

## CHAPTER 3

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# THE APARTMENT

**A** word about the apartment we lived in -- I called it That Place. It was on the Northwest Side of Chicago, a street lined with bungalows, one-story homes typical of the city. We lived in the only apartment building on the block, three stories high. Since we were on the second floor, anyone who wanted to come up had to ring a bell in the lobby.

The apartment stretched narrowly from a front hall where the telephone sat on its tiny table, the first thing you saw when you came in the door, located so anyone in the apartment could hear any phone conversation going on. It was my grandmother's favorite spot, listening to everyone's phone calls, especially mine.

To the left of the hall was the master bedroom, my crib in one corner, near the window. It was the sunniest room in the house, its one window sending more light into the house than any other room.

Off the front hallway was the living room and beyond that the front sun room, surrounded on three sides by windows like the sleeping porch in the back. This is where we all sat around listen-

ing to the radio, on couches under the windows, after dinner every night, when my parents weren't going out.

Down a hallway was the only bathroom, then past that, the kitchen on one side of the hall, a large dining room on the other and beyond it, the sleeping porch. Outside the kitchen was a porch, and stairs running down the back of the house.

There was a large yard with grass and not much else growing in it and beyond the yard an alley stretched past all the back yards on the block. Peddlers would make their way through this alley daily and I was forbidden to go near it, which made me want to go out there even more.

My grandmother said, "Peddlers are Gypsies. They kidnap little girls if they catch them in the alley. You don't want them to take you away, do you?"

"What's a Gypsy?"

"Never mind," she said. "You don't need to know." This was her standard answer to most of my questions.

I was scared but I went in the alley anyway, looking cautiously up and down to see if anyone was coming. When I heard the peddlers shouting, calling out the things they sold, I ran up the stairs and into the house as fast as I could go.

Many years later I learned that my grandfather had been a peddler. I wondered at my grandmother's remark about Gypsies. But I didn't ask. I knew I wouldn't get an answer.

Next to our back yard was a small house where a family with two children lived. Sometimes I cut through the broken fence and visited them to play with the children, a boy and a girl near my age. My mother didn't like me to go there. She said, "The house is dirty, the people are too poor, the father is always out of work. I think it's not a good place for you."

I didn't care about any of that. The mother and father were very kind. They always welcomed me. "Elaine! We're so glad you came over. Let's have some milk and cookies. Here, I just baked them." And the mother set a plate with steaming cookies on the table with a pitcher of milk.

ELAINE MARGOLIS

I played games with the children, like Tag or Hide and Seek or Jump Rope if I brought my rope. They had few toys, mostly broken. Sometimes I would hide a toy or two under my sweater and bring it over for them.

The things I did notice: the parents were missing some teeth, the family wore clothes that seemed about to tear, the fabric worn, some places already sewn together. There was a musty smell in the house, like dust so ingrained it could never be wiped away. Looking back, it seemed as though a pervading sadness hung over them. I tried my best to cheer them up. It was the one place I always wore a happy smile.

No one ever yelled at us, we were allowed to do what we wanted. Our only restriction was, "Don't go in the street."

When I heard my mother calling, I would leave, giving everyone a hug. I'd cut around to the front of our apartment building so my mother wouldn't know I had been doing something I was forbidden to do.

The warmth in that house, despite the sadness, nourished me. I played with those children secretly until the family had to move away because the landlord was going to tear down the house. Their leaving left a void in my life that took a long time to fill.

To me, years later, when I thought of them, they personified all the sadness and upheaval the Depression had caused.

In our apartment the sleeping porch had a twin bed on either side, and a dresser and small desk along a wall lined with windows. Eventually this became my room and I would spend long hours at that desk writing stories, living other lives I made up that I found more desirable.

A large table surrounded by many chairs took up most of the dining room. There was a heavy sideboard, loaded with the Good Dishes, which were only used when my parents had a dinner party.

The table and chairs in the kitchen where we ate breakfast and lunch, usually separately, were on one wall, opposite the frighten-

ing stove. I was warned repeatedly by my grandmother not to touch it, I could get burned, and so it became another hostile object, along with the sink in the corner, which made terrible noises when the water was running. Plumbing was not one of the finer features of That Place.

There were always dishes piled in the drainer on the sink, and garbage usually waited under the sink in a large can to be thrown out. My mother and grandmother were very particular about the garbage, always opening the kitchen door to throw the garbage into the big can on the back porch, letting in huge drafts, usually while I was eating.

Near the back door was a walk-in pantry where the canned goods, the dishes and other household things were kept. When my grandmother made cookies and cakes, and her specialty, strudel, she would hide them on top of the refrigerator, really it was an ice-box for much of my childhood, with the iceman delivering huge chunks of dripping ice every morning.

I would try my best to reach the goodies and sometimes I succeeded, on top of a stepladder kept nearby. Once I ate half a recipe of strudel. I hid behind the piano, my face full of tell-tale crumbs, my mother shouting, “Elaine? Elaine? Where are you? Come here this minute,” my grandmother muttering in the background, “You ate the strudel. It took me all day to make it. Now there’s not enough and I worked all day.”

But I couldn’t resist. The flaky sweet crust filled with raisins and prunes was so delectable, my mouth watered at the thought of eating one piece. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. The pieces went down so easily, I stuffed them in my mouth, one after the other. I knew I would get in trouble but the delicious haze I was in was worth it.

The uproar my mother and grandmother made over the strudel was terrible. My mother yelled, my grandmother sobbed. You’d think they would have been happy I was eating something. Usually I consumed very little and was skinny and always sick. Cowering behind the piano, I didn’t feel sick at all. I felt wonderful.

ELAINE MARGOLIS

My punishment was no dessert for dinner. I didn't care. I didn't even eat dinner.

In the living room the grand piano, my secret hiding place, dominated the narrow room. Later, when I was much older, the collection of books on the shelves, books I had tried and finally succeeded in reading, filled me with disdain, only a few of the books, I felt, worthy of further notice. When I left home I took two books -- "Anthony Adverse" and "An Introduction to Psychoanalysis" by Sigmund Freud. Any book held the promise of magic but those two had to come with me wherever I went. I still have them.

Beyond the living room was the sun room with the couches and the radio, the gathering place after dinner (we didn't talk, we listened), the place I spent my time in the evening when everyone had gone out and I was alone with my grandmother who went to her room early. I listened to the programs, the comedians, the dramas, the Hit parade, anything I could find to amuse me. In 1938 I heard Orson Welles frighten everyone with his famous broadcast about Martians invading Earth, and was surprised to find out people actually believed it.



**Grandfather Perlman and his horse**