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REMBRANDT'S  
SHADOW

BY  
JANET LEE BERG

*Dedicated to Mother*



*This book evolved under the instruction of Jules Feiffer, Ursula Hegi, Kaylie Jones, Heather Dune Macadam, Robert Reeves, Roger Rosenblatt, Lou Ann Walker, John Westermann, and the late, great Frank McCourt.*



*Fiction is history that didn't happen and  
history is fiction that did.*

—GEORGE ORWELL

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*When I met my husband Bruce Berg, he told me about his family history.  
I filled in the blanks with research and imagination.*

# HOW REMBRANDT SAVED MY FAMILY'S LIFE

AN INTRODUCTION BY BRUCE BERG

(Husband of Janet Lee Berg, Author of *Rembrandt's Shadow*)

**I**t is October 20, 1942, and my Opa, Benjamin Katz, and his frightened family stood at the train station in occupied Holland, unsure if the train doors would open and take them to freedom or a death camp. My sister Alma, who was six years old, would later recall the madness, as they were surrounded by armed soldiers on the platform barking orders as they wondered if a desperate last-minute escape had worked. They were accompanied by a German officer who, when he, received the order to allow the escape commented, "I would have much rather been given the order to kill all of you."

Opa's brother, Nathan and business partner, both well-established art dealers, had been working on a big trade—a Rembrandt "Portrait of Dirck Jansz. Pesser" in exchange for 25 Jewish lives.

My telling this story gives away the ending of their harrowing escape along the tracks through Paris and on to the Spanish border where they would depart on a boat, the *Marque de Comillas*, which took them further away from Auschwitz, and closer to the island of Jamaica where they would wait out the war in a British internment camp.



But many other members of my family were not so fortunate. Benjamin also tried to arrange for his in-laws escape, but was not able to do so and they perished in the camps.

Even though I was born in America after the war, I was long aware that my grandfather and his brother, Nathan, were art dealers of considerable reputation, but I had no idea as to the extent of their prominence in the art world. They were considered the foremost experts in the field of Dutch painting, especially Old Masters. They possessed the works of such esteemed artists as Vermeer, Jan Steen, and Nicholas Maes and at one time, acquired more Rembrandts than anyone in Europe. It was that collection that had long made them a prime target of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi henchmen.

My mother would only tell us stories haltingly, and with little detail, except she repetitively told me about seeing people holding bars of soap at the train depot.

But only in the last few years, as I have worked to trace what became of that Rembrandt and so many other works of art my family once treasured, have I learned the terrifying details of what happened after the Nazis invaded the Netherlands in May of 1940 and appeared on the doorstep of their comfortable home in the village of Dieren.

Nathan's son David, who is still alive, recalls those days, and describes a house once filled with much joy. "The residents of Dieren, who knew my grandfather, still speak with so much affection of my grandfather's family and how their home was a magnet for Friday night Shabbat dinners." According to David, conversations turned tense with "the growing anti-Semitic movement and what to do with the children."

After the invasion in May of 1940, my grandfather testified that they were forced to sell almost their entire inventory of 500 paintings. He stated that they "would never have parted with so many paintings at one time."

PORTRAIT OF RAMAN



*Portrait of Dirck Jansz. Pesser*

REMBRANDT HARMENSZ. VAN RIJN - HOLLAND, CIRCA 1634

The abstract questions turned deadly real when Nazi agents, who had long targeted the art in the Katz gallery, came to pay a visit in August 1940.

“Eventually, Hermann Goering, the head of the Luftwaffe and Hitler’s chief art collector, arrived. Surrounded by armed goons, he stood in our family’s living room and conducted “business” with Nathan. All the children were ushered into another room and ordered to stay there. They were not even allowed to use the toilet. The visit left everyone shaken, including my mother, who soon fell ill.”

(STORY CONTINUED IN AFTERWORD)



ONE  
QUEENS, NEW YORK  
1971

Sylvie Rosenberg Beckman resealed the letter and placed it on top of the pile. She carefully retied the lavender bow that held the stack of mail, so nothing would be detected, and she tilted her head at the sight of Michael's wavering script. "Angela" was written on the outside of each envelope; the capital "A" cradled between sketched wings. She clapped her hand over her quivering lips. Sylvie never recalled her son as being artistic.

She thought about when she was a young girl, drawing train tracks in her journal the day the German soldiers had lined them up at the depot. She was trying to teach herself *perspective* in drawing, the illusion of the train tracks getting further away in the distance. After so many years, Sylvie's life was anything but a straight path. Her memories vacillated between euphoric and tragic without order, without making sense.

Then Sylvie snatched up the receiver and dialed Angela's number.

Angela was grateful for her Friday morning slumber without the interruption of college classes, until the shrill ring of the

telephone woke her. She realized her parents were both out, and stretched her slight torso in her four-poster bed.

"Hello?" She yawned.

"Angela? Is this Angela Martino?"

"Yes. That's me," she said in a fog.

"This is Michael's mother. Sylvie Beckman."

Angela was quiet. *Mrs. Beckman?* Her eyes opened as she recognized the woman's thick glottal accent and felt a powerful jolt in her half-sleep. She hadn't heard the woman's voice for over two years now. Not since that dreadful summer night they met.

"Angela, find a pen. I will wait."

"A pen?" Angela sprang up to a sitting position and fumbled for a pen on the nightstand. The curly white phone cord twisted around her long dark hair as she tried to make sense of what was happening. "But, Mrs. Beck—"

"Quickly. The pen. Before I change my mind."

"Yes," she said, ripping her hair loose. "I have a pen."

"Now, write down these directions."

Angela felt a clamp tighten across her skull with an instant headache.

"I've moved," Sylvie said.

"Yes. I know . . . I tried to—"

"Do you have something to write on?"

Angela looked for a clear spot on the back of her homework assignment. "Yes. But, Mrs. Beckman, how is—"

"Shhh! You must come see me in person."

Angela remained silent as she wrote down the directions. *Talking to this dragon woman is impossible!* "Mrs. Beckman, please. Please tell me, how is—"

"We'll talk when you get here. It is important—an emergency. I can no longer keep this to myself—this secret . . ."

“Secret? What secret? Hello? Mrs. Beckman, are you still there?”

Angela blinked. She moaned. As if to mock her, the dial tone moaned back. She stared at the starkness of the ceiling and exhaled. Then she drew a deep breath and wildly thrashed her feet to free them from the tangled bed sheets. The image of a mermaid freeing her tail from a cluster of seaweed came to mind as she dove off her bed and landed on top of her crumpled Levis on the floor. She left her white nightshirt on and jammed her legs into her jeans, hopped on one leg, and tucked the scribbled directions into her back pocket.

She ran her fingers through her hair and rubbed her front teeth clean with one finger, while searching the room for her moccasins. *What is wrong with her? Who does she think she is, giving me commands like that? The same old arrogant, overbearing, self-centered—Oooh—that’s who she is!*

Her mind raced as Angela scooped up one of her moccasins with her big toe, and squeezed her foot inside the fleece lining while she scanned the room for its mate. Dropping to her knees, she pulled back the dust ruffle and felt for the softness of the suede under her stretched fingers. *Where’s my shoe? Where’s my shooo? Where’s my—?* She sat back with her legs tucked under her rear end, as tears came to her eyes, and all the emotions came rushing back to her—first the heartbreak, then the anger, and then finally being honest with herself. She covered her mouth with a shaking hand. *Where’s my Michael?*





## DIEREN, HOLLAND

1930s

**B**ecause she was the daughter of Josef Rosenberg, a noted Dutch art dealer, sometimes Sylvie believed her father loved art more than he loved her. That is, until the day he traded a Rembrandt to the Nazis in exchange for her life.

As a baby, unaware of her own worth, Mother had propped her up in a high chair and fed her with a silver spoon too big for her mouth. She often clamped her mouth shut on it or spit out its contents. Sylvie Rosenberg had the birthright to do so.

The nanny from England, the one with the alabaster eyebrows, somehow single-handedly managed to get pabulum down Sylvie's obstinate little throat. On the nanny's day off, Mother had to deal with the unpleasant task by herself and she could only get Sylvie to eat if she doused the food in honey. Not wanting to soil her own clothing if her child should spit up, mother donned an apron to cover her fine dress. Because the child tried her patience, her mother noticed one of the copper-bottom pots hanging on the rack overhead wasn't properly buffed, confiding in Sylvie that she'd have to reprimand the help.

The other two siblings weren't as stubborn by nature, and hardly caused a fuss, so Mother could attend luncheons, the garden club, and shopping. The more Father got engrossed in his business, the more items Mother came home with from her sprees.



How exhilarated she seemed after a day out, hours upon end, caressing the finer fabrics—crepe de Chine, silk moiré, and taffeta in the best shops on the avenue. The week the nanny was called away to visit her ailing relative in London, Sylvie developed a fever which her mother had ignored too long. The child, half conscious, was carried into the back seat of the Bentley by one of the servants, the one who always carried a dust cloth saturated in lemon oil. Raleigh, their English driver, rushed her to the physician where she was diagnosed with yet another ear infection. Mother blamed the nanny's absence for the child's suffering, and her partial loss of hearing in one ear. She told her not to bother coming back. She immediately hired a new nanny from England, the one whose breath smelled like cooking vanilla.

There was word of anti-Semitic demonstrations going on, especially outside of synagogues, but it had little bearing on the Rosenberg's lifestyle as they were secular Jews who didn't attend temple.

Sylvie's sister, Gretta, a straight-laced type who wore her hair tied back severely from her face, distanced herself from her younger siblings. "No, Sylvie, I can't possibly fit in that tiny chair," she told her five-year-old little sister. "I'm ten, which is practically a teenager."

Sylvie had waited all day with her rubber dolls seated around the small wooden table for Gretta to return from private school, imploring her to join the tea party she had painstakingly set up with miniature china cups and saucers so delicately placed on doilies.

In the center of the table stood a dainty three-tiered server she had promised Mother she'd be extra careful with that held plump crème puffs drizzled with caramel sauce.

“Besides,” Gretta said, “You have your doll friends. Look, Marta finished her tea, and she’s asking you to refill her cup.”

Sylvie protested. “You’re making that up! Marta doesn’t talk. She’s a doll!”

“I’ve got more important things to do, do you understand? Maybe Mother can find a friend for you, call a neighbor, or—or hire someone.”

Seven-year-old Wilhelm, always making boy noises and shooting pretend-guns, came soaring through the playroom with his arms extended out at his sides like a fighter jet in a flash, ready to bring down the entire tea party and Sylvie’s make-believe world. The doll’s face smeared with crème, made Wilhelm laugh and laugh, and Sylvie wail so loud, Father could hear her from his office at the other end of the house.

“What on earth is all that ruckus?” Papa called. He had been studying a painting in his office, behind closed doors with Dr. Visser; the two of them calculating the value of art for hours on end.

Wilhelm glided out of the playroom with his radar searching for a good landing spot, while Gretta slipped out to the courtyard for her cello lesson.

A servant came to pick up the mess, and to sooth Sylvie, who had developed hiccups from crying so hard. “Let’s have a sip, shall we?” the maid said and patted Sylvie’s shoulder. With her arms crossed over her chest, Sylvie elbowed the woman’s hand away.

“No, I hate tea parties!” Sylvie cried, throwing the place settings back onto the Persian carpet. “Now, you clean them up!”

Sylvie turned eight and had long abandoned her tea set and dolls. She would not get a baby sister of her own to play with for years to come and had to become accustomed to playing alone

at home. Without any of the servants noticing, she slipped out the back door one weekend to wander about.

Sylvie wanted friends and to be like everyone else. She skipped along the sidewalk that ran next to the cast-iron fence of the unfamiliar playground. Some of the children spotted her, and to her delight, they motioned her toward the entrance.

“What’s that on your necklace?” the smallest of the girls asked, studying her through the steel openings that separated them. “A star?”

Sylvie nodded, hopeful she found a new friend.

The girl unlocked the latch, and let her in, and whispered something to someone else. The gate closed behind her. Suddenly, Sylvie felt *different*, as if she didn’t belong there. The sky shifted. So did her smile. Light raindrops ricocheted off her head. She simply stayed put. Her feet, pointed in contradiction.

The other children started drawing something in the wet dirt with a stick—a giant symbol. Someone with a small voice said, “I think the mark means ‘good luck.’”

One of the girls, much bigger in girth and older than the others, called everyone over to where she was standing and eyed Sylvie the hardest. “We’re going to play a game now. It’s called Catch the Jew.”

Sylvie’s neck tensed up. The girl looked familiar. *Ingrid*? She remembered seeing her in school one day. Wasn’t she the one who made nasty comments? She was pretty sure of it. All the students were instructed to hide in the school basement during one of their practice drills. *Yes, that’s her . . .* the one who complained the loudest that day about doing the emergency rehearsal, the one who had said “It’s all the Jews’ fault.”

Sylvie wondered if her older sister ever had such confrontations when going to private school. It seemed, overnight, that sending all three of the Rosenberg children to the ‘fancy’ schools was suddenly prohibitive for her parents.

The other children at the park shouted and snickered as they chased Sylvie in circles. Ingrid was the first to throw the mud, and the others soon followed. Then they caught her. Sylvie was forced to stand in the center of the ancient-looking letter they engraved in the dirt; she didn't learn the significance of the *swastika* until later. Whatever it meant, to her it stood for humiliation.

As her fine shoes sank into the sludge, minutes seemed forever. She refused to make a spectacle, refused to make eye-contact with those she thought were her peers. *So these are Christians.*

She tried to focus on something else. Anything. In a tree, she spotted a thick clump of twigs in the branches. Had a mother bird tried to build a home there? Would the young chicks be happy so high above the other birds? She wondered.

Maybe she should tell all the gentile children that her family wasn't a *religious* one, but that probably wouldn't change her from being a Jew. The other kids stepped off to the side; she thought of the parting of the Red Sea, as the titan made her way up to Sylvie's frozen face.

"Hmmm...what did we *catch* today? Something unlike the rest of us, I believe. Do you think you are *better* than us? Deserve special treatment?"

Sylvie said nothing. She wasn't sure how to stop the tears from coming. Should she blink a lot or continue to stare?

The troublemaker picked up a long, thin branch off the ground and pointed with it at the dirt on Sylvie's shiny shoes. "You think you have *better* looking shoes than us, don't you? *Used* to have better looking shoes, I should say!" Sylvie heard giggles from the others.

Then, the leader of the pack tickled Sylvie with the twig, dragged the stick down each arm, and left a track of dirt everywhere it touched. "Such a fancy blouse with fancy ruffles. I'm afraid you are nothing but a *dirty* Jew now."

Sylvie's eight-year-old mind raced. The stick lightly poked at the bridge of Sylvie's nose, and she inhaled deeply. *I smell dog poop on your breath, you big kak!* Sylvie wanted to scream. Instead, she recited the alphabet in her head, backwards.

"Even your eyes are dirt-brown," Ingrid added.

Sylvie refused to let one tear drop from her dirt-brown eyes onto her milky-white skin. Ingrid continued the taunting, glancing the stick slowly down Sylvie's spine, walking behind Sylvie, then in front of her, brushing the twig on her cheek and down her neck. Sylvie thought of her science lesson in school; how the moon rotates around the earth.

Then the beastly girl stared closer at Sylvie's necklace. "Looks like *real* gold to me, no?"

Sylvie's father had given her the necklace. She concentrated on Papa's soft voice—when he used his "forever words." Her favorite lesson—the day he taught her how to draw the hexagram—two triangles laid over each other. His gentle words were slipping away, replaced by the hateful words of this wretched girl. Sylvie had learned a new lesson now.

Somehow, she would turn things around, get even. She'd come up with her own strategy that would serve her for the rest of her life, so she'd never again have to stand on that horrific insignia. With her mud-streaked face and shoulders erect, Sylvie looked the captain of the bullies straight in the eye and smiled a potent smile that said she was *different, all right*—different because she was better, nicer looking, smarter, and more powerful, especially more powerful! She told the big bully all this without saying a word.

She *had* to come up with a good plan. Her eyes went to the tree again, darting from branch to branch like a squirrel. Finally, Sylvie opened her mouth. "You like my jewelry? There's more where *that* came from. I bet *you* would like some for yourself."

A torrential downpour ended the staring game between the two and their unlikely conversation, confirming a time. “Three o’clock, it is then.”

“Yes,” Sylvie answered. “Do you know where I live?”

“Everyone knows where you live,” Ingrid said.

The children ran in circles again, slinging the mud at one another, as if nothing had happened. They were all dirty now, all the same, and the children’s game ended.

Sylvie was about to bury her muddy clothes in a pile of rags in the basement, promising herself she would never wear them again or set foot in that park again, ever. But wouldn’t that be letting that horrible girl win? No, she’d let one of the servants wash and press everything. She’d wear those clothes again and in front of that same bully. Ingrid was poor, and not very smart. Sylvie had *things* she wanted. She could win her over, and the power that would come with it.

Sylvie tossed in bed the entire night, because of having second thoughts about the invitation she had extended to the big brute. She dreamt the bully sat on her until she suffocated. She awoke gasping for breath, ripping at her bedcovers in a panic.

At three o’clock the next afternoon, Sylvie, dressed in her freshly pressed and starched blouse, kneeled on her window seat, and watched the street from her third floor bedroom window, as she waited for her plan to unfold.

*There she is. That’s her! But who’s that girl with her? Oh, I remember. She had also been at the park—the pint-sized one, the spineless one who had stood back and watched like everyone else; the one who said the symbol stood for “good luck.”*

“Hmm, maybe she’s right, after all.”

The two girls, Ingrid and Maxine, walked past the lamppost boxes filled with flowers and turned up the slate walkway through the perfectly pruned shrubbery.

"This isn't a house. It's a mansion!" Ingrid said coming to a halt.

"A mansion?" the smaller girl repeated the word.

The girls looked up at the gabled roof with open mouths. "See. I told you. Papi was right. She is a rich Jew."

"Should we use the knocker?" Maxine asked in a wee voice.

One of the servants opened the door. "May I help you?"

"Umm. Is Sylvie at home?" Maxine peeked through the hinges of the massive door.

"Please go around to our guest entrance." The servant pointed to the sunroom to their left of the front entrance. "The door is unlocked. You may go in and wait there."

They entered the sunroom and closed the door behind them. In the corner, there was a faded sage toile settee and six petite wood chairs in a line, where visitors would wait until they were announced. The two girls looked at one another, then looked around the room. The walls were made up of many partitions, tiled in blue and white delft with sprigs of green. The girls sat on the stiff chairs without speaking. Then Ingrid got up and went to the divan, and extended her legs out long.

"I feel like a mo-o-ovie star," she enunciated. "Why don't you come on up and *see* me sometime . . ."

Maxine didn't comprehend her bawdiness. She stretched her neck and looked to see where the housekeeper had gone when she had disappeared past the foyer through the tall French doors that led to a world beyond her imagination. On a far wall, she spotted delicate figurines on a very high shelf.

"My Papi also said her father's a big shot art dealer. Owns more of Rembrandt's paintings than anyone in Europe," Ingrid said.

“Who’s Remember-ant?” Maxine scratched her chin with a dirty fingernail.

“Nevermind!”

Minutes later, the woman returned to the waiting area and said, “Miss Sylvie will see you now.”

The girls followed her down the long hall and paused in the main foyer at the over-sized cherry secretary that Ingrid told Maxine probably had once belonged to the queen herself. They passed dark, heavy-framed oil paintings and ascended the central staircase on tiptoes, as they held onto the banister. The stairwell was squared-off as it went up to the private third floor; it would have been fun to slide down had it been spiral, Ingrid indicated.

As the girls stepped on each riser, they tried to peer at the rooms below through the railings—Maxine’s imagination saw the all-white porcelain kitchen with copper pots hanging above the counters; the flowery powder room; the busy laundry area with orderly shelves stacked high with linens and folded towels.

“I bet the master suite is where they keep a giant safe with a giant lock,” Ingrid whispered while touching a tall vase at the landing.

The maid snapped at her. “Ah-Ah-Ah—fingerprints.”

Ingrid leaned closer into the girl’s ear. “She’s a real sourpuss, isn’t she?”

Sylvie opened the door and Ingrid entered first, walked in slow circles around the room, and glared at Sylvie, reevaluating her.

Sylvie looked at Ingrid, and then at the other girl.

“Oh, that’s just Maxi. Maxine,” she informed Sylvie, pointing with her chin at the diminutive one.

Maxine chattered incessantly. “You have your very own



servant? Is *she* the one who folded all those towels? Does she pour your drinks, too?"

"I pour my own. To the top of the glass. Why do you ask? Are you thirsty?" Sylvie queried.

"Where's your mother?" Maxine questioned.

"She's out. So is my father. He works a lot. And mother is very, um, social. Only the servants are home. But they stay on the first floor." Sylvie got busy, ignored Maxine snooping around at her things, and showed Ingrid her doll collection and all her splendid games and toys.

"Doesn't *she* pour?"

"Who?" Sylvie asked Maxine, annoyed.

"Your mother."

"I told you. She's *out* somewhere. In fact, my whole family is out today." Sylvie continued rooting through her jewelry box until she found the glittery necklace she had been looking for, and then picked it up and dangled it in front of Ingrid's face. The contrast of the shiny necklace in front of Ingrid's face made her look even uglier. Sylvie pretended to beam as she offered to put it around the girl's thick neck.

"You can keep it." Sylvie felt her throat constrict at her own words.

"Really?"

The slight girl tapped Sylvie on the shoulder. "I live in a small house, and my mother is *always* home."

"Good for you!" Sylvie barked.

"When does she come home, your mother?"

"You ask a lot of questions, don't you, Mousy Girl?" Sylvie said.

"That's not my name!" Maxine protested.

"Yes it is. That's what I'll call you if I want to—Mousy Girl. Mousy Girl."

"Stop! Stop calling me that!"

“Ooh, look, there’s a mouse in the house.” Sylvie teased.

Ingrid looked delighted as they squabbled. Sylvie made believe she was enjoying this, and said, “I have an idea. Let’s play Seek and Find. I’ll hide these bags of chocolate-covered jellies somewhere on the third floor. Let me tell you, it is the *best* Dutch chocolate in all of Holland.”

Maxine wore a worried expression. “What if *she* finds both bags?”

Ingrid licked her lips as Sylvie left the room for a few minutes. When Sylvie returned she shouted, “Ready? Go!”

Maxine scooted off toward the west wing, but before Ingrid headed for the east wing, Sylvie grabbed her chubby arm and pulled her back into the room. Then she opened both her hands which she had kept behind her back and exposed the bags of candy.

“You never hid them?” Ingrid’s eyes widened.

“No. Come with me,” Sylvie said. “I know how much you love playing *Catch*. How would you like to play *Catch a Mouse*?”

They could hear the teeny girl rummaging through a closet in one of the spare bedrooms.

“Shh!” Sylvie whispered, putting one finger to her mouth while twisting the key in the lock. “Good. Now, we get to have the candy to ourselves,” she said, knowing the piggish girl would love that idea. Maxine banged on the door, nonstop, while Sylvie undid the wrappers, and talked to her through the crack. “Oh, you poor mouse,” she said. “It’s unfortunate you found your way into *this* closet—the one with the broken lock. It gets stuck sometimes, you know. Hold on, while I try to get you out.”

Ingrid laughed so hard her shoulders shook, and the delicious dark brown saliva bubbled between her teeth. Sylvie wished she could cover her eyes and ears. The piggish girl leaned her back against the door and slid down until she hit

her rear end with a thud. Then she looked at Sylvie. "You have so much at your house! Can I come visit tomorrow, too?"

Tears formed in Sylvie's eyes. She was benumbed, unable to respond.

She knew all along exactly where to find another whole bag of chocolate-covered jellies to stop the girl from her pathetic crying—in the second kitchen cabinet from the right. Her mother always made sure there was extra everything in whatever she desired . . . *almost* everything.

It seemed a very long time, and Sylvie did nothing to help Maxine in the closet, just as the girl did nothing to help Sylvie the day before at the park.

That night, Sylvie lay awake in her giant-sized bed, sick to her stomach, thinking about everything—the games—the silly children's games. *I had to play! I didn't mean anything by it!* She had hoped if there was a God, maybe he understood. How she wished her mother would come home and give her her *forgiving* kiss when she'd tuck her in, and rub her belly in circles with her smooth, cool hand. The only thing that came to her was the deep sound of the clock bonging from the downstairs foyer. She counted. *Eleven times*. She wondered where Mother was this time.