

My Mother's Prayer

By Rossi

My mother wanted to raise her kids, born in the '60s, who grew up in the '70s with values she'd internalized in the '30s. She didn't want us to have goyish friends, out of a terror that we might one day marry out of our faith. Her mantra was, "MY daughters are going to marry Jewish doctors, lawyers or at least fakaka accountants! My SON is going to be a doctor!"

As it turned out, her son became a fakaka accountant, but only on the weekends. The rest of the week he was a schoolteacher.

From the moment we could speak, Mom taught us a bedtime prayer. She drummed it into us like an army sergeant. It went like this; *I pledge allegiance to the Torah and to the Jewish People. I promise to live a good Jewish life and marry a nice Jewish boy.* In my brother Mendel's case it was Jewish girl.

One night when I was 6, I crawled into bed, closed my eyes and tried to imagine what the Jewish boy I was going to marry might look like. Try as I might, I couldn't conjure him up. After fruitlessly smothering my face in my pillow, searching for my future husband, the image of Wonder Woman from one of my tattered comic books appeared to me. I had a vague sense that there might be something wrong with this, but no matter how hard I tried to replace her, Wonder Woman was my future Jewish husband.

By the time I turned 7, a seismic shift occurred that took me years to understand. Despite my best efforts to the contrary, I began to look like ... a girl.

Dad pulled away. Gone were the wrestling matches we used to have on the shag rug. No more piggy back rides either. Why had he suddenly put a wall between us? All I knew was, for reasons beyond my understanding, I'd been abandoned. That feeling grew venomous, until the very sight of him made me angry.

A harsh division emerged, leaving my dad and brother on one side of the gender divide and my sister Yaya, mother and me on the other. The only one who didn't mind the arrangement was Yaya. She was a girly girl from birth. I think she shot out of the womb and put on lipstick while they were taking her vitals. While Yaya played with her Dawn and Barbie dolls, I played with Tonka trucks in the dirt. Mendel? Well, he mainly liked sucking up to Mom. He would have breast fed for another decade if she'd let him.

It didn't take long for me to funnel my unhappiness at home into full scale rebellion. I graduated 8th grade a frumpy Jewish girl who hid behind her bangs and entered high-school looking like the love-child of Joan Jett and Janis Joplin.

I made new friends right away.

I met Jeni in French class. She took one look at me when I walked into class in my Sex Pistols T-shirt and said, "Here comes trouble." Then she patted the chair next to her. We were pals. I started going to her house for overnights. Mom wasn't thrilled about my new friend. She was horrified that I was hanging out with a *shiksa*. It got worse when she found out Jeni was of German origin. "Don't stand too close to the oven. Your friend Jeni Webster might push you in!" she screeched.

Jeni joined a local theater group and roped me in as an assistant stage manager.

The first time I walked into the theater, I felt like I'd stepped into some kind of alternate reality. I saw a six foot tall woman who looked like an Amazon wearing a pink leather mini-skirt and go-go boots. That was Magnolia. Another woman in crayon red hair was practicing on an unplugged bass guitar. That was Cindy Butler. In the back, behind the sound booth, two men were kissing!

"Is this heaven?" I asked Jeni.

"No, Doll. This is theater."

I couldn't take my eyes off Cindy. I'd never seen a woman in leather pants. She looked like a punk rock Audrey Hepburn. The "Tribe," as the theater group called themselves, took me in with open arms. Cindy even let me tag along when she went dancing on punk rock night at a local bar. I told my folks I was at the Jewish Community Center.

Mom was blinded by hope. "Maybe our Slovah will meet a nice Jewish boy." She said to my father. Dad did not sound hopeful. "Don't hold your breath."

One night after I'd been hopping around the dance floor with Cindy to a punk band called Shrapnel, I came home, said my prayer and crawled into bed. I was feeling a bit jumpy, but finally fell asleep. In the middle of the night, I sprang awake! Cindy had replaced Wonder Woman in my dream! Cindy had become my future Jewish husband! And.. We were kissing!

A few nights later I met up with Cindy at a club called Toad Hall. I went into the bathroom to fix my eye liner. She came in to spike up her hair. I told her about my dream. Cindy grabbed me by the cheeks!! pulled me in!!! AND stuck her tongue in my mouth!!!

I was frozen. Stunned. But then ... I started ... melting. I felt a bit like I was floating. Parts of my body that I'd barely known existed were suddenly on fire. We stood in the bathroom making out for what felt like hours. It probably was only about five minutes.

Cindy looked at me and laughed, then went to the bar for more drinks.

After she left, I felt like the answers to the universe were suddenly appearing in shooting stars in that bathroom! That's why I had to bring Mrs. Mahon in the first grade an apple every day! That's why I stayed behind and cleaned Miss Marshal's chalk board! That's why I had to watch the Bionic Woman every Wednesday, or I would just die!

That night, I bent down to say my prayer. "I pledge allegiance to the flag, to the Torah, and to the Jewish People. I promise to live a good Jewish life and marry a nice Jewish ... marry a nice Jewish ... I ... promise to." I couldn't say it.

After that, Cindy and I skipped the dancing. We spent our nights parked on dark streets in Mom's *Volare*, making out like there was no tomorrow.

One night I drove Cindy home and as she turned to leave the car, out of my mouth tumbled, "I LOVE YOU!" Crap. I couldn't shove it back in. Why did I have to say that?

She said, "I love you, too," then walked up the driveway, into her house without waving goodbye.

The next seven times I called, her mom said she was too busy to come to the phone.

It wasn't like I had a lot of opportunities to see Cindy at the theater. Mom came home early one day and found Magnolia in full leather sitting on our picnic table smoking a More cigarette out of a long pink cigarette holder.

Mom went ballistic. "Bad enough your friend Jeni Webster is German, now you have the Gestapo sitting in our back yard! (Screeching) You are never allowed to associate with those people ever again!!!! No More Theater For You!!!!"

I had to escape.

A lot of my burn-out pals were dropping out of high school, but I wanted my diploma. I found out about a rapid promotion program that let you snag extra credits by adding on classes. You could graduate high school in 3 years! My folks thought I was eager to start community college. I didn't give a rat's ass about college. I had my drinking buddy Doug on alert to pick me up the moment I called and said "ESCAPE." I was gonna break out like Alcatraz soon as I got my diploma. But I didn't want to run away from home. My plan was to get thrown out. That way my folks wouldn't come looking for me.

A week after graduation I began my get-thrown-out-of-the-house campaign. I blared my music, smoked cigarettes and fanned the smoke down the hallway. Then I upped the ante by lighting up a joint in the kitchen. I got yelled at. I got grounded. Nothing seemed to work. Finally one day the phone rang in the kitchen. Mom answered the phone. It was Mrs. Katz, my friend Sarah's mom. I spent a lot of my spare time smoking pot with Sarah, and once properly stoned, writing her poetry.

Mrs. Katz's voice was so loud coming out of the phone that I could hear her up the stairs, "Harriet Ross! I found love letters your daughter wrote to my Sarah! Your daughter is a lesbian!!!"

That did the trick.

When I came back from Piping Rock Park, my folks were standing on the front lawn with their arms folded. Dad looked even meaner than usual.

"We're going shopping at the Path Mart. When we come back you better be ready to obey our rules, which are going to be 10 times tougher! Or don't be here!"

The second the Volare pulled out I ran to the phone. "Doug! Doug! Escape!!!"

I moved into a sleazy low rent motel in Long Branch. The parking lot was full of delivery trucks. The drivers picked up a little action from the hookers who lived in the motel. A Puerto Rican gang sold drugs behind a perpetually parked 18-wheeler. It was pretty dicey, but it was also pretty cheap. 70 bucks a week and the toothless guy at the front desk didn't ask for ID. Good thing, since I was only 16.

I felt like the living version of that Meatloaf song Bat Out of Hell. I proceeded to go on a two-month-long party, hopping from bar to bar. At first, all my school pals came to hang out. But after a while, Sarah was my only friend who came over.

One day, Long Branch filled with sailors. It must have been some fleet week, shore leave thing. I don't know. I invited a half dozen of them over on the condition that they buy the pizza and beer. Sarah and a few of my school pals came over too. I cranked up Blondie and it turned into a real party.

The front desk manager didn't seem to mind the truckers, hookers and dealers, but teenagers and sailors were a combo he just couldn't stomach. He called the cops.

Dad seemed taller than I remembered when he walked into the Long Branch police station. Or maybe I was feeling smaller.

He threw my bags in the trunk of the Volare and started driving and driving ... and driving?! He drove past our town, past the towns I grew up around, past all the towns I knew and kept driving. Mom sat in the passenger seat, digging in her purse for something and crying.

After a while, nothing looked familiar. The green trees of Jersey disappeared and were replaced with brown; brown buildings, brown brick walls, brown walkways, brown leafless trees. The only color came from the graffiti, then that disappeared, too. Finally we stopped in front of a brown townhouse. I glanced up at the street sign: Eastern Parkway..... Never heard of it.

We pulled up to the townhouse, and Dad rang the bell.

A Chasidic man with a long red beard answered the door.

I didn't know that my parents had begun searching for me shortly after I left. Dad only meant to scare me by throwing me out of the house. But clearly had misjudged his demon child. A few months earlier, Mom read an article about a rabbi who was hired by concerned Jewish parents to kidnap their kids away from cults they'd joined up with. Like the Moonies. He was said to be an expert in de-programming them out of their false beliefs and into Judaism. I'd seen the Moonies on TV. At least *they* looked like they were having fun.

Where was Wonder Woman when I needed her?

My father shook Redbeard's hand and walked away. He never said goodbye.

Redbeard explained the ground rules of my new life to me.

"The rules are simple. You will attend Ba'al teshuvah classes at Machon Chana, obey the laws of kashrut and come to shul on Shabbos."

It turned out Ba'al teshuvah classes were for secular Jews who were coming into the fold. More power to them, BUT they came voluntarily! They were interested in becoming Lubavitchers! I certainly was not. They needed a new word for me. Bal-I'm-Outta-here.

Redbeard said I was free to explore the neighborhood but not allowed to leave it without his permission. He said if I did, my folks had authorized him to call the cops, and I would be sent to reform school!

Reform school?!

When I was 11 years old, I'd seen a movie starring Linda Blair where she endured all sorts of terrors in reform school, including being raped with a broomstick. There was no way I was going to reform school.

So I caved. I allowed Redbeard and his family to believe they had a shot at bringing me around to their way of life. They allowed me a living room couch for a bed and two hot meals a day.

To be sneut - that means modest - I had to cover my knees, and not with pants, but with a long dress or maxi skirt. I had to cover my elbows and collarbone, too. Back then, I liked to sing a lot or rather hum. This didn't go over well. I was told I must never sing if men might hear me.

I was dragged to class at Machon Chanah in the bizarre outfit I'd concocted to try and keep my dignity; a Blondie t-shirt over a long sleeve pullover, a plaid itchy maxi skirt with the legs of my Levi's sticking out. I got invited over people's homes for Shabbos dinner a lot. I'm fairly certain I was the primary source of entertainment for a whole lot of Lubavitchers in 1981.

Eventually, I was able to move into my own apartment in the neighborhood with a school chum from Ba'al teshuvah class. Life got easier for a little while, but when I decided to be true to myself and stopped wearing the maxi skirts and long sleeved sweaters and started just wearing T-shirts and jeans again, things got chilly. Shopkeepers ignored me. The Shabbos dinner invitations dried up. It got downright lonely.

When Rodney, an adorable twenty-four-year-old black gay boy, moved into a building down the street, it felt like a gift from the heavens.

Rodney was pursuing a modeling career, to no avail. I was pretty sure he was too short, but with his Grace Jones haircut and tight jeans, he was adorable.

Rodney was always willing to try my wacky culinary creations. He started coming over for supper five nights a week. Hebrew National salami and macaroni stir-fry was his favorite.

One Sunday morning, Rodney came by dressed in the shortest shorts I'd ever seen on a man. He'd completed his look with a pair of red cowboy boots and a pink tank top.

"Girl! It's gay pride! You are coming with me to the parade!"

I rubbed my eyes and looked at the clock. It was 9 a.m.! Way too early for me. "Come back later!" I begged.

Rodney wasn't having it. "Girl! This is the most important day of the year! Get your ass in gear!"

Rodney started rooting around in my closet for something for me to wear. While I was busy brewing double-strength Bustelo, he cut three inches off my favorite pair of Levi Shorts. By the time we left my place, we were wired to the gills and I was dressed in shorty shorts, my Frye boots and a black tank top. We looked like twins.. Sort of. The Chasids were horrified as we passed, but we couldn't care less. As we sat on the 2 train heading toward Manhattan, I leaned in to Rodney and whispered, "Do you think it's okay that I'm going to the parade?"

He looked at me perplexed, “and why in the hell wouldn’t it be?”

“Because I’m not gay.”

“Uh huh.... ...So what in the hell are you, Miss Thing?”

I announced proudly to him and half the people on our train car, “I’m bisexual!”

“Girl, you’re about as bisexual as I am.” Rodney laughed all the way to Chambers Street.

We emerged from the train station at Sheridan Square, into the wildest, most breathtaking scene I’d ever witnessed. Thousands of beautiful gay people marched along the street, danced on floats, and cheered from the sidelines. There were gay men and women and lavender balloons everywhere! An elderly woman walked by holding a young man’s hand with a sign that read, “I love my gay son.” The crowd went wild for her. Two pretty young women walked by holding hands. When they passed me they smiled. I smiled back.

I thought about my parents shipping me off to the Chasids. Was this what they’d really been afraid of? Not my smoking or drinking, but the fact that I might not be heterosexual?

I thought of Cindy and the kiss that had changed my universe.

I whispered in Rodney’s ear. “Rodney ... maybe ... I might be ... sorta gay.”

“Girl, get over yourself right this instant! You are the biggest dyke I know! Shout it out, loud and proud!”

“I’m um ... gayish,” I squeaked.

“Gayish? Is that like stylish? Uh Uh. That ain’t gonna cut it. Half the world hates us. How are we ever gonna get our respect if we can’t love ourselves? Do you think it’s just a coincidence that your parents shipped you off to that rabbi. Nah-uh honey. They wanted him to pray the gay out of you. Guess what?! It didn’t work!! You’re still gay, Honey. You’re gay!”

I thought of my childhood secret love affair with Wonder Woman. Yeah, I guess. I’d always known.

I gave a slightly louder squeak, “I’m gay!”

“Is that all you got?”

I listened to the cheers and the blaring music around me. The words came out of me like a rocket as if they’d been held back by rubber bands and suddenly released. I yelled for all the world to hear, “I’M GAYYYYY!”

Rodney hugged me. “Feel better?”

“Yes, yes, I do.”

Rodney and I lingered on Christopher Street, long after the parade was over singing and cheering, until he got picked up by a muscle boy from Hoboken. They hightailed it to the piers to take care of a little something.

On the 2 train going home, I closed my eyes. The image of thousands of gay people cheering with joy and pride stayed with me. This was their day.

This was our day. My day.

By the time I left Crown Heights, I felt about as Jewish as Jesus. Well, maybe not quite that Jewish. I didn't want anything to do with yarmulkes or shul.

After a few years went by, the anger that had fueled my childhood began to dissipate. I missed honoring what I felt was my Jewish soul. But when I visited the Orthodox synagogue my parents still went to for the high-holidays and had to sit in the women's section, while the men were allowed to pray at the Bimah, that old anger bubbled up again. No. This was not my Judaism.

I heard from a pal about a gay synagogue in the city, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah. It got so jammed during the Jewish holidays that they had to rent out part of the Javits convention center. When I walked in and saw men with men, women with women, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, Israeli, Indian people, lesbians with babies, adoring grandparents, and a female rabbi standing at the podium, I knew I'd found a home.

I've been going ever since, at least for the high holidays. My Jewish soul had been awakened. I began hosting annual "orphan" Passover Seders and inviting the friends who have become my family. There was no requirement to be Jewish only to be open-minded. My best pal Tilly, whom I'd met when I was a teenager living in Lubavitch Crown Heights, would often roll her eyes as my girlfriends at the Seders changed every few years.

One year she said, "Honey you need to find someone who is emotionally available. Maybe you will when you are," she'd say laughing.

I responded, "Dayenu."

I met Lyla—a pretty Italian woman with rich black hair—in Provincetown. We spent the week laughing and exploring the many wonders of the seaside town, then stayed in touch after we got back, but just as friends. One night after we'd met for dinner, we began kissing. We'd been laughing all evening. Now we were kissing. Within a week of that kiss, it became hard to imagine life without her.

I stopped saying Mom's bedtime prayer decades ago. But if I did, it would go more like this *I pledge to live a true and authentic life. I honor my Jewish soul by cherishing my life like the gift it is. It does not matter who I marry or even if I ever do, only that I share love and a whole lot of it.*