

NAOMI'S MEMOIR

BOOK ONE

1944–1973

BUT

NOT

NECESSARILY

IN

THAT

ORDER

1. NAOMI

ST. PATRICK-ST. ANDREW'S, 1973, AGES 28-29

MY NAME IS NAOMI, Nomi for short. Not two years ago I was at a public meeting in Toronto where an aged woman looked everyone straight in the eye and asked, “After all our years of service, is this what we have to look forward to?” Two months later, a far younger woman who is ever so precious to me called with an urgent request. “Write about everything,” she pleaded. “Do it for whoever—yourself, me, others at risk. Just do it.” Hence this curious journey on which we are embarking.

Now in the sweep of literature, there have been many unusual, one might even say “oddball” narrators—corpses, the cross on which Jesus Christ hung, even—and I kid you not—a fish. By these standards, I am a fairly everyday narrator, for as best I can make out, I am neither the holy rood nor any kind of fish—well, leastways not since I last checked. What I am now is a sixty-five-year-old activist with holes in my head and a whopper of a memory problem. And that is the crux of the matter. But enough said.

This is one of those stories, you see, best left to unfold on its own. Like a surprise autumn sunset. Like a murder at dawn. I would only point out that there are depths here to plumb, truths to probe. Step into my world, additionally, and you will quickly find yourself rubbing shoulders with a vast array of some of the most endearing and fascinating souls that a person could hope to meet—some housed like

Gerald, some from the streets like my buddy Jack who could always roll the meanest cigarette in Turtle Island. Ah, but all in good time.

Now I could begin almost anywhere—when I discovered the films of Ingmar Bergman, when I fuckin’ rediscovered the films of Ingmar Bergman—but if I am to trust in that old Spenser formula, “where it most concerneth me,” there is really only one place to begin: When I first started crawling out of the void. When those glimmers of consciousness first came upon me in the opening days of March 1973.

Something was fading in and out of consciousness. Something was hurting. But I did not know that I was a person or even quite that I was the subject of this pain. Only that there was this pounding sensation, this nausea, this heaviness that made *someone* or some *thing* want to sink to the floor and never move again. There came this time, however, when I faded in with some sense of personhood. I could tell that I had legs, that those legs were moving, that I was walking somewhere. I needed something desperately. To lie down. I was trying to get to that place where “lying down” happens. The word “lost” slowly took shape in my mind. I am lost, I told myself. Who comes to the rescue of people who are lost?, I asked, and for some reason that is not totally clear to me, my answer was “police officers.” I wanted to find a police officer and explain who I was and that I had somehow lost my way. *But how to locate a police officer and how to explain...? How? How?* Then something most peculiar struck me. I could not explain who I was because I did not know. For a split second, I felt this giddy rush of freedom. After the freedom came panic. After the panic came confusion. And in the midst to the confusion came a voice. It said something like, “Naomi, take my hand.”

Trembling, I looked up, half expecting God to be there, parting the waters. What I see instead is a stretch of corridor

and a blur of a figure—definitely a human-sized figure—which appears to be a man.

I strain my eyes to try to take in a feature, an expression, anything that can help me identify him. What little I can make out—the bulk, the heft of the shoulders, the beardless face—I do not recognize. Must be a stranger, I tell myself. It slowly dawns on me that he has probably been talking to somebody else, and a disappointment comes over me. Then I feel this hand in mine. So, he has been addressing me after all. What did he call me? Naomi.

Next thing I know, I am stretched out on what must be a bed, my head propped up on what feels like an under-stuffed pillow. I am in a cubbyhole of a room, a dresser and mirror directly in front of me. The man is sitting in a chair to the side, something or other attached to his head—a hat, I suspected. Now I must have commented on the pounding, for he is nodding in agreement. “Yes, they tell me that’s *some* headache,” he observes.

“Headache, is that what this is?”

He chuckles, then reaches over and takes my hand again. “Sorry. It’s just that you always ask that. Yeah, that pounding you’re feeling, it’s a headache—a doozy of a headache; but it’ll pass. So try not to worry about it. Don’t worry about the confusion either. Shit! Everyone’s always in a muddle after shock.”

“Shock?”

“Electroshock Therapy. EST. ECT. The big zap. I hear from the grapevine you’ve had at least one other series. That’s the bad news, kiddo. The good news? This is probably the last treatment for a while anyway. Doc H., he always gives eleven per series.”

Something of singular importance was being conveyed. I was trying very hard to follow, but I couldn’t make head or tail of it. Therapy for what? What does electricity have to do with therapy? And why would I need therapy anyway? Then I started to feel myself slipping, slipping, slipping into the fog.

And so ended day one of my return to the land of the living if such it could be called.

“Naomi, pass the fuckin’ butter already,” a voice was bellowing. “Jesus! Some people!”

If you can imagine suddenly coming to in the middle of a busy intersection, cars piled up behind you, all of them blasting their horns, you are on your way to understanding my predicament. There was a clinking of dishes all around me, loud chewing in my ear, and voices everywhere, one on top of another—declaring, demanding, objecting. “The butter, you’re holding onto the butter,” a high-pitched voice insisted.

“Are we just gonna hafta sit here forever?” complained someone else.

While I kept hoping that some other Naomi was being addressed, I had a sinking feeling that those words were being directed at me. Now I must have been looking down, for I gradually became aware that I was staring at a hand that might be mine, also at this blur of an object in it. Hoping that the hand was indeed mine and that the object was nothing less than the much-sought-after butter, I decided to try passing the blurry object. I flexed some muscles, and sure enough, the hand began to move. But oh! Something wasn’t right. When had that twitching started? I tried to assert control. Couldn’t. Nervous what else might be amiss, I began to take stock of the rest of my body. Absolutely nothing felt right. Everything was in a jitter. My mouth was strangely parched, as if I hadn’t drunk for days. And my legs, it’s as if whole armies of ants were crawling up and down them.

“The other way. Pass it the other way,” came another voice, the words badly slurred.

My eyelids felt heavy. If only I could sleep and forget all about the dry mouth, the butter, that noise that kept assaulting my ears! But then I heard a more promising sound.

“Shit!” boomed a loud deep voice. “Give the lady a break.

You know she's been zoned out. And you know she can't exactly see."

I lifted my head and peered about. A crowd of blurry faces were hovering in the air before me. Among them one I seemed to recognize, but from where?

"Kiddo," he said, his voice now gentle, "don't worry about the butter. I've got it. Say, want me to fetch your glasses?"

I was about to say "yes," when that moment of stillness came upon me. That moment when the world freezes, just before the lights begin to flicker, and just like that, I am gone.

When I faded back in, I was still at the table. For a second there, I did not know what had happened. I was about to call out for my sister but realized that my sister was not in this universe. Now this man had gone to get my glasses. Or at least I hoped he had.

Glasses, I thought. Yes. I wear glasses. Have ever since the first grade. Yes, yes, everything's clearer now. My name is Naomi Cohan. I live on Inkster Boulevard. My sister is Rose. My parents are Moshe and Ida. I'm a Jew. I'm a long-time member of the Winnipeg Film Society. And my life ambition is to follow in the footsteps of revolutionary filmmakers like ... like.... And here I came to a full stop. To my surprise, I could not think of the name of single director. Maybe if I shut my eyes and concentrate.

As I wracked my brain, I could hear the buzz of conversation about me. Someone was saying something about being sorry for being impatient earlier. Someone was complaining that he was tired. I could make out the meanings more or less. But many of the people were slurring their words, which made it difficult. Why were they slurring so?

As I pondered this question, once again I heard that familiar voice. "Kiddo, your glasses," it said, and I realized that this was the same man who had helped me to my bed, who knows in what distant century? And there and then, I knew that I had a friend.

I took hold of the glasses, eager to get a better look at this friend, but I had trouble making my fingers work properly.

“Catch you later, Naomi. Gotta go right now,” he said.

“Please, just give me a second,” I urged.

“Sorry, but I’ll be back. Promise.”

I could hear footsteps trailing off in the distance as I struggled with the glasses. Eventually I managed to slip them on. Once again I found myself staring at my hand. My hand still had fuzzy edges, like a photo taken from a moving vehicle, but my sight was significantly clearer than before. I took a deep breath. Then I lowered my hand, pushed my chair back from the table, and at long last dared to look around.

I was in a huge room, about thirty-five feet by twenty feet. I was seated at a long narrow table, second from the end. There were seventeen, eighteen people at the table. A number were visibly twitching, one drooling. A black man with a pot belly was slouched over the table, barely able to keep his eyes open. A white woman was snoring, her head to one side. Now while earlier I’d had the impression that everyone was talking, I had clearly been mistaken. Most were quiet, some utterly still, but not like people lost in thought, more like people who just could not be bothered.

Ours was one of three tables in the room—the one closest to the door. At the farthest table was some sort of commotion. Bending over, seemingly trying to re-establish order, was a woman in a nurse’s uniform.

I rubbed my eyes, then began searching for details—clues to some mystery which I could not name. About a third of the people in the room were clad in what appeared to be blue hospital gowns, in some cases ones that demonstrably did not fit. Except for the nurse, the rest were sporting everyday clothes—jeans, trousers, the odd skirt. I instinctively checked my own duds. Oy! Hospital gown. Probably not a good sign.

I was clearly in a hospital. The million dollar question is: Which?

I pulled my chair back in, grabbed the edge of the table, and turned to the old woman on my left. “Excuse me,” I said. “What hospital is this?”

I could hear it—hear it only too clearly. When had I begun slurring my words?

Giggling to herself, the old woman picked up a piece of toast and started chomping away, as if she had not heard me.

“Excuse me,” I begin again, “but...”

“Ahem,” comes this other voice, somewhere from the other side of the table.

“Excuse me,” I try once more.

“Ahem! Ahem! Ahem!”

I look over. Seated immediately across from me is a plump middle-aged woman in a filthy yellow T-shirt, a tie-died cloak draped over her shoulders. Crumbs are dribbling out of her mouth. She is looking directly at me, I think smiling at me, though it is hard to tell as her face is strangely contorted.

“That there’s Annie,” the plump woman clarifies. “Pointless asking Annie a thing. Why the poor lamb hasn’t spoke in years! But I can help you out. Let me introduce myself. I’m Zelda.”

“Nice to meet you,” I try.

“Oh sure, sure! That’s what we all long for! To open our eyes and find ourselves being introduced to a bunch of loonies. Anyway, we’ve met before, but to answer your question, this here bastion of loveliness, this gourmet capital of the world is St. Patrick-St. Andrew’s Mental Health Centre, but us old-timers, we like to call it St. Pukes. Eat them eggs on your plate, honey, and you’ll quickly discover why.”

I glance down, take in how runny the eggs are, chuckle despite my discomfort, then focus back on Zelda. “St. Patrick-St. Alfreds...” I begin.

“No. St. Patrick-St. *Andrew’s*.”

“St. Patrick-St. Andrew’s Mental Health Centre. So I’m...”

“Committed, oh yeah. Certified and certifiable, if you know

what I mean. Lock, stock, and ever lovin' barrel. Want me to introduce you to some of the other esteemed patrons of this here commodious abode?"

Without further ado, Zelda rises from her chair and points to a scraggly-haired young woman in a hospital gown who is sitting half way down the table. "Dora," she calls.

"What?"

"I'd like you to meet Naomi."

"But I already know Naomi."

Zelda scowls at Dora. "Look, your highness. If you want me to keep slipping you my bennies..."

Dora immediately says hello, yawns, then asks if I have any bennies to spare.

"Don't think so," I answer.

"Bennies," Zelda explains, "that's benzodiazepines. Your everyday minor tranq. Now moving right along, this here is Emily."

Zelda seems to be indicating a young emaciated-looking woman on her left. Upon hearing her name, Emily casts her eyes about nervously. "The sperm, it's everywhere," she insists. "On the walls, under the carpet. They're planting it. Dr. Gordon says they aren't, but they are."

"Its okay, dear heart," says Zelda. "We can find ways around them sperm people."

"Hey, baby," pipes up someone from another table, "if you wanna see sperm, I can show you sperm."

"James Limon, shut that filthy mouth of yours," calls out a nineteen or twenty-year-old man seated to Emily's left.

"And this here is Brad," Zelda explains.

Brad takes a sip of coffee, lets out a belch, then stares at me. "They call me schizophrenic," he states point blank. "I call them assholes. Don't call me schizophrenic, and you and me, we'll get along fine." Then he glares at the man on the other side of him—a Chinese fellow with granny glasses. "You hear that, Bob?"

Bob eyes him with contempt. “You *are* schizophrenic. Dr. Hopper say so.”

Brad whirls around and faces Bob. “Bob Sook, you’re a damn toady. And as far as I’m concerned, you can blow it up your ass. Or, I know. Call your imaginary stockbroker. Eh?” he asks, his tone mocking. “Isn’t it time to call your stockbroker?”

I am starting to feel dizzy. I take a bite of toast. Tastes like chemicals. I gulp down a tumbler of water. Inexplicably, my mouth remains dry. If only that man would return!

“Zel ... Zel,” I stammer.

“Zelda. Rhymes with Helga,” Zelda offers graciously.

“Zelga, could you tell me the name of the guy who brought me my glasses?” I ask. “And you any idea how long he’ll be?”

“Zel-*da*” she reiterates pointedly. “Rhymes with...” Zelda stops abruptly. “Oh, I see, honey. Not the most fortuitous rhyme, is it?” Wiping some crumbs off her face, she proceeds to explain that Jack—that’s what she calls him—has probably slipped out to the washroom. “Even the indomitable Jackman has shitty days,” she adds, grinning mischievously. She quickly clarifies that ‘the indomitable Jackman’ is Jack’s nickname, then launches into a vivid description of digestive problems—Jack’s, hers, Brad’s.

“Now when I say long bouts of constipation,” she points out, “I don’t mean ten or eleven days. Pssh! That’s nothin’. Mere child’s play. I’m talking five, six weeks here.”

“Sometimes twelve,” offers Brad.

“Right you are,” Zelda concurs. “And that’s when they have to dig you out.”

Now much as I feel for their plight, what I really want to know is: Why haven’t I heard of this hospital? And how on earth did I end up here?...And wasn’t I just thinking something? Thoughts, do thoughts go where the westerly winds blow?

Zelda is still going on about digestion conundrums when Jack re-enters the room. He momentarily places his hand on my shoulder, then without uttering a word, slips into the chair

to my right, and begins wolfing down his now cold eggs.

I take a good long look at him. A large burly man, somewhere in his late thirties, he has long raven black hair and keen welcoming eyes. He is clad in jeans and a t-shirt. Now earlier, I thought he was wearing a hat. But no. While it does not appear to be on, curiously, there is a yellow transistor radio pressed up against his left ear.

Jack speedily polishes off the rest of his breakfast. Then he puts down the radio and removes a tobacco pouch and a pack of rolling papers from his shirt pocket. Soon half the patients are watching him with rapt anticipation. Making the most of the moment, Jack dramatically plunks his elbows on the table, then begins to roll, his eyes sharp, his hands steady. In mere minutes a perfectly proportioned cigarette emerges—one he is clearly proud of. “How bout this?” he asks, raising it high over his head and looking about.

Brad grins from ear to ear. “Man, no one can roll like you! No one, nowhere, no how.”

“Sheer perfection, Jackman!” concurs Zelda.

Jack generously offers me the cigarette. When I explain that I do not smoke, he pops it into his mouth, lights it, then just sits there puffing. Now he is holding my eyes at this point, almost as if he were waiting for something.

“Jack,” I say, “this is St. Patrick-St. Andrew’s Mental Health Centre, right?”

“Right.”

“But there’s only two mental hospitals in Manitoba. And neither of them are called St. Patrick-St. Andrew’s. And neither of them is in Winnipeg.”

Jack takes a drag from the cigarette. “That may well be, Naomi,” he answers, the smoke slowly drifting out his nostrils, “but we’re not *in* Winnipeg.”

“In Brandon, then?”

“Nope.”

“Selkirk?”

“Not Selkirk neither.”

“So where?”

“Toronto, home of the Maple Leafs. More importantly,” he adds, “land of the Mississaugas. I’m Aboriginal, you know.”

Barely noticing that somewhere to my side, someone is muttering, “damn Injun,” I stare at Jack in disbelief. Part of me wants to stop right here, but before I know it, my lips have formed the most frightening question of all: “What’s the date?”

Jack downs the rest of his coffee in a single gulp. Then he looks at me, his eyes filled with compassion.

“Jack?”

He does not respond, leastways, not with words. Just holds still, his face soft, his eyes melting.

“Zelda?” I hazard, turning toward her.

“March 13,” she responds.

“March 13, 19..., what?”

“Oh, honey, 1973.”

What was I to do? 1973 was a good nine years later than it should be. I had never been in Toronto. Never been in a nuthouse. I needed to get out of here. Get out right now. Or perhaps call my folks. Or better yet, hit the sack, fall asleep, wake up, and discover that it was all a dream. I took a deep breath, pushed down on my feet and rose. I took a couple of wobbly steps, fully intending to return to my room. Then I realized that I hadn’t a clue where it was. And the nausea was rising up again.

While nothing was as confusing as those first few days, the days and weeks that followed were a muddle to say the least. Time passed, with me largely shuffling down the corridor aimlessly, slipping in and out of the fog. Not exactly an act to take on the road, if you get my drift. Fortunately, there were moments when I had the wherewithal to make an effort, though my recall even of them is spotty. This, however, I do remember: Trying to get my bearings was rather like

trying to assemble a puzzle with missing pieces only to find the ones already in place vanishing. Now Jack and Zelda were a blessing. They kept showing me the ropes, taking me to the washroom, telling me where to line up for meds, repeating the simplest information over and over. And for all of that help, which so many never receive, I am eternally grateful. Oh Jack, Zelda, when I think of it now! But there were times—terrifying times—when one or both could not manage. Whole days when Zelda was mortified by her facial contortions and found no comfort in our assurances that we loved her. Yes, and those ominous mornings when Jack would just sit expressionless in the dayroom, his nose dripping, his radio pressed up to his ear. “What’s he doing?” I would ask.

“Trying to drown out the voices,” Zelda would answer.

And while she would say nothing further, for Jack was far too private to have revealed much, I quickly came to understand that this man who seemed on top of everything was struggling with demons that I could only barely intuit.

Intermittently, other patients would come to my aid when Jack or Zelda could not. Nonetheless, many is the time I found myself stranded. Moreover, whether I was lent a helping hand or not, I was in a terrible predicament; and I knew it. A huge chunk of my life was gone—vanished, as if it had never been. And something was seriously wrong with my mind.

At first, I could make little sense of it. Why did I forget some things and remember others in intricate detail? Was I really forgetting or was this someone’s idea of a practical joke? Depressed, exhausted, and not having a clue what I was dealing with, naturally, I did not have even the most rudimentary idea of how to proceed.

One evening, as I lay alone in bed, a possible solution came to me: finding my way back into the fog permanently. There were people on the ward who appeared to have done just that. Annie, for example. Why not me? If I just closed my eyes, who knows? Maybe I could pull it off. Alternatively, maybe

I would wake up with my faculties intact. A win-win, either way. Too tired to really care which one, I did indeed close my eyes and drift off. And for the first time, I was visited by this most unusual dream:

I am tearing down a long dark hallway, frantically searching for the secret exit. After hours of hunting in vain, something penetrates the stillness. A barely perceptible hum. I scrunch up my eyes to get a better look. A machine appears in the distance. Mounted on four wheels, it is rolling relentlessly toward me. At first, the features are unclear, but eventually, I can see that it is metallic and perfectly rectangular. It is equipped with hundreds of dials, and protruding from it and running in every direction are thick black wires. Closer and closer it comes. And the hum becomes a buzz. And the buzz becomes a roar. As it closes in, the wires begin to glow. "Not another one. Not another," I scream.

I awoke shrieking. Minutes later, in rushed a nurse, needle in hand. Without a word, she lifted my gown. Something sharp nipped into my skin. Then she shot me a faint smile and murmured, "It's okay, Naomi. First thing tomorrow, I'll talk to the doc about increasing your meds."

"Please," I asked, "when am I gonna be able to remember stuff again?"

"Stop worrying. Four, five days, you'll be right as rain."

"*Believe the woman in white. Don't believe the woman in white,*" chimed in a voice from everywhere and nowhere. But of course, I wanted to believe her, right?

"Jack, can't find my room," I cry out for the umpteenth time. I am stranded in the middle of what feels like an alien corridor, confused and miserable. Jack is facing me, his trusty radio pressed to his ear. While I expect him to reach for my hand, thankfully, he does not. Rather, keeping his wits about him—another Jackman talent—he takes his time, leans against the nearest wall, turns up his radio, listens to some disco. Then he

slips it into his pocket and stands there, his hands on his hips, his eyes deep in thought. “Okay, kiddo,” he finally answers. “Let’s you and me try something. See that steel door there at the end? Well, if you set out from there, your room, it’s fourth on the right. I’ll just stand here. Now go to the steel door, turn yourself around, and start walking toward me. When you reach the fourth door, just go on in. Know how you can remember it’s the fourth?” he asks, his eyes lighting up. “The nursery rhyme. Three, four, shut the door.”

Not confident, but eager to give it a try, I approach the steel door and turn about. I glance at Jack, see the reassuring glint in his eye, murmur, “three, four,” and begin to walk. When I come to the fourth door, I whirl around and stare at the door directly opposite. Then I stand there, stymied.

“Know how you can remember which way to turn?” calls out Jack. “That steel door, it’s never left open. Get it. *Never left.*”

“Never left,” I tell myself. And my body a quiver, and totally without conviction, I entered “my room.”

Ever after, I was able to find my room, though only if I proceeded from the steel door. “Naomi, three, four, shut the door; Naomi, never left,” I whispered endlessly.

Learning the location of key rooms was one thing; learning the logic of the hospital was quite another. Staff told me that I could wear my own clothes if I earned the privilege. Patient after patient told me that I should not get emotional or my meds would be increased. Now I understood that all right. But not the distinctions.

“No. No. You can cry,” Jack clarified. “Just not when staff’s around.”

“But Brad was in tears in group therapy,” I pointed out. “This, I remember.”

Jack nodded. “True enough, Naomi, but that’s different. In group, it’s appropriate.”

The time came when I felt utterly discouraged. While I knew

where my room was and had held onto trivial bits of information here and there, I was keenly aware that I had forgotten more than I had retained. Moreover, I had learnt little that specifically pertained to me. I knew that I had received new modified electroshock—that's what the nurses called it, wasn't it?—but not what that meant. Years of my life were still missing. And I knew nothing of the personal circumstances that had led to this predicament.

As I sat in the cafeteria mulling it all over one afternoon, I also started to feel just a little peeved, for clearly memory loss was not the only problem. If I did not understand about the shock, it is not because I had forgotten. I could tell because whenever I asked for clarification, staff dodged the question. "It's just something that works," said Nurse Beth. "It's Dr. H you should be asking," insisted Jim the orderly. Nor did they cast any light on how I ended up here. Not even Jack, though I kept getting the feeling that he knew a thing or two. Nor did a one of them lift a finger to help me contact my family. Oh, I had tried. I had waited a good hour for the patients' phone while Bob yammered on to his "stockbroker," only to discover that the phone was not hooked up for long distance. I had asked this one nurse to take me to a pay phone so that I could call my folks, but from the expression on her face, you'd have think I was asking directions to Mars.

"Damn St. Pukes!" I muttered to myself. I smiled, then repeated the words louder. It felt downright exhilarating. And that is when I remembered a curious life detail. While I didn't do it often, when the circumstances were right, I had always enjoyed a good bout of swearing.

For the next half hour, I strutted about the ward, cussing away, always being careful to tone it down if I detected staff nearby. Ignoring the people like Bob that stared at me in amazement, and smiling at the many more who gave me the thumbs-up, I literally waltzed over to the washroom—one two three, one two three—twirling as I went. I stopped at exactly the right

place. Damn the washroom!” I declared. I whirled around and danced down the hall, past OT, through the dayroom doorway, coming to a full stop at the bulletin board on the far right. I pointed to the list smack in the middle of the board—the one specifying who did and didn’t have bingo privileges. “Damn the frigging list,” I thundered. I felt strangely powerful, as if the world were at my fingertips.

Moments later, in rushed Nurse Ann, her cap slightly askew, a serious look on her face. “Naomi,” she said, grabbing me by both shoulders, “you’re upsetting the other patients. If you don’t pipe down, we’re going to have to inject you.”

Immediately, I apologized. Now I figured that this was the end of the issue, but no. Suddenly, four orderlies were in my face. I started to run, but before I knew it, I was down on the ground, someone or some thing tugging on my leg.

“But I stopped swearing,” I screamed. “Someone please tell them I stopped.”

It was morning, and I was in bed, more exhausted than usual. Was it my imagination or had my head been stuffed with cotton batten? Remember you are in St. Pukes, I reminded myself. Zelga. Rhymes with Helga. I pulled myself up, stumbled down the hall, entered the cafeteria.

After what seemed like an eternity, Jack turned up, sidled in next to me. He shot me one of his broad Jack grins, said something about me being dragged to my room and injected, then whispered in my ear, “Gotta be more careful around Bob and Janet; they always tell, right?” What’s he talking about?, I wondered. Then I recalled the dancing. The look on Bob’s face. And suddenly, I knew.

Now I was shaken, and my faith in humanity was at an all-time-low, but I had learned a lesson that I was intent on remembering. Just to be on the safe side, Jack wrote it out in huge black letters on what appeared to be an index card: Number One: Not safe to show feeling. Number Two: Dan-

gerous to act inappropriately. Number Three: Some people will squeal on you every time.

There it was—Lunatic Self-Management 101. And given the consequences, clearly, failing was not an option. Hey, I was certifiably crazy—not certifiably stupid.

Just before lights out, Nurse Ann entered my room, drew a chair up to my bed, and sat next to me, a clipboard in her lap. I was bracing myself for a lecture about swearing. Wrong again. Compassion in her eyes, she inquired how I was making out. Then she placed her hand on my shoulder and informed me that I had an appointment with Dr. Higgins tomorrow. I wondered if my recent behaviour was the reason, but she assured me that it was not, that the appointment had been scheduled weeks ago. “He’s your personal psychiatrist,” she explained. “He’s an international authority on ECT, and you’ve met with him numerous times. Remember?”

Of course, I did not. At the same time, befuddled though I was, how the prospect of this appointment excited me! I was about to meet with the head honcho, yes? And finally, I was going to get some answers.

While the desk was immense—gobbled up a good half the room—to my relief, the man behind it did not seem especially intimidating. Dressed in an unassuming grey suit, he was short, middle-aged, with a deep receding hairline, and he had an odd habit of looking away, then glancing at you from the corner of his eye. When I first entered, he had given me a shy sort of smile, murmured, “I’m Dr. Higgins,” and gestured toward the empty chair. Then for the next five, ten minutes, he’d plied me with questions, now and then scribbling something in a chart. His voice was gentle—a distinctly promising sign. But I could not exactly relate to his questions: “Have you ever married?” “Why have you never married?” “Was your sibling—well, sister—ever diagnosed with schizophrenia?”

Finally, he began talking about St. Patrick-St. Andrew’s.

“And we’re known internationally for our leading research into electroshock therapy,” he observed.

Although I was having trouble following, I saw the opportunity and grabbed it. And it was then that I first heard the official line on electroshock.

“Exactly what is electroshock?” I asked.

“A form of therapy that works by electricity.”

“But *how* does it work?”

Dr. Higgins wet his lips, looked slightly to one side, and smiled. “Oh, don’t worry about *how* it works. What’s important here is *that* it works.”

A solitary folder laid open on the desk. He stopped, rifled through the papers in the folder, then looked up abruptly. “Now I understand you have complaints about memory loss,” he went on. “Every ECT recipient suffers some manner of memory loss, but let me assure you, the loss is temporary. The memory, it comes back. The thing to keep in mind about electroconvulsive therapy—really the only thing that you need to know—is that it is safe and effective. No appreciable long-term side effects. You understand?”

“But my memory hasn’t come back.”

Dr. H. nodded. “Patients differ. With some, it takes a bit longer. Also sometimes worrying about memory loss creates the very problem that you’re worrying about. Memory isn’t an isolated phenomenon, you see. You worry, you get depressed, and that affects your memory. Also, you know, Naomi, sometimes patients don’t let on that their memory has come back—not even to themselves. That’s because forgetting serves them somehow. They’re getting something we call ‘secondary benefits.’”

“Can you tell me something?” I asked. “What am I being treated for?”

He looked off into the distance, then glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “I’ll be frank with you. The original diagnosis was ‘reactive depression,’ and there is no question but that your depression’s at least partially reactive, but you are

also schizoaffective. Easy now,” he added, sensing my alarm, and raising his hands as if to calm me. “These terms, you’ll get accustomed to them in time.”

“But everything sounds so serious. Please tell me that I can be cured.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. You’ll have the illness the rest of your life, but the good news is, between electroshock, neuroleptics, and antidepressants, we can keep it under control.”

Horrified, but intent on finding out more, I proceeded to ask several follow-up questions. I learned that a neuroleptic was also called an “antipsychotic”; that “schizoaffective” was a “mood disorder” that resembled schizophrenia. More importantly, I found out that this was my second hospitalization and that I’d been given electroshock both times.

Now I was hoping to learn more about my hospitalization. I was especially interested in learning about the involvement—or lack of involvement—of my family, but before I knew it, Dr. Higgins was talking about drug dosages. Then somehow—I’m not sure how—the issue of dosage turned into a warning about what he called “the incident.”

“Swearing, yelling, jumping about—we can’t allow you to do things like that,” Dr. Higgins asserted, tapping his pen on the table. “You understand why I’m saying this?”

I nodded. “And it won’t happen again.”

“It’s disruptive,” he continued. “It is also unseemly. Unseemly no matter who does it, but especially for a woman. You get my drift?”

Now I was shocked by the distinction, but I was not about to rock the boat. So I said, “Yes, of course.” At this, he began searching through that folder again. Guessing that it was mine, I asked, “Any chance I could see my file?”

Dr. Higgins shook his head. “It’s not recommended.” Then he closed the folder slowly, as if lost in thought. “Well, there *is* something here that I would like you to see,” he finally uttered. And to my surprise, he passed me the folder, adding, “Now

please don't be frightened, but I'd like you to get a good look at the name on top."

My heart pounding, I took hold of the folder and stared at the caption. And with this simple act, my life was to take an about-turn. While for a second there, I had trouble making out the letters, the name was unmistakable—"Smith, Naomi."

"There's been some sort of slipup," I exclaim. "This isn't right. My last name is Cohan—not Smith."

"But I'm afraid it *is* right."

"No, this is *meshugah*. My file must have gotten mixed up with someone else's. Honest, that's not my name. I'm a Jew, right? A Cohan. Naomi Cohan."

Dr. Higgins leans forward once again, takes back the file, and for the first time looks me squarely in the eyes. "Naomi, try to calm yourself. I know that what I am telling you is huge, but you've got to try to take this in. You remember my asking just now if you ever married?"

"Sure. My memory is bad. But, hey, not *that* bad."

"Why do you think I asked that?"

"Cause you wanted to know," I answer, feeling increasingly uneasy.

"Try again."

Feeling the blow coming, I cover my head with my hands. "Oh no. Don't tell me..."

"Precisely. You are married. Your married name is Naomi Smith."

I lower my hands and grip the arms of the chair. "But how is that possible? I don't even believe in marriage. And to someone named 'Smith!' Please!"

A grimace ripples across Dr. Higgins' face. He leans back, crosses his legs. "Not believing in marriage," he states, "well, that's not exactly a healthy attitude for a wife, and you want to start being a better wife, don't you? I mean, surely you want to get well and get out of here some day."

My impulse is to run, but recalling the events of the other day,

I refrain. “I don’t know,” I respond, “but tell me something: Who is this man I’m supposed to have married?”

“A teacher, and as far as we can make out, an extremely kind man. You’re a very lucky woman, Mrs. Smith.”

“Look, I’m not trying to make trouble here, but if this man really is, well, my husband, why hasn’t he ever visited?”

“Oh, but he has. You’ve just forgotten. Tell me. Do you know what month it is?”

“March or April.”

“It’s late June,” he points out. “Your last ECT treatment was in early March, and your husband’s been here a few times since then. Now it’s perfectly normal that you don’t remember. Up until a few weeks ago, you were forgetting most things, and he’s not visited since then.”

“Late June,” I mutter, trying to grasp this new reality. “Husband been here.... Um, um, so why didn’t anyone say anything about him? And why hasn’t he come recently?”

“You kept getting so upset that we figured it best to let everything be for awhile. Anyway, we’re expecting him around two p.m. tomorrow. Perhaps some other members of the family also. That’s why I arranged this appointment—to help prepare you.”

“So my parents, they’ll be coming? And my sister?” I asked, getting excited for the first time. “I’m dying to see them, and...”

“You’re forgetting,” he interjected. “They don’t live here. You are a twenty-nine-year-old woman and you live in Toronto with...” At this point, inexplicably, he paused and began tapping his pen. “You know, your parents and you...” he finally resumed. Once again, he paused. At long last, he smiled and said, “You know something? It’s not so good just being told things. Anyway, it’s probably best if your husband fills you in. In cases like this, we find it helps with the bonding.”

Now I was appalled by the idea of my life being turned over to some man that I did not know, however nice someone else thought he was, and I was on the verge of asking if it were all

right if I put off meeting with him at least until my memory returned. Suddenly, however, I found myself moved at the thought of this poor *schmuck* who had waited God knows how long for a wife who actually recognized him. And to my surprise, I heard myself saying, “I’d rather not meet him like this. Please, can I wear my own clothes?”

Dr. Higgins nodded and wished me luck. Reeling from the craziness of it all, I headed for the door. Just as I was turning the handle, I realized that I had failed to find out a pertinent fact. “Excuse me, Dr. Higgins,” I asked, “but this Mr. Smith, what’s his first name?” Once again, Dr. Higgins hunched over and peered into the folder. Now I am reasonably confident that he responded. By the time that I had arrived back in my room, however, I did not remember his answer.

That evening over supper, Jack and I had our first argument. “You must have known,” I protested. “And hey, you could’ve at least warned me.”

“Shit! Since when is that my responsibility?” roared Jack. “And you think I don’t know what’s going to happen now? You’re gonna hightail it out of here with that consummate asshole.”

Later, as I was sitting in my room, I heard someone approach. “Please God, let it be Jack wanting to talk further,” I prayed, but no, it was Nurse Ann, a plastic bag filled with clothes in her hands. She placed the bag on the bed, muttering, “Naomi, these are yours. I recommend the dress.” Then she wished me luck and left.

I picked up every piece of apparel one by one, eyed each intently. Oy! I didn’t recognize a single item, but the dress, that was downright bizarre. Why I had stopped wearing dresses when I was seventeen!

I put it to one side and tried to wriggle into this one pair of pants. Didn’t come close to fitting. Reluctantly, I pulled on the dress. On the tight side, but a distinct possibility. I hesitated. I

really did not want to know what I looked like, but eventually I did it. For the very first time, or at least as far as I was aware, I peered into the mirror on the wall, and a fat woman with jowls and love handles peered back at me. Humiliated, I tore off the dress, piled all the clothes on the top of the dresser, and crawled into bed.

I slept little that night. For some time, I just lay there wondering about the elusive Mr. Smith. Just what was he like? I imagined him a Chaplin look-alike, complete with moustache and walking stick. I imagined him a man so skinny that the only way that he could lose weight is if he fell on the sidewalk and chipped. Then I began worrying. I worried about meeting this strange new husband. I worried about Jack. I worried about worrying, having just discovered that it causes memory loss. And hour after hour, I struggled with that terrible question of who I am: Naomi Cohan or Naomi Smith? A budding young filmmaker or the schizoaffective patient in room B?

Intent on finding a resting place, eventually, I fluffed up the pillow, laid down, and let myself drift back to the early days. Before the memory loss, before University of Manitoba, before even St. John's High. And images of a happier time began filling my mind: The white stucco house where I was born. The grass-filled boulevard that ran down the middle of our street. My sister Rose and I, mere toddlers, rushing out the front door and hitting the boulevard, hand-in-hand, the thrill of anticipation coursing through our limbs. His *tallis* draped over his shoulder, my father reaching across the table to light the *havdalah* candle. My mother setting aside the broom, muttering, "Yeh-yeh," then holding forth on the significance of the politician J. S. Woodsworth, her head high. Like the photograph of a friend long deceased, the images comforted me, and within a short while, they lulled me to sleep. Some hours later, that nightmare returned. I bolted upright, screaming for my sister, then drifted off again.

Next morning, I awoke with a curious sensation that I'd not had since childhood. As if Rose were somehow with me. I got up and put on the dress, unsure where I was, terrified at what the day might bring, but determined to meet it with the dignity of a Cohan.