

Scapegoated, abused and betrayed, Miranda Portnoy witnesses something astonishing when she turns to the God she doesn't yet believe in. Clumsily growing to embrace Judaism, she is blessed beyond her dreams as the Little Match Girl becomes a princess.

CINDER-OY-LA! How a Jewish Scapegoat Becomes a Princess

By Miranda Portnoy

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CINDER-OY-LA!



A Memoir by Miranda Portnoy

How a Jewish Scapegoat Becomes a Princess

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Cinder-oy-la!

“A heartfelt, honest, at times harrowing, and inspiring memoir that reminds us of the indomitable human spirit.”

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“Miranda Portnoy tells a compelling story of how she emerged from a toxic family, which nearly destroyed her, forged a turbulent, troubled young adulthood to arrive as a devoutly religious woman, married to a wonderful man and living with her family in Jerusalem. She is a gifted writer who has written a psychologically sophisticated, gut-wrenching memoir of courage and determination. As a clinical psychologist, I was privileged to witness many individuals recreate themselves and move on to live better and more productive lives. It is rare, however, to find such a gifted writer who can bring her reader so palpably close to the pain of family trauma and the challenges that lie along the path of recovery. Her story gives hope to every human being who strives to emerge from psychological despair and spiritual darkness to a more tranquil, meaningful life.”

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“*Cinder-oy-la!* is an authentic, eye-opening personal journey of a victim of child abuse determined to survive and strive toward a healthy and meaningful life. She takes us on her journey candidly; we can feel her joys and sorrows as she climbs, falls, and climbs again. This is a story of hope, determination, and redemption. A must-read for anyone wanting to understand the struggle for and process of recovery from childhood abuse.”

—Chaya Weisberg, Co-Director, Heritage House, www.heritage.org.il

“Each of us has a past. Some of us are lucky enough to use it to propel us forward to achieve great accomplishments. In so doing, we carry along with us all of those who nurtured and guided us through our formative years. Others of us are not so lucky. Our past was painful, lonely, and at times terrifying. It clings to us accusingly, reminding us each moment that we are nothing and will never amount to anything. And that’s when we need, if we can, to embrace courage. With renewed faith and conviction, we can turn the darkness into light, and the despair into hope. Miranda Portnoy has accomplished this phenomenal feat, and I salute her.”

—Tova Mordechai, author of *To Play with Fire*

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Chapter 1

“**W**hich Turovs are you?”
Everywhere I go in the holy city of Jerusalem I am asked, from which branch on this celebrated family’s tree did you emerge? My married name conjures towering figures of Orthodox Jewish learning and refined conduct. The Turov dynasty spawned several English-speaking Torah giants in the twentieth century with innumerable descendants devoted to the cause. Hailing from Belarus, where their family combined European culture and erudition with the highest standard of fealty to ancient Jewish law, the Turovs are revered like royalty in the Torah world—which respects lineage.

But I carry an amusing secret. Estelle, the irritable, overbearing mother of George Costanza on the 1990s TV series *Seinfeld*, more closely resembles my kin. Yet Estelle Costanza was much more benign than my mother was.

As fate would have it, my mother happened to have borderline personality disorder *and* narcissistic and histrionic personality disorders. But she didn’t come shrink-wrapped and labelled. Nor did we get her at a discount. In fact, I only found out about her diagnoses as a grown woman when the scars she had left on me could no longer be ignored. Clinical depression is like that. When one falls apart at the picnic because the roasted hotdog fell on its way to the bun and lies in the dirt—when this releases a torrent of tears and self-recrimination of the kind Stalin doesn’t deserve to suffer—one comes to the attention of a

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psychiatrist. That's what happened to me when I was eighteen and a freshman at an Ivy League university.

Until then, I suffered. But I didn't take it lying down. I fought as though my life depended on it.

I don't remember a time when I wasn't fighting with my mother. My earliest, vaguest memories are of violence accompanying my decision to wear the green playsuit rather than the pink one she had laid out for me.

My mother was indeed a pushy woman. When she picked me up from a friend's home, she would blow the car horn nonstop until I came out the front door, deafening wildlife within miles. When we ate in restaurants, she would inevitably request menu substitutions.

"I'd like a beverage instead of my second vegetable—a coffee, please."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, we can't do that. You can have applesauce, peas and carrots, or corn."

"I'll have a hot tea, then."

"Ma'am, we don't substitute beverages for vegetables."

"Well, I suggest you tell the manager that he ought to allow menu substitutions. I'm on a special diet for diabetics, and I can't eat too many vegetables."

Cringing behind my menu, I knew what was coming next.

"Did you know that my daughter got a 96 on her math test in school last Friday?"

I copied the answers from Peggy Calhoun, I thought to myself—tell him that too, okay?

"That's very nice."

"She's a very good student."

"That's very nice."

"She was reading before she was walking."

"How nice. I'll bet she ate her vegetables."

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Growing up with Evelyn Portnoy for a mother was like walking around with a thumbtack in my shoe.

My mother knew what her assets were and how to accentuate them. *My name is Evelyn Portnoy, and I'd like you to meet my décolletage.* After work, she usually wore dyed skinny jeans on her short, stacked frame, with high-heeled pumps. Her hair and lips sported a matching shade of atomic tangerine, her cropped hair the texture of Rumpelstiltskin's straw from too many trips to the beauty parlor. Encrusted with chunky gold rings as big as brass knuckles, her small hands were transformed into prizefighter's fists.

A high school star who married at eighteen, my mother dedicated herself to the most conventional path to glory open to women of her 1950s generation: vicarious accomplishment through her husband and children. Convinced that doctors were an uber-race of demigods—holding the key to life and death in their hands—she determined that her children would gain admission to this exalted sect, intoxicated by their power. She uttered the words *residency, internship, and fellowship* many, many times a day with the holy reverence due a biblical hymn.

With a twelfth-grade diploma and mere secretarial skills, my powerless mother waged her power over us with uncompromising control. Driven by an emptiness too vast to fill, she would crush us like candy between her teeth for failing to gratify her outsized ambitions. Promised paradise or threatened with annihilation—depending on whether I acquiesced to her desperate fantasies—I would come downstairs in the morning and lay my head on the vinyl placemat, listening to the whoosh of the kitchen faucet with an already quickened heartbeat, knowing that at any moment, my mother's harsh voice would summon me to a new day.

Nevertheless, I credit my mother with the birth of my scruples. As early as I could remember, I recoiled from her

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contemptuous slurs against African Americans and Gentiles. I shrank from her obsession with money and her worship of doctors, who epitomized the social prestige she craved. She *was* the caricature of the Jewish mother. With her greed so naked, I had no choice but to embrace the opposite values.

We drew battle lines early: I shaped my identity in a firing kiln. My social-climbing mother gave birth to an artsy, bohemian daughter determined to bring compassion to Madonna's material world. Born with a surfeit of conscience, I remember crusading as a tot through my grandparents' littered Roxbury, Boston neighborhood with a placard taped to a yardstick on which I had scrawled, "Don't Plute [pollute]!" I won a place in the county newspaper for banding together girls to collect for the SPCA with cat and dog-shaped coin banks, instead of hustling candy at Halloween.

Along the margin of the popular clique, but attractive enough not to be excluded entirely, I made my mark as an early reformer, sticking up for the awkward girls that were picked on. Serving as the resident pincushion for the popular set, I was the perennial victim of the malicious bull sessions of the kind in which fifth-grade girls excel. The two blonde queens would go around the circle of girls sitting Indian style and gleefully roast every member to her face. Only my turn was distinguished by an added ritual: they would repeat my nickname over and over, shaking their heads disdainfully, "Miri, Miri, Miri, *Miri*," as though they just couldn't stomach reciting *my* shortcomings. Then they would declare me the source of the resurgence of childhood polio.

Forsaking my mother's dreams of a B'nai B'rith Girls' princess—complete with a surgical nose and frosted hair—I defied even my generation and became a feminist-socialist-Zionist, clad in blue work shirt and Wallabees, long after it was fashionable. Alone on a Habonim summer camp stage at

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fourteen, I strummed Ralph McTell's "Streets of London" and John Prine's "Hello in There" on my guitar—mournful, cathartic folksongs—to an audience much more interested in adolescent debauchery than I was.

Habonim Dror—in English, "the builders of freedom"—was a group founded in 1929 by European Jewish Marxist Zionists. We were dedicated to purging society of everything hypocritical and bourgeois, and to establishing a utopian socialist society modeled after the Israeli kibbutz. We championed the ideals of the American sixties—which I considered myself fortunate to be touched by, despite coming of age a decade too late. Needless to say, my participation in Habonim was nothing less than vexing to my mother, for whom the term *social justice* meant eugenics.

Owing to the increasing tension at home, I suffered debilitating insomnia in junior high school. I would lie awake from midnight until morning, sleeping only for a few hours after school each day. On the less stressful weekends, I took special joy in sleeping until ten in the morning. Faced with my conscientious objection to her daughter-improvement program, my mother deployed more subtle tactics to induce my submission.

Her favorite maneuver was to charge through my door at seven o'clock on Saturdays, snap up my window shade in a cacophony of noise, and yell, "RISE AND SHINE, MIRANDA! TIME TO WAKE UP! THE WHOLE DAY IS ALMOST OVER!" If I failed to open my eyes, she would throw back the blanket and slap the bottoms of my bare feet. Next, she would blast the radio—shattering my dreams of a world without mothers with ear-splitting WBZ news.

When I would oversleep during the week and miss the school bus, we would ride to school in frenzied silence, my mother tapping her inch-long, pink plastic fingernails on the steering wheel—TAP! TAP! TAP! TAP! TAP!—inhaling and exhaling so loudly and forcefully, I feared the dashboard would catch fire.

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At about age ten, I became acquainted with my older brother's best friend, Shawn Dougherty. Shawn was a gentle, sweet guy eight years older than I was who lived across the street and occasionally gave me guitar lessons. He knew—as did the whole neighborhood—that my mother tormented my brother Richard and me, and he sensed that beneath my withdrawn shyness, I was very unhappy. If Richard wasn't home when he stopped by, Shawn would convey a big-brotherly sympathy in the few words we spoke.

By the time I was twelve, I was passionately infatuated. As is typical of twelve-year-olds, however, I became increasingly dumbstruck in his presence and hid in my room whenever he came over. I confessed my feelings only in a notebook I stashed among old magazines and schoolbooks in a box on my closet shelf. In that notebook, I sketched out elaborate fantasies of the day during a guitar lesson when Shawn's eyes would get misty, he would lean close, take the guitar from my hands, and whisper, "I want you, Miranda," and give me a warm, juicy kiss.

My mother, however, detested Shawn: He wasn't Jewish. He wasn't going to be a plastic surgeon. He was a dangerous influence on my brother and me.

When I was fourteen, we moved away, and Shawn and my brother drifted apart. I rarely saw Shawn anymore. Yet I still thought of him, trying to accelerate my growth so he would no longer be too old for me.

One day, at fifteen, I was sitting in my mother's room, talking animatedly on the phone with my friend Julie. Fiddling absentmindedly with the phonebook on her night table, I knocked some papers tucked between the pages onto the floor. Retrieving the material, I immediately recognized my own handwriting. I felt the blood surge to my face as a siren blasted off between my ears. The pages were photocopies of my fantasies

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about Shawn Dougherty, clipped to an envelope addressed to him.

I was mortified: my shock, humiliation, and utter fury at the invasion of my privacy were so overwhelming that I flew out of the apartment and ran over three miles, propelled by pure emotional energy. Julie—who lived upstairs in the apartment building—followed me to the high school football field. She sat with me while I vented hours of unrelenting tears in an outpouring of shame.

My mother, when confronted with this violation, merely inverted the truth: she blamed *me* for being secretive. “I have every right to determine with whom you associate, by whatever means you *force* me to use,” she accused. I could only presume she was sending a letter along with my diary musings, threatening an indifferent, unaware, and astonished Shawn Dougherty to keep away from me. I felt my sense of control over my life and welfare completely dissolve in the face of my mother’s intransigence. During my entire childhood and adolescence, I never heard her say the words “I’m sorry.”

Before long, my overactive conscience, initially occupied with righting the wrongs outside my family, turned inward upon saving myself and my father and brother from the corrosive force in our own home. I fell instinctively into the role of my older brother’s savior and my parents’ therapist—trying to preserve harmony and promote détente between the ever-shifting factions. Here and there, I abandoned diplomacy to double as a pint-sized bouncer, breaking up my parents’ brawls.

In the early years, my father and I forged a subversive alliance against my mother; we both needed protection. Berating him mercilessly for his weaknesses—whether social, financial, or sartorial—she goaded him to defend his fractured masculinity.

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In one moment's lapse in her vigilance, my mother offered a compliment of my father, which I forever cherished: in contrast to her friends in their role-segregated early 1960s marriages, *she* never had to press her husband to spend time with his children. In childhood, my father was my hero, releasing me from detention at the kitchen table by inviting me to unload my soggy unfinished peas onto his plate while my mother was behind the refrigerator door. I remember him reading to me as a child and teaching me to ride my first two-wheeled Raleigh bike. My father liked little children and pets, creatures who could be both pacified and manipulated by treats and pats on the head. As long as I was naive and worshipful, he was gentle and tender with me.

Yet I remember my father's red face, wet with tears, his body beaten after a particularly bruising battle with my mother: "Miranda," he exclaimed, "I just can't take it anymore." When he moved out, life got worse, and no less dramatic. Instead of the fights erupting between my parents in our den, my father broke into our house every so often to vent his rage at my mother's outlandish legal gambits in their bitter divorce. Once he managed to twist the steering wheel of my mother's car into a pretzel before he even crossed the threshold of the front door. The police knew about the Portnoy family. We aroused the sleepy suburban police of Medway, Massachusetts with the occasional distress call.

Unfairly, in retrospect, I blamed my mother for fostering the estrangement between my father and me. Although my mother would come home several times a week with Loehmann's shopping bags under each arm and had two walk-in closets stuffed with clothes, purses, and shoes, she never had money for her children's needs. When I would ask her for milk money or change for a school trip, she would snarl, "I haven't got it. Ask your ignoramus *father*—that %\$#\$&@# hasn't sent a penny in

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months!” Every day she would rail about the heinous things *my* father had done.

My father’s weekly visits provoked scuffles between my mother and me: I would have to wrestle her to get outside to see him, her fists pummeling me while she blocked the door. “Good, go and don’t come back!” she would shout, as I pulled out of her grip. I would wait with trepidation until the end of our visit before sheepishly bleating, “Dad, Mom won’t give me milk money ‘cause she says you’re not sending any—is that true?” My father began to treat me like an accomplice and hold me responsible for my mother’s behavior, as she exploited me to do battle on her behalf.

When my mother would become particularly violent, I would call my father for help. He would call the police. After they would summon me to confirm I was still breathing, the police would reprimand *me* for pitting one parent against the other. (We lived in the suburbs, and parents don’t beat their children in the suburbs.)

However, I came to realize that the idealized savior of my childhood dreams is a much more ambiguous and shadowy figure. My father disappeared from my life in adolescence without a backward glance, only to usher in critical traumas later on. I maintained a stubborn loyalty to my father for longer than he deserved—reluctant as I was to part with comforting illusions. Realizing that flattering my father was the only route to preserving some connection with him, I found his neglect eventually snuffed out what remained of my gratitude.

After building a new life with his second wife, Theresa, my father reappeared for a cameo in my early twenties when he was going through another divorce. He was warm, attentive, and apologetic. After a few congenial phone calls, he asked me for a

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letter for the judge declaring that he had sent me a sizable monthly sum for support all these years.

"I'll have more money for you," he claimed.

"No," I told him. "I'm not going to lie."

"C'mon, you never liked Theresa anyway."

This paper is too pristine to print the language my father hurled at me before hanging up, when his plan to bilk a second wife out of alimony encountered resistance. His new offer to contribute to my college tuition—had I even believed it—would not persuade me. I clung like a leech to morality that was decidedly absent from my upbringing: it was my only insurance that I would not meet my parents' fate.

As an adult looking back, I once shed a rare tear of self-compassion in utter perplexity: my brother and I were both—by anyone's objective standards—good kids. We were both bright children; administrators placed us in the academically talented track early in our schooling. I remember proudly marching up the aisle in Hebrew school to claim all six of the honors given out to the first-grade class. As teenagers, we were neither promiscuous nor profane. We managed to sidestep delinquency, drugs, and drink, despite being caught in the crossfire of a hellish divorce. In truth, our parents had reason to be grateful that we displayed strength and self-possession amidst a chaotic family life.

Yet I am struck dumb when I remember my mother's foul-mouthed tirades, day after day, moment by moment, because I wouldn't salt my eggs or change into a freakish green lounging robe at dusk, or memorize a medical school anatomy workbook when I was a child longing to finger paint. My mother's blistering rages, along with my father's creeping abandonment—so inconsistent with my actual transgressions—left me feeling

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guilty and *bad* beyond what I deserved. Faced with the contradiction between my self-image and my parents' reflection—and the subsequent cognitive dissonance—I leveled the gap by accepting the projection of their sins. A child needs her world to make sense, and her parents to be sane, if she is to feel protected at all in the world.

My mother was whipped about between two forces: a terrifying emptiness and an unparalleled entitlement. I was buffeted between the currents of her mercurial moods, one moment clutched to her chest like a suckling babe, the next receiving the *thwack* of her hand full force across my face.

When I was a small child, hours after a savage attack, she would come into my darkened room and scoop me up—limp from wailing—and rock me in her arms: “Ah, ah, baybee, ah, ah, baybee,” she'd soothe. My mother's secret lure was her touch. The tenderness of her hugs and kisses almost made up for the horror that preceded them. Her uncanny ability to switch effortlessly from the most ardent idealization to the most eviscerating demonization left me hurtling like a pinball between withering curses and grasping praise. My mother could careen so impetuously from rage to pathos and back again that in time, I had no choice but to flee from her whirlwind and forfeit the warmth I cherished so much. The misplaced ambition transformed her love into domination, yet she claimed to love me.

Had my mother been solely rejecting and cruel, I might have detached sooner. Instead, I was tempted by her kindness to chase after her love. Daughters of borderlines are driven, like all daughters, by dependency. We cannot forsake our mothers without imperiling ourselves.

A social worker whom I saw as an adolescent explained to me that she had once had a patient whose mother was schizophrenic. Because the patient's mother was so clearly and

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incontrovertibly crazy, the daughter adapted by seeking support and succor from others in her life, withdrawing any expectations from her mother. Because my mother had some veneer of sanity and professed to love me in language almost lyrical, I never stopped hoping that one day my plaintive cries would reach her heart and mind. With the spectacle of her adolescent daughter, tears streaming down her cheeks, pleading for mercy from her merciless tirades, she might finally cease her degradation. But the sight of me, reflecting her own powerlessness, only seemed to enrage her further: “Are you *finished* yet?” she’d demand, refusing to look at me—her crossed leg shaking as fast as a jackhammer—“I haven’t got time to listen to your *G-d-d-mn-d* psychological *bullsh-t!*”

Her abject lack of compassion, the viciousness with which she shamed and humiliated me, forever stains my memory of her. And the utter denial, the feigned innocence—casting herself as the unappreciated martyr, who lived only for her children’s happiness—is what purges my heart of all sympathy.

A narcissistic borderline’s abuse is different from an average hypercritical parent’s scrutiny. It’s like growing up in a blender with Julia Child on speed. Moments after you perform thoughtful gestures, you’ll be accused of always thinking only of yourself. Innocently mentioning a new acquaintance brings instant accusations that “You only live for *her*. Only *her* you love. Heaven forbid you should ever think of your own mother. You wouldn’t care if I drove off a bridge. Yeah, that’s what I’m gonna do. I’ll drive off a bridge. Then you’ll realize what I meant to you. You’ve never appreciated a %@\$&%\$# thing I ever did for you, but after I’m gone, you’re gonna be sorry!” Remember those Looney Tunes’ cartoons with Elmer Fudd’s face being clobbered from side to side so fast it’s blurry? That’s what it’s like, except you look into the eyes of your tormentor to find yourself, or to

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find pity and compassion, and you can't find either and can't figure out who you are.

My mother once offhandedly mentioned that when I was a young child, I formally petitioned her with a list of demands. First on the list was "my right to be myself." Although she missed the poignancy in that appeal, I felt vindicated. Learning I had so long contested her oppression confirmed that it was real and not a self-serving fabrication.

To this day, I do not know how I survived the insanity of a mother who regarded normal separation and individuation as a betrayal. Nothing would have made her happier than if I had crawled back into her belly where she could possess me forever. I defined myself in a climate where every autonomous step was an inadvertent declaration of war.

Memories of my mother are plagued by the sound of her shrieking and the image of her lips drawn around pointed teeth tearing into my sensitive soul with a brutal tongue. The daily punches were trivial by comparison. Old enough no longer to be a fool, I would threaten, "If you hit me again, I'm hitting you back."

Hearing "I'll smash your face in, you little \$%&#!" as the refrain of my lullaby was especially hard in that my mother had the borderline's knack for knowing where and with whom to unleash her fury. Being secretly savaged by my mother, while she carried on a thin veneer of normalcy with the rest of the world, meant I was left to wage self-defense unassisted and suffer the self-doubt and guilt that accompany any child who dares to truly battle a parent.

That I resisted the scorn my mother heaped upon me—yet hurled it down upon myself in her absence—would be her pyrrhic victory. Instead of priding herself on having two content and healthy children who were able to separate from her, my

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mother preferred her children depressed and debilitated if only *malleable*.

I witnessed this firsthand when I suffered my beloved older brother's first clinical depression *with* him, after he dropped out of Syracuse University in his first year. Richard lay on the living room couch in a fetal curl, mumbling about suicide—his greasy hair matted against his forehead by the pillow he clutched for months.

I never saw my mother so alive and so elated. She positively exulted in wishful fantasies. Richard would go back to school to study medicine. He would drop his “cockamamie” friends. He would start dressing like a go-getter. All he had to do was listen to her, and she would chart his path to stardom. “He could have been reconstructing the Boston skyline like Donald Trump by now, instead of painting houses for money, if only he'd listened to me,” she rapturized.

In his pathetic state, my brother couldn't resist her. He put up no fight. She dressed him and spoon-fed him like a gargantuan infant. That he was unable to bring himself to bathe did not dissuade her.

Finally responding when lithium was added to his third course of antidepressants, Richard got up off that couch to resume his former life. And that's when she descended upon him in a panic, hissing into his ears all the vile epithets he had muttered about himself for those many months when severe depression distorted his thinking: that's how desperate she was to restore his lifeless surrender. Few spectacles highlighted her insanity as boldly as this.

Then I did what I always did when faced with my family's dysfunction. I protected my brother; I defended him and I pleaded helplessly for his mercy. And got abused in the melee, by both of them. But my brother's real abuse would only come later. At that age, I was still no threat to his ego. I myself was a

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withdrawn little creature who barely occupied the psychic space of a flea. I was busy every waking moment perpetuating the same relentless self-reproach that would eventually consume me as it consumed my brother.

Some mothers forever remain larger than life. She cast a pall across family borders and down generations. Her only brother, Isaac, would fall into dark, brooding moods whenever my mother crossed his path. Isaac's wife, Vivienne, once confessed to me in my late twenties—by way of apology for their abandonment—“Miranda, if I had allowed our family to stay in contact with your family, it would have been the end of my marriage.” Because of my mother's theatrics, we were shunned by relatives, so I had no one to validate my perceptions nor help me shed the shame that I carried for being a bad child and responsible for her rage.

A child of working-class Eastern European Jewish immigrants who sweated for prosperity in the New World, my mother lost her father early in her own marriage, and her mother a few years later. Perpetually lionizing them as paragons of devotion, she claimed to be the product of a perfect harmony. Her pathology belied this fantasy, yet her family's secrets were buried along with her parents.

My own brother, driven to skepticism and wrung dry of compassion by a mother who played for sympathy too often, became an angry, selfish brute, jealously protecting his meager territory. After a lifetime of coming to his aid, I turned to him once when afflicted with severe gastroenteritis, begging him to bring me some Imodium so I could get myself to the doctor without soiling myself the whole way there. He declared, “Get it yourself—I'm too busy,” and hung up the phone, though he lived only a few blocks away. By the time my roommate returned a few days later and took me to the emergency room, I was admitted for dehydration, seeing stars.

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Later, my mother's newly second but soon-to-be-ex-husband Albert—frustrated by my refusal to cocreate the *happy family* illusion with him—exploded at me, “You're just like your mother. She pretends to be so loving and inviting, but try to get close to her on a Friday night and she just pushes you away. She wants you to *crawl*.”

My uncle, my father, my brother, Albert—anyone who came into my mother's orbit—was so traumatized as to punish me because they couldn't punish her.

What does a good girl do—full of normal, filial feelings—in quarantine with a feral mother? No matter how she protests, she blames herself. My utter inability to penetrate the heart of this primitive creature left me feeling helpless and exquisitely inadequate.

Instinctively, I chose gentleness in a bid not to become like the woman who raised me. Yet her abuse left its mark. Increasingly fearful of criticism from teachers—expecting from all subsequent authority my mother's persecution—I performed poorly, though I was believed to be gifted. My mother's excessive pressure for me to perform put me at odds with my own ambition: To achieve was to gratify this insatiable tyrant. To fail was to vindicate her derision, restoring her place of authority and the natural order.

Two incidents emerge from the blur of my final year under my mother's roof. Not having her talent for the pointed and cruel, I meekly defended myself with “I hate you” when my mother would tear into me, to which she would respond, “I hate you, too!” But once, I said something nasty—I can't even remember what it was, though it was richly deserved, *whatever* it was. My mother spun around, yanked open a kitchen drawer, and the next thing I knew, she was brandishing a steak knife at me with venom in her eyes. Not knowing what to do, I flung the glass of milk I was holding into her face. She stood there, mouth

Cinder-oy-la!

agape, with milk dripping into her cleavage. For once, I had rendered her speechless.

The night before my college entrance exams, I went to the movies with my friend Julie. Carelessly forgetting the train schedule, we found ourselves stranded without a way home. I called my mother, who refused to pick us up, in pique. Arriving home tired, despondent after a two-hour walk, and anxious about the next morning's exam, I found an unwelcome surprise: my bedroom door refused to give way. Forcing it open, I found my room a shambles. In front of me lay devastation wreaked by a human hurricane. Drawers were overturned and shelves spilled in an exhausted heap: books, papers, clothes, records, pictures torn from the walls. I stared in horror at my mother's misguided vengeance on her own child. My anger swelled impotently—I knew how useless it was. Good luck on your SATs, Miranda!

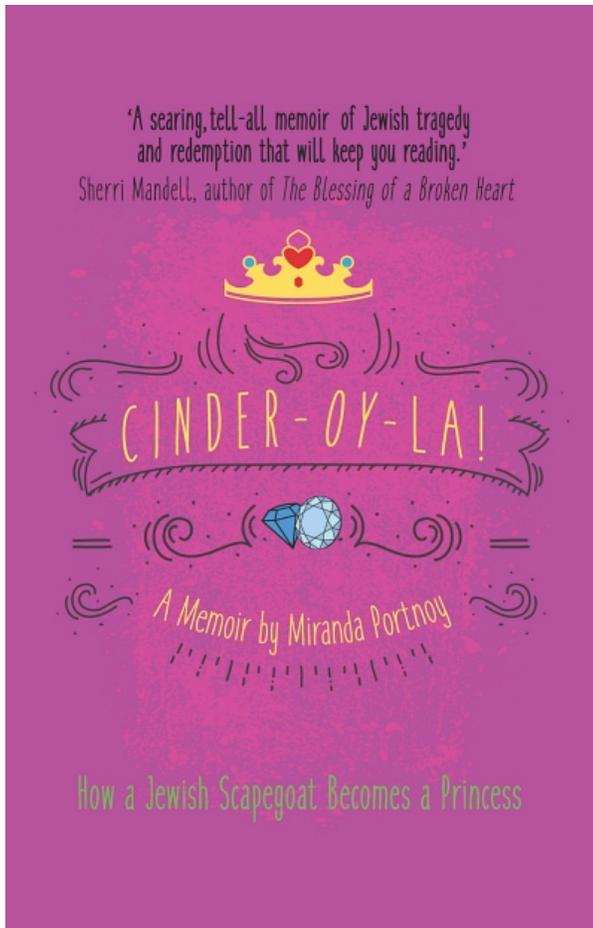
By the grace of my then unacknowledged God, I was offered the chance to spend my senior year in high school living and working on an Israeli kibbutz, in culmination of my years in the Zionist youth movement Habonim Dror. Given permission to graduate high school a year early in order to do so—on condition that I pass two English classes at a university before my departure—I seized the opportunity to flee what would have become my asylum.

I remember the morning of my flight, banging on my mother's bedroom door, begging her to open it so I could say goodbye with a hug and a kiss. I was just sixteen. No matter how we fought, she was my mother and I was her only daughter. But she refused, tearfully cursing me for leaving from the other side of the door...until the last calculating moment.

The feelings lingering for my mother ran all the way from intense hatred to bitter dislike. Like a barren scarecrow, I was

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filled with straw where feelings should be. The six thousand miles between us would not be far enough.



Scapegoated, abused and betrayed, Miranda Portnoy witnesses something astonishing when she turns to the God she doesn't yet believe in. Clumsily growing to embrace Judaism, she is blessed beyond her dreams as the Little Match Girl becomes a princess.

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