

Chapter 2 Forced Separations

As we headed back to my grandparents' house after the concert, I was sure my mother would be waiting for me at home. She wasn't. What was there was the empty living room with its floral-patterned wallpaper. Until that moment I always thought of the room as pretty and delicate. Now, when we entered, it seemed chunky and chaotic. I closed my eyes, turned away, and forced myself to think of happier times—My mother and I laughing. Her, chasing me, catching me, picking me up with a bear hug and a kiss. Wanting ice cream, I asked her to get me some. Teasing, she told me she couldn't. Then, the two of us laughed again as we licked the cherry-vanilla ice cream running down the outside of the sugar cones.

Without wishing it, my memory rolled back to a meeting Mom called—She was sitting in the big chair, Marty on the living room floor next to me. As I tried to get my brother to talk about his new hobby, photography, he brushed my questions aside. I tried harder for his attention, and we started to squabble. "Boys, stop fighting," Mom said. "I want to have a serious talk. You know I've been to the hospital. What you don't know is the doctor told me I might have to go back."

The word "hospital" still frightened me, but again I didn't ask for an explanation.

"Now, if that happens," Mom continued, "I need the two of you to be strong because no matter how long I'm sick, I'm going to get better."

How does she know she's going to get better? I thought. And from what? What does she have? What if she doesn't get better? What if she has to go to a hospital and stay there?

Within a couple of weeks, Mom did come back, and even though she looked thinner and tired, she maintained a perkiness that made me feel good.

Commented [E24]: Make sure you're using consistent dashes for these chapters. En dashes (–) not hyphens (-).

Deleted: |

Deleted: |

Deleted: -

Deleted: |

Deleted: |

Deleted: there

Deleted: --

Deleted: She

Deleted: --

Commented [E25]: Capitalize words like "Mom" and "Dad" when used as proper names.

Deleted: mom

Deleted: #

Deleted: go

Deleted: the

“Boys, I know you don’t want to hear this, but I’m probably going to have to go to the hospital again, this time for a longer stay. So, before I do, I’d like the three of us to at least enjoy ourselves. So, how about we go to a Broadway show. Would you like that?”

“Yes,” I answered first, and Mom took us to one of the last performances of *Brigadoon*. Even though Marty sat still the entire show, I started squirming as soon as we sat but stopped at the curtain’s rise. The story was about a little Scottish town named Brigadoon which only appears every hundred years. At the end of the show Marty said he liked it, but I loved it. It brought back memories of Paul Robeson and my fantasy of becoming an actor.

Two days later, Mom went back to the hospital, and the day after, Zayda took me and Marty to visit. It was 1948, and children weren’t allowed in hospital rooms. With Mom isolated and unable to come to the lobby, Zayda had to find a way around the protocol. He talked two nurses into bringing Mom to a window overlooking the street where Marty and I stood and looked up at her. We did three or four visits like that, but all I remember of them was our yelling up to her, “How are you?” and Mom yelling back, “I’m fine. Don’t worry. I’ll be home before you know it.”

At the end of our third visit, I asked Zayda, “Can’t we get closer to Mommy?”

With a dour look, “I’ll see what I can do,” was his answer. It took a couple more visits before Zayda talked one of the nurses into opening some stairwell doors, so Marty and I could sneak up to where Mom could be rolled to us in a wheelchair. When we got to the landing and saw Mom smile, I cried and ran the rest of the way. Bending over her knees I put my head next to her stomach and took note of how skinny she was. When my hands encircled her, my crying became weeping, and I hugged her as if I’d never let her go.

Deleted: “

Deleted: ”

Deleted: By

Deleted: provoked

Commented [E26]: I did not know this!

Deleted: when

Deleted: .

Deleted: .

It took two years before Mom started coming home occasionally. Remembering our reactions to *Brigadoon*, she started taking us to more Broadway shows. We saw musicals like *Kiss Me Kate* and *South Pacific* and non-musical comedies like *Stalag 17*, as well.

Once, when I was about eight, I was sitting on the stoop when a friend, Lloyd, walked up. “What’s going on, Shrimpy? You look sad.”

Shrimpy was a nickname I had picked up because I was shorter than all my friends. The name became so associated with me that Mom embroidered the word “Shrimp” on the back of my denim jacket and gave it to me as a present.

“I’m just down, Lloyd. Mom went back to the hospital this morning.”

“You know,” Lloyd said. “When I’m feeling down, I find going to schul helpful, and it makes me a better person. You should try it.”

Not knowing anything appropriate to say, I just said, “Thanks.”

When Lloyd left, I went into the house. “Why don’t we go to schul?” I asked Zayda.

“Why do you want to do that?” he answered, a wry smile crossing his lips.

“Lloyd said it might make me feel better and also make me a better person.”

“A better person? Hmm,” Zayda stopped to think. For a moment, “That’s interesting. To make a change to a person last, the person must do something.”

“Well, going to schul is something. I mean, lots of people do it.”

“Lots of people do lots of things, but that only makes what they do popular. I’ll give you a for instance. You know the poolroom on the corner. A lot of the men who go there, also go to schul. Some go for the entire Friday Evening service. They pray. They feel better. They even think they’re better people for davening.”

“So, what’s wrong with that?”

- Deleted: “
- Deleted: ”
- Deleted: Not only did we see
- Formatted: Font: Italic
- Deleted: “
- Deleted: ”
- Deleted:
- Deleted: “
- Deleted: .
- Deleted: ” but
- Deleted: “
- Deleted: ”
- Formatted: Font: Italic
- Commented [E27]: No comma needed here.
- Deleted: .

- Deleted: H

- Deleted: .
- Deleted: ought

- Commented [E28]: It seems there are multiple spellings of “schul/schul” I’d advise you to pick the one you like best and stick with that throughout the book.
- Deleted: S

- Commented [E29]: Merriam-Webster doesn’t have “schul/schul” capitalized. I also don’t know a lot about Jewish culture though, so if you disagree feel free to change it back.
- Deleted: S

“Nothing. Except Monday morning, they go back to their real jobs, gangstersing. They rob people. They hurt people. They may even kill people, and I guess they make a nice living.”

The way he threw off the phrase, “they make a nice living” made me laugh, and I decided I wasn’t for me.

Two years later, when I was ten, after one of our stickball games my brother and I asked Mom a question. “Mom, you know those two older people up the block who come out to watch us play?”

“Yeah, what about them,” she said, turning a bit pale.

“They haven’t been around for a couple of days. Do you know where they went?”

“Sit down, boys,” Mom said getting even paler. “Those two people are your grandparents, my father and stepmother.”

“What are you talking about?” Marty asked, shock etched on his face. “Why didn’t you tell us that?”

“Because the facts of the story are ugly, and I felt it best to keep it a secret.”

“What facts?”

“My father disowned me when I disobeyed his order not to marry your father. Then, when I was pregnant with Marty and needed help, I went to him. Instead of help, he pushed me out the door, and I fell down the stoop.”

“How could he do that?”

“He was a very Victorian man and demanded obedience.”

“And where was your real mom?”

Commented [E30]: Is this supposed to be “gangster-ing”? Or did he pronounce it with the “s”? Adjust as needed.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: S

Deleted: #

“She had died, and my father remarried a very strict woman who had a son she was protecting.”

Thinking *this is crazy*, I said, “So, that side of our family is completely nuts? And Bubby and Zayda’s side of our family is only nuts enough to accept a father’s desertion as not that big a deal.”

“Don’t be funny, Mark.”

It was the first time a dark thought of mine was called funny. “Why not?” was all I could come back with.

“Because not everybody on my side of the family is terrible. My two aunts, the ones we visit on Avenue U, are nice, and they’re my father’s sisters. My father’s brother had a city in Russia named after him, Sverdlovsk. He was the man who led the firing squad that killed Czar Nicholas II of Russia and his family. In the early days of the Soviet Union, he became chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. That should count for something,” she said with a chuckle, and continued. “Knowing he was in my family, and what he did, gave me a bit more strength to fight my disease, and I hope you kids get some of that fight in your life too.”

Thinking, *I guess he didn’t go the shul*, I laughed to myself.

When Mom finished, I saw pride across her face, and it shocked me.

We have a killer in the family, I thought. *How cool is that? The next time I’m feeling bad about not having a father, I’ll think about having a killer.*” I laughed to myself again.

During one of Mom’s last temporary visits, Zayda called Marty and me into the living room. “I haven’t told your mother yet, but your father called and said he wants to get to know the two of you better.”

Deleted: #

Deleted: #

Better? I thought. “He doesn’t know us.”

Commented [E31]: You had a lot of good zingers as a kid.

“That’s why he wants to take both of you on a trip with him. It’ll be while your mother is in the hospital.”

“Where to?” Marty asked.

“I don’t know. He’s keeping it a surprise,” Zayda answered.

All I kept thinking was *Our father? A trip? While mom is in the hospital? When, What’s she going to say?* came to mind my stomach filled with butterflies.

Deleted: w

When Zayda left, I turned to Marty. “I don’t feel good about this.”

“I’m not really interested in how you feel,” he said and walked away.

When Mom was told about our father’s plan she mumbled, “He’s coming to take you away,” and her words chilled me to the bone. “Why else would he want to take you on a trip?”

“Zayda said to get to know us?”

Deleted: .

“That’s not the way your father works.”

“We don’t know that,” I said almost shouting. “We don’t know much about him at all, Goddamn it.”

Deleted:

“Mark, try and keep a lid on your temper. I think it’s better you don’t go with him.”

“Mom,” Marty pleaded more than said.

“I don’t want to hear another word about it,” she snapped back.

Our mother could certainly stop us, but she couldn’t stop our father from showing up. A couple of weeks later a man showed up looking nothing like I had imagined. He wasn’t stocky, husky, or round chested like Zayda. He was tall, a little more than six feet, and thin. If he were a boxer, he’d have been a middleweight, around a hundred and eighty, maybe eighty-five pounds. But what impressed me most was the confidence he showed when he stood with his second wife

Deleted: or

and their three kids, two boys and a girl, next to their car. They were all slender. Sheila, the oldest, was the tallest. Stan, the second, was middle height. And Rick, the youngest and shortest, was barely old enough to walk.

Deleted: -

Deleted: ,

Deleted: a

“How are you doing, son?” were the first words my father said with the word “son.” They sounded cold, formal, and impersonal. I couldn’t tell what Marty’s reaction was, but I tensed.

Deleted: ing

Picking up on the discomfort, Sheila began to prattle. I’m not sure if it was because of how I was feeling or for some other reason, but none of what she said sounded interesting until she hit the highlights of the trip. “We’re going to take Route 66 cross-county to see the Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon, ending in California.” As she continued, I became impressed at how extensive the trip was going to be. A desire to go began to grow, but I couldn’t. So, I killed it, and the subject was never brought up again.

Deleted: a

The second Lonow family stayed until Zayda told them that we wouldn’t be going with them. Then, without protest, they replaced Marty and me with two of our cousins.

“How could they just change us out like that?” Marty asked.

“Because they’re the same size as us and won’t cost more to feed.”

Marty didn’t laugh.

Commented [E32]: Made this its own line to clarify that Marty didn’t say this.

Deleted: #

After our father’s family left, Mom called Marty and me into her room. “Boys, it looks like I have to go back to the hospital, but the doctors say it’s for the last time.”

My heart sank. “Is that true?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s as true as they can make it.”

Later that year, 1956, I passed a general placement exam for acceptance into Cunningham Junior High, a Special Advanced Progress School where students did three years of work in two.

Within days of getting the news, Marty invited me to his friend Howie Cashman's house

Formatted: Indent: Left: 0.5", First line: 0"

"What's this about?" I asked.

"I'd prefer telling you with Howie."

The next day Marty and I walked into Howie's house, and the look on his face gave me some serious willies. "What's this about guys?"

"We want to know why you want to go to Cunningham?" Howie answered.

"Because I made the school, and it's one of the best Junior Highs in New York. Besides, I'll get three years of school credit in two."

"And what happens if you're not able to keep up with the work?"

Realizing the meeting was a setup by my brother, my anger shot to where I was about to throw punches, but instead I said, "I don't have trouble doing schoolwork."

"Yeah, well Cunningham is different than regular school."

"Did you talk to Mom about this?" I asked Marty.

"No, because she wants you to go. I'm the one trying to keep you from getting hurt."

Bullshit. Why are you doing this? I thought as my anger grew and my fists clenched.

Then, my thoughts changed. *You're not stopping me from going to Cunningham, I thought,*

calming down.

Deleted: and

Deleted: I

Deleted: e

Deleted: d

Deleted: #

After our Cunningham fight, I didn't speak to my brother until he, Zayda, and I were walking up Coney Island Avenue. We passed an appliance storefront with an almost empty window. In window, sat a single glass-fronted box.

"What's that," Zayda asked.

"A television," Marty said.

My eyes widened. "So, that's what they look like. I've heard kids talk about them but don't know anyone who has one."

"Look at it. There are people inside," Zayda said, pointing at the TV.

"Those are just images, Zayda, projected by electricity," Marty answered.

Zayda nodded. "In Russia, we never had such things."

Staring at the box, I wondered if Paul Robeson ever appeared in it.

A week later, Zayda walked into the house. "Moishe, Mortcha, I have a surprise."

Zayda's surprises weren't always met with delight. The last one he'd brought home was a live cod. We filled the bathtub with saltwater and kept it there until it died two days later.

This time Bubby's trepidation was obvious. "Vus is dus?"

"Ah television. The very first on the block." Zayda pulled it out of the box and put it on a table in the living room.

We didn't have a car or money to go on vacation like some of our friends did, but we now had a thirteen-inch Dumont TV.

"First, we have to attach the antenna," my brother said reading from the instruction manual. "Next we have to plug the set in."

After doing as instructed, we waited for a test pattern to appear on the screen and the speakers to start their steady "Shhhhh" indicating everything was on.

Commented [E33]: Remember the Oxford comma!

Deleted: breach

Commented [E34]: Adjective + Participle compound are hyphenated when preceding a noun.

Deleted: i

Deleted: which

Deleted: glass

Commented [E35]: Very curious to know why he did this haha. Was he planning on eating it? Or keeping it as a pet?

Deleted: that w

Deleted: had to store in

Deleted: filled with

Commented [E36]: In Chicago style, you *generally* you spell numbers out. There are exceptions though.

Deleted: 13

“I think it’s working,” I said, trying to contain myself.

“I guess we’re Americans,” Bubby said, her eyes questioning what she was looking at.

“You betchum,” Zayda came back with pride.

“Und, viffle cost dus?” Bubby asked, her worry growing as her hand covered her mouth.

“A hundred and eighty-nine dollars.”

“Do bist mashuga. Do vaste dus? Mir kenen nisht farginen dos,” my grandmother said.

“It’s better than the expensive one for a thousand dollars.”

“If you had spent a thousand dollars, we’d be going to your funeral,” Bubby shot back.

“Genug, Minnie,” Zayda shouted. “It’s something the boys need for education.”

Education was what Zayda would mention when he did something Bubby might not like.

“Well, for education I guess it’s okay” she said calming down. “But what can we do with it?”

“They have programs to watch on three channels,” Marty said turning the channel selector from “1,” a nonexistent station to “2,” CBS where a sign read “Search for Tomorrow.”

“That’s a soap opera I heard about,” my brother explained.

Over the next few days, we explored all three channels trying different ones to see which we liked best. One evening we landed on *Your Show of Shows*, a comedy starring Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner, Louie Nye, and Howard Morris. It became our weekly staple, not only because it was funny, but also because, more importantly, four of its stars—Caesar, Reiner, Nye, and Morris—were all from Jews from New York, in situations our immigrant grandparents understood and laughed at.

Your Show of Shows was performed in front of a live audience. I found this amazing. The performers weren’t just acting for an audience of hundreds sitting in front of them in a theater, but, being on TV, they were making an impression on people all over the country. I tried to

Commented [E37]: Normally, you would have this as numerals, but since this is dialogue and you’re trying to capture the way he spoke, I think this is fine as is.

Deleted: “
Deleted: ”

Deleted: --

Deleted: --
Deleted: ;
Deleted: and all Jews

Deleted: “
Deleted: ”
Formatted: Font: Italic

imagine what it must feel like to be able to move so many people with a performance, but I couldn't quite grasp the concept. One afternoon, as best as I could, I wrote down an excerpt of the Judge's speech from the show's, "the garbage sketch." After memorizing it in all its gibberish glory, I performed it.

The few laughs I got were small, but it didn't dissuade me. It prodded me to try something I could perform, like dancing to the show's musical numbers. As my arms and legs learned to move together as if they were of a piece, I found my family delighted by what they saw.

During my third performance my brother began teasing. "That's not the way real dancers dance," he said with enough derision to cause me to stumble. Not only was the hurt my brother inflicted going deeper, it was also becoming sharper. As it did, thoughts of my father began coming to the surface more often. "Did he leave because of something I did? Did he ever love me?" I needed answers, and turned to my grandmother, but she turned the problem back on me. "Write him. Ask him He's the only one who can tell you."

"Why doesn't he write me?" shot out of my mouth with a force that caused my grandmother to grimace.

Two weeks later, Zayda called Marty and me into the living room. "Boys, I just spoke to your father." My mouth went dry. "He wants to see the two of you again."

Did Bubby call my father, ran through my head, while out of my mouth came, "Is he also going to visit our cousins?"

"Maybe, but he's coming to see me and your grandmother too, if you have to know."

Commented [E38]: Maybe expand on what this is.

Deleted: T

Deleted: G

Deleted: S

Deleted: ,

Deleted: #