

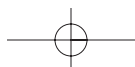
Chapter 21. Sophomore Year

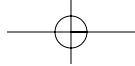
I

In 1943 Jacques got a call from the Honeywell-Brown Company. Close to six years had passed since he had last worked there. Now with the country deep into its third year of war, there was a desperate need for engineers. They offered him his old job back, with an increase in salary and numerous benefits. Malvina and Josy prodded him to accept.

From the first day, back in 1938 when Jacques had joined his friend Daniel Berkowitz as a business partner, he had been discontented. He badly missed the stimulation and challenge of engineering. The uncertainty of not knowing from one week to the next what his take-home pay would be left him constantly uneasy, since everything depended on the number of sales, something unpredictable from one week to the next.

He also lacked the skills of a salesman. Nor did he have the temperament to run a





business. Dealing with customers, bargaining about prices, quibbling over minutiae and what extra benefits he could offer to tempt buyers, all this offended his sense of dignity. His relationship with his partner had deteriorated, each seeing the other as not doing enough to increase business. With the prospect of a return to engineering he saw a way out. After much soul-searching, he told Daniel that he wanted to end the partnership and resume his job at Honeywell that spring. It was a move he never regretted. He would continue working for Honeywell for the rest of his life.

* * * * *

Most of the men on Penn campus were ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) recruits. Uniformed military students (B12 and B7, groups listed as military-academics) could be seen marching in formation on many parts of the campus. Because they were few in number, the University permitted them to take some of their classes with women.

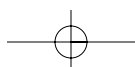
Back to the time of Benjamin Franklin, all activities in Houston Hall had been restricted to men. Now, however, the College for Women was permitted to hold a few classes in the building. During Josy's sophomore year, a new regulation was introduced, shocking many of the "old timers". Women were now allowed to take their evening meal in the Houston Hall dining room. After making their selections from the cafeteria on the first floor, they had to carry their trays upstairs to the balcony. From here while they ate they could look down at the men having supper in the main dining room below.

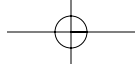
All this was a departure from tradition, and it failed to sit well with everybody. One March day, when spring came unseasonably early, many students brought their books outside, spreading blankets on the grass to sit and study outdoors. None of them sat alone; all were in groups, either all boys or all girls. As far as Josy could see, nobody spoke to anyone in any other group.

After a while Dr. Flower, a young professor from the Philosophy Department, came walking from the corner of Thirty-fourth and Walnut Streets down the path across the green towards Houston Hall. Glancing furtively in all directions, she approached Josy's group, leaned down and whispered, "Girls, I think it best that you leave now."

"Why?" they asked.

"Oh, it's all right with me," Dr. Flower assured them, "but one of the older deans has been sitting at that fourth floor window of Houston Hall all morning watching the





Chapter 21: Sophomore Year

347

scene and complaining. He's very unhappy that boys and girls are both outside sitting on the same lawn!"

Rolling her eyes, she shrugged helplessly and walked away. Josy and the other girls hastily got up, gathered their books, and left.

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Seated on either side of her in Philosophy Class were two girls who spent their entire time knitting. Never once did they take notes. Occasionally the professor glanced at them wryly, commenting that it was perhaps better to learn this way than to write down, as he put it, "every cough". But on the last day of class, they approached several of the other students, Josy among them, desperately pleading for copies of their notes. They had nothing to study from to prepare for the final. Josy let them look at her notes, but after glancing at them, the girls left perplexed, unable to decipher most of what she had written.

She saw them approach the teacher but, as she left the room the last thing she heard was his loud laughter, taunting them with the words "Go back to your knitting!"

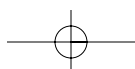
For her Philosophy requirement she wanted to take Ethics during the first half of her sophomore year and Logic during the second, but she was unable to fit either into her schedule. Instead she took History of Philosophy. When the professor posed the question, "How do we know that we actually exist", it startled her.

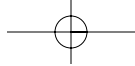
"How *do* I know that I really exist?" she asked herself over and over. "What arguments could I use to prove it conclusively?"

She struggled with this idea for weeks.

The professor told the class he would give them the solution eventually, but right now he wanted them to search for it themselves. Week after week he delayed, toying with them, a smirk on his face every time somebody brought up the question. Josy grew more and more troubled. She kept trying to reach a logical solution, but came up with nothing convincing. It grew into a personal dilemma for her, not so much because she wanted to answer the challenge, but for her own peace of mind.

"How do I know that I even exist?" she kept asking herself. It consumed her to the point where she spent every spare moment thinking about it. She searched everywhere, even asking her friends and family. Most of them laughed, saying she was out of her mind.





Finally Bernie Kabacoff, her cousin Leah's husband, promised to discuss this at length the next time the family got together for dinner. Three weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon, Leah invited everybody to their apartment. After the meal, Bernie went into his study for a few minutes to consult several volumes. Armed with three or four books, he finally emerged, prepared for a lengthy debate. As he sat Josy down on the sofa, he began.

"You know, there are certain questions in life that it just isn't practical to waste time worrying about. They lead nowhere, they have no useful value, and there's nothing to be gained from worrying about them. And anyway, even if you do worry, there's nothing you can do about them anyhow."

"That's it!" Josy cried. "That's the answer!"

"But aren't we going to discuss this?" he asked, nonplussed. "After all my work?"

"What for?" she demanded. "You just gave me the answer. It solves everything!"

"So I did all my research for nothing?" he asked.

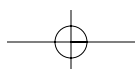
"But you solved the problem!" she reminded him. "Thank you! It really makes sense! That's great!"

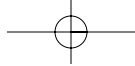
He kept shaking his head for the rest of the afternoon. The following week, the professor finally presented his answer to the class. It was Descartes' famous "I think, therefore I am."

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She had difficulty keeping up in the Physics course. In high school she had done well and loved the subject, but that course had ended just as they were beginning to study electricity. Now electricity occupied most of the course, and she lacked the background. To make matters worse, Dr. Cope, Head of the Department, went very fast. It took her only a couple of lessons to feel lost. One time in the laboratory, without first checking she placed a kettle that turned out to be empty on top of a burner and turned up the flame, almost setting the place on fire. Her lab partner, Anna May Deitch, gave her wide berth after that! Josy managed to end the course with a C, but felt she had never mastered or understood most of the material.

Calculus, her second-year Math course, was even more of a struggle. The professor, Dr. Shohat, was a famed mathematician from Russia. He happened to be married to the aunt of Russia's foremost living composer, Dmitri Shostakovitch, which gave him the





Chapter 21: Sophomore Year

349

aura of a celebrity. A charming man, he strained desperately to impart the wonders of calculus to his students. Fixing his attention especially on the girls one day midway through the course, he addressed them earnestly.

“Ladies,” he began, “in ten years or so, when you are mothers, saddled with the responsibility of washing diapers and suffering dull household chores, remember! Remember! Think back to these days and the beauty of calculus! It will bring light and joy into your lives!”

He had a remarkable memory. Nobody ever saw him take roll. Yet one day, when an ROTC cadet complained about his grade, Dr. Shohat raised his eyes to the ceiling and retorted, “How can you expect to comprehend such a subject as calculus with your poor attendance, Mr. Essington? You missed class on February 4, February 18, and twice again during the first two sessions of April!”

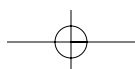
Although she struggled valiantly, all Josy ever retained from the course was the revelation that calculus had been discovered simultaneously and independently in two different parts of the world, London and Belgium. She considered it remarkable, one of life’s great and important truths, that when something is ready to be discovered, it will emerge somehow, if not through one person or place, then through another. She would come across this idea again in a later course on The Philosophy of Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Neitche, when they learned about Tolstoy’s theory that circumstances and the times produce the individual who will bring about the solution to a problem.

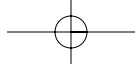
In the mathematical part of Calculus she felt she was drowning. She worked desperately on each assignment, spending enormous amounts of time and seeking the professor’s help continuously. He did what he could for her, but she soon realized that, with her deficiency in the basics, especially what she had failed to get from freshman mathematics with Dr. Erdos, she lacked the essential background for the present material. Dr. Shohat refused to see it that way.

“You are a very nice girl, Miss Feldmark,” he stated repeatedly, “but you just do not have a mathematical mind!”

She remained convinced though, that all this had nothing to do with having a mathematical mind, for later when she would take Graduate Record exams, her math scores would turn out as high as her verbals.

At the end of the course she approached him in despair. Her final exam had left much to be desired. Yet he had watched her exert continuous effort throughout both semesters of Calculus.





“Tell me, Miss Feldmark,” he demanded. “Do you ever intend to take another mathematics course in your life?”

“Not if I can help it, Sir,” she blurted out.

“Very well, then,” he announced, gazing steadily at her. “In that case we’ll call it a D!”

Months later she was saddened to learn that Dr. Shohat had died. Hers was the last course he ever taught, and she and her classmates sometimes wryly quipped that trying to teach a group such as theirs could very well have contributed to his passing.

II

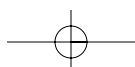
That August she went with her mother to the shore for three weeks. Malvina found a tiny apartment, the second-floor front of a two-story house near the bay in North Wildwood. A sweet elderly couple who lived in the downstairs front owned the place. The wife was ninety-six years old, her husband ninety-eight and failing rapidly. When Malvina hung out laundry to dry in the back yard, the old lady sometimes would come outside to talk. On one occasion she complained about the woman who had just moved out of the first floor back.

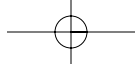
“There were these crawly things in her garbage can,” the old lady confided (it turned out that she meant maggots). “I saw them with my own eyes! I have lived a long, long time, my dear, but never have I seen such a thing as that!”

Repeatedly she lamented about her husband. “The doctor says he’s like an old clock,” she whimpered. “He’s just winding down.”

The tranquility of the place was just what Josy needed to recover from the turbulent emotions she felt after her struggles with physics and calculus. Though both were now safely behind her, she repeatedly woke up from nightmares in which she had failed both courses, disgracing both her family and herself. She kept reminding herself that now, entering her junior year and majoring in English with a minor in French, she would have no more subjects like these to tackle. Yet the nightmares kept coming. Solemnly she promised God that from now on she would apply herself with dedication, fervor, and diligence to every course she ever took in the future.

The peace and stillness of the area exerted a calming effect. But for the first time in all the summers she had been coming to Wildwood she noticed an atmosphere of decay in many parts of town. A great number of houses were badly in need of repainting, several





Chapter 21: Sophomore Year

351

with broken shutters; many street pavements were cracked; the train station was in disrepair.

“It’s the war,” people said. “Nobody has the money or the desire to do anything.”

At first she was unhappy that Malvina had chosen Wildwood for their vacation. Shirlee and Millie Granoff were spending that summer in Atlantic City, where there was far more activity. The last time she had seen them had been last April during the Jewish Passover holiday. During that visit Millie had had a cold so they spent most of the time in their house, except for a brief few minutes sitting inside the back of Mr. Granoff’s car. They thought this an amusing diversion, but before long the grandmother called them back inside, afraid it was too dangerous.

“How could it be dangerous?” they asked indignantly. They were all three in the back seat, so there was no chance of setting the car into motion accidentally.

“Because another car might come along and hit you!” came the firm reply.

At that point she demanded that Shirlee go to the corner store to pick up a bottle of grape soda.

“Now be sure it’s ‘kosherla-pesach’”(kosher for Pesach), she instructed. Josy decided to go along.

Behind the counter the thirteen-year-old son of the owner was waiting on customers.

When Shirlee asked for the soda and he handed her a bottle she noticed that it was from regular stock.

“My grandmother said I had to get only ‘kosherla-pesach’,” she told him.

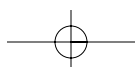
Upon which he reached down under the shelves, came up with a stamping gadget and, leaning over the counter, stamped the top of the bottle in her hand.

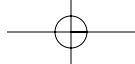
“There,” he declared, “it’s ‘kosherla pesach’ now!”

After this Josy’s regard for the sanctity of religious food-product labeling remained suspect.

Now this present summer in Atlantic City, nowhere near her friends Shirlee and Millie, Josy had to content herself with days alone on the beach reading. Evenings she and Malvina sat on the boardwalk, simply talking and looking out at the sea. As the summer wore on, though, the serenity proved therapeutic, and later she looked back fondly at the many talks she and her mother had had in that quiet place.

Not all their discussions were tranquil, though. Once in a small park near the train station, they sat down on a bench to rest. In a movie they had seen the night before, the





actress Alexis Smith had worn a dress both of them admired. It had three-quarter length sleeves and a V-neckline, with a white diagonal strip running down each side of the bodice.

“That would look good on you,” Malvina suggested. They began to discuss having it made by a dressmaker, going into details about the color and fabric. Malvina wanted it in dark brown, with white stripes; Josy insisted on copper-color, the stripes cream-colored. They argued about this, their discussion growing more and more heated until finally a man who had sat down at the opposite end of the bench stood up and cried out, “Will you two stop fighting and just shut up!” Indignantly he strode off while they both stared after him in amazement, then burst into peals of laughter.

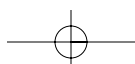
One morning Josy woke feeling out of sorts, and asked her mother, who was going out for groceries, to stop at the library and bring home something to read.

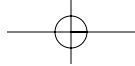
“Any book you think is good,” she requested listlessly.

Malvina returned with a copy of *The Island Within* by Ludwig Lewisohn, an author Josy had never heard of. The story followed a family through four generations, exploring their sense of Jewish identity and how this rooted itself subconsciously and in many unexpected ways into all their lives as the century passed. She found it intriguing, different from anything she had read before, and it lingered in her memory for a long time.



Jacques and Josy (arrows) in Wildwood, 1944.





Chapter 21: Sophomore Year

353

There was a church on the main avenue and, passing by it one day, Malvina saw a notice that they were looking for performers to volunteer for a summer concert. She insisted that Josy participate. For the next two weeks Josy used the piano in the public high school auditorium to prepare. She chose Ravel's "Alborada del Grazioso" and De Falla's "Ritual Fire Dance". The De Falla number she had already mastered. Although she played both at the concert, she was less than satisfied with the way the Ravel came out.

On the beach she read, mostly plays by George Bernard Shaw. *Back to Methuselah* was her favorite. The novel *She* by Haggard also impressed her, its ending haunting her long afterwards. On weekends, when Jacques was there, they joined the outdoor calisthenics class on the beach from eleven to twelve. Her nightmares about calculus and physics gradually faded.

* * * * *

She still had six weeks left till school started in the fall, though, and when she came back from Wildwood she went looking for a temporary job. As had happened two summers earlier, she found one at the Signal Corps. Now she was able to state in her resume that she had two years of college behind her. It made a difference. No longer did she have to stand at a counter wrapping packages on a schedule based on three different shifts and seven consecutive days as she had done after high school. This time she worked at a desk from 8:00 till 4:00 in the afternoon and for only five days a week. Her duties were to sort, file, and classify shipping orders. Seated among white-collar workers, most of them courteous and affable, was a most pleasant contrast to her experiences in the packaging room two years before. An elderly gentleman at the desk beside hers even gave her a going-away present when she left for school in the fall (a paperweight made of a highly polished cube of onyx). More and more she was coming to understand the advantages of a college education.

