

Prologue

*“Friendship is almost always the union of a part of one mind
with the part of another; people are friends in spots.”*

George Santayana

IT is quite possible that if Miss Thompson had been an altogether different kind of person, Irene, Sylvia, Barbara, and Rochelle would not have become lifelong friends. One can only guess about that, but what we do know is that the kindergarten teacher’s autocratic style and stern demeanor brought them together and created a bond that lasted for over fifty years. At the root of Miss Thompson’s pathological need to control everyone and everything in her path was her diminutive size, which explained why she taught kindergarten. By fifth grade, most children had outgrown her.

That year—1952—as Miss Thompson watched the children come through the door, clinging to their mothers for dear life, she felt very positive. It was the first time in ten years of teaching that the number of children had “come out even.” She had exactly twenty-four children on the roster, which meant there would be four and only four children at each of the six round classroom tables. Such precision, she believed, augured in a year of peace, symmetry, and absolute control.

As each mother and child made their tearful good-byes, Miss Thompson pinned a tag with his or her first name onto their shirts and blouses. Then she took hold of their cold, sticky hands and led them one by one to a pre-determined table while whispering reassuringly, “There, there,” and “Now, now. It’s going to be all right.” When all twenty-four children were seated, Miss Thompson closed the classroom door, marched to front-center of the room, and introduced herself.

“Hello. My name is Miss Thompson, and I’m your teacher. The first thing I want you to see is that at the center of each table there is a cutout of a jungle animal . . .”

That was as far as she got. The door opened, and Mr. Pintar, the school principal entered. With him was a pretty, dark-haired child who, unlike the others, did not look frightened. She looked past Miss Thompson to the other children and busily searched their faces, as if expecting to find an old friend—or make a new one.

“This is Irene,” Mr. Pintar said. “Her family just enrolled her, and she’s been assigned to your class.”

“There must be a mistake. I have twenty-four children, *exactly* twenty-four children.”

“It’s no mistake.” He handed her the updated roster.

“But I only have twenty-four chairs.”

Wordlessly, Mr. Pintar left the room, returning minutes later with Miss Thompson’s twenty-fifth chair. He set it down at the Zebra’s Table, directed the twenty-fifth child to sit, and exited. The perfect symmetry of Miss Thompson’s classroom had been destroyed, and with it, her composure. She began to hyperventilate. *Do not let one little girl destroy your year*, she told herself. *Do not, do not, do not!* She glared at Irene, who, instead of looking apologetic for the imbalance she had created, was waving a glad hand to the other children. *You will not destroy my year, little girl. You will not*, she told herself.

Suddenly, the lone boy at the Zebra’s Table let out a scream.

“Idonwannabewithgirlsonly!”

Before Miss Thompson could stop him, he had dragged his chair to the Tiger Table, where two boys and girls were sitting. Miss Thompson immediately noted this transfer onto her roster.

“Now that *that’s* settled,” she said, waving her yardstick through the air, “I will continue. As I was saying, you will notice that at the center of each table is a jungle animal. The table you are sitting at will be your table for the year. You might like to think of it as your home away from home.” She smiled insipidly at the children, who were mostly too cowed by their first day to respond to anything. “Those sitting at the Zebra table will be called The Zebras. Children at the Elephant table will be The Elephants—the same for the

monkeys, the hippos, tigers, and lions. So now, let's say hello to our new family."

Irene, the twenty-fifth child, was the first to bray. Sylvia, Barbara, and Rochelle responded in kind, and all the other children followed suit: elephants trumpeted, monkeys howled, hippos bellowed, tigers growled, and lions roared, culminating in a thunderous and unpleasant cacophony of clamor. Miss Thompson felt another panic attack coming on. She closed her eyes, inhaled and exhaled deeply while rocking from one foot to the other. The children quieted, fascinated by their teacher's peculiar behavior. After a minute, Miss Thompson opened her eyes, grabbed her yardstick and pointing it ahead of her like a dowsing rod, descended upon the Zebra's Table. And Irene.

"You started it," she said. "With your braying."

"But that's how zebras say hello," Irene explained, opening her mouth wide, preparing to repeat her performance. Miss Thompson smacked her yardstick against the edge of the table.

"There are rules in life and in school," she began. "The first rule is that we never speak unless we're called upon. And to be called on, you must first raise your hand. Do you understand?" She paused to examine the four upturned faces. No four little girls could look more different from each another, she thought: Irene was dark-haired and dark-eyed, Rochelle, blonde with blue eyes, Barbara had red hair and freckles, and the fourth one, Sylvia—there was no one good feature to describe her kindly. She was, in total, a singularly unattractive child. "I repeat," Miss Thompson continued. "You must raise your hand and be called upon before you speak; otherwise, you can imagine what it would be like if twenty-four children . . ." She stopped herself. ". . . if twenty-*five* children all spoke at once."

Irene raised her hand. Miss Thompson ignored her. Irene jumped to her feet and waved her hands frantically overhead, miming the words: "Call on me. Call on me."

"Yes. What *is* it?" Miss Thompson finally asked, unable to ignore Irene any longer.

"No, I can't."

"No, you can't *what*?"

"Can't imagine if twenty-five all talked at once."

"Irene, that wasn't a real question. It's what we call a rhetorical question, which means I didn't expect an answer."

"Then why'd you ask?"

Miss Thompson jabbed her yardstick at Irene, like a fencing foil.

"Sit down right now, and remember what I said about speaking out of turn. That includes laughing. If there is ever an outburst like that again, I will have to speak to your parents, and you know what *that* means."

Twenty-four ashen-faced children sat quietly. Irene raised her hand.

"*Now* what?" Miss Thompson screamed at her.

"I don't know."

"You don't know *what*?"

"What it means if you speak to our parents."

"You, Irene, are a troublemaker who is taking time away from my teaching. I want you to apologize to the other children. Right now." Irene was silent. "I said now!"

Irene looked around the classroom. "Soreee," she whispered.

"We can't hear you."

"Sor-reeeeeeeeeee!" she screamed.

The classroom door opened, and Miss Thompson was signaled out into the hall.

"Don't forget!" she said, leaving the room. "No talking while I'm gone."

The door closed shut.

"I don't like her!" Irene said to the other Zebras.

Rochelle's baby blue eyes opened wide. "Don't we *have* to like her? She's our teacher."

"I don't have to like anyone I don't like," Irene shouted. The children at the other tables giggled.

"You're going to get in big trouble," Barbara warned.

Sylvia, already jealous of the attention Irene was getting, jumped into the fray. "Who's afraid of trouble? I'm not!"

Miss Thompson returned to the classroom.

“Let’s begin our first lesson, which is about organization, leadership, and government. Every political unit has a leader. The president runs the country. The state has a governor. Your mother and father are the head of your home. The school has a principal, your classroom a teacher, and now each table will have a leader. We will vote.”

Barbara raised her hand.

“Yes, Barbara. What’s your question?”

“What’s a vote?”

“You pick someone at your table to be the leader. Everyone picks one person, and the child with the most votes becomes the leader of that group.” Sylvia raised her hand. “Yes?”

“Can we vote for ourselves?”

“You wouldn’t want to do that. That wouldn’t be very friendly, and we all want to make friends, don’t we? So let’s begin.”

Barbara voted for Irene. Irene voted for Barbara. Sylvia voted for herself, and Rochelle refused to vote because voting was the same as choosing, and whenever she chose, it came out wrong. If she refused to chose, she’d learned, eventually some grown-up would decide for her, like her mother or father. Maybe teachers did in schools what parents did at home.

“You didn’t vote,” Barbara said to Rochelle.

“I don’t want to.”

“You have to,” Sylvia said. “Vote for me.”

“No. Vote for Irene,” Barbara argued. “She’ll be a good leader.”

“I’ll be better,” Sylvia said, pulling on Rochelle’s arm.

Rochelle shrugged off Sylvia’s hand and tucked her delicate neck down deep into her chest. “I’m not and you can’t make me!”

Miss Thompson tapped the large wall clock behind her with her yardstick. “One minute to go.”

Barbara whispered in Irene’s ear: “If you vote for you, and I vote for you, you’ll have two votes and win.”

And that’s how Irene became leader of the Zebras.

Later in the morning, when the children went outside for recess, they circled the Zebras, asking to play with them.

“We’re poplar,” Barbara later explained.

“What’s ‘poplar’?” they asked.

“Children want to play with us. They like us. That’s poplar.”

Sylvia wanted to know what “poplar” was good for. The question puzzled Barbara. “It’s just good. Everyone knows that.”

“Name me one thing it’s good for,” Sylvia demanded.

“It’s good for everything!”

“Then let’s always be poplar together,” Irene suggested. The others nodded in excited agreement. “We have to do something to make it forever. That’s what they do in movies. Let me think what.” They waited for their leader. “Let’s pinch each other but not very hard.”

“Who does the pinching?” Sylvia asked, suspiciously.

“We all do. We stand in a circle, and we pinch the person next to us one time until everyone’s been pinched.”

That first day of school had other firsts for the Zebras: Irene enjoyed her first political win; Barbara experienced her first success as a political strategist; and Rochelle learned that indecisiveness worked as well at school as it did at home. As for Sylvia, she decided that “poplar” was something she wasn’t, and the closest she would get to it would be a pinch away from someone who was.

For the next six years, the Zebras remained inseparable friends, but by seventh grade, Barbara and Irene were anxious to break away from the pack. All that stood in their way was guilt. “We’ll still be best friends forever,” Irene explained to Sylvia and Rochelle. “But there’s not going to be any more Zebras.”

Tears welled up in Rochelle’s eyes, and Sylvia clenched her fists so tightly her nails dug into her palms and made them bleed. “We’ll still see each other,” Barbara assured them, “but this is so much healthier,” she added, repeating her mother’s words.

Rochelle and Sylvia were afraid that without Irene and Barbara’s proximity, they would be friendless. That is, essentially, what happened to Sylvia, but Rochelle, whose beauty outweighed her passivity and indecisiveness, was not forgotten. Sylvia saw very little of her three best and only friends and became despondent. Her English

teacher noticed and counseled her. “You’re too smart to care about being popular. Use that good brain God gave you, and I guarantee you one day you’ll be a star, while all those silly girls will be doing housework and changing diapers.”

Sylvia thought about it, long and hard. What was the worst thing that could happen to her if she became known as a “brain”? Boys wouldn’t like her because boys didn’t like smart girls, which was why girls worked hard *not* to get A’s. They also didn’t want C’s because C’s could keep them out of a good college where they expected to go to find the right kind of husband. B, therefore, was the grade of choice, but no boy was going to like her no matter what grade she got, so why not study hard and make something of herself?

Six years later Sylvia graduated high school salutatorian and won a four-year scholarship to the University of Chicago. Unfortunately, she never got there.

Barbara and Irene started college at the University of Illinois, and Rochelle enrolled at the Chicago Art Institute. Rochelle was the first to marry. She married Mark because—unlike the other men she had dated—he didn’t ask. He told her. He also told her to quit art school, where she was not only winning awards but beginning to sell her paintings. Then he told her to stay home and raise their children, and after forty years of marriage, he told her he wanted a divorce.

Barbara married Richard, a law school graduate her mother approved of. “Say yes to this one,” she advised. “He’s going somewhere.” Her mother had been right, and because the marriage gave Barbara what she needed most in life—financial security and social status—she had been willing to “look the other way” during Richard’s many short-lived and non-threatening affairs.

Irene married Phil two weeks after she graduated from college. Their happy thirty-year marriage ended in 1998 when Phil was killed by a drunken driver. Since that time, Irene has been searching for “the perfect man.” She thought Mel was the one, but that was before he moved in—before the “up” toilet seats, the Metamucil-coated glasses, and the water stains on her wood furniture.

Sylvia was the last to marry. She was in her late twenties when she met Morris Mazol, a quiet, gentle man ten years older than she, and although she felt none of the excitement her friends had displayed, she was happy: happy to quit her job, happy to be married, happy to have a child, but most happy to join her three best friends once a week for a (usually) friendly game of mahjongg.