A Chapter from *Background Music*, an unpublished novel by Phyllis Schieber

5. *The Same, But Different*

"I was peeling potatoes… I guess I wasn't paying attention."

I came home to find my mother bleeding all over the kitchen. She cradled her right hand in her left and tried to reassure me.

"It looks worse than it is," she said.

"Where's Jeffrey?" I turned the water on in the sink and let it run, testing it with my fingers. "Cold, right?"

She seemed to look right through me. I always knew where she had drifted off to. It was always the same place.

"Mom? Where's Jeffrey?

"I was remembering how my mother peeled potatoes… so fast you didn't even see the knife…. and then I cut myself. I went to hold my hand under the cold water…I don't know what happened after that. The water…"

"The water?" I asked.

Nodding, she said, "It reminded me of how cold it was the winter they forced us from our homes. The snow was up to here." She held her good hand sideways against her chest. "Many limped as they walked. Their shoes were wet, and their feet were raw from the cold. So many people were sick, especially the old ones."

I tried to calculate how many more times I would have to hear the story until I could say I didn't want to listen anymore.

Probably never.

"I remember one mother begged the soldiers to give her child some water."

Her voice always sounded surprised when she reached this part. And I was always amazed she was still surprised.

"The poor mother clung to the arm of that Ukrainian soldier and said, 'Please. My baby has a fever. She needs some water.' At first, the soldier ignored her pleas, but then he offered her a tin cup filled with clear liquid. She held it to her child's parched lips, encouraging her baby to drink. And that poor child drank with such thirst."

Do your ears hang low? Do they wobble to and fro? Can you tie 'em in a knot? Can you tie 'em in a bow?

I sang the words in my head, hoping to drown out her story.

"The soldier gave the mother petrol to give her own child." She looked so sad. "What kind of person does that?"

After so many years, she still could not believe what she witnessed. Neither could I.

There was nothing to do but let her finish.

"Then the soldier shot them both," she said. "His comrades slapped him on the back. It was a good joke, killing a baby with petrol and then shooting them. They yelled at us to keep walking, but I kept turning around to look. The blood was so red against the snow."

I swabbed her cut with peroxide and applied a band-aid.

"They were animals, Sonya. Animals."

Do your ears hang low? Do they wobble to and fro? Can you tie 'em in a knot? Can you tie 'em in a bow?

"Thank you. You're a good girl." She kissed my head. "Did I scare you?"

"No," I said. "I'm not scared."

"Jeffrey will be home soon. They asked him to work late."

Jeffrey worked part-time at Miles, a shoe store on Dyckman Street. He's supposed to start college next year, but I knew he wanted to go Israel and join the army.

"You worry me," Mom said. "What were you doing with Lilli?"

I was waiting for this.

"Doing with her? I wasn't doing anything. We were just talking."

"What would you have to talk to her about?" Mom said. "You have something in common?"

I shrugged and said, "We both like nuns?"

"Sonya, this is serious."

"Which part, Mom? The part about Lilli being a nun, or the part about Seymour saying *Kaddish* for her even though she's still alive?"

"I agree… it's *meshuggah,"* Mom said. "I know… but believe me it was done."

"I believe you," I said.

She took my chin between her thumb and forefinger and shook my face a little and said, "You're a good girl, a smart girl."

"Thanks, Mom."

I needed to be smart to make her think I was good.

"*Dos gantseh leben iz a milchomeh,"* she said. "Understand?"

How could I not understand that all of life was a struggle?

"I know," I said.

"It's for them to figure out, not you, Sonya."

"Seymour wouldn't really say *Kaddish* for Lilli, would he?"

Mom shrugged and said, “I heard such stories when I was a child, but here in America? Never. But who knows?”

She kissed the top of my head. As soon as I was sure she was gone, I checked on the paper with Lilli’s address inside my English notebook. I had to figure out a way to write to Lilli without my parents finding out.

Mom left after dinner to play mahjong with her lady friends at Shirley’s house. All of Mom’s mahjong friends are Americans, which is what my parents call anyone who wasn’t in the war. The mahjong ladies took turns hosting every week. Jeffrey was in the living room watching *Star Trek.* He looked tired. Earlier in the week, he had rushed home from school, ringing the buzzer over and over until Dad answered. Almost instantly, Jeffrey appeared. He must have taken the steps three at a time. He had a softball game, and he was rushing to change out of his school clothes and get to the playground. Somewhere deep inside myself I know our mother couldn’t help herself. But I also understood Jeffrey’s eagerness to escape her endless warnings to be careful on his bike, to remember to call if he was late, to take a jacket. I heard the impatience in my father’s tone when he said, “Giselle, *genug!* Let him go.” *Genug.* Enough. Mom waved her hand at him in that way she had of dismissing someone. It really just meant that she knew she was wrong. Jeffrey, looking relieved, grabbed his jacket, a handful of Oreos, and placed his hand on Dad’s shoulder, a rare gesture of gratitude. They were not often on the same side.

“Jeffrey?”

“What’s up?” he said.

“Mom told me the story about the Nazi soldier who gave the baby gasoline to drink.”

“That’s a good one.”

"I've heard it a million times.'

Jeffrey kept his eyes on the screen and said, "So, what's the problem?"

I used to wake him in the middle of the night when I had a bad dream. He even begrudgingly let me into his bed when I was too terrified to sleep. I was a bed wetter until I was six or seven, maybe even older, so that invitation always came with a warning. Jeffrey knew I couldn't go to a movie or ride the subway without wondering if black booted German soldiers would storm the subway car or theater and demand all the Jews form a line to the right. He knew every subway ride reminded me of how the Jews were pressed one against the other in sweltering, filthy cattle cars as they were forced to their final destinations. He knew my fears.

"I can't stop thinking about it."

"About what? Cattle cars? German soldiers? Gas chambers? What's it going to be tonight?"

"Don't be mean," I said. "What if they came to our school and asked for all the Jews?"

"That's not going to happen." His attention drifted to the screen. "We have Israel now."

"But what if it did? Would you try to get away or would you fight?"

I sat next to him. He swung his legs around and pulled himself up. I could tell he was not in the mood to play my game of What If? When we were kids, we played for hours.

"You already know the answer."

He stared ahead. It was hard to compete with Captain Kirk.

"I've been having that dream again."

Jeffrey sighed. "Go ahead. Get it over with."

I launched in without any hesitation.

“I’m standing on a train platform with hundreds of other little girls. We’re in terrible danger,” I said. “I hear a train whistle. When the train pulls in, all the mothers get off. They’re searching for their daughters. ‘I’m here, Mom!’ I shout. I keep shouting, but she doesn’t hear me. I wave at her and call her name, but she looks right past me. Then I see her talking to a guard. ‘I’m looking for my parents,’ she says. ‘And my brother Mendel. Have you seen them?’ The guard shakes his head. I call to Mom again, but she gets back on the train. I’m the only one left on the platform. All the other little girls go off with their mothers.”

Jeffrey eyed me suspiciously.

“Did you make this one up, Sonya?”

It wasn’t an unlikely assumption.

“Maybe.”

He moved over to make room for me.

“Watch *Star Trek* with me. You’ll feel better when you see what the future holds.”

I stuck out my tongue at him. He knew I always felt safe with him.

“Jeffrey?”

“What?”

“Aren’t you ever afraid?”

He didn’t even hesitate.

“Never,” he said.

Jeffrey gave me the couch and took the floor. I stretched out, dragging my hand along the carpet until I felt something solid. I wrapped my fingers around the worn, smooth wood of Jeffrey’s baseball bat.

At the commercial break, he turned to look at me. I quickly brought my hand up and smiled. He didn't smile back, but we watched television together until Mom came home.

My cousin Helen was a few months younger than Jeffrey and two years older than her brother Marvin. I was the youngest. We never lived more than a few blocks from each other. Dad and Uncle Carl spoke every day, and Mom and Aunt Bluma consulted each other on most everything from recipes to child rearing. Helen and I couldn't stop laughing when we discovered that when we were all toddlers and took baths with our brothers, everyone wore underpants in the tub. Our mothers must have collaborated and decided that propriety called for underwear in the bathtub. They had no one to ask for advice. We were the same as every other family, but different.

I wanted to talk to her about Lilli, so we arranged to meet in front of my building for a walk in the park. After we stopped at the corner deli for hot chocolates to go, we walked and caught up a bit before we reached our bench—six benches in and next to a honeysuckle bush.

"How's school?" Helen asked.

I shrugged and pulled off a leaf from the bush. Fort Tryon Park was our private backyard.

Helen smiled, patted my arm and said, "You're so quiet."

We didn't share any physical similarities. She was petite and slight while I was neither. Her hair looked even darker and straighter against my messy, brown curls. But we spoke the same language.

"That meeting with Lilli and the Mother Superior was really something," I said.

"I heard." She peered at me. "I also heard you and the nun were very chummy."

I was immediately irritated, which was so unlike how Helen ever made me feel.

"Chummy? That's a little exaggerated," I said.

"Is it?"

Helen was always on my side. This was new.

"I think so," I said.

"Why are you so interested in her, Sonya?"

"Why aren't you more interested? She's a Jewish nun. How could you not be curious about her?"

Lilli's story was one we hadn't heard before, and we had heard a lot of stories. I remembered how we played under the dining room table, listening to our parents' friend Bella describe how she had survived a massacre in her Ukrainian village. The Nazis stormed in and assembled the Jews in the village square before leading them to the village outskirts. They were forced to dig a pit, then lined up, execution style, and shot. When it was her turn to approach the pit, Bella decided to jump, attempting to avoid the volley of bullets. She remained hidden under piles of corpses, praying not to be discovered or killed as Nazis continued to fire into the mass grave, killing those who had merely been wounded or were just taking too long to die. Hours later, Bella forced her way out from under the corpses. She recognized her parents, brothers, and several neighbors before she escaped into the forest where she eventually met up with a band of Jewish partisan fighters. I think I was four or five the first time I heard Bella's story. Everyone knew we were there, pretending to hide, and there were occasional pauses in the story, and Bella's voice would become a whisper. Bella was fourteen when she was left for dead. Helen and I weren't that age combined when we first overheard the gruesome details of her survival. Sometimes we held hands as we listened, but we could listen and continue our play, nibbling at the halvah we took from one of Aunt Bluma's crystal candy dishes. But we had never heard a story like Lilli's.

I felt betrayed by Helen's indifference.

"She's not Audrey Hepburn," Helen said. "You know that, right?"

"Right."

After we saw *The Nun Story*, we were both obsessed with Audrey Hepburn. She made the most gorgeous nun. Helen was satisfied with just seeing the movie, but I was determined to see how I would look as a nun. I fashioned a crucifix out of aluminum foil, hung it from a piece of string, and wore it around my neck with a white pillowcase for my veil. I walked up and down the hallway in our railroad apartment, pretending to chant in Latin. I clutched a small, white Siddur while Helen kept watch, worried that my mother would catch us.

"I heard our parents talking," Helen said. "They said Seymour wants to take her out of the convent."

"I think he's wrong," I said. "It wasn't her fault… no one came back to get her."

"Everyone was dead."

"I know, but it's still not her fault."

"She's Jewish," Helen said. "She doesn't belong in a convent."

"She *chose* to take her vows," I said.

Helen looked surprised at my tone, and I was immediately sorry. I could never be angry with Helen, but she should have known better. The hot chocolate was already lukewarm. I sipped at it anyway, welcoming the cloying sweetness. Nothing could be too sweet or too sour as far as I was concerned. Everything was about the intensity for me.

My mother was fourteen when she was forced, together with her family, to leave everything in their Czernowitz home behind. In the mostly German speaking capital of the Bukovina province that lay in the grooves of the Carpathian Mountains, Jewish life flourished until Romanian soldiers

pounded on their door, ordering everyone to gather their things, and join the growing columns of stunned Jews—young and old, rich and poor—assembled outside. My grandmother and namesake, anticipating the moment, sewed knapsacks for each of her five children in preparation for what she suspected was coming. My grandfather reassured them all that, "*Wir gehen mit Got."*

We go with God… all seven of them survived the Transnistria Death March. Maybe my grandfather was right—God went with them. I just wondered why God made the trip only to abandon them.

They were housed in pigsties, stables, and sheds in Obadovka, packed against each other in the most awful conditions. Piles of corpses everywhere, stuck together because of the cold. The ground was so frozen it was impossible to bury them. The living were emaciated, infested with lice, and weakened by typhus.

But it was not until the day my grandfather gathered his family around him and told them to eat the pork he was able to obtain through the intricate barter system that was essential for day-to-day survival. They bartered with the local Ukrainians who offered a loaf of bread for a sweater, some old carrots for a pair of socks… and who even knew what for some pork, which was trayf—unkosher. My grandfather, a pious *shoychet,* knew that pig was trayf. But he was also a husband and father who wanted to save his family from starvation.

They all ate the pork. *Pituach nefesh*. Nothing in Judaism mattered more than the sanctity of life. It was their obligation to stay alive under any circumstances.

It was likely Helen had overheard this story many times, same as every other story we added to the files we marked confidential in our heads. We never talked about the Holocaust between ourselves. None of the children did. There was nothing to say. It was simply the background music of our lives.

"Seymour should leave her alone," I said.

"Lilli must be in her thirties. Seymour can't make her do anything."

It wasn't the point. I was surprised Helen didn't understand that.

"What?" Helen said. "Tell me."

"You know what I mean," I said.

"Not really." She stood and motioned for me to get up. It was time to walk. "Lilli looked for Seymour, didn't she? It's theirs to figure out."

"I guess."

Lilli's parents saved her from a fate similar to our mothers' and to Bella's. I wondered if Lilli understood just how much she had been spared. She never had to bear witness to the freshly murdered dead in a mass grave or to the frozen corpses that lined the roadside like silent guards, foreseeing the certain destiny of most on the aptly named death march.

The stories of the survivors I knew varied in detail, but were otherwise the same. Most had promised themselves that if they survived, they wanted two things: to still be able to feel something for others, and to be Jews.

I found both remarkable.

Helen and I didn't talk about Lilli anymore. Instead, Helen told me about the coat she saw in Alexander's—it was double-breasted and had a belt. She wasn't sure if she liked it better in green or brown. I listened, but I was still thinking about Lilli, wondering about what happened to her *neshumah* when she took her vows. I felt fairly confident that no matter the outcome, her soul would always be Jewish.

I didn't ask Helen about Lilli's soul or about writing to Lilli either. And I didn't tell her that she didn't look good in either green or brown. I certainly didn't remind Helen that until Lilli belonged to Jesus, she belonged to no one.

I was just glad Lilli wasn't alone all those years.

Everything I knew about my mother's family was from her stories. There were no photographs, no personal possessions. I never saw a picture of my grandparents or my Uncle Mendel. It was through my mother's stories that I came to know about their lives before the war. I knew they were Hasidic Jews who believed the *Torah,* the *Five Books of Moses,* was the literal word of God, and that carrying out this word gave meaning and purpose to their existence.

According to Jewish law, my grandmother's hair was always covered, and her dress was modest. She took care of her husband and five children in agreement with the restrictions and expectations of Jewish laws and customs. My grandfather was a *shochet,* a ritual slaughterer who, according to the laws of *kashruth,* showed respect and compassion to guarantee the animals died with as little pain as possible. I knew he had a valued position in the community.

The stories helped me piece together a portrait of a family I never knew, a family committed to Judaism and to learning. After obedience to Hashem, education mattered most. Lilli didn't even have stories to help her flesh out the pieces of what was once her life. Her memories of her parents and the Bukoskis were vague at best and until now, there was no one to tell her who she was supposed to be.

My grandmother died of starvation and typhus. My grandfather, weak and ill, fought to stay alive, so he could say *Kaddish* for his wife and the mother of his five children, before he too surrendered to death, leaving his children orphaned. The oldest, Mendel, died just days after his

father. “We were just children ourselves, but we dragged their bodies to a mass grave,” Mom said. Every time I heard this story, I dug my nails into the palms of my hands to create pain I could understand. I imagined the open grave. I saw the pile of dead bodies, limbs splayed, and heads twisted at odd angles. In my dreams I was there, but I was unable to identify either my grandparents or my uncle because I had never seen their faces.

I thought often about the girl my mother didn’t have a chance to become. I mourned the family I would never know. And sometimes I was just sad because my mother didn’t know I was too young to bear so much tragedy. I didn’t blame her. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t have known how. Her stories often made me hold my breath until they were over. I always listened because if I didn’t, who would? Only my father seemed able to rescue her from her own sadness. She told me that she couldn’t cry anymore, so I cried for her.

Most of Lilli’s family died in Auschwitz. I used to imagine what it must have been like to be in Auschwitz, to be separated from my parents and Jeffrey, to be tattooed with blue numbers on the outer side of my left forearm. Helen and I once wrote numbers on our forearms with Bic pens and then stared at each. We hurried to wash off the blue ink, too overwhelmed over what we had done to even mention it to each other for a long time, and even then, we could not look at each other.

I was not in the least bit surprised to find my mother waiting for me when I came home from my walk with Helen. And I was even less surprised when she was ready with a story I’d never heard before. It made me wonder how much I didn’t know.

“Help me fold some laundry,” Mom said.

I hated folding laundry, but I followed her to the living room. A pile of sheets and towels were waiting on the couch.

"I had a friend, Clara," Mom said. "She wasn't Jewish, but she came to my house. She even ate with us. Whenever I went to her house, her mother always offered me food. When I refused, Clara scolded her. 'You know Giselle is a Jew, Mama. She can't eat our food.' The first time Clara talked about becoming a nun, I was stunned. She was such a beautiful girl. I envied her blonde hair. She talked to me about Jesus and how she could never love anyone the way she loved him. 'How can I ever marry another man when I dream of Jesus?' I never answered. What did I know from Jesus? When she spoke of Jesus, she said, 'I'm in love.' Nu? *Meshuhgah.*"

"What did you say?" I asked.

"What's to say?" Mom folded a towel and then added it to the pile. "In love with a dead man? Never getting married and having a family because you're in love with a dead man? *Meshugah*."

"What happened to Clara?"

Mom sighed deeply, and then continued. "When things started to get very bad, Clara came less and less often to visit. My parents wouldn't let me go to her house at all anymore. It was too dangerous. The first time we ran into each other, Clara assured me it would pass. She told me she was praying for us, for all the Jews. I believed her. Then, one evening our landlord, Mr. Ostow, knocked on our door. He was a large man with a very red face." She was busy checking the stack of towels to make sure she didn't leave any in the dryer. It was the same every week. I just hoped she wouldn't ask me to go down to the laundry room. I would have to go if she did even if there were never any towels or anything else left behind.

"What did he want?" I said.

"Who?"

"The landlord. You said he came to the door." I was used to her distractibility. "Mom?"

She didn't even look up, counting and recounting. And then she did. She looked up and right at me.

"He never bothered us before. He always told my father, 'I have nothing against the Jews. Especially you. You're a *good* Jew.' This time he was waving a sickle around, close to my father's beard. 'I'm going out to get some Jews, but don't be afraid. This isn't for you or your family. I know you're good Jews. It's the other ones. The ones who use the blood of Catholic babies to make your Jew crackers. Those Jews must be punished.' I thought I might faint. My father stood quietly until Mr. Ostow left. I thought I would never be so afraid again. Funny, no?"

"Not that funny," I said.

She waved her finger at me, pretending she didn't approve. But I knew she didn't mind. I was always careful with her, afraid she would shatter if I pressed too hard. The wrong question or reaction could stir up a memory that should've been left alone. I knew I could hear the same story hundreds of times, and on the one-hundred-and-first time, a completely new detail would be revealed. I collected those details, hoarding them for what I didn't know.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard about Mr. Ostow, but it was the first time I'd heard about Clara. Lilli must have caused the memory of Clara to surface, and I was sure Mom was poised to make that connection evident.

"Lilli can't be your friend," Mom said. "She might think it's possible, but it isn't."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Sonya." Mom shook her head. "The last time I saw Clara she didn't try to tell me it would pass… she didn't even tell me she was praying for us."

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She said nothing. She just turned away as if I were a stranger.” I saw how the memory of that betrayal still hurt, and I was sorry for her. I really was… but not sorry enough.

“Lilli isn’t Clara.”

“In the end, they’re all Clara,” Mom said. “It’s never different. And don’t ever forget it.”

“I won’t,” I said.

But I’d already stopped listening.