

# Chapter One

## Robin

The week before Labor Day, I made several attempts to work my way into a group of local teens that spent much of their time sitting on parked cars, reciting their dreams to each other, smoking whatever they could get their hands on and sniffing glue when there was nothing to smoke. There was no ritualistic acceptance or rejection, they just gathered.

I danced in this limbo until Robin showed up one day after vacationing with her parents. She slowly moved back into what seemed to be her spot, between Adam and Jerry. No one introduced us, it just wasn't done . . . and it mattered little because once she crossed my path, I stopped trying to fit in, shifting my attention to her.

Most of the kids on my new block were Jewish. There were differences, but not enough to keep me from seeking membership. I had been away too long to understand the hippie culture that had erased most of the stigmas attached to those differences. My immigrant parents had hijacked my American adolescence off to an isolated, small southern Italian town for four years. So, even though I felt the depth of my detachment, they never once made me feel I didn't belong; it just wasn't an issue . . . everyone belonged.

This was the attitude Robin brought back into the group. It wasn't as pronounced or obvious until she appeared, making the relationships between the guys and the girls seem unsuspectingly egalitarian. The years in Italy had turned me into an old-fashioned romantic, so on my Bronx block, during the social revolutions of the late Sixties, I missed the signs completely. Barriers were falling, and women had taken the opportunity to level the field a bit.

I kept studying Robin: her crystal blue eyes, her long, metallic black hair, spaghetti headband, peasant skirt and the sheer, loose blouse that fell like a soft shroud over her cocked breasts. I was amazed that she wore no bra and that her nipples had softly protruded into the paper-thin fabric. Incapable of pulling my eyes away from her chest, my small mind had exposed what little I understood about women.

I stared attentively, off balance and awkwardly. When she stared back in frustration, it was too late to cover up.

"See anything you like?" she barked.

Unable to connect thoughts to words, my mouth was left to its own device.

"No . . . I mean, yes . . . I mean no, I uh, really like your top; I mean your shirt."

"Yeah, I'm sure you do . . . asshole!"

Stunned, I stiffened like a mannequin, the paralysis denying me a reaction. Then she started in again, not wanting to let it go.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you some immigrant dickhead that just got off some ship? They are fuckin' tits . . . are these the first ones you've ever seen?"

With that, she lifted her shirt to reveal it all. My first instinct would have been to keep looking and stay focused, but the embarrassment was too powerful, causing me to look away. It would be several months before I was able to catch up socially and live down the episode. It was also my first experience with the

liberated female. The other guys in the group had come to accept the new order, and the veiled nudity had become a familiar sight . . . I just wasn't there yet.

I always blushed easily around girls, and I must have been on fire that day. When I was finally able to gather myself, I turned and silently walked back to my building. I tried to minimize the blow to my ego, but the little guy on my shoulder kept reminding me to accept the embarrassment as due punishment. I went to bed that night replaying the episode in my mind trying to re-write the scene; coming up with the better ending where I was either able to avoid insulting Robin or improvise some cool statement smoothing over the misstep, but I failed miserably. No matter how good the editing, the psychological manipulation failed.

Yet, it didn't stop me from thinking about her. I dealt with my awkwardness, courageously entertaining the possibility that I could get her to like me. I knew I lacked the street appeal. I didn't smoke tobacco or pot, I didn't sniff glue, and my clothes had no dye, holes or patches on them. I landed back in America with fashionable Italian clothing. At a time when few people wore jeans in Italy, I had brought none back. My pants were all cotton or linen bell bottoms. My hair was cut stylishly and none of it fell softly over my ears, or down to my shoulders. One of the only battles I ever won with my mother was to get her to stop giving me astronaut crew cuts. I did have a couple of shirts with the long collars, but those were ahead of their time in America. I was looking disco when everyone else was Woodstock.

Robin, on the other hand, had committed herself entirely to the progressive, liberal hippie lifestyle, at least aesthetically. She never had any intentions of going to Woodstock, nor of trading her life to a commune for the extremely comfortable one in her parents' large, terraced apartment in the newer high-rises on Olinville Avenue in the North Bronx. She didn't dye her own shirts or sew on her own patches—Macy's did it for her. She didn't wear a bra probably because her breasts were too small, and it doubled nicely as a symbolic gesture towards Women's Lib. We were all convinced that feminism was practiced by tough-looking lesbians, not by upper middle-class sympathizers influenced by their socially liberated parents. Besides, the hippie look appealed both as a fashion statement and a lifestyle to many girls like Robin.

With the summer of '69 shedding its last days, the group continued to meet at the same spot, and although Robin paid little attention to me, it didn't keep me from being there. She always smelled good, so despite the Populist movement to "become one with nature and smell like it too," she showered and wore her mother's perfumes. Her hair had a perpetual shine to it, she wore a silvery gloss on her plump lips, and her nails were polished in blood red. She smoked pot only because it provided instant equality with the guys and was a way of neutralizing her beauty. She was aware that there was a thin line between being viewed as an easy lay and a serious contender for attention. It became increasingly obvious that beyond the Pop exterior, Robin would probably make certain at some point in the future to provide for herself the same comfortable, material-driven lifestyle as her parents with a handful of socially correct modifications.

The well-disguised alter ego couldn't keep her from taking me a bit more seriously. I may have been unappealingly different, but she overlooked it, oddly consumed with the thought of me not attending the local public high school, but rather an all-male Valdesian Preparatory School. She never shied away from injecting a probing remark about my academic life.

"Jerry mentioned that you're going to some Catholic high school with no girls. How can you go to a school with no girls? Aren't you afraid to turning homo? You already dress like you're gay. Aren't you afraid of becoming a priest? The Catholic ones can't get married you know, and they can't have sex."

I tried to avoid the topic, so I didn't react, wishing for it to go away. These episodes made me blame my mother even more for feeding my confusions, insisting on sending me to the Prep, despite my desperate hesitations listing the ways I could be damaged.

Robin's remarks always received a vote of confidence and a few giggles from most of the other members of our group except for Jerry; he was the group's conscience. His room was littered with record albums, but

he mostly listened to Dylan, the Doors and Simon and Garfunkel. It was easy to tell that much of the way Jerry approached topics was influenced by the lyrics in his music. He mediated heated arguments in a non-patronizing and appealing way, the kind one would expect from someone older.

Jerry was eighteen, that's why it didn't surprise me when he came to my defense on the all-boy school topic. I had practically expected him to do so.

"Back off, Robin. Just because there are all boys, doesn't mean he's gay, he's a preppie. It takes a lot more than that to figure he's gay. Just because you refuse to get laid doesn't mean you're a lesbian!"

You could have cut through the thick, sudden silence with an ax. There it was, as clear as day: not only were these remarks an exposé on Robin's sex life, they also hinted that Jerry and Robin had made attempts at intimate moments that had failed to live up to expectations. The comment accurately defined Robin's attitude towards men and sex. Her interest in either seemed more to satisfy a social need than some burning passion.

"You're such a fucking asshole, you know that! What the fuck is wrong with you? Just because I wouldn't let YOU fuck me doesn't mean I haven't gotten laid!"

Robin's words rang out like a cannon volley, and with the precision of a sharpshooter, those words, tinged with spit, landed squarely on Jerry's face. She turned and walked away with the anger and animosity of a jilted lover. Her middle finger sprung erect from her clenched fist, hard like a marble statue . . . it seemed twice its normal size.

I wanted to run off to console her, but I knew that to do so would compromise my relationship with the guys. I mean, I spent a lot more time with them hanging out, talking Yankees and Giants, pizzeria lunches and bullshit sessions. Disregarding my feelings for Robin, I decided it was a price I wasn't ready to pay. So, setting aside the tempting opportunity, my quest for Robin's affections would have to wait. Besides, I was indebted to Jerry, and I sensed that there was a male support system at work that, despite not being enforced and with no gang character, still attracted a dedicated crew.

In those final days of August, I would see Robin frequently walk past my building; the path that one would have to take to get to the stores on Allerton Avenue. My stoop stood between the two, and since she traveled the route consistently, I would make it a point to be out in front faking some task or reading a book looking to exchange a quick greeting. I knew that we hadn't gotten over the Jerry episode, so she spent less and less time with the group, and as August faded into the Labor Day weekend, she wasn't making her daily pilgrimages to Abe's candy store for her cigarettes and gum. I would find out later that she spent that weekend annually at the Jersey Shore with her family.

Had I known, the thought of her in a bikini on the sands of Wildwood Beach would have caused me to miss her more. My mother used that last summer weekend to get me ready for my first day at St. Killian Prep. I had completed my freshman year in an Italian high school, so I would start my high school life in America as a sophomore. We walked Allerton in search of socks and underwear and some newer dress ties. The only thing my mother knew for certain about the dress code was that I had to wear a tie. I had very little to add, and since neither one of us read Father Sullivan's Code of Conduct we received at orientation, my first day at school would be a total bust with reprimands and insults. So, I would come to hate the place before even setting foot into a classroom or listening to the first damning lecture about our warped characters. My life was about to diverge onto two pathways that would have me reconcile segregated American experiences with which I could hardly claim familiarity.