Smithtown Girl

by

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The names of many of the individuals described in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

This book was printed in the United States of America.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Anita Weinstein.

I love you and always will.

Prologue

When I was thirteen years old, my father abandoned my mother, my brother and me, leaving us to fend for ourselves. This happened right before the feminist revolution of the 1970s. My mother had no job skills or college education; she had never worked outside the home. A father abandoning his family was culturally unusual for a Jewish American family, especially back in the late 60’s. It defied the stereotypes.

This is the story of what happens when a family, my family, that appears to deeply love each other breaks apart, becoming destructive and cruel. My story is about how my mother and brother and I coped with and survived this trauma—mentally, spiritually, financially and physically.

I wrote this memoir because I want all that we went through to count for something. I especially want my mother’s story to be heard, the story of how a woman with no job skills was able to raise two children alone, without clinging to a man to survive.

Despite our new found poverty, the loss of our father in our lives, and being raised by a panic-stricken mother, I grew up to became a psychotherapist and published author of self-help pop psychology books for women. My brother grew up to be a criminal lawyer, famous in the rap music industry. In a way, our accomplishments can be considered a testament to the American dream because he and I did pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

My memoir is also a love story. My love for my mother, my brother, and, yes, even my father. My love for the house in Smithtown that we lost, and the life we had built there.

I want my story frozen in time. Documented so that it is timeless and exists as an entity in itself. Something tangible that I can go back to and look at. Isn’t that what art is about? Making a situation, a relationship, a love or a time in one’s life, immortal?

Lastly, my memoir is a testament to the human spirit that never gives up, even in the face of hardship, loss, suffering and hopelessness.

It is my wish that you, the reader, find healing, truth and wisdom as you read my tale and accompany me on my journey.

Chapter 1

Lenox Road, Brooklyn, 1963

“Marvin’s not home right now,” I told Mr. Johnson, my father’s bookie.

“Well, you tell your pops to call me back, ’cause it’s important!” His deep loud voice frightened my nine-year-old ears.

“Okay,” I said, looking up at Dad, who stood in front of me with his arms crossed. He smiled, pleased, nodding his head as if to say, “Good work, Rhonda.”

Mom, who had glimpsed this exchange while washing the dishes, said, “I can’t believe you’re gambling again.”

“You know I’ll stop when baseball season ends.”

“It just began,” Mom spoke sharply.

“Don’t start in, Anita.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she said, raising her voice. “It wasn’t me who blew the money for the electricity bill at the track.”

Earlier that month, all the lights in our house were turned off, along with the appliances and even the television. I had to finish my schoolwork by candlelight, which made me feel like I was Laura in the book, *Little House on the Prairie*.

The morning after, I went with my mother to a pawn shop, a store where people sold things instead of buying them. It sounded silly to me, but I didn’t say a word. So pretty, I thought, as my mother twisted the sparkling ring off her finger, and handed it through metal bars to the man behind a glass window. He squeezed the tiny ring between two fat fingers, peered at it through a magnifying glass and placed it in a box. Mom got a wad of twenty dollar bills. That night, the lights came back on. A few weeks later, Mom got her ring back, after my father got paid.

I watched my little brother, Drew, sit at the kitchen table, quietly dipping his lamb chops into a small circle of ketchup on his plate. He was my one student, who would listen while I lectured and wrote on my blackboard easel about spelling, division, and multiplication tables. I knew he didn’t really know what I was talking about since he was only four years old.

We didn’t look alike except for our long black eyelashes. Drew had big brown eyes and mine were blue. My mother swore she once saw the color of my eyes turn lavender in the sun, just like Elizabeth Taylor’s. Mom told me a photographer once told her, “Your daughter’s pretty enough to be the Ivory Snow baby!”

Dad was a high school teacher, so he gave me expert help with my homework, which was sort of like having a secret weapon in the house. His desk was covered with folded-up lesson plans and topped with racing newspapers with pictures of horses running and tables of numbers.

I was working on my composition about Mexico, using the World Book Encyclopedia Dad had gotten for free when he used to sell them. I tapped him on the shoulder. “Can you read it?” I asked.

He tucked his hand down by his side to grab my paper without looking at me. “Mmm-hmm.” He read through it slowly. “Good job, but write a little about the crops Mexico is famous for.” He stuck the paper up by his ear so I could grab it without him turning around. Later, after his help, I put my composition, schoolbook, and pencil holder into my red leather school bag.

My mother said all the kids in my fifth grade IGC class were geniuses. We had all skipped third grade, so they called us Intellectually Gifted Children. My mother always told me how smart and talented I was and wanted me to go to Radcliffe, the college Jackie Kennedy had graduated from. Every Saturday we’d take the subway to my ballet class at the Brooklyn School of Music, while she sat on a folding chair in the hallway outside the dance studio waiting for me.

Mom convinced Dad to buy me a piano so I could take lessons with Miss Cohen, a professional musician who lived by herself in our building. Some of our neighbors referred to her as an “old maid” because she never got married. I thought she had a cool life because she had a beautiful apartment, did whatever she wanted to, and didn’t fight with a husband.

“You have to give me some money to pay Eljay’s,” my mother said to Dad. Mom liked dressing my brother and me in fashionable clothing, purchased at this little children’s clothing store on Flatbush Avenue. “They’ve been nice enough to let me run up a bill.”

“Let them wait! We need to pay the rent!”

He went to the fridge, snatched up the carton of orange juice and took a huge swig.

“Marvin, don’t finish it. Leave some for the kids tomorrow.”

“I’m King of the Castle and this is my castle,” he said, and slugged down the rest of the Tropicana.

Later that night, Mom was in my parents’ bedroom, flipping through photos of movie stars in *Modern Screen* magazine. She looked up at me.“Goodnight, Pussycat.”

She called me “Pussycat” or “Momma Doll” whenever she was very happy or very sad. That night, I couldn’t figure out which one it was.

Dad called out from the kitchen. “You want milk and dumplings?”

“Okay!” I yelled back.

I ran to watch him boil milk and pour it into a glass with Oreo cookies. He stirred until it was perfect. I dove under the covers. My brother Drew was in the next bed, already sleeping. Dad sat next to me on the bed and handed me the glass.

“It looks like ants,” I said, scooping up a melted Oreo with a spoon and popping it in into my mouth.

After I finished I lay down on my belly, while Dad scratched my back for a few minutes, singing our favorite lullabye to me.

 “Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep Little Miss Rhonda, go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep, and goodnight. Go to sleep. . .”

Mom and Dad’s yelling woke me.

“I’ll pay it out of my commission check next week!”

“You’ll probably lose that money, too!”

Their voices spilled down the hallway, bouncing off every wall and into our room.

“Lay off me!” Dad exclaimed. “You’re not going to make a wimp out of me like your father!”

“Don’t you talk about my father that way! At least he’s not a bum like you!”

Grandpa was the nicest man in the whole world. He worked hard all day and always did what Grandma told him to do; Mom called Grandpa a *mensch*, but Dad said Grandpa wasn’t a “real man,” whatever that was.

“Simpleton!”

“Screw you! If it weren’t for me you wouldn’t have even graduated from college!”

There were thuds against a wall, a crash of something glass.

I looked over at Drew, who was still asleep. Lucky, I thought and pulled the blanket over my head.

Chapter 2

My Dad in Brooklyn

By the weekend my parents were back in love. My dad was in one of his musical moods so he put a record on the phonograph. My parents started doing the cha-cha. They laughed as they gazed longingly into each other’s eyes. They were crazy about each other. It was so romantic!

My parents had been taking dance lessons and were getting good enough to be on *The* *Ed Sullivan Show*. Mom was beautiful. She dyed her hair platinum blonde like Marilyn Monroe and had an hourglass figure like her, too. My father said she looked like the movie star, Kim Novak. Mom had green eyes like emeralds but she had to wear glasses because she said she was “blind as a bat.” Mom worried about her weight a lot though. One time she got very skinny taking some special diet pills the doctor had given her and got an offer to become a model. She told me she turned the modeling job down because, “That’s a sleazy world.”

My dad was very handsome and strong from playing baseball, basketball, and handball. He had brown eyes just like Drew and curly black hair. He worried about his weight too and especially loved Chinese food and barbequed potato chips. My parents would eat a lot in restaurants and then go on diets together.

Dad put his favorite Glenn Miller record on the 78-RPM vinyl record player. They started dancing the Lindy together in the middle of the living room. My mother screamed as my father playfully tried to throw her over his shoulders like they do in the movies.

“Ma—Marvin!” Mom choked out, laughing so hard she was crying. My father put his hand out to me. Mom clapped as Dad and I did the Lindy. I especially loved it when he spun me round and round.

“Hang on!” he’d say as Mom clapped.

He ran out of the room and came back with his set of bongos. Dad and I lost ourselves in a rhythmic trance as he drummed while I shimmied and danced along like a gypsy girl.

Sometimes Dad and I would go out alone, just the two of us. My mom thought it was cute and said we were out on a “datell”—like the time he took me to see the new Steve McQueen movie, *The Great Escape*.

“It's good to be nervy,” Dad told me while eating a handful of popcorn. “That’s how you sell to people.”

“Uh-huh.” I poured some Milk Duds into my mouth and chewed on the chocolate and caramel, which made my teeth stick together.

“Tell you what,” Dad continued, “I’ll give you a dollar if you run across the stage before the movie starts.”

I didn’t even ask why. A dollar’s a dollar. I looked around. It was summer, hot everywhere, so the air-conditioned theater was pretty crowded. A dollar…a whole dollar. I imagined everything I could buy with a dollar. One hundred licorice strips, or one hundred Tootsie Rolls at the candy store. At least ten egg creams. Four *Mad* magazines or around nine Archie comic books. But if I ran up there, I’d be in front of so many people. All those eyes staring directly at me. What if they threw popcorn at me? I couldn’t take it. Does Dad even know what he’s asking me to do?

“You only have a couple of minutes left,” Dad said, looking at his watch.

I know, I know, I thought. I bit my lip. What if they kicked me out of the theater? What if I was never allowed to see a movie ever again? The guards would tackle me and drag me out to jail, and I might not even get my dollar!

Then the lights lowered. The movie was starting. Dad’s eyes were glued to the screen. The bet was over. Thank God.

Dad hummed “The Blue Danube” as I pirouetted and leaped across the carpeted living room of the O’Reilly’s house. I was performing part of my last year’s ballet recital piece. The room was strange to me. I had never been there before. The only thing I knew about the O’Reillys—a balding man in a brown sweater and his wife—was that they were Dad’s customers.

Most of the time, Dad was a teacher. But he had another job, too. He was a life insurance salesman. So when he was done teaching during the day, he sold insurance policies to people at night. I was his “secret weapon,” he told me.

“Customers like to be entertained,” Dad would say, and they went nuts over my ballet. I didn’t really understand what dancing and insurance sales had to do with each other, but it didn’t matter much to me. I felt like a big-time star on a cross-Brooklyn tour.

Dad clapped as I twirled three more times, ending with a curtsy.

“Ta-da!” I shouted. I spread my arms out wide and twinkled my fingers for emphasis. They turned to each other, smiled, and applauded.

“She’s so graceful,” Mrs. O’Reilly commented as I took another bow.

“Thank you, thank you,” I said.

They must have been pretty impressed, Dad told me later in the car, because they bought two full life insurance policies and they didn’t even have any kids!

Chapter 3

Leaving Brooklyn, 1965

My nursery school furniture was not for a sophisticated sixth grader like me. How was I suppose to entertain? I begged my parents to buy me grownup furniture. At the beginning of my last year of elementary school, I covered every inch of the floor in my room with the Ethan Allen furniture catalogue I found in my mother’s nightstand. I turned down the corners on the important pages. Each page was filled with a glamorous new room that I could only dream about. Oh, how I longed for the oak bachelor chest on page nine! And the bookshelves and hutches spread across the centerfold on pages thirty-four and thirty-five.

Finally they gave in and we went shopping at an Ethan Allen furniture store.

“It’s too expensive,” my mother said. “We’ll keep looking until we find something more reasonable.”

Then one day, the beautiful Colonial Ethan Allen bedroom set with the very hutch, bookcase, desk, bachelor chest, and mirror magically appeared. lt was the happiest day of my existence!

“Marvin, how did you pay for this?” Mom asked.

“You can thank the Yankees.”

Apparently my father had bet on the Yankees who’d won five games in a row that summer. My mother didn’t yell at him for betting this time.

Drew’s crayon set was way too close for comfort to my brand new Colonial desk. I stretched my jump rope from one side to the other, marking my territory and cutting the room in half. I was getting older and longed for my own bedroom.

Mom and Dad were both first generation Americans, the children of Eastern European Jews, and had lived in the Bronx and Brooklyn all of their lives. Moving to the suburbs was a lifelong dream for the two of them. My begging and pleading finally convinced them to seriously consider moving out of our four-room apartment in Brooklyn.

We started driving to Long Island every Sunday. House hunting became my favorite activity. I walked through people’s places, observing how they lived, and wondered what my life would be like if our family moved in and took over.

The best were the model houses. They were the Ethan Allen catalogues come to life—everything brand-spanking new. I’d wander through the rooms, admiring the professional decor. I could have died and gone to heaven.

Every week, going back to our apartment with its long linoleum foyer, seemed more and more disappointing. To soften the blow, we’d usually end up at a House of Pancakes somewhere in Hauppauge, Long Island. We’d gorge ourselves on corn and buckwheat pancakes, which I drenched in the variety of syrups sitting on the Lazy Susan I loved to spin around, watching the steel cups and dishware catch the light.

One Sunday, we found our new home.

On Woodhollow Road, we saw a model house called the Georgetown that looked like a castle compared to our tiny apartment. The front lawn was covered with huge one-hundred-year-old pine trees. It smelled like a flower shop. I wondered if that was what heaven smelled like—or at the very least Hawaii!

There was a family room with a fireplace, kitchen, dining room, and a half bathroom on the first floor. The living room, on a little floor by itself, halfway up the stairs, was why they called it a splanch! All the bedrooms were on the second floor. The wallpaper in some rooms had real velvet you could smooth with your finger.

It was in a beautiful housing development in the branch of Smithtown. Even the name of the suburbs seemed to match my Colonial-style furniture. It was love at first sight for all of us.

“They aren’t building the Georgetown anymore,” the real estate man told us.

We were in his office, part of a model house across the street. My parents looked at each other.

“Well, what about the model?” my dad asked.

“It’s more money because it’s professionally decorated,” the real estate man explained.

“Yeah, but people have been walking through there.”

“Twenty-eight grand. Take it or leave it,” he said while eating macaroni salad out of a deli container. Then he lit up a fat cigar.

“How much for a down payment?” my father asked.

I could see Dad going into his wheeling and dealing mode.

“A grand!”

“That’s gonna be hard,” Dad responded, scratching his head. “Well, how much of a deposit to hold it for us?”

“At least a hundred,” he answered puffing on his cigar.

“I don’t have that kind of money on me now.”

“Twenty bucks and I'll hold it for you for a couple of weeks.”

“Deal,” Dad answered, pulling out his wallet.

“I’m just worried you won't be able to pay the mortgage every month,” Mom said, while we were driving back to Brooklyn.

“I told you Anita. My gambling days are over.”

Taking his eyes off the Long Island Expressway for a moment, he glanced at my mother with a moon-pie expression. She looked back at him with an even moonier pie expression.

“Okay,” Mom responded. “But you know we've been renters all our lives. Now we’ll have our own house. It’s a big responsibility. We can't just call a super if something goes wrong.”

“Nothing’s gonna go wrong. And the kids will help do chores. Rhonda, you’re going to have to help with the lawn, sweeping pine needles, leaves, raking.”

“No problem!” I exclaimed, more than happy to do whatever necessary, to move to this beautiful place in the country that smelled like a flower bouquet. I would chew through our linoleum foyer to get out of stinky Brooklyn.

There was no turning back for us. The mortgage went through and my father managed to scrape a thousand dollars together for the down payment. Everyone was happy, most of all, me!

Chapter 4

Woodhollow Road, Smithtown

This, I thought, will be the greatest day ever.

It was better than birthdays, better than an A on a test. Today was the first day of my new life in Smithtown. I burst out of my bed and opened the window. The sun was just coming up.

I looked over the gigantic pine trees lined up in two rows. I wondered who planted them. Who walked down a grassy field with a handful of tiny seeds, spreading them around? Hundreds of needles fell off the branches onto the driveway. Although Dad had already set me to work, sweeping them up, I didn’t mind. The smashed needles had a syrupy sweet smell that floated up into my nose.

We had moved most of our things out of the old apartment and thrown away a bunch of stuff. It would be a brand new start. We left all the bad things behind—the yelling, the fighting, and the stinky, orange, living room couch. Life would be better here in Smithtown. I just knew it.

It would begin with my “own” new bedroom, which was the best. Even though I loved my little brother, it would be nice not to step on plastic dinosaurs and G.I. Joes that were like landmines in our old small bedroom. Now, I had the place to myself, and I could decorate. It was simply enthralling. I’d spent the last three weeks flipping through my *Calling All Girls* magazines, looking for tips on fixing up and organizing my bedroom. Everything was perfect. Having a house was like living on the set of the *The Donna Reed Show*.

I got ready to start my first day at Great Hollow Junior High School. It was weird at first because P.S. 92 had been only a few blocks away from the apartment. Now I had to take a school bus and wait on the corner every morning with a bunch of kids I didn’t know.

I shivered with anticipation as I walked down Woodhollow Road to the bus stop the very first time. The bright sunny autumn morning—the trees, the houses, the lawns—all looked spectacular. The bus arrived the minute I got there. Despite all of my nervousness I actually liked sitting on the bus with other kids because it made me feel like a real grownup. Especially since up until now I had only taken buses with my mother.

Because I was now in junior high, we changed rooms for each class which was a little weird because I was used to sitting in one seat for almost eight hours.

It wasn’t long before I started making friends. In homeroom I sat next to a girl named Tina every day. She had just switched from a Yeshiva because she wanted to go to public school with us secular kids. Tina was smart too and we both liked to read. Her father was a dentist and had lots of money. Tina always came to class with expensive, “mod” mini skirts and leather boots, When I told Mom about Tina’s fashionable wardrobe she promised to me take me shopping at Lord & Taylor at the Whitman Mall for new clothes. So long, Eljay’s!

The first couple of weeks of school was great. But then things got rough.

“Hey, Shortie.”

This girl had some nerve calling me that, since she was only an inch taller than me. But she wouldn’t lay off with the insults and it was driving me bananas. I decided to ask my parents for advice.

“Just ignore her!” Mom yelled over the vacuum cleaner. “A girl like that is probably just jealous of you! There’s no use worrying about it!”

“Fight her,” Dad said.

“Huh?” I asked, “Dad, I don’t want to fight another girl. ”

“You’ve gotta do it or she won’t respect you.”

“I don’t think I can fight her.”

“Why not? You’re a strong girl.”

Even though Dad loved when I danced ballet and the Lindy with him, he still raised me tough. Not only could I play baseball, but he was also teaching me how to catch a football pass. We had been practicing in our new backyard almost every Sunday. Still, except for Drew and I arguing every once in a while, I had never been in a real fight before.

Later that night he taught me some judo moves, like tripping someone backwards by putting your foot behind them and pushing them. Practicing with Dad and Drew, I felt a little like James Bond.

The next day, I saw Susan in the hall.

“Boy, Rhonda,” she said snidely, “you get shorter every time I see you. What are you, shrinking?”

That’s it, I thought. I was terrified, but thinking of my dad, I threw my loose-leaf binder and books on the floor. Then I grabbed her by the front of her dress and slammed her up against the locker.

Everyone around gasped in shock.

“Alright, alright!” Hearing the cries of the kids, one of the teachers came out of his classroom and pulled me off of her. He grabbed her arm and dragged us both to the principal’s office, where we were lectured on the importance of respect for the next half hour.

“Hey,” she said, after we were escorted out of the office, “Sorry.”

I looked up at her as she twisted one of her braids in her fingers. She was looking down at her shoes. She seemed sincere so I put one hand on her shoulder. We became friends after that.

Almost every weekend for the next couple of months, Dad and I worked on the outside of the house: raking, putting down mulch, fertilizer, seeds, weed killer and pulling weeds. My favorite part of gardening was planting bulbs for tulips to grow in the spring. Dad said we had to put special vitamins into the soil around the shrubs.

“You put these tablets in here,” he mumbled, studying the instructions on the side of a box one Saturday. I had never seen anything like it—the box contained what looked like a monstrous doctor’s needle. Dad sprinkled some pellets into the needle top, added water, and shook it up. “Here, Rhonda,” he said, handing me the needle. “You try it.”

I grasped the handle and stuck it in the soft, wet dirt. I pushed the top down with my thumb.

“Good job!” said Dad. “See, it wasn’t so difficult.”

“Yuck,” was all I could manage to reply. My shoes were soggy with water and mud, chilling me since it was autumn.

“Have you really ever gardened before?” I asked my father, teasingly.

“Well, I mowed the lawn a few times when I was your age,” he answered, smiling.

“Daddy-o!” We both started laughing as we continued to inject the remainder of the shrubs around the house.

Now that we lived in the suburbs, I had to stop my ballet lessons at the Brooklyn School of Music. I hoped it was only for now.

My former piano teacher, Ms. Cohen, referred my parents to a new piano teacher in Smithtown, Mrs. Swain, who lived in a Tudor house that looked like a creamy stuccoed confection. Chocolate-colored crossbeams laced the front and sides. On Monday evenings, a warm pink glow came through the windows as I walked up to Mrs. Swain’s house for my piano lessons. It really did look like a big piece of candy and, inside, it smelled like one, too.

After school and on weekends, I loved exploring Smithtown on my own. A winding, narrow road led to Main Street, where all the stores were. There was even a little, wooden, storybook-looking bridge that crossed a brook that I loved walking over.

One of my two favorite stores was a gift shop right off of the main street in Smithtown, which seemed a world away from crowded, tightly packed, noisy, dirty Brooklyn. The store was filled with delicate knickknacks that were always perfectly arranged on glass shelves. There was a light flowery fragrance of potpourri that permeated the air of the serene little store, which seemed to have an aura of timelessness.

My other favorite store was Paperbacks Etc, scarcely bigger than a large walk-in closet, and filled with books from the floor to the ceiling. There was a young adult’s section in the front, near the door, with books I’d never seen before. I’d spend hours rummaging through the books, obsessing about which one to buy with the money I saved from my allowance.

After my shopping or window-shopping expedition, I’d walk back to my house in the dark, early evening. I’d cross back over the bridge, deeply inhaling the fresh, country, woody air that smelled of trees, and smoke from fireplaces burning. It reminded me of a New England town I’d seen in movies. I couldn’t imagine that I’d ever be as happy as these first months in Smithtown.

Dad continued to stay on top of my grades. He told me he’d get me my own TV set for my bedroom if I made honor roll the whole school year. He suggested that I do my homework in the musty scented Smithtown Library also on Main Street, so I wouldn’t get distracted. Often I’d go there not leaving until all my homework and studying were completed. I achieved my goal and was thrilled to see a brand new portable TV set sitting on my hutch when I got home the last day of the school year.

I loved watching *The Patty Duke Show* in the privacy of my own bedroom now, especially since I absolutely adored Patty. She was just like me. A petite brunette, with a flip, born and bred in Brooklyn.

One day Dad saw an advertisement in the newspaper about a play, casting eleven-year-old girls for the lead role. He ripped it out and showed me. “This could be our lucky ticket.”

I held the *Long Island Press* article in my hands, positive that this was to be my future: Broadway! The bright lights, the cameras, the fan letters: I could really and truly be the next Patty Duke! Maybe I’d end up with my own television show just like her!

The auditions were held in Manhattan the next week. Dad told me that the Lansbury brothers were producing it. They were the brothers of an important movie actress, Angela Lansbury.

“Groovy!” I exclaimed.

The next week I drove with Dad into the city. I waited for him in a teachers’ lounge while he taught his high school classes. Then he took me to the audition, held in a skyscraper in the middle of the city.

We took the elevator to the top floor and went into a big office. Dad sat in a waiting room and a secretary led me into another office where two men in dark suits sat behind a big wood desk. I found out later that they were the Lansbury brothers.

“Go on, dear,” said one of the men. “Why don’t you sing something for us?”

I had taken special care that morning to pick out my best outfit: a gold sequin dress, black knee socks, and patent leather shoes. I put Dippity Do on my hair that morning and got the perfect flip. I was looking good.

My voice was a little shaky when I started to sing—but I managed to belt out the only song I could remember, “We’re Off to See the Wizard.” I even started skipping around the office as if I really saw a yellow brick road. Since there was no music, I imagined Dad’s humming in my head and kept to the beat. They clapped at the end and were smiling so I think they liked it.

When the phone rang the next evening, Mom told me it was Lansbury’s secretary. “They want you to come back and audition again.”

I got a callback! I got a callback! Woo-hoo! I ran around the house.

“Marvin,” Mom said as I ran laps around the kitchen table. “We need to talk about this.”

I could picture my life as a celebrity. I would be a famous star, signing autographs and posing for photographs.

“I don’t think the play’s a good idea,” Mom said.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

“What!” I exclaimed, outraged.

“If you get in this play, you’ll probably have to stop going to school. Then they’ll have to assign you a tutor! What if the play doesn’t last and you miss around four months of school? We’d have to drive you into the city every day. Marvin you’ve got to go to work. If I drive you in, who’ll take care of Drew?”

Dad just listened and looked at me.

My mom continued to plead her case. “What if she gets caught up in the show biz world, Marvin? What if she drops out of school?”

“Your mother’s right.”

“What? Daddy-o!!!”

“I don’t think it’s such a great idea to be in this play either,” my father explained calmly. “I just want you to have a normal life. That’s why we moved out here.”

“Jeez,” was all I said, and went to my room and slammed the door.

I could have been a famous actress and singer, but tonight, Mom had me beat. She had convinced Dad to give up our dreams of money and fame. My theater career was officially over.

My parents’ decision ended up being a good one, because the play closed the day after opening night!

Chapter 5

*Calling All Girls*

Twelve now, I was getting more absorbed in my own life that was changing by the minute. First, I was developing a real passion for reading books about teens, probably because I was preparing myself to be a teen. I spent hours consuming Rosamond du Jardin, Beverly Cleary, and Madeline L’Engle.

I had a subscription to *Calling All Girls* magazine now and read it from cover to cover every month. I even joined the Girl Scouts, became a Cadette, and worked on my badges. I loved studying the Cadette handbook, full of information on grooming, dating and organization.

I took pride in my body, which was developing and changing. I was now wearing bras, tight hip huggers, “mod” mini-skirts and boots. I was starting to diet, although I didn’t really need to, because I wanted to look like Twiggy and the Yardley cover girl models.

One night Dad and I sat on the burnt-wood colored, tweed couch in the family room watching an episode of *Gidget*, while Mom was upstairs putting Drew to bed. The TV audience laughed in the background as Sally Field made a gigantic sandwich that looked bigger than her.

“I don’t understand why your mother won’t make desserts,” Dad said interrupting my imagining myself as a surfer girl.

“Well, it makes it easier for me to stay on my diet,” I responded.

“I just cannot believe a housewife who has absolutely no interest at all in baking.”

“I don’t know, Dad,” I said. “Did you ask Mom to make dessert for you?”

Dad shook his head, staring at the TV. “Everything she cooks is so…bland.”

I didn’t understand what he was complaining about because everyone was calling Mom a *balabusta*. “Look at how cleeeean!” Grandma would squeal when she walked inside the house.

“Such a gooorgeous home you made,” my mom’s friends and family said.

Dad seemed proud that she stayed home taking care of things, and keeping the house looking so beautiful. Even with Mom’s tight budget, she managed to buy beautiful, elegant Wedgwood china at the little gift shop I loved. It was creamy white with painted sky blue leaf designs sculpted on the edges.

But the truth was, Mom was always the queen of bland food. Broiled chicken and boiled veggies, lamb chops and baked beans or corn from the can. And, of course, her famous plain lettuce salad with mayonnaise dressing mixed with ketchup. She just wasn’t into desserts. She never bought a Betty Crocker cake mix in her life. We always had cookies around the house, like the Mallomars and Oreos my father loved. And canned peaches, the big, juicy slices in thick syrup Why did Mom’s not baking bother him all of a sudden?

“Well, when you get married, be a really good cook,” he said, “because men like that.”

“Okay, Daddy-o,” I said, vowing to myself that I would bake and cook all sorts of interesting things so that my future husband wouldn’t complain about me and feel disappointed like my dad was.

“So, who’s that guy?” Dad asked focusing on the TV now.

“Oh, that’s Moondoggie, Gidget’s boyfriend.”

“Hmm,” Dad commented, staring at the screen. “Do you like any of the boys at school?”

“Oh, jeez, Dad, I don’t know.”

Oh, but I did know. I liked a few boys at school but was currently boyfriend-less.

“Well, they should be lining up around the block for you,” Dad said matter of factly.

I was secretly happy that my dad thought boys should like me more.

“Have you ever kissed a boy?”

“No,” I responded shyly.

“When you have your first kiss, just say ‘two,’” Dad explained.

“Huh?”

“That’s how you kiss a boy; you say ‘two.’ It makes your mouth pucker to kiss.”

“Oh…”

“Try it.”

“Two.” I said.

“No, like this. Twoooooo.” His lips poked out.

“Oh, okay, twooooo.” I giggled.

We must have looked pretty silly, on the couch together. Did Mr. Lane ever give Patty kissing lessons? Or Gidget’s father?

We were just staring at each other, our lips flared and poofy like fishes. Dad leaned towards me and for a second our lips touched. Then he pulled away.

“You can practice on your wrist, see?” He put his mouth on his wrist and kissed it.

Weird, I thought. I wondered how he’d heard about the “two” trick and if somebody had taught it to him. But I didn’t ask him. I decided not to practice on my wrist, either. When the time was right, I thought, I would kiss whatever boy it was and it would just work out. I was rooting for Mickey Dolenz, Davy Jones or Napoleon Solo, the handsome guy from *The Man from U.N.C.L.E*, who I was also a little in love with.

My talks with Dad often seemed as if we were more friends than father and daughter. Like the night my parents were having some couples from our former neighborhood in Brooklyn over for a dinner party to celebrate the new house.

Mom had just gotten her hair done at the beauty parlor. She was upstairs fixing her makeup while Dad and I were sitting in the family room again, our favorite place to hang out.

Dad was on the couch and I was sprawled out on the floor, reading my one of Mom’s movie magazines.

“You see how I’m sitting?” Dad asked.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Women find it very attractive, when a man sits something like this.”

His legs were spread apart. His left arm was extended along the back of the couch, as if he were a guy sitting with his date in the movie theater.

“You’ll see. By the end of the night, both of the women visiting us tonight will have a crush on me.”

I don’t get it, I thought. Dad looked like a silly James Bond when he sat like that, but I liked James Bond. I don’t think James Bond would have tried to get a woman other than my mother to have a crush on him, though he did kiss a lot of girls in the movies. I was glad Dad loved me so much that he could talk to me about anything, now that I was getting older, but I didn’t get it.

A few weeks later we were having company from Brooklyn again: Aunt Shirley, Uncle Danny, and my cousin Andrea. I sprinted to the front door when I heard Uncle Danny’s junky old Chevrolet crunch up the driveway. I liked to stand just behind the door. The instant the bell rang, I’d open it, pretending to be the butler.

Aunt Shirley was Daddy’s older sister, and I was one, too, so we had a lot in common. Around her eyes were thick, black lines that shot off the sides like an Egyptian cat. Aunt Shirley had jet-black hair that was bigger than Mom’s. Her hair was like a real beehive, looped around and around up into a big basket shape. Mom told me it wasn’t real, which I suspected.

When Aunt Shirley came over, she would bend over and kiss me with her big lipstick-pink lips. She was always really nice and would tell me how pretty I was.

When they first came to visit, everyone piled into the foyer. Aunt Shirley talked loudly about how bad the snow was on the Long Island Expressway and yelled, “*Oy*! Is it cold!” Then she “oohed” and “aahed” about how beautiful our new house was.

Andrea and I ran off to my bedroom as soon as Dad pulled out his martini shaker. It had been ages since I’d seen my cousin Andrea. A year older than me, Andrea was sort of like a big sister. We didn’t look anything alike because she was tall and dark with brown eyes, and I was short with blue eyes. Andrea never took music or dance lessons like I did. She didn’t like reading very much either. I loved her anyway, because she was always so nice, and we were family.

Before we moved to Smithtown, Aunt Shirley and Uncle Danny lived right around the corner in Brooklyn, so Andrea and I got to have sleepovers all the time where we’d talk about school and our favorite TV shows.

Pretty soon we were hungry, so Andrea and I went back downstairs to see if Mom had put out any snacks for us. All the adults were sitting in the family room laughing and chatting. I plopped down in Dad’s lap to relax.

“Marvin,” Aunt Shirley said, from across the room. “Rhonda shouldn’t be sitting on your lap anymore. She’s getting too old for that.”

“Rhonda’s still my little girl,” he said, giving me a hug.

“She’s twelve already, Marvin.”

My cheeks burned. Aunt Shirley was giving me a squinty-eyed look, which was even squintier with all the black stuff she had on her eyes. I was disappointed in my aunt. She was usually so nice to me, but that night she made me feel embarrassed. Maybe it was the cocktails.

No one seemed to notice when I slipped off my father’s lap. They just went on drinking and talking. I found my cousin, Andrea, who had just come out of the downstairs bathroom so she didn’t hear what her mom had just said. I didn’t tell her. Instead I lost myself in the potato chips, carrot sticks, pretzels, and onion dip, my mother had put out on the beautiful Wedgewood china.

Later, after everyone went home, Dad told me, while I helped my mom clean up, “I think Aunt Shirley is right. Maybe you shouldn’t sit on my lap anymore.”

“Okay,” I answered, embarrassed again. I felt sad but forced myself not to dwell on it. Instead, I went straight to my bedroom, which I really adored now because Andrea had told me how beautiful it was. She even admitted she was jealous that I lived in a house while she had to go back to a yucky cramped apartment in Brooklyn.

I changed into my nightgown, then nestled under my cozy blanket and thought about how my Dad was mixing me up. First, he teaches me how to kiss, then he tells me how he gets women to have crushes on him, and now he tells me I can’t sit on his lap anymore. I lost myself in Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* until I could barely keep my eyes open. I turned off the light from my beautiful Colonial Ethan Allen lamp and went to sleep.

Chapter 6

The Life of Miss Popularity

I was slowly becoming popular. I knew almost all the kids in my eighth-grade class now. Everyone seemed to like me. I even threw a Halloween party. It was just Tina and some other girls from school but it was very successful. I was even starting to flirt with boys a little although my heart still belonged to The Monkees.

I was madly in love with Micky Dolenz and Tina was infatuated with Davy Jones. We talked about them incessantly and consumed all the magazines about them. *Tiger Beat*, *Monkee Spectacular*, and *Sixteen*. Tina and I even plotted how we could meet them.

I don’t know how it even happened, but I suddenly fell in love with Davy. My feelings for Micky seemed to just fade away. I was afraid to tell Tina because I didn’t want her to get upset. I even consulted the Ouija board with my brother one night and it predicted that I’d meet Davy someday! I kept that a secret from Tina as well.

Now my family took great vacations. We spent Thanksgiving at the Homowack Lodge in the Catskill Mountains where I learned how to ski. My parents and brother hung out during the day at the indoor swimming pool and indoor ice skating rink. My mom even went to a fashion show there. Three times a day we feasted on gourmet meals. We had a blast.

We even went to Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia on our school break. It was as if we had been transported into another place and time. On Christmas Eve, we were served peanut soup in an old time restaurant, waited on by men who looked like soldiers from the Revolutionary War. It was a very happy time for all of us.

On the last night of January we got hit by a blizzard. I fell asleep tucked in between my comfy bed and the soft, woven quilt, my legs stretched out towards the window. I watched the snowfall silently in the velvety blue darkness outside.

In the morning, the four of us sat around the kitchen table, eating steamy Cream of Wheat in our pajamas. Mom, in her apron, was pressed against the kitchen counter, listening to school closings being announced on the radio. When he said Smithtown school district, Drew and I jumped up and cheered, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” My dad joined in when they added New York City schools.

After breakfast we all sprawled out on the family room floor, wrapped in blankets and watched *I Love Lucy*.

“Hey,” Dad said to me. “Let’s go grab some logs for a fire.”

We had never built one before, even though the house had a fireplace. The idea was enthralling.

“Come on, Rhonda. Let’s start rolling up some newspapers and try it out.”

“Oh, jeez, Marvin, Just don’t blow up the house.”

After bundling up and driving out to the store, Dad and I came back covered in snow. Dad bear-hugged an armful of chopped logs we bought at a landscaping store in the Billy Blake’s shopping center and dropped them on the tiles in front of the fireplace. They clonked like bowling pins as they hit the floor.

Dad got the Sunday paper from the kitchen. Drew and I tore out long strips from the newspaper pile and wedged them in between the logs Dad stacked up.

“Alright,” said Dad, “Let’s fire this baby up.”

Dad flicked a match between his thumb and the floppy matchbook cover. Drew and I jumped a little. When had we ever seen a flame inside a house? The paper smoked when Dad threw in the match, but didn’t catch. He grumbled and tried again: a poof of smoke, no fire.

“Looks like it’s gonna need some help,” Dad said, and went out to the garage to get the red plastic container. He came back and tossed in a splash of lighter fluid.

“Marvin! Be careful,” Mom exclaimed, leaning from the kitchen window that connected to the family room. Dad turned and raised his eyebrows. He poured one more splash, closed the cap, and lit a match.

A big channel of orange soared up the chimney with a boom, filling the whole fireplace with bright flames. The fire was safe, but the burst of light and heat had us all take a step back.

“Wow,” Mom exclaimed.

We sat in awe rubbing our dried-out eyes to refresh them.

By the late afternoon, Mom and Dad were watching an old classic movie from their childhood. Drew was outside building a snowman. For the first time in a while, the house was quiet. I put on my Patty Duke album and listened to her sing “Funny Little Butterflies” over and over, while I stenciled and cut out guitar shaped versions of The Monkees, just like their logo and scotch taped them on my wall.

After a while I started to get cabin fever, so I put my snow boots on and trudged outside where heavy snow started falling again. I crossed the slick street and walked over to a model house. All the lights were on and the front door was unlocked.

No one would be looking for houses on such a snowy day, so it was empty and completely mine to explore. I looked quickly over both my shoulders, like Agent 99 from *Get Smart*, to make sure no one saw me go in.

The heavy wooden door opened to a foyer with a staircase just like in the houses in *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*. I loved that it smelled like brand new furniture and rugs right out of a store. The house was all lit up and cozy-looking with colorful furniture, curtains, bedspreads, chandeliers and dinnerware as if people and children were really living there. It had four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a big living room, and family room. I memorized all of its details.

I imagined the house as my very own, to fill with my books and stuffed animals, and my husband, and our eight children. In the checker-floored kitchen, I could cook giant, steamy turkeys and gourmet French cuisine for the ten of us. If I stuck with Dad’s advice and actually did all the things Mom couldn’t do, I knew I would be the best, happiest wife in the world in this house. Life would be more perfect than on *The Donna Reed Show* because it would be real, and mine.

It was getting dark so I walked back out through the front door. The snow had stopped and all the kids were back inside their homes for dinner. The lights of the houses were lit up all the way down the block. With the fire still going inside, our house flickered like a jack-o-lantern.

On the first warm night of spring the four of us went to Bonanza for a big steak dinner on Main Street. When we got home Mom grabbed the mail from the mailbox. I plopped down on the couch the minute I got inside.

“Mmm,” Dad said, loosening his belt. “That steak was a lot better than the food at the restaurant we went to last week. Wasn’t it, Anita?”

“Yeah, it was delicious,” she responded and then stopped mid sentence.

I turned to her. She stood at the kitchen counter, frozen.

“Mom what’s wrong?” I asked.

She was quiet a few seconds.

“What is this Marvin?” She walked over to my father, waving the piece of paper in his face. “What are these charges for motel rooms in Commack last month?”

“It’s a mistake,” Dad said, swiping at the paper. He grabbed it right out of her hand and looked it over.

“Whenever things are going good for us, you have to sabotage it.”

“Don’t psychoanalyze me! It’s a mistake!” he shouted.

“I’m calling up Diner’s Club right now,” Mom exclaimed, marching over to the wall phone.

“Come on, Anita,” Dad said, putting his hand on the wall phone so she wouldn’t pick it up.

They yelled that night for hours. I came downstairs to say goodnight and turned back halfway down. They were still at it.

“Why can’t we just have a normal life like other people?” Mom said sharply.

“Why don’t you just get rid of me then?” Dad boomed. “You can do better than me.”

I couldn’t take it. In this new house, which was supposed to change everything for us, here they were, yelling and fighting again. I went back to my bedroom, slammed the door, and lost myself in Madeline L’Engle’s *Meet the Austens*, a book about a happy family who lived somewhere in New England…until I fell asleep.

Chapter 7

Dad’s Confession

Mom and Dad had not spoken for a week. Each in their own corner like the boxers on TV. In the middle was just an empty space that made the house feel ten times bigger and twenty times lonelier.

On Saturday afternoon, I went with my dad to Billy Blake’s to pick up some Miracle Gro and grass seed. I loved to garden with Dad despite my newly-developed interest in perfecting my nail polishing, which the dirt always seemed to sabotage.

Dad turned off the car in front of our house instead of the driveway, something he’d never done before. A DJ on the radio was mumbling about Herman’s Hermits’ new hit song .

Dad crossed his arms and looked at me, frowning. “I don’t know what you think is going on between your mother and me right now.” He paused to rub his face.

I stayed quiet.

He kept on, “I’m in love with someone else.”

This couldn’t be real. How could he be in love with someone other than Mom? What was he even talking about?

He went on to tell me her name was Rosa and that she used to be the secretary at the insurance company where he worked. She had three kids, a girl and two boys, close to my brother’s and my ages. She was married but fighting a lot with her husband, too. They all lived together in Brooklyn.

“The first time Rosa and I got together outside of the office, we met at a playground,” he explained.

I gazed out the front windshield as if the whole scene was playing out in front of the car. But there was nothing there except an apple tree in front of the house across the street on Woodhollow Road. It stood out from everything else, a glowing emerald spotted with little lime-apples. It looked good for climbing and I wondered why I had never climbed it before. Not that I was a natural tree climber, but I decided then that I would try at some point.

“We sat next to each other on a bench. I wanted to kiss her, so I leaned over, and kissed her.”

I stared at the leathery dashboard because I couldn’t look at him. My heart pounded in my chest as I listened to Dad tell me about Rosa. He might as well have socked me in the gut or thrown me off a cliff because nothing could have been worse than listening to him talk about his kissing some woman other than my mother. A part of me actually wanted to hear about this side of his life that no one else knew about. I felt special that my father could only trust me with his secret. How important I must be to him.

“She’s Italian.”

I imagined her having dark hair, not blonde like my mother’s.

“She’s in love with me,” he said, looking at me intently as if he were waiting to see my reaction. Like we were two friends telling each other secrets and now it was my turn to talk. But I just wanted to throw up. He was saying stuff but I started spacing out and didn’t really hear him anymore.

“Dad, you’re married to Mom. What are you even talking about?”

“Maybe if you met her, you’d understand. I think you’d really like her.”

Was he nuts? How could I possibly like this woman? And how could he even think to ask me to meet her? It was bad enough that I knew about her now and couldn’t tell my mother.

“I don’t know, Dad.”

“How about tonight? We’ll meet her at a restaurant and then we’ll go to that famous discotheque in Greenwich Village. You know, the one where all the celebrities go.”

“The Electric Circus?”

The Electric Circus was the coolest place to be in all of New York. Maybe the world.

“Yeah, remember we read in the paper that The Monkees go there?”

“How will you get me in though? I’m only thirteen.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Maybe Davy will be there.”

“We’ll have a good time. But you can’t tell your mother, Rhonda. It’ll be our secret. I’ll tell her I’m taking you into the city on a sales call, alright?

I nodded, but a part of me felt horrible that I would be lying to my mother! It was like I was a double agent now, trying to be a friend to my dad by betraying my mom. He was like Dr. Zhivago, in the movie we’d all just seen together as a family. My mom was his wife and Rosa was Lara. And I was helping him out by meeting the woman he was cheating on her with!

I couldn’t believe it but just then Davy’s song came on the radio!

“Daydream believer and a Homecoming queen. You once thought of me as a white knight on a steed, now you know how happy you can be…”

Maybe it was a sign he’d be there. I looked back at Dad. He was staring out the windshield again, like he was in a daze. My stomach sunk a little because I knew he was probably planning our rendezvous with Rosa. I couldn’t let it bother me though. I concentrated on Davy’s voice instead, and let the blurry picture of a black-haired woman on a park bench fade away into a dark nightclub crowded with famous singers and movie stars.

Chapter 8

Strangers in the Night

I spent the rest of the afternoon picking out potential outfits, imagining which one would make me look grown up, just in case I ran into Davy or Micky. I settled on a loose mini-dress with big lime and yellow psychedelic swirls all over. I’d wear my new white go-go boots.

I was putting on the final touches of my pink Yardley Slicker lipstick when Dad came to my bedroom and told me he was ready to go. Mom was in the bathroom, taking a shower, so we didn’t even say goodbye. I was glad because there was no way I could look her in the eye and lie.

The sun was going down as we drove into the city. I loved looking out the window as we crossed the Queensborough Bridge, going deep into the forest of giant glowing skyscrapers.

Dad drove to MacDougal Street in the heart of Greenwich Village and parked the car. We walked over to a little Italian restaurant. Inside, I saw a woman, with short, shiny, black hair, waiting alone at a table fidgeting with her napkin. She came over when she saw us, and kissed my father on the cheek.

“Rhonda, this is Rosa.”

“Hi, Rho-o-onda, it’s so good to meet you.”

“Hi,” I responded, trying to sound as polite as possible to make my father happy.

She was around my height, shorter than my mother. She must have been Mom’s age, but she didn’t look anything like her. This woman’s pants were sort of tight and she had a huge butt. My mom had a small butt and big boobs. Rosa was flat chested and definitely no Kim Novak. My mom was a beauty and Rosa was not. The three of us sat down.

“There was tons of traffic,” Dad said, describing how we got stuck in a line of cars going over the bridge.

Rosa nodded, as if the traffic on Long Island was the most fascinating subject in the whole entire world.

“Your dad told me that you’re in ninth grade,” Rosa said.

“Yes,” I answered, moving my silverware around. I tried to butter a piece of bread, just cut from a loaf by my father.

“Rhonda’s a wonderful student. She made honor roll two years in a row.”

“Dad helps me sometimes. He’s a high school teacher.”

“I know that,” Rosa responded, smiling warmly at Dad.

A waiter came and took Dad and Rosa’s order. I couldn’t decide what I wanted.

“You like lasagna,” Dad suggested, glancing at the menu.

“That sounds okay,” I said. This is all so weird, I thought.

“Some lasagna for my daughter. She’ll also have a Shirley Temple.” He leaned toward Rosa. “She loves those.”

Rosa smiled back at him with a moon pie expression.

Gross, I thought.

After ordering we talked about TV shows. Rosa seemed to know all of my favorites. She even liked the *The Monkees*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Laugh-In*.

“Mmm!” Rosa said, after the waiter set down our plates. “Smells good!”

Dad and Rosa chatted about the especially warm spring weather we were having. When we were pretty much done Dad went to the men’s room.

“So, what do you think you’re going to order for dessert?” Rosa asked me, studying the menu.

“I’m not going to get anything,” I said. “I’m trying to lose weight.”

“You don’t look like you need to lose weight.”

“I do.”

“How old are you, Rhonda?”

“Thirteen.”

“Don’t worry. Your body will probably change on its own in the next couple of years. You’ll naturally become slimmer because the baby fat will melt away.”

Rosa’s explanation made me feel better so I smiled at her. Maybe she wasn’t so bad after all. I wondered if she made cool desserts that my dad complained my mother didn’t make for him.

Off we went to the Electric Circus. We parked a few blocks away and walked up to the club where I could see the long train of people waiting outside. Dad got us into the club right away so we didn’t have to even wait. The inside was dark and mysterious. Lights like jewels sparkled all over the room. Dad, Rosa and I took a seat on a big velvet couch.

“Hey, there’s one of my students from a couple of years ago,” Dad said, waving to a tall, dark-featured guy in a silvery silk shirt.

“Hey, Mr. Findling. How ya doin’?” he asked, shaking my dad’s hand.

“Great! How you doing?”

They started talking, catching up. It was hard to hear over the loud music.

“Tom, this is my daughter Rhonda.”

“Hey, Rhonda.”

“Hi,” I responded shyly.

“Why don’t you take her out on the dance floor?” Dad suggested.

“Sure,” Tom responded, grabbing my hand.

I looked around the room. I was nervous and excited. The music was blasting. People were talking loudly and dancing wildly. It was definitely a circus.

I danced to Steppenwolff’s “Magic Carpet Ride” and pretty soon felt like a natural. I smiled at the hundreds of colorful strangers all around grooving to the music. This was my kind of place.

Frank Sinatra’s “Strangers In The Night” started to play and everyone slowed down and grabbed partners. Tom pressed me against his chest and we rocked me back and forth. *Oy*, I thought.

“You’re a very pretty girl,” Tom said. “How old are you?”

I had to think fast. “Uh, eighteen,” I answered, hoping he bought it.

Tom pulled his head back and looked into my eyes. “Well, you sure look young for your age. I’m eighteen.”

An eighteen-year-old guy. Holy cow.

“You sure are pretty,” Tom told me. “You must have a boyfriend.”

I shook my head no.

“Well, I can’t believe that a girl as pretty as you doesn’t have a boyfriend. You must be the prettiest girl here.”

He put his cheek back against my ear. I imagined he was Davy Jones as we danced forever under the blinking psychedelic lights.

Chapter 9

The Beginning of The End

“Where did you and Daddy go last night? You both came home so late,” Mom asked standing in the doorway to my bedroom.

*Oh no, this is what I was dreading*, I thought. I was at my desk working on equations for my algebra class. How could I lie to my mother? But I had promised my father.

“Umm, the city”

“Did he take you to see a customer?”

“No, we went to some nightclub…the Electric Circus.”

“Why would he take you there? How did you even get in?”

Since I pretty much shared everything that happened in my life with my mother now, keeping a secret was unbearable. She was like my diary.

“We went with some woman.”

“What woman?”

“Um, I think her name was Rosa.”

My mother’s face looked like it split into a million pieces. When I saw how hurt she was, I couldn’t believe how cruel my father was to have put me in a position to betray my mother like this. She wanted to know every detail about the night so I told her everything. I was officially a double agent now, betraying Dad for Mom.

“He’s been having an affair with her on and off for years. He may have even brought you to Rosa’s house when you were a little girl.”

Oh my God! I may have even danced ballet for her but I was too young to remember.

“How could he have done this? Your father is a womanizer! A lying cheat! How could he have taken you to meet her?”

“I’m sorry I went, Ma. I shouldn’t have gone.”

“It’s not your fault.” she said her voice trembling. “I know he loves me! How could he do this to our family? He always says, ‘My little family. My little family.’ What’s wrong with him? He even told me he wants to have another baby.”

“What?!” I exclaimed.

“Yes!” she started to cry. I hugged her, which seemed to calm her down. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“That whore!” Her voice sounded like someone else’s voice now, not hers. “She just wants a Jewish husband. It’s a big prize for a *shiksa* like her to get a Jewish husband. Well, she could have him, that no good bum! He probably wanted you to tell me so I’d throw him out. I can’t believe he’s destroying our marriage like this. We were crazy about each other when we first met.”

“Weren’t you my age when you first met Daddy?” I always loved hearing the story about how they first met and fell in love.

“Fifteen, at my best friend Beattie’s birthday party in the Bronx. Only a couple of years older than you. He was twenty. I still remember him in that long blue overcoat and white silk scarf. So handsome. Like a movie star. It was cold out. I think it was November. It was love at first sight for both of us. We kept breaking up and getting back together. I’d dump him and then he’d come crawling back, promising he’d change. Eventually, he bought me a beautiful diamond ring and we got engaged. We were supposed to have a wedding, but his mother didn’t want us to get married. But we ended up getting married anyway by a justice of the peace at City Hall.”

A calmness washed over her. Her survival instinct seemed to kick in.

“If I leave your father, how will I even support us? I’m just not ready to be on my own yet. I’ll go back to college and become a teacher, and then I’ll leave him.”

She looked at me—so lost. I felt lost, too. We just kept talking till Dad came home.

I fell asleep to them fighting.

My parents went to see a therapist. Things got better for a little while, but then Dad started coming home in the middle of the night again. He’d tell my mother it was because he’d had a lot of new, potential customers he was trying to sell life insurance to. Then they’d have another fight.

After getting home from doing my homework and studying at the Smithtown Library, I heard Mom upstairs in her bedroom speaking Yiddish to Grandma on the phone. Mom came down later and headed straight for the dining room and grabbed a bottle full of whisky from the hutch that was only brought out for company.

“Who’s coming over, Ma?”

“No one,” she said, pouring the whiskey into a glass. She downed it in one gulp. “Just go watch TV with your brother.”

I had never seen my mother drink any alcohol before except for Manishevitz wine at Passover so I was really worried. She went upstairs. I tried to lose myself in *Batman*, with Drew.

Dad came home a little while later. I rushed over to him the moment he opened the door to tell him I was worried about Mom.

She came back downstairs and blocked his path when he tried to go upstairs. “You’re drunk, Anita.”

“I went to that whore’s house in Brooklyn and saw your pants on her clothesline. You’re a disgusting bum.”

“You what?”

“You heard me! The pants you wore when you went there to fuck her.”

“Shut up. The kids can hear you.”

“How could you do this to me? To the kids? Our family?” she said. She took a swing at him and missed.

My dad went into the garage.

“Where are you going? To that whore?”

He just ignored her but she followed him. I followed them.

“Fuck you!” she screamed. There was a loud crashing noise, like glass being broken. I rushed over to her. She had punched the glass part of the garage door. Her hand and wrist were cut and bleeding.

“Mom!” I yelled, running over to her.

Dad quickly got towels from the bathroom and wrapped them around my mother’s wrist, then, put her into his car and drove her to the emergency room. My brother and I huddled together in front of the TV set watching show after show, until they came back a few hours later. A doctor had given her some medication to help her relax so she went straight to bed.

For a few weeks Dad came home at normal times again, but then he stopped going to the therapist. Mom kept going without him.

“The therapist said I shouldn’t let your father come home in the middle of the night. He needs to shit or get off the pot,” Mom explained to me in the kitchen a few days later. “He can’t keep leading a double life.”

Taking her therapist’s advice, Mom started locking the storm doors when Dad came home after midnight, which couldn’t be unlocked from the outside even using keys.

Dad slammed his fists against the storm door late one night and started yelling for my mother to unlock it. It was like the scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire* that I was reading in my English class: Marlon Brando yells “Stella!” except Dad yelled “Anita!” It was scary! My mother wouldn’t give in and open the storm door for him, so he gave up and drove away.

After this incident, Dad started coming home early again. But then the fighting started again when my mother saw calls made from our house to Rosa’s on the telephone bill.

One night, I went upstairs, hoping to see if they were getting along. Mom was standing at the bathroom door and Dad was shaving. As I walked over I heard her ask my father. “Where are you going?”

“To see Rosa, the woman I love!”

He obviously didn’t even know I was even there but his cruelty towards my mother cut through me like a knife as if he was saying it to me. I couldn’t understand why my dad was so mean to her. The “storm door ritual” was reinstated.

A few days later I was alone doing my homework at the kitchen table, when Dad came home. I rushed over to him.

“Hey, Daddy-o, I just got an A on my paper in English class comparing *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*!”

“That’s great, Rhonda,” he said, but had a sad expression on his face instead of his usual excitement when he saw I had gotten an A.

“What are you doing home so early?” I asked.

“I— I have to take some of my suits to the cleaners.”

Weird, I thought, because my mother usually brought his clothes to the cleaners.

“Okay, catch you later, Daddy-o.” I went back to my homework.

A little while later he came downstairs carrying about half of his wardrobe.

“You’re taking all your suits?”

“Yeah. I just need to get them all cleaned,” he said, with that same sad expression like he was going to cry. He left and didn’t come back that night or the next. Dad had officially moved out of the house.

Chapter 10

Dad’s Being Gone

*I felt my father’s absence when I woke up in the morning; when I walked down the beautiful staircase in our house, where I knew he wouldn’t be waiting at the bottom to give me a ride to school when I’d missed the bus. I felt it when I walked into the kitchen, where he wasn’t eating cereal at the table with a big, floppy newspaper high up over his face, greeting me with a “Hey, Little Miss Rhonda.”*

A profound feeling of emptiness swept over me around eight every night when I knew he wouldn’t be coming home anymore. After I finished reading, I’d turned off my light, lie down in the darkness, and wait for the fights to start like they did before Dad left. Instead, I’d hear Mom crying, or talking to Grandma on the phone in Yiddish or her TV set blaring. I missed Dad’s yelling, because it meant that he was still here.

Sometimes Mom tried to give us both pep talks. She even told me that maybe we’d move to Switzerland or Australia where there were more men than women. I guess she was hoping she would meet a new man to fall in love with or rescue us.

I called Dad almost every night, but it didn’t do much good. Since he didn’t have a place of his own, the only way to call him was to dial the number of his answering service, and leave a message for him. Sometimes he didn’t call back for a couple of days.

Dad never came into the house anymore. When he finally picked me and Drew up, I asked him, “Where do you go to sleep at night, Dad?”

“Sometimes in the car, and sometimes at Aunt Norma’s.”

It scared me to think of my father cold, bundled up in blankets, on the leather back seat of his car. He could get robbed, or worse.

“He’s living with that whore,” Mom said, violently mashing up canned tuna for a sandwich she was making for Drew.

“You mean Rosa?”

“Yeah, that whore and her *mamsas*!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! He told me.”

Hmmm. Here I was so worried that he was all alone, cold and shivering in the dark, like a little mouse. But he wasn’t alone at all. He was living with Rosa and her children. Maybe he liked playing with Rosa’s kids more than us. I imagined her cooking bacon for Dad on Sunday mornings like Mom used to. I thought about how big and special her house must be to make Dad want to live there so badly.

“Your father has a character disorder,” Mom told me after she came back from therapy the next day. Mom had started telling me about her sessions after my father stopped going and she went by herself.

“What does that mean?” I asked, still keeping an eye on Dan Rowan on *Laugh-In* saying, “Here come de judge!”

“It’s very complicated,” Mom explained, “but, essentially, your father just cares about what he wants. He doesn’t think about other people’s needs or feelings. The therapist said that I better learn how to financially support us because he doesn’t think your father ever will.”

My heart sunk. I hoped the therapist was wrong.

“I just wish your father was more like your Grandpa.”

Grandpa Hymie was a baker and stayed up all night long making Danish, cakes and challah, so they’d be ready in the morning. Whenever I slept over their apartment he’d always bring fresh rolls and bread from the bakery where he worked. Sometimes he’d bring me an éclair. But he came home the same time every morning, like clockwork.

Dad was definitely his opposite. He wasn’t a nine-to-fiver.

“Your father’s a rainmaker,” Mom explained. “He’s always been good at creating money ideas but a lot of his schemes involved making a fast buck, and usually didn’t work.” She sighed and then went on, “He likes hanging out with marginal, edgy characters like gamblers whose wives threw them out. He used to tell me he was ‘an enigma’ and not to try to ‘figure him out.’ He’d call me ‘his conscience’ and ‘old reliable.’”

I would just sit and listen. We tried to analyze him together, Mom with her therapy terms and me, a bit confused, trying to take it all in. Somehow talking about Dad, even in a mean way, made us feel better. Like he was still there…even though he really wasn’t.

Chapter 11

The World’s Fair

July Fourth weekend marked the second month that Dad was gone. A couple of days before the big national holiday, Mom asked, “Wouldn’t it be great to get away? Let’s just go somewhere. How about the World’s Fair?”

Everyone was talking about the World’s Fair in Montreal. We had read about it in the newspaper. Mom decided it was the closest foreign destination and we could get there in an eight-hour drive.

“Come on!” she exclaimed. “Let’s be spontaneous!” But her excitement was tinged with a nervous shake because Dad was always the leader of our adventures; the one who drove the car to get us there.

Despite her fears we took off the next morning, driving through the city to upstate New York. Drew and I pressed our temples flat against the cool car windows and watched the city magically turn into the Catskill Mountains. Our minds tingled as we imagined the glittery new adventures we would have in this foreign country.

I fell asleep and awoke later, groggy, and looked around the new city, shiny and gray like New York.

“We made it!” said Mom, smiling from the driver’s seat after we’d crossed the border to Canada. After driving a while she pulled up along a side street in front of a dingy-looking motel.

“Wait here. I’ll be right back,” she told Drew and me. She walked out the glass doors a few minutes later, looking disappointed. “No luck,” she said, and we drove off to another motel down the street.

A few hours later, we were still in the car. The sun dipped below the skyscrapers. The sky turned purple, and, soon, everything became dark and still no motel.

“Can’t you ask them if they have an extra room?” I asked Mom after she got back into the car for the twentieth time. We were outside of the city now. I could see the lights from far away.

“We could sleep in the hotel pool,” Drew suggested, “on rafts.”

Mom must have thought my brother’s idea was awful because she put her head on the steering wheel and started to sob, “How could I be so stupid? There are no rooms anywhere. It’s the World’s Fair; of course everything’s full. The whole world is here!”

I was so mad. If Dad were here, he would have taken care of everything. I wanted more than anything to tell her that. I wanted to lean over to her and say, “See? Do you see what happens when Dad is gone? How can you think that you can take care of us by yourself? Nothing works when Dad’s gone!”

I opened my mouth to say the meanest thing I could, but instead, I rubbed her back and told her, “It’s alright. You didn’t know.”

After she calmed down, we decided to sleep in the car, next to a field. The car bounced, as we rolled off the side of the road into the ditch. We lowered the car seats and curled up against the cool leather.

Hours later, we were awakened by the blinding white beam of a flashlight that pierced through the driver’s side window. It shone in my face; I couldn’t see anything but heard a few dull raps of the policeman’s knuckles against the window. Mom rolled down the window quickly.

“Are you alright ma’am?” the officer asked. He looked younger than my mom and had a high, wheezy voice. The officer moved the flashlight around the car suspiciously.

“Yes, we’re fine, officer,” Mom answered.

“Okay, you can stay here but just be careful,” he said.

When I woke up a few hours later, I popped open my door. The whole sky was blue except for the big yellow and orange sun that had just risen and looked like a big ball of fire. The field smelled fresh and sweet like Woodhollow Road. I wondered if this is what it felt like to be a farmer, waking up at the crack of dawn to milk the cows and feed the chickens. I thought that maybe I should live on a farm someday. Things didn’t turn out so bad after all; at least, we got to see another country.

Just then Mom and Drew got up and we drove to a restaurant and had pancakes for breakfast. Mom didn’t want to spend another day looking for a motel so she drove us back to Smithtown. I didn’t put up a fight. I’m not sure what it was, but watching her push around her maple syrup soaked blueberry pancake, I thought something had died inside of her.

Chapter 12

The Piano Recital

For the next few months, Dad only came by occasionally. When he did, he took us to the movies, and restaurants a couple of times. One time he even took us skiing at the Long Island Ski Bowl: a single ski slope built on a very large hill a few miles from Smithtown that everyone was going to.

Our most fun time was when Dad took me to The Monkees concert at the Forest Hills stadium. He took me to a glamorous restaurant in Forest Hills called The Stratton where we feasted on barbeque spare ribs. At the concert, he listened to me and thousands of other girls yelling and screaming to Davy and Micky.

The second best time was when he took me on a shopping spree at a boutique in Greenwich Village. I came home with an entire wardrobe of the hippest clothes that I couldn’t wait to show off in school.

“The bills,” said Mom, pacing around the kitchen one afternoon when I just got home from the library.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Your father’s last two checks bounced. I called him but he’s not calling me back They’re just piling up. The heating bill, the electricity. I don’t have a job, and I can’t pay for all of these things by myself.”

“Well,” I said, “why don’t you try and get one?”

“I haven’t had a job since I was seventeen.”

Mom’s survival mode must have kicked into high gear again because a week later, she borrowed money from my grandparents and started taking classes in keypunch operating. For a few weeks, she went to school every day to learn how to practice punching hundreds of little paper cards for big New York companies.

But Mom was devastated when she couldn’t find a single keypunch-operating job on all of Long Island. Apparently all the big companies were in Manhattan and she was worried about leaving Drew and me alone all day.

Over the next few weeks, Mom went out to try and find work. She finally got hired as a saleswoman at Robert Hall’s department store, selling clothes. But on the first day, Mom got fired.

“Ma, take a breath. What happened?”

Her hair was teased and hairsprayed into a glamorous beehive hairdo. She was wearing the high heels she only wore for special occasions.

“I was trying to sell this woman a very nice blouse that happened to be on sale in my department. I told her that I thought it would look very nice on her so I held it up in front of her. No, no, she says, I don’t want it. And I said to her, ‘This is a gorgeous blouse. It’s on sale!’”

“Uh-huh.”

Mom waved her hands around in the air. “So the woman started yelling at me and then my supervisor, Mr. Dudley, comes over and *oy*! The whole thing just turned into a big fiasco. He told me I was too pushy! Huh! When have I ever been pushy? When?”

“Well, I don’t think you’re pushy.”

“Thank you,” she said and gave me a hug. “How about dinner? I brought home some barbecued chicken. It was on sale at the supermarket.”

On Saturday I woke up to freezing air in my room hitting me like a gust of wind. I threw off the covers to see why Mom had the heat so low. I got dressed quickly and went downstairs.

“Mom!” I shouted.

She was drinking coffee, already bundled up in her bathrobe, coat, and scarf.

“Your father didn’t pay the oil bill so the heat got cut off. Apparently he thinks it’s fine that we all freeze to death this winter since he doesn’t have to do it with us,” she said, placing a bowl of hot Cream of Wheat on the kitchen table for me.

 Later, Mom and I made a fire in the fireplace like Dad did on that snow day, just to keep the house warm.

Grandma and Grandpa ended up paying the oil bill.

Completely fed up with not receiving any money from my father and his not paying the bills, Mom decided to get a legal separation. Then, the courts could order him to take care of the bills. In order to serve him with the separation papers, my mother had to tell her new lawyer Morty Silverman where to find him. She gave him the address to Rosa’s house in Brooklyn but the lawyer said it wasn’t a good idea to serve him in these places since we didn’t really know his schedule.

My father promised me that he’d come to my Christmas piano recital so my mom told her lawyer that they could find him at Mrs. Swain’s studio.

On the night of my piano recital, Mrs. Swain welcomed Mom and Drew and me inside, guiding us into the living room with the other families leaning against walls or sitting on fold-up chairs facing the shiny black grand piano.

The three of us sat down in the back of the room where we peeled off our winter coats. Mrs. Swain announced to the small group that we’d be starting soon. She called up the first player, a small, short girl with a twisted ponytail. The girl played “Moonlight Sonata” and when she finished, Mom turned to me and gave me a big lipstick smile.

“You’re gonna be great,” she said, while clapping for the little girl who bowed in the front of the room.

By the time I smiled back, her eyes were off me, looking up over my head to the door. She pressed her lips tightly together. Another kid played, an older boy with glasses, as I sat fiddling with the pages of the “Fur Elise” in my lap. As he hit his last chord and the soft applause began, Dad snuck into the room.

“Dad!” I yelled waving, and he grinned and waved before positioning himself against a windowsill. I turned back to Mom, who’d been following him with her nervous eyes before looking down at the floor.

“Rhonda Findling,” Mrs. Swain announced. My stomach dropped to my knees. I popped off my chair, shuffled through the row of chairs, and took my seat at the piano, nervous and excited.

I must have torn through the “Fur Elise” in record time because it was all over in seconds. My first big concert. Everyone applauded and I felt like one of the big stars in Mom’s movie magazines.

After the show, everyone was munching on pieces of cheese on toothpicks, potato chips and dip while drinking punch and chatting.

Mom tugged Drew and me outside to the cars parked around the U-shaped driveway. I was surprised when she walked up to a beat-up brown sedan. There was a man inside that I had never seen before, smoking a cigarette. Mom rapped on the window. He looked out the steamy glass, put out his cigarette in the door ashtray, and stepped outside. He had a brown hat and briefcase. The rest of the families started pouring out the front door. I saw Dad.

“Hey it’s Dad!” I called out.

Mom turned around. She took a deep breath, and gently touched her hairdo with the bottom of her palm.

“Great job tonight.” Dad bent down to hug me. “Hey there, Drew.” He rubbed Drew’s head. “How about we get ice cream sundaes?”

“Yeah!” I said.

“Yeah!” Drew exclaimed.

Dad stood up and looked at Mom. “Come on, what do you say, Anita?”

I looked up at Mom. Her red lips were open just a little and she looked like a statue standing there. That’s when the man with the briefcase walked over.

“Mrs. Findling?” the man asked.

Dad looked past Mom towards the man. Mom kept looking at Dad.

“Who’s this?” Dad asked.

“Marvin Findling?” said the man as he took some papers out of his briefcase.

“Yes,” Dad answered. “What is this, Anita?”

“Mr. Findling,” he said, handing Dad the papers, “you have just been served.” He tipped his hat and walked away from us.

The four of us stood there on the curb, haloed by the Christmas lights from Mrs. Swain’s house. I stood close to Mom. Each time she exhaled, her chest felt like a big balloon expelling air.

“How could you do this?” Dad asked.

“You stopped paying all the bills, Marvin. You haven’t been giving us any money, at all! How am I supposed to take care of the kids? You don’t give a shit if the oil is turned off. If it wasn’t for Mama and Daddy we would have gotten pneumonia that week. What am I supposed to do?”

Dad rubbed his hand over his mouth and chin. He looked away, then at me, then at Drew, then away again. His eyes were all red and I saw two tears fall down the side of his face.

“Crocodile tears, Marvin.”

Dad just stared at her. And for the first time, in a very long time, both of them were quiet. They didn’t yell, or fight, or throw things. I could hear cars pulling out of Mrs. Swain’s driveway and felt Mom’s arm shaking against my shoulder. Dad bent down again to hug me, then Drew. He walked down the street to his car, with the papers the man had given him crumpled in his hand.

Chapter 13

Leaving Woodhollow Road

I woke to my mother shaking me in my sleep. “Rhonda, get up and get dressed.” Before I even had a chance to ask what was going on she had hurried out of my room. I could hear her getting Drew up.

“Whats going on?”

“The bank foreclosed on the house so it’s on the market now. There’s people downstairs looking around.”

In around fifteen minutes our home looked like a crime scene. House hunters were all over the place, stepping on Drew’s toys and kicking them out of the way. I could see them trying to picture their own things and families, in our house, just like I did when we used to go house hunting on Long Island.

When the people saw me, they didn’t even bother turning away. They weren’t embarrassed that we hadn’t invited them in; that they had interrupted our morning, or that we were too poor to hold onto our home.

A few days later, I was taking pink curlers out of my hair primping my flip for school when I heard Mom shrieking on the driveway. “Oh my God!”

I ran down the stairs, out the front door. Mom was standing over the bare patch of gravel in the snow that was made by our car—but there was no car.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The car’s been repossessed! Shit! That bastard must have completely stopped paying the car payments. What the hell are we going to do?”

We were like Robinson Crusoe. Without a car, and no subway, we were now stranded on Long Island, about to be homeless.

But it didn’t take long for my mother to go into survival mode. “Come on, get your coats.” An hour later we took the Long Island Railroad to go see my grandparents.

Grandma and Grandpa were both from Poland. My grandmother was in an internment camp in Poland with her mother and brothers during World War I. My grandfather’s family was also living in Poland then. He spent a lot of time wandering around Poland on his own when he was around twelve so Mom told me he was sort of a ragamuffin. Both of their families eventually made it to America in the 1920’s. Grandma was twenty-five, six months older than Grandpa, when they got married.

My grandmother raised my mother, aunt, and uncle in a two-bedroom apartment on Vise Avenue in the Bronx. My grandma’s sister, Cipi, lived with them most of those years.

My grandparents had squirreled away money from Grandpa’s baker’s salary. They did this by living very frugally, sometimes buying bruised fruit and dented cans when they went grocery shopping. They never went on vacations or anywhere for that matter.

“I think your Grandpa’s crazy about you because you look just like Grandma when she was your age.”

I smiled because I loved Grandpa, too.

“And your Grandma’s been crazy about you since the day you were born.”

I smiled to myself again thinking how lucky I was to have such great grandparents who loved me so much.

They buzzed us up to their little one bedroom apartment and greeted us with big hugs and kisses. Their house was always warm, filled with the smell of meats stewing and soups boiling. They had a small living room with furniture covered in shiny plastic that squeaked when you sat on it. A couple of the red velvety chairs looked like they were from the French Renaissance period.

“Mama,” said my mother, taking off her coat, “I’m so upset. They took the car. I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

“That Marvin, he’s a putz! Psat! on him. He’s a no-good bum, a bad Jew!” Grandma exclaimed. I went to sit on the plastic couch with Drew.

“I don’t know, I don’t know. I can’t call him, Mama! He doesn’t even have an answering service anymore. He hasn’t called the kids in weeks. He could be dead for all I know!”

“That bum! I hope one day he has to be schlepping from house to house with that whore! Feh!”

“I messed up, Mama,” said Mom, “I’m sorry, I just don’t know—”

“Shh.” It was Grandpa Hymie, always the quiet one in the room. When he spoke, it was with a very thick Yiddish accent. “All of you talk, so much. Ahnie, don’t worry. Mama and I are going give you a down payment for new car.”

“But, Daddy—”

“What else are we going to do with our money? Let it sit under our *toochis*? We can’t pay for the whole car, but we can give you the down payment. We’ll send you the car payment every month. Stop your worries about that *trumbanik*.”

Grandpa reached into his pocket and gave Mom a rose-colored check.

“Oh, Daddy, thank you so much.” She walked over and hugged and kissed him.

“Alright, alright, enough *bubba meise*, she exclaimed, “Let’s *fress*!”

Grandma had made her usual five-course dinner: grapefruit with a maraschino cherry in the middle, lettuce and tomato with chopped liver, matzo ball soup, roast chicken and vegetables and sponge cake to top it all off. It was so good I even forgot my diet! I was just happy that we weren’t going to be stranded on Long Island.

After much haggling with lawyers, my father gave my mother $5,000 for a divorce settlement which included back child support. Mom told me she was going to use the money for a down payment on a small house even further out on Long Island.

“Why can’t we move back to the city so I could study at the High School of Performing Arts?” I begged my mother. I wanted to study acting or music at one of the specialized high schools so I could become a professional actress.

“There are civil riots in all the cities,” my mother explained. “It’s too crazy out there now.”

Earlier that year, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy had been shot and race riots raged across the country. New York City was like a war zone. Eastern Long Island was far away from all the clamor and social upheaval.

“Besides," she added,” I don’t want to move back after we finally got out of the city.”

It had all made sense when my mother explained it to me but I was still disappointed. I couldn’t stop thinking about all the music and drama classes I could take and the plays I would perform in. Besides if I had to leave my friends and house in Smithtown at least I could have a cool life in a great performance high school in New York City.

Mom ended up buying a little ranch-style home in a Levitt development in Coram, filled with inexpensive new houses recently built for young families starting out. My grandparents put the house under their name since my parents’ credit was awful. Grandma and Grandpa also helped pay Morty, the divorce lawyer.

An older man around my Grandpa’s age eventually bought the house in Smithtown as a foreclosure. Either he was a generous person or felt sorry for my mom because he let us stay a few extra months without paying rent so that my brother and I could finish out the school year.

Right before we moved, my dad surprised me by picking me up at school. I hadn’t seen him in months. He took me to dinner and then we went to see *Valley of the Dolls* at my request. I loved the movie, especially the theme song, sung by Dianne Warwick. I identified with the main character, Ann, because she moved to New York City from Vermont, in order to have a glamorous life.

My father looked very sad, as we sat in his car in the driveway. This warm, late spring night was almost a year from the day he told me about Rosa. His eyes were red and I could see a couple of tears. I wondered if they were crocodile tears like my mother said.

“Watch out for the boys in your new high school. They’re all out for just one thing and they may want to take advantage of you.” He said, stroking the side of my face with his hand.

“Okay,” I responded, confused. I was already thirteen, but boys were the least of my problems now. We hugged each other, then I left the car and went into the house.

I woke up one sunny morning in June of ’68, almost three years from when I woke deliriously happy to start my new life in Smithtown. Except today was the day we were moving out. My beautiful, magical, fairy-tale life in Smithtown was now officially over.

Chapter 14

Coram

The Big Apple moving truck men unloaded the beds, tables, desks, dressers, and chairs. After squeezing everything through the front door, they distributed all the furniture in the few rooms of the little house.

The moving men, Mom, Drew and I tried to arrange the furniture exactly as it had been in our old house. We pushed the television into the living room corner and shoved the fancy, marble coffee table into the middle. The elegant green chairs, with puffy satin cushions didn’t match the large rust-colored, Colonial couch against the window. Our things just didn’t fit here, I thought, and neither did we.

Mom gave a check to the moving men, who sat on the spare boxes in front of the house, smoking cigarettes.

“Could you wait a few days before you deposit that?” she asked the driver.

After the van drove off, the three of us took a seat on the living room floor and started to unpack boxes of silverware and knickknacks that belonged in the dining room Ethan Allen hutch. We stacked plates and bowls for Drew to carry back to the kitchen. Mom opened the carton with her Wedgwood china inside.

I had to get out. It was too sad seeing all the pieces of our old spacious life cramped together in just a few rooms. I told Mom I would be back in a few minutes and went to the garage to get my bike. I wheeled it down the driveway to the front of the house. The tires bounced and shook over the balding, weedy front lawn. When I looked up at our new home, all I could see was our old house in Smithtown.

I soared down Winside Lane. At least the pavement was the same, smooth and fast. There was enough wind to cool down my hot cheeks and blow my hair in every direction. I rode all over the development, passing house after house: Cape Cods, split-levels, and L-shaped ranches. They were all brand new, but none of them were like the more opulent looking Colonial-style houses in Smithtown. And there were no pine trees anywhere.

When I got back, we met our next door neighbors. Johnny and Carmella, a middle-aged, Italian-American, childless couple, living in the house on the left of us. Carmella maintained a spotless interior and Johnny kept their front lawn and bushes trimmed to perfection. Sheila and Jack lived in the house on the right. They were in their late twenties and had a three-year-old daughter and another one on the way.

I had to figure out a way to make money because now I had to pay for my own clothes and personal items. So I put flyers about my babysitting services in mailboxes throughout the neighborhood. I was thrilled when people started calling and booking me for weekends.

Since it was summer, I operated a day camp in my backyard in the morning from ten until noon. My whole investment consisted of a small wading pool, Crayola crayons, construction paper, paste, and coloring books, that I bought from Billy Blake’s. I managed to get three campers between the ages of two and five from down the block. I’d go to their houses and walk the children to my backyard. When we’d get to my house I’d read a story to them. Afterwards I’d let them color. By eleven o’clock I’d fill up the wading pool with water from the garden hose. Then my campers would go in and splash around. At noon I’d walk them back home. I had officially become an entrepreneur.

I missed the beautiful tulips and geraniums that grew around the front of the house in Smithtown, but without my father as my gardening partner, I lost total interest in planting bulbs and taking care of the shrubs. But Mom put me to work mowing the lawn, which I hated.

I was tearing up the grass one afternoon, yanking the lawnmower back and forth over the rocky patch it was jammed in, when I caught sight of a tall, handsome boy with dark, shaggy hair trying to set up a sprinkler in his backyard diagonal to ours. He was breathtaking. *Oy*, I thought.

Carmella and Sheila were sitting out on lawn chairs in Sheila’s backyard, fanning themselves with their hands. Sheila waved for me to come over.

“Rhonda, dear,” Carmella said, motioning her head towards the neighbor’s yard. “Have you caught a glance of the new boy that’s moved in behind our house?”

“Yeah, I just saw him. He’s cute!”

“Cute? He’s gorgeous!” Sheila exclaimed, leaning in, and fanning her hand in my direction. “Did you see his eyes?”

“No, uh, well, not really,” I answered, taking another quick look.

“Well they’re baby blue, just like that Paul Newman’s. Slanted down and always a little bit closed.”

“Bedroom eyes, they call it,” Carmella added.

“You should start a conversation with him,” Sheila said, putting more lotion on her arms.

“Yeah, find out if he has a girlfriend.”

I squinted my eyes in the sun to catch a better glimpse.

“Boys love it when you ask them questions,” Carmella explained.

“Really?” I asked.

“Definitely.”

I glanced across our backyards again. He became cuter the longer I stared. Maybe Carmella and Sheila were right. They both had husbands. They had to know something about how men thought. I walked back over to the mower to finish up and tried to resist my urge to look anymore.

A week later I spotted him alone in his backyard. I thought about what Carmella and Sheila had told me about boys liking it when you asked them questions. It wouldn’t be weird. I’d just be a friendly neighbor, that’s all. Taking a deep breath, I crossed the imaginary thresholds of our yards and waved nervously when he saw me.

“Hi, I’m Rhonda.”

“Hi, I’m Greg.”

“Did you just move in?”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “We just moved from Queens.”

“Oh, I just moved here from Smithtown. Are you going to Coram High School?”

“Yeah, eleventh grade. What about you?”

“Tenth grade. Actually I’m supposed to be going into ninth but I skipped third grade. They used to do that in the city. I don’t know if they do that out here.”

“Yeah, I know. They have SP in the city where you can skip eighth grade too. I don’t think they do that here.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“So you’re fourteen?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m fifteen, I’m gonna be sixteen next month.”

“Cool.”

We were both silent. I bit my lip and stared down at my toes, thinking of something interesting to say. I was doing a pretty good job so far.

“Well, I’ve gotta get back. I’m watching my brother. He’s only nine,” I said.

“Yeah, I have an eight-year old brother. I’ve gotta watch him sometimes too,” he responded.

I took a deep breath, squinted my eyes and asked, “Would you like to come over and hang out tomorrow night?” The words had come out fast so I hoped he’d heard me.

“Okay.”

 It was an unenthusiastic okay, but it was an okay nonetheless. “Um, how about eight?”

“Cool”

“Okay. See you then.”

The next night, I put on my pink Yardley lipstick and wore my prettiest outfit—a sundress I still had from last summer. I polished my nails and brushed my hair till it shone. It was a beautiful, warm, summer evening with a full moon, so I put out the green plaid lawn chairs we’d brought from Smithtown.

I was thrilled when I saw Greg walking through my backyard. I offered him some pink lemonade I had made from Tropicana frozen concentrate for the occasion. Just as we were starting to talk about the new school we’d be attending, I was surprised to see my mother had come outside.

“So-o-o,” she said, with a big smile. “Greg, where did you and your family move from?” she asked, making herself comfortable on one of the lawn chairs.

“Uh, Queens,” he answered politely, but nervously. “Bayside.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Mom poofed up her coif with the palm of one hand. “And you’re going into the eleventh grade?” She raised the pitch of her voice a little at the end.

“Y-yes.”

“Interesting," she commented. “Well, we moved from Smithtown, but we used to live in Brooklyn.”

“Yeah, Brooklyn,” I added, trying to break into the conversation.

I’m sitting on the other side of Greg as he is being drawn into my mother’s eyes. This must end.

“Ah-hem.” I coughed a little.

When Mom leaned sideways, I shot her a glare, which she ignored. She leaned back into flirt position. I considered running inside and grabbing a large sheet of paper. I’d write, Hey! He’s only fifteen! Then I’d hold it up, behind Greg’s head, hoping she’d finally relent and go back inside.

After about a half an hour of my mother dominating the conversation, Greg politely said, “Goodnight,” and left.

I was pissed and heartbroken. I went to my bedroom, slammed the door, threw myself on my bed and started crying. My mother opened my door without knocking.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Why didn’t you just stay inside the house?” I cried.

“I was just being friendly,” she answered defensively.

“You were flirting with him!”

“I was not!”

“You were, too!”

“You’re making too much of this. You’re just upset because your father left and we had to move.”

“I am not! It’s not Daddy, it’s you!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “You ruined everything. I didn’t even get a chance to talk to Greg. I hate you!”

“Stop yelling! You sound like a crazy person.”

“I’m not crazy, it’s you. You make me crazy. I hate you! Get out of my room!”

“You’re crazy!” she yelled, storming off, slamming the door behind her.

I absolutely despised my mother then, not only for not understanding me, but not admitting how much she upset me. I wanted to hit her for calling me crazy. Why couldn’t she get that she made me crazy? I played my Simon and Garfunkel album to calm myself down. A couple of hours later she knocked on my door.

“What?” I snapped.

“It’s Mommy. Can I come in?”

“Yeah,” I answered in a snotty tone.

She walked in and sat on my bed. “You know I love you,” she said. Then she apologized for talking too much to Greg. She was being charming and nice now. When she was like that my heart would melt. I couldn’t even remember hating her a few minutes ago. We ended up watching *Bewitched* together with my brother.

I didn’t seek Greg out anymore in the backyard that summer, nor did he seek me out. Even though we couldn’t afford for me to take piano lessons with Mrs. Swain any longer, I still practiced an hour a day. So sometimes I’d open the sliding glass door and play my favorite pieces, Beethoven’s “Fur Elise” or Chopin’s “Nocturne in E Flat,” hoping to lure Greg back to come visit me or at least to impress him.

Chapter 15

Summer

My mother finally got a job at a local supermarket where she worked as a full time cashier. It didn’t even come close to covering the bills but somehow we managed to scrape by.

Mom joined Parents Without Partners, a social networking group for single mothers and fathers. The new girlfriends she made in their Coffee and Conversations group were soon accompanying her to singles’ bars.

When it got really hot, we’d go and visit my mother’s new friend, Francine, who had an above ground pool, which took up most of her small backyard. Sprawled in lawn chairs, the two of them would talk for hours. Francine also had a son Drew’s age and they’d swim and play in the pool. I was in awe of Francine’s seventeen-year-old daughter Hannah. She was tall with short brown hair. Hannah wasn’t too glamorous looking but she was older, wiser and had just graduated from Hauppauge High School, which automatically made her cool.

Despite our age difference, Hannah never seemed to mind me hanging out with her. We’d talk about our parents’ divorces in her bedroom. She also listened patiently when I complained about my mother. She even gave me advice about high school that I’d be starting at the end of the summer.

“You gotta get involved in sports when you start school in the fall,” she told me. “You’ll make tons of friends, and it’ll help you feel better.”

Talking to Hannah always made me feel hopeful and optimistic. Most important, she introduced me to what was to become the shining beacon of light throughout my teen years, *Seventeen* magazine.

“Here,” Hannah said, pulling out a magazine from a knee-high stack, and tossed it next to me on the bed.

I loved everything about the magazine including its fresh and deep-inky fragrance. I had officially graduated from *Calling All Girls*.

The rest of the summer, I continued exploring Coram on bicycle. Riding a couple of miles up winding Terrytown Road to Nesconset Highway, I pedaled to Billy Blake’s. There I bought cosmetic products that I’d read about in *Seventeen*. Balancing my purchases on my handlebars, I couldn’t wait to get home to try on my new shade of Slicker lipstick, hoping it would make me look like Jean Shrimpton, the Yardley cover girl. I spent almost an hour selecting my first eye shadow. I settled on the color blue from Revlon to match my eyes. I also bought Maybelline Cover Girl foundation and powder to hide some blemishes I was getting. I got Shower-to-Shower powder and a sponge on the back of a long handle to take a more glamorous shower. Perfect grooming was my passion now.

I continued to read *Seventeen* magazine voraciously, studying all the clothes, trying to figure out which ones I could afford on my budget. The last week of August, I took the money I had earned from the day camp and babysitting and went shopping. I bought five outfits. A “mod” cotton mini-dress with colorful stripes going across horizontally, two regular length skirts, and three sweaters. I also purchased pantyhose and colored opaque tights to match the outfits, plus a new pair of loafers. It was the closest I could get to being Jean Shrimpton of Coram Highs School.

During the last week of August, I began a daily ritual. I’d lay all my new outfits on the bed and thoroughly examine them. My body tingled in anticipation of the new life waiting for me when school started in September.

Chapter 16

Coram High School

I could barely swallow the oatmeal and hot chocolate my mother had made for me the morning I was starting high school. I looked across at my brother, calmly eating his daily breakfast of cream cheese on toast and Captain Crunch cereal. My mother ate his leftovers, which seemed sort of weird but I figured she thought it was a way for her to save money.

Shaking in the gray chilly morning, I walked to my school bus stop half a block away. There were around seven other kids there. We all smiled and introduced ourselves. I found out that they were all in eleventh and twelfth grade. I was the only tenth grader.

In homeroom, everyone seemed to know each other. I felt weird and out of place. The bell rang for first period and everyone scrambled out the door. Walking down the hall, I watched boys giving each other noogies and girls putting on lipstick in front of their locker mirrors, gabbing loudly.

In Geometry class, the teacher asked us what we’d gotten on our Algebra Regents. I announced that I’d gotten a ninety-five, a standard response at Great Hollow Junior High School, and a mark of respect among the other kids I’d gone to school with.

One girl booed. A boy yelled out “We got a genius in the class!” Everyone laughed. My shoulders slumped.

Our neighbor Sheila used to be a teacher and told my mother that Coram High School had previously been primarily a vocational school where you could only major in secretarial science, beauty culture, wood shop and car mechanics. It had recently changed and started including courses to prepare students for the New York State Regents and college. I figured that’s why students didn’t care whether or not they had good grades.

I started hanging around with the kids I’d met at my bus stop. They had come from Brooklyn, Queens, and other parts of Long Island. We formed our own little group. They ranged in age from sixteen to seventeen. I had just turned fourteen and looked young for my age, to boot.

Annette’s mother and Margaret’s father had just married and now the two were instant stepsisters. They had dyed their dark hair blonde and smoked cigarettes. Lisa had just moved with her family from Oyster Bay. I thought all of them were fast because they knew how to flirt, and had boyfriends waiting for them in their old towns.

A couple of boys fluttered around the four of us, as we’d walk home from school. I would watch the older girls’ flirting techniques. It amazed me that the simple acts of throwing back their hair or flashing a smile, could get them the boys’ attention. Invisible, I became a pawn in one of the boy’s flirting games. Tom put his arm around Lisa one Friday afternoon and tried to hold her as they walked.

“Oh, gross!” she screamed, pushing him away, “I already have a boyfriend, Tom!”

“Fine,” he said in a huff, walking over to me, “I’ll just go talk to Rhonda, then.”

He flung a floppy arm across the back of my neck, choking me a little. I knew he was just trying to get back at Lisa, but there was something about the feel of his big, heavy arm on me and the warmth from his chest that heated my side. I felt stupid and guilty for liking it so much. Tom wasn’t even cute. Six feet tall and weighing little more than me, he looked more like a pimply lollipop rather than Prince Charming—but I couldn’t help myself. On boys, I was officially hooked.

Right after school started, my father called and said he wanted to see my brother and me. In exchange, he promised my mother he’d pay some back child support. Mom agreed with a deep sigh.

A week later he picked Drew and me up and drove us to a local pizza place. The restaurant had low ceilings and fake ivy vines that trailed along the tops of our leather booths. The three of us slid in, me across from the guys.

Under the stained glass parlor lights, Dad’s face looked older. His hair had fallen out a little. His cheeks sagged, making little pouches in the corners of his mouth. He had gained weight. His skin looked grey.

We ordered a pizza, and mostly talked about school. During the past year, something had changed between us. I realized that Dad was the cause of our money worries. I thought that if he actually understood what we were going through, maybe he’d start helping us. I had never stood up to my father before. After we were done eating, I confronted him.

“How could you not send Mommy money for the bills?”

He looked away. Then he turned his gaze back, shaking his head.

“I just gave her some money. Besides, your grandparents are helping.”

“Why should we be depending on Grandma and Grandpa when you’re our father?”

“Your mother’s been brainwashing you,” he said sharply. “You’re starting to sound just like her.”

“No she hasn’t. She just says that you don’t send any money and we can’t pay the bills. That’s not brainwashing; it’s true.”

“I shouldn’t have to pay to see the two of you. Like I’m buying a ticket.”

“You should just give her money because you’re our father and have to pay the bills. Whether you see us or not. That’s what fathers are supposed to do.”

I could see the disappointment in his eyes. No longer his adoring, obedient little girl, I’d become a teenager with a big, rebellious mouth. We barely spoke to each other on the drive back to the house.

We didn’t hear from my father for a while. He continued to not send any child support.

Chapter 17

Fred

“That was Fred. Do you remember him?” my mother asked, hanging up the phone in the living room.

Yeah, I remember Fred, I thought. He was one of my dad’s former high school students. A couple of years ago, he came to visit us in Smithtown. The Fred I remembered was tall and lanky, with a goofy, barely-grown moustache, hanging from his top lip. It was weird that he would be calling Mom, I thought, since she and Dad were divorced now.

“How nice of Fred to call and check on us. He might even come over for dinner one evening,” Mom gushed. But I could tell by the way Mom threw back her head, chirping with laughter every thirty seconds on the phone when he called again, that something was up. The fact that this man had to be at least ten years younger than her, thoroughly weirded me out.

Fred came by on Sunday. Mom spent the three-and-a-half hours before his arrival dashing back and forth between the kitchen and the bathroom, alternately basting the roast and fixing her makeup.

The four of us sat in the living room, sipping Cokes. We talked about Fred’s job as a clothing salesman at some men’s boutique in the city. If one were to judge the evening by Mom’s reactions, he could have been Johnny Carson delivering one-line zingers.

“So I asked him, ‘You want to wear a yellow tie with that shirt? Sir, you’ve got to be out of your mind!’”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” Mom giggled loudly, and wiped some tears out of the corner of her eye.

I cracked a smile for Mom’s sake and gave Fred the once-over. He was different from the gawky high schooler I remembered. He was still tall and slight. His crew cut had become a golden-blond shag with long bangs. He dressed like he was one of the Rolling Stones.

He was definitely cute. I even liked the way he flicked his hair behind his ears. He talked about rock music, about which Mom was hopelessly clueless. He wasn’t as funny as Mom thought, but he was definitely cool and hip. I started to have a little crush on him, too.

It turned out that Fred was twenty-three, ten years younger than Mom, which meant he was closer in age to me. She was the seductive older woman vulnerable from a divorce ripe for the picking, and I was jail bait.

He came over again the next weekend. The routine was the same. Mom put on enough lipstick to turn the whole East River red and wore her sexiest outfits. Nothing could have been worse than watching my own mom act coquettish with a guy nine years older than me. On Saturday night, Fred started slept in my mom’s bedroom that was separated from mine only by a wall. It was a miracle that I never heard them having sex.

Sunday night Fred wandered into my bedroom while I was doing my homework. We chatted about Nehru jackets and The Beatles.

“You should try to be nicer to your mother,” he suggested.

“She gets on my nerves,” I replied.

“Well, she’s going through a lot.”

“So am I.”

“It’s harder for your mother. Everyone’s depending on her.”

Then suddenly he leaned over and kissed me, square on the lips. He smiled and brushed my shoulder with his hand. Then he left the room. When he was gone, I looked into the mirror, excited by the kiss, and wondered if he liked me romantically.

The next morning, I was cramping from the first day of my period. I went to get a towel from my mother’s dresser so I could take a shower. Fred was sleeping on the bed, beside it. I tried to be quiet, but he woke up.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice sleepy.

“Getting a towel,” I replied. “Sorry I woke you.”

“You look like you’re in pain.”

“I am.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Uhh...cramps,” I told him hesitantly.

“You’ve got your period?”

I nodded shyly when I found the towel, and closed the drawer.

“Come sit over here,” he said softly.

Sitting down next to him, he put his hand on my belly and gently rubbed it.

“Does that feel better?”

Actually, it did seem to soothe my cramps, but it felt wrong.

“I have to go. I don’t want to be late for school,” I said, and left the bedroom, feeling weird.

This strange scene with Fred and my mother’s new adolescent behavior made me want to talk to my father desperately even after all my disappointment and anger at him. I found his phone number in my mother’s address book and called him. He picked up right away.

“Dad, can you come out here this Sunday?” I said, “I really need to see you.” Then I started to cry. Tears came out of nowhere.

Dad sighed, sounding annoyed. “I can’t understand what you’re saying when you’re crying.”

I had a flash of him telling me when I was a little girl, “If you don’t stop crying I’ll give you something to cry about.”

“I don’t want to talk about it on the phone,” I said. “Can you just drive out to Long Island? We haven’t seen each other in a long time.”

“I have to do something with Rosa on Sunday so I can’t. I’m sorry.”

 I felt so hurt I could barely take it. “I have to go now,” I barely managed to say and hung up. I went to my room, threw myself on my bed, and cried, humiliated that he rejected me for Rosa.

Didn’t he already spend every day of the week with her? Didn’t he want to see me? Why should I even have to ask him? How could he be so cruel to me?

It was hard for me to get through the next few days. My father’s rejection caused a horrible pain that literally hung over my heart. It stopped me from ever wanting to feel vulnerable with him again.

The next weekend Fred came to visit us again. Mom was making breakfast for all of us, giggling over some stupid remark Fred made. Smiling, her head thrown back, hands on her hips, she looked like she thought she was Marilyn Monroe. Disgusted and fed up, I stormed out of the kitchen and slammed my bedroom door. Mom came to find out what was wrong.

“You’re acting like a teenager with Fred!” I exclaimed. “It’s gross.”

“You’re just upset because you think I love Fred more than you and Drew,” Mom said, sitting on my bed. “A woman can love a man and her children at the same time. One doesn’t interfere with the other.”

“What are you even talking about?” I cried out with frustration that she wasn’t getting it. “You’re acting like you’re my age! I’m the teenager, not you!”

“Well,” she said, “Fred is going to keep coming here whether you like it or not because I lo-o-o-ove him!”

“Get out, just get out of my room! I ha-a-ate you!” I screamed.

It took every ounce of strength I had not to yell after her, “No wonder Daddy left you!” Instead I put on my new *Sargent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album.

That night, when my mother and Fred were watching TV, I threw some clothes in an army knapsack. I decided to take the train to Greenwich Village and become a hippie. I’d listened to enough Janis Joplin to know how it was done. I’d go back to the restaurant where my father had taken me to meet Rosa and get a job as a waitress. I’d put on a lot of makeup so I’d look older. Or, if I needed to get further away, I’d take a train or bus to San Francisco and live in Haight-Ashbury.

Thinking I was making a clean getaway, I walked out the backdoor. I got a block away when my nine-year-old brother came running after me.

“Go back to the house, Drew.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the train station. I can’t stand her anymore.”

“Are you going to Dad’s house?”

“Are you kidding? I hate him too. And I’m certainly not going to that bitch Rosa’s house in Brooklyn! I'm going to Greenwich Village."

“By yourself? Tonight?”

“Yeah, I may even go to Haight-Ashbury. Anything’s better than living with her.”

“If you go then I have to be alone with her.”

My heart melted. How could I be like my father and abandon my little brother? Standing under the streetlamp, his thin, boyish frame protected by a red windbreaker, Drew imitated my mother’s stupid cheesecake pose.

“Oh Fred,” he said, trying to mimic my mother’s voice, “You’re a dreamboat. Let me stroke your mustache. Oh Fred, you’re so cute. But I’m so beautiful.”

I giggled. It was actually pretty dead on.

“I thought your head was going to spin around like in The Exorcist when you were yelling, ‘I h-a-a-ate you!’”

Drew’s eyes almost popped out of his head imitating me. He laughed out loud at his own standup comedy routine and pretty soon I was laughing, too. He took my army knapsack and we both turned around and headed back to the house.

Mom’s relationship with Fred lasted only one more week, thank God. I never found out who ended it, but I figured it had to have been him. Twenty-three-year-old Fred had had his fun with the teacher’s ex-wife, until he got bored and moved on.

Mom’s flirting had gotten on my nerves, but I’d always felt sad, watching her as she giggled on the telephone with Fred. She never would have admitted it to me, but I think her thing with Fred was her way of trying to get over her pain about my dad.

Chapter 18

My Mother and Men

Mom continued her search for a man to fall in love with, and possibly rescue us financially. She even went on a couple of dates with a single rabbi in his thirties. He was handsome and cool-looking for a religious guy. I was excited when after their second date, she told my brother and me that they would probably get married. But then he never called her again. She found out later he had gotten engaged to a woman who was very religious and involved in the synagogue. We never went back to that temple again.

“Always keep the water boiling when I’m around,” Joe, the next guy she dated, announced. I wondered if he was thinking someone was going to deliver a baby but what he really meant was that he drank a lot of instant coffee.

One time, Joe and my mother were making out in the living room. The one bad thing about being a teenager and living in the suburbs, is that you can’t go anywhere unless you have a car or someone to drive you. So, being only fourteen, and without a driver’s license, I was stuck in my bedroom. Trying to drown out the silence that indicated their making out, I blasted my *Sargent Pepper*’s album. I don’t know why, but my mother sent him to tell me to lower the music. He knocked on my door. When I opened it, he walked inside.

“You mind keeping down the noise?”

“Why don’t you keep down the noise? I don’t feel like listening to you making out with my mother,” I retorted.

I was startled when he bent his head down and kissed me. Oh my God, he stuck his fat, slimy tongue in my mouth! This wasn’t like the sweet kiss Fred had given me. At least Fred was a cool, hip dude. Joe was a fat slobbering guy, my dad’s age!

“Do I have a sign hanging around my neck that says free kisses from a fourteen-year-old?” I asked.

He slinked back to Mom. When they put on the TV, I flicked my record player handle to The Beatles’ “She’s Leaving Home” and blasted it even louder. I told my mother the next day about Joe’s kissing me in my room. She called him up and told him off. Thankfully, she never saw him again.

Afterwards, she dated a kind social worker that I really liked. I was relieved that he acted normal and didn’t try to kiss me. I thought he’d make a great stepdad. He reminded me of a *Father Knows Best* or a *Leave it to Beaver* kind of dad. He told my mother, after a few dates, that he was bisexual. I was disappointed when my mother decided that she didn’t want to be with man who had been with another man.

She kept her manhunt going by still attending Coffee and Conversation groups at Parents Without Partners. She also became a regular at a singles’ bar in a little shopping center, near our house, called Hounds and Foxes. But I could tell she was starting to get worn down by men disappointing her. She even started seeing a new therapist, Dr. Klein.

One day she came home from one of her therapy sessions and announced, “I’ve decided, with Dr. Klein’s advice, that I’m going to stop dating men for a while and start focusing on raising you and your brother. I’m also going back to school to make something of myself.”

“Cool, Mom,” I told her, secretly relieved and happy that I wouldn’t have to see or hear about anymore of her loser boyfriends.

Because of my father’s not paying child support and my mother’s almost nonexistent income, she was able to get grants and went to Suffolk Community College, which was dirt cheap and only twenty minutes away from our house. Going to college opened up a whole new world for her. She stopped cutting her hair and dying it blonde. Her fancy Smithtown clothes were replaced with jeans, sweatshirts, and sneakers. She even stopped teasing her hair and using hairspray.

She told me she wasn’t able to absorb information as quickly as I, so she had to study twice as hard to get decent grades. Determined, she would sit in her ornate, gold suede chair, studying her textbooks for hours. Her passion for finding the right man had been transferred to her newfound love of politics and history.

She would enthusiastically explain to my brother and me how corrupt the government was, although we weren’t really interested. She joined the National Organization for Women and started going to Liberal Party meetings. Sometimes I wondered if she didn’t have Drew and me to take care of, if she would have become a full-fledged S.D.S. member, a Weatherman or some other kind of left wing political activist.

Chapter 19

Visit With Dad

My mother’s lawyer, Morty, had suggested she should let Dad see my brother and me again. They hoped this latest strategy might get him to pay child support. Although I was still hurt from his last rejection, I still longed to see him, so Mom called him.

The following Saturday, he picked us up in his car and drove to a nearby deli. I sat in the front and my brother sat in the back. The two of them ordered huge pastrami sandwiches. I only ordered a few slices of roast beef without the bread because my baby fat had not disappeared like Rosa had predicted.

“How’s school?” my father mumbled, fidgeting with the radio dial, trying to find the ball game.

“It’s okay, I guess,” I sighed. *If I sound sad, he might ask what’s wrong.*

“Huh?” he mumbled. “That’s good.”

The static from the radio crackled into the nasal voice of a sports announcer. Dad sighed with relief and slumped back comfortably in his seat, biting off the remaining half of his sandwich. He crumpled his wrapper into a little ball and turned to face Drew in the back. Dad asked him what he thought of the Yankees this year. The two talked excitedly about sports as my father started the car, drove a few blocks, and pulled up to a schoolyard. I was quiet and envious, wondering why my life was never as exciting to him as those games.

The two of them started shooting hoops. I stood against the chain-link fence and watched, crossing my arms to protect myself from the freezing cold. I was startled when my father threw the ball to me. I caught the pass, dribbled it, and shot at the basket. The ball circled the rim and actually went in.

“Good shot,” my father said.

Thrilled by his compliment, I played with them for a while. He was passing the ball to me a lot so, for a moment, my hopes of him loving me again were raised. An hour later, we drove to a diner.

“So how’s French?” he asked, in between sips of his coffee.

“Not bad,” I responded.

I cut up my corn muffin, buttering it carefully as if I were frosting a cake. I knew I wasn’t going to eat it. I could barely swallow.

“You need to study harder,” he said coldly.

“I’m trying. I’m just having problems with conjugations.”

“Maybe you should ask the teacher for extra help.”

I managed to squeeze back my tears, remembering how he used to tutor me with textbooks he’d brought home from the school where he taught. Now he was passing me off to a teacher.

“You’re wearing eye makeup!” Dad remarked, in an accusatory tone.

Unable to look at my father anymore, I just examined my eight, perfectly even pieces of muffin. I hated that I no longer felt safe enough to tell him anything about Greg and Fred or that I couldn’t study harder because I couldn’t concentrate. I hoped he would notice how miserable I was and try to make me feel better or at least act concerned, but he didn’t seem to get it at all. I felt like yelling and shaking him. *You’re more like a snotty boy in my class than a father. Where is my Daddy-o that loved me so much? Where did he go?*

When I was a little kid, I saw this movie, *Invaders from Mars*. Aliens drilled holes in the humans they captured and made them into Martians. Afterwards, the Martians would send them back in their original human bodies. The spooky part was they began acting weird for no reason, which freaked out their families. I wondered if my father had become a Martian? Maybe he was an impostor.

When he dropped my brother and me off, he came into the house and gave my mother a check for $200, a month’s child support. Even though he still owed her thousands of dollars for back child support she just took the money and didn’t say anything. Maybe she figured Morty’s plan was working.

Miraculously, they were actually friendly for a couple of minutes and she made some coffee. Glad they were getting along, I went to get mugs for everyone.

“Rhonda looks like she’s gained some weight and her face is breaking out. She never broke out before,” my father told my mother, as if I wasn’t even there.

I wanted to yell at him.

*Maybe because I am fourteen now and I have my period and my hormones are running.*

*Maybe because my whole life is fucked up because you left and don’t give a shit about us, about me, anymore.*

Instead, I just left the kitchen and went to the sanctuary of my bedroom. After slamming the door, I blasted Janice Joplin’s “Take Another Little Piece Of My Heart” on my record player.

Chapter 20

High School Parties

A girl named Mindy moved right across the street from Greg. She was tall, thin and Jewish with wiry black hair. Even though she was a year and a half older than me and a senior, we quickly became friends. Maybe because we both had something very important in common—a crush on Greg.

Like me, Mindy enjoyed the view of Greg’s yard from the sliding glass door in our little dining room where we could catch a glimpse of him raking his backyard lawn and wiping the sweat from his forehead. Like me, Mindy melted at the sight of Greg, roaring with delight as he shot glances in our direction.

She was an only child with a mother who was a housewife and a father who brought home the bacon. Whenever I hung out at Mindy’s house, her mother would serve us chocolate chip cookies made from scratch.

I’d feel sad and lonely when I’d come home to an empty house. Since my mother wasn’t around much, I felt like an orphan. Besides, Mom wasn’t smiling too often these days. Her happiness felt a little forced after a long, tiring day on her feet cashiering, or attending classes.

In early December, when Mindy turned sixteen, she threw a birthday party and invited me, Greg, kids from the development, and some of her classmates. Mom said I could wear makeup to the party, so an hour before I left for Mindy’s I squinted hard at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, eye shadow brush in hand. I glanced back to the open page of *Seventeen* I’d spread across the sink.

I applied lots of blue eye shadow over my lids and darkened my already thick black lashes with mascara. I even put on eyeliner. My skin, looked magically model-clear after I applied a ton of Maybelline Cover Girl, patting it down with pancake powder. I smudged rouge over my cheekbones and applied a brand new shade of Slicker lipstick that just came out. I look pretty, I thought.

The party in Mindy’s basement was loud with kids talking as Mindy’s mom led me downstairs. The Zombies’ “It’s the Time of the Season” was playing in the background. Among the group of around twenty kids, was Greg. I could barely breathe. Adrenaline soared through me when I saw him.

“Everyone’s here!” Mindy shouted, as I came downstairs. “So let’s play Spin the Bottle!”

Everyone formed a messy circle. Trembling, I set my coat down and squeezed in with some girls I recognized from school. I’d never played Spin the Bottle before, but knew that it was a kissing game.

The idea of me kissing a boy for the first time was exciting but terrifying.

“Alright,” said Mindy, a crazy grin on her face, “It’s my birthday so I’m going first.”

She took the blue glassy Coke bottle and twisted it under her wrist, flicked it the other way, and let it spin. It wobbled around a bit before slowing down and landing smack on Greg, our mutual crush. The game wasn’t being monitored for impartiality, but if there had happened to be an official referee watching over this particular game of Spin the Bottle, boy oh boy, would there have been some furious whistle blowing called against that spin. The other boys hooted and the girls giggled. My face burned bright red as Mindy got up and sat on Greg’s lap, planting a big, kiss on his luscious lips.

When the game was over, I sat on a chair in the corner. My disappointment and relief that the bottle never landed on me were assuaged with handfuls of pretzels and potato chips.

“Color My World” began to play and a boy I’d never seen before came over to me. He wasn’t as dashing as Greg but he was cute. He also had shaggy brown hair and the beginning of a mustache. I found out later he was someone’s cousin visiting from out of town.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked.

As if I was in a trance, I placed my hand in his soft, clammy palm. He pulled me towards his body and held me close. We started moving in rhythm to the music. I let my jealousy of Mindy’s kissing Greg fall out of my body through my shoes, which moved between my dancing partner’s, to keep with the beat and avoid his toes.

Thank God nothing ever happened with Mindy and Greg after that kiss, because I don’t think I could have remained friends with her if something did.

My Aunt Shirley and cousin Andrea never called us after we moved to Coram.

“We shouldn’t have to chase after them. They should be calling us since we’re in a crisis,” my mother said. “I guess they’re just siding with your father.”

I couldn’t understand why there were sides, or why they weren’t checking up on us. It was as if Aunt Shirley and Andrea dropped off the face of the earth. Just like Dad, they were gone. I didn’t want to make Mom mad by calling them behind her back. Besides I agreed with her that it was awfully mean.

I did start hearing a lot from my teenage cousin Laurie, Aunt Cipi’s daughter. She had long, straight, brown hair down to her waist. My mother said that Laurie had a great figure, which was true. Laurie told me that she didn’t like looking in the mirror and not looking good so she almost always had eye makeup on. Maybe it was because she was self conscious of her huge nose, which was out of proportion with the rest of her face and distracting from her beauty.

Aunt Cipi had named my cousin Gertrude when she was born. Laurie hated her name so much that she went to court and legally changed it to Laurie.

Even though she was just about to turn sixteen, my cousin already had lots of experience with boys. She had made out with a few of them and had even gone on dates. She wanted to move out of her parents’ apartment where she shared a bedroom with her brother who was into all sorts of drugs. Her father suffered with mental illness and had been psychiatrically hospitalized a few times.

Aunt Cipi was always nagging Laurie to go “fishing” for a husband, so she wouldn’t end up “an old maid” like Aunt Cipi almost did. My aunt didn’t get married until she was in her thirties, which in the 1940’s was considered a nightmare for a woman.

Aunt Cipi was so desperate to get married she went to Cuba, where many Jews had migrated after the end of World War II. Her brothers paid for the trip. When she got there, a Jewish family matched her up with my uncle, who had survived a concentration camp. They got married right after they returned to New York.

I was thrilled when Laurie invited me to her sweet sixteen party in the Bronx. Aunt Cipi had rented a room in the back of a restaurant. Mom drove me into the city that night. It was packed when we arrived. Mom left me and walked over to Aunt Cipi. I looked around and sat down near a friendly-looking bunch of girls and boys. Everyone cooed with delight when I told them I was Laurie’s cousin.

After a couple of girls got up, a boy, who had been telling jokes, moved over and introduced himself. His name was Paul and was only a few inches taller than me.

“I know Laurie from school. She sure is something, huh? He said, sitting down next to me “So where do you live?”

“Well I’m originally from Brooklyn,” I said. “But now I live on Long Island.”

We talked about school. When I was laughing at one of his jokes he stroked my arm.

Oh man, I thought, but I tried to play it cool. I tried to look into his eyes, even though it was hard. He kept asking me all the questions you ask someone when you’re getting to know them. I asked him some questions too. He wasn’t as cute as Greg, but I liked him anyway. We kept talking, until Mom tugged on my sleeve to go. I shot him a big smile and waved goodbye. He didn’t ask me for my phone number, but I figured we’d stay in touch somehow through Laurie.

In the car, I felt like someone had lit a fire inside my chest. I’d never had a boy pay so much attention to me before. The feeling was weird and different, but my whole body felt illuminated. I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. I told Mom all about Paul.

“It feels good when a man shows you affection,” she said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

 “I used to love when Fred showed me attention,” she smiled smugly. “He was so-o-o-o-o-o affectionate. He used to put his arm around my shoulders when we were watching TV.”

“Oh my God, why must you tell me everything?”

“Well you just told me about Paul.”

“I’m the daughter, remember? You’re the mother for God’s sake!”

“Why does everything I say upset you? I have to watch everything that comes out of my mouth. You’re so goddamned sensitive!”

I snapped on the radio and switched the dial to WABC and then slumped in my seat. It was like she was competing with me. Like she had to take the attention from me. Why couldn’t I have a normal mother who just baked spice cupcakes like Mindy’s mother? Why did she have to act like such a teenager?

The next week I spent hours listening to my records, daydreaming about the boy from Laurie’s party, praying he’d ask my cousin for my phone number and call me. My favorite romantic songs were Brooklyn Bridges’ “The Worst That Could Happen”, Stevie Wonder’s “For Once in My Life”, and Eddie Holmes’ “Hey There Lonely Girl”.

After a couple of weeks, I started to give up on hearing from Paul and went back to daydreaming about Sajid Kahn, Leonard Whiting and Bobby Sherman. I wasn’t into Davy or Micky anymore. I was now into actors I hoped to meet when I moved to the city and became an actress.

I loved watching romantic movies on the “Million Dollar Movie” at 4:30 PM on TV when I got home from school like *Wuthering Heights*, *Splendor in the Grass* and *From the Terrace*. I desperately longed for a great, romantic, passionate love. The hope of finding it was the one thing that sometimes kept me going when I couldn’t stand my mom, my dad, school or my whole life anymore.

Chapter 21

Ravioli Chanukah

Mom stormed into the house and threw her keys down on the desk. Looking up as if she were yelling at God, she screamed, “It’s Chanukah, for God’s sake!”

I had just gotten home from school.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“They didn’t pay me! Right before I left work they told me that I started in the middle of the two-week pay period so I won’t get a check until next week.”

Mom had just gotten a work-study job as a clerk at Suffolk Community College, working part-time in the library. Her hours at the supermarket were cut because business had slowed up. We were really depending on the money from her new job.

Her coat still on, she flung open a kitchen cabinet door. “All we have to eat tonight is a can of ravioli.”

Mom rummaged through the other kitchen cabinets as if something would miraculously appear, if she looked hard enough.

“That bastard! How could he do this to us?”

“Why don’t we just ask Grandpa and Grandma for more money?” I suggested, wanting to calm her down.

“They can’t keep going through their savings, helping us all the time. They need their money when Grandpa retires next year. I can’t make the bills this month. I just can’t do this anymore.”

She looked at me with a desperate expression. Then she started sobbing, wailing loudly. I tried to hold her. I was afraid that if she fell apart or went crazy then she wouldn’t be able to take care of my brother and me anymore. Hugging me back she felt sweaty and warm even though it was chilly in the house.

She went to the bathroom and came back with a tissue. She blew her nose hard and stopped crying.

“I’m just going to have to go to the welfare office. Maybe they’ll give me an emergency check. Someone told me that they do that sometimes.”

The thought of the kids from this neighborhood or my friends back in Smithtown knowing we were on welfare was horrifying.

“Maybe we should wait and see if Daddy sends us a check for Chanukah.”

“I can’t wait for your father to develop a conscience. Don’t you understand? We’re broke!”

“Just don’t scream at me, okay?” I shot back sharply.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it,” she sniffled. “I’m just upset that your father traipses around with that whore, not giving a shit that his kids don’t have food to eat. The courts do nothing. He gets away with murder, that son of a bitch.”

Her voice was loud and her words were coming quickly.

“When Morty asked one of the judges what we’re supposed to do when your father doesn’t pay child support, the judge said ‘Go on welfare!’ So that’s what I’ll have to do,” she said, reaching for the car keys. “Let’s just hope I don’t run out of gas.”

“Wait!” I went to my room, and got the two dollars I’d made babysitting on Saturday night. “Use this for gas.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking it hesitantly. “I’ll give it back to you later.”

“Ma, if you get emergency money, we need Chanukah candles. We don’t have any.”

“Okay,” she said re-buttoning her coat and putting on a kerchief. “It’s freezing outside.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No. You need to be here when your brother gets home. Make the ravioli for you and Drew. Don’t wait for me.”

I walked over to the storm door and watched her drive off, determined and angry. I put on The Monkees, and then took out our menorah from the Colonial Ethan Allen hutch. I started polishing it while listening to Davy Jones sing “Daydream Believer”. The song reminded me of when my father told me about Rosa in his car in Smithtown.

I wondered if Dad was thinking about me, while I was thinking about him. How could he have changed so much?

I thought about Rosa, “the other woman,” and I didn’t think she was even pretty. My mother was definitely the better looking of the two. I just didn’t understand what he saw in her.

I took The Monkees album off and put on Bobby Sherman. I thought it was good that my brother, Mother and I weren’t into buying Chanukah presents since their birthdays were in December. But we’d always lit the candles, and sang “*Ma’oz Tzur*”, our favorite Chanukah song. When the menorah was gold and shiny, I placed it on our kitchen table.

Just then Drew walked in the door. I told him about Mom getting upset and going to the welfare office. He looked at me intensely with his big brown eyes that for some reason today reminded me of my father’s. Then he went into one of his ingenious comedy routines.

“Can you just see Greg’s family, sitting down to Chanukah dinner right now, eating their latkes, chicken soup, roast chicken, and applesauce?” my brother asked. Then in a deep voice, imitating Greg’s father, Mr. Cohen: “Oh, dahling, this is so delicious. Drew, what did you have for your Chanukah dinner?” In his own voice: “Uh…Chef Boyardee ravioli. It’s our favorite so we skip the latkes.” Imitating Mr. Cohen again: “I love Italian food myself. Dahling (looking left as if he was speaking to Mrs. Cohen), we must try ravioli for Chanukah next year. Who needs greasy potato pancakes?”

I started laughing. Next he imitated some of our other Jewish neighbors discussing our Chef Boyardee ravioli dinner. I joined in and pretty soon we were performing like a comedy duo. We were both laughing so hard, I forgot all about my mother crying, and our money problems.

Later, my brother went to his room to do his homework. I knew he’d be hungry because he hadn’t eaten anything since he’d gotten out of school. I decided to heat up our Chanukah dinner of canned ravioli.

My mother came home that night with two bags of groceries, including Chanukah candles. She announced that we were officially on Aid to Dependent Children and would get a public assistance check every month, along with a Medicaid card. She gave me my two dollars.

“I don’t need it back Mom,” I said, trying to put it in her hand.

“It’s yours,” she insisted.

My mother ended up making potato latkes, which we ravenously ate with Mott’s applesauce. Then we called my grandparents to wish them a happy Chanukah. My Mom and Grandma spoke a long time in Yiddish. Thank God I didn’t hear my Mom cry anymore. We never heard from my father that night, not that I expected to. Afterwards we lit the Chanukah candles and sang “*Ma’oz Tzur*”.

Chapter 22

Bullied/Depression

Trying to forget my father and my on-and-off irritation with my mother, I decided to take Hannah’s advice and put more of my energies into competitive sports.

I was thrilled to be selected for the Coram High School’s volleyball Intramurals team.

A teammate, Bonnie, sarcastically called my name out, when I went to serve at a practice one night. She had hair like Cher’s, long, black, and straight. She was skinny with brown eyes and an olive complexion.

“Rho-o-o-o-o-o-onda! Rho-o-o-o-o-onda!”

What could she want with me? I wondered.

“Rho-o-o-o-o-n-dahhhh!” My name seemed to bounced off the walls a million times as I raised my arm to serve.

Smack! I hit wrong and the ball flew right into the net. My teammates turned to glare. Bonnie and her friends cackled, their laughter getting louder and louder as it echoed, flooding my head with their noise.

A couple of days later I was sitting at the lunch table across from Mindy, munching on a grilled cheese sandwich and potato chips. Bonnie walked by with two accomplices flapping behind her back.

“Oh! Rhonda,” she said, as if she was surprised to see me there.

My heart stopped, then started thudding again, fast and loud.

“This looks good,” she said, taking some potato chips off my plate.

Take your fucking hands off my food, you bitch, I thought, but didn’t say.

Across the table, Mindy, whose head was bowed, looked more scared than I. She was probably thanking God it wasn’t her who was being picked on.

All my good friends were still in Smithtown so I had no one to stand up for me. No moral friends, like Patty or Cathy from the *Patty Duke Show*, to get on top of a lunchroom table and lecture all the other kids on the importance of kindness and teamwork.

I was half a second away from slugging Bonnie but I was terrified of being “called out” by her, which meant she would want to officially fight me, any time, any place.

Being the new kid on the block, I didn’t say anything.

When I walked down the hallway I’d feel the blood rush out of me at the sight of Bonnie. One time her friend, Ellen, said, “Rhonda’s c-o-o-o-l,” when she passed me in the hallway. Bonnie’s other friend, Kathy, only bothered me when she was with the pack. Trying to be inconspicuous I curled myself into a back bus seat on the way back home from volleyball games; still, the three girls would occasionally call my name out and say stupid things about me as if I wasn’t there. I was just too scared to say anything back.

“Just ignore them. Be yourself!” Mom would advise, exhausted and exasperated from her own problems.

I rolled peas around in my plate. Looking at food made me sick now.

“Why can’t I just switch to another high school?”

“I’d have to pay extra taxes if you switch to another school district.”

Obviously my father wouldn’t pay. He wasn’t sending us any money at all. My grandparents were already giving as much as they could afford. I didn’t understand why life had to be so complicated.

After complaining to my mother a couple of more times, she phoned the guidance counselor to tell him about how Bonnie and her friends were harassing me. The counselor called me into the office that afternoon. I sat in front of Mr. Epstein’s desk. He cracked his knuckles, then repositioned his thick brown glasses.

“Now, Miss Findling, I heard you’ve been having problems with some of the other girls at school. Is that right?”

“Um,” I said, nervously. I took a deep breath and told him everything.

“I’ll speak to the three girls so that should end the problem, but the next time anyone bothers you,” he said, leaning forward a little, “just let it roll off your shoulder.”

I stayed quiet until he finished. He leaned back in his chair, smiling sympathetically.

That was it? I opened my mouth to try and tell him how stupid he must be to think his advice was even close to helpful. My dad, if he had been around, would have given better advice than that. I could picture it perfectly: “Just slug her one day when she’s not lookin’.” Or maybe, “Where’s she live? I’ll show her father a thing or two.” Mr. Epstein’s ‘advice’ left me feeling more alone and unprotected than ever.

The guidance counselors intervening didn’t help at all. In gym class, their insults got louder and scarier. There was nothing I could do; I had nobody to talk to anymore. I had opened myself up and let out everything I could, but it didn’t help. I was on my own. I felt completely powerless. I sealed off from the real world in soundproof layers, and sunk deeper into myself to try and get away.

When I wasn’t at school, I worried about whether Bonnie and the two girls would bother me the next day. Studying was becoming impossible. I’d stare at my books but could barely concentrate. French class was overwhelming, especially memorizing vocabulary. Biology was too much work. I just wanted to put on the television and try to escape. My grades dropped from A’s to C’s.

Even when I was hanging out at Mindy’s house, I could barely concentrate shaking with anxiety about how I was going to fend for myself at school the next day. I was envious of Mindy for having it so good. She never got picked on at school. Her whole life was like something out of a movie—simply perfect.

I quit volleyball intramurals. I lost interest in finding a boyfriend. I had hoped to try out for school plays to pursue my dreams of an acting career but was too scared to expose myself to more humiliation. It felt as if Coram High School was a jail where I had to do hard time. Two years and three months—four hundred sixty-three days, to be exact.

I needed a break from my life in Coram, so Mom let me spend the weekend with my cousin Laurie. She and I went to a mixer for high school students from all over the Bronx.

While Laurie was talking to a cute boy, a girl who appeared to be around sixteen said out loud to her friend while looking straight at me, “I didn’t know they were letting junior high school kids into these dances now.” Although age-wise I really could have been in junior high school, I didn’t understand the need for such a mean remark. What did I ever do to her?

That night, Laurie and I slept on a bed you pull out from a couch. I woke up around seven, overwhelmed with anxiety about returning to school the next day. Then panic kicked in. It built and built until I felt terrified. I lay there frozen, barely able to breathe. When Laurie’s father announced that he had made French toast, I was relieved. Nauseous from the smell of butter frying, I couldn’t eat any of it, but was glad to be out of that bed.

I wanted to tell Laurie how terrified I was—how much I wished I had her life instead of mine. Instead, I just told her about the girls who upset me at the dance with their mean junior high school remark, which led to my confiding in her about Bonnie and her two friends.

“Life is so hard. People could be so cruel,” Laurie said.

I appreciated her support but was jealous that even though she had a drug addicted brother and mentally ill father, she was still beautiful, popular and no one bullied her.

I really wanted Laurie to tell me I could move in with her and her crazy family and spend every weekend looking for boyfriends in the Bronx. Anything would be better than going back home and facing another day at school.

The next morning I woke to my mother trying to wake my brother. “Schoo-o-o-lies!”

Birds chirped outside the window, and The Beatles were singing “Hey Jude” on the radio. It was the number one song on Cousin Brucie’s show on WABC AM. “Good Morning Starshine” followed. I wanted to throw up. How could the whole world be so cheery when I was so miserable? I didn’t know if I could go on anymore or if I even wanted to. I pulled the blanket over my head, wishing I could stay home and not go to school. Not just today, but every day. Life was too hard, too unbearable. I didn’t want to hurt anymore. Maybe I could just go into a mental hospital.

I tried talking to myself. I couldn’t get into college if I stopped going to school. I couldn’t become a high school dropout. My mother wouldn’t allow me to play hooky anyway.

Somehow I managed to get myself up and dressed. I was washing my hair and showering at night now because I could barely get out of bed in the morning. I would have skipped the showers, but I knew if my hair became too greasy, that would only give Bonnie and the two girls more ammunition.

“Or to take arms against a sea of troubles...

Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer...”

My tenth-grade English teacher was reading *Hamlet* out loud. Seated at my desk, I fantasized about better times. I was back in the glistening blue pool with Hannah, spinning around endlessly on a pink raft, under the burning sun.

“To be or not to be, that is the question…”

I imagined that I was in a tub just like Natalie Wood playing Deanie having a nervous breakdown in *Splendor in the Grass* when her boyfriend dumped her. I wondered if that was what was happening to me now. I worried that I was just too fragile for life like Deanie because every moment was starting to feel like a crucifixion.

At home, I would just sink into the couch from four o’clock until bedtime. The TV screen flashed: colors, light, colors, light. But I couldn’t take it today. Things were leaking in, voices, and bits of faces from *The Merv Griffin Show*. It hurt to look at them, to hear them. My mind swirled. I walked over to my mother’s bathroom and went through the cabinets. I grabbed a bottle of Bayer aspirins, wondering if I had the nerve to swallow a handful or all of them.

Why not? I thought. I wouldn’t have to worry about other girls harassing me. And Dad, ha! Everything came back to him, like water trickling down a drain, to one point. It was Dad who’d left and didn’t care whether we were hungry or had a roof over our heads or had to leave our friends, or that I was being bullied at school and that our mother could barely cope anymore and acted fucked up to me. Sometimes I wondered how he could leave me here, for other people to pull at and push around. I’m too sensitive for this, too raw for all of this. Like I had no skin to protect me. I was absorbing all the evil and meanness around me. Maybe if I did swallow the bottle of pills, I wouldn’t have to die. They could take me to the hospital, put me in a mental institution. Maybe then, he’d realize what a horrible thing he’d done by leaving us—by leaving me.

The memory of my mother’s hand, shredded and bloody, after she’d punched through the garage door in Smithtown upon learning about Rosa flashed into my mind. Afterwards Mom had started seeing a therapist. Maybe there would be someone to listen to me also. Someone to hear me, to not drown my feelings out with other people, other problems. Emotionally exhausted, I dropped to the bathroom floor and let the Bayer Aspirins, all of them, trickle through my fingers. Like the pine needles in Smithtown, they spilled through the air, hitting the cold tiles with little taps.

When my mother came home, I told her I was very depressed and needed to see a therapist. She made an appointment for me to see her therapist and we went on Saturday.

Dr. Klein reminded me of Freud because he had a beard and thick European accent. He looked around my grandparents’ age. He was not only a psychiatrist but a psychoanalyst as well. My mom told me that Medicaid primarily pays for psychiatrists rather than social workers probably because they are medical doctors.

“I think I want to go into a mental hospital,” I told him the minute I sat down, desperate to get away from Bonnie, the girls, my mother, and my life.

“I don’t think a psychiatric hospital will take you,” he responded. His eyes twinkled as if he found me endearing. “I don’t really think you would like it there. I understand you’re upset, but you have to be seriously ill to go into a hospital.”

“Can I lie down?” I asked, seeing the analytic couch I recognized from the movies.

“I don’t think you need psychoanalysis right now.”

“How about hypnotizing me?”

“Talking will be just fine.”

Dr. Klein was cool to talk to. He never criticized me and always seemed interested in what I had to say. It became a ritual to go visit him, with my mother, on Saturday afternoons. Wanting to rush my healing and get “undepressed,” I’d write down my dreams and bring them in for Dr. Klein to analyze.

“You’re the most enthusiastic patient I’ve ever had,” he commented, smiling warmly.

My mother and I would take turns having sessions with him. When it was my mother’s turn, I’d usually walk over to the nearest shopping center. Eating a Drake’s apple pie I’d buy from the deli, I’d wander around Grants department store browsing new makeup products, happy that my old interests in glamour were slowly returning.

“How’d your session go?” I’d ask my mother while we were driving back home.

“Okay. How was yours?”

“Okay. But I wish I’d feel better real soon.”

“You have to be patient,” she’d tell me. “Sometimes it’s three steps forwards and two steps back.”

“Yeah, Mom,” I’d answer, hoping she was right.

Feeling safe and protected, while reading magazines in Dr. Klein’s waiting room, I decided that I would become a psychotherapist and not an actress. Someday, I would sit behind a desk, listening to people’s problems, and help them just like Dr. Klein. I wondered if he was now my official father figure and role model.

Dr. Klein never gave me any great insights. No analytic pearls of wisdom. Nor did he rescue me from my situation—using his influence to get me transferred to another school. But he really listened to me and was completely present, which seemed to be exactly what I needed at the time.

Chapter 23

Drew and Baseball

By spring, the three of us had life down to a routine. On Saturday mornings, while my mother worked, I watched my brother. He’d spend all morning watching cartoons and snacking on Halvah, a sugary candy, coated with sesame seeds, his favorite. Sometimes we’d watch *Blondie* movies together.

When my mother got home from work on Saturdays, we’d go see Dr. Klein. Drew didn’t want to wait for us in the office, so we dropped him off at one of his friend’s house. Eventually, Mom decided he was old enough to stay at home, which made him happy.

But Mom still didn’t like Drew being alone during the week so occasionally I brought him along with me while I babysat at night or after school as a mother’s helper. Mom even took him to her college classes. Drew was a well behaved kid when he had to be.

Unlike me, Drew liked the kids at his school and made lots of friends in the neighborhood.

He told me sometimes his friends teased him about not having a father. As if Dad’s leaving was all his fault.

“Those kids are jerks,” Mom and I would say to comfort him.

I’m sure he still felt pain from Dad’s leaving, but missed him in a different way than I did. One time the three of us were watching TV together, and he said without even turning his head. “I wish I could see Dad more,” he sighed. “I just need someone to talk to about man things.”

The next day Mom signed Drew up for Little League at the Middle Country District Youth Association.

“Your brother needs male role models. Baseball coaches will be good for him,” she told me.

In between her hectic schedule of college classes and work, she drove him to baseball practices and sat through all his games. Fourteen games a year to be exact, sometimes I went, too. When he wasn’t on a structured team like Little League, he played baseball with boys from the neighborhood. If he had no one to play with, he threw the ball in the air and swung at it for hours. He loved baseball and became the best player on his team.

My father turned up out of nowhere during the springtime school break, and told my mother he wanted to take my brother to a hotel in upstate New York. Of course Drew was thrilled. Although Dad had not been sending any child support, my mother didn’t want to begrudge him, so she said he could go.

Drew was bouncing up and down, telling me about all the cool things he and Dad would do during their weekend together at the hotel.

“Rhonda!” Drew poked his head through my door one morning as I was getting my new tie-dye jeans out of the closet. “Didja know they have an ice skating rink, too? And you can go skiing there, too! Right in the middle of spring! Can you believe that?”

His excitement was through the roof. Sports, for my brother, seemed to be a way of really connecting with my father, so a weekend full of activities must have seemed like a wonderland for him.

When Dad picked Drew up after school, I was babysitting so I wasn’t there to see his beaming face as he ran out to my father’s car.

The television was flashing blue in the darkened living room when I came home from my mother’s helper job on Monday night. All the lights in the house were off. I jumped a bit when I unexpectedly saw Drew lying belly-down on the couch. He didn’t even look up from his hands, which were clumsily playing with a small key chain puzzle.

“Hey you,” I said.

“Hey,” he responded, still looking down.

“So how was the hotel? Did you go ice skating?” I asked.

“We never got there.”

“What? Are you kidding? Why not?”

“After we left to go into the city, Dad said he had to make a stop at Rosa’s house. We stayed there the whole weekend and never went to the hotel. I ended up playing baseball with Carmine and Vito.”

“Who’s Carmine and Vito?”

“Rosa’s kids.”

“Oh my God!”

“Yeah.” He went back to playing with the puzzle.

I could see he was upset and didn’t want to talk much about it so I didn’t push him.

“So when I woke up, I went to look for Dad and he was sleeping in Rosa’s bedroom in her bed and his leg was wrapped around her.”

“Ugh! Gross!” I exclaimed.

“Double ugh,” he said back.

“Well, triple ugh,” I shot back.

“Double triple ugh!” he yelled and threw a pillow at me.

“Triple triple ugh!” I threw it back at him. Just as another pillow was soaring towards me, I was relieved to see that familiar smile return to his face.

The minute Mom came home from school, Drew told her what happened. I could see her face contort while she listened. It was as if some other personality came over her.

She grabbed one of Drew’s sneakers on the floor and started yelling. “Why didn’t you make him take you home when he took you to that whore’s house? How could you betray me like this?” Then she started swinging at him with the shoe! He dodged her and ran behind the couch.

“Ma, are you crazy?” I screamed, trying to grab her arm. “He’s only ten years old! How’s he supposed to stand up to Dad?”

“I don’t care!” she screamed, as if she were in some crazy zone of her own. “You should’ve told him you wanted to go home. You should’ve called me, you little bastard!”

She yanked her arm from my grasp. Her glasses almost fell off but she nudged them back in place. She took another swing. He ducked. Her eyes were bulging out like a wild beast. A vein in her neck looked as if it were going to burst.

Drew hid behind the couch. She went after him. Every time she took a swing at him, he dodged her, like they were in a Tom and Jerry cartoon. All her attempts at hitting Drew failed. Exhausted and disgusted, she went into her bedroom and slammed the door.

My brother was shaking. We went to my bedroom and I burned some incense. Then I took out a deck of cards and we played Gin Rummy. Drew finally calmed down. Later on, my mother came out of her room and apologized to my brother. She hugged him and told him she was sorry. She never tried to hit him ever again.

Chapter 24

Regrouping

It was roasting that summer, so we hung out in Mom’s bedroom, huddling around the house’s only air conditioner that dripped on the floor and coughed like an old man. We moved the living room television into Mom’s bedroom where we’d snack on frozen mini-pizzas, hot dogs and Carnation Instant Breakfast shakes, the latest innovation in fast food meals.

There, inside our little igloo, we watched the world transform. We saw Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. His muffled words shook us to the core as we jammed our agape mouths with snacks. Feminists were burning their bras right in front of the news cameras. Students were demonstrating on college campuses, protesting the Vietnam War. Black people were demanding civil rights. Who needed television shows? The news was much more interesting!

In June, Mindy and I came running home. Waving concert flyers for the Woodstock festival, we told our mothers how excited they should be that we had decided to go.

“Yeah, right,” Mom said. “How are you supposed to get there?”

“By bus.”

“You’re only fifteen.”

“Mindy’s almost seventeen. Janis Joplin’s going to be there.”

“I don’t care. You’re not going.”

Mindy’s parents wouldn’t let her go either. We ended up watching parts of the concert on the news. Looking at long lines of beat-up cars stopped on the highway, and near-naked people dancing in farm mud pits, our disappointment subsided a little.

I spent most of that summer racking up as many babysitting jobs as I could find. My fee was a dollar an hour, a fortune at the time, but I was in high demand. I got a job as a mother’s helper watching an 8-year-old boy who had severe behavior problems. His mom was often impatient with him, tugging Andy around the house, yelling at him and leaving him for me to deal with while she took care of her two other children, a toddler and a newborn. Mrs. Shapiro seemed to be always doing laundry with her mother, who lived in the house with them. The two were usually chatting about stories from the soap operas they both watched addictively.

*Days of Our Lives* must have been having an especially slow week because Mrs. Shapiro suddenly turned from her folding towels and said to me, “You know, Rhonda,” narrowing her small eyes. “The only way to get a boyfriend is to lose some of that weight and clear up your complexion.”

I was speechless at her rudeness.

“Oh Rhonda,” my mother said, driving me home that evening. “Don’t listen to the crap that comes out of that woman’s mouth. You’re a beautiful girl, dammit. She needs to lay off you.” My mother stretched out the word beautiful and made it sound sparkling. I felt better.

The next day at Andy’s house, Mrs. Shapiro was folding laundry in the kitchen as usual. I took a break at the kitchen table and bit into a Devil Dog I had brought with me from home.

“Eating that won’t bring you any closer to getting a boyfriend,” she said, ironing a collared shirt.

“You know what? My weight and complexion are none of your business, so just lay off!” I exclaimed, surprising myself a little.

“Well!” was all she said.

She never mentioned anything to me about my personal business again.

Almost every night I watched Johnny Carson alone in my bedroom before going to sleep. His silly jokes about current events and movie stars helped me to forget the torture I would endure at school in the fall. I still worried about that on a daily basis.

I bought books with my babysitting money and lost myself in them. My favorites were *Anne of Green Gables*, *Sister Carrie*, *Marjorie Morningstar*, *Little Women*, and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. They were stories of smart young girls who, despite their poor backgrounds, messy families and crummy jobs, followed their dreams.

I read some of my mother’s books, too. From the cerebral and sophisticated—*The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan and *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet—to the decadently trashy *Valley of the Dolls* by Jacqueline Susann. I bought *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist* and read them cover to cover. I consumed book after book like they were drugs. With one parent gone and Mom often distracted, my books often assuaged my loneliness.

I developed a full-blown fascination with families. Everything about family life in popular culture held me absolutely spellbound.

I began examining the homes of the families I babysat for, trying to understand why the couples were able to stay together. I wanted to discover if there was some kind of magic or mathematic equation that my mother and father just didn’t have. I was certain that, with enough investigation, I would be able to discover the formula. After I put the kids to bed, I’d examine their parents’ books and magazines. I’d even look in the kitchen drawers and closets, in search of clues.

I read home economics books I’d checked out from the library. I watched *Father Knows Best* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* with the shrewd concentration of studying anthropological footage.

I started a new hobby of collecting recipes. I filed them by category and alphabetically in a shoebox. I was collecting them for the future family I would have someday.

Sometimes I cooked and baked for my mother and brother. One of my specialities was a gourmet meatloaf I’d concocted with Worcestershire sauce, onions, bread, and ketchup.

I baked Betty Crocker cakes for everyone’s birthdays, including my brother’s friends. I was also good at baking muffins and biscuits. I even made an apple pie from scratch. The whole baking thing could have been genetic, passed down from my grandfather, a baker.

My mother loved when I cooked or baked and bought me a Colonial spice rack for my birthday.

I loved babysitting for Mrs. Thomas, a pretty woman Mom and I had nicknamed Donna Reed because I thought she was the perfect homemaker. Her kitchen was completely organized. She was a full-time housewife and seemed to love it. She also appeared to be happily married.

Mrs. Thomas asked me if I would like to be a mother’s helper for her during the summer. To spend all day with Mrs. Thomas would have been a true homemaker apprenticeship. I was excited to tell her that I would love to, until she said, “All I can afford is fifty cents an hour.”

My heart sunk. I needed the dollar an hour I was earning elsewhere, so I had to turn down her offer. My dream of being part of a fantasy family was not to be had.

As a family of three, our greatest source of pleasure was going to the movies. No matter how broke we were or how depressing things got, my mother, brother, and I would go at least once every two weeks. The three of us sat in a hallucinatory trance, drinking up the drama of other people’s lives for a few hours.

It was very economical because my mother only paid for herself. We pulled this off by going to the indoor theater at the local all-weather drive-in that let kids under twelve in for free. Whenever we drove up to the cashier in the ticket booth, I’d wear a kerchief on my head to hide my face and slump down on the back seat, pretending I was eleven. We’d laugh and cheer pulling into the parking lot, feeling like we’d really pulled one over on the grumpy ticket taker.

We discovered a theater in another town, offering a double feature and a preview for one dollar. *Enter Laughing*, *The Subject Was Roses*, and *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*. Pure heaven! We could barely walk after sitting for almost seven hours.

*The Graduate*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *Romeo and Juliet* were my favorite movies because I had crushes on all the leading men. I let the movie theme songs, “Sounds of Silence,” Henri Mancini’s “Love Theme from Romeo and Juliet” and “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head”, leak into my head and fill it up with their lush melodies.

After we’d come home from the movies, I’d always decide I didn’t want to be a psychotherapist or a homemaker after all. Moving to Manhattan and becoming an actress was my real dream. My destiny. My light at the end of the tunnel.

We spent the end of summer waiting for the judge’s final decision about my father not paying child support.

My mother’s lawyer, Morty, had been taking my dad to court during the year. Usually Dad wouldn’t even show up. He’d send his lawyer instead, who asked for postponements. A couple of times, judges issued warrants for my father’s arrest. His lawyer always managed to get my father off the hook by claiming that my father wouldn’t be able to work and earn money if he was in jail. So the case dragged on.

We were informed that the judge’s final decision would arrive by mail. It turned up the last week of August. My mother’s hands were trembling, as she slowly tore open the envelope. I knew it wasn’t good when my mother ran her fingers through her hair and said nothing.

“Mom?”

She looked up, suddenly, as if I had just magically appeared in the room. She glanced back down at the letter.

“It says he’s married and supporting three other children.” My mother looked up at me stunned. “So he can’t support us.” She crumpled the letter up into a ball. “I don’t understand. They’re not even his kids. This is crazy. The judge says it’s okay for him to let his own biological children go hungry.”

I felt like my feet had been kicked out from under me as well.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” my mom said, her voice shrill and anxious.

I leaned over my mother and put my arms around her, “Don’t worry Ma. We’re going to be okay.”

Chapter 25

The Newspaper Route

When September arrived and school started, I had changed my whole look. The 1960’s were over so I threw away my pastel pink hair rollers and metal clips. No more flips or pageboys. I grew my hair long, parting it straight down the middle, no bangs.

The New York high schools finally started to loosen their girls’ dress codes. My uniform became a pair of jeans with a snug sweater.

I sighed with relief when I got through the first week of my junior year—none of Bonnie’s clique were in any of my classes. I still had to watch my back though, so I looked out for them in the hallways. I had a visual map in my head so I knew where the bad spots were and at what times. I knew shortcuts. I became invisible.

The one place at school I could reappear was chorus. I pushed all the tension from the pit of my belly up and out through songs. The other chorus kids were also outsiders, all of them seniors, and they took me in as one of their own. I finally had friends to eat lunch with. Things were looking up.

Drew decided he wanted to earn money too, so one morning he signed up for a paper route with the *Long Island Press*. Drew would zip himself into his bright red windbreaker and take off on his banana-seat bicycle. He’d parcel off the ten-pound stack of newspapers in his basket around the development. He was only two days into it when Mom started to worry.

“How about I drive you?” she asked Drew, so the two of them drove around the neighborhood in Mom’s Chevy, sliding papers under doormats with red-mittened hands. They did the route together from then on.

On Sundays the three of us cut open the newspaper bundles that had appeared on the lawn at dawn. We assembled all the sections of the Sunday paper, our backs to the radio, listening to bubbly pop tunes like the The Archies’ “Sugar, Sugar”, The Foundation’s “Build Me Up Buttercup”, David Cassidy’s “I Think I Love You”, and The Jackson Five’s “I Want You Back”. On Fridays, I’d tag along for the ride and pick up money for the newspapers from the houses. I’d go to each door, ring the bell and say, “Collect!”

There was a moment that I loved about “collecting”. It was right after the door of the house was pulled back, when the man or woman told me to wait and they went inside where they went to get their wallet. I loved checking out how they decorated their house, or what I could see of it. It reminded me of looking at model homes back in the day, when we lived in Brooklyn.

I could often smell food cooking and wondered what they were having for dinner. Did the father eat with them? I imagined what it was like to live in their house instead of mine.

The sky was the color of inky violet as the three of us shivered on freezing seats with the car lights on dim, driving to all of our newspaper customers. I never missed the sunset on Fridays that year.

We earned around $50 a week from the route, which helped to pay for oil, electricity, and gas for the car. Mom had our monthly bills down to a precise science. She paid the mortgage on our house with the $200 we got from public assistance. $90 of the $100 Grandma and Grandpa sent to us went for the car payment. Finally, when Mom got her paycheck, she went grocery shopping.

Mom was an incredibly careful shopper. She only bought food she thought was substantial, with a purse full of coupons. Chicken or hamburger for dinner; frozen vegetables; bread, olive loaf, and canned tuna for sandwiches; and snacks for Drew.

Grandpa had opened up a charge account for us at Abraham & Strauss. My mother had been making minimum payments every month so that the account would stay manageable. We only used it for necessities and emergencies.

In November we had a big Thanksgiving dinner with my grandparents. Mom picked them up in the Bronx and drove them back to our house. It seemed like ages since I’d last seen Grandma and Grandpa. With Mom working and going to school, it was hard to see them as much as we used to. It felt like we needed them around now more than ever.

When they pulled up to the door I ran outside. Grandma showered me with kisses and told me in Yiddish how much she missed and loved me. When she moved on to Drew, I saw my Grandpa in his gray cap. His eyes were filled with love and adoration as he walked over, arms open wide, to give me a big hug and kiss.

After we sat down to have lunch, my grandparents gave Mom some extra money for the holidays. She went out shopping and came back with turkey, stuffing, canned sweet potatoes in pineapple syrup, cranberry sauce, cornbread stuffing mix, frozen biscuits, pumpkin and apple pie. She even got the new Quaker oatmeal with cinnamon and brown sugar. All you had to do was add some hot water and you had instant oatmeal!

After our Thanksgiving feast, Mom, Grandpa and Grandma sat on the couch while I played “Moonlight Sonata”. Grandpa loved classical music and hummed along.

“That’s my Rhonda-la!” he said when I finished and came over and kissed me.

Then Drew launched into his five minute stand-up comedy routine. He finished with his final joke that I already knew by heart. “So why did the chicken cross the road?”

“Why?” we all chimed in.

“To get to the other side!”

Grandma laughed so hard, she almost fell off the couch.

“*Oy*!” she screamed. “Such a comedian. Drew-tala, you’re another Jerry Lewis. *Oy*! I haven’t laughed so hard in such a long time.”

Drew and I continued the show by performing the song, “Do You Love Me?” from *Fiddler on the Roof*. We had practiced for a week and had the song memorized. Drew played Tevye and I played Golda.

Later I went back to the kitchen to get some more pumpkin pie, while Drew was watching a football game. Mom and my grandparents were drinking coffee and talking about the bills and my Dad. It was the first time I had heard his name in months. They were speaking half in Yiddish so I couldn’t understand what they were saying.

Grandpa asked Mom, “Ahnie, how do you manage to pay the bills with such little money? What’s your secret?”

“Daddy, I really don’t know,” she answered in a tired voice.

I glanced over at Mom on the way back to my bedroom. She looked different now. Her skin was still a soft peach color, but her eyes had dark rings underneath them. She looked tired.

Poor Ma, I thought.

Chapter 26

Drew’s Birthday

We were astounded when my father showed up unexpectedly on my brother’s birthday in December.

“The balls on him for coming here,” my mother exclaimed, “especially after the court papers state, in black and white, that he’s supporting her *mamsas* and that last stunt he pulled.”

“I still want to see him,” Drew implored.

When my mother looked into my little brother’s big, brown eyes, I guess her heart melted because she decided to let him see Dad. Maybe she still felt guilty about trying to hit him the last time he saw my father, when he took her to Rosa’s house instead of the hotel.

“Okay,” she conceded.

We both stood at the screen door, watching Drew bound over to my father, standing at the bottom of the driveway. My brother opened the car door, and then hesitated. Rosa’s children were in the back seat. All three of them gave him gifts my father had obviously bought. Two board games and a baseball bat. My father got Drew the new pitcher’s mitt he had wanted. Drew spoke with them for a few minutes, and then told my father he had to go because my mother and I were waiting for him. Just as he was leaving the car, Rosa’s daughter, only about five, told my brother that my mother was a bitch. Drew said her brothers looked shocked and so did Dad.

When Drew walked inside the house, he looked pretty shook up. My mother and I surprised him with the birthday present we’d bought—a Nok Hockey game board.

“Cool! It’s just what I wanted!” he exclaimed.

After two strenuous rounds of Nok Hockey, which Drew won, the three of us headed off to Howard Johnson’s where we all had banana splits.

“Rosa’s daughter called you a bitch,” Drew told my mother in between scoopfuls of hot fudge and whip cream.

“She must have heard Rosa or your father calling me a bitch and repeated that word,” my mother explained.

My mother’s calm, objective response surprised me almost as much as the little girl’s name calling.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw them in the back seat. Why did he even bring them? It’s my birthday. I thought Dad and I were going to hang out together, just the two of us. Shoot hoops and stuff.”

My heart broke for my brother that day. I began to think that there was something dark about my father. All he ever brought us now was pain. No more love, just pain.

Chapter 27

Summer Dieting

I don’t remember whether it was my father, who mentioned that I looked like I’d gained some weight, or Mrs. Shapiro’s off-handed remarks about my needing to lose some weight to find a boyfriend, but I became determined to become skinny the summer before my last year of high school.

I wanted to have a space between my thighs when I pressed my legs together just like Ali McGraw did in the movies, *Love Story* and *Goodbye Columbus*. I wanted my ribs to stick out like hers too. Every morning, I’d stare in the mirror sideways to see if my stomach was protruding. If it was flat, I’d be happy for the rest the day.

Feeling like a genius, I discovered that cutting back my food intake to 600 calories a day would make me lose weight. Casting aside concerns of schoolwork, and health, my sole purpose in life was to lose fifteen pounds and weigh 105 pounds. I figured this out by a body-weight chart I found in a pocket-sized book on counting calories. Focusing on losing weight distracted me from all of my other problems.

Dieting felt like an artistic project because I was creating a new body for myself. It took effort and total commitment to get the fat to melt away. The diet I devised to accomplish this goal was:

Breakfast: One slice of pre-packaged Kraft American cheese, coffee with skim milk and Saccharin (artificial sweetener)

Lunch: Skip

Dinner: One piece of broiled chicken and boiled vegetables

I wouldn’t eat until the next day. If my stomach was hurting from hunger or I was getting weak and dizzy at night, I’d allow myself to eat lettuce, a carrot, celery, or a glass of tomato juice. I could drink as much coffee with skim milk and Saccharin as I wanted.

No one I knew exercised much, so I basically depended on starvation to lose weight. I actually enjoyed being hungry because I knew I would lose weight the next day. I’d jump on the scale every morning. A couple, whose children I babysat for every Saturday night, had a professional doctor’s scale. I weighed myself after running up and down their stairs for twenty minutes. The kids were heavy sleepers, thankfully.

Dr. Klein told me I was so preoccupied with dieting because “the refrigerator was dependable and always there for me, unlike my father and people.” He also suggested that I should eat more, even when I was dieting. He said, in his European accent, “If you’re only going to have yogurt for dinner or lunch, at least have a slice of bread with it.”

I thought this was silly advice because I would never waste precious calories on a slice of white bread!

After reaching my goal of 105 pounds, I became obsessed with staying at that weight. My maintenance diet was adding a dessert in the evening: one of my brother’s snack cakes, or the cookies I’d asked my Mom to buy for me. I would also eat a bigger breakfast or dinner. At my mother’s helper job, I would make myself a large sandwich filled with deli she always had in their refrigerator. If I was three or more pounds over, I would frantically start dieting again.

Every morning I’d watch “The Jack LaLanne Show” and do jumping jacks and other exercises along with him. Afterwards, I’d pour myself a big mug of coffee. I’d peel the plastic off a slice of American cheese and eat it slowly, while watching the famous TV psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers answering phone calls in front of a live studio audience.

“Dr. Brothers, I just don’t know what to do.”

She leaned forward, put her elbows on the desk, and put her hands together in front of her mouth, like she was praying. She closed her eyes and nodded her head up and down. Her shiny hair reflected the light above her. Dr. Brothers would always come up with great advice. I loved hearing her brilliant answers as much as the problems. I definitely wanted to be a psychologist if I didn’t become an actress.

Chapter 28

High School Boys

I longed and hoped for a cute, smart boyfriend who made my heart explode with passion. I wanted to make out with a boy. I wanted to discover what love was all about. I often complained to my mother that I didn’t like many of the boys at school.

“Volunteer at the Ministries at the Smith Haven Mall!” Mom suggested. “I just read in the paper that they’re offering free counseling to men who are trying to avoid the draft.”

“Oh, right, conscientious objectors,” I responded, thinking out loud.

The Ministries was a non-profit organization and interfaith community ministry that had an office right smack in the middle of the Smith Haven Mall, a gigantic newly built enclosed shopping center where all the kids were hanging out now.

I took her advice and managed to get myself hired as a volunteer receptionist at the Ministries for three months, on Wednesdays, from five to nine.

Steve, a handsome, smart boy in my social studies class recognized me and walked up to my desk. He wore granny glasses and resembled the political activist, Abby Hoffman. I had a small crush on him. I’d heard he was dating Terry, a friend of that bullying bitch Bonnie. I had also heard gossip about Steve asking Terry to perform oral sex.

He recognized me and asked, “So, do you work here?”

“I’m volunteering.”

“Why? You could be working somewhere and actually getting paid for it.”

“It’s a cause I believe in,” I explained.

It irritated me that he was criticizing rather than admiring my political activism. But he was so cute and popular; it was hard to be angry at him.

“Do you need a ride home?” he asked.

I wanted to go with him, but I was scared he was going to ask me to perform oral sex on him too. *Oy*! I’d never even made out with a boy! Plus, I didn’t want any problems with Terry. I was so happy no one was bothering me at school anymore. I didn’t need the aggravation.

“My mother is going to pick me up, but thanks anyway,” I responded, shyly.

I guess he felt rejected because he never spoke to me in school after that.

A month later, I had a crush on my student English teacher, Mr. Martinez. He was going to Stonybrook University and doing his internship at our school to be a teacher. He was a bookish, geeky type, but I thought he was very handsome, sweet, and sensitive. I was hoping if we actually spoke outside of class, he would take the chance and ask me out on a date.

I found out when he ate lunch in the teacher’s lounge, so one morning, I put on a lot of eye makeup, my shortest skirt, high heels, perfume, and waited for him in the hall. A teacher stopped me and asked why I wasn’t in class.

“It’s urgent,” I explained, “I have to speak with Mr. Martinez.”

“Urgent?” she asked. Her tightly bunned white hair pulled back the skin of her boney face. “Well, you can’t linger here.”

I turned away to leave, when I saw Mr. Martinez walking down the hall. His suit hung off his thin frame as he walked hurriedly to the teacher’s lounge. He was carrying his paper bag lunch with him.

“Hey, Rhonda,” he said, “How’s it going?”

“Oh, hi!” I said bravely, trying to be Mary Tyler Moore, Marlo Thomas, and Janice Joplin all rolled into one.

I followed him into the teacher’s lounge. He didn’t say anything about me being there so I just sat down. He opened a container of coffee, unwrapped a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and began to eat.

“You want some?” he asked.

I shook my head no. Then I asked him the questions about his teaching career that I had spent the night before preparing. I was so nervous I could barely hear his answers. I looked at my watch and saw that the next period would start soon. A deep sadness enveloped me when I realized that lunchtime was almost over. My time alone with him was running out. He never said anything about our getting together outside of school.

A month later, I was paired up with a teddy-bear-looking boy, while we were square dancing in gym. His name was Jim and he had red hair and ruddy coloring. I wasn’t attracted to him. He was not that smart and not very interested in going to college like me. One morning, he came over to my locker and asked me for my phone number. I gave it to him and he called me that night. Since he was the only boy to ask me to go on an official date, I agreed to go out with him.

He picked me up in his car on Saturday afternoon. We just drove around. I was disappointed that he didn’t even take me for a slice of pizza or anywhere for that matter. This was not the way dates went on *The Patty Duke Show* or *That Girl*. He finally stopped at Carvel where he bought us both ice cream cones with chocolate sprinkles. Watching him slurp his ice cream, I felt nauseous.

I watched the highway signs fly by while he continued to drive, neither of us saying much. We didn’t really have anything in common other than we both went to Coram High School. He drove me back home and thank heavens he didn’t try to kiss me.

He was either crazy about me or liked girls that were hard to get because when I didn’t answer his phone calls, he came to my house. I was very disappointed, not to mention surprised, to see him standing at my door. I didn’t understand why it couldn’t be Greg, Steve, or Mr. Martinez pining after me instead of a boy I wasn’t at all attracted to.

I told him I didn’t want to go out with him anymore.

“Yeah,” said Joe, his smile fading into an angry scoff. “Well, maybe you just don’t like boys.”

How dare he, I thought! “It’s not that I don’t like boys, I just don’t like you!" I exclaimed.

Jim stormed off and never called me again.

In therapy, I opened up to Dr. Klein about my frustration, annoyance and disappointment with boys. He listened attentively, massaging his white beard.

“Rhonda, why do you even need a boyfriend? All they are, are problems!”

I sighed and smiled while I listened to Dr. Klein’s sound opinion on dealing with boys—which was not to deal with them at all.

I studied harder. I dieted. I babysat. I practiced the piano. I thought about and planned for college—but I couldn’t shake my longing for a boyfriend and to be in love, despite what Dr. Klein advised.

Chapter 29

Learning to Drive

When I finally got into the twelfth grade, all of my chorus friends and Mindy had graduated. I couldn’t believe my bad luck—Bonnie and her two friends were in my English class. When I walked in, they smiled wickedly at me, making snapping sounds with their gum. Shuddering, I sat in the farthest desk possible, watching the big hand on the clock move the entire class until it made its way to the hour. I could almost hear their gum chewing, in sync.

I couldn’t take it anymore. Their smiles, their green-eye-shadowed glares, their gum smacking were like a ticking time bomb. The guidance counselor’s advice was bullshit, I thought.

During lunch hour, I marched into the guidance counselor’s office, past his secretary, and burst open the door to his office where Mr. Epstein sat mid-bite through a sandwich.

“Well, hello, Miss Findling.”

Slapping my schedule down on his desk, I exclaimed, “I am not putting up with this crap anymore. Those three girls who bullied me in tenth grade are in my English class. You need to change my schedule. I want to be switched to another English class. And don’t say you can’t do it! I’m less than a year from graduating, I’ve always been a good student, and I’m in the school chorus. I never skip classes!”

I was so angry. I had no idea I could talk like that. Mr. Epstein looked as surprised as I felt. He fixed his glasses and looked down at my schedule.

“Well, I think there’s some room for changes in your class schedule.” He handed back my sheet and opened up one of his binders. “I could put you in another English class the period before and put you in a study hall in the hour you’re in the English class you’re switching out of.”

My heart exploded with joy and relief. “Thank you.”

“The next time you need to see me please make an appointment…and not on my lunch hour.”

“Yes Mr. Epstein,” I responded, too happy to be mad.

During the winter break of my last year in Coram High School, I was feeling creative and impulsively decided to paint one of my bedroom walls with redwood stain so it would look like the Colonial houses I’d seen and loved from our trip to Williamsburg, Virginia with my father five years earlier.

“It looks ridiculous!” Mom screeched.

“It looks cool!” I yelled back.

“Ridiculous,” Mom muttered, shaking her head.

“That’s your favorite word, ‘ridiculous’! You’re so mean. I wish I could just move out of here.”

“Yeah?” she screamed, thrusting her finger towards the front of the house. “Well there’s the door.”

She left and I slammed my door. “Fuck you,” I muttered. Bitch!

I wouldn’t cry and carry on like I used to when I was fourteen. Instead I’d plan my escape. I took out my catalogues and brochures of colleges and universities from all over the world. I had less than a year to go.

The reality was that there was no way I could afford these out-of-state or foreign schools. Because I had let my grades slip in tenth grade when I had been depressed, I didn’t have a good enough grade point average to get a scholarship.

I wasn’t going to fulfill my mother’s dream of my going to Radcliffe. She hadn’t mentioned Radcliffe since Brooklyn anyway. Between my not such good grades and our lack of money, I was going to have to go to a community college, like Mom. I could get grants like her too because I was under eighteen and our family income was so small. The saving grace was that if I got good grades my first year, I could transfer out, so there was still a chance for me to graduate from a college or university of my dreams. Maybe even Leeds University in Scotland! There was a knock on my door.

“It’s me,” Drew said.

I let him in.

“I heard you guys fighting,” he said, plopping on my bed.

“Mom’s such a jerk, isn’t she?” I said, browsing through my brochures.

“She’s alright,” he said, lying on my bed and looking up at the ceiling. “Hey, you see her with the carpet sweeper today?” he asked, referring to our mother’s obsessive use of her new carpet sweeper. Mom walked around the house, her head rolled down like a zombie, pausing in a spot for minutes on end in a failed attempt to pick up (in several rolls) whatever mess we had left for her on the floor.

“She’s crazy,” Drew said, chuckling.

“Yeah, crazy, man,” I agreed.

“Yeah, cr-a-a-a-a-zy. Hey, I know,” Drew said. “Let’s grab some potato chips and sprinkle them on the carpet right now.”

“Ha, ha, yeah!” But I knew Drew would never do it.

My anger at my mother dissipated. I thought it was pretty amazing that my brother’s sense of humor and mere presence always had the ability to make me feel better.

When I complained about my mother to Dr. Klein he said, “All mothers and daughters argue.” His words didn’t make me feel any better. Sessions like this made me wonder if he was really a good therapist. I wanted him to help me analyze why my mother could upset me so much, to give me the tools to not let her get to me. I wanted him to do or say something to relieve me of the pain I had when she and I fought.

Despite all my complaining, there were times Mom and I got along great—like when she taught me how to drive. My mother was an excellent teacher. She never got frustrated or angry with me if I made a mistake or didn’t understand something she said. She made me drive to New York City through the Midtown Tunnel before I took my driver’s test, which I passed on the first try.

After getting my license, my mother let me have her car on Saturdays, while she was working at the supermarket.

She stopped going for therapy with Dr. Klein, so I’d drive alone to see him, enjoying my independence. Later, I’d pick her up. My mother never really liked driving so she usually let me drive whenever we were together.

One day Mom said, “You’re going to need a car to commute back and forth to college. We can’t just use my car. So let’s go to Brooklyn and find your father. Maybe he’ll redeem himself by buying you a car or at least, helping you pay for one.”

My dad was a ghost to us now. We had not heard from him in over a year and his phone number was disconnected, so we had no choice but to go to where he lived. Mom still had Rosa’s old address.

Drew had a doubleheader. He was eating dinner afterwards with one of his teammate’s family, so we had plenty of time.

Mom and I headed toward the Long Island Expressway.

In Bayridge, Brooklyn, we drove around looking for the street. The neighborhood was pretty and quiet. All the houses were connected to each other. When I found the address I parked the car in front of Rosa’s house.

“Ready?” Mom asked, when I shut off the car.

“Yes,” I said. “Are you?”

Mom smiled, tight-lipped, and nodded. She looked scared, even though I knew she was trying her best to act brave.

I followed behind as she walked nervously up to the front door. Mom rang the bell. A few moments later an elderly woman came to the door.

“Is Marvin Findling here?” my mother asked.

“No one’s here by that name. Just me and my husband.”

She had a Yiddish accent like Grandma.

“Are you sure there’s no Rosa here?”

“Ahh! That’s the lady who used to own the house. I think they moved to Florida.”

Mom pulled out a picture of my father and showed it to the woman.

“Do you know this man?”

“Ahhh, yes. I met him before they left," she said. “He lived here with her. I think he was her husband.”

“Okay. Well, thank you anyway,” my mother answered. She put the picture back in her bag.

We went back to the car and looked at each other at the same time, both in pain about my father again. Would it never end? It was a mistake to come here. My mother probably thought so too. I started driving back towards the Midtown Tunnel. My mother told me to head towards the Triborough Bridge.

“Why?” I asked.

“We’re going to Grandma and Grandpa’s house. We have to ask them to help buy you a car.”

My grandparents ended up buying me a brand new red Toyota Corona for my high school graduation because they didn’t think it would’ve been possible for me to concentrate in college if I also had to worry about a secondhand car breaking down all the time.

I passionately loved my new car and the independence it brought me. I drove everywhere the summer I graduated from high school. I got part-time jobs in different parts of Long Island: waitress, candy counter girl at the movies, cashier. When I got bored with one, I’d quit and get a higher paying job.

I took jazz and modern dance classes and even went back to Mrs. Swain to resume my piano lessons. I started auditioning for parts in community theaters in different parts of Long Island, including my beloved Smithtown. Sometimes I’d drive to Woodhollow Road and just look at our old house.

The week before I started college, I woke Drew early in the morning. The two of us took off in my new Toyota for Montauk Point, a beach town at the farthest end of Long Island. The sky was a brilliant shade of blue, speckled with perfectly formed white fluffy clouds. The Long Island Expressway was pretty empty, so I pressed down on the accelerator until I hit seventy.

Janis Joplin came on the radio, belting out “Me and Bobby McGee”. Drew and I sang along. We both started to laugh because neither of us could remember all of the lyrics and just started making our own words up.

“So what are you going to major in?” Drew asked.

“Probably psychology. Then someday, I’ll be like Sigmund Freud, without the beard of course, and have my own office, just like Dr. Klein.”

“I thought you wanted to be an actress?”

“I’ll probably take some classes in acting to cover my bases.”

“Good idea,” he agreed.

Just then, “Hey Jude” came on, reminding me of that depressing time in tenth grade. Probably worried that I’d get upset from the bad memories, Drew tried to change the station “Don’t worry, it’s cool. I can handle it,” I told him.

We both started belting out The Beatles’ tune together. I was relieved to find that the song didn’t even bother me anymore.

I glanced at the ocean while I drove. It was choppy and dark like the color of blue jeans. Everything seemed hopeful right now because I had a chance for a new beginning.

Chapter 30

Drew’s Party

Drew was twelve and needed to start Hebrew lessons if he was going to have a Bar Mitzvah. So my mother called up the nearest synagogue and told the rabbi about our financial situation. The synagogue’s board agreed to let my mother not have to pay for Drew’s Hebrew classes—on the condition that, every three months, Mom provided written, signed, stamped-in-blood proof that he was on Aid to Dependent Children. Mom was still working as a cashier, going to college full time at Stonybrook University and still no word or child support from Dad, so this wasn’t a problem.

A second stipulation was that Drew, my mother, and I would help put out the refreshments for Oneg Shabbat (the celebration after Friday night Sabbath services) once in a while. Apparently all boys’ and girls’ families who were being Bar and Bat Mitzvahed had to do this service.

By his third class, Drew started complaining about a couple of kids who were asking what his Dad did for a living.

“I don’t lie about it. I tell them Dad’s a teacher,” he told me. “But then they ask me more questions about him like what school he works at, if he makes a lot of money teaching. But you know I don’t even know what he is anymore.”

“Dad’s probably still a teacher, I think. He also sells life insurance. Well, at least he used to.”

“I’m not telling the other kids that Dad doesn’t live with us. That Mom’s divorced.”

“Yeah, it’s none of their business.”

A week later Drew told my mother he didn’t want to go back to Hebrew school. My mother and I were both relieved that we didn’t have to help clean up after the Sabbath services.

The only problem was that by the time my brother was about to turn thirteen, he wasn’t ready to to have a Bar Mitzvah. He couldn’t read Hebrew and didn’t know any of the prayers. Grandma and Grandpa threw a great party for him anyway at an Israeli nightclub in Queens to celebrate Drew’s thirteenth birthday.

We invited all of our friends, neighbors and family. The singer and his band pumped Hebrew songs and pop songs through the club’s ancient speakers that echoed off the walls. There were claps and shouts and laughs. But in the low-ceilinged ballroom splashed with house lights, my mind wandered off to Dad. I couldn’t stop wondering if my father had forgotten entirely about my brother’s thirteenth birthday, maybe the most important one of his life.

Did he? My mind raced out the door of the nightclub, out onto the Interstate, flying all the way south till the buildings stopped and the palm trees began, to a house on a sunny street, populated by a dark-haired family of five that he’d decided long ago he loved more dedicatedly than us.

The glitz and music from the nightclub, filled with most of the people I’d ever loved in my teenage life, suddenly felt empty. It was as if everyone had all at once spilled out the back door.

Sweaty from a boisterous round of the Horah, Mom placed her hand on my shoulder and gave me a “we did good” look. Her face glowed, pretty in makeup I hadn’t seen her wear in a while. I smiled at her, despite the pain. Thinking of Dad knotted my insides. Mom could see me wincing.

My Aunt Cipi came over and grabbed my arm, yanked me out towards the dance floor, and threw me into the lion’s den of thirty or so friends and family moving in one big circle. I closed my eyes and let myself be taken in by the pulsating crowd, chanting the ancient song I knew by heart, worried only about not stepping over my own two feet.

Chapter 31

Mom’s New Beginning

In August, Mom strolled calmly into the living room where I was lying on the couch with my Abnormal Psychology textbook nestled on my belly. I had transferred into Stonybrook University, which was also right near our house. I was now officially a psychology major in my third year of college.

“It’s the oddest thing,” she said. “Harry called.”

I put down the book. “Who?”

“You remember Harry. We dated about four years ago.” Mom told me she was surprised to hear from him, after their brief courtship that had fizzled out a few years earlier

I shut my eyes, for a minute, to think. Suddenly an image appeared: a tall, gangly man with deeply set wrinkles in thin cheeks, patchy gray hair and glasses. He resembled Arthur Miller, minus the intelligence and Pulitzer Prize. Of all Mom’s suitors, Harry had been the most unremarkable.

“Yeah, I remember him. He was an assistant manager of a car parts’ supply store.”

She told me calmly and resolutely that she and Harry were getting married.

“What?” I exclaimed. “Why do you want to marry Harry? I thought you weren’t that attracted to him!”

“I won’t have to worry about running all over Long Island every week trying to find a teaching job I may never get. I don’t want to be a cashier again. It just makes sense.”

Mom had finally gotten her Bachelor’s Degree in Education and was going to be a teacher. But the job market had taken a turn for the worse. There didn’t seem to be a need for freshly minted teachers. All she could get were substitute teaching jobs, which weren’t paying the bills. She was quickly losing hope.

“Do you love him, Mom?”

“No, not really.”

Mom had been losing little pieces of herself each year she struggled to make ends meet. She knew I was leaving home after graduating next year, and as much as she liked to joke about what a big relief that would be, I knew she was sad. Before she knew it, Drew would be going off to college.

I never really questioned Harry’s motive. As a financial asset, Mom was far from a good deal. But she was still a good-looking woman and more educated than he. But it was clear on their wedding day, as they stood together among the family and friends at our famed Israeli nightclub where Drew had his thirteenth birthday, that neither wanted to be lonely anymore. To Harry, Mom was a steal; to Mom, Harry was a chance to give marriage a shot from the other side of things, replacing the passion of my parents’ relationship with cold, hard logic.

She didn’t seem deliriously happy after the ceremony. She smiled in pictures, hammed it up with the family and touted her modest ring. But I noticed something had changed in Mom—her face looked a way I almost could not recognize because it had been so long since I’d seen it that way—she wasn’t so worried anymore.

After seeing my mother settle for a man she wasn’t in love with, I swore I would never do that. I would be alone forever rather than just be with a man for financial security or loneliness. I knew my mother was from another generation and had gone through so much with my father so I didn’t want to be judgmental. I became even more committed to going to grad school and making a career for myself as a psychologist.

Becoming a homemaker was definitely not for me anymore. I didn’t even want to be an actress. The income was too undependable. I heard in my theater arts classes that only one percent of actors actually earn enough money to support themselves using their craft. The rest were waitressing or doing temp jobs. I’d definitely become a psychologist so I’d have a career with an income I could depend on. I wanted to always be self-sufficient. I would never have to need a man for money. Never!

Chapter 32

College Boys

When I first started college, I was still very shy with boys. Although I dated now and then it was as if my father’s abandonment and rejecting behavior were still lingering in the background not relieving me from its grip.

In the second semester of my third year of college, I met Gina in my Western Civilization class. She and I became instant friends. It felt as if we knew each other our whole lives. We were soul sisters.

Gina was tall and had long brown hair. She always wore tight jeans and looked as if she had a perpetual suntan. Gina was engaged to a guy named Eddie, a car mechanic who caught clams on a small fishing boat as a side hustle. Personally I thought she could do a lot better. She claimed she loved him but wanted to “try out” more guys before “tying the knot”.

Gina was aggressive with guys and flirted like no one’s business. The first night we went out together, she called a guy she knew from her high school, hunting down the trail of an alleged party in someone’s house.

“Tom,” she squealed with delight. “Where the hell have you been?”

I listened from the car. She threw her head back dramatically and laughed seductively. What *chutzpah*! I thought.

We spent most of the summer, before senior year, at the house of Gina’s old high school friend, Ricky. He was a handsome, dirty blond, beach boy with blue eyes. He looked a little like Robert Redford.

Ricky was pining over his ex-girlfriend, Theresa, who lived in upstate New York. She’d broken up with him for cheating on her. Of course I had a crush on him. He was cute and seemed sensitive. I chose to overlook the cheating incident.

His parents were away in Europe so he had the house all to himself. It was a big, white Colonial on the corner of a suburban block with a backyard. Ricky kept a perpetual supply of beer bottles in the fridge and music playing.

Once a week, Gina and I would go over to Ricky’s. Kids always dropped by. One night, when around thirty people were over, Ricky got especially drunk. Gina was catching up with some old high school friends of hers. As I sipped my beer, Ricky walked over to me.

“Come on,” he said, taking my hand.

The two of us sat down under some trees in the backyard. He kissed me amidst the darkness and chirping summer bugs. I opened my eyes to try to see if his bright blue eyes shone in the moonlight, but Ricky kept his eyes shut tight and all I could see were his thick blond eyebrows.

Towards the end of the party, Ricky and I ended up in his bedroom. I looked around at the sports-themed wallpaper paneling and rock posters of a teenager’s room. We lay on his bed. I told Ricky I wouldn’t let him go past second base, which didn’t seem to bother him. After around a half hour of making out, Ricky passed out. His chest pressed against my back, his arms circled my waist, holding me all night. I didn’t remember ever feeling so happy.

I expected Ricky to ask me out on a date, but he never did. The next day he acted as if our sleepover and makeout session never happened. My only salvation was that he never asked anyone else out either. All summer, whenever I was driving, it seemed that Steely Dan’s “Ricky Don’t Lose That Number” was on the radio.

At the end of August, Ricky’s parents returned, and he got back together with his girlfriend, Theresa.

When September rolled around, Gina and I had to be creative to find new places to party. It was hard to meet boys at Stonybrook since we were commuters. So after the fall semester started, Gina and I decided to look for parties in the dormitories. We’d drive out to Stonybrook and park in a dorm parking lot. Then we would pour Southern Comfort (in homage to Janis Joplin) into plastic cups and add Tab diet soda. We drank while listening to our favorite songs on my eight-track tape deck: all the Beach Boys songs, especially “Help Me Rhonda”, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes’ “Bad Luck”, Carl Carlton’s “Everlasting Love”, Barry Manilow’s “Mandy”, Three Degrees’ “When Will I See You Again” and David Bowie’s “Changes.”

The liquor tasted like gasoline to me, but there was no way we could roam around dormitories looking for guys sober. In half an hour we were completely buzzed. We’d stumble out of the car and start our search for a party.

“Hey! Do you know where Johnny Murphy’s room is?” Gina would ask the first attractive guy she saw.

I would always burst out laughing, partly because I was drunk, but mainly because the people we were asking for didn’t exist. It was just a way to get invited into somebody’s room. Guys believed us and looked up the names in the Student Directory. This would be followed by a boring conversation about Stonybrook. Before we knew it, we’d be partying, which meant a lot of chatting and flirting. Sometimes we’d drink and smoke pot with the guys we met.

We eventually became friendly with six guys in a three-bedroom suite who we’d go back to see regularly. I’d observe Gina carefully as she drew the guys out, asking them questions about themselves.

“Wow, Kevin, you’re a biology major? You must be so smart,” she’d coo.

Gina would listen attentively and laugh outrageously. She’d make ridiculous suggestions that confused the guys and sometimes they’d end up agreeing.

She found out Mark, the studious pre-med suitemate, had a waterbed.

“Wow, I’ve never been on a waterbed before!” she squealed, and knocked on Mark’s door. “You ever wonder how many people it could hold?” Gina flashed him a big smile and promised him a kiss if he’d let us test out the waterbed.

Then she managed to get all the guys in the suite on his waterbed. We jumped up and down, laughing hysterically. One of the guys even took pictures. Mark stood in the corner of his room, biting his nails. When he’d finally had enough, he shooed us out of the room. Gina flashed us a smile, went into Mark’s bedroom and closed the door.

In the beginning of the spring we met Anthony—handsome, muscles rippling down his athletic body, dark mustache and layered black hair. He was on the university baseball team on a full athletic scholarship. He had gotten into Harvard Law School and was starting in September. There was something intense and angry about him. He’d say sarcastic things to Gina and me, but I got a thrill out of answering him back and putting him in his place.

Right before we all graduated, Gina and I went to visit Anthony. I started tearing out matches from a matchbook, and throwing them on his rug just to annoy him.

“You better stop it or I’m going to put you in the shower,” he warned me in a scolding tone.

“I dare you,” I responded cooly.

Egged on by Gina’s giggling, I threw more matches. He walked over and pulled me out of the chair. I tried to fight back when he scooped me up like he was Tarzan and I was Jane.

“Let me go, Anthony.”

“Beg me! Beg me to let you go!”

“I’m not begging.”

He threw me over his shoulder and carried me into the bathroom.

“This’ll shut you up for a change!”

He pushed me into a slimy shower stall and turned the water on full blast. He tried to push my head into the stream but I managed to pull out of his grasp.

“Your hair got all wet. I’ve got to dry it now,” he said, picking up the blow dryer.

I slammed the door shut and turned off the lights.

He dropped the blow dryer, and we started making out. We got all the way to third base when we heard Gina yell, “Hey, what’s going on in there you two?”

We pulled away from each other. Anthony just left the bathroom. I re-buttoned and retied my midriff blouse, then joined him.

“I may be throwing a little graduation party Friday,” Anthony told us, as we were leaving.

“I can’t go Friday,” Gina said.

That’s when she spent time with her fiancé Eddie.

“Well, I’ll give you a call if I have the party,“ he told me.

I waited all week but never heard from him. On Friday, I got dressed up, figuring he’d call at the last minute.

Drew, now fifteen, was hanging out with his friend, Tom, in the house that night. They had been friends since they were nine. Now they were in Coram High School together, fixated on sports and girls.

“Anthony’s a baseball player. He plays for Stonybrook,” Drew boasted to Tom.

“Cool, Rhonda,” Tom said. “Then you gotta go to his party.”

“I don’t think he’s going to call. I’m just going to go to sleep.”

“It’s only seven o’clock,” Tom laughed.

I crawled into my brother’s bed in my party clothes and full makeup. Drew covered me with his blankets.“Oh, the poor baby,” Drew teased.

“Oh my God, Anthony’s not calling! I can’t take it,” Tom said dramatically imitating my voice. “I’ve taken ill. Any smelling salts in the house? Because I think I’m going to faint.”

The phone rang shrilly. I sat up and screamed at the top of my lungs.

“What’s wrong with you? Are you crazy?” my mom yelled from the kitchen.

Drew, Tom, and I started cracking up. My brother ran into my mother’s room to pick up the phone before she did. I followed him.

“Yes she i-i-i-i-s,” he cooed, rolling his eyes at me.

I tried to grab the phone from him.

“M-a-a-a! It’s for you!” he yelled.

“Damn you, Drew,” I yelled.

“Why don’t you just go and see if there’s a party. It’s only a fifteen minute drive from here,” said Drew.

“I am not going over to Anthony’s dorm room without Gina.”

“Who’s Gina?” Tom asked.

“Rhonda’s party partner,” Drew explained.

“Well, where is she then?”

“With her fiancé,” I said.

“Then go without her,” said Tom. “Why can’t a girl run after a guy a little bit?”

“Maybe there’s no party,” Drew said, “and he figures you don’t want to go there unless he has a party.”

“Or maybe he’s calling and he can’t get through because he’s getting a busy signal.”

They had a point. I decided that clarification was more important than rejection. So, listening to my fifteen-year-old male dating counselors, I tweaked my makeup and left. Drew and Tom high-fived me on the way out.

In the dorm’s hallway, I could see Anthony and his suitemate watching baseball. No party. I went into the bathroom, ran my fingers through my hair, took a deep breath, and made believe Gina was with me. Anthony did a double-take when he saw me.

“So where’s the party?” I asked.

“It never materialized cause I can’t graduate until I hand two papers in. They’re due tomorrow. And I’m driving to Boston tomorrow afternoon. Got a game. That’s why I didn’t call you.”

I remembered what Drew and his friend said about not wanting Anthony to think I was just here to go to his party.

“Well, I also came to say goodbye.”

“That’s nice. Uh, I’m real busy with these papers though so I can’t really hang out. I’m coming back to New York in a week though.”

“Well, maybe Gina and I could come and visit you then.“

“Okay,” he said.

“Good luck with your papers.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“So, did you guys have a quickie?” Tom asked, the minute I opened the door.

“Yeah, was there an orgy with other Stonybrook baseball players?” Drew asked.

Although I felt rejected, I couldn’t stop laughing at my brother’s and Tom’s ridiculous, fifteen-year-old questions. They were my knights in shining armor. I was famished from not eating all day because I was so stressed about Anthony’s call. The three of us piled into my car and drove to a pizza place where we all split a pie with everything on it.

During my last year at Stonybrook University, I had applied to several graduate schools across the country that had a Master’s Degree program in Clinical Psychology. There were only two in the entire country—Pepperdine in California and Roosevelt University in Chicago. I choose Roosevelt because it was smack-dab in the middle of a city. I’d had enough of the suburbs to last a lifetime. I also knew it was time to leave home and be on my own.

Right after we graduated, Gina and I were sad that there would be no more wild nights in the dorms. We found refuge in a little bar called Tuey's where Stonybrook students hung out on Thursday nights. Cramped and dark, with low ceilings and a dance floor, it became our new and final place to party together.

We’d order Singapore Slings and down them fast. We’d laugh and dance to reggae, freestyle or with partners doing the hustle as the DJ blasted one fantastic song after the other. Van McCoy’s “Do The Hustle”, Frankie Valli’s “Swearin’ to God” and The Blackbyrds’ “Walking in Rhythm” were my favorite songs to dance to.

We partied with abandon and passion. Getting tipsy, the music, and making out with guys at the bar, was our way of avoiding the fast-approaching future. In a couple of months Gina would be marrying Eddie and I would be leaving Coram for graduate school in Chicago. It would be the end of my wonderful college era with Gina. My days of being the shy, withdrawn fourteen-year-old wallflower were officially over. For good!

Chapter 33

Letting Go

I was only a few weeks away from leaving home. For the first time, my path in life seemed set. New boys and new adventures awaited in Chicago. I still hadn’t found the love of my life, but I knew he was right around the corner. Perhaps like the song “Something’s Coming” Tony sings in *West Side Story*, when he knew he was going to meet Maria.

Drew burst into the house one afternoon, smiling and waving a piece of paper. He had received a full scholarship for a baseball camp in the Catskills Mountains. It was a big deal, collecting recommendation letters and filling out the paperwork. My mother did the financial part but Drew did most of it on his own.

Out of the blue my father called. Thrilled about Drew going to baseball camp, he volunteered to drive him upstate, if my Mom could drop him off in the city. He invited us all out to lunch.

I thought for sure Mom would refuse to deal with Dad. I was completely surprised when she told me, “You know how I hate driving, so let him help out and take Drew to the camp. At least then he’s doing something as a father.”

I had been through so many experiences in the past few years, including therapy, that I didn’t think my father could affect me anymore. I told my mother I would go along for lunch.

We were all going to meet at one of my father’s favorite restaurant, Ratner’s, a famous Jewish restaurant on the Lower East Side. The three of us arrived first and sat down at a big red booth. Dad was late. We wondered if he would actually show up.

“Hi, Dad,” Drew said, looking both relieved and happy when my father arrived.

He was wearing a toupee and wire-framed glasses now. There were new lines around his eyes. He scooted into the seat next to Drew.

“Hello, Marvin.”

“Hi, Dad” I said, actually happy to see him.

“Hi, Rhonda. Hi, Anita.”

He bent over and kissed my cheek.

“Congratulations for graduating, Rhonda,” Dad said, handing me a white envelope.

I opened it. There was a Hallmark graduation card and inside a crisp hundred dollar bill.

“Thanks Dad,” I exclaimed, thrilled that he thought of me and gave me money, which I desperately needed now. My love for him was back, as if the last eight years were just a dream.

“So you’re going to Chicago to graduate school?”

“Yes.”

“What are you studying?”

“Clinical Psychology.”

“Yeah? Maybe you’ll be able to psychoanalyze me.”

We all started laughing. It was almost like the old days. I wanted to throw myself in his arms and be close to him again.

“How’s the baseball team this year, Drew?” Dad asked.

Drew perked up and began to fill him in on all the stats from the high school’s last season. My father seemed totally absorbed in what Drew was telling him. Sports—the only failsafe topic Dad knew that could shut me and my mother out.

I tried not to be jealous because I was so proud of my brother. He had become a great athlete and was hoping to one day earn a college scholarship. Although, I was glad to see how happy he was talking to Dad, I was starting to get angry that my father wasn’t paying attention to me anymore. I couldn’t believe he had no concern about how I was going to pay for grad school. I had spent the entire last year working two jobs trying to save up, besides applying for loans and grants.

My anger was building, stewing inside me. He never paid a cent for me to go to college. Couldn’t he figure out that loans and grants weren’t enough? My love for him was evaporating by the second, replaced by familiar disappointment and hurt.

Then it occurred to me that I should simply ask him. There was a chance he could have changed after all this time. Maybe he’d help me now. After all, he did give me this great graduation present. What was the harm in asking? I was a good kid. I never got into any trouble. All I wanted to do was educate myself, make something of myself. When Dad went up to the register to pay the bill, I knew it was my last chance to say something to him.

“So when are you leaving for Chicago, Rhonda?” he asked.

“In a couple of weeks…Uh, Dad could you help pay for some of graduate school, or living expenses?” I blurted out.

He paused a moment. “Got a lot of bills coming up. Sorry, I can’t help you out,” he said in that monotone, almost, contemptuous voice that resented demands, that I had grown to hate.

I felt like the devastated fourteen-year-old again. I couldn’t believe that he still had the power to flatten me. The old, all-too-familiar wounds were punctured again. His rejection was more than I could bear.

As if on automatic, I walked out of the restaurant and started running onto Second Avenue and across the street, darting in between the moving cars. I didn’t see a Volkswagen heading right towards me, slamming on its breaks trying not to hit me. Just then I felt my mother grabbing my arm, pulling me back to the sidewalk.

“Don’t you ever,” she yelled, shaking, her green eyes blazing into mine. “Don’t ever hurt yourself over someone, especially your father!”

I thought of how my mother could have folded so many times and didn’t. How no matter how much we struggled, no matter how many men disappointed her, no matter what my father did to hurt us, no matter how close to the edge of sanity she got, she’d always managed to pull herself together. She was a true survivor. How could I be anything less? I took a deep breath.

“He doesn’t want to even help me pay for school?”

“He didn’t even care if you had food to eat! Why is this so shocking?”

She was right. “I just got so upset.”
“Well, did you take a look at that rug on his head?” my mother asked, smirking.

“You mean that toupee? Oh my God! I thought it was a raccoon!”

“Well, I guess we know where your child support money went.”

We both burst out laughing. My brother came over and hugged me.

“Don’t ever do that again, okay? You could have got hurt.”

“I won’t. Have a great time at camp.”

“I will. It’s only four weeks. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“I love you,” I said, trying not to cry.

“I love you too,” he responded, smiling crookedly.

My father came over and kissed me on the cheek.

“I gotta go,” he said. As usual, he didn’t even mention anything about what just happened.

“Take care, Anita.”

“Bye, Marvin,” Mom responded coldly.

I watched my brother get into Dad’s car and drive off. I couldn’t hate Drew because Dad loved him more than me. My brother meant too much to me.

Mom’s car rattled over the Queensboro Bridge as we headed back to Long Island. Half in a daze, I looked back at the soaring lights of the Manhattan skyline. The breathtaking sight soothed me a little.

I wonder what Dr. Klein would say about what had just happened. My very last session with him was next week. I’d really miss him. He had become my surrogate emotional father.

A passage from Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* flashed into my mind. Freud had said that to successfully recover from losing someone you love, you have to mourn and grieve them. Only then can the bereaved person hold onto the happy memories and love for the person they are mourning. Then they can forgive them and let them go.

I must have mourned my father enough, I thought, because I’d spent so many years being in pain about him, and talking about him with my mother and Dr. Klein. But I desperately wanted to forgive him and let go now, especially since I was leaving New York and my mother and brother. So, I decided then and there I would try Freud’s theory. After all, if I was going to become a therapist I might as well practice on myself.

Eyes closed, hot cheek pressed against the window, I let my mind soar. But all I could remember was the bad stuff.

My professor had explained that once you feel the grief to the point that you are deeply crying, that’s when everything connects, and you have truly mourned. I tried to make myself feel remember all the hurtful things my father did so I could make myself feel the pain.

No, no, I thought, opening my eyes. This isn’t how things are now. That’s all over with. They’re burnt-out memories, images that are so far away in time. They aren’t real, they aren’t real anymore! This wasn’t working. I felt a million times worse!

Instead, I forced myself to focus on the positive memories of my father.

My earliest memory was Dad taking me to the playground when I was around five. We’d go there together on Sundays, at least once a month. Just the two of us. He’d push me on the swing and I pumped my legs out trying to swing as high as I could on my own.

He’d always ask me, “What are you going to be when you grow up, Little Miss Rhonda?”

“A trape-e-e-e-ze artist!” I’d yell proudly.

He always laughed.

Sometimes we’d go off together to the Prospect Park Zoo. He’d buy me Cracker Jacks that I’d feed to the elephants. They’d suck up the treats through their trunks, like vacuum cleaners. I could still remember worrying if they would swallow my arm. He’d tell me not to be scared.

We always ended our zoo adventure by going to the merry-go-round. He’d put me on the horse and wait for me as I pretended to gallop. Every time I’d pass him, I’d joyously yell “Da-a-a-a-a-dy!” He’d wave, smiling.

It was as if I was dying or drowning, when they say that your life passes before you. Except it wasn’t my whole life. It was just my life with my father before he left.

I was surprised to feel gratitude for the love he did show me when I was a little girl. Some girls didn’t even get that in their childhood.

Then I remembered our gardening together in Smithtown. Auditioning for the Lansbury brothers, while he waited outside, flashed into my mind. How he taught me to fight Susan in junior high school and be tough. The time he dared me to run across the stage for a dollar. I felt suddenly grateful that I learned to have *chutzpah* from him. He taught me to take risks. I had his gambling in my blood.

It was a gamble for me to go off to Chicago to graduate school. I didn’t know anyone there. My whole life was here in New York: Mom, Drew, my grandparents, Dr. Klein and Gina. It would take a lot for me to go off to another city completely alone. But being my father’s daughter, I knew I could do it. I’d learned enough, progressed enough, to take that very same chutzpah my father had given me when I was a little girl—perhaps his last gift to me—and leave all the bad memories behind.



 AUTHOR RHONDA FINDLING IN HIGH SCHOOL