

Shiksa in the Midst

Living in a blue-collar town where Jack Daniels shots were \$1.00 on Friday nights, I was excited to graduate from high school and start working for real money. A few sons and daughters of lawyers or doctors from my town went to college in 1976, but the rest of us wanted our own wheels and our own apartments. Either way, we were all dying to start our own lives and get the hell away from our parents and our dismal little town in Upstate New York. My plan was to get as far away as I could so I took a job as a front desk clerk at Grossinger's Country Club in the Catskills. They not only promised to give me a paycheck, but they threw in room and board to boot.

The day of the high school graduation, I packed up the 1968 Volkswagon Beetle that my older brother handed off to me when he bought his new Chevy and took off for a new job in Maryland. "See ya," he said to me as he waved out the window.

He didn't look back. He couldn't wait to get away from our town when he graduated. That was two years ago, and now, finally, it was my turn. I planned to drive away as soon as the graduation ceremony was over.

During the three-hour drive through Central New York, I couldn't stop smiling. I smiled at the Catskill Mountains, I smiled at the pine trees, and I smiled at the cop who pulled me over for speeding. Maybe he thought I looked too innocent or maybe I looked too happy, either way he gave me a stern warning and told me to slow down. I smiled and thanked him.

Getting off exit 100 off of Route 17, I looked at Liberty, New York, my new home. It looked like any small town in Upstate New York: small taverns, tackle shops, and diners lined its one main street. At Grossinger's gated entrance, my stomach hurt. What the hell was I thinking? I didn't know anybody here.

An ancient guard, whose deep facial creases spoke of many cold winters and many shots of scotch, shuffled out to my car with a clipboard. “Can I help you, dear?”

“I’m here to see Howard Weiner, the Front Office Manager. I’m an new employee.”

The guard winked and waved me through with a swollen arthritic hand.

My old Volkswagen struggled slowly up the winding road groaning as I shifted the gears down. At the top of the hill a series of magnificent German hunting lodges four stories high surrounded by acres of lush pine and maple trees welcomed me.

I parked my car in a small visitors’ lot and walked toward what looked like the main entrance with its double glass doors and golden awning. Tending to trees and the shrubbery around the front of the building, landscapers in green jumpsuits with matching green jackets looked up briefly as I walked by. Two doormen in red coats with black trim and brass buttons stood at the entrance. They smiled and opened the glass doors. *Just like a fairytale castle.*

The glass doors opened to a lobby as wide as a football field. On the left was a concierge with an immovable mass of black curls on top of her head sitting at a desk covered with tennis and golf brochures. Adjacent to her, the bellhop captain stood at an ornate wooden counter throwing car keys and commands at running bellhops.

One elegant woman hotel guest waited for her husband to get the room keys as she reviewed her freshly painted nails and checked her reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. The husband took his time scrutinizing the numbers on his room registration form as if his life depended on it. “What’s this charge here?”

Clutching my Sears raincoat a little tighter around my neck, I walked through the lobby toward a carved wood plaque labeled “Administration” that pointed down a hallway. Passing through the hall, I gaped at the black and white photos of some of my favorite entertainers from

the early 20th century: Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Joey Bishop, George Burns, Sid Caesar, Danny Kaye, Zero Mostel, The Three Stooges, and, *wait a minute*, Frank Sinatra. I loved those guys.

I finally reached a door that said, “Howard Weiner, Hotel Manager.” I knocked.

“Come in.,” said a high-pitched, nasal voice from inside the door.

“Mr. Weiner?”

A short, thin man with twinkling black eyes and a fringe of black hair that circled his bald scalp like a caterpillar reached out his right hand.

Mr. Weiner talked, and I nodded. I heard some strange words like *glatt kosher* and *Sabbat*, but I figured I’d ask somebody about what those things meant later. Mr. Weiner said something about three hundred staff members on premises and getting meals in the staff dining room.

“So do you have any questions?”

“No, sir, I’m very excited to start working here. Thank you.”

“Excellent, and since it’s the staff dinner hour, Loretta, my secretary, can take you to the dining hall. Loretta!”

The buxom woman with a giant, blonde beehive on her head typing in the next room stood up and gave me a motherly smile.

“Honey, let’s go get something to eat.” Loretta hustled me down the basement hallway leading to the staff dining room bursting with landscapers, bellhops, white-shirted accountants, and housekeeping staff.

Loretta plunked me down at table with the accountants and front desk people and introduced me to the table. Most of them were eating as fast as possible since they had to go back

to work. Since I was pretty hungry, I grabbed a roll from a basket and started to look for the butter. I looked up hopefully at a waiter standing nearby.

“Could I have some butter for my roll please?”

Complete silence. A plate crashed to the floor. Loretta held a piece of pickle in mid-flight to her mouth. She put her fork down and smiled sweetly at the waiter. “You’ll have to excuse her. She’s new here.” The dining room resumed its noisy din.

Loretta turned to me. “Honey, you’ll have to be careful around here, especially around the guests. You can get fired if you have dairy with your meat especially on their Sabbath.”

“Their Sabbath?”

“Yes, the Jewish holy day of the week starts at sundown on Friday and goes through sundown on Saturday. This is Friday. Don’t worry, honey, you’ll learn. Nothing to be ashamed of. Just watch carefully and do like we all do.”

“This is a Jewish place?”

Loretta laughed so hard that tears came to her eyes. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard all week. Why, yes. Now, don’t you worry. When you’re on Grossinger’s property, you have to follow their rules for eating. But you can eat whatever you want in town. Hell, you can go to the diner and eat a bacon cheeseburger anytime you want. Tell you what, why don’t you come to my house sometime next week after you’ve settled in, and I’ll make you up some barbeque ribs that’ll make your toes curl.”

After they ate, Loretta guided me to my little apartment in the housing for the staff. She handed me my key. “You’ll fit right in here in no time. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Shutting the door behind me, I knew that I had definitely gotten far, far away from my little Upstate New York blue-collar town. I felt like I was in another universe. I was eighteen-years-old, how the hell was I going to make it here?

I walked toward the window facing the Catskill Mountains and made my decision to figure out what glatt kosher meant.