A Forthcoming Memoir

In The White Space

By Shelly R. Fredman

CHAPTER ONE

In a Cask We Can't Help But Reach Into

When I was a wide-eyed and improbably serious eight-year-old, my mother sat me down on a pink bedspread in the room I shared with my younger sister--so we could have The Talk. Just before, I had run home from the Hilltop school playground, and breathlessly reported to my awestruck mother that Jeffrey Fish had propositioned me and my best friend, Diane Greenberg, beneath the monkey bars. Jeffrey Fish had offered "to show us his if we would show him ours." This was 1966, and the women of my mother's day, even in the suburban Midwest, had begun to read Betty Friedan and Gloria. They weren't certain yet, what to do with their awakenings, but they knew they had to do something.

So Mom and I sat beneath the giant giraffes and hippos she and her best friend, Dee Dee, had painted on our bedroom walls, and she explained about boys' anatomy and girls' too, filling my head with way too much information. And then she added that when you do get older and are ready to have sex, you should never just "give yourself" to a boy. Those are the words she used--to give. As if, in having sex with someone, you inevitably lost yourself, or a part of yourself, never to have it back again. There was an urgency in her voice I didn't comprehend. But I listened really well.

She seemed to be telling me there was a deep danger to love. You might be abandoned. So I waited a long time, throughout all of my teenage years and high school as well, protecting my virginity like a treasure before I *gave myself* to anyone.

Yet, when I met Carmi I slept with him on the first date.

We had first glimpsed each other at a wedding the week before, a wedding I'd only been invited to at the last minute. I had graduated from college in Boston in May, and came home to St. Louis in the summer to begin the next part of my life—whatever that might be.

I stayed at Carmi's house for weeks. We couldn't get enough of each other. We made love in the morning—at 6 a.m.—definitely not my time of day. He reached

for me before he went off to work, his hand lightly brushing my spine, lingering at the small of my back. He worked as a supervisor in his father's bedframe factory, part of a large business that was run by twelve of his uncles and cousins.

We clawed at each other's clothes as evening came on, when we were supposed to be on our way out the door to the Pasta House, to meet his friends for dinner. We made love in all of the beautiful rooms of his dead wife's house: the creamy mauve dining room, the white-carpeted living room, the sunroom, laden with plants and Mexican pottery.

There seemed to be a hunger in us, a fear-tinged loneliness, a kind of desperate need to claim the other as his or her own. He was missing Elly and I was bereft of Marc, the boy I had dated throughout high school and college. I had known for a long time that Marc and I weren't going to last, but I had been with him since ninth grade, and couldn't let go. Three days before I met Carmi at that wedding, Marc had broken up with me. "Still in love," Marc had said, but "I know you're not, and you don't have the nerve to do this." All true. I hadn't been alone, un-partnered, since I was fifteen.

And so Carmi and I met each other on the rebound. Dangerous territory, others warned. But we were young. We refused to believe them. And besides, our bodies told us a different truth. A tangle there, boundless and seemingly infinite.

Elly had died a mere ten months before, and Carmi still lived in the elegant old Tudor they had restored together. Everywhere, there were her things: a hand-stitched white peasant blouse, with delicate red x's embroidered across the bodice. It was tucked discreetly behind his shirts in his closet, a bedroom closet I occasionally ventured into once he'd gone off to work, just to stare at the blouse, and press the fabric between my fingers.

Or that picture of her on the shelf in the guestroom. She was sitting on a beach, her back to the camera, so you could barely see her face. Half-hidden, half-revealed. I supposed he took it. It might have been their last joy, a day in California he'd remember forever. Just before the accident. Carmi had placed the photo in the guest room, left it out there for me to see, the first night I visited. I appreciated the

honesty of that gesture. Although it could also be read as nonchalance. Or negligence. Or grief.

There was more. An entire house I was now living in, where she had once pored over paint chips and held, in her small hands, brown wallpaper strips with lilac elephants against the wall in the alcove bathroom tucked beneath the stairs. When I went to make Gypsy Soup, there were her spices, and I thought, sometimes, though I mostly tried to push the thought away, that I was pouring her, somehow, into the soup. I wanted to clear all of the cabinets of all of her things, and also, I felt some urge to protect something, to leave all of it in place and never touch any of it.

After a first Friday night date, I stayed at Carmi's house the whole weekend. On Sunday afternoon, I realized I'd need to return to my mother's house, if only to pick up some clothes, and to gather papers to create a resume, so I might begin to look for a job. Newly graduated, spouting the radical politics of Marx and Marcuse, both of whom I'd imbibed in political science classes, and moving in, now, with a man I barely knew. When I called her and reported what I was up to, my mother was certain I'd lost my mind. Perhaps I had. I hadn't been involved with anyone significantly except for Marc, and now, suddenly, that was over. She'd been certain I was marrying him, and now I was moving in with someone else. Someone she had never met.

Carmi drove me home that Sunday. He waited in his white Mazda while I went in to my mother's house, a big grey two-story she and Dad had purchased in the year just before their divorce, when she had thought things like houses can complete our dreams.

Now there was a scorching July sun, and that pressing version of heat that is the Midwest in summertime. I was hoping my mother wouldn't be home.

Our dark garage smelled of gasoline, baseball gloves, dust. And her car was here. The house itself was mostly empty of my brother and sister and me, but our things still crowded the shelves. Dad had moved out ages ago, but the rattlesnake he had shot as a boy at Camp Hawthorne was here as well, curled in a murky jar of formaldehyde. I nudged past the back bumper of her car, steeling myself for whatever she might say, before opening the door.

"Oh, so you're here," she said, turning from her sentry place at the kitchen sink. "I wasn't sure if you'd be coming back."

When she's dressed up, my mother carries traces of a dark, old world beauty. But now, just returned from the real estate office where she worked evenings and weekends, too, there was that haggard post-client look on her face. The one that said, *I've pushed myself way beyond nice these past few hours while we've traipsed through houses you probably won't buy*. After my dad left us, I'd seen that look on her face too many times.

"I'm not staying, Mom." The most I could manage. There was a strange, enlivening anger with me now as I headed upstairs, to my room.

She raced up after me, feet pounding the tufted beige carpet of the stairs. "Do you know who had to sit up with Marc, last night, when he came by to look for you? He's a wreck, Shelly. Do you realize that? What are you doing? I've never seen you like this before."

She followed me into my yellow bedroom. French provincial furniture and posters of Joni Mitchell and Virginia Woolf that the high school version of myself had added to mom's décor.

"You don't even know this guy. Who is he?" On a good day, my mother isn't a temperate person. Just one of the reasons I'd tried to time this visit so she wouldn't be here.

I pulled drawers open and shut them again, quickly gathering shoes, shirts, and underwear. I set my mind on Carmi, the coffee smell of his breath. The way his heart sounded when I lay my head on his chest. The idea that he was waiting in the car outside.

The last thing I grabbed: my favorite tiered blue peasant skirt, the one I'd worn week after week in Howard Zinn's Thursday seminar on Marxism and Anarchism. I wanted that version of myself, light and spacious, the California one Joni sang about, all ocean and sky. Anything but this tight, constricted darkness I felt at twenty-three, returned to my mother's house.

I brushed past her. “I’ve gotta go, Mom. He’s waiting outside. I’ll call you later.” Out of the room. Down the carpeted hall. Free, for maybe the first time in my life.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” she called. “This is a new Shelly I don’t even know.”

I grit my teeth, arms tight around the laundry basket I’d dumped everything into. For the first time in my life, I didn’t care what my mother thought.

During my first year in college at Boston University, I had suddenly developed a fear of flying that made it impossible to get home for winter break. Somewhat desperate, I’d sought therapy at the student services office. The young, bearded graduate student gave a name to my terror. He called it “separation anxiety,” and asked me how I had felt when my parents divorced.

I’d smiled and looked into his eyes, certain I could get this question right. And then I narrated, in somewhat lavish detail, how my mother went crazy that year. The year that I was twelve. All the crazy things she said and did.

He gazed back at me over his notepad. “I asked how *you* felt. Not your mother.”

Just now, lugging the laundry basket in the sterling heat as I trudged to Carmi’s car, sweating now too, I realized I was doing all of this—purely—for myself. I opened the car door. Smelling the musky scent of this new guy I couldn’t get enough of, and mahogany leather, too. He’d just bought the car--with insurance money he’d won when Elly died. The rest of his Orthodox family led simple, unencumbered lives. His aunt Esther, he told me, with a strange pleasure, had had a fit when he bought the car.

As I nudged the laundry basket in back and closed the door, he whispered, “Are you okay?” He looked at me, checking, and brushed a wisp of hair from my face.

“Sure. My mom’s having a fit, but she’ll survive.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. He put the car into reverse, and we rolled away. I’d like to say I looked back at the grey house on the hill, my mother’s house, empty and still. I’d like

to tell you that I thought of her, for a moment, felt a pang of guilt or reluctance, even. But I didn't.

The next Shabbat, Carmi and I sat in the mauve dining room together, at a large mahogany table set for two. Which looked odd. But he had grilled steaks and made salad as well. None of the boys I knew in college had ever constructed a salad for me.

We paused before we ate, the steaks in a puddle of juice, potatoes too. He wanted me to bless the Sabbath candles, but I didn't know how. All I could think about was the delicious food, the steaks sitting there getting cold.

"Here," he said, striking a match and holding it to the wick. He took my hands and helped me to make circles in the air above the flames. "Close your eyes," he said, and again, that melodic version of Hebrew I'd heard him chant when I had met him at the wedding the week before, a blessing.

He blessed a delicate goblet of wine I was certain Elly had picked out. Then he turned to the twin loaves of bread he'd retrieved from the bakery that afternoon, and had covered with a swath of watercolor fabric. When I made a face, he said, "It's so when we bless the one, the other one won't be jealous." His lessons were strange and lovely, plumbing some deep inner canyon I didn't know I had.

We sat together and ate, finally making a conversation. He told me stories of growing up in Peoria, and then three years spent in Israel, the birthplace of his mother, and how his parents had briefly tried to make aliyah. He'd been a shy boy already, and the years in a foreign language proved daunting. Plus his dad had left him and his brother with their fiery artist mother, prone to cold moods and retreats as well. "That whole year, all I remember is waiting for Dad. He'd come to see us every three months, lugging a huge suitcase filled with American candy bars. Snickers and Mars and Baby Ruth."

The smell of barbeque lingered in his hair, and his face was this beautiful thing. I couldn't believe he wanted me. He asked about my family, so I told him about growing up in my mother's house, the fisted entropy that was mom, my sister

and brother and me, after Dad left. How I'd always taken care of her, but suddenly couldn't stand doing that just now.

"I'm so angry and I don't even know why. I've been acting kind of crazy the past few months, doing stuff I'd never do. Cheating on Marc. Flirting up a storm with men I barely know. My brother and sister think I've gone off the deep end, moving in with you."

Carmi listened carefully, which seemed to be his habit. He looked down into the candles, as if weighing what he might say against their light. "I don't know, you're telling me all this, and I believe you," he said. "But I sense goodness in you. Some deep something that's hidden underneath all that."

For months, my family had been implying I'd been possessed, somehow, by something crazy and foreign and dark, something they didn't understand. I wanted to believe him.

We spent the rest of that summer together. When he went off to work, I'd sit at the kitchen table in front of the big picture window, and anxiously pore the Help Wanted section of the Post Dispatch. Now and then I'd go out to interview for a job at one of the local newspapers. Editors wanted me to list my experiences. While others had built resumes and edited college journals, I'd spent most of my time curled in the stacks at Yale, where Marc went, happily lost in the worlds of William Carlos Williams, the Brontes, and George Eliot.

In one interview now, an editor leaned across his desk, and told me to come back and see him when I had some clips. I nodded politely, but inside a scream: *how am I supposed to get the experience if you won't give me one?*

There was no structure or rhythm to my days. I had been, for all of my life, the girl who sat in the front row of a hundred classrooms and earned A's. Who knew there would come a time when that life would end? I had no idea what to do with myself, with the endless string of days stretching before me. And I didn't have anyone I could turn to for help. My mother only knew how to add hysteria in situations like these. I'd learned not to turn to her for help when things went wrong. Dad had been the calm and steady one, but he had left us, and though he and I did

manage to see each other occasionally, he'd mostly relinquished the role of father a long time ago.

There was only Carmi. So, when he left in the morning for work, I wandered the rooms of his house, making my way down to the basement. I sat at his workbench, smelling metal solder and grease. He'd made the stained glass lamp that quietly glowed amongst the plants in the sunroom, and a window panel that hung, resplendent with jeweled light, in the kitchen. Holding one of his heavy tools in my hand, I'd see his hands: large, rough, with small cuts at the fleshy place in his palm. And then I'd marvel at the incongruity: the rough strength of those hands and the gentle, nearly prayerful ways he moved them on me.

One day, as I drifted from room to room, not sure what to do with myself, I remembered he'd mentioned that Elly had kept a diary.

I tiptoed up to his bedroom and began to open his drawers: soft cotton t-shirts in princely colors, boxers folded neatly. And socks, such gorgeous socks--pale pinks and oranges and ochre—nestled against each other in the drawer. None of the boys I knew in college had socks like these. I slipped my hand in beneath them, and there it was: a thin, brown leather-bound book. I lifted the diary and held it in front of me. With almost no hesitation, I opened it and began to read. Almost as if I had a right to it.

Elly had been a beloved teacher at a Jewish day school. Many of the entries were filled with her days with students and fellow teachers. I only skimmed these, turning page after page in a rush. There was an entry about the housekeeper who'd helped to raise Elly and her five siblings. Elly's sadness at the loss of this woman. Her writings about the funeral. Pages and pages of writing about death.

So much, in fact--was I reading this in—there almost seemed to be a longing for death. Entries in which Elly went on and on about her sadness, some deep inchoate darkness and pain. This was odd, because whenever I'd caught a glimpse of his dead wife--from Carmi's friends or relatives--they always spoke of her goodness, her great warmth and joy. I read some more. The pages of sadness somehow familiar…words I might have written myself.

I riffled through more of the thin, lined pages, glancing at the small brass clock on his nightstand, making sure he wouldn't be coming home yet. I couldn't believe I was doing this.

Yet I felt only slightly guilty, somehow. He hardly ever spoke of Elly. I had to know.

There were only a few paragraphs about Carmi. Nothing substantial. Nothing that got at what I craved: how she felt about him, what their love was like, what they meant to each other. I wanted to know her. And the part of him he wasn't telling me.

In the rare times when Carmi spoke of his wife, the girl he had known since grade school, it was almost always because someone else mentioned her first. We'd be having dinner with a couple he and Elly had been friends with, and the woman, deliberately or not, mentioned a time or a place they'd all been together. Was this friend trying to remind Carmi of Elly, and their past? To insist that he remember? Or maybe she wanted to let me know I couldn't just waltz into his life, and take Elly's place in it?

And then, at times like this, Carmi would toss off, "Oh yes, Elly loved float trips," and then he'd glance over at me, and away again, quickly. Silence. So I'd start talking, as my mother always did when conversations stalled. Nearly frantic, now. Find another subject. Fill things in. Make it all ok.

I glanced up at the clock again. 4:00. I shut the diary and hurriedly placed it back in the drawer, covering it with socks. My hands trembled, and I didn't know what to do with myself.

I went downstairs and sat at the kitchen table, staring out at the browning grass of his—their—backyard. A few minutes later, I picked up the phone.

"Are you coming home soon?"

"Another hour or so." I glanced out at a deck chair she might have laid in on a hot August day just like this one, hands cramped but peaceful now, because she had written her life in the pages of that book.

"Carmi. I found Elly's diary today. I read it."

"Ok." Another long silence.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't *want* you to say anything. I just think you'd have something to say. I just read your wife's diary. And I didn't even ask if I could."

"But I told you it was there."

"I know that. You don't really care?"

"Nope."

"Have you read it?"

"I think I did. A while ago."

"It's really disturbing."

"Ok."

"It's all filled with death."

"People write sad stuff in diaries, Shell. That's what they do."

"But this person was your wife."

I waited, but he didn't say anything else.

We sat in silence, now, both of us not saying anything, but somehow unable to hang up. *Please,* I prayed, *Let him say something. Anything at all would help*.

Nothing. I tried to tell myself to calm down. Try to understand, I thought, if the one person you've bound your life with is taken, suddenly, on a highway in California. It makes sense that the rest of the world's little temper tantrums won't matter anymore. Certainly, whether I read the diary or not wouldn't matter to him.

I gripped the phone, still hoping he'd say something more.

He seemed to be moving things around on his desk.

"Hmmmm" he finally said, "that's odd. "It's August 17th. Elly's yarhzeit."

Even I, who had grown up with barely a smidge of Jewish education beyond Sunday school at United Hebrew Temple, knew that a yahrzeit is the anniversary of a death. Throughout my childhood, I'd seen my mother light candles on the anniversaries of her parent's deaths, one of the only rituals she clung to from her Orthodox upbringing. Those small, glowing flames leaping from a glass jar on our kitchen counter.

"Her yahrzeit? You mean she died—a year ago—today?" My stomach sank, that Tilt a Whirl feeling there again. Not wanting to ride, and the machine going round and round.

"Yes. Her yahrzeit."

"Aren't you supposed to light a candle?"

"Supposed to? Yeah, I guess."

"You guess?"

"I didn't feel like it."

There were so many rituals he'd always observed that he "didn't feel like" doing any more. He was turning lights on and off, using the stove and the oven on the Sabbath. These were small, inconsequential acts for the majority of us, but something he'd never done in all of his twenty-eight years. He still made Shabbat dinners for us—my first Shabbats—in the mauve dining room with the solid maple table, and two sets of china laid out neatly, with accompanying goblets of wine. But he grilled the steaks and set out the salad whenever his own sense of evening began, ignoring, for the first time in his life, the small Jewish calendar hanging on the back of the pantry door that said "Shabbat candle lighting begins at 4:51."

These were black deeds, violations, for his neighbors in the Orthodox community where he and Elly had lived. Later, I witnessed the way some of these relatives and friends seemed to excuse him, taking the tragedy of Elly's death into account, I imagined, while others, less forgiving, simply judged. His aunt Esther was still raving about Carmi's new car. While the family all drove sensible Fords and Chevys they passed to one another until either the car or the owner died, Carmi had bought, with Elly's insurance money, that sleek white Mazda.

"You didn't feel like it? She was your…wife." The irony, the outrage of my needing to say this only made me grip the phone harder. The complicated tango of the grieving heart, turning toward and then away again, from the loved one, was not something I understood back then.

"I gotta go back to work, Shell." He sounded tired.

I slammed the phone down, hands shaking now. Why had I chosen *this* day, the day that Elly had died--exactly one year ago today--of all of these long summer

days—as the day to read her diary? I paced back and forth in the kitchen, pausing at the sink to stare through the jeweled colors of the glass panel he had created, wanting explanations, words, meaning.

Then I called him back, and pretty much begged him to come home to me. Which he did. Not knowing how to begin to talk about all of it, we found our way to the bedroom again instead.

And just a month later, when I returned from a three-week trip to Europe with my sister that she and I had planned long before I met him, Carmi surprised me and showed up at the airport in New York City, not wanting to wait for my flight back home to St. Louis. I said yes, that weekend, when he asked me to marry him.

In September of that same year, a few months before our wedding, Carmi and I went to see Sam Shepherd's "Buried Child" at the Loreto Hilton Theatre in Webster Groves. We settled in to watch the play on the small repertory stage, on blue velvet seats. About halfway in, just before the intermission, there was a line in the play, something about "our inability to save someone else." Carmi made a sound, the beginnings of a cry, something rough and guttural, coming from deep within him. In the reflected stage light, I thought I could see tears on his face, but I wasn't sure.

Later that night, in the darkness of his room, almost our room, now, I took a breath. I stared at the candle we had lit, our ritual, and wanted to ask, but I was afraid.

"You seemed to be upset," I said, finally. "During the play. Are you ok?"

He turned to face me. There was a long pause in which I lay quite still. Cicadas hummed outside our bedroom window—a deep, dark thrumming, the sound of St. Louis in the summer. I knew if he didn't answer, it would be even harder to ask the next time. There was an air of impenetrability he seemed to carry around him, something I might be able to break through someday, or maybe never. So I waited.

"It was that line," he said, his voice cracking again. I loved the sound of his voice, the deep but almost broken quality of it. Words, hard-won, arriving from

some far-off place. “Something about, *‘Sometimes in life, things happen and there’s nothing you can do.’”*

Silence, again. He began to cry, and I reached out to pull him into my arms. I asked him to tell me what had happened that day in California.

And he did.

“Do you remember waking up, after the accident?”

He told me about looking around the hospital room, the incoherence, the terror, and how, first thing on waking, he’d asked about Elly. His parents, who had flown out to San Diego, told him what had happened in the accident, and then, they wheeled him into her room.

“She was hooked up to all these machines, and it wasn’t her. It wasn’t her—in that bed. I told them to get me out of there. I couldn’t stand seeing her like that.”

Three days later they made the decision to unplug the ventilator.

He’d eventually returned to St. Louis, war-ravaged, I imagined, his broken leg in a cast, and a concussion still waylaying his thoughts. He told me about sitting shiva, another foggy, blurred time, and how this one cousin of his, also in the family business, Shlomo, had sat with him every day, refusing to leave his side. I’d met Shlomo only once—a big gruff fellow who seemed unable, like so many others in the community who’d adored Elly-- to look me in the eye. Shlomo was with him every single day.

Outside the French windows that lined our bedroom wall, clouds scuttled across the sky. I watched them move as Carmi spoke about the raw pain of those days. I kept asking him questions, somehow knowing I had to ask, to keep asking, though no one had ever schooled me in this. I had assumed that someone had been over this with him before, but now, as he continued talking, I realized that no one had ever spoken with him about it all.

And he, for the first time, was telling someone.

We cried together, and held each other, and though I really don’t remember this, I suppose we made love yet again.
