

## Jewish Geography

In late 1996, I planned a two-week vacation in New Mexico for the following May with Carmen, my late ex-husband's first wife. (I was his second wife.) Carmen, who is not Jewish, lives in Las Cruces—the City of the Crosses. We decided to spend our first week at an Elderhostel in Santa Fe and our second week in Las Cruces.

When Carmen and I arrived in Las Cruces, I called Nancy Peters Hastings, who lived there; she was the guest editor of *Café Solo*, one of the journals that had published an excerpt from my memoirs. She suggested we meet her that afternoon at Nabe's Coffee Bar & Newsstand.

Nancy had no sooner come over to our table and introduced herself when she turned her head as she spied a man leaving the restaurant. "Oh," she said, waving him over, "there's a man I'd like to introduce to you. He's a writer, too, and also an editor."

When Nancy introduced the man as Ben Nussbaum\*, I wondered how someone named Nussbaum had gotten *farblonjet* in the City of the Crosses.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Monticello," he said.

Could he have come from Monticello, the town in the Catskill Mountains where I grew up? But there are many Monticellos in this country. "In what state?" I persisted.

"New York," he said.

"Sit down," I said. I told him I had graduated from high school there in 1946 but didn't know anyone named Nussbaum. "But in Woodridge," I continued, "where I lived from 1936 to 1941, *there* I knew someone named Nussbaum. He was a plasterer and a friend of my parents."

"That was my grandfather," said Ben.

Then I realized that I could share with Ben a story that I'd been carrying around with me for almost sixty years. "Would you like to hear a scandal about your Aunt Sherrill\*?" I said. He would.

I told him that when I was about ten and attending elementary school in Woodridge, I was aware of a beautiful young woman of about eighteen—Nussbaum, the plasterer's daughter, Sherrill. She had a certain look of innocence about her.

That summer, a man named Jack Kornblatt\*, one of the New Yorkers who frequented Woodridge during the season, met Sherrill, fell in love with her, and asked her to marry him. They married that very summer and shortly thereafter left for Manhattan.

"She always was impulsive," interjected Ben.

Several years later, while Sherrill was in their New York apartment one Saturday afternoon, the phone rang and the caller asked for Jack. "He's not here right now," she said. "But I'll be happy to tell him you called when he gets home."

"Who is this?" asked the caller.

"It's his wife," said Sherrill.

"That's funny. You don't sound like Betsy\*," said the caller. "But have Jack call me anyway when he gets home."

"You don't sound like Betsy?" Who was Betsy? When Jack came home, it didn't take Sherrill long to find out who Betsy was. Betsy was Jack's wife, the mother of his 3 children, the woman he had already been married to when he proposed to and later married Sherrill. And the woman he was still married to, and had in fact been with, along with his children, that very Saturday afternoon.

After all the tears and remonstrances, Sherrill left New York and returned to Woodridge, somewhat in disgrace. Shortly thereafter, however, she married one of the village's most eligible bachelors, and, I presumed, lived happily ever after with him in Woodridge.

"Not exactly," said Ben. "She's now on her 4th—uh, I guess now he's her 5th—actually, I guess he's still her 4th—husband, and last I heard she was in California with him." Apparently, Sherrill had shed her innocence.

Then Ben got up to leave—he was running home to call his father—to find out why he'd never before been told about his Aunt Sherrill's first marriage.

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\*The asterisked names are fictitious.

"Jewish Geography" is an excerpt from Ms. Fuentes' memoirs, *\*Eat First—You Don't Know What They'll Give You\**.

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