

ALL JUSSY GOT FOR CHRISTMAS WAS HANUKKAH GELT.

Justine Silver's best friend, Mary Catherine McAllister, has given up chocolate for Lent, but Jussy doesn't think God wants her to make that kind of sacrifice. So she's decided to give up being Jewish instead. Jussy's bedroom closet has become her confessional, where she pours out her sins to her teddy bear and takes Communion using grape juice and matzo. But when her beloved grandmother, Bubbe, suffers a stroke, Jussy worries that her religious exploration is responsible. Worse, Jussy must suddenly contemplate life without Bubbe, the one person who seems to understand her. Now Jussy feels she must decide once and for all who she is, and where she fits in.



"Young readers will find much to savor in the warm, angst-lite tone here."
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"A fine new writer, one who is willing to tackle difficult subjects. Sarah Littman writes with humor and empathy."
—Paula Danziger

Chapter One

It's Friday night, and Mom is yelling at me because I won't eat the chicken she cooked for dinner. In our house, Friday night means Sabbath, and Sabbath means chicken. Chopped chicken liver on challah, followed by chicken soup with matzo balls, then roast chicken as the main course. You'd think they'd have come up with some chicken thing for dessert, but it's usually fruit salad, not chicken salad.

Mom doesn't understand that I can't eat chicken on Friday for the next few weeks because I've given up chicken for Lent.

You see, I've decided to become Catholic like my new best friend, Mary Catherine McAllister, otherwise known as Mac. She's given up chocolate for Lent. I don't think God wants me to make that kind of sacrifice. So I've given up being Jewish. And chicken. I just haven't told my parents yet.

It's partly because the last time I tried to talk to my family about religion, it ended in disaster. We were having dinner with Mom's parents, Grandpa Leo and Grandma Lila, at my grandparents' country club, Burning Beeches. It's a Jewish

club, but the dinner buffet's always piled high with shrimp and lobster, and other stuff the Torah says Jewish people aren't supposed to eat because it's not kosher.

My "old" best friend from New Rochelle, Shira Weinstein, keeps kosher. At her house they have separate sets of dishes because you're not supposed to mix milk and meat together.

I always thought it would be cool to keep kosher like Shira and Bubbe, my grandma on my dad's side. But when I made the mistake of telling my family that I was thinking about doing it, Grandpa Leon nearly choked on his shrimp.

"What kind of *mishegas* are you talking now, Justine?" he sputtered, dripping cocktail sauce onto his chin.

Right away, I knew I'd made a mistake. I could tell Grandpa was upset because he used Yiddish. He and Grandma Lila only speak it when they don't want us to understand what they're saying, or if they're upset and it slips out by accident.

Miss Perfect (a.k.a. my sister, Helena), and my little brother, Jake, were snickering. If there's one thing you can count on, it's that my brother and sister LOVE to see me humiliated.

Another thing you can count on is that I start to blush the minute I get embarrassed. I was embarrassed that my grandfather thought I was crazy and hurt that he added the *now*, like my bringing up crazy stuff is a regular occurrence.

"Why would you want to take up with those old-fashioned

dietary laws?” Grandma Lila said. “They might have made sense thousands of years ago in the desert, when they didn’t have refrigerators, but they don’t apply today.”

I looked to my father, hoping for some support, because even though we don’t keep kosher in our house (much to Bubbe’s dismay), he at least was brought up that way. But Dad just sat there eating. It would take an argument of nuclear proportions to come between Dad and his food. He says that it’s because Bubbe and my late Grandpa Sam, whom we called Zayde, were in a concentration camp during World War II. They were always hungry. Afterward, they always worried about having enough to eat. One of Dad’s favorite stories is about how when he was a kid, his parents made him stay at the table until he’d finished everything on his plate, even if it was runny scrambled eggs, which he hates. Mom says finishing everything on his own plate is one thing, but Dad usually finishes everything on everyone else’s plate, too.

“Bubbe keeps kosher,” I said, without thinking.

Grandma Lila bristled. *Earth to Justine’s mouth*, I thought. *Another fine mess you’ve gotten us into.*

Telling a grandma who *doesn’t* do something that you want to do it because the other one *does* is not smart family politics. In fact, it’s a recipe for disaster. I seem to be a master chef for *that* kind of recipe.

“Well.” Grandma Lila sniffed. “That may be. But I like to think that Judaism in the twenty-first century has evolved beyond that kind of superstitious nonsense.”

Grandpa Leo nodded his head in agreement as he bit into a lobster tail. Helena and Jake sat across the table from me, smirking.

“So how about those Yankees?” Dad asked. And that was the end of that.

Afterward, I decided if my family was going to make fun of me for trying to be Jewish, I might as well try something else. I got a book from the school library about world religions and read about some of the alternatives. I read about Islam first. I was surprised at how many similarities there are between Islam and Judaism, although maybe it’s understandable since we share a great-great-great-great-great-great—well, thousands of years’ worth of greats—grandfather in Abraham.

I liked the idea of covering my hair with a head scarf because then it wouldn’t matter that it’s so frizzy and out of control. Imagine not having to worry about a bad hair day ever again.

But then I read about Ramadan. You have to fast during the daylight hours for a *whole month*. It’s bad enough having to fast for twenty-four hours once a year on Yom Kippur. I

can't imagine having to go a whole month being hungry, even if you do get to eat at night.

So I moved on. There are a lot of cool things about Hinduism and Buddhism. They both seem pretty flexible about how you express your faith. Imagine if it were like that in my family. I wouldn't be stuck in the cross fire between Bubbe wanting me to be Jewish the Orthodox (or what my other grandparents would call the "old-fashioned") way, and Grandma Lila and Grandpa Leo wanting me to be Jewish but not "too Jewish."

But then I read the part about "samsara"; how you keep getting reborn over and over until you get it right. If I thought I could be reborn looking like Mom or my sister, Helena, instead of the way I do now, then it wouldn't be so bad. But the thought of having to come back again and again as me, Justine Silver, short, frizzy-haired, and zit-faced (or something worse), is pretty depressing. Plus there are a lot of gods to keep track of, and remembering things isn't my strong suit. I can just see myself calling one of them by the wrong name when I pray and being sentenced to coming back as a cockroach. With my luck, I'd end my next life in a Roach Motel. Nope, I can't be Hindu.

When I tried to be Buddhist and meditate, instead of achieving a relaxed and spiritual state of mind, all I could

think of was the enormous zit starting to erupt on my chin, my itchy nose, the fact my butt was starting to hurt from sitting cross-legged on the floor, and how much I wanted some of the Swiss chocolate Dad brought back from a business trip.

By the time I started trying to calculate the chocolate/zit ratio (how many squares of chocolate you have to eat to produce one zit), I realized that I wasn't going to cut it as a Buddhist.

I never realized that Christianity was made up of so many different denominations until I looked stuff up about it on the Internet. There's something like thirty-four thousand different Christian groups worldwide. You've got the Protestants, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Baptists, Adventists, Amish, Christian Scientists, Methodists, and Lutherans. And that's only naming a few. I thought that everyone who believed in Jesus worshiped pretty much the same way, but there are a lot of differences. I couldn't figure out which was the best thing to be.

So in the end I decided to be a Catholic like Mac, at least for Lent, and I'm not going to eat my chicken, because you're not supposed to eat meat on Fridays during the Lenten period. Since the entire Sabbath meal revolves around chicken (chicken counts as meat, doesn't it?), Mom's mad.

Helena looks up from the lettuce leaf that she toys with on her plate, and gives my mother a sympathetic glance.

"Maybe Jussy's decided to be vegetarian like me." She

sniffs in a superior tone. “But it’s probably just another one of her phases, like wanting to keep kosher.”

She looks at me and smirks. “Whatever will she think up next?”

My little brother, Jake, sniggers. Mom rolls her eyes. One thing that gets me mad about my family is that they never take me seriously. That’s just one thing. I made a list once of all the things that get me down about my family. It’s pretty long, but here’s the top five: 1) My mother loves my sister more than me. 2) My dad loves my brother more than me. 3) My mother loves her miniature poodle, Bijoux, more than me. 4) Mom is tall, thin, blond, and beautiful. (So is Helena. I got the short, brown, and dumpy genes. *WHY?!*) 5) Nobody in my family takes me seriously.

“I’m not becoming vegetarian,” I protest angrily. “I’m . . .”

The confession is poised on the tip of my tongue. But, I chicken out. Chickening out is the only kind of chicken I’m allowed during Lent.

“I’m just not hungry,” I mutter.

My mother looks skeptical. She gives me the Raised Eyebrow.

“Sure you’re not,” Jake taunts me. “You just scarfed five big matzo balls, even if you didn’t eat the soup.”

“Shut up, *Dog Breath!*” I hiss, kicking him under the table for emphasis.

Jake doesn't take it like a man.

"Justine kicked me!" he whines.

"Justine Frieda Silver!" Mom says in That Voice.

I know I'm in trouble when Mom uses That Voice, and it's even more serious when she uses my middle name, because she knows how much I hate it. My middle name's another of the injustices heaped upon me by my parents, who gave Helena a pretty middle name, Grace.

I put my head down and start to eat my green beans. Maybe if I eat my vegetables, Mom will forget about the chicken.

The phone rings.

"I'll get it," I say, leaping up before Helena moves, even though I know it's probably for her.

Sure enough, it is. It's a boy. He sounds embarrassed.

"Um . . . is, uh . . . can I talk to . . . uh, Helena?" he mumbles.

I'm sick of the way guys get all stupid around my sister, and I'm mad that the phone is always for her and never for me.

"Sorry, she's not here," I say, and hang up the phone without asking who it is.

Back in the dining room, Helena asks who was on the phone.

"Some boy," I tell her. "I told him you weren't here."

Helena shrieks with rage.

"MOM! DAD! Can you *believe* what she did?"

She's noisy enough that Dad actually looks up from his food to give me an angry look. He tells me to go to my room with no dessert. Right. Like I'm going to cry about missing fruit salad.

I detour through the kitchen on my way upstairs and sneak a few matzos and a bottle of grape juice. Not because I'm hungry. I need them to practice.

Once in my room, I lock the door and change into a long black skirt and a plain black T-shirt. It's the closest thing I have to a nun's habit. I take the starched white napkin I stole from the linen closet out of its hiding place in my sweater drawer and pin it to the top of my head with bobby pins, folding the corners down behind my ears. I pretend I look like a nun, instead of an eleven-going-on-twelve-year-old Jewish girl with a dinner napkin on her head.

There's a flashlight in my bedside table and I take it into the closet, which thankfully is a decent size in this house, not shoebox-size like my closet in our old house in New Rochelle. Switching on the flashlight, I close the door and sit down. Hidden in a sock inside a pair of hideous patent-leather shoes that I hate but Mom insisted on buying me is a set of rosary beads. I bought them at Revelations, the store downtown that sells all kinds of religious stuff. There's also a small silver cross necklace that Mac left at my house when she slept over. She asked me if I'd found it, and I lied and said no.

I put on the necklace, and feel a familiar pang of guilt. I haven't worked out if it's because I lied to Mac or because whenever I put it on, I picture the look on Bubbe's face if she ever saw me wearing it.

But guilt is good. It gets me in the mood to confess. Confession is the reason I'm sitting on the floor of my closet. Despite the fact that it's a mess of shoes, clothes, and dirty laundry, it serves as my confessional.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been three days, fifteen hours, thirty-seven minutes, and about fifteen seconds since my last confession," I whisper to the enormous teddy bear that Zayde bought me when he took me to FAO Schwarz in New York for my fifth birthday.

Father Ted looks at me without saying anything, waiting for me to fess up.

"I lied to some boy about my sister not being home. I kicked my brother, Jake, even if he did ask for it. My parents are mad at me for all of the above, and because I won't eat chicken," I tell him.

Father Ted hasn't learned his lines, so I have to play both parts.

"Anything else?" I ask in my deep Father Ted voice.

Mac tells me that she always makes up a few sins to tell her priest so she doesn't sound like a goody-goody. If I had a Mom like Mrs. McAllister, and nice brothers and sisters like

Mac's, I'd probably have to make up sins, too. As it is, I always have a long list of bad things I've done, even if most of them *were* because I was provoked.

So I tell Father Ted how I borrowed Helena's favorite T-shirt without asking when a group of us went to the movies and how some jerk smoking in the line behind me burned a hole in the shoulder. I tell him how I've lied to both my sister and my mother, telling them that I haven't seen the T-shirt, when actually I know I buried it at the bottom of the trash can in the garage the night before the garbage men came.

Father Ted sighs.

"My child, my child," he says sadly. In his deep priestly voice he instructs me to do penance.

"Ten Hail Marys. And meditate on your actions," he tells me.

Clutching the rosary beads, I dig into the sock again and take out a small piece of paper on which I've copied the Hail Mary. Shining the flashlight on it, I read:

"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb . . ."

I stumble, as always, over the word *Jesus*. I don't know if it's being the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, or if it's my Jewish genes rebelling against my closet conversion; I feel guilty saying the J-word when I pray. But I figure Mary is going to know who I'm talking about since he's the fruit of her womb, so I continue.

“Holy Mary . . .”

I stumble again. I have problems with the “Mother of God” part, too. I mean if God is God, and if He created the universe and everything in it, then how can Mary be His mother? I need Catholic lessons to understand it. I tried asking Mac once, but she confused me even more by bringing the Holy Ghost into the equation.

Deciding to skip the M-O-G, I continue.

“Pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

After I’ve repeated this, minus the J-word and the M-O-G phrase, another nine times, Father Ted tells me it’s time for Communion.

I take one of the matzos I brought up from the kitchen, and carefully pour grape juice into a Dixie Cup. Father Ted and I haven’t got the Communion part down yet. I’ve never seen it done in real life, only on TV. So we improvise. I eat a bit of matzo and take a slug of the grape juice. Then Father Ted mumbles “Body and Blood of Christ” a few times because that’s all he knows about Communion.

I’m busy munching on my Communion matzo-wafer when I hear banging on the bedroom door, which thankfully I remembered to lock.

“Hey, Jussy!” comes Jake’s high-pitched voice. “I’ve got something for you.”

When I don't answer, hoping he'll go away, he bangs a few more times.

"Why'd you lock your door? What're you doing in there?"

I open the closet door a few inches and shout, "Go away, Jake!"

He rattles on the door handle, as if by some magic or the brute strength of his eight-year-old hands, the door will suddenly go open sesame.

"C'mon. Open up! I've got a present for you," he pleads.

It's always hard to know about Jake and his presents. Sometimes he can be surprisingly sweet. Other times he'll pretend he's got a present for me and it'll be a dead dragonfly or a caterpillar or something else creepy and boylike.

I figure maybe he's trying to make up for getting me into trouble at dinner, so I tuck Mac's cross under the collar of my T-shirt and crawl out of the closet, carefully closing the door to conceal Father Ted and the remnants of my matzo-and-grape-juice Communion.

When I unlock the door to my room, Jake holds out two oatmeal-raisin cookies from Ambrosia, the organic store in town. They're my favorite, and he knows it. Now I feel *genuinely* repentant about kicking him in the shin at dinner.

"I thought you might be upset about missing dessert," he says awkwardly.

I'm in the middle of thanking him and telling him that he's a pretty good brother after all, when I notice he's staring at the top of my head. Reaching up, I realize I forgot to take off the napkin. Uh-oh. I rip it off my head and stuff it into the pocket of my skirt.

"Uh, Jussy . . ." Jake says hesitantly, like he's afraid to upset our newly found peace. "Why were you wearing one of Mom's fancy napkins on your head?"

Fortunately, I'm pretty good at thinking on my feet.

"We're studying English history," I lie. "We're doing a skit about Queen Elizabeth the First, and I'm practicing for my role as Mary Queen of Scots."

He's still looking at me kind of funny, so I throw in the kind of gross, historical tidbit that I know will distract him.

"She's the one who tried to take over Queen Elizabeth's throne and ended up getting her head chopped off."

I've just finished confessing, and within minutes of leaving my closet confessional I'm already lying. What's even scarier is how good I am at it. I wonder if Mac finds it this hard to remain sin-free.

"You're going to get your head chopped off? Cool!" Jake says, buying my deception and moving on to what really matters to him. "Hey, do you want to play S.U.S.A.N. with me?"

Super Ultra Secret Agent Network, or S.U.S.A.N., is Jake's favorite video game. I hate to admit that I like anything my lit-

tle brother likes, but it's a blast to play. Each player is a spy from a different country. You have to capture the Ultra Top Secret Formula that gives your country the Power to Rule the World.

I give Jake a noogie. "Okay, but only if I get to be Hungary."

I always like to be Hungary because that's where Bubbe lived with her parents, nine brothers and sisters, and scores of cousins before the war. Bubbe was the only one of them who survived. Sometimes when we play S.U.S.A.N. I imagine finding the Top Secret Formula in time to Rule the World and defeat Hitler. Then the tattoo on Bubbe's arm, the one they put on her in the concentration camp, disappears, and suddenly we have lots of uncles, aunts, and cousins.

"How can you be hungry?" Jakey says in his lame attempt at a joke. "I just brought you two cookies."

"Shut up," I say affectionately, and we go into his room to play.