

One Day You'll Thank Me
Hayley Katzen

I didn't want to be a doctor. That was my parents' idea. I'd wanted to be a writer until my mother won out. My father paid my fees and bought the expensive text books and my mother tightened her lips and squared her shoulders as she wore the same blazer to every family barmitzvah for those long years of my degree.

As payback I took a three month job as a locum in Balantum. It was a little dot on the map next to a green road, not a red road. So I figured my mother wouldn't know of any eligible bachelors in Balantum, nor would she have an old friend I must look up.

The doctor's house was a fibro two bedroom, next to the surgery. A kitchen with a slow combustion stove, a set of mismatched crockery and bone handled cutlery, a single bookshelf with 'Woodwork for Beginners' and 'Birds of the Northern Rivers' and room for the Henry James, George Eliot, Austen and Dickens I'd lugged with me from Sydney. The monastic bed was layered in crocheted blankets and pillows without any give and the living room light glowed yellow through its tasseled shade. It was a bachelor's home.

And for three months it was all mine.

My mother wouldn't pop in on a Saturday morning, saying over her shoulder as she pushed past me, her arms loaded with clothes, 'I brought these for you from the shop. I thought you could wear them to the Zuckerman wedding.'

'You didn't have to do that, Ma. I have plenty of clothes.'

'It's fine, the girls said I could bring things home on apro for you.'

After she'd hooked hangers onto the tops of the bookshelves, she'd volley questions: who are you going out with tonight? And tomorrow? Aren't you going to the Cohen wedding? Did you meet anyone interesting at the hospital this week?

Now ten hours from Sydney, I was free of the Saturday morning inquisition. For three whole months, I was free of my mother. I could spend all weekend in jeans and thick socks with the company of only my books and my notebook and pen. Here, without her expectant gaze I'd find my story.

The first people I met that Sunday afternoon were a mother and daughter: Marsha and her daughter Avril. The sandwich board on the street said 'Marsha's restaurant Open 12 til 4 pm'. The jaunty fiddles of Klezmer music and the smell of salty chicken soup wooed me up the stairs of an old school hall. The other two shops in the village, the Butcher's and the Rural Co-operative, were both closed. The only action was at the Church. And at Marsha's.

The blackboard menu offered three choices: chicken soup with dumplings, cheese pancakes or hot beef on rye. When the waitress with the shawl of thick curly hair stopped filing her nails long enough to take my order, I asked, 'Are those dumplings made with matza meal?'

She looked at me strangely, then nodded.

'So it's chicken soup and *kneidlach*?'

Hayley Katzen. 'One Day You'll Thank Me.'
Transnational Literature Vol. 2 no. 2, May 2010.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

‘We call them dumplings,’ she said.

The wall above me was tacked full of Certificates of Appreciation from the local school and the New South Wales Rural Fire Service and clipped newspaper articles lauding Marsha’s Restaurant as *the* place to eat in rural Australia.

In the quiet of the empty restaurant, I heard the waitress’s voice from behind the swing door, ‘Lady out there asked for *kneidlach*.’

Then the kitchen door swung open theatrically and a woman, no more than four foot ten, her cheeks rouged by heat, her pert lips painted coral pink, marched out.

‘That’s her, mum,’ the waitress said as the woman descended on me, wiping her hands on her apron.

‘What so now I’m blind?’ the woman said in accented English. She thrust out a hand still moist from rolling matza balls and said, ‘Marsha Abromowitz.’

As she inventoried my short dark hair, my surgically altered nose, she said, ‘So how come you know *kneidlach*?’

‘I’m Jewish, on my mother’s side. My grandparents were Lithuanian.’

‘So you speak Yiddish?’

‘Oy? *Meshugganah*?’ I said.

‘Never mind, never mind. You know *kneidlach*.’ She patted my hand. And then began the questions: ‘Are you related to the Levys from Sydney? Who are you visiting in Balantum? Married? No? Divorced? No? Children?’

And while she played Jewish geography, I composed letters to my inner city friends describing this Bette Midler look-alike without the mountains of blonde hair and the American accent. I was hoping she’d burst into song.

When I managed to tell her I was Dr Tenner’s locum, she nodded with her lips arched downwards and her chin mottled.

‘See Avril,’ she said to her daughter. She turned back to me and said, ‘You tell her. Tell my daughter not to waste herself with farm boys. Tell her she can also be a doctor.’

As a family came into the restaurant, Marsha rose and whispered to me, ‘Come try my blintzes soon.’

It became a regular for me, Sunday lunch at Marsha’s. She wasn’t really Bette Midler or Barbra Streisand, she wasn’t that sophisticated and she definitely couldn’t hold a tune. She wasn’t my great aunt Bessie, just out of the shetl either. Sometimes the English word still eluded her, sometimes she said something in Hebrew or Yiddish. But then she also boasted of how she’d ‘skun thirteen rabbits in an hour.’ She was as skilled an Australian country woman as any member of the local Country Women’s Association.

My letters to friends were peppered with Marsha-isms. I described her as an anachronism; I pondered ethnicity and why some become chameleons, others highlight their difference almost to the point of cliché. I wondered if Marsha would’ve been different if she’d lived in Eastern Suburbs Sydney amongst other Jews.

On Sundays I’d get to the restaurant early, before the church crowd, so Marsha

could come out and chat. Even Avril got used to me. Sometimes she'd tell me she wanted to go to university to become an accountant, sometimes she'd tell me she was too stupid and hairdressing was her only option. Sometimes she ignored me and whispered into the phone with the music up high. Once I noticed her flicking through the *Women's Weekly* and hiding it in the middle of her books when her mother pushed through the kitchen door to offer me a little herring with *kigel* dusted with icing sugar.

One Sunday I arrived at the end of lunch. Marsha brought out *gefilte fish* before my soup. She watched as I tasted and then sat down with me.

'So, tell me,' Marsha said. 'You're clever, you're pretty, a bit thin in the face maybe. But why there's no man? No engagement?'

Avril called out from her perch, 'Because she's been too busy studying. That's what happens if you go to university.'

I heard myself say, 'I wish there was, but I just haven't met anyone I like yet. Male or female.' I had never been that honest with my own mother.

Suddenly, Marsha said to me, 'Take off your shoes.'

I eased off my left boot.

'Your ankles, show me,' she said. 'Without the sock.'

I pulled my jeans up to my knees, peeled off my sock and pointed my foot out to the side, twisting my ankle.

'Not bad,' she said. 'Not bad.' And then she pushed off her rubber-soled lace-up shoe and circled her ankle with the grace of a prima ballerina. Her toe nails were painted a bordello red, her calves were shapely and taut beneath the sheer stockings. She leaned towards me and whispered, 'The men always used to look at me. And always I have no waist and this *tochas*,' she thumped her bottom. 'You know why they like me?'

I opened my mouth to answer when Marsha announced, 'I have these legs.'

'Didn't stop Dad from running off,' Avril said, just loud enough for us to hear.

Marsha sneered. 'My daughter,' she said. 'She knows nothing of men.'

To Avril she said, 'Get on with your homework. Go on, there's no customers. Do your work. Without the lipstick.'

Avril curled her top lip and filed her nails.

'Now,' Marsha said.

Avril dropped the file onto the table and pulled out her textbook.

It was on those Sundays that Marsha told me about her childhood in Poland, about moving to Israel and then following her passion for the Australian man, Avril's father. On one of those Sundays, she said to me, 'You should invite your mother to visit. We could have Shabbat together.'

'She wouldn't approve of Balantum. No theatres, no museums, no fancy delicatessens, no one who's anyone important. She thinks I should be in London.'

'And you? You would like her to come?'

I didn't know what to say to Marsha. So far I'd been honest with her. I'd even

told her I'd been writing stories, that I'd rather deal in fiction than prescriptions for high blood pressure.

'You don't want her to come?'

'No.' I said, relieved Marsha had read my silence. 'She's always asking 'Who are you going out with?' She's always disappointed with me, telling me about her friends whose kids are getting married and having their own kids. And because my brother married out, it's all about me. When I ask her how she is she says, 'Don't worry about me. I'm perfectly alright, I keep myself busy.' But I know she's really saying that if I provided grandchildren she'd be happy.'

'She wants you to be happy.'

'That's what she says. When I ask her how she is, she says, 'If you're happy, I'm happy.'

'That's what it is being a mother.'

'But she won't be happy unless I do what she wants me to do. First it was the degree, now it's marry, have kids. She wants to be able to say 'Look at my clever and beautiful daughter.'

Just then Avril came into the restaurant, looking back at the street rather than at the box of tarts she balanced on the palm of one hand, and Marsha rose, scolding her.

Marsha waved to me as I left the restaurant, but still I wondered if I'd offended her. I felt foolish for offloading about my ugly relationship with my mother. I started arguing with Marsha in my head. Who was she to talk? She didn't have a husband around anymore. She'd struck out on her own.

I scribbled away in my notebook. My life had become a play within a play. I'd come to Balantun to escape my mother and her desire for me to marry a nice Jewish boy and here I was head to head with Marsha. But somehow it was different with Marsha. What is it that makes other people's mothers easier to get along with?

At Marsha's invitation, on Tuesdays after my last patient I'd take my saucepan to the restaurant for takeaways, country style. I'd find Marsha mopping floors or hurling fresh white cloths over the tables. When I came in, she'd heft her blunt body into a chair.

She'd say, 'Sit a minute, sit and talk with me. What a big day. The whole school staff. Twenty five of them.' Or she'd tell me about the tree planting team working out past the old piggery and how the men each had soup and then *tsimmes* and asked for bread, or the busload of people from South Australia who stopped in for lunch.

One evening, before she got up to fill my saucepan, I braved it.

'What happened to Av's father?'

'He left me for another woman,' she said, her voice losing its bravado. 'A wealthy Sydney girl. Avril was eighteen months old.'

'So how did you come to be here?'

'He brought me here when he brought me to Australia; he was the engineer at the asbestos mine until it closed down. Then we moved to Sydney and he went off with that woman. She knew everyone; she was from money. So I packed up and came back here.'

Here I could get work. Always you can earn a living cooking.’ She laughed and then looked at me and said, ‘So can you make *kneidlach*?’

‘Are you joking? I can make toast. Roast chicken at a push.’

‘Come I’ll show you,’ she said. ‘Watch carefully so you remember Marsha’s cooking.’

‘Can I write it down?’

Marsha smiled. I could tell she was flattered. She waddled out to the front counter and found Avril’s stack of order docketts.

‘Here,’ she said, ‘On the back, you can write.’

That evening I moulded *kneidlach* with her, my hands slippery and moist from the matza meal and the chicken fat and the egg. And then she taught me about *tsimmes*, about the dried fruit and the brisket and how it needed to cook overnight so that it was sweet and tender. In my blockish print I filled docket after docket with her recipes, with the ingredients and stories about where she’d learned about brisket, the kind of dried fruit she’d used in Israel, her first misadventure with pickling tongue, how her mother would cook *cholent* overnight in the embers of her stove in the old country.

When I asked her if she liked living in Balantum she shrugged with one shoulder.

‘Balantum I could afford. I could manage. Without asking him for anything.’ And then she said in a thoughtful voice, ‘But Avril, she must leave here. Make another life in a city somewhere.’

As I buttoned my thick coat to brave the cold night air, Marsha took the wad of scrappy paper marked with bits of moist matza meal. She flicked through them, weighed them in her hands.

She said to me, ‘Like gold, hey? This is the only copy in this world. Five generations of Abromowitz women. You be careful what you do with Marsha’s recipes.’

At the doctor’s formica table, under the tasseled light, I typed up the recipes just as I’d recorded them, with all Marsha’s ‘little bit of salt’ and ‘enough water’, ‘just get a feel’, the amounts measured by handful or pinch rather than teaspoon or tablespoon, the little secrets her mother or her grandmother had told her. Although I’d laughed when she’d said, ‘You’ll know when the consistency is right’, I typed it up. I tried translating the recipes into Ingredients and method but the Times New Roman and the ordered list were too bland and angular for Marsha. So each recipe was just Marsha’s story of the dish without quantities but full of when she’d first eaten it, who had taught her to cook it, who had eaten too much of it one night. I doubted I’d ever be able to make *kneidlach* or *gefilte fish* from Marsha’s recipes. I doubted I’d ever understand ‘just enough’. But I didn’t really care, Marsha’s story and her recipes were taking the shape of a novel.

I ate more chicken soup and *kneidlach*, more *tsimmes*, more *bubkes*, more *gefilte fish*, more chopped liver and chopped herring than in all my life. All because of Marsha. One Sunday I’d lingered after a late lunch. The restaurant had emptied and Marsha came out and sat with me. I asked her why she kept all this tradition going here in the middle of nowhere.

She shrugged and kept picking at a plate of leftover chopped liver.

From her post at the till, Avril said, 'See? Other people think it's weird too, not just me.' Avril smiled at me, her eyes shining with camaraderie; for once she had back-up.

'Still I'm a Jew even if these people here care nothing,' Marsha said very quietly. 'I know I am a Jew and they must all know this is who I am, this is what it means.'

'So why not miss Shabbat sometimes? Maybe just once we could go shopping on Saturday? Why not cook spaghetti? Just once?' Avril asked.

'Every time I don't cook or drive or work on Shabbat, I know I am a Jew. Every time I don't eat pork and I cook *tsimmas*, I remind myself still I am free to be a Jew.'

'As if you could forget,' Avril said, sighing.

And then Marsha's voice went softer than I'd ever heard it and she looked straight at her daughter and said, 'No, because if we forget, then we forget my grandparents, we forget the gas chambers, we forget everything before us. And if we forget, everyone else forgets too.'

That day, Marsha didn't laugh away the disagreement. She got up from her chair and picked up my empty plate. She shook her head as she walked past Avril and into the kitchen. Avril tossed her hair.

Earlier than usual one Sunday, I stepped through the double doors of the restaurant. Avril was sitting on Lenny Muller's knee, their mouths locked, his hand on her breast. I knew the softly spoken boy with floppy fair hair, mid-way through his plumbing apprenticeship. He'd come in to get me to cut off a plaster cast from a dirt bike accident. AA had been tattooed up and down his cast. He'd blushed when I asked him if AA stood for Avril Abromowitz.

When Avril saw me she jumped up pulling down her short skirt, her face a blush. Lenny said he was there to fix a broken toilet. I took my usual table.

After Avril had taken my order out to the kitchen, Lenny leaned over the back of his chair towards me and said, 'Av and I are gonna fix this place up someday. Same food but no granny cloths and kitchen chairs. We'll get a licence and have live music. Not this weirdo stuff.' He rolled his eyes as the violins and fiddles squeaked and clattered from the speakers.

Before I had time to answer, Avril came out with a plate of *borscht*, sour cream and chives swirled through the deep maroon of the beetroot. I turned to my soup and Avril led Lenny out the back to the broken toilet.

My days were packed with patients from early until late. As I grabbed a quick lunch at my desk one Wednesday, Ellen Muller, the dairy farmer's wife, came in to collect her pills. As I reached up for them from the tall glass cabinet, Ellen sniffed at my bowl of soup and asked, 'What's for lunch?'

'Chicken soup from Marsha's,' I said.

Ellen wrinkled up her nose, 'I wouldn't if I were you.'

I looked at her blankly.
'You shouldn't eat that food.'
'Why not? It's the best food in town,' I said lightly.
She leaned over the desk, 'They're Jewish, you know.'
'So?'
'I don't know who she thinks she is,' Ellen said in full swing now. 'Telling my Lenny he can't go out with her precious Avril. Thinks she's better than the rest of us.'
I stared at her, waiting for her to finish her assault.
'You know what she did before she opened her fancy restaurant?'
'No.'
'She was the cook at Yugilbar Station. You wouldn't know the way she carries on.' Ellen's large face loomed closer as she said, 'Only job she could get when she came back here after Avril's father left her high and dry. Mrs Better than the Rest of us.'
I told Ellen I liked eating at Marsha's. I didn't bother watching her response; I went back to my *kneidlach*.

That night I realized Ellen was the antagonist in my story. I tried writing the day's encounter as a confrontation between her and the doctor, saying all the things my diplomatic self had stifled. Then I put Marsha and Ellen head to head. Then I wrote a romance between Avril and Lenny where they eloped. It didn't work. I'd filled note books, created a whole story about Marsha's love affair with the Australian engineer, written scenes about her tough life as a single mother, now I even had Ellen's anti-semitism. Still I couldn't find the story's end.

Three weeks before I was due to leave town Marsha had her stroke. I swallowed back my own tears as Marsha's vigour was replaced with wet eyed silence, her skin sagged papery and loose, like sheets not tucked in tightly round the edges. Avril stayed at her mother's bedside in the hospital all day and well into the night. She fed her thickened liquids, rubbed lavender scented creams into her reddened hands and feet, painted her toe nails and brushed her hair, translated her mother's slurred Yiddish for the rest of us. That first stroke was one of many. As Marsha began to slip into stillness, I took Avril aside and told her that her mother could still hear even if she couldn't speak.

It was that night that I heard Avril pleading with Marsha. Her voice was urgent, desperate as she said, 'Mum. Mum? You have to tell them to me?'

I stepped back into the shadow of the hallway.

'Mum I know you can still hear me. Please. Just try. I'll understand.'

Avril was tugging at her mother's hand. 'Why are you doing this? Why?' She paused. 'Just tell me how.'

I was about to walk into the room when I heard Avril say, 'What am I going to do?' I heard her sniffing. 'I'm not smart like you think, mum.'

A week after Marsha's funeral I found Avril at the restaurant. Her shiny curly hair hung limp and her usually clear skin was scorched with pimples. The place looked as if it had

been burgled. Through the open kitchen door I could see drawers and cupboard doors open, pots and pans, lids, plates, tea towels strewn over the floor. Avril was wrapping plates in newspaper and bedding them into cardboard boxes with white table cloths.

‘You doing the place up?’ I asked.

She bristled and said, ‘Oh yes, thought I’d give all mum’s junk to Vinnies. Maybe get some large white plates, a bit of crystal?’

‘So you and Lenny really are going to reopen?’

Avril glanced at me and swallowed. She balled up a piece of newspaper and hurled it into a box. ‘Don’t talk to me about that idiot,’ she said, scrunching up more newspaper. ‘It’s all over. Lenny, this place, everything.’ And then as she let the ball of newspaper drop from her hands, she shuddered with sobs.

‘What happened, Av?’ I asked, leading her to a chair.

Avril slouched over the table, her head buried in her hands.

‘It’s all stuffed, totally stuffed,’ she said between choking sobs, wiping her runny nose on her sleeve, grabbing for air.

‘You’ll be ok,’ I said, remembering the night I’d walked into the restaurant, to find Marsha stashing a ten dollar note in an old biscuit tin. ‘For Avril,’ she’d said and then she’d set her jaw. As she snapped the tin shut, she said to me, ‘If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll make her leave here.’

‘What because of Mum’s tin?’ she said, her sobs trailing off. ‘Oh yes, \$5000 and my father’s address. Fat lot of good that’s going to do me.’

‘She did her best, Av,’ I said.

‘No, she didn’t. She was a selfish controlling bitch.’

I was bewildered. I looked around at the upturned chairs, the Certificates of Appreciation torn from the walls. I looked blankly at Avril.

‘Her recipes, Jane. She didn’t leave them for me. She wouldn’t tell me in the hospital and they’re nowhere. I’ve looked everywhere, here and at home.’

My shoulders drooped with the significance of her words. In that instant, I thought of course, I must give them to Avril, they are hers.

And I was about to offer them when Avril said, ‘There was no way she was going to let me stay here with Lenny like I wanted. No, not her Avril.’

I thought about the wad of recipes back at the surgery. I’d inherited Marsha’s recipes by default. I was confused – how could this woman who kept culture and tradition going in country Australia, who told us that when she cooked *tsimmes* it reminded her she was a Jew, how could she not have given her daughter this heritage, this culture. Why hadn’t Marsha taught her daughter to mould *kneidlach*?

Avril slipped into her mother’s accented English and lowered her voice, ‘You must make something of your life, move to the city, get a degree, a good job.’ Avril shook her head as she said, ‘She’s made sure of it now.’

I fiddled with a loose blue thread from the cross stitch on the table cloth.

Her voice impatient, Avril said, ‘You don’t get it, do you?’

‘Well no, I mean you could serve something else like –’

‘Now you sound like bloody Lenny.’ She took a deep breath and said, ‘I can’t cook, Jane. Not even a boiled egg. I’ve never even made porridge.’

I stared at the toothpick arms of the daughter of the world’s best cook.

‘Don’t look at me like that. It’s not my fault. She wouldn’t let me in her kitchen.’ Avril said, her spit striking the table. ‘There was no way she was going to let this place be my life. She knew that without her recipes, we couldn’t do it. I don’t care what Lenny says. Even if we give the place a makeover, it just won’t work without her chicken soup. And no one’s serving pork pies or hamburgers from my mother’s kitchen.’

She paused and looked up at the faded newspaper photograph of Marsha outside the restaurant, the headline boasting how Marsha’s restaurant had raised \$600 for the Rural Fire Service. ‘Oh yes, she knew exactly what she was doing.’

Without guidance or warning, Marsha had left me with the power to decide Avril’s future. Bandaging limbs, ordering blood tests, taking temperatures perhaps, but determining someone’s future? This wasn’t what I’d signed up for.

‘Bloody Marsha,’ I thought as I wandered home past crackling dry front gardens and fences stitched together with left over barbed wire and mesh. As a black Labrador lunged at me through a gap in a paling fence, my sadness about Marsha’s death evaporated. How could she put me in this position? This was too much responsibility, especially for someone like me who knew what it was like to have a mother who thought she knew what was best.

I had what Avril wanted more than anything; I had what money couldn’t buy. All because I wanted to be a writer rather than a doctor; all because I wanted my encounters in this nowhere rural town to be fodder for my stories, all because of my bower-birding of other people’s lives. I’d written the recipes down that cold night in Marsha’s kitchen and then gone home and typed them up. Why had I typed them up and not just shoved them into my research folder? So they could start the chapters of my novel? Or was it for Marsha and Avril?

I argued with myself all that night. I should give Avril the recipes because Marsha’s stroke prevented her from doing so and she would’ve wanted her to maintain her culture. I shouldn’t give them to her because if I did she would do exactly what Marsha hadn’t wanted: she’d marry Lenny and run the restaurant rather than set out for a life beyond Balantum. I couldn’t make either argument stick.

Images of my mother flitted around the bachelor pad, quizzing me as she stood in my kitchen, beaming at me from the graduation photograph, telling me there was no money in writing. But this wasn’t about me and my mother.

This was about Marsha and Avril and Marsha had deliberately kept Avril out of her kitchen. Marsha hadn’t given Avril the recipes. Marsha had chosen not to teach Avril to cook Jewish. But Marsha had been my friend and she knew I resented my mother for pushing me into medicine. And Marsha had trusted me.

So I wrote out my address for Avril and as I patted her hand I said, ‘Maybe it’s for the best.’ I insisted she promise she’d find me before she turned thirty.

A fortnight after Marsha's funeral, my locum ended. On my way out of town, I paused outside the restaurant. The sandwich board lay in the dirt, the heavy double doors were padlocked shut. As I leaned the sandwich board against the wall of the old school hall, I thought of Marsha and Avril, how their love bruised and then recovered, how respect for Marsha meant Avril refused to serve pork pies from the restaurant. I remembered Avril rolling her eyes and telling Marsha she was stuck in the Ark, and Marsha shaking her head as she said, 'One day you'll thank me. One day.'

Standing on that silent street, I opened my notebook crammed full of stories. Stories written on those solitary nights in Balantum; stories inspired by Marsha, the dreamer, Ellen the dairy farmer's wife and other battlers who'd told me, Doctor Jane, their secret longings. And folded between those pages were the docketts scrawled with Marsha's recipes. Recipes of a culture I knew I would no longer deny.

I knew then that one day, far away from Balantum, I would return those docketts to Avril. One day, Avril would again hear Marsha's voice instructing her how to make *kneidlach*, how to make *tsimmes*, how to make *kigel*.