

The book cover features a teal background with a collage of elements. At the top, there's a white envelope, a piece of blue fabric, and a small bird perched on the right edge. A circular button with an 'X' is pinned to the left side. A torn piece of paper with a quote is pasted on the left page. Another small piece of paper with the text 'A Memoir' is pasted on the left page. A second bird is perched on the bottom left edge of the book. The right page contains the title in a typewriter font. The book is bound in the center, with various papers and fabric scraps layered around it.

"A riveting journey."  
--JULIE METZ,  
author of Perfection

A Memoir

The  
Year  
My  
Mother  
Came  
Back

Alice Eve Cohen

author of *What I Thought I Knew*

THE YEAR

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MY MOTHER  
CAME BACK

Alice Eve Cohen



ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2015

ALSO BY ALICE EVE COHEN

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*What I Thought I Knew*

For  
my mother  
and  
my daughters

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As this is a memoir, my telling of the events in this book is filtered through the lens of memory and emotion and has been altered by the passage of time. I've changed names and identifying details of some individuals to protect their privacy. Conversations and dialogues have been modified by memory and sometimes intentionally compressed and reshaped for narrative purposes. I have also included the dreams and fantasies that were an integral part of my experience, which took place only in my imagination and on these pages.

PART 1

TWO

ONE

THREE

FOUR

FIVE

SIX

PART 2

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

FIVE

SIX

SEVEN

EIGHT

PART 3

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

FIVE

SIX

SEVEN

EIGHT

NINE

Acknowledgments

About the Author

About Algonquin



One day, my brilliant, beautiful, complicated mother appeared at my kitchen table, thirty-  
years after her death.

This is a story of mothers and daughters. My mother, my daughters. My mother's daughters, m  
daughters' mothers. This is the story of a year.



# *PART 1*

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“What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as a memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling.”

—WILLIAM MAXWELL, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*



She pulled the blue-checked dish towel off the mixing bowl. The dough was twice as big as it was an hour ago. My mother was amused by my open-mouthed astonishment. Her smile was beautiful, colored with bright red lipstick.

“Punch it down, Honeylamb.”

The dough was warm and elastic, deflating under my tiny fists, exhaling a sweet, earthy smell. When it was back to its original size, she emptied it onto the floured board, and it surrendered to her confident hands.

“Your turn, Alice.”

I jabbed. I poked.

“Like this.” She stood behind me, reached around my shoulders, and placed her hands on the dough. I put my hands on hers. She pushed forward with the heel of her palm, folded it back, forward, back, we kneaded in unison, like rowing a boat, like our purring cat scratching the sofa, like Dad waltzing me around while I stood on his feet, like Mommy giving me a backrub at bedtime. I basked in the euphoria of her touch.



I wipe my tear-streaked face with the back of my hand, surprised and embarrassed to be crying in the schoolyard on a hot Friday afternoon, waiting to pick up Eliana. One more week of school. A sparrow takes two staccato hops toward me on the green wooden bench. A gust of wind blows my long hair in all directions. The sparrow flies away.

Why am I crying? Why am I thinking about my mother so much today?

Oh, yeah. Because it's June.

I don't think about Mom anymore. Well, not much. Once in a long while, in fits and starts. Sometimes I find myself writing about her, my fingers typing her onto the page, unbidden. On the Jewish High Holidays, the two days in the year I go to synagogue, I think about her while reciting the Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, which I read phonetically, having never learned Hebrew. Sometimes I dream about her, but I rarely remember the details.

And every year in late June, I suddenly get sad and wonder why I'm crying, until I remember that Mom died in June. Thirty-one years ago. June 29, 1977. My summer-solstice mood swing takes me by surprise every year, even though it's as predictable as the days getting warmer. By the start of July, it's over.

Thirty-one years is a long time. My mother has become a character from a story I used to know; a face from an old photograph, the colors faded, her features blurry. Sensory fragments emerge—the

smell of her hair, the warmth of her hands, the melody of her voice, the sound of her typing and typing and typing.

I used to think about Mom all the time, the good parts and the bad parts. After she died, my thoughts would reflexively turn to her. I'd have an impulse to pick up the phone and call her, catch up on the day's events, tell her when I'd fallen in love, invite her to my performances. In darker moods I'd want to summon her to our old battlegrounds, to demand explanation and apology, or offer my own.

Over time, I stopped wishing for her. With great effort, I stopped thinking about her. It hurt too much, too closely resembled the angst of unrequited love. Now I can't remember what I tried so hard to forget. I exiled her, like banishing an errant ex-boyfriend from my thoughts; burying my memories of her as deep as I could, so my unrelieved longing for her—and my anger at her—would go away.

Except in June.

Every June she's in my thoughts, whether I want her there or not.

I picture my mother the last time I saw her, when she told me, "This is the first time in years that I am truly happy."

The school bell rings. I look for Eliana's third-grade class in the sea of children streaming out the doors into the sunbaked schoolyard, giddy in anticipation of summer vacation.

Eliana approaches the finish line, her long braids swinging from side to side as she runs. She looks unmistakably like Michael's daughter—same light brown, wavy hair, fair complexion, and slight crooked grin. No trace of my Mediterranean looks, dark straight hair, dark eyes, olive complexion. Eliana's luminous green eyes, which change color depending on the light, are hers alone.

Her gait at the end of three miles is slightly off-kilter, a dancier step-leap, step-leap, step-leap. She puts less weight on her right foot, which is not as cushioned, because of the inflexible shoe laces. Her right leg is three inches shorter than the left. Her head tilts slightly to the right, compensating for the shorter side of her body, something she does when she's tired or when her muscles are tight, a distant echo of her infant scoliosis. When she was born, her tiny, asymmetrical body was curved like the letter C. The doctor said she might never walk. Today, she ran three miles!

She runs under the arch of purple balloons and joins her team, ten ebullient girls jumping up and down in a group hug. Today is the culminating event of the citywide after-school program, Girls on the Run. We head over to celebrate with a team breakfast on the pier, which the city has recently transformed from an abandoned wreck of rotting wood into an idyllic park with a sublime view of the Statue of Liberty.

This was an extraordinary year for Eliana. When she was younger, she couldn't keep up with other kids. Now, she's one of the fastest girls at tag. It took Eliana's determination and the joint efforts (planned) of her gifted physical therapists, from the time she was two months old, to straighten her curved spine, overcome the physical challenges of asymmetry, and—like personal trainers coaching a diminutive Olympian—maximize her athletic potential.

For the first time in her life, she's as tall as other kids her age. Since kindergarten, she has taken a daily injection of growth hormone to compensate for her growth disorder. Even more impressive than these physical gains, with the attentive guidance of her third-grade teacher, she's evolved from an insecure and shy seven-year-old into a socially and academically confident eight-year-old. At the beginning of third grade she hated writing and said she was terrible at it. Last week, she wrote:

*Poem about Poem*

1 cup of starting and a half a cup done,  
3 cups of creativity, and 2 cups of fun,  
3 cups of friendly, and 2 cups of mean,  
2 tablespoons of king, and a half a cup of queen,  
3 cups of faraway, and 2 cups of home,  
and all that's a recipe, for one tiny poem!

The girls sprint ahead of their parents, making a beeline for the sprinkler. Michael takes my hand and I get that same adrenaline rush I felt when I fell in love with him twelve years ago.

This past year has been a period of relative calm in our marriage, now that our worry about Eliana has subsided. At our wedding, Eliana was six months old and Julia was nine: we jumped directly from fiancés to stressed-out married couple with kids. Ten years younger than me, Michael was like a kid himself when we met, but he grew up fast in order to keep our family in one piece, giving up freelancing for a more stable career in corporate communications. His bio now reads, “Michael used to create comic performances for corporate audiences, where he portrayed, parodied, and spoofed business executives—before becoming one himself.”

For me, this past year was about seeking absolution from my most unforgiving judge: me. I’m making slow progress toward assuaging my maternal guilt. The onset of that guilt was nine years ago. Michael and I had just gotten engaged, when I started to feel sick. My doctor said it was menopause but I kept feeling worse. After months of doctors’ visits and tests, I was raced to an emergency CA scan for an abdominal tumor, which turned out not to be a tumor at all. I was six months pregnant.

I desperately didn’t want to have a baby. There was evidence that the fetus had been injured—by x-rays, CAT scans, and my daily dose of prescription hormones, known to cause birth defects. I was in shock—it was fourteen years after I’d received a diagnosis of infertility, with no chance of ever becoming pregnant; it was nine years after adopting Julia. I felt trapped and *terrified*. My suicidal thoughts made late-term abortion a legal option, and I scheduled an appointment in Wichita, Kansas, one of only three clinics nationwide that provided abortions in the third trimester. I had exactly one week to make an impossible decision. At the eleventh hour, I chose to have the baby.

After giving birth to Eliana, I plummeted into the purgatory of postpartum depression. I was sure her shorter leg and other medical problems were my fault. I was guilty of prenatal neglect—unintentional, but in my depression-addled mind, unforgivable. I was so confused and full of remorse—for wanting to abort, and for injuring her in utero—that I kept all of it a secret.

I’ve recently begun to share the story of my terrifying pregnancy. My friends don’t judge or despise me for it, as I’d feared. But one day (a day I dread), I will have to tell Eliana the harrowing story of her birth—a conversation I hope to postpone for as long as possible.

THE GIRLS DASH from the sprinkler to their mothers’ laps, soaking wet, teeth chattering, exhausted from the run. We wrap our daughters in colorful beach towels and hand them water bottles. They sleepily drink from their bottles, lying in the sun, curled up in our laps, like when they were babies. The wind picks up. Eliana is shivering. I wrap my arms and the yellow towel around her more tightly, and her wet body begins to warm.



The wind picked up, whipping my long hair around my face. Mom led us across the seaweed-strewn wet sand at low tide. Madeline was twelve, Jennifer was five, and I was eight. My sisters and I were dressed in matching blue one-piece bathing suits. Mom was wearing her yellow-striped sundress. The foamy waves rolled over our feet, tangling our ankles in long strands of seaweed, and sculpting ephemeral footprints, which disappeared with each new wave.

“ ‘Private Property, No Trespassing,’ ” Madeline read aloud.

“Ignore the sign!” said Mom.

“Won’t we get arrested?” I asked, with equal parts trepidation and excitement.

“No. We’re below the high-tide mark, so we’re not breaking the law. The point is, girls, that a beachfront should be public access. That’s what we’re fighting for. It’s unforgivable that rich people are the only ones who get to enjoy this glorious coastline. That’s why we’re protesting. Do you understand?”

I nodded. Madeline shrugged her shoulders. Jennifer chased a fiddler crab.

We kept walking across the low-tide wet sand, tossing stones into the surf, chasing seagulls and terns, skirting barnacle-encrusted rocks, till we got to a secluded area marked by a wooden fence and another sign:

PRIVATE BEACH. KEEP OUT.

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

CHILMARK POLICE DEPARTMENT

MARTHA’S VINEYARD, MASSACHUSETTS.

A palatial beach-house sat above the dune, the sea and sky reflected in enormous picture windows. A weathered, wooden stairway, overgrown with sea grass and beach plum, led from the beach over the dune and up to the sundeck, where two women in bikinis and a man in plaid shorts were having drinks. The man stood and waved his arms, shooing us away.

“This is where we stop, girls. Right here.” She ignored the man and sat down on the wet sand, facing the ocean.

“Not cool,” said Madeline under her breath. The four of us sat side by side on the sloping shore.

“Isn’t it beautiful here?” said Mom.

“I’m cold,” said Jennifer.

“HELLO! EXCUSE ME,” shouted the man on the sun deck, competing with the sound of the wind and surf. “THIS IS A PRIVATE BEACH!”

Mommy turned to face him, and shouted back through the wind, “NO, SIR, YOU ARE MISTAKEN.”

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?”

“I SAID, WE’RE BELOW THE HIGH-TIDE LINE, SO THIS IS NOBODY’S PROPERTY.”

Mom was brave, the way she stood up to him, and really smart.

The man threw his hands up in exasperation and went into the house. The ladies in bikinis continued to sip their drinks, smirking.

“You sure we won’t get arrested?” I asked.

“Absolutely not! We haven’t broken the law.”

“I’m cold,” Jennifer said again, shivering in the salty spray.

“Then run around. But don’t swim, because there’s no lifeguard. And watch out for sharks.”

“Aw, I wish I could go swimming,” said Jennifer.

“Sharks need more than three inches of water, Mom,” said Madeline.

“You can’t be too careful when it comes to sharks.”

Jennifer collected shells and seaweed. Madeline waded in the waves. I sat next to Mom. It was exciting when she fought for things like this. I loved when she took us on adventures. I mean protests. You never knew how it would turn out. It made me feel important to sit on the sand beside her. We were fighting for something together.

After a while, a tall, thin policeman walked down the beach toward us. He looked out of place in his uniform. The man in plaid shorts came back out onto his deck with his arms folded over his chest, watching us.

“Oh, no,” groaned Madeline. She and Jennifer watched from a safe distance, while I inched closer to Mom on the wet sand. I was a little scared of the policeman, in case he arrested us.

“Good afternoon, Ma’am,” said the policeman.

“Good afternoon, Officer. Isn’t it a gorgeous day?”

“Ya see that sign?”

“Yes, Officer, we read the sign.”

“Do you know what trespassing means?”

“Of course. But we’re not trespassing.”

The policeman was confused. “This is a private beach. Belongs to that man up there.” He pointed to that man up there.

“No, it doesn’t. We’re below the high-tide line, so this isn’t private property, his or anybody else’s.”

“Lady! The high-tide ordinance is for boat-owners. You’re allowed to bring your boat up close to the private beach, for fishing or whatever, as long as you’re below the high-tide line.”

“Alas, we forgot to bring our boat with us today. But whatever the intent of the law, my daughter and I are within our legal rights, and we intend to stay here until the tide is high, which is hours from now.” She smiled at him, friendly as can be, and a little bit flirty.

The policeman glanced at Mom’s cleavage. He looked up at the man on the sundeck and shrugged his shoulders, then wagged his finger at my mom. “You better not cross the line,” he said, pointing

behind us at the uninterrupted ribbon of blackened seaweed, pale driftwood, shell shards, desiccated jellyfish, and other flotsam and jetsam separating the wet sand from the dry beach.

“I’ll be back.” He turned and sauntered back down the beach.

“Do we really have to stay here till high tide?” I asked, when the policeman was out of earshot.

“No. We just had to make a point,” said Mom. “Come here, girls. Now listen, if you never question the rules, nothing will ever change. That police officer will never think about waterfront access the same way.”

“Yeah, never,” I agreed.

“Maybe,” said Madeline.

We played by the shore a while longer, chasing sandpipers and scuttling hermit crabs, till the tide began to rise.

“I’m freezing,” said Jennifer, jumping from foot to foot.

“Me, too.” I was beginning to shiver.

“Let’s go, girls. Good work.”

“That was fun,” I said.

We retraced our steps, jumping over clamshells, stranded jellyfish, and foamy surf, back to the crowded public beach.

Jennifer’s teeth were chattering. Mom wrapped her in a big, yellow towel and cuddled her in her lap.



The Girls on the Run picnic is winding down. Eliana snuggles drowsily in my lap. In one week, she finishes third grade, and Julia graduates from high school. Last Saturday was Julia’s senior prom. In two months, she leaves for college. (College! How did that happen?)

I stroke my younger daughter’s wet hair. Eliana ran three miles today.

It’s a day of pure happiness.

So of course, I’m counting the days till Doomsday.

Doomsday is scheduled for August 6.

THE GOOD NEWS: Eliana is going to have surgery to lengthen her shorter leg.

The bad news: Eliana is going to have surgery to lengthen her shorter leg.

“She’ll need two surgeries: a first to lengthen her upper leg; a second one to lengthen her lower leg,” said Dr. Campbell in January, after reviewing Eliana’s X rays and growth curve, and describing the long, arduous limb-lengthening procedure to us in grueling detail.

“Is it absolutely necessary?” I asked.

(All surgery terrifies me. My idea of preventive surgery is to prevent surgery.)

“The question is not *whether* she’ll have surgery; it’s *when*. Without surgery, she’ll have back pain for her entire life. This is a good age for her to have her first leg-lengthening. She should complete the second one by high school.”

“Does it hurt?” Eliana asked him.

“Yes, but we’ll give you medicine to take care of the pain.”

“When will I be a hundred percent better?”

“It takes eight months.”

“I just want to get it over with. As long as I can go to camp. That’s the most important thing to me.”

“Okay, here’s what I propose,” he said, sitting beside Eliana on the examining table. “Go to camp this summer. We’ll do the surgery when you get back in August. That way, you’ll be fully recovered by April, and you can go to camp again next summer. Do we have a deal?”

Dr. Campbell extended his hand.

Eliana shrugged and shook his hand.

I took Eliana to two more surgeons for second and third opinions, hoping they would tell me that she didn’t need surgery at all, that she was doing just fine with a shoe lift. Heck, she plays on the West Side Soccer League; she can run three miles. I was looking for a surgeon who shared my “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” credo. But all three surgeons had the same opinion—not the one I was looking for. I wish I could kiss Eliana’s boo-boo and make it better, the way my mom took care of my garden variety scrapes and bruises. But Eliana’s growth disorder is an über boo-boo, requiring Herculean measures.

Eliana’s surgery is scheduled for August 6 with Dr. Campbell. I dread it, but like Eliana, I just want to get it over with. I am determined to be the unwavering, un-ambivalent, dedicated mother Eliana will need me to be, for the duration of her eight-month medical ordeal.



I stare blankly at my computer on the kitchen table, where I've been writing all afternoon, and try unsuccessfully to see this as an *Aha!* moment instead of an *Oh, shit!* moment. My doctor called me three minutes ago, on this steamy July afternoon, with the news that I have breast cancer.

I call Michael at work, but he doesn't pick up. "Please call when you get this," I say, with just enough urgency to motivate him to call me back.

I put my face in my hands and cry for a few minutes, lonely and scared.

I call my sisters at their offices, but Madeline and Jennifer aren't picking up their phones. Julia is in Canada all month. Eliana is at camp in Maine till Thursday.

This doesn't fit into my plans to be a perfect mother, completely available to Eliana. I was so preoccupied with her surgery, scheduled eleven days from now, that I forgot to look over my shoulder and the Evil Eye snuck up behind me.

Michael wouldn't believe me if I confessed to him that I literally feared the Evil Eye. He assumes I use it as a literary device, which is only partially true. I haven't told Michael the part where I believe the Evil Eye is breathing down my neck, waiting for my next misstep. I've tried to overcome my fear of unguarded happiness (the green light for the Evil Eye), but my fear is tenacious.

My slip-up might have been three months ago, in April, when I joyfully e-mailed my friends from college to share the good news that Julia got into Princeton, our alma mater. Joanne e-mailed back: "*i'm so happy for julia, (and for you!) my advice is, if you haven't yet, turn a glass over. if you don't know about turning a glass over, my grandma used to swear by it. it kept the bad spirits away whenever something good happened.*"

I thought I already knew all the necessary precautions for keeping away bad spirits. I learned them from my mother, decades ago: "Always throw spilled salt over your left shoulder." Done. "Spit three times between the middle and index fingers to keep away the Evil Eye," *Tuh, tuh, tuh!*—Done. I ignored her more phobic precautions, which caused her to cower in the middle of a room during an electrical storm and prevented her from taking elevators—she climbed many flights of stairs, long before it was promoted for exercise.) "Don't gloat over good news, and above all," she taught me by example, "don't admit that you're truly happy." Oops, forgot that one.

Joanne's grandma's upside-down glass ritual was new to me, but there was logic to it; the upturned glass would keep the bad spirits out, like keeping a genie in a bottle, or the lid closed on Pandora's box. I promptly turned over the empty glass on my desk and e-mailed Joanne with a pragmatic follow-up question: "How long did your grandma say you should keep the glass upside-down?"

No response. Maybe Joanne thought I was kidding. Maybe *she* was kidding. Maybe she never read my e-mail. The next night, I put the upside-down glass in the dishwasher. The Evil Eye must have

escaped before the rinse cycle.

The cancer showed up on a routine mammogram. During the biopsy, a small metal marker was inserted, to make it easier to find the tumor at a later date. Unfortunately, the metal marker is now sitting on a nerve. For the past week, at random moments while walking down the street, a sudden shooting pain has caused me to involuntarily utter a loud yelp and grab my left breast with my right hand—“*YELP!*” *Grab*—which must look bizarre to passersby, who probably think I have a unique version of Tourette syndrome—“*YELP!*” *Grab*—Excruciating in the moment, but not a lingering pain. Embarrassing, but—“*YELP!*” *Grab*—out of my control. The silver lining of my doctor’s call this morning was her promise that the metal marker would be removed, along with the lump.

I’m not surprised by the diagnosis. My mother had breast cancer when she was forty-seven. I was twelve, on the cusp of puberty, the summer after seventh grade. Mom survived cancer, but she died of a stroke ten years later, when she was fifty-seven, five years older than I am now.

I close my eyes. I hear a familiar percussive sound. I open my eyes.

My mother is at the kitchen table next to me, typing on her old-fashioned black manual typewriter. Her fingers are flying over the keys.

*What is she doing here?* My mother has been dead for thirty-one years.

I think about her every June, but this is the middle of July. I don’t think about her in July. Yet here she is, typing furiously. Here, in my head, in my apartment, sitting beside me at the kitchen table. My brilliant, beautiful, complicated mother.

“What are you doing here?”

“Typing,” she says, barely looking up from her work.

“But you’re dead.” She stops now, looks up at me.

“I know.”

A salty breeze blows through my kitchen and wraps itself around me. It is my mother’s hug from fifty years ago, when I was a very little girl. It makes me cry.

“Mommy, I’m sick.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

I see her more vividly than I have in the three decades since she died. Her fingers race over the clacking keys of the Smith Corona, the same typewriter she’s had since she was a Barnard student in the 1940s. She stares intently at the keyboard, warm brown eyes magnified by thick glasses; her face once chiseled and gorgeous, now softly wrinkled, framed by cropped gray curls. She wears a yellow button-down shirt and blue wraparound skirt. Life-sized and adamantly unconventional—legs unshaven, hair undyed, chest flat and un-enhanced, warm-blooded, 3-D Technicolor. Mom is sitting right next to me, extracted from the cosmic periphery to which I’ve relegated her for thirty-one years.

“I have breast cancer.”

“I know. So did I. I know all about breast cancer.”

YEAH, SHE KNEW about it. Mom had a double radical mastectomy, all her lymph nodes removed and some of the flesh and muscle from both armpits. In 1967, lumpectomy was not an option. Breast surgery was an all or nothing deal. My mother had it all, and ended up with nothing.

On the last day of seventh grade, Dad helped Mom into the car and drove her to the hospital without telling us why. Days passed. I was scared she would die. Two weeks passed. I was sure she was dead. When she came back home from the hospital, she looked and acted like a different person. So sad and thin, flat-chested, suddenly gray-haired, weak and old.

My mom didn't actually die, but she was gone.

Now she's in my kitchen, typing.

My mother was writing her PhD dissertation the summer she was diagnosed with cancer. She was always working on her dissertation, which she never finished. From the time I was able to grasp crayon in my toddler fist, the backs of her discarded pages were my drawing paper. I sat beside her with my Crayola box, drawing and drawing and drawing.

For the first time in decades, I'm remembering Mom, all of her—the wonderful and terrible things about her that I've cast out of my thoughts for so long. I'm still struggling to prevent these memories from erupting from their subterranean depths. Trying to hold back the flood. I can't, not today. The levees break.

My breast cancer has brought my mother back to me.

But now is not the time. My daughters need me, Eliana most of all. I have to be unwavering in my maternal commitment. I'm trying to be a great mother, but my experience as a daughter is still haunting me. I don't want my mother here. Not now. I don't want to think about her, or how our once close relationship devolved into barbed mistrust. She's a liability. She'll get in the way.

But she's back.

She stops typing, pushes her reading glasses on top of her head, rests her elbows on the table with fingers laced together, and looks at me expectantly. What does she want?

It seems perversely ordinary to have my mother sitting here with me in my kitchen. I should make us a pot of coffee, but she's a ghost. I guess. Is that what she is? I don't know what to call this version of her. I'm scared of ghosts, they remind me of death. What if my mother's ghost has come for me like the Grim Reaper? I'm nearly the same age she was when she died. Maybe she wants to take me with her. But I don't believe in ghosts, so this is not possible, which means my mother sitting here at the kitchen table with me is really, really bad.

I close my eyes.

*Send her away. Bury her. Forget her, like I have—very effectively, thank you very much—for the past thirty years. I don't have time for my mother's ghost, or for this uncompromising torrent of memories, or my holographic fantasy of her, or whoever and whatever she is. It's not safe. It's not practical. There's so much to figure out. I don't have time for her right now!*

Open my eyes.

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She's still there. Shit.

Close my eyes. Inhale.

*Yit-ga-dal ve-yit-ka-dash*—I stumble through the few Hebrew syllables I remember from the

Mourner's Kaddish—*she-mei ra-ba* . . . I don't know what it means, but I hope it encourages her to go  
back to wherever she came from.

*Go away! Go!*

Open my eyes.

She's gone. Thank God! Exhale.

The summer suddenly has a different temporal landscape. Eliana comes home from camp in two days. She assumes that she's having surgery on August 6, a week after she gets back. Her surgery will be the start of a grueling eight-month process of painful leg-lengthening.

But now *I'm* scheduled for surgery at the end of August, followed by six weeks of radiation. I'm very lucky: my cancer is zero grade, noninvasive, garden-variety DCIS, *ductal carcinoma in situ*, the most common type of breast cancer. It's completely curable. (*Tuh, tuh, tuh!*) Even so, Eliana's surgeon and mine concur: leg-lengthening can wait; cancer cannot. Eliana's surgery will be postponed until after my radiation treatment is finished.

BEFORE CALLING ELIANA at camp, I rehearse what I'm going to say, so I won't cry. But as soon as I hear her voice—light, airy, high-pitched, full of little girl excitement and wonder and love and trust—I am choking back tears. I love her so much. I tell her, using as few words as possible, so that I can get out a complete thought without falling apart, that her surgery will be postponed until November.

“Why?”

“Because . . .” I speak slowly and carefully, to maintain my composure. “I need to have surgery in August, and my doctor says we can't both have surgery at the same time.”

“Aw. I wanted to get it over with. Now I have to worry about surgery all the way to November.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

“Will I still be completely better by April?”

“No.”

“Aw. That's not fair.”

“I know.”

“Will I be better in time for camp next year?”

“Yes. And the good news is, you're free for the rest of this summer. If you want to, you can stay at camp an extra two weeks. What do you think?”

Brief pause.

“I want to come home. I love camp, but I'm homesick, too, in a good way. I've already packed. I want to come home tomorrow.”

And then I love her and miss her so much, I'm crying again. I can't wait to see her. I'm so happy she wants to come home, so happy I'll see her tomorrow, and that we'll be together for the rest of the summer. So glad she didn't take me up on my offer.

The next day, Eliana's bus from camp is delayed. I have an hour to kill, so I stroll to Lincoln Center and sit on the edge of the fountain. The plumes of water, the hot afternoon sun, the cool mist

and the roar of water are hypnotic. I remember being Eliana's age, the thrall of summer vacation with my family.

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Dad taught me and my sisters to bodysurf. Sand was everywhere—in my bathing suit, in my butt crack, between my toes. He was the fun one. I mean, I loved Mom, too. I loved her so much, and she was the one who brought us on protests, and who took care of us every day when Dad was at work, and if we were ever sick. But he was more fun, he played more, he liked games.

Our sunburns were tanned from long, sunny, salty days on the beach. The summer was almost over.

As soon we got back home from vacation, Dad sat down at the piano. While he played Beethoven Mom announced, “I’m going outside to read.” That was her way of saying she was going to take a nap without admitting it. In five minutes, she was asleep in the hammock with a book on her chest. She snored softly, which Jennifer and I thought was hilarious. We watched her from the living room window and giggled. It was good to be home.

A chickadee flew onto the hammock right next to sleeping Mom. Then a robin redbreast. Birds loved my Mom. They must have missed her while we were away on vacation. I took out binoculars and my field guide to birds. Two sparrows. A tufted titmouse. A bright red cardinal. Mom had a knack of getting along with nature. She just understood. I don’t know how she did it. Jennifer and I wondered why the birds wouldn’t land on us, despite our efforts. We had tried lying on the hammock, as motionless as we could, but the birds never came. We dared each other to stay absolutely still for ten minutes, but we couldn’t do it for even one minute. We were too jumpy. We giggled and the hammock wiggled. It was Jennifer’s fault. She tickled me when I was trying not to move a muscle.

THE TALL BUTTERCUPS in our yard danced in the breeze, like they were having a party. The spring, when Dad mowed the lawn and cut down the buttercups, it broke Mom’s heart, and she campaigned for buttercups’ rights.

“I don’t particularly like the idea,” said Dad.

“Please, Ira, the wildflowers are so beautiful, and the girls love them. What if you just mow the front yard, and not the back?”

“Well, all right, Louise,” he grumbled.

Since we went away for vacation three weeks before, the grass and flowers had grown higher than ever. Jennifer and I ran outside and chased each other around the backyard. It was a meadow now filled with buttercups, dandelions, tiger lilies, Queen Anne’s lace, and goldenrod. Rose bushes in full bloom and peppermint plants with tiny purple flowers surrounded the big rock we liked to climb. Amanda, our gray cat, dove into the tall grass and proudly emerged with a mouse in her teeth.

The blue jays circled high above, cackling from a safe distance. They never landed on the hammock—the jays hated our family. They were mad at us, because this spring a newborn blue jay fell out of their nest into our yard, and I picked it up to save it. I'd been planning to put it in a shoebox and feed it mashed-up bread and milk with an eyedropper, like Mom showed me how to do with the baby sparrow I saved the previous summer. But the blue jay parents thought I was kidnapping it. Or maybe they thought I was a predator who wanted to eat their baby, so they dive-bombed my head and I had to run inside. Then I looked out the window, and saw the most horrible thing: the mother and father blue jays killed their own baby. They pecked it to death. It made me cry so much that Mommy had to hold me in her lap and comfort me. "It's okay, Alice, sweetheart. I know you were trying to save the chick, but the jays don't know that. It's in their nature to protect their domain." After that, the blue jays dive-bombed our heads every time we went out of the house. Especially my head. They were holding a grudge.

Until Mom came up with a plan.

"Alice, round up all the kids on the block and bring them over."

I ran up and down the block and got twelve kids, and we ran into my house, past the dive-bombing blue jays. Mom had assembled all our pots and spoons on the kitchen table.

"I want each of you to take a pot or a pan and a wooden spoon. Everyone have one? Okay. Are you ready to make a lot of noise?"

"READY!" shouted twelve kids.

We went in the front yard, carrying our pots and pans. As soon as the blue jays started flying down from their tree, Mommy gave the command. "MAKE AS MUCH NOISE AS YOU CAN!"

We banged and crashed the pans and screamed our heads off. It was loud and exciting. The jays got scared and flew in circles right over our heads—we could feel the wind from their wings. They were squawking and wanted to peck us, I could tell, but they didn't. They flew in circles, higher and higher and higher.

They didn't attack us ever since then. Nor did they go near Mom.

JENNIFER AND I picked a bouquet of wildflowers and went back in the house. Dad played piano and my sisters and I danced around the living room. He sang the funny songs he learned growing up in Brooklyn. While accompanying himself on the piano, he made a pretend ugly face and sang,

*There once was a man named Dirty Bill!*

*He lived on top of Garbage Hill.*

*He never took a bath and he never will.*

*Ach, Poo! Dirty Bill!*

The three of us climbed on his lap and begged, "More, Daddy! More!" And he sang with a preter

mean face, while banging out minor chords.

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*Oh Dunderbeck, oh Dunderbeck, how could you be so mean,  
To ever have invented the sausage meat machine?  
Now all the little cats and dogs will never more be seen,  
'Cause they've all been ground to sausage meat, in Dunderbeck's machine.*

“More, Daddy!”

He recited a rhyme he learned when he was growing up:

*“There were toidy poiple boids sitting on the coib, on da corner of Toidy-toid and Toid, a-choipin  
and a-boipin' and a-eatin' woims. When along comes Hoib and his girlfriend Moitle, what woiks  
in the shoit factory. Gee, they was pertoibed.”*

He played songs from Gilbert and Sullivan, and we spun around the living room to “Three Little Girls from School Are We,” from *The Mikado*.

He played “Hava Nagila.” Madeline, Jennifer, and I grabbed hands and danced the hora in such a fast circle, we all got dizzy and flopped on the green couch.

Mom woke from her nap. The birds flew off the hammock, and she went into the kitchen to make dinner. I followed her and gave her the bouquet. “It’s gorgeous,” she said, and put it in on the table in a glass jar. I helped her make a salad while the spaghetti was boiling. We set the table, nibbled on cheese and crackers and carrot sticks, and talked about birds and our vacation. I liked being in the kitchen with Mom. She was usually busy, but she always had time to talk to me while she was cooking.

After dinner, she washed the dishes in a sink full of soapsuds and I helped her dry. She put Jennifer to bed and came back to work at the kitchen table. While she typed, I sat next to her and drew a picture of our backyard, using all the colors in my crayon box.

“What a beautiful drawing, Alice.”

“It’s for you.”

“Thank you, darling, I’ll put it on the refrigerator. Time for bed.”

I got in my pajamas and she tucked me in.

“Will you do ‘X Marks the Spot’?”

“Sure, Sweetie.”

She sat on the edge of my bed. I rolled onto my stomach, and she stroked my back with her warm hand, under my pajama top. This was my favorite thing in the whole world.

“X marks the spot, with a dot, dot, dot . . .” she recited in a soft, singing voice, her finger tracing an X and three dots, with the lightest touch.

“And a dash, and a line, and a big question mark.”



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