

Catskill Dreams  
and  
Pumpernickel

a short story

by

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Summer in the Catskills. The ramshackle bungalows, now faded shrines to a lost world, were once teeming with life for two brief months of respite from the city's heat. I was a small soldier in that army of people who invaded the area for eight weeks, to conquer that Paradise. I have a story to tell.

It is the sounds more than anything else that brings it all back to me now. They are sweet, these sounds that I hear in my dreams, even today, fifty years later. As I burst out of the door of the bungalow, all suntan, ices, and energy, the sound is behind me; the weathered screen door hits the frame with a comforting smack. It is as familiar to me as anything else I am sure of in my life. There is the clicking of the mah-jongg tiles in the efficient hands of the mothers. Even the melodies of the birds here are unique, different from the ones that wake me up at home. The rhythmic thump of the little blue rubber ball, catapulting off the paddle racquets as the men wail away on the asphalt paddleball court comforts me too. The weekend warriors take aim at the commanding white wall, a monument with the name of our bungalow colony, Happy Acres, painted in black across the top. It validates the place.

It is the first thing I see as we approach the colony's grounds at the end of June, once school has let out for the summer, and our old Buick turns off Harris Road into the parking lot. My little sister and I are wedged into the back seat of the sedan, surrounded by heaps of clothes, toys, pots, and dishes. And shoes. My mother's shoes are tied together in their boxes, carefully labeled so she can locate them when she dresses for the

festive evening activities. They wait patiently to be released from under my feet. Our brother, the self appointed co-pilot, is crammed in between our parents in the front seat. The journey from Brooklyn is too long for us, as we anticipate what lies ahead. We have counted all the piers that dot the West Side Highway, played “License Plates” a dozen times, and eaten everything our mother has packed for the long drive up to “the Mountains”. The mountains don’t need a name. They are the only mountains that mean anything to us.

We can barely contain our excitement as we burst out of the car. Like clowns in the circus, we and our belongings tumble from the vehicle with noise, unbridled joy and enthusiasm.

For us city kids, summer in the Catskills means freedom. It means we can run, or ride our bikes, the equivalent of city blocks by ourselves, all day, every day, without our mothers’ cautions ringing in our ears. It means unbridled adventures-salamander hunting, berry picking, forest walks, and just plain imagining under a tree if we want. The very air we breathe is different. It is crisp and cool in the morning, as the promise of a new day unfolds. The midday heat brings us in for lunch, and an imposed rest hour, so we do not to tempt the water gods who prey on children daring to swim with full tummies. The swimming pool, once it is permitted to us, beckons all afternoon, until early evening, when the sun goes behind the main house, and the waterfront is engulfed in shade. That, and our chattering teeth and blue lips, are our signals to come in for dinner, much needed baths, and the evening’s activity of movies, energetic card-playing, and on weekends, live entertainment; tantalizing and forbidden to children.

I am a chubby child; nicknamed “Pumpernickel” by Mrs. Greenspan, because I am “round and brown”. I don’t mind the moniker, because I love the woman who has bestowed in upon me. She is an exotic creature, different from my mother and the other women in the bungalow colony. Delicate, and almost birdlike, she has beautiful red hair, which she keeps on top of her head in a bun. Sometimes her hair will break free from the confines of that tight structure, and cascade down her back in a river of red waves. She boasts a trim figure and a heavy European accent. She is my mother’s age, but she sounds more like my Bubby, left behind in the city to help my widowed aunt and her small children. For two months, Helen Greenspan becomes my surrogate grandmother. Her laughter is genuine and infectious. She plies me with honey cookies and entertains me with songs from the old country. She teaches me to swim. She makes me feel so special when I am the beneficiary of her attention and affection.

She takes me to dance lessons, taught by a landsman, a countryman of hers, Alex Birnbaum. Dance class is one morning a week, on the sprawling lawn in front of the main house in the bright sunshine. It is probably the only place where the Latin Mambo and the Israeli “Mayim” make sense on the same bill. Alex Birnbaum and his accordion accompany our attempts to master the classics as well as the latest dances. He is a congenial, pixie-like character. Often, when he wants to demonstrate a new step, he will put down his accordion, extend his hand gracefully to Helen to join him in the center of the circle, and afford everyone the chance to see how the dance should be done. They are so graceful together. I like him, even though he teases me, because he makes my friend Helen happy, and I think she deserves happiness in her life. I can sense, despite my

inexperience, that she has seen an awful lot of sorrow. There is something about her eyes; at times she seems so far away from this world of ours. But on the dance floor, she comes alive. Her dancing is a pure expression of joy and freedom. Her smile is so genuine, and her eyes crinkle with pure delight.

I always avoid dance, embarrassed at my adolescent awkwardness, until Helen beckons me to partner with her one day. “Come, my delicious Pumpernickel,” she calls out to me. Most of my friends sleep till almost noon anyway, so until they join me for our afternoon adventures or in the pool for hours of Marco Polo, Helen is my companion. My mother and her friends partake in the dance class as well, but I am Helen’s regular partner, at least until her husband returns on Fridays with the other men from the city. I have come to love to dance; my gracious partner compliments me on my proficiency and growing talent. I just revel in the attention she gives me. Her hugs come so easily; she is so caring and giving. I feel tall and graceful, like the tiger lilies that dot the path to the main house, blooming under her sun.

I think the Greenspans are the most interesting people in the bungalow colony. They are a striking couple, and the only ones here who have no children. Marvin Greenspan is tall, handsome, and good-natured, with a great laugh that accompanies him wherever he goes. He does not have the same heavy accent as his wife, having to good fortune to be born in New York City, years before the winds of war swept through his wife’s beloved Poland. Helen and Marvin Greenspan met after the war decimated most of the Jewish population of Europe. He was a GI, helping the American army restore order to the chaos brought about by displaced untold numbers of people who survived. Rumors about how they met

abound. One account was that he rescued her from Auschwitz during the liberation of the death camp-literally scooping her up and whisking her away to America and the promise of a new life. Another romantic tale was that he pulled her off a boat docked at the coast of Italy, bound for Palestine, and, unable to take his eyes off the red haired beauty, and insisted that she marry him then and there, as soon as a rabbi and a chuppah could be dispatched.

The truth is that Helen Wyzshniaki worked in an office of the HIAS in Poland after the war. Marvin Greenspan came in one day to get information about European family members who might have survived. They spent many hours together combing through whatever information was available. In the end, they never uncovered the mystery of what became of his family, but a fine friendship and mutual respect blossomed between them. The young woman was so lonely, so needy, so beautiful, and the handsome GI was soon taken with a new personal mission; to right the wrongs of the past, and give this girl everything she deserved. The new Mrs. Greenspan was honest with her young husband. She confessed that she wasn't in love with him; that she would always be grateful to him for saving her from the wretched, lonely life that awaited her if she stayed in Poland, and that she was excited to come with him to America and be the best wife she could be. She meant it, and that was enough for him.

Marvin Greenspan is a mechanic. All the boys love to hang around him when he comes up on weekends and watch as he tinkers with his car, a mint green convertible. It stands out among the drab sedans that are lined up like soldiers in the bungalow parking lot. He indulges the children when they want to take a drive to the ice cream parlor in town, or

take a motor boat out onto the algae ridden lake, trying to catch the elusive fish hiding in its murky depths. He is never too tired for a catch on the dusty baseball field, or a game of Rummy on the Adirondack chairs that dot the front of everyone's bungalow.

He is probably the most popular man in the colony. He can fix almost anything and is happy to oblige almost anyone's request, never seeing it as an imposition. There are always bikes, radios and fans that need attention. Because the Greenspans have no young family with its obligations tugging at them, they are both more than willing to spend time with everyone else's.

Not surprisingly, no one's parents mind one bit. Anything and anyone that keeps us occupied and out of our parents' way is welcome. This is our parents' vacation, as they are very quick to remind us. Now, I am hard-pressed to understand why my mother needs a vacation. My father is a different story; he works hard at his factory job, and the three days that comprise the summer weekends in the country are well deserved. Our mother doesn't have a job. She is a housewife, as are most of the women I know. Now that my baby sister goes to school, my mom has many glorious hours of freedom until we kids return, tired and needy. I imagine she has wiled away the day without us. So the summer should be no different than the rest of the year for her. But it is.

My parents talk about "The Mountains" all year. As far as they are concerned, it is a taste of the World to Come. The friendships they have made and fostered here in the Catskills are so precious to them. Each couple is like an aunt and uncle to me, their children almost cousins. The stories they relate of summer incidents are as sacred to me as tales from the Bible. I never get tired of them. I can see the gleam in my father's eye when I

beg him to tell the story of how he and his pals hid all the furniture from the main house one day when the owner was in his office. I laugh uproariously at the account, as I do every time. The legends of the Mock Weddings, the Talent Shows (which should have been called Lack of Talent Shows!), sneaking into the big hotels for the biggest shows of the year, all comprise a crazy quilt that, joined together, define summer in the Catskills for me. These stories have a special place in our family lore. I hear them, chapter and verse, all year long. They are like bedtime tales that children never tire of hearing over and over again.

The Catskills to my parents are a dream, an escape from the daily grind of the real world, with its responsibilities and burdens. Here there are no aging, demanding parents, no inflexible bosses to be accommodated, no snow to shovel, no homework to oversee, no bills to pay, and no home with its inherent needs. It is one big playground. And boy, do they play. The moment my father's sneaker-shod feet hit the pavement after his long trip on Thursday evening, his big voice booms "Anyone out for handball?" This embarrasses my adolescent sensibility terribly. And thereafter, until the Monday morning trip back to the city in the early morning darkness (to beat the traffic; of course), his weekend is full of activity.

The Greenspans are outsiders. Everyone gets along fine when on the weekends when Marvin is around. He is an athlete, a great card player and "tumbler", and fits right in with the men. But during the week, Helen Greenspan stands outside of my mother's clique of friends. They are civil, but standoffish. At times she is clearly the object of their ridicule, as she is different. They make fun of her heavy accent, her gold teeth, and



her taste in clothing. One Sunday, when she announced she was going to the A & P; did anyone need anything there? One of the women retorted, “Well, why not the “Y and shit?” to the delight of the assembled crowd, my mother among them, roaring with laughter.

Helen looks quizzical, shrugs, not getting the joke, and turns on her heel to her husband’s waiting car. My face is ablaze with shame, as I am old enough to understand what has happened here. The disrespect stings me like the bee that found its way to my brother’s instep the first week of the summer, bringing him to his knees in pain. I am so hurt for my friend; I cannot believe that my own mother would be part of the public humiliation of the woman about whom I care so much. What bothers me even more than that public display is that Helen Greenspan is unable, or perhaps, and even worse, unwilling to defend herself against the barbs and taunts that come her way on a regular basis.

I turn to face my mother and her friends in defiance; a ten year old’s fury rising like bitter bile in my throat. Somehow I find the courage to shout at them. “How could you be so mean to her?” I cry. “Why do you have to treat her like that?” I expect contrition. I expect that heads would be hung in shame. Instead, I am greeted with even more jocularity. “Oh, come on, don’t be so sensitive”, they coo. “We’re just having fun here”. “She doesn’t care”. “What’s the problem, honey?” are the retorts that come back to me. I am horrified. This is not going well. How am I to avenge my friend’s honor if the offenses against her are not taken seriously?

This hangs very heavily on me for the duration of the week. Helen, on the other hand, seems unaffected by the women’s disrespect. I am so embarrassed I can barely meet her

gaze all week long, but her behavior towards me is unchanged. She is as nonchalant as can be. I am at a loss to understand this. What I do not realize is that a small and petty act on the part of foolish women could not possibly have any place in her life. She has seen so much real tragedy and has lost so much, that she appreciates what she has now with fervor; a fine husband, a nice home, and the affection of the children of the bungalow colony that she has adopted for the summer as her own. We fill a void in her life that these women could never, even if they were inclined to do so.

I cannot wait for my father to return from the city so I can unburden myself to him.

Surely he, a man of reason and sensitivity, will see the folly in the women's behavior and reprimand my mother and her friends. Yes, justice will be served. I imagine the whole scene in front of me, like the television shows that consume me during the year (there is no television in the bungalow, as one is meant to spend as much time as possible outdoors in the summer). The whole thing would wrap up in less than half an hour, with no commercial interruption.

There is very little time to corner my father alone on the weekend. Somehow, I manage to get his attention for a few minutes on Shabbos. After our lunch, I tell him that I need to talk to him about something important. I bare my soul and relate what happened with Helen Greenspan and the other ladies. He does not give it the importance that I think it deserves. He admonishes me to be a good girl and listen to my mother when he is not there during the week. It is very hard for her to take care of us three kids without him, he reminds me, and as the most responsible of the children, I am being counted on to be of

great help. He hugs me tight, his Aramis cologne reminding me who he is; he kisses my forehead, and heads off to bed for his Shabbos afternoon nap.

I am so disappointed. I cannot believe my efforts to obtain justice have been summarily shot down, dismissed without another thought. There is no one with whom to share these feelings, except Helen. But her bungalow door is closed, a sure sign that she and Marvin are enjoying some private time together. Bungalow doors are usually open; a closed door is the equivalent of a Do Not Disturb sign on the guest rooms of the many hotels that dot the area.

I am so hurt for my friend that I cannot think of anything else all day. The shabby way my mother and her friends treated Helen has been eating at me all week. I had been hoping for the wrong to be righted and it was not to be. Friends beckon me to join them in their Shabbos activities; card playing, swinging a leg over a pink Spalding ball to a sing-song melody conjuring up the alphabet, or jump rope, but I have no interest in anything but moping around.

With nightfall, our little world comes alive. The lights of the casino burn brightly, and music is in the air. A lively band is playing the popular tunes of the day, and the men and women of the bungalow colony are dressed in all their finery. The men are in dinner jackets, and some of the ladies even sport mink stoles, warding off the chill of the evening air. Children are allowed to join in the festivities for this part of the program. I watch in awe at the beautiful couples dancing to the music. My parents are great dancers, and even though I am consumed with anger at my mother, I am proud of her in spite of her behavior.

The Greenspans join the others on the dance floor. They are quite a striking couple. The music seems to have transported her to another place and time, her eyes focusing on something very far away, as usual. She is dancing with her husband, but does not seem to be completely with him. Then the music changes, and a lively folk tune is the next selection. It heralds a dance that we have been practicing all summer long with Alex Birnbaum, who has joined us for the evening. I am shy to show my parents what I have learned, and Helen has been chosen to dance with our intrepid dance instructor anyway, so I find a good seat to watch them.

They seem to have the dance floor to themselves. What follow are a stunning display of dancing, athleticism, and something else I don't quite understand yet; sexuality. It is disturbing to me.

Mrs. Greenspan seems bewitched by the music. Her eyes are closed most of the time, and when she opens them, they sparkle with enthusiasm, confidence and desire. She seems captivated by her dance partner. Alex is capable of enchanting her; he is a small man, but very masculine. They move beautifully; together, apart, and together again. Her hair has come undone, splaying across her back in a wild tangle. Her skin glows with a sheen of perspiration, like the morning dew on the flowerbeds in front of the casino. I have never seen her as alive as on this night when she dances with such abandon. She has become someone I do not recognize.

Finally, mercifully, it is over. Alex bows to his partner in a courtly, Old World manner. She curtsies back to him, and they both bow to the crowd. The room has erupted with

applause in appreciation for the show to which they have just been treated. The women of the bungalow colony grudgingly accept that Helen Greenspan is quite a talented dancer, and nod their approval as she passes them, as Alex escorts her back to her husband. He is so proud of her and tells her so. She basks in his affection, but more important to her is the approval and acceptance of the group of women of which, it has become clear, she is truly desperate to be part. I now realize how much that means to her. I always thought she was indifferent to their lack of attention and friendship towards her. I am so happy for her! For now, a wrong has been righted. But that acceptance is fickle; it fades quickly, and soon things are back to the way they were before.

Helen spends most of her time during the week teaching the bungalow kids to swim, walking the grounds, reading or knitting on her porch. She is never invited to join the other ladies in the mah-jongg and canasta fests. She seems to genuinely enjoy our dance time together, and invites me and my friends to go blueberry picking with her. We happily tote our pails, anticipating the wonderful blueberry pies and muffins she will bake for us with the spoils of our pillaging. She is an excellent cook and an even better baker.

As we hike, Helen regales us kids with tales of the old country. Not the Nazi stories. She tells us about when she was a girl in Poland, with long red braids down her back. We learn about her town and the people who lived there, about her family's store. She tells us how she loved books, and read anything she could get her hands on. Even though her family was quite provincial, they appreciated how smart she was; that she was stifled in her small town. When she graduated Gymnasia, they sent her to the University of

Warsaw, in the big city, so her gifts would be fostered. She studied engineering and dreamed of being an architect. She loved the humanities classes as well, studied poetry and literature. The world was open to all kinds of possibilities, she told us, until things went dark. At this point, she changes the subject, preferring not to delve into the parts of her history that are troubling to her.

We only have a hint as to what she is referring. We are Americans, progeny of American born parents. Our fathers are proud members of the Greatest Generation, having served in the United States army in World War II. They reap the benefits of the GI bill that sent some of them to college, and furnished mortgages for their first houses. Our understanding of the catastrophic events that swallowed our people whole like Jonah's Great Whale is limited. We do not appreciate how fortuitous it was that our grandparents arrived safely to the Golden Door of Ellis Island in the early part of the twentieth century, thusly saved from annihilation at Hitler's hand. We are spared the burden of being survivor's children. We are a much more carefree generation, real Americans.

Occasionally there would be news of a distant relative who would find his way to a doorstep here from that lost world, telling tales that defied belief.

Our parents were very quick to divest themselves of any semblance of the world their parents had known soon as they could. "Greeners" or "Mockies", as European refugees are derisively known, are uncomfortable and embarrassing to be around. They are a reminder of our grandparents and everything they left behind in Europe; old clothes and old ways. While it is true that every generation thinks it is better off than the one preceding it, privileged first born Americans in particular, in an effort to establish

themselves on solid footing, embrace everything the United States has to offer, throwing off the shackles of Europe. Often that includes religious observance as well, although my parents enjoy being Orthodox, while most of their friends have discarded religious observance as they would a tattered pair of shoes.

Helen Greenspan is a real life link to that lost world. And to her, the Catskill Mountains symbolize all that she has lost. She enjoys nature; she often takes walks by herself, savoring the morning air, the sun breaking through the mist, lifting the fog that floats around the hills like tulle. She imagines she is back home with her family. The comparisons are plentiful; the fresh milk, the clear skies, and the beautiful flowers like those in her garden, the small wooden dwellings like those in her village. In the Catskills, she can lose herself, wistfully pretending that nothing has changed.

She surrounds herself with the children of the bungalow colony in an effort to replace the scores of young friends whose lives were cut short by Hitler's fury, and the children of her own she might have had if a Nazi doctor had not cruelly denied her that possibility. And since the women of our place have no use for her except as the object of their ridicule, or as a non-entity to be ignored, we are easy, natural, and pleasant companions. It is clear that she loves children. We are never a burden; we are a nice diversion from the long, lonely days and nights, until her husband returns from the city.

I love the time I get to spend with her. She listens to me when I share my adolescent baggage. She takes my concerns about growing up seriously, and she doesn't regard my sibling discord as foolish and petty. She, of course, has no need to reprimand or discipline me. Our relationship is pure. I feel totally validated when I'm with her, sure

of myself and confident in what lies ahead for me. It's a great feeling, and I believe her utterly and completely when she tells me that I'm pretty, that I'll soon be a great beauty, and that boys will vie to be with me one day. My mother, on the other hand, tell me I need to watch what I eat so I don't get fat, and that I will need a nose job when I turn sixteen. She has the doctor picked out already; he's a congenial, Jewish surgeon who has already done the twins in Bungalow D; their younger sister will be on the operating table at the end of August.

Helen has befriended one couple who spends the week here. A literature teacher at Brooklyn College, Harvey Bloom is the only man here who has the summer off, and indulges in the midweek activities of the Catskill Mountains. Mrs. Bloom, known to all as Dee, and her husband are avid tennis players. As we have no tennis court, the Blooms, their children happily ensconced in a nearby sleep-away camp, frequent the local Concord Hotel each morning. They partake in tennis lessons and occasional matches, arranged courtesy of the hotel pro Gary White. The Blooms play well, and the wise tennis director takes advantage, utilizing them to make good mixed doubles matches with discerning hotel guests. They look very glamorous in their tennis whites when they leave for the hotel each morning. After all, they do not want to look like bungalow "shnorrers" when they unpack their racquets, readying themselves for play at the immaculate tennis courts of the Concord.

The Blooms, in a way, are outsiders too, but are never the object of scorn or derision. Instead, they are envied. A golden couple, they are college educated; most of the people here can only boast of finishing high school. The Blooms seem in a different class. They



are friendly people, not snobs at all, and enjoy the revelry and raucousness that provide homemade entertainment in the bungalow colony. But somehow, they seem more cosmopolitan than the rest of the bungalow couples. There seems to be an air of refinement about them. Harvey Bloom has deep history with some of the men here, as far back as cheder, or Hebrew school, in their old neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He has the distinction of having “married well”, as his wife is a supermarket heiress. He was fortunate, after returning from military service, not to have to go straight to the workforce. Supported as newlyweds by Dee’s parents, Harvey went to college and graduate school. Nevertheless, they are accepted as part of the crowd, although often teased, good-naturedly, about their wealth. But it is clear that neither Harvey, nor the rest of the fellows, have forgotten where they came from, and the old friends enjoy carefree summers in the bungalow together. It is a well-known joke here that, in discussions about summer plans, Harvey’s colleagues assume his “bungalow” is a multi-room structure a la Newport, Rhode Island, with a pool, sports facilities, and many acres of landscaped grounds. He has done nothing to discourage that idea, and if anything, has fun with it. Yes, he tells them, there are many bedrooms, a basketball court, ball fields, an Olympic size pool, and acres and acres of land! People howl with laughter at his account of the conversation with his fellow professors.

To the people who summer here, their tiny bungalows are no less valuable than if it were the most beautiful, rambling estates.

The midweek afternoons find the Blooms and Helen Greenspan together at the pool. Dee is a sharp mah-jongg player and is sought after at the poolside games. Helen and

Harvey can usually be found side by side, having animated discussions about politics, books, and poetry, smoking cigarettes and sunning themselves on the white wooden lounge chairs that dot the pool landscape. Harvey and his wife are gracious to Helen; Harvey genuinely enjoys their lively chats. I don't understand a thing they talk about, but I am proud of my friend when she keeps that kind of company. To me, they epitomize the upper class, and I think Helen fits right in with them.

They often invite her to join them Monday nights at the Raleigh hotel for Mambo Night. I'm not sure what that is, but I know my mother goes there too, and I also know I'm not supposed to wake her up early on Tuesday mornings. I am charged with getting my sister dressed, making sure she eats breakfast, and is ready for the nursery group at day camp by 10am. For this I get 25cents to spend as I please at the canteen, which is our snack shop and soda fountain adjacent to the Casino. There's another quarter in it for me if I make my brother breakfast too.

So the weeks pass, with their particular routine. They are a blur of beautiful July days, with all the activity we can pack into them, the hot sun high over our heads. But there is always something out of the ordinary that shatters the calm of the summer. One of my mother's friends, Clara Einhorn, unexpectedly goes home for a week. That is unheard of, unless someone has to sit Shiva for a parent who has passed away. Her kids come to stay with us, packing our already crowded quarters. We think this is just great, and have so much fun with the Einhorn kids all week.

There is a lot of whispering, and serious looks pass between the women. I try to make sense out of the conversations, desperate to garner some sliver of information. "She had

no business getting herself knocked up at her age”. “It’s a good thing Robbie found somebody who could take care of this”. “What was she thinking?” When Clara comes back for the weekend with her husband, she looks peaked and wan. The path that leads to her bungalow is well trod by the women of the bungalow colony, who are laden with all manner of nourishment for the family. There is no privacy; in this place, life is an open book; there are no secrets in the Catskills.

I turn to my friend Helen for an explanation. I know I can count on her to be honest and forthcoming. I go straight to her bungalow, and find her door open. Of course I walk right in. To my surprise, I find her sitting at her kitchen table, her head in her hands, her eyes closed. She has been crying. She looks up when she hears me come in. “Oh, my little Pumpernickel,” she sighs. “People are so foolish, so selfish.” I don’t understand what she means. I’m impatient, and I ask her to explain what’s been going on with Clara Einhorn. She looks up at me; her eyes fill with such sadness and longing. She is silent. She is not going to share her wisdom with me this time. My eyes brim with tears. I feel her sadness, even though I don’t understand. I just know in the depth of my being that something very wrong has happened, some major transgression, and Helen Greenspan has been affected by it uncommonly. It wasn’t until years later that I put the pieces of the puzzle together and finally understood what had taken place, and that an abortion of a Jewish baby in America was something a Holocaust survivor could not fathom or tolerate.

The weather changes in August. By the second week, I need a jacket when I go out in the morning. I hate that. Even the sun responds to the cue, hitting the earth differently, as it

filters through the trees that dot the acres of landscape. The leaves already have touches of red and gold and their tips, heralding the approaching High Holidays in a few weeks. The days grow shorter by mere moments each day, but the effect is palpable. I savor the precious days of freedom left, before the inevitable return to school and the year-round routine, with its stifling lack of freedom.

Helen has an interesting habit this time of year. Sundays, in Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah, my father blows the shofar at the end of Shacharis, the morning services, at the neighboring bungalow colony. It is a time honored ritual throughout the Jewish world, setting the mood for the coming days of repentance. She walks in the early morning to the little shul down the road, to hear the capable, melodic, and mournful tones of my father's shofar. She dons her husband's faded plaid jacket against the morning chill, and ties a kerchief around her beautiful red hair. I find this odd, as she otherwise observes no other religious rituals, as far as I can tell, except for lighting candles Friday night. What is it about the shofar that draws her? Curiosity gets the better of me, and, one rainy afternoon, I gather up the courage to ask her.

I find her in her bungalow, reading a novel, the four burners on her stovetop all ablaze in an effort to ward off the August chill. She hangs up my wet slicker. I sit down on a kitchen chair next to her; a cup of hot chocolate finds its way to my cold hands, and she proceeds to enlighten me.

She has my full attention as she sets the stage. It is pre-war Poland. She is a young girl, a few years older than I am. It is summer, she is back from the university, and her village is alive with activity. It is a tiny town, with vibrant Jewish life. She and her friends enjoy

the freedom that summer brings very much the way I do, playing with friends, reading, swimming in the nearby lake, and playing card games. It is carefree and idyllic. Her parents hope she will find a shidduch, a marriageable partner this summer, but she is not interested. She is enjoying her casual friendships for now. She has ambition beyond marriage.

Her parents are respected and active members of the Jewish community. Her father has a small dry goods shop that her mother helps him run. He takes time out of his busy day to study Torah with other men of the town, and performs many acts of chesed, or kindness, throughout the year. But the one thing he is renowned for, besides his capability as a ba'al tefilah, one who leads the prayer services, is his proficiency at shofar blowing. He is a master. His tones are clear, not sputtering like the sexton's, and inspiring. Young Helen, or Shprintse as she is known, enjoys hearing him practice for the High Holidays, which he begins in earnest in August. It is the most reassuring sound in the world to her in its consistency.

At this point Helen's voice takes on a whole different tenor. Her hands tremble as she continues her story.

Their world begins to change. A dark wind blows through Poland, bringing restriction and unsettled feelings. People of their village are fearful, walk with their heads down. The carefree days are no more. Shprintse gets sent back from school. Jews are not allowed at the university any longer. One by one, their property, businesses, and freedoms are taken away. Then people are rounded up. Helen spares me the details, but

what I gather is that her family was sent to Auschwitz, and, forcibly separated from them, she never saw them again.

She thankfully spares me the details of her incarceration, and instead focuses the story on her survival. She is determined to live. She tells me she did whatever it took to stay alive, but doesn't elaborate. Since she was never a big eater, it is easy for her to subsist on very little. The girls who were fat had a much harder time with the imposed starvation. I swallow hard.

One year, before Rosh Hashanah, there is a rumor that someone has smuggled a shofar into the camp, and with it, hope has come to Auschwitz. To Shprintse, the shofar reminds her of good days that will return once the war is over. Someone in her bunk has been keeping track of the calendar, and lets Shprintse know when she should be mindful, in case the miraculous shofar blowing is going to take place.

She listens for it ardently on the appointed day. Late in the morning, she finds herself drawn to the men's section of the camp, and waits. She is suddenly aware of a long, mournful sound. It is coming from very far away, but there is no mistaking the distinct long note, and then the clipped ones, of which she is more than familiar. She vows then and there that if she survives, she will never miss the chance to hear the shofar again, in memory of her father. That is why she avails herself of the opportunity before her now; to savor my own father's beautiful, powerful shofar blasts, quietly remembering what was lost.

An uncomfortable silence surrounds us. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. Should I say I'm sorry? Should I hug her? I instinctively reach out and just take her

hand; it is small, the same size as mine. We sit in silence like this for what seems like a long time, the cuckoo clock on the wall keeping time; it's the only other sound besides the insistent, driving rain pelting the bungalow roof, and my own pulse pounding in my head.

I hear my mother calling me for dinner, and I rise to leave. Helen takes both my hands in her hands, squeezing them tightly. Not a word passes between us. I feel so close to her right at this moment. She nods her head that is alright for me to leave her.

I return to my bungalow lost in thought, consumed with all I have learned this afternoon. My head is swimming and it hurts. My mother sees my face and asks me what's wrong. She feels my head and puts me straight to bed with two aspirins and a wet washcloth on my forehead. I promptly fall into a restless, dream-laden sleep.

I dream that our bungalow colony has become a work camp, surrounded by barbed wire, patrolled by Nazi dogs. The Casino, the source of so much fun and revelry all summer, becomes a factory where we are forced to work on munitions and small parts for the Nazi war effort. Our bungalows have been gutted and the furniture replaced with wooden bunks lined up in rows. We are all wearing tattered, ragged clothing and worn shoes.

I wake with a start. My heart is pounding. It is very dark. It takes me a moment to remember where I am, and to realize that everyone I love is safe, and I promptly crawl into my mother's bed, seeking solace and security. I smell the remnants of her Bal de Versailles perfume that she wears every day, and I am immediately comforted. She

doesn't have to say a word. She puts her arm around me and kisses my forehead. I drift back to sleep until the morning.

Everything looks brighter in the daytime, my mother reassures me. She is right. The sun is shining through the gingham curtains in the kitchen window, and it just glorious... I feel much better about things today. I have not shared the details of the previous day, nor the nightmare with my mother, but she senses I was troubled about something serious, but doesn't pry. She lets me know she's available if I want to talk. I don't. My friends, up unusually early for them, come to call for me, and the day beckons with endless opportunities for fun, sports, and mischief. The wet weather has brought out tons of salamanders and frogs, and we spend the better part of the morning catching them, and putting them into the camp house's glass tank allocated for this purpose. We have furnished it with lots of leaves, twigs, and added some water. We feed our captives flies from the sticky tape that hangs from the ceiling of the camp house porch. It's a perfect bungalow day.

The afternoon finds us all at the pool, enjoying an uncommonly hot day for mid August. Everyone is there. Our handsome lifeguard, Jesse, is seated in his perch high above us, with his pork-pie hat, his nose covered in zinc oxide. Our mothers are entranced by the mah-jongg tiles in front of them, and Harvey Bloom and Helen Greenspan are, as usual, discussing something I don't understand. All is right with our little world.

The topic of discussion around the pool is the big show in the Casino this weekend.

There is always music of course, provided by the Happy Acres Orchestra. The children will be allowed to stay for the music, as usual. But the late show will feature a comedian,



and something else that is also off limits to anyone under twenty-one. My curiosity and that of my friends is peaked.

We are remanded, after the music, to our bungalows and the care of the day camp counselors, who have Night Patrol duty. They circulate through the colony at regular intervals throughout the night, making a cursory check of the bungalows, certain the children are in their beds, and not crying or otherwise in need of assistance. Most of the times the counselors congregate on one central porch, listening to Cousin Brucie spin the latest hits on someone's transistor radio.

We have got to find out what is going on in the Casino! My friends have hatched a plan. It's a good one. We wait until the counselors have passed our units; rig our beds to look as if we're sleeping in them, just in case a zealous counselor decides to take his job seriously. We sneak out the back bedroom windows, meeting at the old well as we had planned. Then we go down the hill, behind the bungalows, and find our way into the Casino through its back door. The room is engulfed in total darkness, which assists us in our mission. We sneak behind the long bar in back of the room and stay so very quiet, watching the show, only our eyes peeking above the counter.

The comedian is in the middle of his act. The crowd laughs uproariously at his jokes. He is very funny, and very profane. He delivers many punch lines in Yiddish, which none of us understand. My parents are having a great time, smoking, drinking, and enjoying the show.

We have the surprise of our lives at the next portion of the program. A stripper takes the stage! She is all spangles and fringes. The music accompanies her bawdy routine, and, as she takes off most of what she is wearing with great flourish, the crowd goes wild. She singles out men in the front rows whom she thinks will be receptive to her charms, sits on their laps, kisses their bald heads, and musses up what little hair they do have. Their wives are overcome with laughter.

I am horrified, embarrassed, and fascinated at the same time. I have never seen anything like this before. And I don't understand why a wife would allow a woman like that to flirt with her husband like that, and right in front of her! The boys in our little group are amazed, and rendered speechless. They almost cannot believe their good fortune. Seeing a nearly naked woman is more than they could have hoped for.

Once she is completely undressed, save some strategic bits of cloth, the music reaches a crescendo, and wild applause and whistles ensue. It is a good time to make tracks for our bungalows before the show breaks. We exit the same way we came in, stealthily making our way back up the hill behind the bungalows. It is hard to stay quiet, but we know we must. We dare not get caught. We see that the counselors are still huddled on a neighbor's porch, and we disperse, ready to climb through the back bedroom windows of our respective bungalows that previously served as our escape hatches.

It is then that I recognize Helen Greenspan, who is behind her bungalow, her face lit by the cigarette she is smoking. She doesn't see me in the pitch darkness. She is with someone who is not her husband; this man is too short. It's hard for me to see, but as I

get closer, I can hear the unmistakable husky voice of Alex Birnbaum. He is holding both of her shoulders, and talking in a very serious tone. She is pleading with him; I can't understand what she's saying; she's speaking Polish. But I know he is being very insistent and wants her to do something she doesn't want to do. He pulls her close, and to my shock, he kisses her, full on the lips. She doesn't resist, and soon begins to respond to his advances. She laces her arms around his neck, her body as close to his as it can be. At that moment, I spot my parents coming up the path leading to front door of our bungalow. I run as fast as my legs will carry me, climb in the back window to my room, and quickly get under my covers. I feign sleep. My mother comes to check on me before retiring. I smell the whiskey and cigarettes on her breath, and do my best not to react, lest my transgression be discovered.

I'm so confused. My mind is racing! What is going on here in our little community? I have seen too much tonight. And I don't know what to think about it, or worse, what to do. Should I tell someone? Should I confront Helen and demand an explanation? Or should I just keep quiet and hope she comes to her senses? Did I completely misunderstand what I saw? No, I know what I saw. Alex is not married, but she sure is. And she has no business locked in that kind of embrace with a man who is not her husband. This much I do know.

I feign a bad headache when dance class comes around this week and stay in bed. I tell my mother to apologize to Helen, but no, I cannot possibly be her partner this week. I just can't face her, after witnessing her indiscretion. I skip our swimming lesson too. I

do everything I can to avoid her. I can't meet her gaze. When she finally spots me later in the week at the pool, she asks me how I'm feeling and tells me how much she misses me. I mumble some apology and run off to be with my friends. She seems perplexed by my behavior, as I am usually so affectionate with her, but doesn't say anything.

I can't share the awful thoughts running around in my head with anyone. I don't even have the words for it. I feel more than disappointment, I feel disgusted and betrayed. I try to clear my brain and concentrate on punchball, tetherball, anything other than that scene that is burned into my consciousness. In the pool, I stay underwater as long as possible, trying to blot out what I know. I am unsuccessful. My friends tease me that I need to come back to Earth, that I seem like I'm on another planet. I tell them I've been visiting the planet Yuck. That's just how I feel.

Our days here are growing shorter. I feel so uneasy in this place now, I almost want to go home already.

The next few days pass quickly. I do my best to avoid Helen at every opportunity.

Sunday morning heralds another glorious, sunny day. I push my baby sister grudgingly on the swings. Helen comes back from her usual routine of going to Shacharis services and hearing my father blow the shofar.

I see her going back to her bungalow. Suddenly we hear shouts coming from the paddleball court. People come running to get Helen from her bungalow, take her by both arms and run with her down the hill in the direction of the court. Soon the wail of an ambulance shatters the peaceful Sunday morning. A sea of people seems to become

aware of the excitement and file quickly out of their bungalows. I am becoming more and more curious, and make my way down there, my sister in tow.

The scene before me on the paddleball court is like a movie set. Our little community seems bathed in light. A ring of humanity surrounds several men drenched in sweat.

Paddle racquets and balls are scattered all about. Several men hold back the crowd as the ambulance crew works frantically on Marvin Greenspan, who is lying on the ground, motionless, eyes closed, his face very gray. Helen is next to him, holding his motionless, limp hand. She is very quiet, and she is shaking.

It is all very surreal to me. Everything seems to be moving in slow motion. The emergency technicians are trying their best to hold back the Malach haMaves, the Angel of Death. But it soon appears their efforts are for naught. One of the crew shakes his head, stops his ministrations, and quietly leans over to Helen, saying a few words to her. She is silent. Her eyes close briefly as she absorbs what he is saying to her. Most of the women and a few of the men begin to weep. It is clear that a catastrophe, much worse than what happened to Clara Einhorn, has shaken our world to its core.

Marvin is put on a gurney, loaded into the ambulance, with Helen right there with him, not letting go of his lifeless hand. Her face is a mask of resignation. She is no stranger to tragedy, and this is just another body blow to her already battered soul. The ambulance pulls away; its siren seems to pierce the August sky. Everyone left behind slowly make their way to their bungalows, heads down.

The next few hours are a blur. Women come and go from the Greenspan bungalow. They help pack it up. My mother locates Helen's phone book and calls her rabbi. He will help make the arrangements. The Blooms drive her back to Brooklyn to face the Shiva week and what lies afterwards. I can only imagine what her life will be like now. She is really, truly, all alone.

It is unanimously decided that everyone will just go home at this point in the summer. Since Labor Day is almost upon us anyway, and everyone's summer has pretty much come to an end with Marvin Greenspan's death, there seems to be no point in staying. A hasty pack-up seems to be the order of the day. Goodbyes are said, promises to keep in touch and blessings for the New Year exchanged.

I do not go to the funeral or the Shiva. My mother dispatches the three of us to our Bubby's house, which turns out to be fun, as our cousins are there too. Bubby makes us a great dinner, parks us on the couch for the night, where we can watch our favorite shows on her big TV until we fall asleep.

I do not think about Helen or any of the things that happened at the end of the summer, until my mother informs me that she has invited Helen to spend Rosh Hashanah with us, and that she will be sharing my room with me! I am amazed at my mother's generosity, and at the same time, fearful.

The beginning of school is a welcome distraction. I am happy to see all my friends again. I like my teachers and the newness of it all. I am excited about getting new clothes and shoes for the High Holidays. My mother takes me after school downtown to Martin's

Department Store. I feel very grown up suddenly. The truth is, I have grown up this summer.

Before I know it, Rosh Hashanah is upon us. My mother has been cooking up a storm in preparing the house for our guest's arrival, seemingly preparing everything she knows how to. Then the doorbell rings. Helen is here! My mother begs me to answer the door, her hands busy assembling a cake, the phone, as usual, pressed between her shoulder and her ear.

I nervously open the door. There stands Helen Greenspan, her blue suitcase at her side, and a gift in her hands. She seems even smaller to me than I remember. Was it only two weeks ago that I saw her last? It seems like an eternity. So much has happened since then. I beckon her to come inside, show her up to my room where she will spend the next two days with my family. "My pumpernickel", she says quietly. "I'm so happy to be here with you and your family. It was so kind of your mother to include me for the holiday."

I am numb. I finally find my voice. "Gutyur", I say to her, the traditional Yiddish greeting for a good year. "Gutyur", she wishes me back. And we hug. The ice is broken.

We spend most of the next two days in shul. My parents procure an extra seat at services for Helen, and she sits next to me. My sister gets kind of restless, so we are sent outside for a break, admonished to return in time for shofar blowing. We play jacks and cards with the other kids similarly dispatched, and then we are summoned into the sanctuary

for the anticipated highlight of the services. My father stands at the ready on the bimah, the platform that is the stage, the focal point; his beautiful shofar poised at his lips. The congregation stands, waiting.

Helen is standing next to me, her presence so frail. I almost feel I should put my arm around her waist to hold her up. Suddenly, she steels herself, as if making herself ready for the firing squad. She squares her shoulders and stands tall. The first, beautiful, clear tone of my father's shofar is always a shock. Everyone jumps. Once the first blast has sounded, the congregation in unison silently sighs and relaxes. It has come.

After services, we return home for a wonderful, festive lunch. Helen and I take over the kitchen afterwards, so my mother can have a break, and between us we polish off the dishes. The house has quieted down, and it's just Helen and me at the sink. I have always been able to talk to her, and I decide that I'm going to ask her about that Saturday night behind her bungalow. I tell her what I saw. I tell her it's the reason I was so aloof and didn't want to be with her after that, and I say that I'm sorry for that. I start to cry and tell her how sad I am that her husband died.

She puts down her dish towel, makes us both a cup of tea and beckons me to the kitchen table. "You must understand, and I know you are very young, but I think I can tell you this. I loved Marvin with all my heart. He saved me. I was a good wife to him. But he couldn't understand me the way Alex did. We were both damaged people. We had seen things in the war that no one should ever see. We were like the same person. So what you saw was kind of like reassuring each other that we were alive, that we had survived.



It wasn't love. Not romance. And it never was more than what you saw. Do you understand that?"

"I told Alex the next day that there could be no more between us. Oh, he wanted more. He wanted me to go away with him. But Marvin was my whole life, my whole world, and I would never do anything to hurt him. I owed him too much. I never told Marvin. I could never. He didn't deserve that. And before he died, he did know how much I loved him and how grateful I was for every minute of my life with him. I didn't know, of course, that I was going to lose him so soon after that. Something made me tell him that, and brought me close to him in those last beautiful days. People from the war have the feeling that every single moment of our lives now is so important. You can't waste a single minute."

"I know you're so young, and it's hard for you to understand all this. There is just something about the Mountains that brings me back to the best time in my life. The air is so clear, the green land just goes on and on, and the days, so carefree. And the dancing. The dancing! It makes me feel so alive, so young, like nothing will ever be wrong again. Something happens to me when I am there. It's like I can pretend all the bad things, the terrible things never happened."

"So remember to think about good things like the best days in the bungalow, Bonnie, and always be confident that things will work out for you. You will make that happen. You are like Wonder Woman, my young friend. You can do anything".

I told her I understood. And we never spoke about it again.

Helen goes home after the holiday, hugging and kissing all of us and wishing us a good year. My mother asks her what her plans were. She tells us that she is going to go back to school. Harvey Bloom has made it possible for her to continue her studies at Brooklyn College, picking up where she left off all those years ago. She will get her degree in Early Childhood education, and become a pre-school teacher. It is the beginning of a new life for her.

She never went back to the bungalow.

The following summer finds my family home in the city. It is the year of my brother's Bar Mitzvah, and the celebration has left my parents short of cash, so we stay home, joining the neighborhood swim club. It's a fun summer, but different. We are not as free to roam the city streets as we are in the Catskills, with its endless, safe green vistas.

After that, we three kids are old enough to go to sleep away camp, my father gets a promotion and takes my mother to a hotel for the summer. My parents take up tennis and golf. Many of their old friends have joined them here, anticipating making wonderful memories.

## EPILOGUE

With the exception of the summer I stayed in the city, I have spent and continue to spend every summer in the Catskills. My husband and I joined a group of friends years ago in a bungalow colony not far from where I spent my childhood summers. My children grew up there. Now my grandchildren love to spend weekends at their Bubby's bungalow.

My summers here mirror those of my parents' during my childhood. We have had wonderful years. And we have lost friends tragically. We hold each other up. The Catskills for me, as it was for Helen, has always been a refuge. The Mountains is like the "home base" of my childhood games, where one goes to be safe, home free.

