunch. I'm so hungry, I run home.

"Hi Mom," I say as I fly in the door. "I'm starving."

"Go wash your hands and come to the table," Mom said. "Your hamburger is ready."

I take a bite. It's well done. "You know I like it pink inside."

"You don't know what's good. It's much better this way. Now eat up or you'll be late getting back to school."

"Yes, Mom."

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 4

Twelve-thirty, Saturday afternoon. We're on our way to my maternal grandparents' house for our usual dinner. We park the car around the corner so the neighbors don't see it, and we walk to my grandparents' apartment building.

I do not realize it at the time, but this is the last remaining Shabbos tradition we keep, the midday meal on Saturday, even though the large, free-standing radio is tuned in to the Saturday afternoon opera station.

After the meal, Grandpa gives both my cousin and me our twenty-five cent allowance. My cousin and I go across the street to the Five and Dime, walk slowly up and down the aisles, and carefully select our purchases.

"Look at this little tea set," I say to my cousin Joan. "I think I'm going to buy it. We can have a tea party when we go back."

"Nah, I don't wanna have a tea party," says Joan. "I think I'll buy this little pin ball machine. You can try it if you want."

"Maybe after my tea party. I know Grandpa will come."

We pay for our purchases, put our change in our pockets, feeling totally grown-up, and head back to our grandparents' apartment.

When we return, the women are doing the dishes, and the men are napping in the living room, oblivious to the aria that is being broadcast just a few feet away.

Disappointed, I sit on the couch next to Grandpa and lay my head on his lap. I fall asleep before the aria is over. When I wake up, I am alone on the couch, and there is a small afghan that Grandma had knit, covering me. Grandpa is sitting by the window, reading "The Forward", the radio is off, and not a sound can be heard.

"Where is everybody?" I ask as I rub the sleep from my eyes.

"They went for a walk, maidala [little girl]. They should be back soon."

"Grandpa, let's have a tea party before everyone comes back, just you and me. I bought a cute little tea set at the Five and Dime, but Joan doesn't like tea parties.

"Okay," says Grandpa. And Grandma has some tea left over from dessert [we can use]."

"We can use real tea?"

"And sugar!" says Grandpa.

It takes me all of about two seconds to rip the plastic off my new tea set and put everything in the sink. I climb on the stool and wash the teapot, the cups, and saucers. Grandpa dries them for me just as he always does for Grandma. Then, he carefully pours some cool tea in my teapot and brings it to the table. I bring the cups and saucers.

"May I have your cup, please," I ask my honored guest. Grandpa hands it to me.

I carefully pour tea in the tiny cup. "How many sugars would you like?"

"One, this time," Grandpa says. I hand him a lump. He takes the lump of sugar, holds it between his teeth, and sips the tea, just as he did in the old country.

"Grandpa, why did you come to America?"

"Life was very hard for Jews in Russia. The Czar did not like us and he made our lives very hard. I was in the army and was treated very badly, so I decided to come to America to have a better life."

"Did you observe the mitzvahs in Russia?"

"Of course! Everyone did."

"How come you stopped when you came to America?"

"I don't know, maidala. It's hard to explain. Life is different here. Let's finish our tea before everyone comes back."

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The rest of the winter passes uneventfully. I go to school, play with my friends, and read from my Sefer Tehellim, learning more and more psalms by heart.

Eventually, winter melts into spring. Pesach approaches and we are "getting ready". I get two new dresses every Pesach, one for each Seder night, although there is nothing different about those two nights in our family except the new dresses and the presence of matzah balls. No wine. No egg. No shank bone. And no Haggaddahs. Our tradition consists only of matzoh balls, gefilte fish, and horseradish. The blue box of Horowitz Margareten matzah on the table is there only to accompany the gefilte fish.

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 5

"Uh oh! Mom's coming in! I dive back into bed where I had previously been lying in a pool of sweat.

Many hot, summer evenings are spent hiding by the bedroom window watching what is going on outside. I can't sleep for the heat and it would be many years before we would have an air conditioner.

"Sandy, are you asleep?" Mom's voice whispers into the stale, night air.

"No, Mom. It's too hot to sleep".

"Put on a bathing suit. We're going to the beach."

"What? It's dark outside!"

"Yes, I know. But we're roasting and since we have a car now, we can drive to the beach. We need relief from this heat."

It's 1953. My parents had just purchased a used, 1949 two-door Ford coup after having been without a car for over a year.

"I'm going to pack some drinks and some fruit and we'll be off," my mother says.

"Yippee!" I jump out of bed and into my bathing suit.

We gather our things together and get into the car. I lie down on the back seat.

"Ah, relief!" The air blows through the open windows and cools me off immediately. My hair, now free, is blowing around after having been soaked with perspiration and matted down against my neck. The radio is on and Rosemary Clooney is singing "Comonna my house, my house, I'm gonna give you candy." We all sing along, each in his or her own key, none in tune with Rosemary.

Coney Island. Quiet, calm, and inviting.

"Sandy, take the blanket, please," Dad says. "I'll take the chairs." "I'll take the food and drinks," Mom says.

We walk a little ways down until we're half-way between the parking lot and the ocean. There are several other families with the same idea. Many children are lying on blankets, sleeping, and adults are sitting on chairs, chatting amicably. Babies are being fed or rocked to sleep in the comfort of a parent's arms. The heat is oppressing and everyone is enjoying the ocean breeze.

"This looks like a good spot," says Mom as she dropped the heavy cooler down on the soft sand. I hear the "thud" in my head. "Okay," Dad agrees, as he opens the chairs and puts them down next to the cooler.

"I'm going in the water," says Dad. "Anyone care to join me?"

"No," says Mom, "I'm just going to sit on the chair and knit. There's just enough light. I'm making Sandy a sweater although it will probably be quite a while before she needs it. Sandy, why don't you lie down on the blanket and try to get some sleep."

"I am kinda tired. What time is it?"

"A quarter to ten."

I snuggle into the blanket. The sand under the blanket molds to my small frame and the ocean sings its lullaby. My eyelids start to close as I begin feeling heady from the warm summer air and the glistening stars. I am instantly transported to that place which is neither too hot, nor too cold, too dry, not too humid [NOTE: damp handwritten in its place] but where mystical dreams envelop your soul and yours is the only reality that exists.

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 6

I don't know how long we stayed at the beach, but the next thing I know, its morning, and I am back in my bed. It's eight o'clock and the heat has not yet had a chance to assault the new day.

I am looking forward to the carnival that is being set up at my friend Carol's church tonight. It feels like a pre-birthday present for me. Debbie and Naomi will be going with me.

I continue to be friends with Sarah at school, but I don't go back to her house. Sarah, of course, is not coming to the carnival.

"Good morning, Sandala," says Mom, as I walk into the kitchen. "How did you sleep?"

"Okay. What time does the carnival start?"

"Not until after supper. What would you like for breakfast?"

"I don't know. I'm too excited about tomorrow. Can't you just give me one little hint?"

"Not even one," says Mom.

Poor Mom! I wonder if she was still mad at Grandma for not allowing her to have a bike as a child. I knew that if I asked for one for my birthday, I would get one. But, that's not until tomorrow. Good thing there is the carnival tonight. It would take my mind off what I knew was going to be a very happy birthday for me this year.

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At seven o'clock there is a knock on the door.

"Who's there," I ask.



"It's us," Debbie and Naomi say in unison.

I open the door. "Are you ready to go?" they want to know.

"Sure am. Mom can I have some money?"

"Here's two dollars. Have fun and be home by ten o'clock."

I run out the door. "I will. Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad."

The church is three blocks from my house. It is right across the street from the synagogue where Debbie and Naomi attend Hebrew School.

"Can I see your classroom before we go to the carnival?"

"I wanna go on the rides," says Naomi.

"Besides, it's usually closed by now. Everyone's gone by six o'clock and they don't come back until it's time for evening prayers," says Debbie.

"Do your fathers go to evening prayer services?" I ask the girls.

"No, they only go on the holidays. You know, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur."

"If your parents send you to Hebrew School, how come your fathers don't go to services?"

"We're not Orthodox like Sarah," Naomi says. "Her father goes three times a day."

"Orthodox?" I ask.

"It's complicated," says Debbie. "Let's just go to the carnival."

I am puzzled. Does Debbie or Naomi really know what it means to be Jewish? They certainly don't know as much as Sarah knows.

"Come on," says Naomi. "We're wasting time. Let's go."

As we go inside the carnival gate, we meet up with Carol. She is volunteering, selling tickets. All members of her church volunteer at the carnivals.

We buy our tickets and run to the carousel, our favorite ride. The line is very long but we decide to wait anyway.

"Hey," says Naomi. "Maybe you'll get a horse for your birthday tomorrow." Everyone knows I love horses.

We all laugh. "Even I know you can't keep a horse in an apartment in Brooklyn. But I do have another idea."

"Yeah, what?" asks Debbie.

"Don't tell, or you'll jinx it," says Naomi.

"Nah, I don't think I'll jinx it, but I'm not telling, anyway."

"Come on!" yells Debbie. "It's our tum on the carousel."

We hand the man our tickets, climb on our horses, and for a little while, three little girls from Brooklyn are Annie Oakley.

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"It's almost ten o'clock," I say. "I better get home."

"Yeah, me, too," says Debbie.

"Besides, you have a big day tomorrow," adds Naomi with a big grin. "Call me as soon as you get your birthday present."

"I will."

Five minutes later I'm home. Mom and Dad are sitting outside, in front of our apartment.

"You look like you had a good time," Dad says.

"You also look tired," says Mom. "Why don't you go inside, take a bath, and go to bed. Tomorrow is a big day."

"I know. G'night."

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 7

I know I'm getting a bike. I just know it! The only questions in my mind are, "What color will it be? And, "How big will the wheels be?" Debbie and Naomi's bikes have twenty-six inch wheels. I know that's too big for me now, but I am growing. I would outgrow anything smaller, just as I did the twenty inch bike Carol have me after she got her big one. Carol is three years older than I am, and I had been using her old bike for the past three years.

Dad had taught me how to ride on Carol's bike. It was silver, all silver. The body, the handlebars, and even the wheels. It was all plastic and made a "squirp" noise when I rode it.

"Dad, Dad," I had run into the house one hot Sunday morning. "Can I have Carol's old bike? She just got a new one for her birthday. Will you teach me how to ride?"

Dad turned his head to reveal a face caked with shaving cream. "Can it wait until I finish shaving?" He smiled, showing teeth that looked yellow compared to the shaving cream.

"I guess. But hurry!"

"If I hurry, I'll cut myself. Relax (yeah, right!) the bike isn't going anywhere without you.

How do you tell a six year old to relax and wait? I sat down on top of the closed toilet seat and watched my father as he shaved. He was big and strong and handsome. He wet his shaving brush, lathered it up with shaving soap from his wooden cup and slapped it on his face with brisk, up and down strokes. When his face was all lathered up, he put down the brush and picked up his razor. Each smooth stroke of the razor revealed another section of clean skin. When all the shaving cream was removed, he picked up a towel and wiped his face. Then he poured some after-shave lotion in his hands and rubbed it on where he had shaved. When that was done, he lathered up the shaving brush again and smeared some on me. We both laughed and I pretended to shave with a bladeless razor, temporarily forgetting that I was in a hurry.

"Okay, can we go now?"

"I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"Daaaaddyyyyyyyy!"

"Okay, we can go now."

I ran out the door, hopped on the bike and straddled the seat. My feet just reached the ground.

"Hold onto the handlebars, and use the pedals," Dad said. "I'll hold the seat and help you keep your balance. After about ten minutes, Dad let go of the seat. I was riding! Dad was huffing and puffing. We were both smiling.

That old, silver bike was ready to be passed along to the next in line. Yup! I just knew there would be a bike in my room when I woke up in the morning!

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The next morning I wake up with a start, sit bolt upright, and wipe the sleep from my eyes. I gasp! There it is! All shiny and brand new! Bright red and soft blue! All twenty-six inches of it!

I climb onto the seat. I'm on my way. Where, I don't know, but I'm on my way!

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 8

Time has a way of getting away from us. I am now twelve and my bike and I are old friends. My feet reach the ground when I sit on the seat, but it is not my feet that I am concerned about.

The turmoil regarding religion is still going on in my head and I have started withdrawing from my friends and family. The phone interrupted my musings.

"Hello?"

It's Naomi. "Sandy, guess who just asked me to the party on Saturday night? Richie! Imagine that! You remember I told you I like him. I can't believe it! I'm so excited! My mom is going to take me shopping tomorrow for a dress. Did anyone ask you yet?"

I'm finding it difficult to share my friend's enthusiasm. "That's nice."

"Sandy, what's wrong? You've changed lately. I'm worried about you. Your grades have gone down and you don't want to go to the girls' club any more. It's like you have no interest in anything."

"I guess that's about it," I say. I'm fat and ugly and I don't want anyone to see me and I don't want to do anything. I have all I need in my room; my phone, my radio, and my record player. I can turn on the music and pretend I am dancing with any boy I want.

"Sandy, that's not true. Maybe you could lose ten pounds, but so could I. And you've been told that you're pretty. I think so. Why do you feel that way about yourself?"

Suddenly, I start crying. "I don't know, Naomi. I feel as if I am losing my mind. I don't know what to do to stop from hurting. I am in so much pain. I didn't used to feel this way. I can't explain it. It's as if demons are living in my head telling me that I'm not worth anything and that I don't belong anywhere."

"Maybe you should see a doctor. You know, one like that girl Phyllis is going to."

"You mean a psychiatrist? No way? She's bad news? She's mean and she hurts people."

"Of course you're not, Sandy. But you seem to be having problems that you can't solve and I just thought that maybe a doctor could help."

"Well, forget about it. I'm not going," I say, slamming the phone down in the cradle. I cry myself to sleep, which is becoming more usual than unusual for me.

When I get up in the morning, I go to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. A bottle of aspirin is sitting right next to the toothpaste. I glance at the aspirin bottle. In large print it says, "STOPS PAIN FAST".

"Hmm," I think, "Maybe this will give me the relief I need. My hands start shaking. I fumble a little as I try to twist off the small, white cap. Once open, I remove two tablets from the bottle and swallow them. I sit down on my bed, waiting to feel better. When I don't, I start pacing, leaving footprints in the dark green carpet. Fifteen minutes go by. I take two more. Another fifteen minutes pass and still no relief. I take two more pills. I begin to feel somewhat tired, so I go back to bed. Both Mom and Dad had already left for work, so no one is there to nag me about being late for school.

I wake up four hours later. I'm groggy and disoriented and stumble when I try to get out of bed but I'm no longer in any pain.

"This is wonderful," I think. "It's the answer to my problems. Mom and Dad had warned me about not taking drugs but aspirins are medicine. I would never take illegal drugs, or drink alcohol, for that matter. I decide to take six more pills and go back to bed.

"Sandy, Sandy, wake up," Mom says as she tries to get me to move. "It's five o'clock in the afternoon. What are you doing in bed? Are you sick?"

"I didn't feel well this morning, so I decided to stay home from school. I'm sure I'll feel better tomorrow."

"Can I get you something," Mom asks.

"No thanks, Mom. I just want to go back to sleep."

"All right, dear. I'll see you in the morning. Feel better."

I sleep very well that night but when I wake up in the morning, the pain is back. I start crying, and then I remember the aspirins. I take six more pills and go back to bed.

Mom can't rouse me so she calls an ambulance. There is no 9-1-1. My parents are at the hospital when I have my stomach pumped.

Finally, I am awake and alert, and Dr. Michaels comes in to speak to me, after having spoken at length to my parents.

Dr. Michaels makes me feel comforted and ill at ease at the same time. He is in his early thirties, about six feet tall and muscular, with dark brown, wavy hair and big brown eyes. He has a five o'clock shadow that is begging not to be shaved.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say honestly. I'm just so sad. I don't feel like me. I hate myself. I wasn't always like this. I don't know what is happening to me. I'm scared!

"Why did you take so many aspirins?" asks Dr. Michaels.

"I just wanted the pain to stop. It said on the aspirin bottle that it will stop pain."

"Well," says Dr. Michaels, "It sounds to me like you are suffering from Depression".

"What's Depression?"

"It's when you feel sad and hopeless. Sometimes people your age begin to suffer from Depression. It can be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain or by a traumatic event in a person's life. In your case, I think it is a chemical imbalance. No one knows why it happens but it is very treatable with anti-depression



medication and talk therapy. I will give you a prescription for some medication, but promise me you will take the pills only as directed and, no more aspirins! Also, it can take a few weeks before you start feeling better. Be patient, Sandy.

You have your whole life ahead of you, and with a little help it can be a very good one."

The anti-depressant medication does make me feel somewhat better but it does not fill the hole in my soul. By this time, I am espousing the same feelings about religion that my parents are. But I feel like a lost soul. I can't seem to find myself.

"Maybe music will fill the gap?"

"Mom, can I take piano lessons?"

"I'm sorry, dear, but we can't afford a piano. How about dancing lessons?"

Six months later, I lose interest in dancing lessons.

"How about Girl Scouts?" Mom suggests. "They do wonderful things, and you'll meet lots of nice girls."

"Okay," I say, so we go shopping for my uniform. Green! Ugh! I can't believe it! Of all colors!" Anyway, I do meet nice girls and I enjoy volunteering at the local nursing home.

My favorite is Mrs. Levine. She has curly gray hair that is always neat and it accentuates her sad, hazel eyes. She shows me pictures of her family and herself as a young woman. She was a beautiful young woman with dark hair and, unlike the slumped over figure in the wheel chair, she stood tall and proud. I visit Mrs. Levine every week and we become very good friends. She tells me all about her family and how she had a hard time getting out of Europe during World War II.

"I lost most of my family in the Holocaust, but I have never given up my will to live. You are the only one who comes to visit me now. My children are far away. Tell me about yourself."

"Well," I say, I am an only child and my parents are very good to me, but I don't feel useful. That's why I like coming to visit you, Mrs. Levine."

"We do make a good pair, don't we, Sandy?"

We do. But when my parents and I return from vacation, I learn that Mrs. Levine has passed away.

"I'm not going back to Girl Scouts," I tell my mother.

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 9

Two years pass. I'm fourteen and still floundering. I'm in junior high now. The medication is helping but I still can't seem to find myself.

Ugh, Monday morning again! First period, here I come. I bump into my new friend Ann on the way to English class.

"How was your week-end?" Ann says.

"Okay, and yours?"

"Boring! I have an idea. Why don't you come to my house this week-end?"

Ann is a nice girl, so I decide to go if it is okay with my parents. It is.

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Friday night, five o'clock. My parents bring me to Anne's house. I ring the doorbell.

"Ma, she's here," shouts Ann.

"Well, let her in," says Ann's mother.

Ann opens the door and starts jumping up and down when she sees me. I'm not quite so excited. I take in the unfamiliar but warm surroundings. Ann's mother is wiping her hands on her appetizingly stained apron and I can see the cushion on the couch where her father had been sitting, the newspaper lying on the cushion next to it. All four parents introduce themselves. We are all warmly welcomed. Soon, my parents turn to go, but not until they embarrass me with their hugs and kisses.

"Bye, Mom, bye, Dad. See you Sunday night."

"Bye, honey. Have a good time."

"Supper is ready," says Ann's mother. "Please come in and sit down."

We all sit down to a delicious meal. Ann's mom had made ham with pineapple, mashed potatoes with milk and butter and her famous green bean casserole with cheddar cheese. The green and orange swirls look delicious. Ann's mom and dad drink coffee while we girls are given milk. None of this bothers me, except the milk, of course, since I had long ago repressed my desire for the tenets of my religion. As a matter of fact, part of what made the stay at Ann's house for the week-end so inviting, is the fact they all go to church together on Sunday mornings. Ann is Catholic.

"Sandy, do you want to come with my cousin and me to a dance at my cousin's Catholic school next Friday night?" Ann says as she swallows her meat and washes it down with a swig of milk.

"Sure, if it's okay with my parents. As a matter of fact, I just got a new dress. It's blue. My father says it matches my eyes. It's fitted at the waist, has long, puffy sleeves, and ruffles on the bottom."

"Sounds nice," says Ann, as she finishes her meal. "Let's go play Chess before we go to bed."

Ann has her own room, with rose-colored carpeting and a bedspread to match. Her double bed, desk, and dresser are white with gold trim. There are no clothes piled up on the desk chair, as in my room, and no shoes piled in the corner. I wonder if she has cleaned her room because she is expecting me. I would probably clean my room if she were coming to my house.

We are heavy into our game when Ann's mom comes in. "Time for bed, girls. Unless you can finish quickly, please leave it for tomorrow. It's getting late and you'll have all day Saturday to do as you please." She turns to Ann. "Dad and I are going shopping. You're both welcome to join us, if you like."

Ann goes to the bathroom to change into pajamas first. Now, it's my turn. When I come out of the bathroom, I find Ann down on her knees, by the bed, hands clasped together in prayer.

"Come join me," Ann says. "I'm determined to give you some religion. It will do you good. Believe me, we may even find you a nice Catholic boy to marry and you could convert."

Ann has no idea of the turmoil that is raging in my head. I have never discussed my feelings on the subject with her, except to say that I don't practice any religion.

I get down on my knees and follow Ann's lead, repeating what she says, word for word. I am finally getting some religion and am getting a rush I have never experienced before, or have I? As I climb into bed, my eyes fixate on an object that is hanging on the wall over the headboard. I have seen the object many times before but not at such close range.

"The cross is there to protect us while we sleep," Ann says.

"Oh," I say, and crawl under the covers. I open my mouth to say something but can't articulate nor even understand what I am feeling. The blanket hugs my body securely. The cross supposedly hugs my soul. I drift off instantly.

Saturday we all go shopping and Ann's mom buys both Ann and me a silver locket. We get our pictures taken in a little photo booth and each of us puts a picture in our locket.

"Thank you for such a wonderful day, Mr. and Mrs. Brown. It's one of the best times I can remember."

"It's our pleasure," both say. "On Sunday morning we all usually go to church but I don't know if your parents would approve of us taking you with us," Ann's dad says.

"Oh, they won't mind," I say. "They don't do anything Jewish."

"Well, in that case, I guess it will be all right," Ann's father says.

Ann and I get up at seven thirty the next morning. My nostrils inhale the familiar smell of bacon. The aroma wafts through the air until I succumb and get out of

bed. I head for the kitchen where there are also pancakes, scrambled eggs, and home fried potatoes. Delicious!

After breakfast, Ann and I clear off the table and get dressed.

"Everyone in the car," says Ann's father.

Five minutes later we arrive at the church. Soul Food! That's what I need! And the priest was feeding it to me. I couldn't get enough and hungrily swallowed every word. The last time I remember feeling this way is when my cousins and I went shul hopping on Shabbos morning before going to my grandparents' house for Saturday dinner. Soon we would be returning to Ann's house for Sunday dinner. Maybe this is the road I am meant to go down.

"Okay," says Ann's mother. "Church provides us with food for our souls and now we are about to feed our bodies again. The body needs nourishment as well as the soul, so we can serve G-d."

Somehow, the words ring familiar but I can't remember where I had heard them before.

"Let's all sit down," says Ann's father. "We are ready for our Sabbath meal and are fortunate enough to have Sandy as our honored guest. More familiar words. Where HAD I heard them?"

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"You're a Jewish girl," says Mom.

"You have no business going to church on Sunday and you're not going to a Catholic school dance, and you're not to see Ann again."

I burst into tears. "When I was eight, you wouldn't let me see my friend Sarah and now you won't let me see Ann."

I run to my room. If I was confused before, I am totally lost now. I feel so alone and out of place and don't know where I belong or to whom I can turn for answers. Is there no place for me on this earth?

## The Long Road Home - Chapter 10

I am now fifteen. It had been three years since I had swallowed too many aspirins and had my stomach pumped. I am reminded of the incident each time I take my anti-depressant medication, but my mental health is still tenuous. I am getting better grades only in subjects that interest me and I am spending a little more time with family and friends.

On the other hand, I had cut off my long, dark curls and was now wearing my hair in a flip that came to the bottom of my neck. After cutting my hair, I decided to pour a bottle of peroxide over my head to further exert my independence. My mother was furious. She had been washing and combing it up until then, taking great pains to see that each curl flowed down my back and bounced as I walked. Mom has no clue as to why I would do something as drastic as that.

"My hair is stick- straight and mousy brown. You have beautiful brunette curls that I could never have dreamed a daughter of mine could have. How could you do this?"

"It's my hair."

"Not entirely," says my mother.

She meant well, I suppose, but it felt as if she had put bows on each side of my head that were fashioned from pieces of apron strings that were constricting my ability to have my own thoughts.

No one is ever going to tell me how to wear my hair again!

High school would prove to be a challenge on many fronts. Ann would be going to another high school. Maybe this would turn out to be a good thing, as both of us were upset that we could not see each other outside of school. I also wanted to get accepted into a good sorority. If it was important to be popular in junior high, it was even more so in high school. In order to be noticed by the right boys, first you had to be noticed by the right girls.



I still wanted to lose ten pounds; thus beginning another battle that would rage in my head for years.

My mother had always had a weight problem, so I decided to discuss the problem with her.

"Mom," I say, "Can you help me lose ten pounds?"

"Of course," she says, and she plans a menu for me, consisting of the following:

Breakfast: juice, milk, toast and cheese or peanut butter, and an egg.

Lunch: a sandwich on light bread and a fruit.

Supper: four ounces of meat, vegetable, salad with diet dressing and occasionally a small amount of starch.

If I were hungry at night, yogurt or fruit would be on the menu.

Within six weeks the ten pounds are gone. I open the door to the closet with the full length mirror. The scale says ten pounds less but I look just as fat. Mom gives me money to buy new clothes. Maybe that will make me feel better about myself.

I take the bus to town and go from store to store. Only one thing pleases me; a black blouse. It has long sleeves with ruffles around the wrist, a high neckline with ruffles around it, and the bottom reaches mid-length, and is also adorned with ruffles.

When I get home, I show my parents the blouse.

"You have to return this," Mom says. "I should have gone with you."

"Why? I like it."

"You're not wearing black. You're too young."

"I'm not returning it! I lost weight and I think I am entitled to wear what I like."

"Well, I won't wash it when I do the laundry," Mom says.

"What do you mean, you won't wash it? That's not fair."

"If you want to wear it, you'll have to wash it yourself. We'll see how much you like it."

"Fine," I say. "I don't need you to wash it, anyway."

I have no appetite for supper. I take a bath and go to my room for the rest of the evening.

Mom wakes me up the next morning and asks me what I want for breakfast. "You can eat a little bit more now. You don't want to lose any more weight."

"I'm not hungry," I say.

"But, you had no supper last night. You have to eat something."

"No, I don't!"

"Do you feel all right," Mom says as she puts her hand on my forehead.

"I'm fine. I'm just not hungry."

"Okay," says Mom. "I'll pack your lunch."

I get dressed, grab my lunch, and leave for school.

When lunchtime rolls around, I meet Debbie and Naomi in the cafeteria. I open the lunch bag and stare at its contents. Carefully wrapped in waxed paper is a tuna sandwich on regular bread with lettuce and tomato, a crisp apple, and a waxed paper bag with a dozen or so cashew nuts in it.

"What's the matter?" asks Debbie.

"Nothing," I say. "I guess I'm just not hungry."

"You have to eat," says Naomi, "Or you will lose more weight. You don't want to do that. You look perfect."

I play with the food, eat the lettuce and tomato and a few bites of tuna, and then throw the bag in the garbage. "I think I may be coming down with something," I say to the girls.

"Oh well, in that case, we hope you feel better. Let us know if you are going home and need the homework."

"Yeah, sure. Talk to you later."

Another two months go by and I lose another ten pounds. No one is going to tell me what to eat and what not to eat, or how much to eat, ever again! But, no one notices that I'm still losing weight. Amazing!

## The Long Road Home :- Chapter 11

The long awaited high school graduation arrives! Now, I have to decide what I want to do next year. College is not for me. I would never make it. I don't like pressure. I'll have to get a job. But, what can I do? I don't want to work in an office. With the newspaper spread out on the kitchen table, I go looking through the classifieds. I see several positions as teaching assistants. I like kids, so I decide to give it a try. I don't have any better ideas, anyway.

I haltingly make the first phone call.

"Hello," I say when a woman answers the phone. "I am interested in a position as a teaching assistant."

"Have you ever worked with special needs children before?" says the lady on the other end of the phone.

"No," I say, "But I like kids and I have loads of patience."

The lady gives me an appointment with the principal for ten o'clock the next morning.

The building is very impressive. It is an old mansion with two storey columns and a stucco facade. It is set on two acres of land and has playground equipment and a swimming pool in the backyard.

I walk inside and am greeted by the receptionist. "May I help you?"

"Yes, I have an appointment with the principal regarding a teaching assistant position."

"One moment, please. I'll page her for you."

Mrs. Bloom comes out of her office. She is a tall woman, very stately, and reminds me of an old-fashioned schoolmarm. Her salt and pepper hair is pulled back in a bun and she is wearing a black suit and shoes to match. "You must be Sandy," she says.

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Have you ever worked with special needs students before, dear?"

"No, as I explained yesterday on the phone, but I love children and I have loads of patience."

"Come, I'll give you the tour. We can talk as we walk."

The inside of the building is as elegant as the outside, with antique molding on the walls and around the doors.

"As you can see," says Mrs. Bloom, pointing out some of the students, "Some of our children are higher functioning than others. What age group and functioning level do you think you would prefer to work with?"

"I don't know what level of functioning, but I like little kids."

"We have an opening in our pre-school for the summer but it is in one of our lower functioning classes. If things go well over the summer, we can talk about a permanent position for the fall. Would you like to try it?"

"Yes, I would!" I say.

"Okay then, let's go fill out all the paperwork and you can start on Monday."

By the time Monday arrives, I'm not so sure I made the right decision.

"You'll do fine," my parents try to reassure me. "You are very good with kids. Everyone in the neighborhood wanted you to babysit for their children when you were younger."

The school is a twenty minute ride from my house. I got on the #20 bus at 8:15 and arrived at the school at 8:35, leaving plenty of time for a short orientation before the students' arrival.

Something is a little strange, though. Most of the staff is attired in very long skirts and, even though it is summer, they are wearing long sleeve blouses. Most of the skirts are black and they wear dark tights and black shoes. My black blouse flashes before me.

The assistant in the classroom next to mine is very nice, so I decide to ask her about the dress code.

"Ask whatever you want," says Chana, when I approach her.

"Why do you dress the way you do?" I say.

"Most of us are Orthodox Jews. Our blouses must have a jewel neckline and the sleeves must cover our elbows. Our skirts must cover our knees when we sit down. We must also wear tights.

"Why?"

"We must dress modestly, as it says in the Torah. Would you like to learn more about our way of life? Since you, yourself, are Jewish, you might find it very interesting and very rewarding."

"I'll think about it," I say. "Meantime, can we still be friends?"

"Of course," says Chana.

My mind flashes back ten years. I am eight years old and at Sarah's house. I get the chills, and begin sweating at the same time. Then my mind flashes back six years. I am twelve years old and at Ann's house. A fork in the road, or finally, the right direction?

Chana and I become very good friends and Chana is always inviting me to come to her house after work and for Shabbos. While I often go to Chana's house after work, I am a little more reluctant about going for Shabbos.

Much to Chana's credit, she never pushes. I even eat at Chana's house with no trouble. First of all, I was embarrassed not to, and the food tasted so good.

Chana's father explained that while it was good to take pleasure in what we eat, as it does taste good, G-d requires us to keep our bodies healthy so that we have the strength to serve Him. By doing so, we elevate the mundane act of eating into something holy. Familiar words, but from where?

Chana's father had gotten through to me without even knowing I had an eating disorder, although I am sure the wise Rabbi did suspect something. It all made sense to me now. I started looking at food in a totally different way. By not eating properly, I was disobeying one of G-d's commandments. I would eat properly and live a Torah life. I was determined.

Before long, I begin going to Chana's house practically every Shabbos. There is an otherworldly feeling as soon as I go through the door. The table is set with the finest linen tablecloth, China, crystal stemware, and silverware, just as in Sarah's house. There is a beautiful bouquet of assorted flowers in the center of the table, placed lovingly in a crystal vase. But it isn't the physical characteristics that have taken hold of my hungry soul and completely nourished it. It is, as I was told later, the presence of the Holy Shabbos Queen, something you must experience in order to understand.

When I go home and tell my parents about my experiences and say that I want to eat only kosher food, I got a reaction I didn't expect, just as I did when I was eight.

"Sandy," my mother said, "You are eighteen now and able to think for yourself. If this is what you want, we will work things out with you. Although you can't expect us to change our whole way of life."

I was on my way!

Soon, the topic of marriage comes up. "There is something I must tell you, Chana," I say, and I recount all the problems I had experienced since the age of twelve. I even tell her about my dream about being a princess. "Do you think someone will want to marry me?"

"First of all," says Chana, "You ARE a princess. You are a Bas Melech, the daughter of a King, the King of all Kings. And, as far as a shidduch (match) is

concerned, it might not be easy, but G-d made a bashert (intended) for everyone. You will find yours."

It did take a while, but I did find my bashert. He, too, is a returnee to Orthodox Judaism.

I told him about the Anorexia and the Depression.

"The Anorexia seems to be under control," he said, "And as far as your Depression is concerned, my number one priority from now on is to make you happy.

He is always true to his word. We have a wonderful life, a house filled with children, and I Sandy, or Shaindy, have finally come home.



## The Long Road Home - Epilogue

Dear Reader,

Though this book is about my road back to Yiddishkeit, it was intentionally written as a novel. My road home was a long and arduous one, filled with many complications.

Each and every one of you will stumble on the road, which at times will seem too bumpy to traverse. Indeed, other problems may arise. I urge you to seek counsel from professionals if you feel you are in any kind of situation in which you cannot cope or do not know how to handle.

I wish all of you who seek Hashem and mitzvahs, the courage to move forward. Try to understand those who do not understand you, and seek out people who can help you on your journey.

My very best to all of you,

Judy Gruenfeld