

Part 1. Summer 1961

Joan Zatańczy at Barnard College, New York City, USA to Yanina Kominiarski at Kasefet Kibbutz, Israel

June 7, 1961

Dear Yanina,

Today I am 21! My life is nearly perfect. So why am I waiting for the other shoe to drop? I'm a senior at Barnard with only one more year until I graduate and become an alumna. My advisor has become a dear friend, and I think I'm falling in love! I love my life. What could possibly go wrong?

My birthday celebration has my head spinning. Mama gave me a present that has me gob smack flabbergasted. And Dr. Smyth promised me a picnic when he gets back from his trip to Stanford. I'm counting the days until he gets back.

Mama and Aunt Stasia came to Barnard to celebrate with me. On their way from New Jersey to New York and to my apartment, they stopped at Zabar's on Broadway at 80th. Zabar's is so much more than a grocery store. I love their coffee and tea, bagels and bread, every bakery sweet you can imagine, deli meats and cheeses. They have all of that and more. Mama says Zabar's is worth the extra stop to smell the sugar and chocolate in the bakery (Mama loves her sugar, I inherited that from her). She loves to sample the cheeses in the deli. You should hear Mama go on about "How are they able to give away so many samples and still stay in business?" Aunt Stasia has to say, "Because they charge those prices." You should hear Aunt Stasia go on about Zabar's salad bar.

It was Mama and Aunt Stasia's first visit to my new apartment, and I really wanted them to like it. I tried to be calm, but my nerves kept me pacing in circles while I waited for them to get here. I opened the door for them and Mama scanned the apartment and kept looking, like she expected to see more. Aunt Stasia stuck her head in the door and said it was cozy.

I lost count of how many trips it took from the car to haul up all the bags. They covered my table and the floor with grocery bags and presents. That table is my dining room and office. Mama walked along the wall with my kitchen cabinets, stove, sink, and refrigerator and started opening cabinet doors while Aunt Stasia handed her groceries from the bags. The two of them together are an unstoppable force, so I collapsed on the sofa Dr. Smyth and I found at the Goodwill Store and watched them take over my kitchen space as they set out our dinner.

Dinner started at sunset with the three of us around the table, the classic Zatańczy birthday eve dinner. I never even thought anything about starting to celebrate things at sunset the night before an event until I got to Barnard. In Roosevelt it wasn't a Jewish thing, it was just what everyone just did. But, in Roosevelt everyone is Jewish, except Mama, Aunt Stasia and me.

Mama and Aunt Stasia outdid themselves at Zabar's salad bar, which has every vegetable and salad known to god and man, some not even known to god. Aunt Stasia was adamant—my twenty-first birthday eve dinner had to start with her special wedge salad—crisp iceberg lettuce, diced tomatoes, zucchini, bacon crumbles, raisins, walnuts, all slathered with luscious, creamy blue cheese dressing. And yes, as Aunt Stasia was putting the salad together, she said it! "On birthdays and holidays the raisins and nuts reign. It isn't a celebration if there are no nuts." Last night, Aunt Stasia said one of her favorite nuts was missing.

We all miss you, Yanina. I miss how we lived side by side, next door to each other in Roosevelt. After you and Avraham escaped from Poland after the war, you always knew you would make your Aliyah to Israel, to build a world safe for all Jews. How is it possible that you have been in Israel working in Kasefet kibbutz for five years?

You could always see your dream. I just dreamt of a world beyond our Roosevelt. Roosevelt is perfect for Mama and Aunt Stasia—two sisters-in-law, living together, grieving the husband and brother they lost in the war. They each seem content enough. But I want more than content. I want more than a quiet life in Roosevelt, New Jersey, where everyone knows everybody and everybody's business. Then I read that newspaper article about Dean Millicent McIntosh accepting the title of President of Barnard College and a light went on for me. Barnard College was a place where women found their place in the world. I was in eighth grade, and I found my path out of Roosevelt, I would go to Barnard College.

At supper last night, Aunt Stasia being Aunt Stasia, she handed me my salad saying wedgies are one of her favorite things to give on birthdays. That broke Mama and Aunt Stasia up. They still love to laugh at a double entendre. Sometimes I feel like the two of them have their secrets and I'm an outsider. Why? We all live together in the same house. Why do I feel like I'm missing something?

But then Aunt Stasia got serious and said, "Joan, I know you think your Mama and I are salad crazy. But salads feed our bodies and souls. We select, collect and layer the vegetables, cheeses and even meats for the salad; we select, collect and layer friends and experiences in our lives. We chop, slice, and dice to bring our salad together, and we slice and dice our experiences to understand their depths and complexity in our lives. We gather everything into a bowl, adding dressing and placing it on plates to enjoy it; and we gather, dress, and present ourselves to the world. We do all of that to nurture and sustain body and soul, we do that to strengthen family and build community. Too often we eat without thinking. But it is important to be mindful of how we nurture ourselves. Sharing our salads is how we sustain our common union as a family."

Yanina, Aunt Stasia was deep into one of her Buddhist moments. She has a way of making even mundane moments sacred. What Aunt Stasia said, it was a benediction, a blessing. It made the salad a sacrament. Before, I just ate the salad. Now I will remember the layers, the connections and the implications.

After dinner, the night got seriously strange. We finished eating and cleaning up, Aunt Stasia and Mama gave me their regular presents, then Mama put a brown paper grocery bag on the table. I didn't notice it when we were bringing in the bags; but that bag was ancient, with more creases and wrinkles than the face of a 100-year-old lady.

Mama looked wistful and said, "Joan, I'm not at all sure I want to give this to you. But I suppose it's time. Anyway, one letter is for you."

I sat there staring. I wanted to rip into it, but I was afraid to touch that bag. I do not want to know what those stains are! I just hope that one big stain is ketchup.

Aunt Stasia watched me, laughed her Buddha belly laugh and said, "Go on, open it."

I took out the letter sitting on the top—addressed to me, dated right after I was born, and from Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. A letter from Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt to me! THE Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt!! To me!!!

Mama sighed and talked about how she and Aunt Stasia could see that I was struggling to find a topic for my senior thesis, and they thought those letters might help me, and that is why they gave them to me now.

Yanina, Mama gave me a whole sack of letters from Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, starting from back when our little Roosevelt, New Jersey, used to be Jersey Homesteads. (I keep forgetting our town changed its name from Jersey Homesteads to Roosevelt after President Franklin Roosevelt died.)

Yanina, how did I not know that Mama and Mrs. Roosevelt are pen pals? How did I not notice who she was writing to every month?

Imagine. An entire grocery bag of letters from Eleanor Roosevelt—to Mama.

I asked Mama how she and Mrs. Roosevelt started writing to each other, but you know Mama. She said, “It’s a long story” and changed the subject.

I have to get Aunt Stasia alone to get that story.

Anyway, I stayed up half the night last night reading those letters.

Half way through the bag, I had to check out my collection of quotes, and sure enough, I have eight in there from Mrs. Roosevelt. She said, “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.” She also said, “When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?”

I’m sending you a copy of the letter from Mrs. Roosevelt to me. Not that I needed a push, but her letter has me wondering who I am. Just who do I think I am? Sure, I’m a Barnard undergraduate, but I am no different from every Barnard student who wants to graduate and find her place in the world. I know reason and rationality got me into Barnard College. I am 21, an adult, and I have finished three years of college (all of them on the Dean’s List with my 4.0 GPA)—I am on my way to graduating and fulfilling my dream— to be a Barnard alum, an educated and empowered woman. But, I am a Zatańczy; I am one who will dance. I keep wondering, what harm can a little fun do? But why do I always feel guilty when I even think of having fun?

Yanina, I wish that you, my first and best friend, could have been here to celebrate with us. I miss our talks. I miss our eavesdropping on our families. Remember how we would hear Aunt Stasia liling with lightness, Mama sighing as she dragged a dark cloud behind her, Bubba unwavering in righteousness, and Zayde glowing in wisdom and stories. We would listen to them and debate whether life is a delight or a dirge. I miss solving the grand mysteries of the world with you.

But you are 6,000 miles away in Kasefet, Israel, living your dream. Now you are Yanina Kominiarski, married and living on a kibbutz. I miss you so much, but I am glad that you are living your dream. I’m glad that you are happy.

Yours Always,

Joan

Eleanor Roosevelt to Joan Zatańczy

July 25, 1940 (to be delivered in 1961)

Dear Joan,

Welcome to the world. I am writing this welcoming greeting to you shortly after your birth, but at my request to your dear mother, you will not be reading it until you are twenty-one. So, happy twenty-first birthday. I hope it will be a day filled with abiding joy.

I've asked your mother to be discreet with you about our correspondence until you are old enough to understand the importance of circumspection in personal and private matters. You see, as public a person as I am, I am also quite reserved. I prefer to keep my personal relationships personal and private to the extent that this is possible. I do hope you will forgive me for asking your mother to keep a secret from you for all these years.

Joan, at your moment of birth, as you are welcomed into this world, I wonder who you will become.

When my children were young, we played "Who are you?" when we had a visitor with us. One of the children, often Anna, would start. She would choose someone and ask, "Who are you?" If it was Franklin, he would offer his name. Then each of us would take turns asking him, "Who are you?" As he continued to respond, the same answer could not be used twice. After 1933, Franklin would say, President of the United States, then Commander-in-Chief, then perhaps father, brother or son. With each query, the answer became more interesting, deeper, more personal. Each answer required more thoughtfulness and soul searching. The game continued until each person asked everyone else, "Who are you?" Each person had to answer the question at least ten times. We would need to dig deep to find enough qualities to claim as parts of our identity. As we played this game, we got to know each other in interesting ways.

I remember early on I happily said I was mother, wife, sister and helper, as I find great pleasure in being of service to others. As we went around the table, I often wondered who I really am, who I might be becoming.

Today, Joan, I wonder, who are you? Who will you become beyond daughter, friend, niece or student? What experiences will shape your growth, your character? What values will you embody? How will you contribute to our world? I wonder. I hope for you magnificent things, I hope for you love, joy and laughter. I hope for you meaningful contributions that deepen the dignity of your being. Our world is in need of women of strong purpose and gentle hearts. I hope you will be a shining light among women and men.

My dear Joan, at the moment of your birth, and on your twenty-first birthday when you read this, I offer you my very best good wishes. Our church has been a place of solace and comfort for my family. Each year during the New Year's celebration, we sing a lovely blessing song. I am in mind of it now as I gather my wishes for you:

Power of raven be thine

Power of eagle be thine

Power of storm be thine

Power of moon be thine

Power of sea be thine

Power of land be thine

Goodness of sea be thine

Goodness of earth be thine

Joan, I imagine you may find it odd to begin good wishes with the power of ravens, those often maligned black birds. But in old folk lore, ravens are known as tricksters full of humor and wisdom. With good humor and wisdom, I offer my best wishes for you, Joan. I wish for you the powers and strengths of the elements that bring substance to our world. I wish for you joy, love and just enough saltiness to keep your life interesting and tasty.

Fondly,

Mrs. Roosevelt