

WARNER THEATRE, ATLANTIC CITY

Saturday evening, September 8, 1945

Bess scans the darkened auditorium. Someone told her there would be three thousand people in the Warner Theatre tonight. A photographer's flashbulb lights up the hall, and she can now see that it's packed. She stands tall, takes in a deep breath to calm herself, and waits for the announcement. She and the other semifinalists named earlier in the evening have to do it all over again—the swimsuit, evening gown, talent—to advance to the final five. It's late, but her adrenaline keeps her alert, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. She hears emcee Bob Russell smooth-talking the audience. The muscles around her mouth ache from all the smiling.

What a week this has been. On Wednesday, when she played the Grieg concerto on the piano and Gershwin's "Summertime" on the flute in the talent competition, the burst of applause at the end of her performance filled her with irrepressible joy. *They like me! Maybe I have a chance.*

Bess thinks about all the times that she stood beside Arlene Anderson or had to follow her onstage. It was always “Miss Minnesota” with “Miss New York City” walking behind her. At first, Bess would slouch—anything to keep from towering over Arlene’s petite frame and feeling awkward again, like she did in grade school and every year since she reached her adult height, just two inches shy of six feet.

Now, she is pretending, isn’t she? There is confidence and control in each of her movements, yet she barely knows who she is anymore: masquerading across stages in swimsuits; competing against thirty-nine contenders representing cities and states for their true American allegiance. She wasn’t brought up to be a beauty queen. “Practice!” “Homework!” How Mama had drilled into Bessie and her sisters the importance of education and achievement. Hadn’t she entered the contest for the \$5,000 scholarship? And for the extra sponsorship money to buy things for her family?

Bessie had—still has—ambitions: to be a solo pianist, maybe even a composer. She spies Sylvia’s face in the crowd, then Helen’s. She scours the seats around them knowing Papa stayed home with Mama, feeling a heaviness in her chest at their absence.

Suddenly, the desperate years of war flash through her mind without warning. The bombs dropped on Japan just weeks ago. All the charred bodies in the newspaper photographs. The Nazi death camps finally liberated. Six days since the war officially ended. Millions dead.

She watches as one of the nine judges, Conrad Thibault, reaches toward Russell and hands him an envelope containing the names of five finalists. Bess expects Russell to break out in song, given his reputation as *the* singing master of ceremonies. Instead, without hesitation, he begins to tear at the flap.

As if in a dream, she’s watching from the outside. All around her, silence. Russell’s lips are moving, but, over the sudden roar in her ears, she can’t hear him.

CHAPTER ONE

OLIVE OYL

December 1936

Bessie only has to look in the mirror to see that she is built like a tall, skinny boy, all gangly legs and arms. At twelve, she's already taller than all her classmates, even her teachers, at P.S. 95. As her plaid school skirts have risen up her thighs with no more hem to be let down, she worries about exposing her underpants. She wears shorts underneath, happy they also give her some hips. But she's sure she will always be thought of as ugly.

Today's disastrous school announcement only adds to that certainty. She's been assigned to play Olive Oyl, Popeye's homely string bean of a girlfriend, in the school's winter festival of fairy tales and comic-strip characters.

Bessie is mulling over all sorts of humiliations as she sits at the kitchen table eating dinner with her sisters. Smaller girls at school, like her best friend Ruthie Singer, get hugged by their teachers, while Bessie is asked to serve as room monitor or to fetch something from the school office. Sure, there are times when she likes being seen as responsible, as the student most

capable—except when she just wants to be that little girl who’s embraced. The taunts about her height are especially demeaning, although she pastes on a smile when mean-spirited kids call out, “Hey, Stretch, how’s the air up there?” It doesn’t help to know that her most beloved Gramma Besseleh, after whom she was named, is where her height came from. Bessie broods about all the days after school when she’s stuck at home studying or practicing piano while her classmates are off to the movies or spending time gossiping among themselves. Mama insists on that. Yet, as much as Bessie often acts merely dutiful, like she’s only trying to please her mother, she also feels something stirring inside when she completes an advanced worksheet on prime and composite numbers or masters the preludes and fugues in Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. She, in fact, savors a secret pleasure from these accomplishments.

Bessie looks over at Sylvia, already nineteen, who obviously never had to endure the same kind of embarrassments. Sylvia is a normal height and she’s pretty and feminine, a swimmer who now earns money as a lifesaving instructor *and* sports a gorgeous tan. She actually tells hilarious stories. Best of all is how Sylvia treats Bessie when she’s hurting.

Helen’s asthmatic wheezing cuts the silence. At ten, Helen is delicate and slight, and her condition gives her skin a pallor. Bessie immediately feels less sorry for herself and silently pledges to be more attentive to her younger sister.

Mama stomps into the kitchen, tosses her wool duffle coat over the one empty chair, and drops some change on the table. “See that? It’s what I earned today scrubbing the floor of Giorgio’s Ristorante.” She stares straight at Bessie. “If you don’t go to college, if you don’t turn out to be something, that’s what’s going to happen to you.”

Bessie tries not to take Mama’s harsh tone personally, although these pronouncements can make her feel wretched. She tells herself this is about Joseph, the brother she never

knew—Joseph who died of whooping cough almost two years before Bessie was born, when Sylvia was five. He was just a toddler. Privately, Papa confided that Mama’s sorrow over this loss never left her. Papa, always trying to affirm where Mama criticizes, added that Bessie’s arrival had helped. He told Bessie she was such a pretty baby that her mother would tie a red ribbon around her full head of black curls to ward off the evil eye, an old Jewish superstition that warned of bad luck for anyone too rich, too successful, or too beautiful. Bessie can’t imagine herself as beautiful, though she knows Papa meant well.

If she really were beautiful, she wouldn’t have been picked to play someone as unsightly as Olive Oyl. The shorter girls have been assigned dainty roles like Bo Peep and Snow White. Bessie will loom above them, her hair pulled back tight and knotted in a bun on the top of her head, her only semi-acceptable feature essentially hidden. Bessie is positive that playing Olive Oyl will be her final downfall.

She decides to break her mother’s rule of not talking while eating supper. “I don’t want to be Olive Oyl,” she declares. “That’s the part they gave me for the festival.”

Bella fixes her stern gaze at Bessie, frowning her brow before answering. “What? A lead role? Why wouldn’t you want that?” She dismissively waves her hand through the air. “This is acting, Bess. You can make believe you’re someone else.”

Bessie doesn’t see it that way. She wouldn’t have to pretend she was unattractive. And the other students will only taunt her more. But there is no way to argue with her mother or get any sympathy. Sylvia offers an affirming nod her way and squeezes Bessie’s hand under the table.

After she takes her dishes to the sink, washes and dries them, and returns them to their proper cabinet shelf, Bessie crosses from the kitchen to the living room in just a few strides. Her father is sitting on the fold-out couch that doubles as her parents’ bed so she and her sisters can share the only bedroom.

She snuggles against him, laying her head into the crook of his neck. He sets down the *Bronx Press-Review* and puts his arm around her shoulder. “Ah, Besseleh, how was your day today?”

“Terrible, Papa. Did you hear? I’m supposed to be Olive Oyl in the school play. Mama doesn’t care that my teachers want me to wear some ugly black dress and a pair of oversize black shoes. She doesn’t understand anything.” Bessie begins to cry. “They’re going to squash my hair into a bun!”

Papa kisses her forehead. “Your mother just wants you to do your best, Besseleh. She knows you’re beautiful no matter what part they gave you . . . in whatever it is.” He pats her gently as he returns to reading his newspaper.

Whenever she feels like weeping, Bessie turns to her father. Even when he comes home worn out from painting a house or fixing cabinetry—everyone calls Louis Myerson the best handyman around, a real “craftsman”—he always makes time for her, and she feels like his favorite. When she wants to escape her own reality, she asks about his childhood in Russia. He tells her about the local gangs who would get drunk and attack Jewish boys like him. Of his many stories, the one he recounts most often is about when he was a small child and another pogrom had swept through his village. Hiding under the floorboards, he says he could hear boots pound, dishes crash, his mother screaming, and the baby cousin buried beside him gasping for air. By the time the Cossacks left, little Louis Myerson had nearly suffocated, and his cousin was dead. Bessie holds back tears every time Papa shares this horror of his past. But he always adds that when he arrived in New York at the age of eighteen, he saw that Americans were different, less filled with hate.

Bessie would ask how her parents met, and her father would always say that he fell in love with her mother the first time he saw her toiling without complaint in a Lower East Side shirt

factory. He'd describe a woman Bessie didn't know: a woman filled with laughter, who loved to flirt and dance; a vivacious, pretty, and affectionate woman. Emigrating with her own father from Odessa, Russia when she was only ten, Bella received very little formal education, which explains why she can only read English and Yiddish with difficulty. Bessie figures her mother's obsessive focus on education must stem from this limitation.

Her parents married in 1915, when Bella was twenty-three and Louis was twenty-six. Like many working-class Jews, they left their inner-city New York neighborhood just before the Depression hit. Her father says they were drawn to the trees, parks, and fresh air of the Bronx. They'd thought the multibuilding complex known as the Sholem Aleichem Cooperative Houses would be perfect for raising their family. He liked the uniformity, with identical four-story walkups surrounding a central courtyard with gardens. Her parents prefer the security of living among mostly Eastern European Jews, people like them. Papa says it reminds them of the close-knit shtetls where they were raised. Bessie knows from all the stories Papa has told her that Jews weren't accepted in many places. He says they found signs and flyers in many neighborhoods dictating "no Catholics, no Jews, no dogs."

It is the Sholem Aleichem community that Bessie now seeks for comfort. She puts on her wool coat and walks down the stairway, acknowledging the Dorfman sisters chatting on the second-floor landing. She continues down into the maze of cellars where the cooperative's performance auditorium is located, hoping to find a musical ensemble or drama group practicing for the upcoming neighborhood festival. As she nears, she hears voices inside and carefully opens the door, edging into one of the theater seats to watch the rehearsal of *Waiting for Lefty*. She applauds at the end of the scene where the cab drivers finalize their plan for a labor strike.

“Shalom, Bessie!” Malcolm Fried, a burly neighbor from her building, calls out from the stage. “What brings you here tonight?”

“Bored, I guess. Wanting some inspiration.”

Malcolm, a butcher by day, motions his fellow actors to go on without him. “Ah, you’ve come to the right place. I’m at your service.” He steps down from the stage to approach Bessie.

“What’s new, sweet *meydle*?”

“I was assigned a role in my school play.”

“Mazel tov, Bessie!” Malcolm smiles as he locks eyes with her. “Why the glum *punim* then?”

“It’s a character I don’t like.” Bessie pauses as she considers how much she wants to share. “I mean, someone I don’t want to be. My mother thinks I’m being silly, that I just need to pretend to be someone else.”

“She’s not entirely wrong.” Malcolm takes a seat next to her. “Acting is not about you onstage. It’s about becoming invisible, inhabiting that character so only she can be seen.”

“But I don’t want this role. It’s a stupid character.” Bessie feels her cheeks redden, knowing how trite she must sound to Malcolm.

“Maybe you find some shtick, some trick to make this character more interesting or appealing to you.” Malcolm closes his eyes and strokes his scruffy beard for a moment before he continues. “Actors are often asked to play roles we initially can’t identify with. Look, I know how to schmooze with my customers, not how to be a taxi driver and deal with labor unrest, yes? But, as actors, we find a way. We try to learn something about our character.” He stands and turns back to face her. “Maybe I expand the idea of schmoozing into how I need to relate to my fellow cabbies. Turn a friendly schmooze into a persuasive schmooze. You see?”

The drama teacher, Mrs. Bloom, puts Bessie in men’s laced black shoes and some grown-up’s black crepe dress to accommodate her height. She presses Bessie’s curly black hair tightly into a

bun on the top of her head. In rehearsals, Bessie pretends she is wearing pretty clothes. She recalls her father telling her, “You don’t need fancy dresses, Bessie. You would look beautiful in a potato sack.” When she feels like a clown while pretending to be Olive Oyl, she also pretends not to be humiliated by the role or the costume.

Bessie also goes to the school library to find out more about Olive, just as Malcolm suggested. First, she learns that Olive was a character before Popeye had been created for the comic series. Then she discovers that Olive and Popeye actually hated each other when they first met. Olive’s first words to Popeye were: “Take your hooks offa me or I’ll lay ya in a scupper.” In the rehearsal scenes with Popeye, Bessie applies this to her character and fights bitterly—and her classmates think hilariously—until the place in the script where they begin to have feelings for each other.

“Cut; let’s take a break here!” Mrs. Bloom places the script down on a nearby chair in the school’s multipurpose room. “Bess, I’d like to have a word with you.”

Bessie wonders if she’s done something wrong as she steps off the stage and walks toward her teacher. Only Mama calls her by her more grown-up name.

“I’m quite taken with your performance, Bess. I hadn’t thought of Olive in the way you’re playing her.”

“What do you mean, Mrs. Bloom?”

“Well, I only thought of Olive as foolish, short-tempered, demanding, and fickle. But, in your hands, she is also full of energy and enthusiasm. I like her better that way.” Mrs. Bloom smiles up at Bess. Even at five feet five, she barely reaches Bessie’s shoulders. “You’re playing Olive Oyl as a tough broad with backbone. All I’m saying is that you may have a future in acting, Bess.”