

# THE FIFTH GATE

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## Jew Girl by Linda K. Wertheimer

“Praise the Lord, Oh, Jesus, Praise the Lord.”

My gut tightens and my cheeks flush as the music rises to a crescendo. A band of my classmates jams to a Christian hymn in my public high school auditorium as a pastor nearby beams in spiritual bliss. I stand and wiggle myself around peers to escape.

I rush into the hall. I'm 16, and with my middle brother Kevin's graduation the year before, I am the only Jew left at Van Buren High School. I have heard the name Jesus invoked in school far too many times. Too often, I have been forced to feel just how different I am. My family moved here, to this rural patch of northwest Ohio, when I was 9, Kevin, 11, and my eldest brother, Steve, 14. Living here bonds Kevin and I particularly close because of the ostracism we have faced from the start.

Kevin, though, cannot commiserate with me on the day of this school assembly. He's in college. I am alone, desperate to figure out how I can fit in. In this all-Christian school, I am the oddity. In Jewish circles, I also feel like a misfit.

I fall for the ruse when my principal announces there is going to be a surprise assembly. The surprise is a pre-Easter concert and service. I have begged teachers to give me advance notice about religious assemblies so I can be excused. But no one tells me this time. I dash from the hall into the nearby band room, grab my flute, and slip into a tiny practice room. It is my sanctuary.

*Breathe. Breathe. Relax.*

The calm words that my flute teacher says at the start of every lesson reverberate in my head. As I open my flute case, I still seethe. I felt peers' eyes on me when I fled the auditorium. I wonder how many will again interrogate me about what I believe.

I am not Christian, classmates tell me when I give them a ride home from basketball practice. Therefore, I am doomed. When I die, I will go to hell because I have not been saved. It does not matter, I retort. I am Jewish so I do not believe in heaven or hell. Yet, my peers' words disturb me.

*Breathe. Breathe.*

I twist the flute's silver mouthpiece into the body joint and attach the foot. I am a Jew, but my faith is no salve. Before my family's move from the Finger Lakes Region in New York State to rural Ohio, Judaism is of little consequence. We are assimilated Jews, uninvolved in most religious aspects of our faith.

*Breathe. Breathe.*

In this windowless room, I shut out the sounds of the nearby assembly and practice what my flute teacher preaches. I lower my somewhat muscular frame, formed from playing high school basketball, on the gray rug, and blow softly into the mouthpiece marked with the imprint of my lips. The notes are

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clear, pure. My breath rises and falls, a gentle rhythm from my diaphragm rather than the shoulder heaves of years past. I warm up with scales, then stand and open the piece I at first shunned when my teacher assigned it: Gluck's *Minuet And Dance Of The Blessed Spirits*. The piece is deceptively slow and easy. My teacher persuades me that playing this simple piece well is a daunting challenge. Breathe too quickly, and the piece is harsh. She teaches me to play every note as if I were still lying on the floor, letting each breath slowly rise and fall. Let the music flow. Dance the haunting minuet. Twirl just a tad faster in the spirit dance.

Notes float effortlessly. Shivers skate down my back. This is music. This is peace.

A loud mechanical bell rings. The assembly is over. I clean the flute with a shoe cloth, and rest each piece in its velvety slot, then join the crowd returning to class.

Music is one part of the balm. The other is mainly my brother Kevin, who helps me endure the years at Van Buren. He experiences most of what I do, and he is always my cheerleader.

Enter, the Church Lady. It is the first week at our new school in Van Buren, where the elementary, junior high and high schools share the same plot of land on top of one of the rare hills in this town of 200. In mid-afternoon, my teacher leaves the fourth-grade classroom, and a stranger, her long black skirt flapping against her knees, walks in with a felt-covered board and a briefcase. She sticks bearded figures on the board and tells us about Jesus and the men who believe in his teachings. Disciples, she calls them. Then, she asks us questions about Jesus, questions like, "How does Jesus affect your life?"

My face reddens in a mixture of embarrassment, confusion, and anger. Why is this woman talking about Jesus? Religion belongs in a church, temple, or mosque, not a public school class. I know that, even at age 9. I may not be that into religion, but I know my faith is Judaism. No one should preach religion in school. As the church lady prattles on and leads the class in hymns, I try to shrink behind the top of the old-style school desk. I neither sing nor complain. I want to run, yet I also want to fit in. The same day, at a different time, in his sixth-grade classroom, Kevin also has a visit from the Church Lady.

We come home angry and confused and run off the school bus into our family's one-story brick ranch in a rural subdivision in Findlay. Each of us pushes the yellow vinyl bar stools close to the kitchen counter, where Mom waits with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and milk. There is a little bit of a Leave It to Beaver quality to my family. Dad works 9-5 at his mechanical engineering job while Mom takes care of us. She does not work full-time until I am 12, but even then her job teaching foreign college students English allows her to be home by the time school lets out. Steve, my eldest brother, trails behind Kevin and me. Already a high school freshman, Steve goes directly into his bedroom and shuts the door. The Church Lady does not visit high school classes, but Steve is miserable enough. He, like us, never wanted to leave New York.

Kevin and I do not wait for Mom to ask questions about our day. A slightly bigger talker than I, Kevin goes first.

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“She said we killed Jesus.”

“Did she say that in your class?” Mom asks me.

“No. She and the kids sang, ‘Jesus loves me.’ I kept my mouth shut. I don’t want to go back.”

Mom says that we should not have to sit in those classes. She vows that she and Dad will pursue this with the Van Buren superintendent. That night, Dad echoes Mom’s anger.

My parents protest the existence of the class to the superintendent.

“I don’t want to make waves,” the superintendent said. Yet, he agrees to speak to the school board.

My parents want action, but fear repercussions. “Do it privately,” my mother said. “I don’t want my children hurt.”

The school board refuses to eliminate the classes. The superintendent tells my parents that Kevin and I could be excused during the religious class. My parents debate whether to take our situation to the American Civil Liberties Union but decide against it. They fear retaliation from bigots if our objection draws newspaper headlines. The week they speak with the superintendent, the local branch of the KKK burns a cross on the yard of one of the few black families in the area.

The next week, the Church Lady returns to our classrooms. At first, my fourth-grade teacher sits with me in another room. Then, apparently annoyed that she has to watch me rather than have a break, she ushers me to a room the size of a broom closet. Stay until I return, she says. I sit alone in a windowless room that smells of chalk.

After school, I complain to Mom, who calls the school and gets the teacher to agree to send me to the spacious library where another adult can supervise me. Kevin also is sent to the library during his Bible studies class. He hates reading as much as I love it. For both of us, the worst torture is leaving the classroom each week as our classmates watch. We do not hide our Jewish identity, but prefer not to advertise it.

“Why can’t you sit in the class with us?” a classmate asks me one day.

“I’m Jewish.”

“What do you mean, ‘You’re Jewish’?”

I pause, unsure how to answer. What is a Jew? Being Jewish means I am not Christian. It means I do not believe Jesus is the son of God. And yet I am not sure what I or other Jews believe. While most of my Christian friends go to church every Sunday for services, my family never goes to temple for Friday night services.

I resent questions from my peers about my faith partly because of frustration and embarrassment at my own ignorance. Peers who view themselves as devout Christians seem more versed about their religion. They believe strongly in Jesus and the power of prayer. Any prayer makes me uncomfortable during childhood. I resent, too, that some peers act as if they were better people because they believe. They believe in something.

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My brothers and I, starting at age 5 for each of us, learn about Judaism in religious school on Sunday mornings. In Ohio, our parents wake us around 7:30 a.m., push us to hurry up and pile into the station wagon to drive nearly an hour to Lima. The car soon reeks of cigarettes as my father puffs one after another, refusing to stop even as we complain that the smoke travels from the front to the back seat where the three of us sit leg to leg, elbow often striking elbow. My eyes smart from the smoke, and my nose becomes plugged by the end of the car ride. At the temple, my parents let us out, and then usually go bowling while we receive our weekly dose of Judaism.

On occasion, I like Sunday school. We complete worksheets on Hebrew, which to me is like doing a crossword puzzle. We learn Bible stories about people like Esther, who stands up to her husband, the king, to protect the Jewish people. Esther initially does not divulge that she is Jewish. But when Haman, one of the King's officers, threatens to kill all of the Jews, Esther devises a plan to save her people and succeeds. Esther, like me, cannot be open about her religion as she walks among the populace. I have a Jewish Star of David, but never wear it during childhood except at temple. Afterward, the star lies under my blouse, a talisman of a faith hard for me to understand or embrace.

In seventh grade, Kevin makes the pitch to our parents that there is no need to continue religious school. He does not want a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, which would have required more chauffeuring between Findlay and Lima. He barely knows any of the Hebrew that he would have to chant from the Torah at a Bar Mitzvah. My parents, neither of whom celebrated the ritual at age 13, let Kevin quit Sunday school. I try to quit at the same time, but my parents insist that I take classes at least as long as Kevin did, then decide what I want.

For another year, my parents and I trek to Lima. After Sunday school, before and after Kevin quit, we habitually stop at Wendy's. Our parents sit on one side of the table, and Kevin and I on the other. Kevin snitches fries when I'm not looking, feigning an innocent grin when I poke him. My most vivid memories of Sunday school are of a Wendy's cheeseburger and fries and Dad's cigarette smoke.

At age 12 or 13, I follow in Kevin's footsteps and become a Sunday school dropout. I do not celebrate my coming of age as a Jewish female, a bat mitzvah, and care little at the time. At that point, I have not witnessed a Bat Mitzvah ceremony. At 13, I am growing up but my maturing has nothing to do with liturgy. I am learning what it means to be part of a scorned, little understood minority at school and in a community. No boys ask me to dance at the seventh- and eighth-grade dances. Few invitations come for birthday parties. I am excluded from one of the biggest social outlets at school and in town – church.

Nor do I live in a Jewish world. Into my teens, I am mostly a book Jew, learning bits about my religion through the words of other Jews. Golda Meir, Israel's prime minister from 1969 to 1974, fascinates me with her autobiography, *My Life*. She, like my great-grandparents, is born in Russia, and the pogroms drive her family away to America during her childhood. She recalls what it's like watching her father and a neighbor barricade their homes with boards to thwart a pogrom.

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Writes Meir: “And above all, I remember being aware that this was happening to me because I was Jewish, which made me different from most of the other children in the yard. It was a feeling that I was to know again many times during my life—the fear, the frustration, the consciousness of being different and the profound instinctive belief that if one wanted to survive, one had to take effective action personally.”

Fear. Frustration. Survival. Those words sit with me as I create a jaded definition of what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew: hover on society’s sidelines, trying to blend in yet constantly being pushed away. To be a Jew: Be different and alone. To be a Jew in a town where there are almost none: live in apprehension of what someone might do or say. To be a Jew, too, means an obligation to survive in the face of ignorance and prejudice.

“You Jewish son of a bitch,” a boy taunts my brother Kevin on the school bus during his junior and my freshman year of high school.

I hear the epithet and flinch. Kevin grimaces, but lets the taunt go. A few days later, on a Saturday, we wake to find anti-Semitic graffiti on nearly every window of our house. The same graffiti—a swastika—is etched in white wax on the windows of Kevin’s lime green black-striped Barracuda in the driveway.

Kevin is the angriest I have ever seen him. Scowling, he pledges to find out who did it. He is sure it is the boys, once his friends, who are responsible. I am angry and scared. Would they throw rocks at our windows next? Most days at school, the rejection I sense never occurs because of something blatant. I never really know which peers dislike me because I am Jewish, which ones carry such venom that he or she could etch such a symbol of hate on my home. What puzzles me most is why. Why? Is it anti-Semitism or just ignorance?

The swastikas on our house, on Kevin’s car, are a grim reminder of our isolation. That feeling that we are different is hard to scrub off our skins. It sticks to us like the mud that coats the region’s farm fields after a long rain.

Our family does not make a police report, but Kevin calls a deputy sheriff he has become friends with through his Boy Scout troop. The deputy visits the homes of the young suspects, speaks to them and their parents, and emphasizes the seriousness of the act. No one confesses. But for several mornings on the school bus, we hear whispers about the marks on our windows. Kevin sits next to me and gives me reassuring glances. He lets me know we are in this together and that above all else, he is my big brother, my protector.

Kevin soon gets my parents’ permission to give us an escape from the half-hour bus ride. He regularly drives me to school in his Barracuda. In that car, it is just us. There is no fear of whispered insults. After starting the engine, Kevin looks at me, his blue-green eyes lighting up, “Ready, squirt?”

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The engine roars. My brother is in constant search of an adrenalin-high whether behind the wheel of a car, on skis, or on a bike.

I nod, though my stomach flutters. “Ready.”

“Let’s see how fast I can make this baby go.” Kevin drives slowly until we are out of our subdivision and on the 11-mile stretch of one-lane rural roads leading to Van Buren. Then he pushes his foot to the floor and we zoom past farms, past fields of soy and corn, past cows too lazy to even turn their heads. In these moments, we are free. Free of judgment by peers. Free of well-meaning parents. Free of Mom who thinks the secret to happiness is to stay busy. Do, do, do, and there’s little time to dwell about the kids who taunt us. Free of Dad who controls when and what we watch on TV and how loud we listen to anything.

“Music?” my brother asks.

He knows the answer is yes. Our relationship is less about what we say to each other and more about the experiences we share. He sticks a cassette tape into the stereo and turns the volume as high as it goes. Some mornings, we belt out John Cougar’s “Hurts so Good.” Another day, it’s Pat Benatar’s “Hit Me With Your Best Shot,” or Billy Joel’s “Big Shot.” Fast. Loud. Strong. Rocking. Kevin cannot sing a single note on key. I sing better, but my high soprano voice is not the best fit for rock music. We sound terrible. Yet that awful cacophony is one of my most beautiful memories from my teen years.

For a period, we have to ride the bus again. One night, while driving back alone from a night out, Kevin falls asleep behind the wheel of the Barracuda. The car drifts off a two-lane highway and hits a farmer’s fence. Kevin is unscathed, and the car is dented. My parents are relieved and furious. If he is too tired, Kevin should not be driving. Kevin acts as if he were a cat with several lives. The accident is nothing, he says. He is nonchalant. He is the most even-keeled person in my family. He reassures more than he ever agonizes.

At school, we often see each other in the halls, and if I look downcast, he winks or grins as if to say, “Don’t worry. Tomorrow will be better.” Oddly, both of us become known for our big smiles at Van Buren. Somehow, despite our sense of isolation, we appear as if we are always happy. We each find ways to survive.

Kevin becomes the yearbook photographer. At 5’6”, only a tad taller than I, he is too short to be a competitive athlete in most sports. But he becomes a popular presence at basketball and football games as he stands on the sidelines with his Nikon 35mm camera strung around his neck. At home, he spends hours in the darkroom he and Dad built under our basement stairs. Often, he invites me into the darkroom to see the pictures come alive in the developing trays. There in that windowless space, he is in charge. There, he finds sanctuary.

His face, so similar to mine with blue-green eyes and wide mouth, glows in excitement in the darkroom’s orange light as he talks about the images revealing themselves in each tray. There are

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photos of beautiful girls with long wavy Farrah Fawcett hair, the cheerleaders who seek my brother out because they want copies of his photos. Kevin, who in another town where religion mattered less likely would have been in the in crowd, breaks into cliques a little because of his camera.

There are photos too of our family and the sights we see, like the sea gulls flying effortlessly above us on a family vacation to Boston. There are photos of me playing basketball, running track, acting a bit part in a school play, and playing flute. He catches me unawares as I practice in our living room. My eyes stare off in the distance. My fingers curl over the keys. I don't realize he is there until I hear the click of the shutter. Funny, Kevin is so loud, so gabby except when he is behind the camera. Then, he, like I do as a writer, becomes the observer.

We lead our lives together and yet also separately during high school. Two years apart, we are never in the same classes. But we come together for school assemblies and lunch periods. We share the same distaste for the frequent appearances of a youth minister who picks lunch hour to roam from table to table. Young with black curly hair and dark glasses, the minister invites all of us to the club meetings. "Come pray with us," he urges. Kevin and I learn to simply ignore the invitation. We put on our famous smiles and eat the same sandwiches, chips, and chocolate chip cookies Mom sticks in our lunch bags.

"I, Kevin Wertheimer, being of sound mind and small body, will all of the good times I have had to my sister Linda." It's a joke, part of the seniors' will in the Van Buren High School 1980 year book. Kevin is leaving me for the first time. In a few months, he will head to Ohio University in Athens for college. At his high school graduation, I stare at Kevin's diploma and watch Mom hug him. I am proud of Kevin. Academics never came easily for him. But I am also sad. I do not want to be on my own at Van Buren. But it is just two more years. I have a few select friends. I have my flute. In a tiny practice room, I still find sanctuary.

*Breathe, breathe, relax.*

"And in Jesus' name, we pray."

My face grows hot. It is June 1982. Wearing a black graduation gown and cap and a yellow honor cord, I sit among my classmates in the same gym where I played basketball for four years, where I watched my brothers graduate, and where I heard too many preachers advise us to find peace in Jesus. This time I cannot flee.

It is my high school graduation, and the speaker giving the benediction is the youth minister who pals with students in the cafeteria. My classmates voted to have him participate. I implored the high school principal to ask the minister to give a benediction amenable to all religions, a prayer that excludes Jesus.

With a few words, the speaker isolates me from peers. I am again the Jew girl, the bespectacled fourth-grader with pig-tails who slides behind her desk, wanting to plug her ears and close her eyes as

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her classmates sing Christian hymns. And yet, I breathe and relax with less effort this time. Comfort is nearby. Kevin sits a few rows away understanding exactly how I feel.

I set foot in my high school only a few times after graduation. The pain of feeling different remains raw. And yet, that school at the crest of a tiny hill gives a priceless gift – the chance to bond so close to my brother. Kevin and I would have only four more years of our lives together after my high school graduation.

Mid-morning on a Saturday, the phone rings again and again in the apartment I share with another student. It is my last year at Northwestern. I drag myself into the tiny kitchen. “Hello,” I mumble. Both my parents are on the phone. My parents never call together, and they know not to call until after 10 on a weekend. Their voices are hoarse.

“Is something wrong with Grandma?” I ask.

“No, Linda,” my father said, “It’s your brother Kevin.”

I sit on the kitchen’s cold tile floor. “Kevin?”

“He was killed this morning,” one of my parents said

Kevin should have been driving back to Colorado from California, where he had been on vacation. My parents should have been flying to Denver to visit Kevin and go skiing. They got the call first from one of Kevin’s friends, who heard from state troopers. Kevin rolled his jeep in rural Utah in the middle of the night and died of massive head injuries. The troopers have one too plausible explanation: Kevin fell asleep at the wheel.

Twenty minutes after my parents’ call, I step into the shower, turn on the hot water, and scream. I try to cry. No tears flow. I am 21. I cannot imagine how I will get through this day. The pain of loss pierces every fiber of my skin.

Everything is surreal. I mechanically pull on jeans and a sweatshirt. Two college friends knock on the door. My parents called them, not wanting me to be alone after receiving the news of Kevin’s death. My friends and I cram into my bedroom, furnished with a convertible sofa bed and a dresser. I nibble at a sandwich they brought. I try to talk. The thunder in my ears is deafening.

Every once in a while, my eyes rise to my bureau top where an airplane ticket to Colorado sits in a paper sleeve. In two weeks, I am supposed to fly to Denver to spend spring break skiing and visiting Kevin. I have a job interview with a Denver paper. I am in my last year of college in an accelerated master’s degree program in the journalism school. Six months. That is all I have left of college. Kevin and I decided to live in the same town. We wanted our future families to get to know each other.

In the years after my brother’s death, I ache to fill the hole in my gut left by his absence. I quit two jobs. I turn again to my flute. Memories from Van Buren often provide solace. In school, he was like a flashing beacon on a lighthouse, always guiding me back to a safe place with his grin. In Ohio, we

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shared a piece of childhood history. Only we would ever know what it was like the day the Church Lady walked into our public school classrooms – and afterward.

Driven by grief over my brother's death and by an inability to explain much about my faith, I steadily learn more about Judaism. Music becomes a part of a journey closer to my faith.

More than a decade after Kevin's death, I stand next to a rabbi at a Shabbat service in a Dallas temple. At the rabbi's nod, I put my flute to my mouth and played as he strums the guitar and sings, "Oseh Shalom." It is a prayer about peace and healing, the last lines of the Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer said at Jewish funerals and on the anniversary of a loved one's death. The prayer is a wish that God grants peace to us and all of our people. The tune we play is easy. And yet, it takes me years to play a Jewish prayer the way it should be – with meaning and spirit.

The melody from my flute is sweeter than I ever thought possible to play. Finally, I embrace myself as a Jew. Interrogate me. I can better field questions about what it is to be a Jew. But ask me about the Jewish views of life and death, and I still falter.

My brother has been gone a quarter of a century. I have lived longer without him than with him. He misses my college graduation, my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, and my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. He misses my adult bat mitzvah ceremony. At age 41, after nearly two years of study, I chant from the Torah and celebrate the rite of passage most Jewish girls mark at age 13. My brother misses my wedding to Pavlik, who I meet shortly after turning 40. And Kevin misses the joy that sweeps through my family when I give birth to a son. How can any faith possibly explain my loss?

Linda K. Wertheimer's essay won honorable mention for nonfiction in Tiferet's 2011 writing contest.



Linda K. Wertheimer, *The Boston Globe's* former education editor, left full-time journalism in 2009. Since then, she has balanced the joy of becoming a mother in her 40s with writing and teaching journalism at Boston University. The story, *Jew Girl*, stems from her memoir about journeying closer to her faith after losing her brother. Her website is: <http://lindakwertheimer.com>. Follow her on twitter

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