

by Arlene Bernstein

Fate

He was a lanky, dark-haired 16-year-old boy who wore glasses; she was fourteen and small for her age. She really liked him but couldn't believe he liked her. Boys wanted pretty girls, not just smart girls. In her family, they always said about her, "Well, she's not so pretty but she sure is smart." She was not used to getting what she wanted.

They had met in June at the Neighborhood Center summer day camp where each was a counselor for the first time.

They were surprised to find out how close they lived to each other and that they shared dreams of escaping the monotonous warren of row house South Philadelphia life.

On Saturdays and Sundays, they walked in the warm sunshine and once in summer rain along the Delaware River waterfront. All their conversations felt important to her.

One late August evening they sat side by side at a special meeting of the day camp staff, called by the director to plan the end-of-the-summer gala for campers and parents.

The boy played the saxophone and would be responsible for the music.

She wrote poetry and would be in charge of producing a funny skit involving all the staff.

As the agenda moved on from point to point, she thought about how soon their summer together would end. Suddenly, she felt she couldn't breathe; the space around her heart felt tight. After all, she reasoned, he wouldn't have spent any time at all with me if we hadn't been thrown together by fate.

They did not even attend the same high school. She was at Girls High and wanted to become a writer.

He went to Southern and had already been accepted to Yeshiva University, where he would prepare himself to become a rabbi.

He didn't seem like the rabbi type to her, not forbidding like the ones she had encountered. He laughed a lot, teased her, and he was far too handsome to be a rabbi, she thought. What would happen when summer was over? He was the nicest boy she had ever met, so gentle, so strong looking.

They sat together side by side, and she wondered what he was thinking. Did he like her? Did he really enjoy her company and talking to her or was he just acting nice? How could a rabbi want a girl like her? Her family hadn't really taught her much about being Jewish. She did know some Yiddish songs and dances but a rabbi wouldn't be interested in just fun, would he?

No, he was probably just killing time with her. She was sure he had a real girlfriend, a smart beautiful rounded-bodied girl from a family of synagogue Jews, a girl able to match his knowledge, eager to raise his tender-eyed Jewish children. *She* didn't want children...*she* didn't even want to get married. From what she had witnessed of her parents' relationship, she preferred being single.

Anyway, he could never fall in love with a girl like her, could he?

She was aware that he had put his arm around her, that his arm was resting on the back of her chair. The director droned on. The big standup fan in the corner hummed loudly but really didn't cool the auditorium. She wondered what she had missed of the director's words.

Suddenly he pulled her to him and whispered, "You seem so far away tonight" and lightly kissed her ear. She froze, startled to feel his embrace, his breath on her cheek. The air in the auditorium was hot; her head ached.

For a moment she sat rigid in his embrace unable to look at him, her face burning with embarrassment even while a memory of their walk in the rain and how she had wanted to throw her arms around him and hug him flashed through her mind.

He looked at her for what felt like a long time, then slowly withdrew the offending arm from around her shoulders. She remained stock still, unable to utter a word, yet desperate to lean against him, to cry out, "Choose me; choose me! I will become everything you want."

He sighed, moving away from the slender shoulders toward which he had inclined his head. His tall strong body deflated, slumping down on the hard auditorium chair.