

Fascination

by Susan Kleinman

CHAPTER ONE:

“I met the most fascinating woman today,” Jerry said as he dug into his supper.

Fascinating women seemed to land on Jerome Weisfeld the way pigeons land on telephone wires. Old women who spent the Holocaust hiding in haylofts. Young women who escaped the killing fields of Cambodia. Once, on a Metroliner to Washington, Jerry sat next to a high-ranking cabinet member, Jeanette Somebody-or-Other. On the way home, it was a woman who played the harp for the Trenton Philharmonic. Jerry hadn't shut up about her for weeks. “Did you know,” he'd asked Marilyn every evening, over dinner, “that the earliest harps were made from hunters' bows?”

And, of course, all of those fascinating women at the College. Jerry was a Professor at Maplefield, where, even now, in 1978, several years after the arrival of the college's first male undergraduates, the faculty and student body were still overwhelmingly female – each woman more enchanting than the next.

Well, at their age, Marilyn herself had been somewhat accomplished: co-captain of the fencing team in high school, some short stories in college literary magazines. But then she'd married Jerry and made babies, and her daughters – now 14, 11, 8 and 4 years old – occupied her days and her mind to the exclusion of all else. Every morning, four pink or purple outfits to set out. Every night, four pink or purple outfits to launder. The breakfasts and the lunches and the suppers and the snacks, the pediatrician's appointments and the PTA committees. Sunny-day treks to the park and rainy-day rounds of Candyland. Multiplication tables to be memorized and complicated shoe-box dioramas

to construct: The Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, with a battered old Ken doll in the starring role of Miles Standish. The Binding of Isaac, rendered in Play-Doh and Popsicle sticks.

And in between it all, the lists. Oh, God, the lists! Lists of annuals to plant and people to call and cards to mail. Lists of shopkeepers from whom she had promised to solicit prizes for the next Sisterhood raffle, and lists of stores that were to be boycotted forever because they refused to donate to the *last* Sisterhood raffle. The school phone-tree list in case there was a snow day. The synagogue phone-tree list in case somebody died. And recently, she had begun keeping another list, a secret list. A list of things she could do to make *herself* a bit more fascinating.

Well, she could audit a course at the college. As a faculty wife, she could sit in on anything for free. But what? And when? “Europe 1917-1945” started at 8:00, before the older three girls boarded their school bus, and “Introduction to Greek Archaeology” finished an hour after they came home in the afternoon. “Bilingualism in Louisiana” looked intriguing, but it met on Fridays, and Marilyn spent her Fridays preparing for the Sabbath, shopping and cleaning and braiding challahs and braising brisket and dressing salad and whipping egg whites into a froth for chocolate mousse, rushing and running and spinning and whirling from the minute she deposited Elana at nursery school in the morning until she lit the candles at sundown, said the blessing, and collapsed in an exhausted heap.

But she could get a Berlitz tape and learn Italian, or maybe take up an instrument. Okay, so not the harp-derived-from-a-hunter’s-bow. No money to buy one; no place to put one. But the guitar, perhaps, or the Israeli recorder. She could learn Transcendental Meditation, or pottery.

At the bottom of her list, in letters larger than the others, Marilyn had written, “Keep up on Current Events!!” and circled it in red pen. It was the most reasonable idea she had come up with, she knew; the one least likely to throw her whole household into upheaval. And so, every few days, she drove to the Mini-Mart and picked up *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, read a few paragraphs of each – but then gave up. It had been so long since she’d paid attention to politics that reading these articles made her feel as if she had walked into a movie in the middle, only to sit and wonder for the rest of the show: *Who is that man in the fedora? Why is that woman kissing her son goodbye on the dock?*

So the newspapers piled up unread, except for the casserole recipes Marilyn clipped out every Wednesday. On this particular night, she was trying the *Inquirer*’s latest variation on the tuna-noodle formula: “Tonno alla Fiorentina.” Instead of cream-of-mushroom soup, it called for cream-of-tomato. A brick of frozen chopped spinach replaced the usual peas. And it must not have been too bad, Marilyn noted with some satisfaction. Jerry had polished off his first serving in five minutes flat, and was asking for more.

She sprang up to get it for him, and while she stood at the stove, Jerry went on and on about the fascinating woman he had met that day, a visiting professor at the College, the world’s foremost expert on the work of John J. Audubon.

“Hmmm... sounds *fascinating*,” Marilyn murmured, as she opened the oven to check on the apple brown betty she was making for Jerry’s dessert. If he heard the sarcasm in her voice he didn’t react to it, just talked and talked about the research one of his students was completing, and the tenure review for one of his junior colleagues, and

the visiting Audubon expert, not stopping once to ask Marilyn how her day was or what the girls were up to or even whether she had called the roofer for a quote on the repair.

“Anyway,” he said, as he stuck his fork in the steaming mush of fish and macaroni that Marilyn had just plopped on his plate, “I was wondering if we could have a little dinner party – have the ornithologist over, and we owe the chairman, and maybe Goldfarb; I haven’t seen him in ages. Think you could throw something together?”

Marilyn suppressed a smile. Jerry may not have found her fascinating, but he could not deny that he needed her. She proofread his journal articles and pressed his shirts, and scheduled his lectures and booked his plane tickets. And though she’d never be vain enough to say so, she was proud of the academic dinner parties she threw for him. Marilyn always knew exactly what to serve at these gatherings. When they invited Irish-Lit professor Roger Conan (born Reuben Cohen), she made the brisket and matzo balls he yearned for but would never order in a restaurant. For Berel Helfgott, who commuted from Staten Island to teach the College’s one course in Jewish history, something from Joyce Chen or even Madhur Jaffrey – something Helfgott would never get to taste except here in the Weisfelds’ strictly kosher yet cosmopolitan home. When Jerry invited his graduate students, those determined zhlibs scraping by on their measly stipends, Marilyn cosseted them with baby lamb chops and raspberries out of season. And for the Wall Street types Jerry hoped would offer him consulting contracts (and who, Marilyn imagined, spent most other evenings nibbling thimblefuls of caviar and fussy little canapés at fundraisers for the Metropolitan Museum and the Metropolitan Opera) she served meatloaf, or even macaroni and cheese, to great delight – and once, even actual applause.

After she planned the menu, Marilyn turned her attention to the seating arrangements, writing names on index cards that she arranged and rearranged until she felt confident that the party would take off like a jumbo jet and last well past midnight, ending only when one of the graduate students looked at his watch and apologized with genuine sorrow: He had a review session to teach at 8 a.m. and a knee-high pile of papers to grade. The senior professors would all groan in empathy, cursing the pimply freshmen whose tuitions paid their salaries. And then, one by one, the guests would reluctantly pull on their coats, and depart in a sea of wool-blend tweed and down-filled nylon, calling thank-you's over their shoulders and heading for their ridiculously small and ostentatiously unfashionable cars.

“Sure. I could pull something together,” Marilyn told Jerry now. “How about next Thursday?”

“Great,” Jerry said – and then, a bit too quickly, “I’ll make the calls myself.” He relished these invitation calls, Marilyn knew. They allowed him to tell himself that he was a key player in the planning and execution of these soirees, that he was an equal partner in domestic duties, all without having to so much as scrape a carrot or scribble a grocery list.

The next night after dinner, Jerry took a piece of paper out of his battered briefcase and read Marilyn the guest list: Charlotte Lewis the Audubon expert had accepted, and Goldfarb was bringing a girl named Kim, (which, Marilyn guessed, given Goldfarb’s taste in dates, was spelled with a little heart instead of a dot over the *i*), and the chairman of the Econ department was coming with his wife, whom Marilyn didn’t

dislike too terribly much, even though she was 25 years younger than her husband and wore gauzy white shirts – even in winter – with no brassiere.

“Annnnd,” Jerry said, in the sing-song voice he used when he was especially pleased with himself, “I’ve got Ashanti Mubutu!”

Marilyn scowled. Ashanti taught in Maplefield’s new Afro-American studies department, although her given name was Alice Martinson and her skin was as white as Wonderbread.

“I don’t know why you don’t like her,” Jerry said with a pout. “She’s absolutely *fascinating*.”

Without bothering to respond, Marilyn headed for the kitchen bookshelf and started looking for recipes. After dismissing African groundnut soup as too obvious a pander and Beef Wellington as too much of a *potchkey*, she opened a recent issue of *Gourmet*. There was an article with some unusual soups and a story about breast of veal and a whole feature about Sri Lanka. That one had some interesting recipes – some vegetable curries and a spicy halibut dish, and it occurred to Marilyn that recounting the origin and history of each dish as she presented it with a flourish to the waiting company would give her the opportunity to show Jerry that while she might not keep up on *Time* and *Newsweek*, she did know how to pronounce Sri Lanka properly, the first consonant just like the *sh* in “Shabbos.” But when she was halfway through the shopping list – lime juice and coconut oil and fennel seed and turmeric – she decided that the whole enterprise smacked of trying too hard, the absolute death of a mid-week dinner party. So in the end, she decided to make beef carbonade, the perfect thing for a chilly winter night, and the red meat less likely to upset the bird lady than a murdered chicken might. Some nice

thick egg noodles for under the stew, Marilyn decided, and a bracing chicory salad. And for dessert, her famous chocolate mousse.

It rained on the morning of the party, and the weatherman promised it would continue throughout the day. But Marilyn didn't mind. She actually preferred entertaining in bad weather. Her rugs weren't valuable enough to worry about, and the gloomier the sky was, the more festive and welcoming the air in her dining room felt by comparison.

After she dropped the girls at school, she changed into the dungarees she wore only for housework, and went through the living room like a mine sweeper, throwing out the stale Cheerios she found under ottomans and armchairs, putting away the array of Barbie shoes that she dislodged from between the sofa cushions, and straightening the brightly-colored Mexican tapestry she had bought at a street fair years ago to create the false impression that she and Jerry occasionally traveled somewhere more exotic than his mother's condo in Miami Beach.

Marilyn looked around and smiled. She was proud of the way she had transformed this house – a builder's colonial identical to its neighbors on either side, chosen not for any charm but for its proximity to a synagogue – into the sort of home all the other professors lived in, those rambling old Victorian houses right on the edges of Maplefield's campus, with their overflowing bookshelves and generations-old Oriental rugs and heirloom furniture, all of it nicked and watermarked because the academic luminaries were too serious-minded to bother with frivolous things like coasters and Lemon Pledge.

As soon as the Weisfelds took title of the house, Marilyn had hired a carpenter to build in bookcases – smaller bookcases than were actually necessary, so that the volumes

would spill over the edges of the shelves and create the illusion that her husband's intellect was Abundant! Explosive! Uncontainable! Her rugs weren't antiques like the other professors' rugs, but Marilyn had left some Persian-patterned carpets from Macy's out on the deck in the sun and rain for three weeks to age them, and then drove over them with her station wagon in the garage a few dozen times. Now, with the living room lights dimmed, the rugs looked ancient and slightly threadbare, as she intended.

The furniture, too, looked as if it had been passed from grandmother to mother to daughter, although Marilyn (whose own mother had brought nothing but battered brass candlesticks with her from Minsk) had actually bought it all at flea markets and estate sales over just one exhausting Labor Day weekend: Wicker stools that she turned into plant stands; Eastlake chairs with their shredded upholstery left just as it was.

"What are you buying other people's old dreck for?" her sister, Bernice asked every time she drove down from Long Island for a visit. "Don't they have a Bloomingdale's near you? We just bought a great set – sofa, loveseat and recliner, 100% leather, for just \$700 and the glass coffee table thrown in for free!"

Sometimes, Marilyn wondered what her life would be like if she had taken the same path as Bernice: Marry a pliant little seedling of an intern, feed him and water him until he was a mighty medical redwood, and then sit back and enjoy the leafy green shade. Bernice and Arnie, a neurosurgeon, had a huge house on the South Shore with a maid who kept the Cheerios under control. When Bernice entertained, she served nothing more challenging than deli platters in the winter and chicken salad in the summer, and unapologetically offered sponge cake from the local bakery. It wasn't an exciting life but it was comfortable – certainly far more comfortable, Marilyn imagined, than her own

endless efforts to impress Jerry's colleagues, who as often as not, forgot her name ten minutes after they met her and called her "Carolyn."

With the radio on and the children out of the house, the day of cooking passed quickly, and at 5:30, the friend who had promised to collect Elana from pre-school and keep her for the whole afternoon dropped her off. Marilyn gave her a quick peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and kissed her good night, rushed into the shower and dried off, and pulled on her new brown gauchos and the Qiana shirt with a sunset screen-printed across the back.

Just as she was buttoning her blouse, Jerry came in and looked her over, gave her a little kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you for doing this," he said. "I know how much work it is."

No you don't, not really, she thought as she rubbed hand cream into her palms, chapped from mincing vegetables and scrubbing utensils. Her feet hurt from standing on the hard kitchen floor all day, and when she saw, in the mirror, how tired her eyes looked, she swabbed on another coat of mascara before leaving the bedroom so that Jerry could trim his toenails, as he always did before these soirees – as if someone were going to demand that he remove his shoes and socks for inspection in his own house.

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The doorbell rang at exactly 8:15 – a rather amateurish version of "fashionably late," thought Marilyn, who, when *she* was a guest, made it a point to show up to these sorts of evenings at 8:12 or 8:18 or 8:27 but never exactly on the so-obviously-calculated quarter-hour. She opened the door to the Butterfields, and then to Ashanti Mubutu, who walked into the living room and greeted Jerry with a Black-power salute. Flummoxed, he

mirrored the gesture, raising the left arm around which he wrapped his *tefillin* every morning, and looking like such an ass that Marilyn had to stifle a giggle.

“Spinach puff?, Spinach puff?” Marilyn asked, lifting the tray up to her guests like a waitress at a bar mitzvah, as talk about the new Toni Morrison novel and the new Nobel laureates and the new parking-sticker regulations at the college eddied around her.

The Audubon lady walked in around nine o’clock and, without saying hello to anyone, poured herself a vodka and downed it in one gulp. Marilyn took that as her cue and invited everyone into the dining room. Goldfarb wasn’t there yet, but it would be fine to start without him. He loved making a grand entrance anyway, in fact always came late enough to positively guarantee it, bursting through the front door and into the dining room with his sweater on backwards and his hair a mess, lest anyone miss the already-obvious fact that he and whatever girl he had brought with him (last time it was a college sophomore, for heavens sakes!) had just, very reluctantly, climbed out of his bed.

Dinner hadn’t even started yet, and already Marilyn was exhausted, amazed as always at how much effort went into making things look spontaneous and unstudied. She had set the table with hand-thrown pottery from a craft fair, with a hand-turned wooden bowl as a centerpiece, piled high with voluptuous fresh persimmons. The look was entirely casual, but it had taken her the better part of an hour to balance the fragile fruits exactly so.

The guests nibbled chicory and murmured appreciatively, and as Butterfield and Jerry complained about their undergraduates’ illegible handwriting, Marilyn rose and cleared the salad plates, returning moments later with the stew. All talking ceased as

everyone tasted the beef. As soon as Butterfield swallowed his first bite, he lifted his wineglass. “A toast to our hostess! Domestic engineer par excellence!”

There was a slight edge to his voice, and Marilyn wondered whether he was patronizing her, the lone housewife in the crowd, for having no higher calling in life than dredging beef cubes in flour and sautéing onions in margarine. Or perhaps this was a dig at his own wife, who, everyone knew, called in caterers for all of the Butterfields’ parties, even the simple wine-and-cheese evenings. It wasn’t as if she didn’t have *time* to throw together a simple supper. She had no children, and she taught just one course at the college, as an adjunct: “The Lyrics of Joni Mitchell – ‘Songs to a Seagull’ through ‘Blue.’”

While Marilyn wondered what to make of Butterfield’s toast, the front door swung open and Goldfarb strode in with a young woman dressed like Annie Hall.

“Goldfarb!” Jerry sang out. He and Henry never called each other by their first names. They had been calling each other Goldfarb and Weisfeld since their shared childhood in Brooklyn.

“Weisfeld!” Henry bellowed back, as if he were shouting across a noisy subway platform and not a smallish dining room. “And the intoxicating *Mrs.* Weisfeld,” he added, walking over to Marilyn’s side, where he leaned down and kissed her firmly on the mouth.

“Hands off the merchandise!” Jerry commanded his friend. But his smile was broad and forgiving. Jerry seemed to like the way his generosity with his wife’s lips established, in the eyes of everyone gathered, that although the lapsed yeshiva-bokher

Goldfarb liked to tease the Weisfelds that they were religious fanatics, they in fact were nobody's prudes.

Marilyn showed Goldfarb to his seat on the other side of Ashanti, and Kim to her chair at Jerry's left hand. She always split couples up at her dinner parties to keep things lively, and she always put Goldfarb's pretty young dates right next to Jerry. This made her appear secure and trusting and open-hearted, she reckoned. And besides, Jerry's proximity to these ripe and ready young women always increased the likelihood that, after the company left, he would make love to Marilyn for the first time in who-could-even-remember-how-long – albeit with his eyes very tightly closed.

Goldfarb and Kim settled into their places and tasted their stew. In the silence that overtook the table while everyone ate, Marilyn directed her attention to the guest of honor.

“So! Dr. Lewis! Tell us all how you decided to become an ornithologist!”

“I AM NOT AN ORNITHOLOGIST!” Charlotte Lewis said.

“I'm sorry,” Marilyn said, although she wasn't quite sure why she was apologizing, “Jerry said you were an expert on Audubon.”

“Precisely,” said Professor Lewis. I study the *study* of birds, not the birds themselves. My dissertation was on Lucy Bakewell's influence on the Eastern Phoebe experiments, and my current research centers on a particular conversation between Audubon and MacGillivray, and its particular influence on the naming of the MacGillivray Warbler. And so you see,” she said, her tone indignant and her voice rising, “I am *in fact* not an ornithologist, but an ornithologologist!”

“How very *meta*,” Goldfarb said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, for which Marilyn rewarded him immediately:

“Have you all heard that Henry’s new novel got a starred review in *Publisher’s Weekly*?”

“What’s it called?” asked Ashanti Mubutu. She herself hadn’t published anything in eons, and was in grave danger of perishing.

“It’s called *Pecker!*” Kim sang out, before Goldfarb could answer for himself. “It’s a bildungsroman – am I saying that right this time, Henry? *bil-dungs-ro-man*? – told from the point of view of a giant penis!”

“You know, speaking of peckers,” Lewis said, rising up in her chair.

“*This* should be interesting,” said Goldfarb.

“Did you know that when illustrating the ivory billed woodpecker...”

“Or maybe not so interesting,” Goldfarb wisecracked. Everyone laughed, and when their laughter died down, no one bothered to ask Charlotte what she had meant to say.

“There’s going to be a huge book party!” said Kim, still flacking for Goldfarb’s new novel. “I hope you’re all going to come!” Everyone at the table who knew Goldfarb – or knew men *like* Goldfarb – looked at her with pity. The book wasn’t due out for another six months. Goldfarb’s longest affair had barely lasted seven weeks.

Down at the other end of the table, Amanda Butterfield tried to hijack the conversation. “So, what does everyone think of the National Book Awards?” she asked. Having written her doctoral thesis on the second verse of Joni Mitchell’s “Both Sides Now,” she always felt compelled to prove that she actually *read*.

“The Howe was impressive,” said Jerry. “You know, he’s a City College grad, just like Marilyn. Summa cum Laude, my wife was, isn’t that right, Marilyn?”

“Summa?! What a waste!” said Charlotte. “Jerry told me you don’t work at *all*.” Before Marilyn could think of an appropriate response, or decide whether she even wanted to respond, Charlotte shrugged and said, “*Suum cuique*,” and then gave her hostess the most patronizing look possible and translated, “That means ‘to each his own,’ of course. In *Laaaatin*.” And then, turning back to the others, she added, “My Lord! the sheer boredom of being home all day! I would just kill myself!”

“Kill yourself?” asked Goldfarb. “Well, *Dum spiro, spero*,” And then, with mock sweetness: “That means ‘as long as I live, I can hope.’ In *Laaaatin*.”

Marilyn made a mental note to invite Goldfarb more often.