

*One*



ETHEL KATZ NEVER WANTED a guru. In fact, she didn't believe in such things. Why would anyone trust another person to know more about life than she could figure out herself? Ethel's daughter, Debra, on the other hand, had always been very interested in spiritual matters. When she was in high school she'd gone crazy over one of those Indian gurus and scared Ethel half to death. Then in college she hopped from one guru to another and traveled to Europe for some secret levitation course.

Ethel had been so worried she almost called a cult detective! Things settled down once Debra got married and started working at the newspaper and by the time Casey was born, she was almost back to normal. Now, with both kids in college, Debra was suddenly going off every few weekends for what she called “retreats,” and this made Ethel nervous. What’s she doing on these retreats? Every chance she and Fred get they run off to meditate with that new guru of theirs.

Ethel grabbed the dust cloth and polish from under the sink. She was cleaning up the condo before Fran, her old friend and neighbor, stopped by for coffee. What a way to spend the weekend, meditating all day. She angled the spray toward the dining-room table and paused to watch the foam bubble, taking in the familiar aroma. She swiped the cloth across the dark walnut, like they do in the commercial, then glanced down at the chair seats and brushed a few crumbs off their plastic-covered upholstery.

The buzzer sounded.

“Who’s there?” Ethel barked into the intercom.

“Who do you think?” Fran barked back. Ethel chuckled and headed for the door.

“You smell like lemon,” Fran said as she entered.

“I was polishing the table,” said Ethel.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have.” They laughed and hugged. “The place looks nice. Is that new?” Fran pointed at a coat tree by the front door; Ethel’s spring jacket and windbreaker dangled from the arched branches.

“I got tired of having to pry open the closet. It’s a pain in the neck when the door gets stuck. How are you? You look thinner. Weight Watchers must be going well.”

“Ounce by ounce.”

“I envy your discipline,” Ethel said, patting her bulging middle and noting that Fran’s double chin had lost some of its heft. “Come, the coffee’s ready. I only prepared fruit, so you’re not tempted.”

“Thanks.” Fran slid into a chair while Ethel poured coffee into two mugs and brought out a fruit salad of cantaloupe, watermelon, and honeydew.

“Looks delicious,” said Fran. “So how are things, Ethel?”

“Fine.” Ethel took the seat across from Fran. “Nothing much new. Except that I’ve been worried about Debra lately. She found herself another guru.”

“You’re kidding. Since when? I thought she grew out of that years ago.”

“The last few times I’ve visited I’ve noticed more and more books around by this fellow: Anandaji. Meshuggener, like the rest.”

“Anandaji. An Indian person?” Fran served herself some fruit salad.

“No! He’s American. With an Indian name. Did you ever hear of such a thing?”

“Just be happy she’s not running away to Tibet like Sylvia Finkelstein’s son. Remember her Alan shaved his head and joined a monastery? He’s named Tinsle now or something like that.”

“God forbid. I guess I should count my blessings. But I’ve had my own troubles with Debra.” She rolled her eyes. “All of a sudden at sixteen she’s a vegetarian. She wouldn’t touch my pot roast and I had to lie and tell her there were no eggs in my noodle kugel. I used to sneak beef bouillon into my casseroles, just to get some extra protein into her.” She dropped a teaspoon of sugar into her coffee and stirred.

“I remember coming over for dinner once and Debra was sitting at the table with her legs crossed like a pretzel. Milt tried to copy her but he couldn’t get his legs up that high. He was some jokester.” Fran sunk her fork into a wedge of honeydew.

Ethel glanced over at Milt’s picture in a magnetic frame on the refrigerator and noticed the color was fading, making his features less distinct.

“Milt was more tolerant than I was. He trusted in Debra’s good sense. But even he got concerned when

she lost her accent. She started sounding like an Indian instead of a New Yorker.”

“That’s nutty.” Fran popped a piece of watermelon into her mouth. The skin under her chin quivered slightly as she ate.

“I was so concerned; I snuck out to a meditation lecture once. I thought the guru would be there and I could get a look at him firsthand. Instead a local Jewish boy was speaking. Goldberg, I think. A little older than Debra. He was skinny as a rail and talked in that same singsong as Debra, smiling away as if he’d won the lottery. What was wrong with these kids?”

Fran leaned toward Ethel and patted her hand. “You put up with a lot of mishegas. And now she’s at it again? I thought she’d straightened out for good.”

“I thought so too. She’s been eating like a normal person for years. Even improved on my chicken-soup recipe. She adds sweet potato. You ever try that?”

Fran shook her head, her mouth full of fruit.

“And she sent the kids to temple for a while. But I should have known from our conversations.”

“What do you mean?” Fran topped off her coffee and wrapped her hands around her mug.

“Well, every now and then when I stay over at Debra’s place until late, we talk. I ask her about her life, and she

sometimes tells me how she feels about things. She talks about God in ways I don't understand."

"Like what?"

Ethel thought a minute. She took a few gulps of coffee. "I don't know. How we're all God, something like that. How God is inside everyone."

"That sounds pretty harmless. Even interesting."

"Yeah, but sometimes she'll get this look in her eyes that concerns me. Like from the hippie days. And if I say something about it she'll cut the conversation short. She's very touchy about God. I don't understand why. I mean, I believe in God. There must be a God. How did we get here otherwise? I just don't feel a need to think about it so much. You go to temple, you say a few prayers. That's enough."

Fran looked at her sympathetically. Most of her lipstick had washed away from the fruit, leaving a pale amber rim around the edge of her lips.

"Why can't she find a nice rabbi instead of a guru, for God's sake?" Ethel took another gulp of coffee. She was getting to the bottom of her cup and she savored the sugar that had settled there.

"That would be nice." Fran glanced at her watch. "I've gotta go, Ethel. Sorry to eat and run, but I promised Sophie Snider I'd check on her cat. She's away this week visiting her son. His wife left him. Poor thing."

“Oh, that’s terrible! Okay, Fran, nice to see you. Would you like to take some fruit?”

“No, I had plenty. Thanks for the trouble.”

Fran headed to the door and Ethel followed.

“I’ll see you at bridge on Saturday,” Ethel said.

“Yes, see you then.” Fran patted Ethel’s arm and kissed her cheek lightly, then waddled toward the door. Ethel noticed that her pants were hanging a little looser than usual.

While doing the dishes, Ethel eyed the brochure tucked under the phone book on the kitchen counter. She had snatched it from the magazine rack in Debra’s bathroom. A flush of warmth passed over her cheeks. She’d never taken anything before, not without telling Debra. But she’d been so concerned. She wiped her hands and pulled out the brochure. The cover photograph displayed a spread of white clapboard buildings. A picture of the Buddha was in the far left corner under the address: Rte. One, South Amesburg, New York. South Amesburg. Ethel used to go there with Milt to see Jackie Mason. That’s the Catskills, for God’s sake! What’s an ashram doing there? She opened the brochure and came face to face with a large picture of Anandaji, his blue eyes twinkling. Oy, what was the world coming to? She decided to go to South Amesburg to find out.