

L O R I H O R V I T Z

The
Girls
of Usually



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To my mother and father.

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South Dakota Review, The Tusculum Review, Salt River Review, The Broome Review, The Monarch Review, Compose: A Journal of Simply Good Writing, Burrow Press Review, Hamilton Stone Review, Mad Hatters' Review, and Dos Passos Review.

Author's Note: This is a work of creative nonfiction. While all of the stories in this book are true to the best of my recollection, most names and identifying details have been altered to protect the privacy of the people involved. Since I didn't have detailed transcripts and videos of my experiences, I recreated dialogue and scenes in a way to evoke the story's essence based on journals, interviews, and memories, and as we all know, there's a certain lawlessness to memory.

The Magician

That's me at fourteen in my one-piece tuxedo shirt, magic wand in hand, my sad eyes focused on the camera. If you look closely, you can see the tripod's reflection in the window behind me. I took the photo. I had nine seconds to press the self-timer button and run into the frame.

Back then I could turn a penny into a dime, transform a red scarf into a green one, and pull coins from the ears of unsuspecting children. Sometimes I performed at birthday parties. "How'd you do that?" the kids asked. And I said, "It's magic," and left it at that. I also played the "psychic game" with my sister. One of us would pick a card and telepathically communicate to the other which card we had picked by focusing with all of our might. One time we got ten in a row and got scared and stopped playing the game.

My world of magic brought me into another dimension, far from the house I grew up in, the house built on suburban landfill, where I moved a dresser in front of my bedroom door because my mother would barge in, despite the sign taped to it: Please Knock Before Entering!!!! As if she knew the precise moment I'd take my shirt off to change into something else, she would find me topless. "Let me see your breasts," she'd say. "Have they grown at all? Where's your period already? If you don't get it soon, I'm taking you to the doctor." When I did get my period at fifteen, she said, "Mazol tov," and gave me a lifetime supply of sanitary napkins. Yet my breasts barely grew. I snuck off into the stacks at the public library and researched breast enlargement surgery and stared at before and after pictures, but I never left the library without checking out books about magic.

Magic gave me a sense control, power. Once I asked a birth-

day girl to pick a card and put it back in the deck. I then shot the deck with a cap gun. Lo and behold, the card she picked was the only one with a bullet hole through it. The girl shrieked, hopped across the room, and jumped into her mother's lap. Now I had more power than the bully neighbor kid who blocked my path when I rode my banana seat bicycle to mail a letter for my mother. He pulled the envelope from my hand, dipped it in a dirty puddle, handed it back, and let me pass.

My magical world was far from all the crap my mother hoarded: old bicycles, baby clothes, newspapers, broken appliances, all piled high to the ceiling of our two-car garage. Wedged among the junk were her abstract expressionist paintings created in college, where she studied with Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell. She also knew how to play the piano.

In fourth grade I wanted to take clarinet lessons but my mother said no, I could only take the French horn. There was no rental fee for the French horn and a nominal fee for the clarinet. But I screamed and cried and begged. For a full week. My brother said I wore her down. Finally we went to a music shop and found a used clarinet for forty dollars. At the same shop, my mother eyed an old rosewood grand piano. She bought it. Big men set it up in our turquoise-carpeted living room and my mother put her stacks of old sheet music in the bench. Although it was the centerpiece of the house, never once did she get the piano tuned. Now and then my mother spread open a piece of sheet music and played, her long fingers moving across the keyboard. Off-key piano clanks sang a sorry tune. I asked again and again, "Why don't we get the piano tuned?" And in response, she hummed the Israeli national anthem.

I loved the world of illusions, and if I pulled a trick off without a hitch, I started to believe the illusion myself. Every week I rode my bicycle ten miles each way along Sunrise Highway to Esposito's Magic Shop. Among other tricks, I bought steel rings that linked and unlinked and a magic wand that went limp on command.

When I saw a neighbor kid juggling, I was mesmerized. I wanted to mesmerize too. So for three days straight, I attempted to juggle, first two in one hand, then three in two hands. I practiced and practiced until I got it. And to this day, I have never lost it.

Maybe I took up magic to draw strangers in, to connect with the outside world, like when I snuck in my brother's room and used his CB radio: "Breaker-breaker one-nine, anyone out there?" That's where I met Brian, a fifteen-year-old boy who lived on the other side of town. He had a syrupy sweet voice and asked me questions about my dogs, my magic, my photography. Nobody gave me this kind of attention before. We talked for hours, and I began to swoon. Yes, it was magic, to connect right there on the CB radio, and maybe he could be my boyfriend and I imagined him to look like a younger version of David Cassidy and I could barely sleep thinking about Brian. Before we met, I watched a young couple waiting in line in front of me at the supermarket, the man caressing the woman's back, the woman making soft cooing noises, and I thought, maybe, just maybe, Brian could caress my back like that. I'd never seen such tenderness, right there under supermarket fluorescent glow. But Brian turned out to be a big-eared, pimply-faced nerdy kid, although I still liked hearing his voice over the CB.

Perhaps I took up magic to get attention, to be seen. At school I was the shy, practically mute girl who sat in back of the classroom. Designated as "queer-o faggot" by third grade, my label had nothing to do with my sexuality. Just an easy target. Even Robin Greenblatt, the overweight, almost-blind daughter of the local orthodontist, taunted me. In second grade, she put her big leg up on the last remaining bus seat and told me I wasn't welcome to sit down. She said, "You've got pepper in your under-pants, Smelly." When I got off the bus, I ran home and cried to my mother. "She's just jealous of you," my mother said, "because you're pretty and she's ugly." My mother's explanation made perfect sense, yet I still felt trapped. Like Houdini, I had my own box

to break out of (or in Houdini's case, a nailed packing crate), the box that kept me complacent in my role as the shy "queer-o fag-got," the box holding me captive to deep-rooted patterns, the box I didn't know I could break out of, not until I discovered a trap door for escape, and even then, more times than I'd like to admit, I stayed in the box so familiar, the box that spoke my language, the box containing the lovelorn legacy of my Grandma Becky, who told me she never loved her husband.

"So why'd you marry him?" I asked.

"He bought me a ring."



Magic helped me step into a world where anything was possible, a world where even I might find someone to caress my back. It gave me faith that things would get better once I left home. In the back of my underwear drawer, I left notes for myself: "By the time you read this, you'll be happier and have bigger breasts!" But for now, I practiced magic routines in front of my pocket poodle, Sunshine, the only family member I could hold and hug. In my hot pink bedroom, wallpapered with hippie men flashing peace signs, I performed the Chop Cup trick. I showed Sunshine a red ball and put it under the metal cup and waved my hands and picked the cup up and the ball was gone and Sunshine cocked her head and sniffed, and I waved my hands over the cup again, and the ball reappeared and she wagged her tail and jumped around and ran over to my cowboy boot and humped away, her little black lips in a perfect smile.

2

Shiksa in My Living Room

On the never-tuned grand piano, a two-faced, plastic picture frame held a bar mitzvah family pose on one side, and, on the other a stock photo of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, busty skier—a picture that came with the frame at the time of purchase. Years went by; still her retouched blue eyes stared me down—when I ran to answer the telephone, when I walked in from a lonely day at high school. Through dusty, glare-proof glass, her perfectly straight nose pointed towards my mother’s screams when the greasy chuck steak caught on fire. A decade later, with maroon earmuffs neatly arranged upon her windblown hair, the skier’s rosy glow endured, even when our black poodle, Cindy, died of a heart attack in her sleep. This woman became my surrogate sister—my quiet, confident, blonde-haired role model. The *shiksa* in my living room.

I envied the *shiksa*’s long blonde hair. All the while, I had to tame my thick mass of dark, curly hair by using expensive conditioners and spending hours blow-drying it section by section. Every so often I paid my sister fifty cents to iron my mane; the ironing flattened the frizz for a few hours before it coiled back into its usual rat’s-nest appearance.

I hadn’t thought about why my parents left her in the frame. Plenty of photos could have taken the *shiksa*’s place, family photos stuffed in my mother’s bedroom dresser drawer. Years later, I asked my father why the stock photo had never been replaced.

“It was just a nice picture,” he said. “And that’s where it stayed. No theories, just another picture.”

Similar to the shame I felt about my out-of-control hair, I was embarrassed by my unruly family. In restaurants, my father

About the Author



Photo by Leah Shapiro

Lori Horvitz's writing has appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, including *South Dakota Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Chattahoochee Review*. She has been awarded writing fellowships from Yaddo, Ragdale, Cottages at Hedgebrook, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Blue Mountain Center. A professor of literature and language at UNC Asheville, Horvitz also directs the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program. She received a PhD in English from SUNY at Albany and an MFA in creative writing from Brooklyn College.

Lori Horvitz grew up ashamed of her Eastern European Jewish roots, confused about her sexuality, and idolizing the “shiksa in her living room,” a blonde all-American girl whose photo came in a double frame and was displayed next to a family photo from a bar mitzvah. Unable to join the “happy blonde families,” she becomes a “hippie chick” who travels the world in search of ... something. *The Girls of Usually* chronicles each trip, each romance, each experiment in reinventing herself that draws her closer to discovering the secret door through which she can escape from deep-rooted patterns and accept her own cultural, ethnic, and sexual identity.

Reading Lori Horvitz’s *Girls of Usually* feels like calling up an old friend and talking late into the night. Deeply intimate and wickedly funny, these are essays to be treasured.

— STEPHANIE ELIZONDO GRIEST
author of *Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana*

When I first heard Lori Horvitz read some of her memoir essays, I laughed so hard my jeans burst open at the waist. *The Girls of Usually* may be like nothing you’ve ever read. But as in all the very finest writing, you’ll see yourself—and maybe find yourself.

— LYNDA SCHOR
author of *Sexual Harassment Rules* and *The Body Parts Shop*

Horvitz writes with a fine balance of wit and poignancy, deftly delivering her stories in a way that feels both personal and universal. *The Girls of Usually* is a read that stays with you—unsettling, complicated, and wholly rewarding.

— ARTIS HENDERSON
author of *Unremarried Widow*

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