

(Excerpt from forthcoming novel, set at a midwestern college in 1965)

### Esther and Mrs. Cohen

One day during winter break of senior year at Belfort, Esther drove the car to Cohen's. Taking the car on her own to run errands, saying dammit instead of dangit, making a fresh pot of coffee just for herself, these were all markers of her adulthood in her parents' house. Esther's task at Cohen's was to pick up two dress shirts for her father. She walked up to the men's counter (adult all the way) and chatted with Mr. Cohen, who was as old as Esther's uncle by the sideboard at Thanksgiving, but less sherried.

Cohen's was where Esther had first been fitted, almost exactly four years ago now, for a long-line strapless undergarment, a combination brassiere and a girdle. It was to be her iron substructure for high school graduation week and for any formal occasions at college in the fall. Mrs. Cohen had shown Esther into a fitting room in the back of the store, not the public fitting room, but a curtained corner of the alterations room strewn with garments and scraps and spools. "Take off your blouse," Mrs. Cohen had said. They stood uncomfortably close in the tiny space. She'd scolded Esther for the unsupportive bra she was wearing. "Come on, come on," Mrs. Cohen said when Esther hesitated. She took off the bra, and they beheld the bare breasts of Esther, age 17, in the fitting room mirror. Mrs. Cohen pulled a tape measure out of her pocket and wrapped it around Esther's ribcage, almost managing not to touch the breasts themselves.

"Look at your breasts!" she said.

Esther looked at her breasts.

At that moment, she was there, but also not really there. She had stripped as instructed, understanding the brutal logic: you cannot be properly fitted for a brassiere while wearing a brassiere. But in her mind she found an edge to wander off to, a perch on the length of twine across which the privacy curtain was pulled, except only half pulled, as Mrs. Cohen ducked purposefully in and out.

Esther floated as far away as she could while still watching. While she was of course still inside the body, behind the breasts.

Mrs. Cohen brought a box full of ivory and beige nylon things into the tiny room, rummaging and producing what looked like the snipped-off nose of a model of the Hindenburg. She fitted this thing onto Esther's breast, shoving gently upwards, lifting it. She frowned and pulled a different Hindenburg from the box.

"You have heavy breasts."

As soon as she could do so without fear of Mrs. Cohen's annoyance at her for interrupting her measuring, Esther covered her breasts with her hands. It was too late: she could not suppress the fluorescent afterimage when she closed her eyes.

"Get dressed dear. Meet me," Mrs. Cohen, pointing towards the shop floor as she slipped out of the curtained corner.

Esther got dressed. Her stomach hurt.

When Esther got back out to the rear counter of the shop, Mrs. Cohen pushed an enormous wholesale catalogue towards her. "This one," she said, "or this one, these are right for you, and we can get in the proper size."

Esther pointed at one. She didn't care which. And then she outgrew it anyway. She ordered it in the spring and by late fall freshman year, it was too tight. She was able to open a seam and insert a sewn-in piece to make it last through the end of the semester, but she was back to see Mrs. Cohen over that first winter break.

And so it went, her relationship with Mrs. Cohen cemented by her dependence on her for undergarments that could keep up with her expansions. No more bare breasts, no more Hindenburgs, though, thank God.

Now, Christmas break of her final year of college, on the cusp of the auspicious-sounding 1965, Esther carried the package of her father's shirts under her arm and walked with purpose from Mr. Cohen's menswear up front to Mrs. Cohen's womenswear department. Two bathing suits were pinned to the wall behind the counter, a kelly green one-piece and a bikini in a little red and yellow geometric

pattern. Matching swim bonnets. Slender spring pant-suits for Mary Tyler Moore, in coral and lemon. Floral silk scarves. Mr. Cohen talked of moving to Florida some day. Until then, Mrs. Cohen had moved Florida onto the back wall of their store.

“Good morning, Mrs. Cohen,” Esther said, the moment of her nakedness between them forevermore.

“Hello Esther dear,” said the old woman, scowling approvingly at Esther’s tidy outfit, her upswept hair, her blameless strawberries and cream complexion. *You have heavy breasts*, an objective fact, was the most hardship she had ever given Esther about her figure.

“Mrs. Cohen, I wondered,” she began. Adult. “I wondered if you could help me sort out a bathing suit.” Esther glanced at the hysterically cheerful wall and continued, “I know I’m not the easiest shape to fit.” As if to soften the outrageousness of her request, she added, “I’d want a one-piece.”

Mrs. Cohen considered, glancing tactfully at Esther over the rectangular lenses halfway down her nose. Then she bent down, pulled a catalogue from a low shelf, and flapped it onto the counter.

“We go shopping. First, measurements.” As if she could hear, or even feel, Esther inhale, she said, “No no. Clothes, no problem.”

Mrs. Cohen suddenly reminded Esther of her voice teacher Tati, if Tati had had to mind her family’s tiny village store back in the Old Country instead of going to school and then to the Paris Conservatoire, to a career on the opera stage, and on to a second career as a beloved singing teacher at a midwestern dot on the map of America. Or perhaps she could have been Tati’s mean older sister, mean because she had seen things, protected little sisters. Mrs. Cohen came busily from behind the counter, measuring tape draped on her forearm. She measured Esther’s waist and the distance from her neck to her bottom, touching her deftly, a nurse giving a painless shot. Esther felt a surge of love for Mrs. Cohen, for her lack of curiosity about her desire for a bathing suit, for her fierce competence, for her complete failure to deplore her.