



Chapter 1: A Yellow Victorian in Chestnut Hill

Hillary Jacobs

On February 26, 1979, the moon eclipsed the sun over Portland, Oregon. My father Sheldon Jacobs, a Distinguished Professor in Astrophysics at Temple University, arranged to be a visiting professor at Portland State University for the event. When the forecast called for rain Daddy chartered a Cessna to take him above the clouds. But he missed his flight and the eclipse in order to rush my mother Audrey to Bess Kaiser Hospital where I entered the world as their blue-eyed daughter with dark brown hair. They named me Hillary JoAnne. My father was thirty-eight at the time and my mother was only nineteen. Six months earlier they had married at Temple Beth Zion in my hometown of Philadelphia.

I grew up an only child in the affluent community of Chestnut Hill. My parents and I lived with my granddad Ephraim in a yellow Victorian that had white-trimmed gables, bay windows, and a steep mansard roof. I loved my zeyde. He was a gentle soul and a great storyteller who mingled colorful Yiddish words with his English. Each Friday at sundown he said the Sabbath prayers while Mom lit the Shabbat candles. Granddad often told stories about our family history. His great-grandparents were Ashkenazi Jews who had left Ukraine to work in the Pennsylvania coal mines. Their son Isaiah Waldman had purchased the Victorian at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Granddad, when Isaiah was a young man, he somehow

came into money and established Waldman Pawn Brokers on Philly's Jewelry Row and provided my family with its legacy and wealth. Isaiah left the house and business to his son Joseph who in turn left everything to his son Ephraim Waldman, my mother's father and my only living grandparent. During my early childhood, Granddad managed the Waldman business together with his son Burt, my mother's only sibling.

My mother never complained about quitting college to marry my father, at least not to me. Daddy treated her royally and Mom relished her role as wife of a distinguished professor and mother of a prodigious child. She had an "always look on the bright side of everything" personality. She was a five-foot-four beautiful brunette with penetrating blue eyes and she dressed herself and me in stylish clothes from New York, London, and even Paris and Milan. She loved discussing the day I'd have a spectacular wedding because her own wedding had been a quick, private affair that didn't include her mother. My grandmother Ruth had died when Mom was sixteen and at that vulnerable age when she really needed her mother. I don't think Mom ever fully recovered from her mother's sudden death even though Granddad Ephraim became her Rock of Gibraltar. Mom was a brilliant and beautiful woman who sometimes became emotional and sentimental over unimportant matters. But she rarely uttered a sharp word at me or Daddy because she was an exceptional mother and wife.

I didn't inherit my mother's disposition. My emotions have always been steady perhaps because I didn't have any siblings to argue with me. My childhood involved Mom, Daddy, and Zeyde and they always made me feel talented and smart. Before I started school, the only children I really played with were my cousins Fletcher and Floyd, Burt's sons, who sat with me at a card table during holiday and birthday meals while the adults sat at the dining room table.

While Granddad and Mom tried to bring religion into my life, Daddy devoted himself to my intellectual well-being. He was only two inches taller than Mom and had green eyes and balding red hair turning grey. Daddy believed in the Almighty but didn't pray aloud like my zeyde unless Mom called upon him to do so. "Your intellect is your ticket to the world," Daddy liked to tell me. Before I even went to school, he was taking me to the Rittenhouse Astronomical Society's meetings at the Franklin Institute and to his lectures at Temple University where I quietly drew pictures at the back of the auditorium. Over the years Daddy and I watched meteor showers, lunar and solar eclipses, and NASA events on TV beginning with the 1981 Columbia launch that initiated the Space Shuttle program. When Daddy first told me about Nobel Prize winners, I believed that one day he would receive the award. I loved Zeyde and Mom with all my heart, and I withstood Mom's constant primping, but I idolized my father and aimed to please him more than anyone else.

When I turned five my parents enrolled me at the Spring Side Elementary Academy, an elite private school for girls. I quickly surpassed all the other students but my safe, unimposing world of three pampering adults drastically shifted. For the first time in my life, I faced ridicule. My classmates called me "half-pint" and "bookworm" and when my father drop me off at school, they teased me by saying that he was my grandfather. I confided in my parents like I always did and they encouraged me to ignore these taunts and be proud of my accomplishments and abilities. My mother even suggested that being petite was a fashion statement. Bolstered by my parents' encouragement, I began standing up to my classmates and making claims that my father was a brilliant physicist who would one day win a Nobel Prize. The other little girls didn't even know about this coveted international honor and that left me feeling even more emboldened.

The Events of 1991

My granddad's passing on New Year's Day, 1991, left me and my parents devastated, especially Mom. But she graciously arranged the funeral with the help of Uncle Bert. After the traditional seven-day period of mourning, Mom started acting manic-depressive. She always needed something big to plan or she would sink into depression. In early February, she decided to throw me a large bat mitzvah reception for my twelfth birthday and invite my entire eighth grade class, everyone she knew at the Beth Zion Temple, and everyone Daddy knew at the university.

I immediately rejected the idea and explained to my fragile mother, "I don't want to be the center of so much attention." When that didn't work, I protested that certain Jewish sects forbid girls from touching the holy scriptures and that mitzvah rites for girls didn't start until the 1920's whereas boys have had bar mitzvahs since the beginning of time. "Why should I celebrate a bat mitzvah when it's so unfair to girls?" I asked. But my arguments got me nowhere and Mom fell back on the words she often used, "It's what Zeyde would have wanted." In the end I agreed to the party because I realized that Mom needed to organize the event as a distraction from her grief.

After a spectacular party for me at the Marriott, my parents and I went home and relaxed in the front room of the old Victorian before going to bed. I sat on the floor at the marble coffee table placing my gifts and cards in a large wooden keepsake box with butterflies fluttering around the Tree of Life on its top. It originally belonged to my grandmother Ruth and Mom had passed it down to me for the occasion.

Mom was sitting on the plastic-covered sofa and sipping a glass of Manischewitz and Daddy was reclining in his armchair, enjoying a Bailey's nightcap. They had been drinking since

mid-afternoon and were acting slightly intoxicated. But I didn't mind. I was happy they were proud of me and that my mom had escaped her sorrow, at least for the day. She promised to help me with my many thank-you notes then Daddy retold the story of my birth, a tradition he had started on my first birthday. It was a story I loved to hear. He then cleared his throat and added, "I have a wonderful surprise for my two best girls. This summer we are going to see the July 11th solar eclipse in Mexico and this time I'm sure the skies won't cloud up like they did in Portland at the time of Hillary's birth. After the eclipse, we'll rent a car and tour the Maya ruins. I've already cleared my schedule for the trip."

I was overjoyed with the news of yet another great surprise from my wonderful father. But Mom began arguing that Daddy had failed to warn her about his lofty plan. She eventually became so agitated that she stood up and exclaimed, "I refuse to travel the year of my father's passing. It's not proper. It's a sin against the Almighty."

"Audrey," Daddy said. "You must go on this trip. For our daughter's sake!"

My mother's face reddened with fury and she uncharacteristically lashed out at my dad because by now she was totally drunk. "I won't go to Mexico, Professor Jacobs!" she said. "You can't make me go and you can't take my daughter. She's not even yours!"

The living room instantly fell silent. I could hardly breathe and my chest felt heavy and crushed. Daddy set his tumbler aside and glared at his wife of twelve years. I could see that her words had left him dumbfounded. And he was also quite drunk. He remained silent for a moment then stood from his armchair and yelled, "You menshugana bitch. Nafka Shikker. Drunken whore." Then he left the room.

I had never heard my father swear before and he rarely said anything in Yiddish. In fact, my parents almost never argued and they drank only on special occasions although since

Granddad's passing my mother had been having an occasional glass of wine to help her withstand the evenings. In truth, I had never seen them drunk and yelling at each other and what had just happened left me so stunned and unable to speak that I rearranged in the keepsake box my gold necklace with my name in Hebrew, a Hamsa pendant, a Star of David, and cards, cash, and checks. All the while I kept thinking about my parents' marriage and my birth. I didn't resemble my father nor did I even favor Audrey except for her blue eyes. I glanced at Mom who was now sitting on the sofa quietly nibbling a piece of mandelbread. She had no tears. No expression. She probably didn't even remember what she had just said to Daddy or what he had said to her.

"Is Daddy my father?" I finally asked, staring at my mother's pretty blue eyes.

She snapped to attention and said to me, "Yes, of course, Hill. Sheldon's your father. Why would you ask such a stupid question? Bat mitzvah."

"No, he's not. You said so yourself, Mom! And why did you have a rushed wedding six months before I was born?"

My mother sighed, sipped her grape wine, then told me a story that shook my pristine world even more than the passing of Zeyde. "I was eighteen, Hill," she said. "In college and rebellious. My mother had died. I slept around. It's what girls did back in the seventies. When I found myself pregnant, I consulted my rabbi about getting an abortion."

"An abortion? Mom!" Her words were becoming toxic. I didn't know if I could withstand learning anything more.

"I was scared, Hill. I didn't want your granddad to know I was pregnant. Rabbi Goldman introduced me to Professor Sheldon Jacobs and arranged our marriage. Granddad was happy. I was happy because I wanted to be your mother. And your father was ecstatic. He needed a wife

and family. A beautiful Jewish girl to light the Shabbat candles. We married and your loving father took me to Portland where you were born under a solar eclipse.”

“Who *is* my daddy?” I whispered so my father wouldn’t hear me in case he was eavesdropping. I felt so confused at the time. I did not know about anything. I was normally calm and rational because that’s how my life had always been, until Zeyde died.

“Sheldon is your daddy, Hill. That’s all you need to know.” Mom reached over and brushed back my hair.

I slapped away her hand, glared at her, and said, “Mother! Who is my daddy?”

Mom took my hand and kept me from pulling away. “Back then, I was a wild child on campus. Your granddad paid for my private dorm room.”

“Who is my daddy?”

“I don’t know. He was either a rabbi, someone I met at the Jewish Union, or, well. . . maybe a married man. They were all Jewish. You are entirely Jewish, bat mitzvah. I’m afraid all these men are long gone. I don’t know them.” She paused for a moment, looked at me, and sternly said, “Hillary JoAnne! Sheldon Jacobs is your father! That’s all you ever need to know. Promise me, bubbala,” my mother then implored. “Never tell Sheldon you learned this secret. It would break his heart. And I truly love your daddy. He’s my Rock of Gibraltar.”

I looked at my mother and saw a broken woman redeemed by a good man. A mensch. In that instant, I realized that Daddy *was* Mom’s complete support now that Granddad was gone, especially emotionally. For a moment, I remained speechless. Then I hugged her because it was my duty to keep the mitzvah of honoring my father and mother. “Mom,” I suddenly thought to say, “Dad heard you tell me I’m not his daughter.”

“Don’t worry about that,” she replied. “He’s drunk and I’ll tell him I explained to you I was just being stupid and mean. He’ll believe me.” She took another sip of her wine then reclined on the crackling sofa and fell asleep.

After learning my mother’s shocking secret, I refused to light the Shabbat candles despite my new status as bat mitzvah. I didn’t know how to feel about the God of my mother because I couldn’t believe that such a powerful force could so cruelly take from me the person who I admired most in the world.

I didn’t say anything more about it to Mom because the matter easily distressed her like a lot of things did during the year of Granddad’s passing. And I couldn’t speak to my father about what troubled me because he was involved. Fortunately, Daddy seemed oblivious to what Mom had revealed and neither of my parents said anything about my sudden aloofness from their religion. Mom knew the reason and Sheldon wasn’t concerned. He was happy with Audrey performing the Friday night ritual while he said the prayers after Zeyde had passed. But a wall had gone up between me and God because the man I’d always idolized wasn’t related to me and I’d probably never know my real father. It didn’t take me long, however, to decide that Sheldon was, and always would be, my father. He gave me my name. Loved me as his own. And adored me unconditionally. He shared the universe with me and when he took me to watch the solar eclipse from the Sun Pyramid and to the Maya ruins, he encouraged me to combine my interests in archaeology and astronomy and become an archaeoastronomer. Even though I had high school between me and college, I was as ambitious as my father and planned to graduate in three years so I could start working on my chosen profession.

Soon after we returned home from Mexico the summer of ‘91, I began classes at William Penn Charter. This brought another drastic change to my life—encountering boys and competing

with them for top grades. My small stature, plain looks, and intellectual prowess, made me feel awkward around them. I was usually smarter than everyone else, like Sheldon, and I quickly learned that boys do not like this trait in a girl. Additionally, most of my classmates, both boys and girls, loved sports and I had no interest in games. I was too busy working toward my goal of attending college in three years.

At sixteen, I went out on my first date with a boy named Darrin but students at Penn Charter called him Derwood because of the TV show *Bewitched* where the witch Endora called her son-in-law Darrin, Derwood. I met Darrin in physics class and we enjoyed discussing our science projects. He had a good sense of humor and seemed to like me as much as I liked him. One afternoon I invited him to study at my house. He came over a few more times and even met my parents. They liked him too and agreed he could take me to *Braveheart* as long as he brought me directly home. I was happy with my first date and assumed Darrin was too because he invited me to join him on a daytrip skiing on Shawnee Mountain. I asked my parents for permission and Daddy said it was up to my mother. Then Mom discouraged me by making a typical mom remark. “You’ll get hurt and you don’t even know how to ski.”

“Darrin says he’ll teach me,” I argued and Mom suddenly started talking about my grandmother Ruth and how she had taken up skiing just after WWII. She then agreed I could go for the day if I used my grandmother’s old skis.

“Darrin told me I can rent skis at the mountain lodge,” I said, but Mom had already sent Daddy to fetch the skis from the attic.

“Your grandmother was an excellent skier,” Mom said. “This will give you a way to connect with her spirit.”

I really had no choice in the matter. It was my mitzvah to honor my fragile mother, and besides, once Audrey made up her mind about something, Daddy and I both knew we had to go along with it.

My second date with Durwood was a complete fiasco. First, he whipped up Shawnee Hill on the T-bar and left me to figure it out for myself. I had told him that I'd skied before, like my grandmother Ruth, in an effort to explain why I was using the old skis. It was a stupid entanglement of illogic but I felt trapped. If I mentioned my mother's delicate condition, one thing would lead to the next and I didn't want to explain anything about my mother.

I attempted to use the T-bar but kept falling and blocking everyone behind me. Finally, a kind soul showed me how to use the pully device. I then made it to the top of the slope but one of my antique skis came loose and slid down the hill. Another kind soul fetched it for me, then suggested I be more careful. All the while, Darrin was busy enjoying himself on the slopes. By the time we left Shawnee Mountain, I was angrier with Durwood than embarrassed for myself.

When I told my parents about the date, Mom tried to call Darrin's parents to discuss how rudely their son had behaved but I literally stopped her from dialing the phone. Then she and my father encouraged me not to worry about boys until I became a doctor of science in ancient astronomy. "I promise you, Hill," Mom said. "One day you'll meet a nice man who'll appreciate your intelligence and never make you look foolish."

After that second date, I avoided Darrin in physics class and in the halls of Penn Charter and he avoided me. I kept to my academic pursuits and rarely even talks to boys, and whenever I did, it strictly concerned academic matters.

During my third and last year, Daddy helped me apply to MIT, Harvard, Stanford, and Temple. Each university immediately accepted me and I was prepared to work on a joint major

in astrophysics and anthropology at MIT but then in early spring, Daddy and I attended a lecture at the Franklin Institute called *Songs of the Cosmos: Archaeoastronomy in the Desert SW*. The pictures of SW archaeological sites and Arizona's unrivaled night skies, enticed me like the Maya ruins had. I wanted to study my chosen field in Arizona. Just prior to the deadline, I sent my application to the University of Arizona and their admissions immediately accepted me for enrollment.

My parents gave me a titanium Taurus and together we drove to my dormitory on the UA campus in Tucson then my parents flew back to Philly. Without pause, I immersed myself in both archaeology and astronomy with the intention of finishing my BS and MS in five years. It was my first time away from home, however, and I missed my parents enormously even though Mom called me every evening and always put Daddy on the phone. And they often joined me on my trips to the SW sites and I'd fly home to Chestnut Hill every holiday break.

The year I began my master's degree, my parents bought me a Santa Fe condo in Tucson. I then pursued a combined doctoral degree from the School of Anthropology and the Department of Astronomy and Stewart Observatory. I titled my dissertation *A Survey of Native American Astronomy in the Desert SW: A Path from the Ancestral Puebloans to their Modern Descendants*. For two years I met with Zuni, Hopi, and Navajo natives to learn their lore and traditions. Several times I traveled to Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, Montezuma's Castle, Casa Grande Ruins, and other SW archaeological sites. At the Pueblo Grande Museum I gave public lectures and at the UA I taught both astronomy and anthropology classes to undergraduates. I was as happy as I had been when Sheldon showed me the night sky and took me to Mexico. "You fell into the right niche," he often exclaimed.

At age twenty-four I completed my Ph.D requirements and planned a big graduation party at the Marriott in Tucson. I invited my classmates, students, professors, colleagues, and advisors. I had reached a pinnacle in my life and for the first time I wanted to be the center of attention.

One month before my scheduled reception the Space Shuttle Columbia exploded over Texas. The tragedy seemed to jinx the date of my party and I wanted to postpone it another month. But Daddy's commitments at Temple keep me from changing the date. I couldn't possibly celebrate the greatest achievement of my life without my parents so I kept the party scheduled for March 1, 2003.

As it turned out, I had been right to feel uneasy about scheduling my party so soon after the shuttle explosion. On the morning of my big event God once again pulled the carpet out from under my feet. My parents' charter flight from Philadelphia crashed landed at Sky Harbor Airport and a massive inferno instantly killed everyone on board. I could not even give my parents an open casket funeral to honor their Jewish beliefs and traditions.