

Chapter Five

Unconvention in the Catskills

Other people's prejudices are so hard to accept and work around, I just want to shout at them to shut up, sit down, listen in and chill out, I'm just intolerant that way. Which isn't to say that I'm free of bias or bigotry, I'm as narrow minded as the average person, if such a creature as the average person exists.

Mind you, it isn't *my* daughter who's bringing home the Jewish members of her new joined group of extreme militant and radically politicized sexual deviants from college to dinner at the Shabbes table, is it? My daughter does not sit with her freshly shaven head gleaming, with shiny chrome spikes like a Klingon sticking out of her scalp, with Grampa Horrorwitz from Florida and the weird aunt from Cleveland who always get drunk and sings the *Chad-Gadya* song at the Family Seder on Passover night in our house, does she?

No. It's other people who have the reactions and the bellyaching and the self-pity and the shame. I only get the phone calls.

"My Mashalleh, did she tell you she's binding her breasts now, Rabbi? It shouldn't happen, I tell you, to a Jewish person."

I do not tell the woman on the phone that Masha/Moshe has not had breasts to bind for longer than I have known him in his present incarnation as a Yeshiva College graduate and candidate for rabbinical ordination.

"Rabbi, can't you tell her it's forbidden from the Torah, can't you make her see what she's doing to herself, to her body? My Mashalleh was such a beautiful girl, she was such a sensible girl, they named her after my father Moshe, you know. He was rabbi in Poland before the war, such a beautiful girl."

As it's Masha/Moshe's grandmother and not his mother on the phone, I give myself permission to listen and say nothing. Nor do I tell her what my theory is about the cosmic effects of naming boys after dead women and girls after men.

"He was killed in the holocaust, you know, Mashelle was named for him," she continued.

But I say nothing. Nor do I tell her what my theory is about the cosmic effects of naming babies after holocaust victims.

"Can't you find her a nice young man, rabbi, she thinks so highly of you? I wish you would do something to save her from herself. It's such a pity, such a shame. A shidduch, can't you find for her, already?"

Grandma had no idea how hard I was trying to set people up with dates and possible marriage partners. Nor would I tell her that my utter lack of success with Kinky Shiduchin/Matchmaking was because the list of names was so short; there were only half a

dozen motley individuals on the books. No one, without the miraculous intervention of serendipity or a heroically flexible approach to relationships, is likely to find their soul's mate from among such a short list. Well, you wouldn't, would you - not unless it were the end of the world and they the only six humans left alive, or you were castaway on a desert island with them? None of us normal people, on a planet carrying billions of people and with no less than a few hundreds of millions of available singles, is going to settle and choose from a selection of just three individuals! But then again, when I say *none of us*, I'm really only speaking for myself, aren't I? Matchmaking is a funny business, a very funny business.

Who were the kinky candidates for marriage? Well, to begin with there were just a few hopefuls:

- An Ashkenazi stockbroker from NYC in his mid-thirties, with myopia and a tendency to corpulence. He signed his name *M'Gnasher*, pronounced Menashe, (which was his real name).
- Two madly gay ex-yeshiva bochurs in their forties, from Brooklyn.
- A thirty-something Israeli/American woman, an unemployed former accountant, commuting between Tel Aviv/NYC. She signed herself 'B44wine', (her real name being Perle).
- A convert to Judaism, a former naval officer with two children and a dead-beat ex husband in Charleston, SC.
- A black-but-Jewish day-school headmistress with an impressive resume in Cleveland, Ohio.
- A very earnest Ba'al Teshuva¹ in her twenties, with a small part in a nationally syndicated soap opera, enjoying a comfortable legacy from her grandfather and life on the west coast.
- Masha/Moshe?

Interesting and genuinely available people all, whose needs were so particular and nice, I sincerely doubted they could ever find their match. Reading their profiles made me acutely conscious how difficult it can be for singles with special needs to find each other, with or without help. A call to Izzy the *Shadchan*/Matchmaker, for suggestions, only had my head reeling in bewilderment and overloaded with unsolicited data.

"Rabbi," Izzy cautioned me. "If you want to succeed in Shiduchim/Matchmaking learn to identify the exact section of the market you're catering to, or else you'll exhaust yourself. When someone sounds too good to be true, they probably are. Don't try and match apples and oranges or your stock will run on past its best-by-date, and don't match sheep with wolves, they make a mess and have bad taste. If it's sensible enough to come in out of the rain, it's mature enough to get married. Now, another thing, because we're living in this day and age, prevail on the rabbi who does the ceremony to get them to agree to sign a prenup, if it's their first marriage, and make sure to obtain copies of their divorce decrees, in your very own hands, if it isn't. You'd be surprised. If it was the parents who engaged your

¹ Ba'al Teshuvah = BT: Born again Jew, generally available in three, rugged flavors. LTBT = long term, MBT = mad, RBT = rabid.

services on behalf of their children, make sure to talk to both of them, you'd be surprised, trust me on this. Remember, it's not like matching dwelling houses and house buyers, here people really don't want to know about the dry rot, they really don't want to know. And never forget the Shadchan's mantra: For every lid there is a pot. If you want to know my experience, just so you don't get discouraged, it's like this. Ten percent of those who meet first time make it, just like that, no problem. Thirty percent of those meeting twice go on to make it all the way to the wedding. Seven percent get to the final decision-making moment, only to say 'No', for no good reason you can fathom. Twelve percent..."

"What about special needs Shiduchin?" I interrupted, hoping to stem the tide of facts and figures.

"What do you mean, like for people with handicaps, deaf and blind Shiduchin?"

"Something like that" I admitted.

"Hmmmnnn," he replied thoughtfully. "There's already an organization run by a woman out of Jerusalem, catering to that section of the market. But I don't believe it's a money making proposition, even though I have referred people to her, there's not much money in it. I can give you her address and phone number if you need it."

I declined his offer without explaining. What's to explain?

Thus was KinkyShiduchin.com born, and the stage set for the big drama, the revolution and the growth in all of our lives.

"KINKY SHIDUCHIN," the banner on the web page announced in bold, crimson type, both in Hebrew and English, of course. "This is where you will find the girl or guy your parents warned you about all those years ago!"

Masha/Moshe did most of the groundwork on the database, 'tapping the woodwork' he called it, to see what comes out. Did you know there are people who dress up as rabbis for part of their sexual thrill? Ok, so maybe you can stand it, but did you know that some, maybe the very same people, also dress as nazis for part of their sexual thrill. Doesn't it make you think? On the web-page of Kinky Shiduchin there was a list of every known, named, anatomically feasible and legally sanctioned kink for people to check or cross off next to their names. The whole enterprise came with the warning: This is not a computerized data-base where forms, queries and reports appear magically in your Emailbox as "Daily Kinky-Shiduchin Updates - here are your 40, latest, computer generated, perfect matches..."

It didn't work that way. In fact, it didn't work, at all. Aspiring and eligible marriage partners there are plenty, I learned, but matches are either made in heaven or not at all. Or, to put it another way, within a short time I decided that I have no talent for this sort of thing.

Three months into operations, M'Gnasher the stockbroker in NYC was arrested for soliciting, and retired from the lists. One of the gay ex-yeshiva bochurs succumbed to a full-

blown acquired-immune-deficiency. Six new singles applied, filled out the forms and sent in their hopes and fears, and now we were a Minyan², but no one had paired off or begun a dating relationship. Which explains, in a roundabout sort of way, why we (surely the most diverse company of Jews ever) were gathered in the lobby of the Kretchmer Hotel and Conference Center in the Catskills, one dismal Friday afternoon in November, for the first Kinky Shiduchin Unconvention.

Masha/Moshe declined to participate at the Unconvention for fear of jeopardizing his anonymity. Only those with loud profiles and out-of-the-closet type lifestyles jumped at the idea without preconditions, everyone else was beset with fears of coming out, being seen and recognized or standing up in public and making a statement about who they are. Even when we established lots of rules to protect people's anonymity; no cameras or recording devices were allowed on the premises, people were encouraged to register using an alias and divulge no personal information, all previously discussed special needs and kinks would be kept in strictest confidence etc., people were still reticent. In the end it was Perle who made it happen. Perle is the consummate organizer and social secretary. She worked out the ground-rules, took care of the correspondence and scouted the location, negotiated the cost, the food and the transportation.

"I have the perfect formula," she said. "Let's model the weekend on an A.A. convention. Let's have speakers talk about their experiences, strength and hope. Let's have some workshops and demonstrations of techniques and technicalities, and let's have round-the-clock fellowship and meetings."

Needless to say, by Friday noon, Reb Chainik, the worlds sexiest and most talented ex-Rosh Yeshiva was in high spirits, loud and visible in the hotel lobby, welcoming the arrivals with a glass of orange juice in one hand and a sheaf of brochures and nametags in the other. Whether standing with his arm companionably around the shoulder of a pair of newbies, or telling raucous and bawdy jokes in the center of an admiring ring of auditors, he was usually to be found somewhere, center stage.

Late in the afternoon Masha/Moshe called me to find out how things were going.

"We miss you here," I said. "There's going to be a shortage of pre-op, transsexual, marriage candidates on the top table at the banquet. And there's a talent show planned for Saturday night, you could have shown off."

"Yeah. Well, maybe I'll drive up after Shabbes is over," he said. "I'll see how the weather looks and stuff. By the way, how's Perle doing?"

I looked over at Perle at the welcome table, smiling at newcomers and helping each one feel like the guest of honor. It's a gift she has. Genuine warmth. Just one of Perle's five

² Minyan: Quorum. The minimum for an assembly to conduct Jewish services has traditionally been ten males over the age of Bar-Mitzvah (13 years old). Actually bar-mitzvah comes with puberty and in more enlightened times people checked to see whether the boy or girl was growing pubic hairs before loading them with guilt and religious obligation. These days the point of the connection between puberty and responsibility seems to have been missed.

thousand watt smiles is enough to make anyone feel like the beneficiary of a whole shower of blessings. I turned back to the phone, “She’s doing fine, you know how she is. Why d’you ask?”

“Nothing, no reason. Here, you guys have a great time. Give everyone my love,” he said, ending the call abruptly. Rather too hurriedly, I thought.

An irritating man, approaching middle age, of medium height and possessed of an excessively ingratiating smile cornered me and introduced himself as M’Gnasher pronounced Menashe.

“Ahh,” I said, congratulating myself on remembering his particulars. “The stockbroker from New York City, and how are you?”

“Well, er, actually, not the stockbroker anymore, er, the SEC intervened, you understand,” he explained, nodding his head rapidly and squinting at me through pale, almost lashless eyes.

“Oh, quite, yes the SEC, quite,” I replied knowingly.

“Later on, perhaps we’ll talk?” he asked with another cloying smile. I nodded acquiescence, but walked away from him with the feeling of having been solicited.

We were far too small a small crowd to fully occupy the actual hotel and convention center. Add to that the fact we were such an indigent group of people, the lobby of convention center was merely an assembly area for participants. The Unconvention was to take place in a small, wooden hunting lodge in the woods, on the hotel grounds. It had running water in the bathrooms and real log fires in the grates. Other conveniences or luxuries were absent.

Chainik led the services for Friday night, choosing the most exquisite tunes. His chanting was inspired. He stopped halfway through and told a story, an old Hasidic tale. We wept. The room was breathless, entranced. I’ve seen him do it before, hold a room full of people in the palm of his hand so gently they have no idea he’s working magic. Still, watching him in this particular room, seeing him away from the black-hatted Jewish scene, was to see him sparkle and shine. Ostensibly his presence was explained (as was mine) in the welcoming brochure each guest received, as being adjunct to the rabbinical committee of the Unconvention. He was fooling no one.

We brought our own Shabbes food, Challah bread, fish, chicken, drinks and fruit. Perle called on those who enjoyed being of service as part of their kink, to volunteer as waiters. Three men and two women came forward. They donned aprons, jackets and serviettes and served the rest of the guests.

There was an unplanned scene during the meal. His screen name was SpicEasy, (real name: Isadore from Mexico City) and he had a bit of a size problem. He was one of those lumbering giants whose awareness of their own bulk makes them extra gentle around

people, as though afraid of inadvertently hurting passersby. Well, quite by accident he spilled soup over another guest – actually, over the waitress who was serving him. Her name was Shoshanna (real name: Victoria Ellen from Portland, Oregon). Perhaps it was the shock of the hot liquid that startled her, or seeing her plans for looking nice at the Unconvention go down the drain with her best shoes, who knows? We were all a little highly strung that night, but Shoshanna lost it completely.

You know how it is when seated in a public eatery like a restaurant, and you realize someone in the room is angry because the background noise of clattering cutlery is no longer background, when it's been raised by a factor of ten or more to impinge on your consciousness like a dentist's drill? This moment sounded like one of those only louder.

We all stopped eating and talking, to watch this drama unfold. SpicEasy apologized, but she refused to be mollified. He apologized more abjectly. She shook her head as though shaking tears out of her eyes, or trying not to cry. He got up clumsily to rectify the harm done and knocked a whole carafe of water off the table. Some people in the room groaned in sympathy, others, closer by, shot out of their chairs to extend their assistance, dabbing at the floor ineffectually with paper napkins.

Seeing it happen, watching SpicEasy incoherent with embarrassment before this little woman, Shoshanna who was turning apoplectic with rage, I was struck by the thought that this weekend might not have been such a good idea after all. What if all goes out of control? What if he starts shouting at her?

What actually happened next was worse, I thought; she began shouting at him.

“Look what you’ve done to my shoes, look what you’ve done!” She went on for a bit longer than strictly necessary, considering he never stopped begging her pardon.

He was unable to meet her eyes throughout, and kept his eyes on his own shoes, which only made her more furious. It was Chainik’s supreme presence of mind, that defused an increasingly embarrassing situation. He walked past Shoshanna, whispered something in her ear and walked away without stopping.

Shoshanna stopped shouting and stared at Chainik’s retreating form as though for confirmation, but he never looked back at her, he didn’t stop until he’d left the dining room completely and the kitchen doors had swung closed on him.

She turned back to SpicEasy who was still rooted to the spot, and slapped his face once with her right hand and once with her left. She actually had to reach up to do it; he was so much taller than her. The room became an instant cacophony of clattering cutlery as everyone put down the spoons they were about to use for the soup.

Perle, sitting next to me, was watching it all happen with horror and envy – a scene, a scene! Suddenly waking to her duties as chaperone, she rose out of her seat and taking firm but undeniable charge, she ushered the two protagonists out of the room, putting her arms around both of them, well, around his waist and her shoulders, and ushering them firmly

out of the room. In a moment she had returned, closed the doors on them, and turned to face us. Leaning back and resting on the double doors behind her, she first let out a deep and audible breath, and then favoring us all with her most glittering smile, announced, “Mazel Tov! I guess someone just discovered she’s a Switch, boys and girls. Now shall we proceed with the soup?”

There was lots of laughter and chatter, as people discussed their impressions of the scene we’d all just witnessed, and an easing of tension. So things were quite relaxed when we all gathered after dinner, in the main lounge area, for the talk session. Perle was the opening speaker, an honor she granted herself as a reward for being chair, director and organizer of the Unconvention.

“Shalom, ladies and gentlemen and Good Shabbes. Welcome to the first of what will be, hopefully, many gatherings of Unconventional Shiduchin. If I have your permission, I’d like to break the ice and introduce myself to you, I’m Perle. Now, looking at me, you may not have noticed my endowment, but when I was thirteen years old, living in Tel Aviv, my breasts grew, ahhemmm, extremely extreme. For those of you men and women who dream and others who fantasize, let me tell you that it is a life changing experience to go from relative obscurity as a plain girl, to instant cult status as a girl owned by a pair of fabulous breasts. Now, at that time there was a young doctor in Israel hoping to make a name for himself in the annals of medical science. He had played around with the statistics and discovered that women whose breasts eh, peaked, that is to say, they reached a certain critical mass before the age of fourteen, are at a significantly greater risk of developing cancer later in life than women in other categories. Doctor Titskiller, as he is known in the sorority of his surviving patients, decided that a course of hormones administered in the fourteenth year to girls in this category to inhibit the growth of their breasts would end up being to their statistical advantage. Instead, of course, it merely increased their chances of developing cancer by fifty percent, but that is not the point of my story. My ever-loving parents decided to enroll me in this crack-brained program, and I was duly measured, X-rayed, prodded and photographed until they deliberated and decided, thank God, that I was not eligible for the course of hormones. Now here’s the point. I went through the whole process from beginning to end. My mother would drop me off at the hospital. I’d go up to the nurses’ desk and they’d show me into a small room where I’d take my clothes off, and then they’d take me for the X-rays or whatever. But the most intense thing was when I would stand in front of this panel of doctors or whatever and they would pore over these huge photographs of my breasts. I can’t imagine how many other girls went through the process of having their breasts photographed and having those photos examined and compared to the things on my chest. But over the period of a year, I was there, and they examined me that way three times, comparing the growth and development and whatever else they had as criterion for their *meshuggene*³ schemes. It went on for a year.

“The thing is, I became ten thousand times more conscious of my breasts than previously. I was sure everyone pointed to them and whispered about them. When I’d meet boys, I’d see them mostly talking straight at the breasts. Even adult men had trouble talking to the

³ Meshuggene: Nutsoid, as in: “Of course I claim my children as a business expense, d’you think I’m a *meshuggene* or something, you think I’d register as a child-psychologist for the fun of it?”

person standing behind the breasts. I tried hiding them and walked hunched over so as not to stick out in front so much.

“I grew up anyway, graduated anyway, did my military service, did the Israel-Nepal trekking thing, went to college, got a degree in accounting and settled down in the USA to a normal life, got married, house, kids, you know, and I completely put out of my mind the saga with the damned doctors at age fourteen. Then, one day, four years ago, I was invited to an interview for a partnership with a prestigious accounting firm. I power-dressed for the interview, you know, Chanel tweed suit, the whole works and psyched myself up for the meeting. Then when I walked into the boardroom to meet the partners I had to cross a square of carpet and approach this semi circle of senior partners seated behind the table. All of a sudden, BAM! I’m back in my fourteenth year and I’m approaching the table with the doctors and I feel them all staring at my breasts and the whole interview falls apart. Collapses. End of my career climb. I talk about moving back to Tel Aviv. I want to hide and disappear. My marriage fell apart shortly after that. I started looking, reading, getting the facts, learning what it is that shaped my psyche and how my wiring is assembled. And what do I discover?”

“Listen to me. I’m terrified of being humiliated in public. The thought of being humiliated in public makes my blood run ice-cold in my veins. But all my sexual fantasies are about being humiliated and degraded. Nu, anyone?”

“I know, standing in this room, you all know what I’m talking about. I thought I was going quietly bonkers. Luckily for me I hit on Gloria Brame’s ‘Different Loving’ website and saw a link to what had to be the most, totally weirdest, fantastical link, to Jewish BDSM links. Jewish BDSM links? Am I hallucinating?”

“I join and am made welcome by someone who shall remain nameless, and that’s my story, I’m here and so are you. Ok, ok, enough talk. Remember the mantra of anonymity: What you see and hear here, let it stay here. And now, it’s time to open these proceedings. I think we’ll begin by going around the room and introducing ourselves. We’ll each say our name and something about ourselves we want everyone to know. Later we can split up into groups or sit at the desert table and nosh, personally I’m looking forward to having my first rabbinical spanking...”

Perle sat down to a good deal of applause. After everyone had been introduced Pesach spoke, or rather, I should say, Pesach and his slave. For wherever Pesach went, his slave was sure to be following. It’s hard to say who has the more commanding presence, Pesach, larger than life, ever smiling, full of laughter and effortlessly bestowed affection, or his slave, dark, exotic, beautiful and serene. Her serenity is what is most striking. Silence and placidity spread out around her as soon as she kneels in the presence of her master, it’s uncanny. From time to time he may stroke her head, absentmindedly, as one might that of a house pet, or feed her a tidbit, or finger the chain collar around her neck. Even before saying anything their statement is so loud it drowns out every other sound in the room. Although, not looking for a Shiduch, he was invited to the Unconvention to share his amazing expertise in various arcane BDSM arts; Shibari, the art of Japanese rope torture, the six-foot, single-tail whip and suspension techniques.

“Rabbi,” someone asked me later on Friday night. “What’s the Halacha about swimming on Shabbes, can we use the swimming pool, only, someone said that it’s not allowed and we didn’t want to offend the sensibilities of those more frummer than others, you know? We asked permission at the hotel, and they said we might use the pool there as they’re empty this weekend.”

Six or seven hopefuls stood poised waiting for a rabbinic response. I stroked my beard thoughtfully a few moments, then put my hands behind my back and nodded again, in my imitation-of-the-raven routine.

“HMMMMM,” I mused. “There’s no technical objection to an indoor swimming pool, it’s only in the outdoors, at riverbanks and such that the rabbis made decrees against swimming on the Sabbath. The problem is this though, if you come out of the water in a swimming costume and clothes you’re going to end up squeezing the water out of the clothing as you undress. You know, of course, squeezing water out of clothing is a no-no, don’t you?”

“Happily, rabbi,” enthused my questioner, “This will not be a problem. Come on guys, gals,” He turned excitedly to the room. “Hey! Listen up, the rabbi said swimming’s ok, if we’re all in the nude. It’s probably a Mitzvah or something, let’s go.” The room emptied swiftly.

An hour and a half after the Havdalah ceremony on Saturday night, Masha/Moshe turned up looking seriously debonair, groomed and very nonchalant, tallish - about five eleven, slim, short bearded and wearing a dark suit and tie.

“Is Perle around anywhere,” he asked casually.

“Sure,” I replied. “Saw her heading for the coffee urn downstairs not five minutes ago, should be still there. Why, did something happen at home I should know about?”

“Neh, nothing. Just wondering where she is, that’s all.”

“And just what is going on, pray tell, I thought you were scared of being outed, and how come you’re here to see Perle and not me?”

“You know,” he said grinning at me, adding a sort of Parthian shot as he headed in Perle’s direction. “I’m just about the only person she’s likely to meet who is not interested in her splendiferous, ginormous, brutoculus, explaribus, humongoid breasts. Wish me luck.”

“Oh,” I shot back. “You noticed them, did you?” But he was gone beyond earshot.

The talent show was an eye opener for me. I hadn’t known that the human body could be tuned as a musical instrument that way, with spreader bars and rubber bands and buckets and such. I guess if a person has a music fetish it’s inevitable that such discoveries will be made. TroubleCleft (real name: Mordechai - music teacher - Miami) had an unforgettable routine. A spreader bar is, as its name suggests, a bar with leather cuffs on either end used

to keep the legs spread apart. He kept up a constant patter of commentary, as, standing with one naked leg each on a large tin bucket, for the sound to vibrate, he tuned himself up for the gig. With brightly colored bungee cords for strings, the person-contraption grew ever more elaborate and the contortions his body went through ever more preposterous. It was a show about show and a performance of a performance; it was also very, very funny.

Someone did a thing with talking dolls. They're like ventriloquists dummies, except they aren't. It was done so well, you forgot the person was speaking and not the dolls. Forget Miss Piggy and the Muppets. Think what's-her-name, Jessica from *Roger Rabbit*, you know, with the legs? These dolls had attitudes and sexuality.

Shoshanna, accompanying herself on guitar, gave a short and beautiful recital of Ladino songs. And sure enough, one super-orthodox man left the room, unwilling to break the taboo against listening to a woman singing.

I went to bed around midnight, others, I am told stayed up and played into the wee hours.

After breakfast on Sunday morning a woman, very hesitantly, approached the table where I sat chatting over a late coffee with Chainik. She waited until a gap opened in the conversation at the table, before inserting herself, ever so respectfully, into our personal space, so as not to interrupt, and then, only after we'd made it quite clear she had permission, she introduced herself.

"Hello, rabbis? I'm Chanda Jerpa, can I trouble you for a few minutes of your time?"

"Certainly, Chanda," I said. "Join us, sit down, make yourself comfortable. Do I know you by any other name?"

"Oh, yes," she said, sitting carefully on the edge of a chair. "I've been writing to you for some time, I'm a member of JBDSM. Online my alias is *tsdykes*."

Chainik was staring at her very intently.

"Are you?" I asked.

"Am I what?"

"Are you a Tsdynes?" Chanda merely blushed and perched even further out onto the edge of her seat. Pesach, who was also having breakfast with us, wanted to know what a Tsdynes is. When I began by explaining that it was a transsexual dyke, Chainik interrupted in exasperation.

"Oh, come on, rabbi. Not everyone speaks Yiddish here. Have a little mercy on all the lost souls. Don't lead them astray."

"Ok, Ok," I confessed. "I was only kidding. A Tsdynes is a woman equivalent of *Tzadik*/Saint. Am I right? I asked Chanda, she only nodded, smiling shyly.

Chanda was a surprising woman; a polyglot ethnographer with an Ivy League PhD, a long, willowy body, beautiful hands and, as it turned out, a bottomless fascination with every detail of Chainik's life and work. She was working, part time, as a journalist while working on her first full-length novel, a bio/fiction describing the life and times of the Maid of Ludmir, the only Hasidic, woman Rebbe.

"Would you really take the time to read my manuscript?" she asked him timidly. "Only, I would so, so appreciate it. I read that you referred to the Maid of Ludmir in a lecture you gave at the Academy, back in March of 1997, and I've been trying to get a transcript of that class ever since."

Where flattery leaves him unmoved, being adored and worshipped gets Chanik going every time. He disappeared in a cloud of ego.

After breakfast the Unconvention wound itself down. Speeches of acknowledgement, thanks and congratulations were made and soon forgotten. Shoshanna and SpicEasy walked up to me with huge smiles on their faces and the declared intention to do some serious dating in the city. Pesach and his slave appeared to have attracted a small female who hopped into their car with them and disappeared without my learning her name. All in all I considered it a success, and went to my room to pack my stuff.

Masha/Moshe had left before breakfast, excusing himself on the grounds he had to be back at the Yeshiva before noon.

Perle and I shared the car ride home.

"Do you have any advice for me, Oh Rabbi?" she asked after we'd spent a while avoiding the subject of Masha/Moshe. "Isn't there anything I should ought to know?"

"Don't let him talk you into having any piercings," was all I could offer, before we both burst out laughing.

As with almost everything Chainik does there tend to be long lasting reverberations following his decisions. Such was the case with this particular pairing. The repercussions are still being felt. For a while Chainik was off the radar screen, staying out of the news and out of town. He told everyone he met that Chanda was the perfect companion for him, quiet, submissive and unassuming. When not together, they talked on the phone at least four hours every day. It was Chanda who suggested he find a publisher for his commentary on the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides. She tracked down and contacted the individuals and institutions with interest Chainik's academic career. It looked as though there might even be money for a new edition of the Guide to the Perplexed with Chainik's commentary on the page, in a very modern format, published by the University of Illinois. She organized all the myriad logistical and financial particulars of the grant applications and the correspondence coming from institutes and universities, and all without fuss or flap. She flew in from Rio De Janeiro to take care of negotiations. Beyond a curt acknowledgment she expected nothing. How could anyone be so self-effacing? She

translated and found a Spanish language publisher in Argentina for his collected sermons and stories.

“While I may be her teacher in the intellectual sphere of our endeavors, Chanda will always be my greatest teacher in the flesh,” so Chainik told me in a candid moment on the phone. I believed him. “I may have radicalized her intellect, brother,” he boomed at me down the telephone from Duluth, MN. “But she’s the sexual anarchist.”

If he had to describe her areas of expertise, (and how could he refrain) he would have to point to her abilities and intrepidity exploring the body. The Mandelbrot Equation of Pleasure, she called it. When I asked him to explain what on earth the Mandelbrot Equation of pleasure was, he said, “Something to do with fractals, every inch of skin having infinite tactile potential.”

“Sounds like you’re having an interesting time,” I remarked.

“She’s amazing, just amazing. No one can go so swiftly and easily into deep orgasm, there can’t be another person like it on earth. We’re here in Duluth with no mikveh, so you know I’m wracking my brains not knowing what to do. She said ‘please don’t order me to use the lake as a mikveh, unless you first put me into deep orgasm first, so that I don’t feel the cold.’ And d’you know what, half an hour later the deed is done. She comes out of the cold lake water like a venus, you know, and I watch totally fascinated, she shows me how to push needles through her nipples and come at the same time. I got to tell you this woman is a phenomenon, I’m standing there totally enthralled as she’s putting these horrible crocodile clips on her labia and earlobes. Where does a person learn such things? It’s the middle of April, the lake is still partly frozen. She doesn’t feel the cold because she’s so sexually aroused. What is this?”

To sum up their relationship in one sentence, I quote the inimitable Chainik quoting that paragon, Chanda: It’s not that she does whatever he tells her to, without question, *she is whatever he wants her to be*. It sounds very fishy to me. Surely, a person ought to be what they are, not what someone else tells them to be? But Chainik assures me he knows what he’s doing, and who am I to argue?

Chanda wasn’t kidding about becoming whatever he wanted her to be. A more marvelous actress cannot be imagined, her versatility was an education all of its own. She was straight, she was queer, she was bi-curious, she was trisexual. (If it was sexual, they tried it.) Omnisexual. Chanda wrote poetry like a demon. Chanda this and Chanda that, who could fail to be stirred? For Chainik, being with Chanda was a little like inhabiting a fairy tale, or more probably, an adult fantasy.

“Isn’t she a married woman?” I asked.

“Not she’s been divorced for ages.”

“Well then, how come her youngest child is only two years old?”

But the minor details were not important. What decided whether a detail was judged minor or major was itself a minor detail, not sufficiently important to warrant serious contemplation or discussion. Thus does Chainik blunder through his own life like a bull in a vagina shop. He would amuse us with his tragicomic exploits, semi repetitive stories in which he inevitably featured as the conquering hero. And now and then we would be regaled with credulity-stretching tales of intricate and many peopled relationships. Chanda plus Layla, she who always wore a garter belt and stockings. Layla brought the strap-on, double-ended, all natural leather dildo. Walking into the movie theater with a woman on either arm was, quite frankly, a matchless experience, he said.

I have noticed a tendency in Chainik to exaggerate. When I bring it to his attention he dismisses it as a minor foible, a quirk, a mere eccentricity. I point out that perhaps there may be an element of less-than-truthfulness in it. He assures me there is nothing wrong with it.

“Women love it” he asseverates. “And besides, truth isn’t all it’s cracked up to be!” In the years that followed I have often wondered whether all our trials did not begin with that unspoken challenge? Is truth dispensable?