

and changed it to Rachel Deborah Shilsky, and I got rid of that name when I was nineteen and never used it again after I left Virginia for good in 1941. Rachel Shilsky is dead as far as I'm concerned. She had to die in order for me, the rest of me, to live.

My family mourned me when I married your father. They said kaddish and sat shiva. That's how Orthodox Jews mourn their dead. They say prayers, turn their mirrors down, sit on boxes for seven days, and cover their heads. It's a real workout, which is maybe why I'm not a Jew now. There were too many rules to follow, too many forbiddens and "you can't's" and "you mustn't's," but does anybody say they love you? Not in my family we didn't. We didn't talk that way. We said things like, "There's a box in there for the nails," or my father would say, "Be quiet while I sleep."

My father's name was Fishel Shilsky and he was an Orthodox rabbi. He escaped from the Russian army and snuck over the Polish border and married my mother in an arranged marriage. He used to say he was under fire when he ran off from the army, and his ability to slick himself out of anything that wasn't good for him stayed with him for as long as I knew him. Tateh, we called him. That means father in Yiddish. He was a fox, especially when it came to money. He was short, dark, hairy, and gruff. He wore a white shirt, black pants, and a tallis on his shirtsleeve, and that was like his uniform. He'd wear those black pants till they glazed and shined and were ripe enough to stand in the corner by themselves, but God help you if those pants were coming your way in a hurry, because he was nobody to fool with, my father. He was hard as a rock.

My mother was named Hudis and she was the exact opposite of him, gentle and meek. She was born in 1896 in the town of Dobryzn, Poland, but if you checked there today, nobody would remember her family because any Jews who didn't leave before Hitler got through with Poland were wiped out in the Holocaust. She was pretty about the face. Dark hair, high cheekbones, but she had polio. It paralyzed her left side and left her in overall poor health. Her left hand was useless. It was bent at the wrist and held close to her chest. She was nearly blind in her left eye and walked with a severe limp, dragging her left foot behind her. She was a quiet woman, my sweet Mameh. That's what we called her, Mameh. She's one person in this world I didn't do right by. . . .

2.

The Bicycle

When I was fourteen, my mother took up two new hobbies: riding a bicycle and playing piano. The piano I didn't mind, but the bicycle drove me crazy. It was a huge old clunker, blue with white trim, with big fat tires, huge fenders, and a battery-powered horn built into the middle of the frame with a button you pushed to make it blow. The contraption would be a collector's item now, probably worth about five thousand dollars, but back then it was something my stepfather found on the street in Brooklyn and hauled home a few months before he died.

I don't know whether it was his decision to pull out or not, but I think not. He was seventy-two when he died, trim, strong, easygoing,

seemingly infallible, and though he was my stepfather, I always thought of him as Daddy. He was a quiet, soft-spoken man who wore old-timey clothes, fedoras, button-down wool coats, suspenders, and dressed neatly at all times, regardless of how dirty his work made him. He did everything slowly and carefully, but beneath his tractorlike slowness and outward gentleness was a crossbreed of quiet Indian and country black man, surefooted, hard, bold, and quick. He took no guff and gave none. He married my mother, a white Jewish woman, when she had eight mixed-race black children, me being the youngest at less than a year old. They added four more children to make it an even twelve and he cared for all of us as if we were his own. "I got enough for a baseball team," he joked. One day he was there, the next—a stroke, and he was gone.

I virtually dropped out of high school after he died, failing every class. I spent the year going to movies on Forty-second Street in Times Square with my friends. "James is going through his revolution," my siblings snickered. Still, my sisters were concerned, my older brothers angry. I ignored them. Me and my hanging-out boys were into the movies. Superfly, Shaft, and reefer, which we smoked in as much quantity as possible. I snatched purses. I shoplifted. I even robbed a petty drug dealer once. And then in the afternoons, coming home after a day of cutting school, smoking reefer, waving razors, and riding the subway, I would see my mother pedaling her blue bicycle.

She would ride in slow motion across our street, Murdock Avenue in the St. Albans section of Queens, the only white person in sight, as cars swerved around her and black motorists gawked at the strange, middle-aged white lady riding her ancient bicycle. It was her way of grieving, though I didn't know it then. Hunter Jordan, my stepfather, was dead. Andrew McBride, my biological father, had died while she was pregnant with me fourteen years earlier. It was clear that Mommy

was no longer interested in getting married again, despite the efforts of a couple of local preachers who were all Cadillacs and smiles and knew that she, and thus we, were broke. At fifty-one she was still slender and pretty, with curly black hair, dark eyes, a large nose, a sparkling smile, and a bowlegged walk you could see a mile off. We used to call that "Mommy's madwalk," and if she was doing it in your direction, all hell was gonna break loose. I'd seen her go up to some pretty tough dudes and shake her fist in their faces when she was angry—but that was before Daddy died. Now she seemed intent on playing the piano, dodging bill collectors, forcing us into college through sheer willpower, and riding her bicycle all over Queens. She refused to learn how to drive. Daddy's old car sat out front for weeks, parked at the curb. Silent. Clean. Polished. Every day she rode her bike right past it, ignoring it.

The image of her riding that bicycle typified her whole existence to me. Her oddness, her complete nonawareness of what the world thought of her, a nonchalance in the face of what I perceived to be imminent danger from blacks and whites who disliked her for being a white person in a black world. She saw none of it. She rode so slowly that if you looked at her from a distance it seemed as if she weren't moving, the image frozen, painted against the spring sky, a middle-aged white woman on an antique bicycle with black kids zipping past her on Sting-Ray bikes and skateboards, popping wheelies and throwing baseballs that whizzed past her head, tossing firecrackers that burst all around her. She ignored it all. She wore a flower-print dress and black loafers, her head swiveling back and forth as she rode shakily past the triangle curve where I played stickball with my friends, up Lewiston Avenue, down the hill on Mayville Street where a lovely kid named Roger got killed in a car accident, back up the hill on Murdock, over the driveway curb, and to the front of our house. She

would stop, teetering shakily, catching herself just before the bike collapsed onto the sidewalk. "Whew!" she'd say, while my siblings, camped on the stoop of our house to keep an eye on her, shook their heads. My sister Dotty would say, "I sure wish you wouldn't ride that bike, Ma," and I silently agreed, because I didn't want my friends seeing my white mother out there riding a bicycle. She was already white, that was bad enough, but to go out and ride an old bike that went out of style a hundred years ago? And a grown-up no less? I couldn't handle it.

As a boy, I always thought my mother was strange. She never cared to socialize with our neighbors. Her past was a mystery she refused to discuss. She drank tea out of a glass. She could speak Yiddish. She had an absolute distrust of authority and an insistence on complete privacy which seemed to make her, and my family, even odder. My family was huge, twelve kids, unlike any other family I'd ever seen, so many of us that at times Mommy would call us by saying, "Hey James—Judy-Henry-Hunter-Kath—whatever your name is, come here a minute." It wasn't that she forgot who we were, but there were so many of us, she had no time for silly details like names. She was the commander in chief of my house, because my stepfather did not live with us. He lived in Brooklyn until near the end of his life, staying away from the thronging masses to come home on weekends, bearing food and tricycles and the resolve to fix whatever physical thing we had broken during the week. The nuts and bolts of raising us was left to Mommy, who acted as chief surgeon for bruises ("Put iodine on it"), war secretary ("If somebody hits you, take your fist and *crack* 'em"), religious consultant ("Put God first"), chief psychologist ("Don't think about it"), and financial adviser ("What's money if your mind is empty?"). Matters involving race and identity she ignored.

As a kid, I remember wishing I were in the TV show *Father Knows Best*, where the father comes home from work every day wearing a suit and tie and there are only enough kids to fit on his lap, instead of in my house, where we walked around with huge holes in our pants, cheap Bo-Bo sneakers that cost \$1.99 at John's Bargains store, with parents who were busy and distracted, my stepfather appearing only on weekends in sleeveless T-shirt, tools in hand, and Mommy bearing diapers, pins, washcloths, Q-tips, and a child in each arm with another pulling at her dress. She barely had time to wipe the behind of one child before another began screaming at the top of her lungs. Back in the Red Hook Housing Projects in Brooklyn, where we lived before moving to the relative bliss of St. Albans, Queens, Mommy put us to bed each night like slabs of meat, laying us out three and four to a bed, one with his head to the headboard, the next with his feet to the headboard, and so on. "Head up, toes down," she called it as she kissed us good night and laid us out in the proper position. The moment she left the room we'd fight over who got to sleep next to the wall. "I got the inside!" I'd shout, and Richard, the brother above me and thus my superior, would shake his head and say, "No, no, no. *David* sleeps on the inside. *I* have the middle. *You*, knucklehead, have the outside," so all night I'd inhale David's breath and eat Richie's toes, and when I couldn't stand the combination of toes and breath any longer I'd turn over and land on the cold cement floor with a clunk.

It was kill or be killed in my house, and Mommy understood that, in fact created the system. You were left to your own devices or so you thought until you were at your very wits' end, at which time she would step in and rescue you. I was terrified when it came my turn to go to school. Although P.S. 118 was only eight blocks away, I wasn't allowed to walk there with my siblings because kindergarten students were required to ride the bus. On the ill-fated morning, Mommy chased me

all around the kitchen trying to dress me as my siblings laughed at my terror. "The bus isn't bad," one quipped, "except for the snakes." Another added, "Sometimes the bus never brings you home." Guffaws all around.

"Be quiet," Mommy said, inspecting my first-day-of-school attire. My clothes were clean, but not new. The pants had been Billy's, the shirt was David's, the coat had been passed down from Dennis to Billy to David to Richie to me. It was a gray coat with a fur collar that had literally been chewed up by somebody. Mommy dusted it off with a whisk broom, set out eight or nine bowls, poured oatmeal in each one, left instructions for the eldest to feed the rest, then ran a comb through my hair. The sensation was like a tractor pulling my curls off. "C'mon," she said, "I'll walk you to the bus stop." Surprise reward. Me and Mommy alone. It was the first time I remember ever being alone with my mother.

It became the high point of my day, a memory so sweet it is burned into my mind like a tattoo, Mommy walking me to the bus stop and every afternoon picking me up, standing on the corner of New Mexico and 114th Road, clad in a brown coat, her black hair tied in a colorful scarf, watching with the rest of the parents as the yellow school bus swung around the corner and came to a stop with a hiss of air brakes.

Gradually, as the weeks passed and the terror of going to school subsided, I began to notice something about my mother, that she looked nothing like the other kids' mothers. In fact, she looked more like my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Alexander, who was white. Peering out the window as the bus rounded the corner and the front doors flew open, I noticed that Mommy stood apart from the other mothers, rarely speaking to them. She stood behind them, waiting calmly, hands in her coat pockets, watching intently through the bus windows

to see where I was, then smiling and waving as I yelled my greeting to her through the window. She'd quickly grasp my hand as I stepped off the bus, ignoring the stares of the black women as she whisked me away.

One afternoon as we walked home from the bus stop, I asked Mommy why she didn't look like the other mothers.

"Because I'm not them," she said.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm your mother."

"Then why don't you look like Rodney's mother, or Pete's mother? How come you don't look like me?"

She sighed and shrugged. She'd obviously been down this road many times. "I do look like you. I'm your mother. You ask too many questions. Educate your mind. School is important. Forget Rodney and Pete. Forget their mothers. You remember school. Forget everything else. Who cares about Rodney and Pete! When they go one way, you go the other way. Understand? When they go one way, you go the other way. You hear me?"

"Yes."

"I know what I'm talking about. Don't follow none of them around. You stick to your brothers and sisters, that's it. Don't tell nobody your business neither!" End of discussion.

A couple of weeks later the bus dropped me off and Mommy was not there. I panicked. Somewhere in the back of my mind was the memory of her warning me, "You're going to have to learn to walk home by yourself," but that memory blinked like a distant fog light in a stormy sea and it drowned in my panic. I was lost. My house was two blocks away, but it might as well have been ten miles because I had no idea where it was. I stood on the corner and bit back my tears. The other parents regarded me sympathetically and asked me my address,

but I was afraid to tell them. In my mind was Mommy's warning, drilled into all twelve of us children from the time we could walk: "Never, ever, ever tell your business to nobody," and I shook my head no, I don't know my address. They departed one by one, until a sole figure remained, a black father, who stood in front of me with his son, saying, "Don't worry, your mother is coming soon." I ignored him. He was blocking my view, the tears clouding my vision as I tried to peer behind him, looking down the block to see if that familiar brown coat and white face would appear in the distance. It didn't. In fact there wasn't anyone coming at all, except a bunch of kids and they certainly didn't look like Mommy. They were a motley crew of girls and boys, ragged, with wild hairdos and unkempt jackets, hooting and making noise, and only when they were almost upon me did I recognize the faces of my elder siblings and my little sister Kathy who trailed behind them. I ran into their arms and collapsed in tears as they gathered around me, laughing.

3.

Kosher

My parents' marriage was put together by a rov, a rabbi of a high order who goes to each of the parents and sees about the dowry and arranges the marriage contract properly according to Jewish law, which meant love had nothing to do with it. See, my mother's family had all the class and money. Tateh, I don't know where his family was from. Mameh was his meal ticket to America, and once he got here, he was done with her. He came here under the sponsorship of my mother's eldest sister, Laurie, and her husband, Paul Schiffman. You couldn't just walk into America. You had to have a sponsor, someone who would say, "I'll vouch for this person." He came first and after a few months sent for his family—me, Mameh, and my older brother, Sam. I was two years old and Sam was four when we arrived, so I don't remember anything about our long, perilous journey to America other than what I've seen in the movies. I