

Prologue

Bombay, India

December 1918

The three young women drank tea and nibbled *machboz*, a pastry—filled with cheese, walnuts, and dates—indigenous to the Sephardic Jewish heritage of Miriam Ezra, the hostess. Their rattan chaises cushioned in ivory canvas were positioned on the stone terrace like spokes of a wheel against the hub of a small round white marble pedestal table that held a blue-flowered bone china teapot and the platter of sweets. An arrangement designed, despite the stretch to replenish plates and cups, to capture every smile, frown, and raised eyebrow of their conversation. In short, to not miss a moment of their limited time together as best friends soon to be parted. While many of their peers and certainly their elders would have spent this stifling afternoon lying in solitude in draped and darkened rooms under newly installed whirring ceiling fans, napping was the furthest thing from the minds of Miriam and her Indian girlfriends, Maya and Mena. Eighteen years old, they were newly minted graduates of Bombay's elite Queen Mary's School, where they were known by their classmates and instructors alike as "the three Ms." Each was soon to embark on a separate journey: Maya to marriage arranged by her parents, Mena to medical studies in London, and Miriam on a mission accompanying her widowed father, an attorney assigned by his older brothers to tidy up a family legal mess.

"I don't know how I will manage without you two," said Maya. "It scares me to think about it. Living in Anil's parents' house and not even having my dearest friends around?"

"I am not going away until summer," said Mena.

"And by summer I should be back in Bombay," Miriam said.

"You will be sure to write to us, won't you, Miriam? I will, too, once we are settled after the wedding. I hope I can..." Maya was nearly in tears.

Miriam reached over and took her friend's hand. "Of course, I will write, and you two must keep me informed about everything here."

They sipped their tea and gazed toward the parlor just inside the terrace doors. There, four steamer trunks were squeezed among substantial pieces of furniture draped in white muslin sheets that appeared to be ghostly puffs of meringue made limp by humidity. One of these puffs engulfed a large sofa, and nestled on it was a four-foot-high cylinder of hammered sterling silver, bedecked with jewels and clasped in the middle with a shiny Star of David.

"Miriam, do Jews always take a Torah with them when they travel?" Mena's question made Miriam laugh.

"I really don't know about other Jews. But my grandfather brought this Torah from Baghdad. Father refuses to leave it. You see that steamer trunk over there, the biggest one right behind the settee? It's specially fitted out with a raised bottom and sides, so that the Torah will never touch the ground."

"But," countered Maya, "if you're only going to be away for a short time, isn't that a lot of trouble? Surely, your houseman would keep it safe."

"Father insists we take it to Shanghai. He wants me to continue to read Torah with him every Shabbat. The family there would disapprove; they firmly adhere to the belief that women are too unclean for Torah. Anyway, Father says, 'Wherever this Torah is—is home.'"

Part I

New York City and San Francisco

January 1991

Chapter 1

“Lily Kovner...Nothing to declare?” The customs officer with the Brooklyn accent arched his eyebrow as he scrutinized my form.

“Nothing to declare,” I said.

“Classy lady like you didn’t shop in London?”

“Too busy visiting my new granddaughter.”

“Welcome home, and mazeltov!”

An only-in-New York moment of universal Yiddishkeit, worthy of submission to the Metropolitan Diary column in the *Times*. I made a mental note to write it up and send it in.

The remark put a smile on my face as I made my way out of the dingy JFK customs hall. It was usually easy to spot my driver, Yossi, uniquely clad in black leather jacket and jeans amidst a row of black-suited chauffer types. But, in scanning the arrivals area for this outfit and the familiar bright blue-lettered sign saying “Mrs. Lily K,” I spotted one of his liveried competitors reading the *New York Post*. Its headline screamed, SCUDS ATTACK ISRAEL. My mood changed instantly.

Yossi stood three persons to the left of the newspaper reader. Yossi is Israeli. He is a partner in one of New York City’s ubiquitous Israeli-owned car services named for cities there (Tel Aviv, Carmel...). I’m not sure why so many *yordim* (Israelis who live outside Israel) got into this business here. Or why, considering that it’s taking your life in your hands to ride with an Israeli driver in Israel, I and their other clients patronize them. One thing I knew for sure on this particular morning—Yossi would be able to fill me in on the news. As soon as he commandeered my luggage cart, I peppered him with questions.

“What’s going on in Israel? What are Scuds? When did this start?”

“Ah, Mrs. Lily, Scuds are missiles. I worry about my family.

“Missiles? From where?”

“Iraq. That *mamzer* Saddam Hussein.” Yossi used the Hebrew pronunciation of the epithet for bastard.

Saddam Hussein? Attacking Israel? In the middle of Operation Desert Storm? After Saddam had attacked Kuwait the previous summer, we Americans had launched this retaliation to support Kuwait in driving out Saddam’s forces. And now he had turned on Israel. Yet another tyrant joining that notorious club founded by Pharaoh.

“This started when? Overnight?” While I was 37,000 feet above the Atlantic, in a flying cocoon.

“Yes. To everyone now in Israel there’s a gas mask. Already these Scuds have fallen on Tel Aviv.”

“Oh, my God. I hope your family will be all right. Everyone there...”

Everyone there—in Israel—included *my* family: my cousin, Ruth Sofer; her husband, Boaz; and their two children. And Simon Rieger, the man in my life, though also a Manhattan resident was spending that week in Tel Aviv on business.

The ride, even in off-peak traffic by New York standards, should take at least a half hour. Yossi possibly set a record from JFK to Central Park South, and twenty-six minutes later, Victor, our genial weekday doorman, greeted me. More warmly than I deserved as I rushed into the building barely uttering “Yes, nice trip” and “thanks, Victor,”

as we rode the elevator and he deposited my luggage in my entry hall. My silence didn't go unnoticed.

“Take care, Mrs. K, hope you feel better,” he said on the way out.

I couldn't get into my apartment and pick up the phone fast enough. My home phone, that is, what's come to be called a landline. Simon was way ahead of me both in his embrace of the future and his willingness to pay for it. He already had a mobile cellular phone equipped for international calls. He picked up after five rings that seemed as long as my flight home. Between static on the line and a cacophony of shouting in the background, I tried to piece together what he was saying.

“Scuds. Ruth, Boaz, kids...Mossad...special shelter...overnight. Tel Aviv. Fine, fine...you're home? Good. Don't worry...interesting story...Ruth...Torah...China...”

The line went dead. Ruth...Torah...China? What was he talking about? Well, at least he was alive and well, and it sounded like my cousins were, too. It was nearly noon in New York, about seven o'clock in the evening in Israel. Apparently, he was spending the night in a bomb shelter.

That thought made me shiver with memories—of shivering. When I was a little girl in London during the Blitz, I had spent so many nights in the frigid Underground. No matter how many layers of clothing and blankets were piled on me, the penetrating chill precluded any possibility of resting comfortably. Falling asleep was out of the question, between the whimpering babies, the ale-fueled card games, and the constant whirring overhead that might or might not culminate with an ear-popping, wall-shaking bang.

How long ago that seemed, compared to the glamour and liveliness of the rebuilt London where Simon and I had just spent a week visiting my daughter, Elizabeth; her husband, Jonathan; and their two-month-old daughter, Charlotte Ann. Like most Jewish children of eastern European Ashkenazic descent named after deceased relatives, Baby Lottie-Ann honored the memory of two of the most cherished—her first name after my aunt who'd died at 90 the previous summer. This was the aunt who raised me in England after, at age eight, I escaped Nazi-occupied Vienna on the kindertransport, a special evacuation of Jewish children to England—the same aunt who tried to keep me warm and lull me to sleep throughout the Blitz. The baby's middle name, Ann, commemorated my husband, Arthur, who'd died nearly two years before he had a chance to be her grandfather.

As much as I missed Arthur, it was very special to see Simon, not yet a grandfather himself, playing surrogate to this smiling and cooing infant who had already grown so much since I had first seen her as a newborn in October. Simon and I tore ourselves away from this precious bundle for a romantic New Year's sojourn to Paris. From there he had left for Tel Aviv, where his jewelry business had an office in the Diamond Exchange, and I had returned to London to savor another week with the baby and her parents.

My suitcase lay on the bedroom floor challenging me to pay attention to it, but sinking onto the bed was more my speed at the moment. The view of Central Park from my apartment across the street was appropriately hazy and gloomy, but I never took for granted my good fortune to occupy this perch atop one of the most sought after real estate locations in the world. Even so, just then, my home and, certainly, the tranquil

pleasures of the past few weeks seemed flagrantly luxurious and self-indulgent as people and a country I loved faced the murderous ambitions of a maniacal despot. Again.

Uncharacteristically for me during the day, I flipped on the television. At least there would always be news on CNN. On the screen the skies of Tel Aviv were punctuated by what looked like shooting stars or firecracker duds falling to earth. So, these were Scuds. How could Simon have sounded so calm and soothing?

Despite the explosions, I felt myself dozing off. Fear of jet lag roused me. Enough, I said to myself—they have to be fine. One thing my life had taught me was to try not to drive myself crazy over what I could not control. In the meantime, I was home and needed to return to my own routine. Since I left the set on, it was hard to avoid glimpsing the continuing flashes or hearing the crackling sounds that accompanied them, audible even over the news correspondents' commentary. I forced myself to make it background noise and unpack and check through my accumulated mail, mostly bills.

Eventually, motivated by a need to replenish my barren refrigerator, I turned off the set and bundled up for a bracing walk from Central Park South up the West Side to the Fairway Market at Broadway and West 74th Street. But there was no escaping the nerve-wracking news from the Middle East. Whispered conversations, overheard as I edged my cart through the store's aisles, only increased my anxiety.

“I talked to my daughter in Israel today.”

“Is she coming home?”

“No, she insists on staying. What can I do?”

“I saw pictures on the news—the gas masks...”

“Why doesn’t Bush bomb that Saddam Hussein to hell?”

“Oil. It’s always oil. What has Israel got? No oil. Just Jews.”

Exchanges of nods and shoulder shrugging “what can we do?” expressions signaled tribal sympathy and solidarity, albeit anonymous, that provided a level of consolation, if not reassurance. For more tangible comfort—and to ward off the sore throat and snuffle that had just cropped up—I laid in supplies of soup and orange juice. Suddenly weary, I sure didn’t feel like cooking for myself.

As soon as I got home, I clicked on the television in my study. CNN’s around-the-clock coverage alleviated the need to wait for the evening network news programs. I sat down and really watched this time. The live shots from rooftops in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv fascinated as much as frightened me. As a print journalist, I’ve always pooh-poohed the glib and abbreviated news coverage of the younger medium. But I had to admit these onsite reports in real time were mesmerizing. Alerted by the wail of sirens seconds ahead of those now familiar bursts of light, I witnessed an entire enemy attack on screen. The missiles exploding over downtown Tel Aviv and over ships in Haifa’s port may have sparkled on first glimpse. But these explosions ignited real fires and giant puffs of smoke that lingered ominously. The correspondents speculated that anthrax or other chemical toxins could be attached.

All I could think about was Simon and my cousins. It was frustrating not to be able to talk to them. Perhaps in the morning. In the meantime, CNN reported that the United States was urging Israel to not retaliate but to let us take care of it. If this warning exasperated me, I could only imagine how it was playing with the Israelis.

I stayed up as long as possible, until ten o'clock, but slept restlessly. Every time I woke up, my head felt more and more stuffed and my throat was sore. In case that wasn't enough to keep me from sleeping, I'd switch on CNN again and just lie there watching Scuds showering down on Tel Aviv and Haifa. Finally, at four—11 a.m. in Israel—I picked up the phone and dialed Simon's office.

"Lily, what are you doing up? It's the middle of the night there. I was going to call you about seven o'clock your time."

"I've been watching CNN on and off all night. Are you all right? What were you saying when I talked to you before? Where were you?"

"In a safe room."

"You mean a bomb shelter?"

"Right. People here are making them at home, even if they don't know what they're doing or have the knowledge or experience to seal them properly."

"So, was this at your house? Was Ruth there? Everything was garbled on the call."

"No, I haven't had time to do anything at my house. This was a special Mossad safe room at headquarters in Tel Aviv."

Simon and I had met nearly a year before at an auction where my family's antique Seder plate reappeared in my life fifty-two years after the Nazis stole it—and vanished again moments later. At that time Simon Rieger was a name I'd only read about on the society pages. I figured he was too much of a player for me, but our relationship evolved to an intimate affair during the course of my search for the looted treasure. Along the way, actually on the day I got the Seder plate back, yet another surprise about Simon came

out— his job moonlighting with the Mossad. He was an expert on precious Jewish texts and books, and served as a consultant to Israel’s legendary spy agency.

“And Ruth was there?”

“Yes, when I heard from Avi”—Avi Ben-Zeev was Simon’s closest colleague in the Mossad—“that I should get over to headquarters, he asked if there was anyone else I wanted to bring, up to six people. I called Ruth, and she and Boaz and the twins came. I also took Shoshana from my office and her husband.”

He couldn’t see either my smile or my eyes welling up with tears of gratitude for the generous and considerate gesture of reaching out to my family and inviting them to what was probably the safest place in Israel at the moment.

“Thank you, Simon.”

“Nonsense. Your family is my family. Plus, it turned out to be a very interesting evening...”

“I’ll bet, sitting there listening to how close to you the Scuds were landing.”

“Well, that, too. But didn’t you hear what I told you about the Torah that was stolen from Ruth’s aunt and uncle in Shanghai?”

“Her aunt and uncle had a Torah stolen? In China? All I heard was Torah...China. What were they doing with a Torah?”

“I’m still not entirely sure, but it has to do with a family her father was close to during the war. Ruth didn’t want to talk about it in too much detail in the safe room. I think she didn’t want to upset the twins with talk of her going away. She wants to go to China as soon as possible to help her relatives. And she wants us to go with her.”

Incredible, I thought. Another lost treasure! But a Torah in China?

Finding my cousin Ruth was a bonus benefit of Afikomen, my code name for the previous year's search for the Seder plate. The hunt ended up in Israel; I met Ruth in Tel Aviv at the Mosaica gallery of Jewish ritual objects, where she worked as curator. Her boss, a former Nazi officer named Rudolf Bucholz reinvented as Israeli gallery owner Eliezer Ben-Shuvah, was the devil in a deal with my late surrogate uncle, Nachman Tanski. Uncle Nachman had conspired in an arrangement in which Bucholz had secured his new identity and business after World War II. In return Uncle got some fine specimens of art that Bucholz had looted as a Nazi officer. But the real prize, and Uncle's ostensible rationale for partaking in this diabolical transaction, was a stash of usable German war materiel that Uncle and his Zionist cohorts procured for Israel's War of Independence.

Before I encountered Ruth at Mosaica, I didn't even know she existed, never mind that she was my cousin. Her father, Erich Heilbrun, was my mother's twin brother who had fled Vienna for Shanghai before I left on the kindertransport. My parents didn't survive the war, and my aunt and uncle in London lost contact with Uncle Erich after the Communists took over China in 1949. All we knew then was that his Chinese wife was pregnant and couldn't travel when they were supposed to leave Shanghai for Hong Kong. Ruth was the half-Chinese product of that pregnancy. When we met, in Tel Aviv in 1990, she wore a locket around her neck similar to one I wear. Our mutual grandmother had bought both of them, and the same family photos were inside.

Ruth's odyssey from China to Israel wended from her parents' deaths— Uncle Erich in 1960, her mother during the Cultural Revolution—to study in the Soviet Union and the United States, places where she established relationships with Jewish *refusniks* and an

American lawyer advocating for them. Along the way she developed an interest in Judaism, met Boaz—an Israeli in graduate school at MIT when she was at Harvard—and officially converted to Judaism to marry him and join his Egyptian Sephardic family.

“So, that’s all you know, just that a Torah was stolen?” I said.

“No, she called me this morning with more details. But it’s a long story, and I don’t have time to go into it now. It’s not just any Torah—it’s old with a pedigree and a very valuable case. Originally from Baghdad.”

“Baghdad?” Visions of cocky, gun-toting black-mustached Saddam Hussein rushed through my head. I looked up at the TV to see CNN panning over a line of his tanks grinding through the desert. Baghdad, where this Torah was from, now the launchpad for missiles aimed at Tel Aviv.

“Yes. You know the Sephardic community in Shanghai—Sassoons, Kadoories, Hardoons—they were originally from Baghdad.”

Of course, I’d heard the name Sassoon. “You mean the poet, Siegfried Sassoon? In England, when I was in school, we read his anti-war poems, but his Jewish roots weren’t advertised. And the hairdresser, Vidal...”

Simon’s chortle crackled into the static already on the connection. “Siegfried and Vidal. I love your frames of reference,” he said. “I suppose they were all related. But the group that settled in Shanghai first got there in the 1840s.”

“Right,” I said. “Mainly to trade opium, as I recall.”

“Yes, but to their credit many stayed to build the city and even provide some social service benefit to the indigenous Chinese, though Shanghai was a famously international

city. Of course, they became fabulously wealthy until they had to hightail it out of there when the Communists took over. Apparently, Ruth's father worked for one of those families."

"It's always fascinated me to find pockets of Jews in unexpected places. But it's comforting to know that Uncle Erich lived among them when he made his way to China. If only my mother and I had gone with him, my grandparents..."

Simon didn't answer but steered the conversation back. "You heard me tell you that Ruth wants us to go to China with her, didn't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Me, I think, because of my background in texts. This Torah dates back a long way and might be a famous one. Not that I'm an expert on anything Baghdadi or Sephardic, but I have a bit of an eye. You, because you're family—her cousin and kindred spirit. She loves you, Lily, and respects you so much. But I also know she wants you along because you're a great detective. A regular Jewish Miss Marple!"

Now *I* laughed. Of course, I loved the books and those films with the doughty—and dowdy—Margaret Rutherford playing Agatha Christie's character. But I didn't think my brief Afikomen "caper" put me in her league. "Me, the Jewish Miss Marple? That's funny," I said. "Was that Ruth's description, or yours? The Miss Marple part?"

"Hers. She loves Agatha Christie."

"Back in London, we all thought Agatha Christie was a flaming anti-Semite. I wonder if Ruth knows that or what Miss Marple looks like in those movies? Bassett hound

face, figure the width of a picture window dressed in those voluminous suits and capes, the old schoolmarm sensible shoes.”

“I think Ruth has just read the books, not seen Margaret Rutherford.”

“Okay. I’ll go. Of course. I must support Ruth. I can only imagine how torn she feels between her concern for her family in China and this attack on Israel. When does she want to take this trip?”

“Not for at least a week or so. She’d like to wait until things quiet down here ...”

“Do things ever quiet down in Israel?”

“Well, at least until the family is back to sleeping at home. But Boaz told her she should leave as soon as she can, that he and his parents can handle the kids and the home front. He’s very concerned about her relatives. This aunt and uncle and their daughter and her little boy are the only family she has left on her mother’s side.”

That was a feeling I understood only too well. By the summer of 1945, I knew that Aunt Lottie and Uncle Arnold and their sons, Julian and Daniel, in London, and Uncle Erich, in faraway Shanghai, were my only remaining close relatives. I could hardly know then that forty-five years later I would find another, much younger, cousin, Ruth.

“We need visas to go to China, don’t we?”

“Yes,” said Simon, “You can go to the Chinese consulate downtown and get one right away. Here in Tel Aviv it’s not so easy—China and Israel still don’t have diplomatic relations. There’s a Chinese tourist office here, but I don’t think it issues visas. Ruth and I are going to have to fly to Hong Kong and get them there.”

“Okay, I’ll at least get a visa photo taken today. Maybe I’ll stop in San Francisco for a day or two to break up the trip and see the kids on the way.”

My son, Jacob, a pediatric oncologist, lives in that breathtaking city with his wife, Amy, and their twins, Gabriella and Joshua, four years old. Their life is hectic, and I’d just been there, with Simon, for Thanksgiving. But you can never see your grandchildren too much, and I try to go along with their plans and help out—even driving the city’s hills—when I visit.

“Good idea,” Simon replied. “Listen, I’ve got to go. Everyone’s working at breakneck speed all day to get things done before going to the safe rooms at night. I’ll keep you posted. By the way, have you given any more thought to what we talked about in Paris?”

“Here and there.”

“I hope more ‘here’ than ‘there.’ Okay, Lily, go back to sleep, for God’s sake. I love you.”

Going back to sleep would not be easy. It was hard to turn off the unrelenting news coverage, especially now that I’d heard from my personal correspondent in Israel. Even though everyone was all right so far, the constant barrage of blasts and flames was terrifying, and updates on diplomatic efforts did nothing to relieve the tension.

What Simon meant—what we’d talked about in Paris—was also unsettling, in a different way.

We had acknowledged being in love with each other. We’d shared intimacy, commitment, and companionship. I could see living like this forever and I thought he could, too. Yet, in Paris, from out of the blue came an age-old question.

“Why don’t we get married?”

I didn’t laugh it off but didn’t answer seriously, either. “And give up my remote control?”

Lying there watching CNN in the wee hours was a poignant reminder that maybe my flippant answer spoke more truth than I let on. If Simon were lying here with me, would I be watching the war on TV right now? Possibly, if we were both awake and jet-lagged. Not the best example, as certainly he’d be as concerned about Israel from afar as I was. But on a typical night together, sometimes I wanted to watch “Nightline” and he preferred to relax with Johnny Carson, at least for an instant, until he’d click through to the next channel and then the next and the next...surfing, sampling, driving me nuts.

How superficial! That’s a reason not to get married? After all, there’s more than one television set in both of our apartments. And we don’t even watch them much. But the remote control has become a universal symbol of male influence, because men just click up and down and never settle on anything to watch, unless it’s sports. Such an annoyance, especially now with cable.

I find our life of being together often, but not all the time, perfect. Before Arthur’s death two years ago, I’d never lived on my own. Few women of my generation did. I like it. It’s nice to have a man around the house—or be the woman around his—but it’s nice to be a woman on my own, too. For now, at least.

I drifted in and out of slumber until seven and debated with myself about my usual morning swim. I felt chilled, drowsy, and lazy but decided it would be good for me. And it was—in a way that both energized me and provided a sense of accomplishment, whatever

else I might or might not get done that day. That's fundamentally why I swim almost every day when there's a pool handy. Home from the athletic club, with CNN and exploding Tel Aviv still dominating my sensibility, it was hard to focus on China or anything else. But the day was surprisingly warm and sunny for January, my budding head cold seemed to have abated, and I decided to walk downtown. With plenty of time, I ambled all the way to the Lower East Side, stopping at a small photo shop for visa pictures, en route to a one o'clock lunch date that had been on my calendar since before I left for Europe.

Marty Zuckert, my longtime friend and sometime editor, stood at the head of a ridiculously long line waiting for tables at Katz's Deli, which had become a tourist destination since Meg Ryan's onscreen orgasmic reenactment in the film *When Harry Met Sally* two years earlier. Everyone wanted to have what she had at Katz's. But for me eating here with Marty was a tradition that preceded by three decades the deli's newfound status as a culinary destination. And no one would have mistaken Marty for a Meg Ryan groupie! The Dashiell Hammett shock of white hair, the ground-sweeping tweed great coat, and the long Burberry scarf wound tightly around his neck made Marty an even more flamboyant persona in his early seventies than he was thirty years before, when, still dark-haired, his was the first Jewish Afro among my acquaintances.

Bronx-born and a New Yorker to the core, the now Washington-based Marty embraced me in a bear hug, and we followed a waiter to the same two-top where we'd sat for years. Typically, the monologue started gushing out before we even sat down.

"Lily, how are you? You look fabulous! I'm so glad we could do this. You're just back from Europe, right? How was it? The new granddaughter? Catch me up! When did you get back?"

“I got back yesterday, and all’s well. Except for what’s going on in Israel, of course. I was up half the night watching CNN.”

“Me, too. Don’t you have family there? Are they safe?”

“I talked to Simon...”

“Ah, yes. Simon. The swain,” Marty said. “If I didn’t check out Bill Cunningham’s pictures every Sunday in the *Times*, I’d never know what my fancy society lady friend is up to, now that she’s got Simon.” He raised his water glass in a mock toast.

I ignored the tinge of sneer. “Simon is in Tel Aviv right now, too, and he had my relatives in a safe room, which is what they’re calling shelters there. But who knows how long it will go on?”

“Indeed. Saddam Hussein is a real *meshugenah*, to be charitable. One good thing is so far the reports of chemical warfare aren’t credible. But it sure is disturbing. Here I came up yesterday, a day earlier than I needed to be in New York, thinking it would make the trip more restful. All night in the hotel I couldn’t turn off the damn TV.”

“Remind me what you’re doing in New York, Marty. Just craving a pastrami fix? Work?”

“It’s so good to be in New York again. DC’s such a wasteland for deli. Among other things. How I’d love to move back here. But what can I say? That’s where the job is, and at my age I’m lucky to have any job, let alone the *Smithsonian Magazine*. Yeah, I’ve got a few people to see here for work, but mainly I came in for my nephew’s wedding this weekend. Big extravaganza—at the Pierre, no less.”

Marty took a breath long enough to stab at the ubiquitous plate of pickles. “That kind of wedding can be fun,” I said, “especially if you’re not the one paying for it.”

“I don’t know,” he said, “since Nancy died, I feel like a fifth wheel at big social events. But my son and daughter-in-law will be there, thank goodness. And I figure they’ll seat me next to some woman on the prowl. Too bad you’re already spoken for, Lily.”

That really shocked me. Marty and I went back thirty-five years as friends and colleagues. I was married to Arthur for all but the last two of them, and Marty was either married or living with someone. Nancy was a lovely long-term companion who had passed away several months before. Was this a romantic overture?

“I don’t know that I’m spoken for, but Simon and I have a nice relationship going. Kind of a side benefit of finding my Seder plate.”

“Well, if you ever . . . no, forget it.”

“Let’s not spoil a wonderful friendship,” I said, patting his hand. “So, are you working? Another mystery on the horizon?”

My foray to the Judaica auction where I’d discovered my family’s Seder plate began on assignment from Marty to write about antique Jewish ritual items and the market for them in light of the recent fall of the Soviet Union.

The personal story that resulted turned out to not be what he and the *Smithsonian Magazine* envisioned, and they’d given me a “kill” fee. However, the *New Yorker* picked it up, and the reaction to my piece shocked me. Besides significant news coverage, Holocaust survivors all over the world immediately began writing and calling to ask me

to find their looted family treasures—ranging from cheap, commercially produced silver Kiddush cups to priceless Rembrandts.

Using some money left to me by Uncle Nachman, I'd established a global foundation to be based in Israel and headed by my art historian cousin, Ruth. Her first goal was to set up a registry of art still sought by pre-war owners or their heirs. So, despite the fact that I hadn't personally taken on another Afikomen-style quest or even another free-lance assignment since then, I was "hot" by editor standards. Marty was still kicking himself for not accepting my story as it evolved, in spite of its ultimately personal nature—and the expenses incurred along the way.

"A new mystery? Funny you should ask. As of today I'm preparing to leave for Shanghai to look for a stolen Torah."

"A Torah in Shanghai? You're joking?"

"No. If you read my *New Yorker* piece..."

"Yeah," he grumbled, "Who didn't?"

"Then you know my cousin in Israel is half-Chinese and half-Jewish. Her aunt and uncle in China have just had a Torah stolen. On the way here I had photos taken for my visa to China. I can get quick turnaround from the Chinese Consulate and leave in a few days."

"Wow! Maybe I could snag the story this time?"

I hadn't even considered the professional possibilities this trip could afford. "You had your shot last time," I said.

"Yeah, I know. We blew it. Are you going to talk to the *New Yorker*?"

“Honestly, Marty, this just came up overnight. I’m not going to pitch it for an assignment. I have neither the time nor the energy to do it right now. You know I don’t need the *Smithsonian* or the *New Yorker* for an advance or expenses. Let’s see how this turns out.”

“OK, but please don’t talk to anyone at the *New Yorker* until I call you. Maybe I can talk the *Smithsonian* into it this time!” he said, slathering brown mustard on a piece of rye bread and plopping it onto a piping hot mound of peppery sliced meat.

“In your dreams, Marty.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised about a Torah having been in Shanghai, but now? So many years after the Jews left? You know, I had an aunt who lived there. Married to my mother’s brother. Her father worked for the Trans-Siberian railroad in Russia, and he was transferred to Harbin, when the czar wanted to extend it there. A whole Jewish community sprung up that was happy to be free of pogroms. My aunt was born there, I think, but she and her mother moved to Shanghai after the father died. Some other relatives had gone there after the Russian Revolution. My aunt and her mother left China long before the war—in the late twenties. They had relatives in Montreal, who sponsored them out, and my uncle was working there—running bootleg booze during Prohibition—as a young man. And the rest is history. But Aunt Teddy was quite a character...”

“Aunt Teddy?”

“Yeah. Her real name was Theodora. Her parents were *ferbrente* Zionists. They had a thing for Theodor Herzl and named her after him. Aunt Teddy was really something. Even though she left China at something like nineteen, her tiny little apartment was full

of all sort of Chinese *tschotchkes*, and she would wear those skinny little Chinese dresses...”

“*Cheongsam* they’re called.”

“Right. Really cheesy ones she had probably had made in a little Chinese tailor shop three blocks from here and, believe me, she didn’t have the figure. But she was our own Jewish Anna May Wong from the Bronx at every bar mitzvah and wedding.”

“That’s a riot. She must have stuck out like a sore thumb.”

“Well, she sure added a little exoticism to the family. My mother and grandmother laughed and talked about her behind her back and didn’t treat her very nicely. But Aunt Teddy was a good lady, and I had a nice relationship with her. She loved me, because I’d sit and listen endlessly to her stories about life in China. She’d haul out a scrapbook she’d kept since she left. We’d pore over it page by page as she explained the postcards and pictures in it. She started collecting as a young girl before she left and added to it when she received letters and cards from girlfriends who stayed longer.”

“Wow, I’d love to see that.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Probably the end of next week.”

“When I get back to DC Monday, I’ll send it overnight on Federal Express.”

“That would be great, Marty. Thanks. Look at that.”

At that moment an elderly Chinese couple accompanied by a little girl of about ten sat down at the table next to us. All three were elegantly dressed in beautifully tailored

clothes—the man in a camel hair coat over a grey flannel three-piece pin-striped suit and conservative tie, the woman’s black cashmere coat topping a black St. John suit, the child in a red wool coat with navy velveteen collar and cuffs over a red party dress and tights. Elegant by Katz Deli standards, for sure, they looked like escapees from lunch at the Four Seasons. “Ha!” Marty said, “Finally, some payback for the Jewish infatuation with Chinese food. Maybe they could give you some advice about going to Shanghai to find a stolen Torah.”

“Not so loud,” I said under my breath. “The man turned this way when he heard Shanghai. Can’t be too careful.”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot how experienced a sleuth you’ve become. The Jewish Miss Marple.”

I laughed. “*Et tu, Marty?*”

After lunch I hugged him and said goodbye. Although the family next to us was an incongruity at Katz’s (and probably in Chinatown), nominally that district lay several blocks south of East Houston Street. But it had begun to meld with the Lower East Side. The prospect of my forthcoming trip made me more attuned to the Chinese businesses and their indigenous clientele I passed before turning uptown. Also more dubious about the likelihood of succeeding on the upcoming quest. Would this be a ridiculous wild goose chase? The Miss Marple epithet notwithstanding, my credentials as a private detective were nil; with *Afikomen* at least I had connections and referrals to initial contacts, as well as both personal and historical context to start with. China was so much more obscure, foreign, and—well—mysterious. But I was a journalist and, after picking up my visa photos, I realized the discussion with Marty had stimulated my professional

instincts. With or without an assignment, I needed to do some research so on the way home I stopped at one of my favorite haunts, the New York Public Library.

Baghdadi and Russian Jews in China? The card catalogue yielded practically nothing—just a few mentions I quickly jotted down, including a smattering of references to the Europeans, like Uncle Erich, who settled there to escape the Holocaust. But a book on the Jews of Kaifeng piqued my interest enough to check out. It was odd to page through illustrations of Torah scrolls being read by men with distinctly Asian physiognomies who did so clutching a traditional *yad* pointer. These were the so-called “real” Jews of China, as the preface described them. Newspaper microfiche from 1938 to the war yielded more. Stories about Jews arriving in Shanghai from Europe. This was familiar, of course, because of Uncle Erich. Going back to 1918, I found a small piece about Jews leaving Russia for China. Although I could sit reading old newspapers nonstop for days, I found little to enlighten me on the forthcoming mission to Shanghai and I was anxious to return to CNN. I went home, acknowledging I clearly had a lot to learn.

The arrival a few days later of Aunt Teddy’s scrapbook took me into a Jewish world in Shanghai I would have never expected. Marty had truly provided a treasure trove of background material and orientation for my trip.

Theatre programs from Yiddish productions, snapshots of young people at dances at the Jewish Club. A photo of the club’s exterior looked like a shiny white embassy in Washington set on landscaped grounds. Wedding couples and their families. Young boys wearing the uniforms of Betar, a Zionist youth organization. A bar mitzvah boy holding a Torah. Every photo was labeled on the back with names Aunt Teddy knew and where the people moved after leaving Shanghai. It was remarkable she’d kept up so assiduously

with friends, considering she herself had left China so young and so long before the mass exodus of Jews and others that accompanied the Communist takeover.

But they had, indeed, taken over—more than forty years before my quest. Aunt Teddy's Shanghai Jewish world was long gone. Interesting, yes, but unlikely to point me toward finding a stolen Torah there.