

## HAD I WON AT BINGO

The church in Brooklyn was not near my mother's apartment. She had to take two buses to get there. She said she didn't mind—it was worth it. It was August 1970. It was hot and humid outside, but when I walked into the church, it was cool and cavernous with an unfamiliar smell of incense. I don't know where the pews had gone, but they had been replaced by long aluminum tables that wound through the hall like metal scales on a silver snake. There might have been a hundred tables in the room and eight or ten times as many chairs, all facing the altar. Perched on the altar was a large glass canister filled with balls. Next to the canister was a microphone. No one was at the microphone.

Earlier, we'd been part of the throng of people gathered on the steps of the church, waiting for the carved wooden doors to open. At exactly 1:00 p.m. the doors majestically parted, and a stampede of women pushed their way in like they were trying to get to the sales tables at S. Kline's department store. They should have shopped before they came, because mostly they were a sorry lot. They came in housecoats, some with stockings rolled to the ankles. They had unkempt gray hair, held in place by bobby pins. Resignation lined their faces. Other women were *oysgeputst*, over-dressed, with too much rouge and too-red lips. A few reluctant husbands straggled along behind.

My mother, as always, was dressed appropriately. She wore flowered capri pants, an orange belt tightened over her small potbelly, and a white nylon shirt. Her hair, colored and set each week by Andrea the hairdresser, was neatly combed into a beehive. She had worn wire-rimmed glasses for the twenty-seven years I had known her but had recently traded them in for a new pair—yellow to match her hair, and shaped like butterfly wings, with rhinestones on the temples.

My mother, at fifty-two, could still be called an attractive woman, but her looks were dictated by her mood. When she was angry, she gritted her teeth, her eyes flashed, and her chin stuck out in defiance. She had a hard look like a tough girl who had grown up in a bad neighborhood. When she was sad, her eyes looked inward, her features disappearing into her face, her determination gone—she became invisible. But my mother also had a lively, fun-loving side. She would listen to Cab Calloway singing “Minnie the Moocher”, dance around the living room, and recount the days she had danced in the marathons.

“Your father and I were hot on the dance floor,” she bragged. “We could do a mean Lindy Hop. He’d throw me over his head and between his legs. We were something...” Her voice would trail off as her face lit up with the memory, and then, as if by a switch, the smile would go dim.

She was twenty-three when she married my father. In their wedding pictures, she looks triumphant. Grandma told me the bridal gown had been rented. “That’s what they used to do back then,” she said.

To Grandma, for whom there was no part of a chicken that couldn't be eaten, turned into soup, or stuffed into cabbage, the idea of renting, rather than buying a wedding gown made perfect sense.

“What you supposed to do when the wedding is over?” she'd ask. “You should pay good money to storage so they should stick it in a freezer? You should pack it in a trunk with mothballs? You should think that maybe your daughter or future daughter-in-law wants not to be her own self on her wedding day but instead she should walk down the aisle looking like you...*Meshugeh*, the dress is just for a day—it's the marriage that's forever.”

I, on the other hand, was disappointed that the dress was gone. I loved that gown in the photo. I would have worn it when I got married, would have been happy to look like my mother. I wanted to feel as I imagined she felt before the disappointment and the bitterness set in.

Inside the church, my mother warned me of this woman or that, who might steal our seats. These were not assigned seats, but they had been spoken for by repetitive use. My mother had appointed herself to the fifth table from the front and the fifth seat to the center. She insisted that was her lucky seat. She held me by the arm, pulling me behind her, yelling over her shoulder that when we got to the table I should sit on her right-hand side.

I am eight again. She is dragging me across the green courtyard of our garden apartment complex, screaming something about what I did or didn't do, or what I should or shouldn't have done. I can't hear her over my own wails except when she yells at me to shut up or she'd give me something to cry about.

“Just wait till I get you inside,” she warns.

I know I'm in for it. It has happened too many times before—no trial, no defense. Just punishment.

It seems that I have embarrassed her by not wanting to play with her friend's daughter. The mother complained to my mother. Her friend's daughter is an idiot girl who wouldn't share anything. I hated her. I try to explain to my mother that this is not a girl I should befriend, but she can't hear me. She is yelling for all the neighbors to hear—they shouldn't think that she did not have control over her daughter: “You are a mean, selfish ingrate of a child.”

When we make it into the apartment, she throws me down against the steps and, in a frenzy, beats my head, my arms, wherever her hands land. I know that this is no longer about playing with the idiot kid, it is about my father's never coming home for dinner. I decide that enough is enough. I will myself not to cry. For a moment she hits me harder, and then, as if defeated, her hands drop to her side and the beating stops.

“Do you feel better now?” I ask.

She never hits me again.

There in the bingo church, I wrestled my wrist from her grasp.

“What is the matter with you?” I asked. I was hot and annoyed. “What does it matter where we sit?”

She looked at me as if I didn’t understand. She was right. I didn’t understand this whole bingo thing. I knew she went four, sometimes five times a week. She’d bribed me to go with her, offering to pay for a sitter, buy dinner for my family, and take me to the beauty parlor—anything as long as I’d go with her. But bingo was not my idea of a day off. Taking care of three little kids, to me an afternoon off would have been the opportunity to take a nap without the children at home, or to go grocery shopping without two kids in the cart and one on my hip.

I had finally given in because I was tired of the harangue, and I also wanted to make her happy. I had always wanted to make her happy. There were times I succeeded—once, I recall, when I let her teach me the rumba and then again when I had agreed to go to the high school senior prom with that kid Elliot—the first, learning the rumba, was a gift I cherished, the second was a sacrifice. My mother never went to the senior prom at Thomas Jefferson High School because she, like my father, had quit when she turned sixteen.

“You shouldn’t miss this opportunity,” she insisted. “You’ll be sorry for the rest of your life.”

It hardly seemed possible that I would ever regret not going to the senior prom with Elliot, but I saw it meant a lot to her, and also to my friend Phyllis, so I went.

“We have to hurry or *that* one will take my seat.” She pointed with her head.

“Which one is *that* one?” I asked, like it mattered.

“The one with the *farbissener pisk*, the sourpuss.”

I looked over and saw whom she meant. This short, fierce lady with slightly bowed legs and a face that looked like she'd been sucking a lemon was elbowing her way to the front. My mother, realizing I couldn't move fast enough, dropped my wrist and beat her to the chair. She plunked down her purse on the chair next to her and waited for me to catch up. By the time I got there, I felt like I had run a marathon. I plopped into the chair. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as my mother furtively started pulling something out of her purse. It was a small rubber troll with flyaway orange hair.

“What is that? What are you doing with that? Isn't that the toy you gave to David?” I asked. My son David was five. He was already a collector of strange objects, and he liked that troll. “Did he give it back to you?”

“He won't miss it,” she said. “I'll get him another one. Why are you looking at me? I said I'd get him another one!” Whenever my mother felt guilty, she got adamant.

“That isn’t even the point. Why is it here?” Then I looked around and I saw that many of the women were doing the same thing, pulling these weird objects out of their purses and setting them up like talismans before a shrine.

“It’s my lucky charm,” she explained. “I’m a big winner here. Three times I won the jackpot. Five hundred dollars a shot, and I didn’t even have to split it. Everybody hates me,” she said. “Do I give a damn? Let them hate me. I’m the winner. It’s worth it.”

I began to understand the lure of the bingo parlor. A parlor in a church is where the monastic are allowed to speak. It was there in that church that my mother, silenced by my father, had found a voice. I looked around, and I saw that she was being eyed and envied. For two and a half hours a day, four days a week—she mattered. It was less about the money and more about accruing the envy. I didn’t know what to say to her—*I’m glad you win. It’s nice to be a winner.* Anything I’d said would have been a lie, because what I really wanted to say was, *I’m sorry. I’m sorry you have to come here at all.*

Ushers came around the room selling lapboards. Each board held two bingo cards—my mother bought twelve. She took ten and gave me two.

“That’s quite an investment,” I chided.

“Not really, I sometimes play fifteen. You want more? Here take another two.”

I told her two was enough. “Where are your discs to cover the numbers?”

“I don’t use any.”

I was stunned. “How do you keep track?”

“Your mother’s a smart lady,” she answered. “Go tell that to your father.”

I ignored the dig at my father. “I know you’re smart, but still you’re going to play . . .”

A hush came over the room as a priest took the podium. I thought he was going to bless the proceedings. I turned to ask my mother, but she shushed me.

He mumbled a few words then reached into the basket. There was a tension in the room as he was about to drop the first ball.

“B-4,” he called. “B-4,” he repeated. My mother looked down at her board and eyeballed her Bs to see if she had any fours. She looked over at my boards.

“You don’t have any,” she stated.

“I can see that. Are you going to play my boards too?” I was beginning to get into it.

“Don’t get testy with me. You haven’t played before.”

“It’s bingo, Mom,” I said. “It’s not rocket science.”

“B-2,” called the priest. “B-2.”

And so went the afternoon—two and a half hours of bingo. My mother won about one hundred dollars. I still didn’t understand how she had done it without the discs, but she sure knew when she won. She stood up and waved madly until she was seen, and then she would sit down, self-satisfied, look around at all the losers, and wait for

the usher to bring her booty. Only once did she have to share the pot with the woman who sucked lemons. My mother shrugged. “I’ll let her have a few. She shouldn’t think I don’t care,” she said, laughing.

As we filed out of the church, we were hit again by the late summer heat.

“Come on.” my mother said. “I’ll blow you to a soda. It’s right around the corner.”

“No, Ma. I can’t.” I told her. “I’ve got to get back.”

She knew I wasn’t just leaving: I was escaping. I’d had enough. There was something about the whole afternoon that made me terribly sad. It was more like a cult gathering than an afternoon’s distraction. My mother’s emotional pain was contagious. I knew that my father was close to leaving her again—they were killing each other. I thought that he stood a chance at happiness without her. I hoped, beyond hope, that she would find some too. She was only fifty-two years old—young enough to start a new life. Meanwhile, my own marriage was in shambles.

My father kept calling me. “You’ve got to talk to your mother. She’s driving me crazy.” She kept calling me and crying that she’d been a saint, but he was killing her. I’d had it. *Enough*. Even if she didn’t want out from under, I did.

We were standing on the steps of the church.

“Do you think...?” she started to ask, and I knew what was coming. “Your father...what do you think? I’m asking you, Linda, what do you think? I’m telling you

he has somebody. He doesn't come home till late. Every night...two, three in the morning. What does he tell you? You must know," she said.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I don't know why you think he talks to me."

"You're the only one he talks to except maybe his sister. He'll listen to you. Tell him to cut it out once and for all and be a husband. If he has to live a lie, so let him live a lie. Tell him," she pleaded. "You at least owe me that."

"Mom, please," I begged. "Give me a break."

"What am I asking?" Her eyes got dark. "I'm only asking you to do what a good daughter should do—help her mother."

*Monkey in the middle*, I thought.

"I've got to go...the kids. But thanks for the afternoon. It was really fun," I lied.

"Here," she said, resigned, "take a cab. Don't take a bus. You're tired. It's too hot."

I accepted the cash, even knowing it came with a dose of guilt. I was tired, and

I was sad.

Had I won at bingo, I would have paid my own way home.

I left my mother standing on the steps of the church.