

BY BETH PERKEL

# The Doppelganger



*Everyone thought she was a woman with a history*

Michal looked at the army of scattered moving boxes the way she looked at all her newborns: full of hope for the new start that lay ahead, and yet terrified of their likelihood to keep her up all night.

With eight moves behind her in 20 years of marriage, Michal had surveyed similar scenes so many times that she could practically paint the picture with her eyes closed: *"Moving Day,"* oil on canvas by Michal Schneider—a sea of cardboard, dusty footprints from the movers' many treks into and out of the house, and so many plastic bags of hastily tossed items that she could enter the bag lady Olympics. In between the mess, a blur of legs and arms attached to giggling and screaming children running around to explore their new home dotted her gaze.

It would be days until they located all the immediate necessities (*Where is the fleishig knife block? The milchig fry pan?*), weeks until the boxes were a minority instead of majority, and months until this house truly felt like home. But at least after two decades they were here. Poised to make a difference to a *kehillah*. To be known by name. To not just be one of hundreds in the sea of *sheitels* in the carpool line. A small community. *Finally*.

Michal let herself drift into memories of the long road that led them here: She and her husband Yaakov had both grown up in New York, in a neighborhood with rows of cookie-cutter houses and with so many black hats darting back and forth that airplanes above must have viewed the scene like an epic game of Othello. Her family always being one of so many, and her personality in her youth tend-

ing towards shyness, Michal longed to be somewhere where she could more naturally stand out and make a difference. When she and Yaakov became engaged, she told him her dream of living in a small community. He smiled kindly but summarily talked her out of it: *But both of our extended families are here. And there are already plenty of organizations you can join to make a difference—why would you want the struggle of being the one to have to build those from the ground up?*

"Because I am tired of being another anonymous face: I want to stand out, help in a way that there aren't already 50 other women helping," she would always explain.

Yaakov promised he would keep that in mind, while reminding her they would likely have to move for his job anyway, so there was always a chance she would end up in "Nowheresville Springs," as he liked to teasingly call Michal's dream community. It took seven moves around the tri-state area until his job really did require him to take the larger leap. Yaakov announced the big move to Michal by bringing home a novelty city sign which he had customized with the words, "Nowheresville Springs. Population: Michal." She laughed so hard her eyes watered.

The move was four months away, but with dreams of starting a host of *chesed* organizations, Michal began packing the next day.

Her reverie was broken by the loud "oof" of two boxes being knocked to the ground, as Shimmy crashed into one while Chevi's hand covered his right eye.

"Chevi, be careful, there might have been Shabbos china in there!" Michal admonished.

"But it's my magic trick!" she said gleefully. "When I put my hand over this eye, Shimmy

always crashes into things, and then when I say 'Abra Cadabra' and lift it, he can suddenly get around perfectly again!"

"Is that true, Shim?" Michal asked, quite puzzled. It was the first she was hearing of this.

"Yeah, it's no big deal, Ma. My left eye sees fuzzy, but I keep both eyes open anyway so it's normally all good."

Michal still didn't like the sound of this. "We are going to have an eye doctor examine that. As soon as we settle in."

"So...like tomorrow?" Chevi asked innocently.

Yaakov chuckled behind her as he struggled to wrestle an allen key through approximately a thousand Ikea bolts. "Depends how many weeks your tomorrow is made of."

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The next day, with a few random kitchen items located and plugged in, two boxes of unpacked toys and games entertaining the younger children in the den, and enough clean clothing and toiletries unboxed to get them through several days, Michal headed out on her maiden voyage to the local kosher grocery store, Nosh Stop. It was small, but the center of kosher staples and prepared food for a town that boasted only one pizza shop and a run-down burger joint as its other gustatory options. Her new next-door neighbor, Tirtza, had informed her that most people preferred to buy the delicious prepared food from the grocery rather than eat the restaurant fare.

Tirtza had managed to track Michal's number down as soon as the Schneiders closed on the house, and she called Michal to

fill her in on the town's inside scoop. Michal couldn't have been more tickled by the neighborly gesture. It was her first taste of small-town friendliness.

Michal arrived at the grocery in the early morning when the shop was fairly empty, but bursting as she was with uncorked bubbiness, she scanned the aisles for likely candidates with whom to sow the seeds of friendship. In the produce aisle, she sensed her first opportunity as she riffled through the banana bin side by side with a woman roughly her age.

"Ahhh, you hit the jackpot—the elusive slightly green ones with no blemishes," Michal mused as the woman broke off four from a bunch found at the bottom. "Mind if I take the other ones?"

The woman nodded her assent but stared straight ahead. Both women ended up by the melons next, and this time the woman and Michal enjoyed a joint chuckle as they found themselves both knocking on them in the same rhythm and Michal mentioned a funny story when her husband had put his phone's

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mouthpiece to a melon and called Michal to help him select one remotely. The two women began chatting and loading their carts with veggies, when the other woman finally turned Michal's way to make eye contact. She suddenly stopped mid-sentence as she took in Michal's face.

Michal waited for her to continue speaking, but instead of finishing her witticism, the woman turned three shades of pink, cleared her throat awkwardly and made a beeline towards the cereal aisle with a quick wave in Michal's direction.

The getaway was so abrupt that Michal was left reviewing the trifecta of appearance trouble that might have caused the off-putting exit: *Was there food or lipstick on her teeth? Was her sheitel out of place? Did she have bad breath?*

A quick peek in her compact mirror ruled out the first two and she popped a mint to rule out the third as she headed to the meat

department. There, between briskets and steaks she smiled at another woman who proceeded to bug out her eyes as if she'd seen a ghost. Before Michal could open her mouth to inquire about the response, the woman abandoned the chicken (or, one might say, acted like one) to escape to the cereal aisle as well.

*Was there a clearance on cereal or was Michal suddenly the town leper? What exactly was happening?*

The meat flee-er popped her head back out with an unexpected hiss at Michal: "A lot of nerve you have coming back here!" An inkling began to grow within Michal—were people mistaking her for someone else? Someone else who apparently wasn't exactly Miss Popularity.

In the fridge section she got yet another awkward brush-off, followed by a stare in the freezer aisle that was colder than the coolers. "Forget not popular," Michal's internal narrator warned. "I think my doppelganger is downright despised."

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By the time she got home, Michal was so beside herself that she didn't notice the fancy Lexus parked in her driveway next to her husband's banged up 2009 Sienna. Michal muttered to herself as she buckled under the groceries and almost banged into the impeccably clothed woman carrying a giant basket of goodies in her perfectly manicured hands.

The woman turned around with a big smile, which quickly melted into the kind of perturbed look Michal might have expected if she had *actually* knocked the women with her

protruding French bread.

"Who are you? And why are you looking at me like that?" Michal demanded, feeling her former bubbly pop as her small-town utopian fantasy went up in flames.

"Are you...Michal?" the woman countered, trying to collect herself. "I'm Tirtza. Sorry about that. It's just that you looked so much like someone else who used to live in the community, and it caught me off guard for a moment."

Michal immediately felt equal parts curiosity and regret. She desperately wanted to know more about this alleged look-alike, but she also felt bad for snapping at this new neighbor who was clearly going out of her way to welcome her. Michal dropped the groceries in the entry hall, then went back outside to invite Tirtza in to enjoy some of the goodies from her own basket.

"I would offer you something I made myself, but as you can see—" Michal gestured to the mounds of moving-related chaos to fill in the end of the sentence. "The best I can offer you is something made out of coffee beans and cheerios whipped up with the can opener."

Tirtza couldn't untie the decorative bow fast enough.

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Over the next few days, the doppelganger mix-ups got progressively odder. Michal was offered listings by a real estate agent who accosted her in the park with assumptions she was moving back to town, and she was told by an elderly woman that Michal was "aging beautifully despite the stress." Each time

Michal tried to calmly introduce her *actual* self, clarifying she was not the woman everyone thought she was (who, she had gathered, was named Miri Morgenstein). However, even after Michal extricated her identity, there seemed to still be a sheen of unpopularity that stuck to her previously untarnished name like...well, *tarnish*.

Michal decided to get the real story from the person she felt most comfortable with in town at this point: Tirtza.

She took the shortcut between their two yards the next morning, noting the rows of beautiful flowers and precisely trimmed bushes. Michal knocked on Tirtza's ornate door—finally carrying some goodies of her own making, now that the Kitchen Aid was set up, her spatulas awoken from hibernation, and her pantry stocked.

Tirtza answered looking perfectly put together, as usual, and invited Michal in. She arranged Michal's pastries on a beautiful platter and set two steaming cups of espresso between them.

"You have such a beautiful garden!" Michal began, not wanting to make it too obvious that she was trying to pump her hostess for information.

"Thank you! Tirtza said, her eyes lighting up. "The truth is, it was a bonding project I did with my daughters when they still lived at home. We would garden together and plan out all the flowers every spring. Now it's just me, and frankly, each time I go out there to garden, it just brings up how much I miss them and wish I had someone to work alongside me. I end up spending half the time reading in that shady spot near the roses and not getting much done." Tirtza stopped and gave



Michal a bright smile. “But enough about me—how’s the unpacking going? The transition?”

Michal sighed with such force that it doubled as a breeze to dispel her espresso’s steam.

“If I was just transitioning my family, it would be fine. But I have this added layer of first proving to everyone I’m not the axe murderer who used to live here and apparently looked just like me.”

“Miri wasn’t an axe murderer. But you do look uncannily like her.”

“Well, what could she have done that was so bad to make an entire town uncomfortable seeing her?!”

The answer came out in pieces, spurts, fragments...

“She was the principal of the school here, which already put her on half the town’s most beloved list and half the town’s most hated... she messed with the wrong family and it kind of tipped the scales...ruined their dream *shidduch* for their son...meddled where she shouldn’t have... used confidential information in a breach-of-confidentiality kind of way.”

“That’s so upsetting,” Michal offered. “But wouldn’t that just cause that one family to hate her? How did the whole town turn on her?”

“When you mess with a family, and affect something so high stakes...and factor in the small town...loyalties, rumors, accepted practices...stories have a way of taking on a life of their own...”

What Tirtza was offering was more broad strokes than tangible storyline, but it was enough to get the idea.

“So, she left town?”

“Yes. Things were so awkward not only for her but ultimately for the rest of us as well as she tried to clear her name, fight for her job and defend her actions. When she resigned and moved away, it seemed better for everyone.”

Michal gave an ironic chuckle. “Not for me!”

“You are not her. You just *look like* her. There is a difference. People will get it with time. Also, I know the family, and they really regret how things went down. The rumors haven’t been fueled in a long time.”

The two women chatted some more as they turned to the pastries, yet despite Tirtza nibbling and Michal full out stress-gobbling, something about the encounter left Michal unsatisfied.

Over the next few weeks, the tide began to shift as word was officially spread that there was a new woman in town who was *not* Miri Morgenstein. Michal began the uphill march of making new friends and acquaintances. And with each person, as soon as she became comfortable enough to ask them the real story of Miri’s misdeeds, she heard everything ranging from a slightly different version of Tirtza’s account to a barely recognizable one—various rumors weaved around one story, but all with the same conclusion: her doppelganger was made to feel so uncomfortable that she moved away, leaving a storyline of betrayal for some, of wrongful accusation for others, and ultimately, such discomfort for all that the concrete details of what really went down were as hard to hold onto as vapor.

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Michal was in a particularly foul mood when she finally brought Shimmy to the eye doctor the week before school began. At first, the secretary told her that there was no appointment for her family, but Michal was on high alert and immediately countered with, “We are the Schneiders, not the Morgensteins.” The Schneider appointment was located in the system right away.

The exam revealed a severe astigmatism, and the doctor sat down with Michal to explain it. “The right eye is blurry on its own, but the brain is compensating by sending the correct image from his left eye. He is going to need glasses as the right eye retrains itself to see for itself and not rely on the other image.”

Michal tried to process it. “So you are saying the brain gets involved in what the eye sees? It can send false images to the other eye?”

“You bet it does,” the doctor replied. “There’s a deeper meaning to that saying, ‘Things aren’t always what we see.’”

She had heard the saying slightly differently, but the upshot remained strong and eerily on point with everything she was going through. If people’s perceptions of actual physical reality could be shifted by the brain, imagine how much more so by the things much more open to reinterpretation—such as rumors, opinions and stories, for example? If Michal was going to stay in this town and battle a vision, she had to know what she was actually dealing with. It was time to visit the real Miri Morgenstein.

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Michal got the address from that same real estate agent who had tried to slip her the listings. The agent had sold the Morgenstein house upon their departure and had their forwarding address. They had moved to another small community about an hour away.

When the kids were safely tucked away at their first day of school—Shimmy sporting adorable new glasses—Michal made a mini road trip out of it. It was a warm and sunny Monday, and the car ride afforded her the first opportunity to think clearly since the move.

Were small communities not all they were cracked up to be, or was this particular one just playing out a cliché? Was Miri as bad as everyone made her out to be, or were there other forces at play? Who knows what crucial information she legitimately had to inform the other side of that *shidduch*—she could have saved a couple (or one spouse) a lifetime of misery for all everyone knew. What was fact and what was fiction in the shady accounts that had been offered? And why was Michal letting this all sidetrack her from her original mission: getting involved in uplifting and helping the community in meaningful ways?

Michal hadn’t called the Morgensteins in advance because she was afraid of being turned away. Not many people receive phone calls from strangers asking them to revisit sordid details of the past and respond with, “Sign me up!” Michal hoped Miri would open the door, notice their resemblance and be curious enough to invite her in.

But when Michal finally rang the doorbell and a woman at least ten years her senior opened the door, it was she who was struck by curiosity.

Michal could no longer judge her on the shallow metric of appearance only. Kindness certainly wasn't a trick of the light.

*Is this how people think I look? Do those lines crease my face too? Do I appear that heavy? Is this all just the trick of the light from wearing the same sheitel?*

Michal felt an instinctive wave of being offended until she remembered that Miri had left her town many years ago, when her face was younger and her frame potentially carrying a different weight. She tried to put her sensitivity aside and looked deeper for the similarities: she found parallel face structures, freckles and wide and warm smiles.

The minute Miri's beautiful smile spread, Michal could no longer judge her on the shallow metric of appearance only. Kindness certainly wasn't a trick of the light.

"Can I help you, dear?" Miri asked.

The backstory that brought Michal here all came out in one long sentence: her hopes for being a valued and *chesed*-oriented community member in the new town, the doppelganger mix-ups, the divergent story lines of explanation. Miri's face was a mask of calm.

She graciously invited Michal to her yard to sit on rickety lawn chairs while she tried to answer her questions.

"Wow, what a twist," Miri chuckled as she brushed some fall leaves off the chairs. The two women settled into their seats. "Just when they thought their conscience could forget me, Hashem sent them my look-alike."

"What really happened all those years ago?" Michal asked.

"The truth is in my role as principal I did have a lot of inside information about the families. In the case of one particular family, the information was so egregious that I couldn't stand by and not let the *shadchan* know so she could inform the other family and let them make a decision with full information. It's never a popular thing to do, but my conscience wouldn't let me keep quiet."

"But why did the whole town get involved?" Michal continued.

"They were a wealthy and important family in the *kehillah*. They try to project an image of perfection, and this revealed cracks in their façade. You can imagine they didn't take it well and, unfortunately, they were able to trace the information back to me. Once the mother started spreading seeds of false rumors, my competency at my job was questioned, as well as my motives. It spiraled from there."

"But what made you give up and leave?"

"It was the *parshah* with the story of Avraham and Lot's splitting up that convinced me. *Chazal* tell us that they were doppelgangers. I felt like I had been split into two doppelgangers myself—the person I knew I was inside, and the person I was now being

treated like on the outside. I realized that sometimes the best thing to do is to separate those two things and go to a new place where you can truly be the real you, without that false mirror image."

Michal flashed back to her son's diagnosis and filled Michal in on what the doctor had said.

"Isn't that fascinating? Reflecting on it was what brought me here," Michal concluded.

"The eye is indeed tricky," Miri mused. "There are things people want to see, and things they don't. Vision is more than what comes into our retina; the brain gets involved, and we all know that whenever the brain is involved, the stories we tell ourselves about the world get layered on. It takes a very clear person, and I'm talking about clarity of the heart here, not the brain or eyes, to see things, situations and people as they truly are. To not blind ourselves. It's like that saying, 'What's essential is invisible to the eye.'"

"I see you chose to move to another small community, though. That didn't worry you?" Michal asked.

"Sometimes a small community can feel broadening, and sometimes it can feel suffocating," Miri sighed. "It's not about the size of a community—it's about the people you surround yourself with. It's about finding how you can give back to the community rather than how it can give to you. There are plenty of good people in your new town. You will find the right circle—and the right projects, though they may not be big showy ones. You came with the right spirit and perspective, just these initial distractions have projected the wrong image for you to focus on."

Michal liked Miri. The more she looked

at her face, the more her initial revulsions washed away and she was able to accept the similarities. Perhaps her initial insistence that they didn't look alike had to do with her assumptions about Miri. After hearing so many bad rumors about her doppelganger, she hadn't wanted to be like her. But now that the air was cleared and Michal was able to see through the fuzziness, it was like talking to a future, wiser version of herself.

"Do you miss anything about your former community?" Michal asked, as she got up to go.

Miri laughed, a beautiful, uninhibited sound. "The broccoli kugel at Nosh Stop!" she declared without missing a beat. "It's my favorite kugel and I've never been able to replicate the recipe."

The doppelgangers enjoyed a chuckle together and embraced before Michal headed home.

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A week later Michal stopped by Nosh Stop to pick up a delivery order that she needed early. She asked the man behind the counter for the Schneider order, and after he gave her the confused are-you-sure-you-aren't-Miri-Morgenstein-look Michal had learned to now embrace, he went to retrieve it. As he handed the box over, his eyes spied the address.

"Wow—you look like the ghost of *Miri* and live next to *Tirtza*?" he said, shaking his head. "Now there's Divine justice. Tirtza has to look at you every day and reflect on how she ruined someone's life."

Michal froze in shock for several moments

as her brain replayed her conversation with Tirtza: "...I know the family, and they really regret how things went down..." *Tirtza was the one who started all the rumors? But she had seemed so nice, had treated Michal with genuine chesed from the moment they had met—no, even before the moment they had met!*

Michal drove home in a mental fog, feeling more than ever that she didn't have a good hold on this new town, as though her feet had been hovering above solid ground ever since she had moved here and she hadn't settled down yet.

*Was Tirtza a big fake? Was a baalas lashon hara who could turn on Michal in a moment living not ten feet from her side windows?*

Eerily enough, as Michal drove into her driveway and got out of the car, the suspect in question was there in her beautiful garden, knees down in the dirt, cutting the stems of gorgeous blue hydrangeas.

"Hey there, Neighbor!" Tirtza called out as she waved, a genuine smile on her lips.

For the second time in the hour, Michal froze. *Should she wave back or ice her out, pretending to not have heard?*

Choosing the middle ground for now, Michal gave a non-committal flick of her fingers. As she raised her eyes to her doorstep, though, her gaze took in a stunning bouquet of freshly cut hydrangeas...

The gesture was just what she needed to break out of her torpedoing thoughts.

*Here I am doing just what everyone else has done! she admonished herself. I'm judging Tirtza based on what the counterwoman said, without even knowing what really happened! Maybe Tirtza expressed one spark of anger after the broken shidduch and the town turned it into*

*a flaming torch? Or maybe she is a genuinely good person who made a mistake? Or a previously not-so-great person who has grown and done teshuvah? Who is to say what version of the story is true, anyway?*

As some pieces came together and others fell away, for the first time since she moved into this town, Michal suddenly saw a genuine opportunity to provide clear help.

It would be her inaugural *chesed* here. She didn't need to start a big organization or have everyone know who she was by her visible deeds. No matter a community's size, there was always a need behind the scenes. What better way to start than with an act of *redifas shalom*?

Michal took the flowers, hopped into the car and headed back to Nosh Stop without even unpacking her groceries into her fridge. She stormed the store, a woman on a mission, and loaded five broccoli kugels into her cart. She grabbed a greeting card from the rack near the checkout counter and ghost-wrote, "*Miri: We regret what happened and wish you the best. I heard these are your favorites and hope you enjoy. —Tirtza.*"

Michal drove to Miri's herself, leaving behind more than just the tangible gesture at the doorstep. It was time to stop the cycle of judging. On the drive back home she felt much lighter, and as she pulled into her driveway yet again, she knew what else she had to do. Five minutes later, her door swung back outward. Clad in an old, ratty skirt and gloves perfect for gardening, Michal headed to Tirtza's yard. Her smile was genuine as she grabbed a trowel and crouched down beside her neighbor in the dirt.

"How can I help? □