

“Smart and tender and true. I know these women because I’m one of them.
We all are. We’re brave. We’re afraid. We’re loving. We’re destructive.
We’re finding our way in a difficult world.”

—REBECCA RASMUSSEN, author of *The Bird Sisters*



*The
Appetites
of Girls*

A NOVEL

PAMELA MOSES

The
APPETITES
of GIRLS



PAMELA MOSES

AMY EINHORN BOOKS

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Version_1

*For my mother and for my father
With all of my love and gratitude*

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Part

ONE



FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE

• 2003 •

This, above all else, binds the four of us together: standing side by side, each struggled to believe the best in herself, hearing amid the dark doubts in her mind the whisper of triumph.

Long before we grew in strength, we began life in separate corners. In my first moments, made only small whimpers, my family tells me. Then my face turned red as beet soup, my fists tight as knots, and I cried with a roar that seemed beyond my tiny lungs. Opal was born into the arms of midwives in a country house outside of Paris. Her mother reclined on feather pillows and sipped lemon water until it was time. Francesca claims she bellowed her first day morning through night until the nurses relented, freeing her from her swaddling blanket. And Setsu's life opened just as her mother's closed, her cries lasting longest of all.

Far we have come since those beginnings, and long the journeys to victory over doubt. But always in us, were stirrings of possibilities, and we would find the will to hold fast to these hopes.

• • •

In the eleven years since graduation, Francesca and I have phoned each other regularly, as we have with Setsu and with Opal, a pledge we made long ago and kept. But in the spinning hum of our grown-up lives, our visits became sporadic, and not since our final college year have all four of us been together in one place. This past spring, though, just days after Francesca had come into Manhattan, meeting me for lunch and a stroll through the American wing of the Met, she called, insisting the baby I was carrying deserved a celebration. Besides, what better excuse could the four of us have to reunite? For old time's sake, she said. Wouldn't it be fun?

"Oh, no, Fran, you don't need to. Thank you, really . . ." I had fumbled for the appropriate words to decline her unexpected offer. In part because it is not in the Jewish tradition, a baby shower had never crossed my mind.

"*B'sha'ah Tova*—in good time," my aunts and sisters and mother had said when they learned that I was expecting. *One's hopes should not rise too high before the hour comes. Congratulations may bring bad luck*, they worried. My grandmothers and great-grandmothers would not have so much as knitted a bootee before a baby's arrival. "Why tempt bad spirits?" Nana Leah had cautioned with an old wives' superstition.

But shouldn't I have known Fran would persist? "Ruth, you are bringing a daughter into the world. How can you refuse her some festivity?"

There was a time she could talk me into many things because I lacked the courage to trust my own mind. Now, though, with the sudden possibility of reuniting with my suitemates, I realized I missed not just each of them separately, but all of us together as a group. Our weaknesses differed, but our journeys to overcome them were shared. We learned from one another's struggles, and learned, too, we were not alone in struggling. In our day-to-day living together and the friendships formed in those years, we gained strength to fight for our deepest yearnings. And now as I take this new step toward

motherhood, it seems fitting that we four come together again.

So here we sit at this table beneath the tulip tree: Francesca, Setsu, Opal, and I. Our spoons dip into shallow dishes of chilled soup as the tree's high branches cast soft, swaying shadows across our faces and arms and the plates of luncheon food before us. Years ago we could not have dreamed we would ever be this picture of contentment. But no storms rage forever, not even those that whirl with us. Yes, each of us was stronger than she knew. Even I.

. . .

Fran has thought through every detail. Her garden table is set with linen place mats and napkins, and in its center a crystal vase thick with daffodils. At the table ends stand two pitchers of iced mint tea, their handles wound with ivy and tiny white flower buds as intricate as snowflakes. And beside each plate, someone has placed a pair of cellophane-wrapped baby shoes made entirely of pink sugar.

This is the first time any of us has seen Francesca's new Connecticut home, and when I arrived, ringing the bell to the right of her paneled front door, I heard her calling to someone—"Got it! Got it!"—and then the familiar pounding of her running feet.

"God, it's great to have you here," she said, kissing me, walking me through the house, hanging my spring jacket in her hall closet. As we pass the kitchen, I glimpse the food to be served—dishes I had seen in magazines—crustless sandwiches rolled like pinwheels, bowls of pastel soup with scrolling loops of cream at their edges, salads of nearly transparent green leaves no larger than rose petals. A trim woman in a starched white blouse stands to the left of the double sink, slicing raw vegetables—Lucienne, Francesca introduces her.

"This is really so beautiful, Fran—everything. And so generous—"

"Oh, goodness. You're welcome." She shrugs off my words, never comfortable with sentiment. "Let's talk about you. You look *wonderful*. How are you feeling? Are you getting any sleep?" It was the one trial of her own pregnancies, she remembers. How for hours in her bed, with eyes wide open, her mind would whir.

"Sleeping, yes, but I've never had such vivid dreams," I tell her.

As we speak, a dream of the four of us from the night before returns to me: we are racing along the shore, kicking up the foaming water. And how young we are. Only girls, but then in a twinkling we are women, with our shadows stretching far, out into the ocean.

Then we are interrupted by the arrival of Opal, followed soon by Setsu. "I can't believe you're here," Fran says. "You both look terrific. And doesn't *Ruth* look terrific?"

But Setsu and Opal are already embracing me, asking me exactly how many more weeks, exclaiming that I'm radiant.

In the kitchen, Fran mixes mimosas, pouring them into tall flutes. "Occasional drinks in the third trimester are permissible, aren't they?" She winks at me.

"Just not the way you make them."

She laughs, surprised by my retort but approving of it, and fills a separate flute without champagne.

Lucienne arranges the bowls of soup on a tray, and we follow her, carrying our glasses across the lawn, settling around the table. And now as our spoons clink against Francesca's china bowls, we begin to chat, at first taking turns, speaking of work, of families, of things we've heard of other college friends. But before long, we are talking together and at once, the way we used to do. A rhythm suddenly familiar as chords from well-loved but, for a time, forgotten music.

Setsu surprises us. While sorting through some files at home, she has unearthed some photos from our college days.

"Oh, look at us. Is that freshman year?" Opal asks.

“Yes, it must be finals week. We look *exhausted*. Remember how we studied until morning and Fran kept us all awake with chocolate-covered coffee beans?” Setsu smiles at Fran.

“That’s right! And, Ruth, you collapsed on your books right on the floor!” Fran recalls.

We laugh and agree it feels both a lifetime ago and just like yesterday.

As we put aside the photographs, and as I look from Setsu to Opal to Fran, I see their clothes are more tailored than they once were, their hair more stylishly cut, the angles of their faces more defined. But in other ways, how little they have changed. Setsu’s long fingers still fold beneath her chin as she speaks, pressing to her mouth now and then when she has finished. Francesca’s voice pierces with the same old boldness. And as the soup begins to disappear, how well I recall Setsu’s tiny meals—mouse portions, I thought them—that gave her rope-thin arms. Opal’s insistence on measuring, analyzing every morsel before it passed her lips, scrutinizing each bite before she swallowed. Francesca with her penchant for frosted cakes, her French baguettes and Brie from the gourmet store in town. Much of those years has faded and blurred, but these and other things I still see clearly. And I cringe at what they surely, maybe especially, remember of me.

As the soup slides along my tongue, I gaze at each of the women and think of the hindering roots that had found soil in our earliest experiences of life. Entangled with a thousand secrets and unshared stories, and thickening as we grew, becoming, after a time, almost as hard to cut away as our own limbs.

But these struggles are part of what it means to be human—struggles with our own natures, often undeclared, as if unnoticed by those who know us, even by ourselves. Yet such battles must be waged and won if we are to grow, if we mean to claim what is truest within.

SWIMMING LESSONS

(My Story)

• 1983 •

On the third Saturday of May, exactly one month after my thirteenth birthday, I was to become a bat mitzvah. Already seated in the temple, waiting for me to recite my Torah portion, were my eight aunts and uncles and my eleven cousins. The Kramers had come all the way from Farmingdale, the Martins from Staten Island. Neighbors from our building had shown up as well—the Schafers, the Rosenbergs, the Kleins from across the hall. Mama, Poppy, Sarah, and Valerie had spread across the first pew, Mama in the center in her new navy Anne Klein suit and her best patent leather purse with the gold horseshoe-shaped clasp.

Though the temple was only a six-block walk from where we lived in Riverdale, north of Manhattan, we had, at Mama's insistence, been dressed and squeezed into our building's narrow elevator two hours before the service began. "I want to be sure of securing the front row, the one closest to the bima," Mama had informed us. She'd been standing before the bathroom mirror, spraying her hair—which had been styled just the day before at the salon—filling the apartment with the sweet scent I associated with Saturday mornings and all significant occasions. Even for weekly services, Mama made certain we were fifteen minutes early so she could turn and wave to friends as they arrived. But this day, of course, was of far greater importance. "It's only once you become a bat mitzvah, hmm, Ruthie?" Mama licked her thumb to flatten a strand of hair that had loosened from my rhinestone barrette. "Poppy and I want to be just an arm's length away when you stand to read."

During the service, Jessica Neier and Harold Green would also be called to the Torah, and, of the three of us, I would read last. As Harold recited his passage, I gazed at my new chocolate-brown shoes with their almost-grown-up heels, which Mama had bought at Saks Fifth Avenue especially for this occasion. Most items for my wardrobe, and those for my younger sisters, she purchased at a bargain basement in Brooklyn, scrutinizing labels and buttons and seams until she was satisfied that, despite the discounted prices, she had found top-quality clothes. But at the beginning of the month, Mama had taken Sarah and Valerie and me by bus to midtown Manhattan, to the girls' department at Saks. At the back of the store, a carpeted elevator chimed softly when we reached our floor. And there, on orderly racks, hung dresses and gowns like those I had seen in the fashion magazines Mama bought now and then. Gowns overlaid with lace, silk ones with sashes and pleats or with shoulder straps as fine as shining strings. Dresses like those my sisters and I noticed on girls our age during our occasional trips to the Upper East Side, their hair tied back with ruffled ribbons, on their way to parties, we guessed, at expensive restaurants. In my bedroom closet at home, between my plaid wraparound skirt and my gray flannel one, hung the outfit I had always assumed I would wear: a charcoal suit, wool with four black buttons down the front of the jacket and a slight scallop along the skirt's hem—a purchase from the last High Holy Days that still fit and seemed appropriately solemn. But the Saks dress Mama chose was a deep rose taffeta with a velvet collar and a large bow, and she paid more for it and for the blue crêpe dresses for Sarah and Valerie than I could remember her spending on any previous shopping

excursion.

I proudly ran my hands over my lap, feeling the smooth taffeta, prettier than the beige wool of Jessica Neier's. As she was called to read, I repeated again and again in my mind the trickiest phrase from my portion.

Every Wednesday for months, in one of the third-floor classrooms of the temple, I had studied with Cantor Rothman the Hebrew syllables, the pronunciation and meaning of each word, as well as the musical symbols indicating pitch.

"She's making fine progress, Mrs. Leiser," the cantor had said to Mama when she arrived on her way home from work to fetch me. "She seems to have an ear for the Hebrew language." And he had winked at me, folding his thick arms over the mound of his stomach.

"Thank you, Cantor." Mama had shaken his hand. "That's reassuring." But she had sniffed in a way I knew meant she was not yet convinced. Cantor Rothman had a reputation for praising even the least capable students. Mama had heard this from mothers of older children in our neighborhood when I had first begun attending Hebrew school some years before. And she had been privy to what the cantor had not, had listened as I'd practiced at home, had heard how the words sometimes stuck in my throat even with Poppy's occasional help and with the practice tapes Cantor Rothman had given me.

How many, many sounds there were to memorize, how much for my ear and tongue to learn. So Mama had begun to study the tapes as well, until she knew every line better than I, believing that she too, could be of assistance. When she was young, not many years after arriving in this country, Mama had planned to be a school principal, or even a professor at a university. A goal she certainly could have achieved, she liked to tell us, having maintained for years in a row her position at the top of her class, even though most others had been here since birth.

I had heard snippets of what her life had been from the late-night chitchat of Mama and my aunts after my sisters and cousins and I had been excused from Friday Shabbat dinners. After the reciting of the Kiddush and the completion of the meal, after our plates had been carried out to the kitchen and when our parents thought our ears were buzzing only with our own child-games. Talk of when Mama and Poppy's families had made their way to America from Poland. Poppy's family coming first, years before Poppy was even born, Mama's coming later while Mama, Aunt Helena, Aunt Bernice, and Uncle Jacob were children. Of how turns of fortune had saved Mama's family from the fate that had blotted out so many of our people, turns that, in the end, had allowed them to make the voyage here: their escape to Vilna, of a Japanese diplomat there who had issued them visas, of the safe haven they had eventually been granted in the Jewish ghetto of Shanghai for the duration of the Second World War. And then talk of how both Mama's and Poppy's families had eventually settled in Washington Heights, and then, some years later, here in Riverdale, just north of hustling, bustling Manhattan, where the streets had more trees and the apartments were a bit roomier. Of how the families had hoped for what others already enjoyed—wages that increased, prospects that widened. How grateful they all were to be here. Still, now and then, I heard Mama and my aunts allow that if only Papa Marvin had started a business of his own as some others had . . . For those with the foresight to follow certain paths, opportunities never seemed to run out.

"Always, always we should remember our blessings," Mama would say. But she never explained why she'd changed her mind about becoming a professor or heading a school, why she had opened her shop, Broadway Paperie, where she sold gift cards and personalized stationery and all styles of writing implements, instead. I'd gathered it had something to do with the printing plant where Papa Marvin worked closing down while Mama was in college, with his taking up woodcarving and oil painting to pass the time "because no one was hiring middle-aged men who operated the old presses" (as I remembered him recounting), and with Mama leaving college and returning home to take a secretarial job. "Just a matter of circumstances," was all she would ever reply if we asked, as if to mean, "It all

worked out in the end.” But I saw how carefully she read through any mailings from Barnard, the college she had attended for just two years, scrutinizing the alumnae notes, the descriptions of added courses and publications by faculty, making me wonder if there were things she regretted. And if there were the same regrets that made her complain about the hours Poppy dedicated to his journals—the anecdotes of our family that he wrote with pencil in green cardboard-bound notebooks, even typing up a few and submitting them to *Riverbank Press*, a small literary magazine he’d heard about through a coworker. Recently, now that I was older, he would allow me to read over his stories as he worked, explaining why he’d chosen this word and not that, how he’d elaborated for the sake of humor and artistic merit, even asking if I had suggestions. Poppy had bought ten copies each of the issues that included his pieces. “See that, girls! Your Poppy is famous!” he’d joked, showing off his name—Aaron A. Leiser—in black print, listed between Kyle Jessup and Alice Novak on the back cover.

“How many people even read the magazine?” Mama had wanted to know.

“Not many. But that doesn’t lessen the glory, does it?” Poppy had laughed.

“Our family’s private affairs for the amusement of a few strangers?” she’d asked. (Poppy’s second entry was about our trip to Philadelphia the previous summer when we had lost Sarah in the crowd on line to see the Liberty Bell.) But I could tell it was not embarrassment that made her press two knuckles beneath her chin and look at Poppy as if there were things she wished she could change.

. . .

I hope you girls know how important it is to use time wisely,” Mama taught us. “If we’re not careful it pulls away from us like so much thread unwinding from a spool.” She started a new routine. At the dining table each evening, after the supper crumbs had been wiped from the floral tablecloth, she directed me to close the sketch pad I now liked to draw in every night, illustrations meant to accompany Poppy’s stories. There were other things we needed to attend to, she said.

“I may not be fluent in Hebrew, Ruthie, but I’d like to think I have something of value to offer anyway.” And so she rehearsed my Torah passage with me, prompting me each time I hesitated over a word, whispering the correct Hebrew enunciation until I was able to read from beginning to end with near perfection.

That winter, we had received a printed invitation to my cousin Gregory’s bar mitzvah. For the past three years, Poppy’s older brother, Uncle Leonid, and Aunt Nadia, Gregory, Isaac, and Jack had lived in Scarsdale in a two-story house with four bedrooms. I remembered how Mama’s eyes had widened just slightly the first time Aunt Nadia had shown us their backyard with more than ample space for the swimming pool she mentioned they were considering. Mama’s sisters lived in apartments the size of ours, and ones we could walk to, and Poppy’s younger brother, Uncle Josef, and Aunt Malina were also nearby, on the bottom floor of a two-family town house on Delafield Avenue. But after Leonid and Nadia’s move to Westchester—following short on the heels of Leonid’s promotion to supervisor of the Rockland Textile Company—we rarely saw them for Friday Shabbat dinners or casual Sunday afternoon visits. And they and my cousins seemed different now. Gregory and Isaac and Jack wore leather shoes instead of sneakers, even to play outside. And our old routine of Blind Man’s Bluff and Chutes and Ladders seemed to bore them compared with the games they could now play on the brand new Atari computer in their family room.

Aunt Nadia had begun to dress in frilly skirts made of some stretchy material, strutting proudly in them, though I thought they made the cheeks of her bottom look like two flat couch pillows. She ordered garments from a catalog Mama had browsed through once. “You could buy plane tickets to Europe for the cost of one of those! Or even a small auto!” Poppy had joked, glancing over Mama’s shoulder at the featured outfits. “I know. Ridiculous, aren’t they?” Mama said, but I’d seen how she turned through the pages a second and then a third time, pausing to study a photo of a black sequined

dress like the one Aunt Nadia had worn for Uncle Leonid's recent birthday celebration. But what surprised Mama more than Nadia's new shopping habits was the full-time housekeeper she had hired to cook and clean five days a week—a woman who now practically *lived* with them. Though we did not keep kosher as Nana Leah and Papa Marvin had, or Nana Esther and Papa Elias, Mama still prepared the foods of our people's heritage, traditions Nadia's Jamaican housekeeper, Adelaide, sure was not following. "You'd think Adelaide was family, for God's sake," I'd heard Mama mutter once to Poppy after we learned that, on evenings when Adelaide worked late, she was offered the spare bedroom to sleep in. A bedroom that, in the opinion of Mama and her sisters, should have been set aside for Nadia's father to live in rather than the home for the aged two towns away. I knew in the old country—though it was before Mama was born—her grandparents had lived always in the house with Nana Leah and Papa Marvin, and with Uncle Jacob and Aunt Bernice and Aunt Helena when they were very young. And though I'd complained to Poppy and Mama about having to relinquish my room—sleeping on a cot between Sarah and Valerie's beds for those months before Nana Leah passed away—I knew none of us would have considered any alternative.

. . .

As we had driven up the Hutchinson River Parkway to the temple in Scarsdale where Gregory's ceremony would take place, Mama had folded down the car's visor and checked her reflection in its rectangular mirror. She'd adjusted the pearl choker at her neck so that the largest pearls were centered. The last time we had visited, Aunt Nadia had worn a double strand of pearls, hanging nearly to her navel.

"Do you think Gregory feels nervous?" Sarah asked.

"I suppose he might," Mama replied, though I knew Aunt Nadia had employed a high-priced Hebrew tutor to coach Gregory for his reading. And in the temple, with his prayer shawl draping his shoulders and his gold-embroidered yarmulke, as ornate as Poppy's or Uncle Leonid's, Gregory looked almost a man. Then as he chanted words from the Torah, his voice rocked—high-low, high-low—like the rabbi's. Only once did he stumble over the difficult phrases. When he finished, I looked up at Mama seated beside me to see if she was impressed. But she gave only a small nod, then, bending her head to mine, tucking my hair behind my ear, whispered, "You will be even better." And for the remainder of the service, I sat still as the stone walls of the temple, silent with wonder for what Mama thought I would do.

. . .

When my turn finally came and Rabbi Levi called me to the podium, I smiled at him as my new heels thumped against the wooden floor. I recited the first several lines, using my finger to trace each symbol as Cantor Rothman had taught me. And I raised my voice, remembering his direction to speak so that those in the pews at the back of the temple could hear. But midway through something caught in my throat, a feathery tickle. And by the time I coughed it away, my finger had slipped from its place. Suddenly, the Hebrew figures—which had, just a moment before, stretched across the page in clear, logical rows—scattered into a haphazard jumble of dashes and squiggles, making the soles of my feet go damp in my stockings. When I looked out across the congregation, I saw Harold Green's mother and Jessica Neier's and a hundred other waiting faces. Two women in silk neck scarves, seated in the pew behind my family, murmured to each other behind their programs. In panic, I fixed my eyes on Mama. There were creases of worry between her eyes, hollows above her jaw I had never seen before, making the thudding in my chest quicken. Then, to my relief, she leaned forward, closer to me still, and began to chant, so softly that only I could hear.

So I followed Mama's voice, singing together with her. One phrase and another with Mama as my

guide. Then finding my place once more, I mumbled and stuttered through the remainder of my Torah portion until I reached the final, shameful “Amen.”

. . .

All of the family and friends who had come to watch me paraded back to our apartment when the service ended. In a steady stream, still huffing from their walk from the temple, they poured through our door, squeezing themselves onto the sofa and the wing chairs and around the scratched baby grand. In expectation of the celebration, Mama had laid the dining table with a feast of food. Earlier that week, she had bought beeswax candles for the silver candleholders and pink tulips for our Waterford vase. She had placed three small cakes of lily-of-the-valley-scented hand soap in the china dish in the bathroom and draped the best lacy hand towels over the rack beside the sink. “*Shayna Maideleh!*” Aunt Bernice and Aunt Helena embraced me, pinching my cheeks. Sarah and Valerie were passing trays of salmon and capers on toast, moving with small sideways steps to weave through the crowd, the white bows Mama had clipped in their hair that morning still perfectly placed. Sarah would not become a bat mitzvah for another year, Valerie for another three, but from the way their lips pressed as they concentrated on the platters in their hands, I knew they were no longer looking forward to these occasions. When they reached me in the corner beyond the couch, the least conspicuous spot I could find, they both smiled and whispered “Congratulations.” But they attempted the word so halfheartedly, I could feel a flush spread along my neck.

Mama was offering around a platter of her chicken meatballs. That morning I had helped her stick them with toothpicks, dotting each with a leaf of parsley.

“Well, there you are, Ruthie. Mazel tov! Mazel tov!” Mrs. Rosenberg and Mrs. Kramer kissed me then Mama. “This is a big day, yes? Very exciting!” The front of Mrs. Rosenberg’s dark hair puffed in a cresting wave, just as she had styled it the year before for her daughter Amanda’s thirteenth birthday. She accepted two meatballs and a cocktail napkin from Mama’s hands then blotted just the corners of her mouth, leaving her lipstick untouched. I had no doubt I would be the pitied subject of their conversation for the entire afternoon. So, slipping past forearms, chests, elbows, and plates of food, I escaped into the kitchen.

On the windowsill beside the cupboard stood the brightly colored bat mitzvah cards that had arrived in advance. When they had come in the mail, I had arranged them against the window, liking to reread their bold-lettered messages each time I entered the kitchen: *Congratulations, Bat Mitzvah! We Celebrate You on This Day!* they announced. Mama, holding her now-empty platter, pushed open the kitchen’s swinging door. The small gold hoops with diamond studs, which had once belonged to Nana Leah, quivered in her ears as she began to spoon liver mousse into a pastry bag, piping it onto crackers, her jaw shifting to one side as she worked.

“Don’t you want to join your party, Ruthie?” Mama wiped her fingers on a dish towel. “Everyone is here for your sake.”

“No.” I shook my head, sinking into one of the chairs at the kitchen table, resting my heels on its metal rung.

“They’ll begin to wonder what happened to you, hmm? Are you going to hide in here all afternoon like a chipmunk in a hole?” Mama laughed as she placed a hand on my head, but I could tell she had been worrying. A smudge of plum lipstick stained the white of her front teeth, evidence, I knew, that she had been chewing her bottom lip over my morning failure.

“Please don’t make me go back out, Mama. I can’t, I can’t!”

Mama shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t gnaw, Ruthie.” She tugged my thumb from the corner of my mouth, lifting my hand for me to see the cuticle—shredded and raw once more despite the attention she had given my fingers the night before with warm water and lotion.

“Did you notice at Gregory’s bar mitzvah”—Mama opened the oven door, allowing a rush of hot air into the room, a quick change of subject to distract me from my misery—“Nadia hired caterers to make and serve *all* the food. She never had to lift so much as a pinkie.”

“Yes. The meatballs were dry and the liver canapés flavorless.” I knew this was what Mama wished to hear, affirmations that even professional caterers couldn’t top her dishes. She never said it, but now and then Mama hinted at what we all knew: that of the entire extended family, she was the finest cook. Neither of her two sisters nor any of the sisters-in-law could match her in the kitchen.

“I don’t think Nadia’s caterers actually used butter in their liver mousse. I added chopped walnut this time. A definite improvement, I think. Did you try it?”

“No, Mama.” I cupped my chin in my fists. “I don’t think I can eat.”

“No? At your own bat mitzvah! Perhaps it’s better not to dwell on it, hmm, Pea? What’s done is done.” Drying her hands, Mama pulled a chair next to mine.

“But I don’t understand how I lost my place.” I began to pick at the thick sash wrapping my middle. “The others didn’t make mistakes. I was the only one!”

The hair at Mama’s temples had begun to dampen slightly from the heat of the kitchen. “It was not so bad, Ruthie. You made it to the end, didn’t you? Really, it could have been worse.”

But from the way she frowned as she began to stroke my cheek, I thought she was trying to convince herself as much as me. “What’s the good in comparing yourself with someone else, hmm? We are all different. No two children are the same. When your sisters were babies, they plumped like dumplings. Just breathing seemed to make them fatten up. But you were small from the beginning. You always required a bit more care—”

“Yes, Mama.”

“So we are all unique from the start, each with our own special needs. And with a little help, a bit of attention, everything evens out.” As if to prove her point, the corners of her mouth curving into a half-smile, Mama patted the bulge of my stomach below my ribs.

“Try to eat something, Ruthie. It will make you feel better.”

Standing up, Mama reopened the oven, spearing with a knife three crispy potato pancakes and dropping them onto a dish. She scooped dollops of applesauce over them, then drew her chair closer until our knees bumped. It had been hours since breakfast, and I began to section off a chunk of the shredded potato with the side of my fork. One bite and then another and another. Until the warm pancake filled me, stuffing down the worries of the day.



The summer after my bat mitzvah was much like every summer. Always, in the months of July and August, many of the children in our neighborhood disappeared on extended vacations or to sleepaway camps. But long trips were a luxury our family couldn’t afford, and in Mama’s opinion, sleepaway camps were ill-supervised and of little benefit. So my sisters and I attended the morning summer school program at our temple, singing Hebrew songs, making dolls of papier-mâché, learning the stories of our people’s history. Then, in the afternoons, since this was the season business slowed, Mama would leave Ruby, the college student she had recently hired, to manage Broadway Paperie, and she would devote the remainder of the day to all she had planned for us: a full schedule of activities that she believed would keep our minds active. We would not squander our time between the end of one school year and the beginning of the next, as so many of our friends did. From us she knew that Ellen Reid and her sister, when they were not at theater camp, spent day after day stretched on the rooftop deck of their apartment building for the sole purpose of deepening their tans. And that Jenny Frankel, until her family left for Lake George, was allowed to bring a TV into her bedroom and watch from morning till night. “Someone should tell them that by September their brains will turn to gelatin!”

Mama liked to joke.

Once, when Mama and Poppy attended a funeral in Trenton for one of Poppy's former coworkers, my sisters and I spent the entire day and evening with Jenny. When Mama came to get us after dark, we had fallen asleep on Jenny's pink shag carpet, our unfinished glasses of 7UP, our shared plate of Doritos beside us. Later, walking home in the warm nighttime air to West 256th Street, the glow of the building lights and of the street lamps on the avenues seemed almost a continuation of the fantasy hours of *Charlie's Angels* and *Gilligan's Island* and *The Love Boat* we had just spent at Jenny's house, a dream so complete and prolonged it had seemed it might last forever. Could we ever watch TV the way Jenny did? we pleaded, our feet tripping along the sidewalk in our buckled sandals. Not every day, but just sometimes? Once a week, maybe? Until summer ended? But Mama answered the way we supposed she would: Just because Jenny was permitted, did that make it a good idea? If Jenny leaped from the George Washington Bridge top, would we follow her in that foolishness, too?

Still, for weeks, before rolling from bed in the mornings, I would imagine I was Mary Ann or Ginger from *Gilligan's Island*, lovely in my swimsuit with endless days in the tropics. Sometimes, with the pad and paper I kept on my night table, I would draw elaborate scenes of the grass hut where Mary Ann lived or write poems about the sea or the groves of palm trees along the sand. But, as we expected, our TV restrictions were never altered—*Wild Kingdom* on Sunday evenings, because it was educational, and one hour of our choosing on Saturday mornings. And the next time Mama needed to be away for a day, she brought us to Aunt Bernice's, where we played hangman and tic-tac-toe and dominoes with Aunt Bernice and Uncle Mickey until she returned.

. . .

How much effort Mama gave to making sure our summer was not wasted, drawing up a calendar of projects she believed would put us at an advantage when school resumed in the fall. She bought a jigsaw puzzle of continental Europe, a second of the Americas. From the public library, she borrowed children's history books on ancient Rome and the early explorers and on the Silk Road in China, listening as we read them aloud over bowls of her pea soup and plates of egg salad, correcting when we mispronounced a word. On Friday afternoons, she gave directions from recipes for the evening's Shabbat—to fill tablespoons with flour, quarter cups with broth, and so on—so that we would learn our measurements. She invented a scavenger hunt math game, hiding clues around the apartment that could be found only by solving arithmetic problems. Though my sisters were younger they made fewer errors than I. I knew my multiplication tables and fractions, of course, but sometimes my thoughts drifted to outdoor sounds—the squeals of the Pomerantz children down on the sidewalk, the thump-thump of their ball against the side of the building, the rattling wheels of the Italian-ice cart in the neighborhood—leaving my sisters to win the majority of the games. To make up for this, Mama insisted some days on helping me. “We'll work as a team, Ruthie,” she would say, guiding me toward correct answers if I began to go astray, embarrassing me far more than did losing to my sisters. And as the summer days crawled by, I thought of Jenny Frankel, now on Lake George, and of Ellen Reid and her sister off with their grandparents in the Berkshires until Labor Day.

But though I could never tell Mama, I did love one day of the week: Sunday. The day Mama shopped for our weekly groceries, then scrubbed the corners of the apartment that she complained Inez, our Wednesday morning cleaning woman, had overlooked. Sundays were the days Poppy would drive Sarah and Valerie and me to Long Beach for the afternoon. He would roll down the windows of our old Chevrolet wagon and fiddle with the radio dial until he found the station with the least static.

“You're all going in today, right, girls?” he would say, checking us in the rearview mirror. “No chickens in this car!”

“No chickens, Poppy!” we would laugh. And once we'd made this promise, he reminded us,

there'd be no turning back. No matter how the surf stung our feet with cold as we stood at the water's edge or how our arms and legs bristled with goose bumps. The rule was we had to submerge ourselves shoulder deep. Then, if we were brave enough to stay in longer, he would teach us to swim—freestyle, breaststroke, even the backstroke. For the first few weeks, I had watched for half the afternoon, dry above my ankles, as my sisters splashed about with Poppy beyond the breakers, daring to plunge in with them only after much coaxing. But, eventually, I gained courage and allowed Poppy to show me how easily my body could float on the surface if I relaxed, how quickly I could propel myself by pulling at the water with long strokes and fluttering my feet.

“What a little tadpole you are, Ruthie! A natural swimmer!” Poppy would tug at my streaming wet hair. And then how reluctant I was to leave, staying in long after Sarah and Valerie, despite the numbness in my hands, feeling I could swim forever, past the umbrellas far, far down the shoreline.

On the way home, my hair still hanging in damp strands, leaning my head against the blue vinyl seat, I would dream of swimming all the way to the horizon and back, swift as the wriggling fish below, free as the clouds overhead. If traffic returning to the city was slow, Poppy would stop with us at the Friendly's off the highway for cheeseburgers and milkshakes, calling Mama from the restaurant pay phone to say we would be home later than planned. On these evenings, there was no time for Mama's math games or reading. And I heard her at night, through my bedroom wall, protest that after so many hours at the seashore—and maybe it was also the junky food we had been eating—we were completely spent. Even the following day when she worked with us, she said, we were often unfocused, as if we'd been overbaked in the sun! Certainly there were other things Poppy could take us to do. How about a visit to the Metropolitan Museum or a walk through the gardens of Fort Tryon Park? Did it have to be the beach every time?

“But the girls love it,” I was relieved to hear Poppy reply.

So Mama changed her market day to Mondays after work. She found time for her housework in the evenings once Sarah, Valerie, and I had gone to bed. And she began to accompany us to the beach, packing a picnic basket full of food she claimed would nourish us properly, and learning games for the car since we would not get to them that night. She would sit in a folding chair in her white beach cover-up with red trim, her wide-brimmed hat tied beneath her chin with a red ribbon. Always she brought the *Sunday Times* crossword, which she later liked to tell her sisters she had finished in its entirety (though I thought, on more than one occasion, I had caught her checking the answers in the following week's paper, then filling in the spaces she had missed).

“Don't you want to come in, Judith? It's warm once you get used to it!” Poppy would call to Mama, running up from the water onto the first ridge of dry sand. He looked handsome, I thought, in his black bathing trunks, his hair slicked from the wet. But Mama, who had admitted to us once she'd never learned to swim well, would tuck her feet under her chair—her legs, from lack of sun, much paler than the rest of ours—and wave her hand in a way that meant, “No, go ahead without me.”

Though one morning, after many requests, Poppy did convince her. She waded in with small steps, raising her elbows as she slowly reached waist-deep water, then waiting for a long break in the waves before edging out farther.

“Come to where we are, Ma!” my sisters and I cried from where we swam with Poppy. But as she stretched out her arms to paddle, her chin up, her neck stiff, a wave broke over her. And as soon as her head was above water once more, she quickly retreated to the shore, coughing into her hands.

“Come on, Judith! Give it one more try! We'll go together,” Poppy offered as Mama made her way back to our belongings.

But she only shook her head and resettled in her chair with her crossword. She did not even notice Sarah and Valerie, some time later, tossing back their hair with their eyes closed, puckering their mouths like the man and woman embracing near us in the water. It was Poppy who eventually

declared, "That's enough, girls," shielding his eyes from the sun to look at Mama as my sisters and I giggled bubbles into the salty water.

Mama stayed put until precisely noon, when she signaled us to come towel off and break for lunch. Then she pulled from her basket liverwurst on chewy rye. Or some Sundays, tuna salad with chunks of pickle, even deviled eggs with paprika sprinkled on top, setting it all at the center of our checked beach blanket for us to sit around. Now and then she would turn to glance over her shoulder at groups gathered nearby, families with hot dogs and pretzels from the concession stands, teenage girls drinking diet sodas, nibbling from small packets of chips. And as she sniffed then looked back to us, munching our sandwiches and eggs, I knew what she was thinking—that our meal was far superior. But this seemed the only part of the day she enjoyed, and, guiltily, I would sometimes wish she had not come. I knew it was because Poppy sensed Mama's impatience that he shortened our afternoons, the parking lot still packed with cars when we drove off. The radio remained silent now on the ride home as Mama read aloud a book of Aesop's Fables from the library. And so I would pretend drowsiness, closing my eyes until Mama believed I was asleep so that I could imagine I was still bobbing on the surface of the waves, drifting with the rhythm of the vast ocean.



Summer days seemed to pass more slowly than those of other seasons, but the summer I was thirteen seemed to disappear before its time. The Tuesday following Labor Day weekend, school began again. But this fall I would not be returning to the public school in our district. Since the previous autumn, I knew, Mama and Poppy had argued over where to enroll me for my eighth-grade year, their voices sometimes waking me hours after I had gone to bed. Poppy was eventually expecting a raise from the factory where he worked as a mechanical engineer, and partial scholarships, Mama had recently learned from our neighbor Babbie Schafer, were available for qualified students at her son's private school. If they could find the money for the remaining tuition, shouldn't I be given every advantage? Mama demanded. But Poppy thought our local public school was challenging enough. It was good enough for Bernice's and Helena's children, after all, and for the children of so many friends. Besides, even with a scholarship, he was sure the cost would still be in the thousands. That kind of money wasn't falling out of his pockets. This sounded like one of Poppy's jokes, but I heard no laughing. I wished Mama would forget the whole notion. But she was insistent. Maybe the raise would come faster if Poppy spent less time on his journals, which earned us *nothing*, and more time in the office. She'd heard what Babbie's son was learning, only a grade ahead of me. "Have you considered the opportunities this could mean, Aaron?" Mama's words grew louder, covering Poppy's. I remembered the Passover some years before when I had walked into the kitchen and found Mama and Nana Leah quarreling over things from the past. "That's not so, Mother! It *would* have made a difference if I had finished all four years! How many choices do you think there are without a degree?" I had never seen Mama short-tempered with Nana before. As soon as they were aware of my presence, their conversation ended. But for days afterward, I wondered what Nana had said before I'd entered and about the things Mama would have changed. And from something unwavering in her voice as she argued with Poppy, I knew she would make sure things went differently for me.

Then, some weeks later, I heard Poppy announce to her that an increase in his salary had finally come. And so he agreed that I should apply; and if I was accepted, since they now had the means, I would be given the finest possible education. Then, hopefully, the following year, they could plan to send Sarah, too.

In addition to my usual summer lessons, Mama, during that July and August, drilled me on the rules of grammar and composition. "Extra preparation for your new school can't hurt, can it? I imagine some new things will be asked of you now." For my practice work she brought me, from her

shop, a red marbled fountain pen she knew I had always admired, one of the pens fancy enough to be kept in the locked case to the right of the front window rather than in the rows of plastic bins above the loose writing paper.

Along my walk to school on the first day, I felt for the pen Mama had given me—easily accessible in the pocket of my windbreaker. I headed past the shops of Mosholu Avenue, turning onto Fieldston Road, to the Fieldston section of Riverdale with all of its large homes of stone or brick or stucco, grander than Leonid and Nadia's house in Scarsdale, a world just minutes from our apartment but one that I'd rarely entered.

That first Monday I had six courses to attend. The school had mailed me a copy of my weekly schedule, and on its grid of squares Mama had color-coded each subject—yellow for history, blue for math, red for English, and so on—making it simpler for me to keep track of where I needed to go. The campus of my new school was more expansive than I'd remembered from my visit the previous winter, with its scattering of structures, its lawns far wider than even those of the homes I'd passed on the way. (My old school had only a single building with an asphalt play area in the back.) Here the high-ceilinged hallways seemed to swallow sound, the voices of the students seeming more subdued as they moved from room to room—the boys in fitted jeans or khakis, sockless loafers, the girls in ankle boots and designer sweaters. Though many were Jewish—I knew from talk in the neighborhood—I saw not a single yarmulke, not one below-the-knee skirt like the several Orthodox girls in my old school wore. Was this something Mama had noticed, too, when we visited earlier in the year? I vowed that the next morning I would wake early, allowing plenty of extra time to dress more stylishly.

. . .

By only the second week, I was assigned an eight-page English essay comparing the characters of Edward Rochester and St. John in *Jane Eyre*, the dense novel we had been required to read over the summer. Casually my classmates folded the essay instructions into their notebooks, none of them seeming alarmed by having to complete a paper of this length within just ten days.

For several evenings after dinner, at the corner living room desk, I studied the book, scribbling pages of notes then erasing much of what I'd written, a pile of crumpled papers forming at my feet. Each time I tossed a balled sheet to the floor, I thought I could see Mama glance up from her reading. Since the start of the school year, I'd noticed, rather than spending her evenings at the kitchen table with order forms for holiday cards or sealing wax or decorative stamps for her shop, she had taken to sitting in the upholstered chair not far from where I worked.

"Can I get you anything from the kitchen, Pea?" Standing up, she would give my shoulder a squeeze. She smiled, but I saw, before I answered, that she scanned what she could of my scrawled paragraphs, and that, for a moment, her bottom lip drew inward, as if she were pinching back some remark.

I would shrug. "Yes, okay. Are there any more of those oatmeal cookies?" Then, as soon as Mama walked away, I would read again the sentences I had just written, wondering if they flowed in a logical manner.

As the deadline for the paper drew closer, I spent longer and longer evening hours poring over the chapters of the book, but the more I tried to organize my thoughts, the less sure I was of them. This was nothing like helping Poppy with his stories, which seemed alive and whole before we ever put them on paper, like songs already playing in our heads that needed only their notes recorded and embellished.

"How is it coming?" Mama would ask.

"Making progress!" I would say cheerfully. I did not tell her that as I worked I found myself drawing absentminded doodles of *Jane Eyre* and Edward Rochester around the margins of my pages,

or that I was not certain my paragraphs contrasting St. John's morality with Rochester's expressed all I meant to say.

"Yes? Oh, good, good." But she squinted at the growing mound of papers beneath my chair and the untouched plate of cookies. And I thought I heard the small snap of her tongue when I raised my fingers from my lap, revealing the newly bloodied skin around my nails.

Then, four nights before my essay was due, I saw that Mama, in her chair, her feet propped on the ottoman, was carefully inspecting the pages of a new book. Its cover was hidden by her hands, but when she rose to fill the kitchen kettle with water, I peeked at its title—*Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë! A silver Doyle & Co sticker was adhered to its spine, a brand-new copy from the bookshop next door to Mama's store.

Before I could return to my seat, Mama emerged from the kitchen sipping a mug of tea. "Oh!" She waved an arm toward the book and laughed, as if she'd almost forgotten what she was reading, her cheeks pink as carnations. "You don't mind if I read the story, too, do you? And this way, if you have any questions—"

"I don't think I'm allowed to accept any help on this assignment. Anyway, I can do it on my own." I yanked at the neck of my wool sweater, which had begun to itch, and hoped I sounded confident as I tried to recall the long list of essay rules my English teacher, Miss Fielding, had written across her blackboard in yellow chalk.

Mama flicked her hand and smiled, as if to say she understood perfectly, but for some time I could hear, over my shoulder, the scratch of her pencil as she underlined passages, and, now and then, to my annoyance, when I turned around, I caught her turning down the corner of a page.

The following day in English class, while Miss Fielding led a discussion about the meaning of symbols in our novel, I studied my fellow students. How rested and calm they looked, and I imagined that none of them was keeping my late hours. But when, later in the period, Miss Fielding checked over what each of us had written so far, she complimented my understanding of St. John's values versus Rochester's and of Rochester's development throughout the novel. "You are off to a good start," she said. "Now rethink how you will pull your argument together in the closing sections so that you do not stray from your topic."

At home that final afternoon before the essay would be turned in, Sarah and Valerie were in their room, their door closed, singing along with the *Cats* cassette playing on their shared stereo. (Now that I was in eighth grade, Mama believed we were old enough to look after ourselves for the short hour between our return from school and hers from work.) I spread my papers once more across the living room desk and considered how to rework the last two pages of my essay. Despite the music thumping from my sisters' room, I dashed off three revised concluding paragraphs, my thoughts tumbling out almost more quickly than I could record them.

"Hello, girls!" Mama called when she entered, hanging her fall trench coat in the hall closet, shaking off her buckled heels. She walked to where I was working, kissing the top of my head. "Almost finished?" she asked offhandedly, as if the question were no more than a politeness. But from where she stood behind my chair, I knew she was hoping for a glance at what I had composed.

"Yes, just about! Until today I thought maybe I'd made a mess of it, but Miss Fielding said she liked much of what I've written, and I think I've almost fixed the parts that were wrong."

"Oh, so fast?" Mama smiled, but her voice was low, as if the words were thick in her throat.

"I know—the ideas just flew out of me!" I grinned and twirled my pen between my fingers.

"Good, very good. Now that you're close to finishing, perhaps I should take a quick peek at what you have so far—"

"What, Ma?"

"Just as a simple proofread, a second pair of eyes. Only to catch things you may have missed or to

give a simple suggestion here or there. Especially if only yesterday you still had concerns. . . . It can't hurt, can it? I'm sure it's perfectly acceptable."

As Mama searched for a pen in the desk drawer and pulled over one of the dining chairs, setting it beside mine, I was not entirely certain Miss Fielding would say it was *perfectly* acceptable; but suddenly fearing I could not possibly have sorted out my points so quickly, I nodded my agreement.

Mama read through the paper once and then a second time, and as she did, she found many things to question—things I had not yet considered, things that had not caught Miss Fielding's eye. But Miss Fielding had given only minutes to my paper, and Mama hunched over my essay with me until long after midnight, until my eyes stung with fatigue. And gradually I saw that what had seemed so ordered earlier in the day had only been a tangled muddle. And I resented Miss Fielding for having made me believe I'd had only simple revisions left.

"What if you said this instead? Just an idea."

"Oh, yes, Ma. Yes, that's good." Always her new phrase seemed better than what I had written. Change after change after change, until, by the time our final draft was done, I could no longer remember what the essay had once been.

I received an A- on the assignment Mama had helped with. *Well executed*, Miss Fielding wrote on the final page, *though I am surprised you abandoned the original plan for your paper*.

"A-minus, Ma," I said later that day, and showed her the mark. But I did not mention Miss Fielding's comment on the essay or that I wondered what my grade might otherwise have been.



The next September, as Mama had hoped, another small increase in Poppy's salary allowed them to enroll Sarah in private school as well. "Your turn will come, too." Mama had stroked Valerie's hand the first morning before Sarah and I set off together as Valerie sniffled over her boiled eggs. I liked having Sarah's company as we trod along Fieldston Road to school each morning and back each afternoon. I now looked forward to the walk, which had seemed lonely the year before—to the earthy smell of the leaf piles along the curbs of the landscaped yards, to the game Sarah and I sometimes played, imagining scandalous secrets of the inhabitants of the most stately homes. In the evenings, of course, with our many assignments, all games ended. And we toiled over our work as Mama remained close.

But during the third week of the semester, I brought home a slip of paper—a notice to all high school parents of the options for participation in some extracurricular activity. I could choose a club—drama, chess, or debate—or a sport—track, volleyball, or swimming. All activities met after school, the clubs two times a week, the sports teams five. The slip was to be signed, it said, by a parent or guardian.

As Mama scanned the paper, she adjusted the reading glasses on the bridge of her nose, pushing them close to her eyes, then pulling them forward, as if she could not find just the right position. "Do you really think it's wise, Ruth, to take hours away from the time you need for schoolwork? And you're in high school now—your assignments will only become more challenging."

"But the activities don't last the entire year, Ma. Besides, I've been keeping up with all of my quizzes and papers."

I saw the pen Mama held in her hand. Already I knew which box I wanted her to check. The previous year, the windows of my homeroom had overlooked the school's glass-walled pool, and at the end of the afternoon, as I packed my books, I had often caught glimpses of the swim team members stretching on the pool deck in their racing suits, diving gracefully into the water, skimming the surface like sailfish.

As I'd walked home that day, I had imagined myself gliding beside them and wondered if I could

remember all of the swimming techniques Poppy had taught me. When I told Mama what I was hoping for, she nodded but looked past me, out the kitchen window, as if something there annoyed her. Over the weekend, we had driven to Scarsdale to visit Nadia and Leonid. Gregory had just joined his school's Model United Nations Club. "They investigate *all* kinds of international affairs," Nadia had told Mama. "Gregory was the ambassador from France in their last debate." She showed Mama all of the materials Gregory had studied to prepare for his role and then the award he had received for Best Delegate. Mama had looked impressed. "It's too bad your school doesn't offer Model United Nations isn't it?" Mama had turned to me.

But now she said, "Five practices a week, Ruthie. What about the chess club? It's far less time-consuming. And did I ever tell you Uncle Jacob and I used to play chess for hours together in the Shanghai ghetto? Jacob made us a set out of bits of wood. And then when we came to this country, our Papa bought us a real set with all the proper directions. I still remember lots of tricks. I could teach you—"

But when I begged and begged, Mama finally agreed, as long as I promised that if my grades suffered in any way, I would quit.

The first swim practice was scheduled for the following Monday. In my blue bathing suit with orange piping and wrapped in the beach towel Mama had packed in my bag that morning, I followed the other team members along the corridor of the gym and down the cold tile stairs that led to the pool. The towel was meant to cover me when I was not in the water, but no one else, I noticed as we settled ourselves on the bleachers, bothered with such modesty. So before taking my seat, I quickly pulled at my towel, rolling it into a loose ball on my lap.

Coach Hadley, as I heard the older team members call him, stood facing us, his back to the room's windowed wall. In the late-day sun, his gray hair, thick as steel wool, shone almost silver. With his fists plunged into the pockets of his satiny red jacket, a gleaming whistle dangling from his neck, he announced that we were forty-one strong this year, twenty-two boys and nineteen girls, an encouraging number in his estimation. He was particularly pleased, he said, indicating those of us new to the team with the addition of nine freshmen.

Our practice, he explained, would begin with a simple warm-up. He would time us in heats of four to check our individual speeds. He reminded us to avoid splashing as we kicked, to pull at the water with deep strokes, to breathe only when necessary. Before my turn to race, I silently recited these directions, trying to recall simultaneously all of the pointers Poppy had given me in summers past.

By the time I finished the two required pool lengths, my chest pounded as if it would explode, but much to my delight, I discovered that my time, though far from the fastest on the team, was better than many.

"Not bad, not bad," Coach Hadley pronounced. I needed to learn proper flip turns, I needed to correct the alignment of my elbows, I needed a rubber swim cap to eliminate drag, but he could see that I had potential. He patted my shoulder, the same sign of camaraderie I had seen him give some of the returning team members earlier in the practice. I nodded to show my eagerness to comply, biting the sides of my cheeks to keep from grinning.

When I returned home that evening, Mama was already home from work, quizzing Sarah on the capitals of the fifty states for her upcoming geography test. She waved a hand at me, but did not look up from Sarah's book. "It's nearly dark outside. You must be worn out."

"Only a little." Then as Mama left Sarah's side to spread the floral cloth on the dining table, folding five paper napkins into neat rectangles, setting out knives and forks and glasses of water, I described all that Coach Hadley had taught us that day. Mama nodded but said nothing so that I wondered if the topic held no interest for her. But the following evening, she told me she had a surprise. In the sporting goods store near Broadway Paperie, she had come across two magazines with

articles on swimming. Managing to browse through them during her lunch hour, she had been impressed by the nuggets of information they contained, the descriptions of physical techniques as well as mental exercises that would most certainly be to my benefit. “See. Take a look, Ruthie.” She opened to a two-page diagram in one of the magazines. “Physiologists have studied how our bodies move best through water, secrets most swimmers don’t know. This is the newest research.” Over the next several days, I found these materials opened on the dining table when I arrived home, Mama’s reading glasses resting on one of the glossy pages to mark her place. As I washed my hands at the kitchen sink or unpacked texts and folders from my schoolbag, she would read aloud tips. But Coach Hadley had already critiqued our every move. He had shown us how to visualize our performance before we entered the water, how to dive from the starting blocks for maximum speed, how to angle our fingers and point our feet, how to roll our necks gently as we breathed, conserving motion. And for many afternoons after the cool-down, he had drilled me on my turns until I could tuck my body into a tight coil, propelling myself from the wall like an arrow.

“Yes, Mama. I know! These are things we practice every week!” And I would rotate my arms like a windmill to show off my new expertise.

“Oh, well then—” Mama shrugged, and the sports magazines were stacked with her other reading material on the kitchen shelf underneath the telephone. But now and then, when I mentioned some new skill I had learned in swim practice, she turned to glance at the magazines, as if she still believed they held information of greater value.

. . .

On the first day of the swim season, Coach Hadley had advised us about our diets—heavy meals could slow our systems; we were to think about eating for speed. For some time I had noticed how carefully my classmates, the girls especially, chose the foods they ate. I overheard them in the cafeteria comparing calories, sharing recipes for meals low in fat as they picked at half sandwiches, salads with cottage cheese, diced fruit. But until our coach’s warning, it had never crossed my mind that there was anything to be done about the plumpness around my thighs or the thickness of my middle. “You should be proud to have a healthy physique, Ruthie,” Mama had always told me. “No one’s frame is meant to be skin and bones like so many girls I see these days.” In temple or riding the bus, she would nudge me, jutting her chin disapprovingly toward women whose waists were as small as children’s. “They look as sickly as refugees!” Even Ruby, her new employee, had dropped ten pounds since summer, drinking only strawberry diet shakes for breakfast and lunch. “But now she tells me she is struggling to keep up with her classes,” Mama said. And the other day Mama had caught her incorrectly filling out an order for a wedding announcement—embossed instead of engraved. “Well, what did she think would happen from existing on fruit-flavored sugar substitutes! How can she possibly think straight?”

But after swim practice, in the girls’ locker room, as I blotted my hair with a towel, I began to sneak peeks at my teammates—at their stomachs flat as stone slabs, at the perfect slope of their breasts, at their arms and legs as lean as the classical Greek figures we sketched in art class. To me, they didn’t look bony, but beautifully muscled, feminine and strong. If I followed our coach’s guidelines, would my body slice through the water more quickly? Could I, too, be womanly and sleek? And I stared down at the protrusion below my waist, the lumpiness of my hips.

That evening, Mama, to my dismay, served a supper richer than usual—potato-lentil soup, buttered noodles, veal roast smothered with fat mushrooms, glazed challah rolls. My mouth watered as she placed dishes of the steaming food on the dining table. But I was determined not to weaken. I requested only a single ladleful of soup, rather than the usual two or three. I handed the basket of rolls to Poppy without taking one. Later, when the platters of veal and noodles were passed around the table,

for seconds, I shook my head, “No, thank you.”

“Is something the matter, Ruthie? An upset stomach?”

“No, Ma. No, I feel fine!” But there was a good reason, I explained, for my modest portions, and recited the suggestions Coach Hadley had given.

There was a pause in the scraping of Mama’s fork and knife. “It seems your coach has appointed himself the authority on all kinds of matters, hasn’t he?”

But Papa laughed before there was time to answer Mama’s question. “Sarah, Valerie, did you know your sister was turning into such a dedicated athlete!” And he stroked one hand with the other as he did whenever he was pleased, causing my face to warm with pride.

Sticking to my new diet regimen took more effort than I had anticipated. I craved Mama’s breakfasts—salmon scrambled eggs, buttermilk pancakes, oatmeal with brown sugar. And dinners of turkey with gravy, stuffed cabbage, kasha with onions. How easily I would have given in, but after some weeks, I thought I noticed what seemed almost a miracle—a slightly smaller bulge to my stomach, a bit less flesh around my upper legs. Was I merely wishing it? No! When I stood sideways before the full-length mirror on my closet door, I was quite sure I could make out a change. Along my route to school, I began to check my reflection in the windows of the nail salons, the coffee shops, Ganiaris’s fruit market. If I squinted my eyes, I could make my translucent self almost slender, curving only where I longed for curves. I thought of Cole Freeman, our swim team captain, who reminded me of handsome Luke Skywalker from my cousin Gregory’s *Star Wars* cards, and wondered if Cole would ever notice me the way I had noticed him. “Ooh . . . how do I look?” Sarah teased if she caught me, one hand grabbing her hip, the other cupped behind her head, sashaying down the block until I broke down in laughter.

After a time, I thought I discerned another difference, as well. It seemed I was somehow lighter in the water now, that I felt a quicker energy in our practice drills. So I found the discipline to leave my meals unfinished. To fill myself instead, later, with yogurt and sliced bananas. During a Shabbat dinner at Aunt Bernice’s, as I whispered with my cousin Eva about the R-rated movie she had just watched while on a sleepover with a friend, Mama pressed her lips in annoyance at what remained on my plate. At home that night, she warned me not to believe all of Coach Hadley’s advice. “You know you can’t possibly give proper attention to your homework without solid food in your stomach. Your coach should tell you no one ever got anywhere by starving herself!”

But I laughed and kissed her cheek to show her how wrong she was. “I’m not starving myself, Ma. See, I’ve never been stronger!” And I rolled up my shirtsleeve, revealing the newly defined muscle along my shoulder.

. . .

Several weeks into the season, our team was scheduled for its third meet, but the first in which I would be participating. For days, I thought of little else. At night, I lay awake in bed, listening to street noises, my mind rushing like the cars that rattled past outside my window, imagining how my opponents might leave me behind in a wake of bubbles.

We were driven to Brooklyn, to our rival school, in two yellow vans, and as we drew close, the trembling I had felt in my stomach since that morning worsened.

“Jitters are very normal for a first race,” reassured Celia, a senior team member whose voice turned to music whenever she spoke to any of the boys on the team. Now she let the words drop flatly. “Nerves can even work in your favor, Ruth.” But I was not sure I believed her, and as I was called to my event and curled at the edge of my starting block, I was certain I could see my knees shaking.

But there must have been truth to what she said, or perhaps it was my new eating regime. Never before had I swum so quickly; my arms and legs churned like motors through the water. And at the

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