

# Life, Death, and Doughnuts



KARIN KASDIN

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*For Harold  
Who else?*



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# September 1944

## SARAH

Sarah was furious at Adolf Hitler for undermining her wedding plans. She and Paul had meticulously mapped out a future that would commence the second she was released from the bondage of New Jersey public education. Now here she was, a high school graduate, forced against her will to proceed with her life all by herself. Hitler may as well have scooped out pieces of her heart with a melon baller and fed them to the starving children in Europe her father talked about incessantly.

*You'd think I'd know someone here*, she thought as she anxiously scanned the teeming swarm of women for familiar faces. None emerged. She had most likely graduated from high school with at least a few of these future stenographers of the world, but her chronic introversion would have made their knowledge of her existence highly improbable. Until today she hadn't minded her low ranking in the social hierarchy of the class of 1944. It had taken an entire childhood's supply of tears, but she had trained herself not to mind. More accurately, she had trained herself to *pretend* not to mind. Luckily, Paul had always been there for Sarah, waiting on the sidelines for her to grow up, and his was the only company she chose to keep. Consequently, at Weequahic High in Newark, New Jersey, Sarah Salzman was just a yearbook picture of someone nobody knew. She

had achieved no recognition other than a certificate for perfect attendance.

*I will simply not allow myself to be intimidated,* she coached herself as she dragged her mind away from painful memories.

When confronted with the option of fight or flight, Sarah's fragile ego had always coaxed her to flee.

*You will not run away this time, Sarah! This time there is too much at stake.*

Addressing herself by name was a technique Sarah had invented to trick herself into believing she was receiving instruction from a credible authority. The struggle was in remembering not to move her lips.

*After all, Sarah, you're way ahead of the game. Most of these girls probably want to become secretaries to meet a husband. You want to be a secretary to support one.*

This army of female strangers with widely diverse interests and histories shared a single three-tiered goal: (1) nab a certificate (2) nab a job (3) nab a husband. With the husband matter settled, Sarah was backtracking to step one in order to find a means of supporting herself and her intended while he became a dentist. Paul's acceptance letter from Columbia University School of Dentistry had arrived three days after he shipped out. If only this damn war would end so he could come home and matriculate. If only this damn war would end so he could come home and give her the moral support she needed to survive this challenging day.

*What is wrong with you?* Sarah scolded herself. *Don't be such a ninny. You march yourself into that room and seat yourself smack in the middle of the front row where everyone will know you are a force to be reckoned with. Your life depends on succeeding at this. This isn't hard. Think of poor Paul.*

Indeed, Paul was somewhere in the South Pacific braving dangers far more threatening than the horde of gussied up secretaries-to-be cramming themselves into the Midtown Manhattan office of The Katherine Gibbs School. He was no place where he could save Sarah from drowning in this sea of permanent waves.

*Okay, I'll do this for Paul,* she declared to herself. *Just like I promised.*

The image of her beloved battling evil on foreign soil empowered Sarah to take her first steps into the fray. She marched herself right into the lecture hall and took a seat. Any further back and she'd be sitting in The Bronx.

MITZI

Indisputably gorgeous, and popular enough to be a cheerleader or even homecoming queen, Mitzi chose instead to be Titania, Queen of the Faeries in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She spent all of her free time with Puck, played by a lithe and puckish fair-haired boy. On their fourth *après* rehearsal trip to the ice cream parlor, he was nervous and sweating and obviously desperate to convey something of intimate import. She cut him off at the pass with her well-practiced and oft-delivered declamation.

"Johnny. Johnny, Johnny...my dearest darling, Johnny...you are the catch of the century and I cherish your companionship more than you know, but sweetheart, our relationship can never go further than friendship. Please, allow me to explain. You see..."

"No need to explain," he interrupted. "You see, I've been trying to find a way to tell you I've fallen in love with..."

She interrupted right back.

"I know, honeycake. I was terrified this would happen. This seems to be my plight. I hope I haven't led you on in any way, dear boy, because I would just feel awful if..."

Neither of them appeared destined to complete a sentence.

"Before you go any further...I am in love..."

"Johnny please don't..."

"...with David."

"David? You mean my..."

"Big brother? Yes. I am in love with your big brother, David."

Sentence complete. Wow.

Mitzi paused to determine whether she was shocked or angry or disappointed or confused or merely curious. Curiosity finally trumped all else, even causing her to drop the vocal affectations she had worked so hard to cultivate.

“Man oh man! And does he...”

“Return my love? I’m happy to say he does. Secretly of course.”

Wow again.

This would not go over well with Sol Levine, an orthodox Jewish fishmonger and overprotective father from whom Mitzi hid all of her dreams and aspirations as well as her tight skirts, high heels, racy novels, Frank Sinatra records, and...well, there wasn’t much she didn’t conceal. Her mother was irrelevant, a lily-livered accomplice to her father. She claimed she *wanted* to keep Mitzi’s secrets, but she invariably yielded under Sol’s punctilious interrogations. And now? Now Mitzi’s secrets were chicken-feed compared to the doozy David had been keeping. Once word got out, and it would surely get out, big brother would become the focus of Sol’s *uber*-parenting. Mitzi would be paroled, released from the shackles of paternal overprotection. She would have kissed someone if she hadn’t already rejected all the qualified suitors.

Her decision to go through high school stag had been made magnanimously. Mitzi was determined to escape to Hollywood and movie-stardom once she reached her majority, necessitating a clean break from anyone with a personal motivation for keeping her chained to Newark. How could she in good conscience give her hand to someone, all the while knowing she would need it back one day in order to sign autographs?

She had no time for dating anyway. Habitual participation in school drama productions precluded her from spending after school hours gazing at the football players with the hero-worshipper crowd. Her no-entanglements policy was met with unbridled gratitude by the girls in Mitzi’s class, most of whom were too insecure about their own charms to allow Mitzi anywhere near their boyfriends.

Still, the single life wasn’t entirely without its pitfalls. For one thing, a boyfriend would have paid for stuff, making it possible for her to save her meager allowance for cross-country train fare. With neither meal ticket nor train ticket she would have to support herself in one of three acceptable ways while she

waited to be discovered. Nursing and teaching were out of the question. Mitzi hated blood and she hated children even more. All children. Even her own childhood was a huge inconvenience to her, a mere pit stop on the way to her real life, much like a protracted layover in Fargo when your destination is Hawaii or Greece. Secretarial school was her default option.

She was going to have to miss the first few days of class to have her wisdom teeth pulled, but she wasn't fazed. After all, it's not as if she *wanted* to be a secretary. She could accept being a bad secretary, an abysmal secretary, as long as she got paid for the work. Her challenge would be to quietly sit in class amidst a gaggle of nondescript women who actually *did* want to be secretaries, and to hold back from doing something, *anything*, to make them see she was special.

## IRIS

"Who buys jewelry? Tell me who."

"Husbands," Iris replied robotically. "Husbands buy jewelry."

Iris had asked for the umpteenth time why she wasn't allowed to work in her father's jewelry store, and her father grilled her for the umpteenth time as if the answer to his question was going to appear on a final exam.

"HAH! That's right!"

Bernie Fishbein loved being right. He elaborated.

"*Other* women's husbands buy jewelry. You will never meet a potential husband working in a jewelry store. You will only meet *other* women's husbands or boyfriends in a jewelry store. And now, because of this *fecockte* war, even husbands aren't coming into the store. Who's got money for jewelry? Who gives a crap about diamonds? Folks would rather have sugar or butter. Go be a stenographer. In an office you'll meet men...whatever men are still around to meet."

Iris could just spit. She had been the first girl in her school to secure a spot on the debate team, and she had taken the team to Nationals for the first time in thirty years. She was the first girl to win the math award and the first girl to join the Young

Businessmen of America Club. How was it that her teachers so easily recognized her intellectual gifts while the father she adored was blind to them?

“Give me a chance, Daddy,” she begged. “I know more about how to run Fishbein and Sons than any of your hired help does. Let me prove it to you.”

Bernie had tacked on “And Sons” to the sign above his store because he thought it gave the name added *cachet*. But there were no Fishbein sons. There was only Iris, and Fishbein and Sons Fine Jewelry would not be employing Fishbein’s daughter now or ever.

Her father’s intractability frustrated Iris to her core because she knew just how she would begin to give the store a competitive edge. For one thing, the windows and display cases were eyesores...jumbled mishmashes of pearls and diamonds and gemstones. On weekends, when she claimed to be in the library, Iris would often hop the train into the city just to stand in front of Tiffany’s and admire the meticulousness of the window designs. Tiffany’s never displayed the diamonds and the lesser gems side by side. The pearls were segregated completely. On the day she finally summoned the nerve to venture into the venerable Fifth Avenue store, she surreptitiously took notes in a small diary she had thrown into her purse. The display cases were cleaned so thoroughly they could have been used in operating rooms to hold surgical utensils. Iris had once scribbled her signature in the dust on one of Bernie’s display cases, situating it perfectly so the largest diamond in the store dotted the second “i” in her first name. Weeks later, her perfect penmanship was still on exhibit in the dust-coated glass.

After she cleaned and sanitized the shop she planned to attack her father’s books.

Bernie’s business records were splattered everywhere. On a rare morning off he had even found a shred of an invoice in the toaster, stuck to the heating element. Desperate searches for receipts or order forms or authenticity certificates were routine in the Fishbein household. If only her father could see how

much easier Iris could make his life by organizing it the way she had organized hers...alphabetically and numerically according to color, time, date, space, and priority. Iris was compulsive and fastidious in all areas of her life....except when it came to love. Her love life, by anyone's standards, was a mess and the mess's name was Morry Katz. In public, Bernie chose to call Morry by his formal name, Morris, but within the confines of the Fishbein apartment, Bernie Fishbein consistently referred to his daughter's beau as *The Putz*.

Iris insisted it wasn't Morry's fault that his manners left much to be desired. Weren't his parents responsible for polishing him? So he chewed with his mouth open. So his shirttails were forever rebelling against his belt. So he spit the caraway seeds from the rye bread on his tongue sandwiches into the street once in a while. None of these breeches of etiquette were punishable by shunning. Certainly Bernie Fishbein's conduct was not beyond reproach. Use of the word *putz* was in itself judgmental and low class. Besides, Iris had the rest of her life to work on Morry. When she was finished smoothing his rough edges, Morry would sparkle like a four carat color D, VVS1 ideal cut diamond. Then her father would be sorry.

Bernie Fishbein had survived hardship and programs in Russia. All Iris had to do was survive Bernie Fishbein. It wasn't easy. A father's word was law where he came from. That is why Iris Fishbein, valedictorian of Weequahic High School class of 1944, president of the debate club and owner of three strands of Mikimoto pearls long before the Japanese were *personae non grata*, obeyed her father by rebuffing her guidance counselor's entreaties to apply to college, and registering instead for The Katherine Gibbs School.

Little did Bernie Fishbein know that his daughter's first act of rebellion was already in the works. Once Morry returned from the war, she could no longer postpone the announcement of her engagement. Bernie was going to *plotz* and probably kill her, but in the meantime shorthand wouldn't be such a bad thing to know.

ELLIE

Picasso had passed through his blue period long ago. Now Ellie Monk was in hers.

*It must be my mood,* she told herself.

As much as she decried derivative art, the scene before her was totally and undeniably blue, and she would have to sketch it just that way...Picasso be damned. The instructors, now trying to corral the herd of peplum-waisted girls into the lecture room for orientation, emitted strong cobalt vibrations. The girls themselves, meticulously clad to impress no one but each other, ranged in hue from navy to cornflower. The linoleum on the floor was steel, the walls periwinkle, and the study booklets were bound in azure. Even the blackboards were neither black nor the more commonplace green, but cerulean.

Ellie separated the blue colored pencils from the rest of the deluxe pack she had purchased at Woolworth's on the way to school. She was a miserable writer, particularly when it came to expressing emotion, so rather than sending stilted letters to her *fiancé*, Norman, who was fighting the good war in France, she sent him sketches of her life. The last one she sent was of her beagle sitting in the strawberry pie she had snuck into the house while her parents slept. Norman had loved the drawing of the beagle loving the pie.

*I hope the blueness of today won't depress him,* she fretted. *The last thing he needs to worry about is my state of mind. I hope he understands that art has a mind of its own and I don't control the colors of my life or my work.*

Ellie had done her best to look like the rest of the future steno pool. She had tried on a peplum jacket and pencil skirt at Bamberger's. If lies could kill, three saleswomen should be six feet under by now from their feigned enthusiasm.

"It's you!" they had squealed.

"Please," Ellie rebutted them. "Dumbo looks better in a tutu than I do in this get-up."

Ellie was fat. As far back as she could remember, loved ones avoided the word like the plague, calling her healthy or

robust or pleasingly plump or nothing at all. But in truth she was fat, and fat is not a plague...adolescence is. The taunts cut like machetes, but as far as anyone could tell the wounds were superficial. Ellie's coping strategy was textbook. She laughed at herself. She became funny, sassy, clever, sarcastic, caustic, and cold. She rebounded with insults so clever her tormentors were flummoxed. Ellie had been a sickly child and had thrown herself into the study of art during her periodic quarantines. When she returned to school and came under attack by adolescent smart-alecks, her retorts were uniquely hers.

"You Fauvist!" she would snarl. Or, "You son-of-a-cubist," or "You sissy...go home to your Dadaist." Once she called a particularly unpleasant boy a Renaissance Man. He had no idea he had been complimented. Still, Ellie was miserable. Until she met Norman, who, for some crazy reason she would never understand, fell in love with every square millimeter of her. In Norman's eyes she was Venus di Milo, only with arms. She hoped she wouldn't lose her wry humor now that she no longer needed it for self-protection. She needn't have worried. Norman was sent abroad, deposited in harm's way by Uncle Sam, and she was pulled back underwater by the riptide that is loneliness. And now here she was, in a strange environment where everything was so damned blue. She was once again an outcast...a turnip in a basket of string beans.

The beans were bound to stare at her. They were bound to wonder how she could ever expect to land a job in a respectable firm where the receptionists and secretaries were in charge of first impressions. They were bound to assume that she spent her days gorging herself with bread and butter and ice cream and cake, which she sometimes did, but only when she felt she was being judged. On normal days she ate no more cake than anyone else and probably less than most of the smug size tens gathering around the water cooler. Well, if they were going to judge her, she would simply judge them first. It was time, once again, to get tough.



For three days Sarah sat alone in the downstairs cafeteria at lunchtime, studying the other girls and the ease with which they coalesced into new alliances. They exchanged frayed pictures of their *beaux*, each girl exhibiting an intrinsic acumen for bolstering the others by drooling over their handsome sailors or soldiers. Sarah scrutinized their behavior, awed by their natural grace as they swept loose tendrils from their faces or picked the blueberries out of their fruit cups. With the supply of male company dwindling every day, it seemed to Sarah as if these girls were filling in the gap by flirting with each other.

Each night in her bed she resolved to plunge herself into a conversation the next morning, but each morning she lost her nerve and dressed herself in the invisible bodysuit she had worn the day before.

On the fifth day, she overslept by twenty minutes. Sarah was not comfortable with breaks in her routine. Those twenty minutes were going to cost her her morning bowl of Farina, and she knew from experience that without her Farina she would be tired and cranky all day. It would take fifty years for her to realize that losing those twenty minutes caused her to find a life.

Deprived of her usual breakfast, she dashed into Jake's Doughnut Shop on the way to the bus, and on a whim purchased half a dozen crullers.

*You are going to come out of this ridiculous shell today*, she instructed herself.

*You are going to approach the first group of girls you run into this morning and you are going to offer them crullers. And if you don't, you are going to have to eat all the crullers yourself and get very, very sick and probably puke on the typewriter and embarrass yourself to death, and then nobody will ever want to associate with you and you will live a pathetically lonely life until Paul comes home and you begin to make him miserable because you will be wholly dependent on him for human contact and he will leave you and you will have no choice but to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. So, you just better pass those crullers around.*

FDR's inaugural address had not been as tightly scripted as Sarah's doughnut offer. She spent the entire bus ride choosing just the right words...not too many and not too few, not too earnest and not too devil-may-care. Her plan had been to approach a whole covey of classmates, but before that could happen she had decided a trial run on a single individual was in order. She selected for her guinea pig, the only other passenger in the elevator on the way up to the fifth floor. Unfortunately for Sarah, her elevator-mate that morning was Ellie Monk, who had also failed to hear her alarm clock. Sarah inhaled deeply and then spoke as if she had only a second and a half to catch the last shuttle out of hell.

"Excuse my name is Sarah Salzman and I overslept this morning so I ran into the doughnut shop on the way to school and I picked up some extras and I was just wondering if maybe you didn't have time for breakfast either and maybe you would need a cruller to sustain you until lunch?"

*If this elevator moved any slower it would be going backwards*, Sarah thought as she awaited a response from the woman who seemed to be stealing more than her fair share of the oxygen supply. By the third floor Sarah had begun to regret her decision to be generous. By the fourth, she wanted to flee.

"Look at me. Do I *look* like I need a cruller?" Ellie asked.

Sarah realized there was no judicious means of answering Ellie's question, so rather than speak, she began to hyperventilate.

"Whoa, there..." Ellie looked concerned. "You didn't let me finish. My next question was going to be, "Do I look like I *want* a cruller? Yes. I *want* a cruller. Thanks Sarah."

Ellie helped herself to a chocolate frosted cruller and gratefully acknowledged the gift of sustenance. Sarah gratefully acknowledged Ellie's acknowledgment of her name. She provided doughnuts daily after that, decimating her allowance and trying to squash all of her nagging worries that she was actually paying for friendship.

Iris entered the picture on the third day of the Great Doughnut Giveaway.

“Sarah, why don’t you *sell* the doughnuts and crullers instead of just handing them out for free?” Iris asked. “You could take orders from people the night before and have the doughnuts here waiting for them in the morning. You could probably pay for part of your tuition that way.”

Lacking the *chutzpah* to divulge that she didn’t want money, she just wanted friends, Sarah allowed Iris to help her set up a doughnut-selling business plan, which was nipped in the bud by the director of the school the instant he got wind of it. Iris was livid.

“This flies in the face of capitalism,” she railed. “Here we are in a business-related environment, and they’re preventing you from operating a perfectly legitimate business! You are being penalized for being an entrepreneur! That’s not only unconscionable, it’s un-American! I say we fight them! I am going straight to the top! I am going to fight for your right to sell doughnuts!”

“I’m fighting too!”

Ellie jumped into the cause. “Their denial of Sarah’s right to sell doughnuts denies me the right to *eat* doughnuts! Count me in!”

“That’s not accurate,” Sarah said. “You can still *eat* the doughnuts. I can still *bring* the doughnuts, I just can’t *charge* for them.”

“That’s totally beside the point.”

Ellie brushed Sarah off.

They lost their fight. But the business plan had not been written in vain. Sarah was no longer a non-entity. Two people in her class now knew her by name.



“How doooo you dooooo?”

It was the fifth day of class and Mitzi’s jowls had returned to their normal size. She had convinced herself that having her wisdom teeth extracted had somehow raised her cheekbones and made her even more marketable as a glamour girl. Now she was *en route* to secretarial school trying to pass herself off as a member of British nobility. She was doing a horrible job.

Mitzi over-enunciated her greeting to the three women in the elevator, performing a horrid impersonation of a British elocution teacher. She had every intention of using the money she would earn as a secretary to buy her ticket to Hollywood. In the meantime, she was perpetually trying on various personae to keep her acting skills honed. Yesterday she had fooled the shoe-shine kid on the corner into thinking she was a Hungarian heiress, and now the taste of fame was as sweet and real to her as the powdered-sugar confection the redhead in the elevator was chomping on.

“I’m fine thank-you,” the redhead in the elevator responded between bites of the doughnut she needed to sustain her from breakfast to the 10:00 break.

“I’m Mitzi. I’m from London, England, but I live in New Yauk now.”

Ellie smiled, causing an avalanche of confectioners sugar to cascade down her chin and form snowflakes on the front of her cardigan.

“Are you now?” she replied. “I’m Ellie.” She paused before adding “from Peking, China.”

Mitzi could grasp Ellie’s sarcasm no more easily than she could the feathery sugar, afloat in the elevator after having been shaken off the sweater.

“You don’t look Chinese.”

“And you don’t *sound* English,” Ellie retaliated. “Come on. Yours is the poorest excuse for a British accent I’ve ever heard.”

“Then I do declay-uh you haven’t heard much British because I swey-uh I am really, really British. I’m from the same neighborhood as Elizabeth Tay-luh as a matt-uh of fact. Our moms are best friends.”

Mitzi’s mother’s actual best friend was Shirley Silverstein from Delancey Street. And Mitzi’s mother’s actual daughter was not this silly teenager who spouted Scarlett O’Hara-isms in a jumbled *patois* of Cockney and Brooklynese.

Her charade wasn’t nearly as much fun as she thought it would be, and Mitzi became increasingly squeamish about it as the elevator slowly continued its ascent.

“What is taking this elevator so long?” she asked.

“Gottcha!”

Ellie hooted as if she had personally apprehended Al Capone.

“I’m sorry, whoever you are, but I can’t let you pull that noose around your neck any tighter. Look, if you were British you’d say “mum” instead of “mom.” You’d call the elevator a lift, and I do declare you would not ever EVER say ‘I do declare.’ Sorry honey, the jig is up. I don’t know why you decided to misrepresent yourself, but I don’t care. You’re creative and ballsy and I love creative ballsy people. So what do you say we start over? I’m Ellie from Brooklyn, and this is Sarah, The Doughnut Girl, and this is Iris, The Teachers’ Pet, and I do declay-uh, we’re going to save you a seat at our lunch table.”

It would be the first of hundreds of tables at which this inchoate sisterhood would spend much of the next fifty years of their lives.

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