

## Upstate

By Iris N. Schwartz

When I was fourteen, I tagged along with my friend Sheila Giddins and her parents to Kutsher's Hotel and Country Club in the Catskill Mountains. No one called my friend Giddy Giddins, but I always wanted to, primarily because she was pretty somber. She was also prettier, thinner, and blonder.

I wasn't blonde at all. I was a brunette, chubby, but better-looking now that I wore contact lenses instead of thick glasses.

Sheila's parents probably felt bad for me because my father had died the winter before. I didn't mind their pity if it meant I'd be able to get away from my mother in Brooklyn. Three days' escape from fluttering yahrzeit candles\* and death dates circled in red on the wall calendar beat no escape at all.

My first morning at Kutsher's I stuffed myself with a dinner-plate-sized apple pancake. (I can still summon it—fluffy, cinnamon-aromatic, diabetes-sweet—if I shut my eyes and breathe deeply.)

On the second day, I awakened early and decided to walk the grounds. The sky was clear and sunnier than in Brooklyn. I felt light and, for a change, hopeful.

I met the blonde boy that day. He was tall and Gentile, and so I went row boating with him. On the boat he told me he had just returned from a one-year tour of duty in Vietnam. He saw fellow soldiers blown up. He said they were friends. I pictured bullets piercing uniforms and flesh, blood spurting, bodies bursting apart. I forced myself to listen because he needed to talk and there was nothing else I could do for him. I thought of apple pancakes afterwards.

The blonde boy needed a receptacle for his sadness. I could take it. I had seen death, too: my fifty-year-old father, body stiff as the board under my parents' mattress. Eyes staring up at a void. No blood.

# Writing Raw

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\* *Yahrzeit* candles: Jewish memorial candles.

**Iris N. Schwartz bio:** Iris N. Schwartz, a freelance editor based in New York City, writes fiction and poetry. She has work anthologized in such collections as *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11*; and *Stirring Up a Storm: Tales of the Sensual, the Sexual, and the Erotic*; and in such journals as *Ducts*, *November 3rd Club*, *Pikeville Review*, and *Vernacular*.