Living the Dream of my Father: A Memoir

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Living the Dream of My Father

A Memoir

by

Sherrie Negrea

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Chair, Graduate Committee

Chair, Department of English
For my father

Robert "Beno" Negrea

and my mother

Marylin Esther Negrea
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Abstract: This memoir is an account of the dream my father had for me and the way I eventually came to embrace it after years of rebellion. My father was a Romanian immigrant who lived through the Holocaust, a facet of his life that I never questioned as a child. It was not until nearly twenty years after his death that I began a journey to discover more about my father’s past and what it meant to me.

As a child, I rejected my father’s view of the role women should play in the world—the 1950s version of the housewife who stayed at home rearing children. I was determined to do something else with my life, and eventually I became a journalist. But after finally marrying at the age of thirty-five, I found that my life seemed empty without a family. Fulfilling my father’s dream, though, became impossible as infertility problems conspired against me. My desire to have a child finally led me back to my father’s corner of the world—Eastern Europe—to adopt a seventeen-month-old orphan from Russia.

The memoir is divided into two sections. “The Proud American” chronicles my father’s life in Romania, his escape from that country after the Communists took control in 1944, his emigration to Canada and then America, and my childhood in Florida. “Fulfilling the Dream” covers my career as a newspaper reporter, my struggle with infertility, and my tortuous path toward adopting a child from an orphanage in Moscow. With my return to Eastern Europe, the memoir traces how I finally completed the circle my father began when he left Romania as a young man with no money, education or family, but simply with the dream of a better life in America.
Introduction

Four years ago, I walked into my first creative writing class armed with a stack of my best newspaper articles. While the other students arrived with personal essays, I brought a story about a quadriplegic who had lived in a hospital for twenty years, a story about a single mother who was struggling to survive in a drug-ravaged neighborhood, and a story about empty nesters who had moved back to Rochester after years of a dull existence in suburbia. This was a class on “creative nonfiction” and I thought this sampling of my journalism would fit the bill.

But creative nonfiction, as I found out, turned out to be something entirely different. My newspaper articles were well-crafted, the instructor said, but they were missing an essential ingredient: me. As the class critiqued my article on the quadriplegic, the instructor asked us to write an essay about meeting a disabled person. How did I feel when I walked into that hospital room and met Bill White, the man who became paralyzed after an accident in his high school gymnastics class? I tried to put words down on paper, but the page remained stubbornly blank. After fifteen years as a journalist, I had become so accustomed to writing about other people that I couldn’t write a single word about myself.

The instructor suggested I write a personal essay, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. What did I have to write about? For one, I was in the middle of a painful struggle with infertility, which would eventually lead my husband and me to adopt a child from Russia. I had become disillusioned with my career as a newspaper
reporter and was searching for something else to do. And I had an aching desire to learn more about my father’s experiences in Romania during the Holocaust, a subject he had never discussed with me.

Looking back, I see that creative nonfiction workshop, as frustrating as it was at the time, as the bridge between my journalism and this thesis, my memoir. The novelist William Kennedy once said that it took him at least six years to make the transition from journalism to fiction, when he finally concluded that novel writing went beyond a mere “transcription of life.” As Kennedy described it: “What sets a good fiction writer apart from the journalistic guppies is that he, or she, understands that the truth comes up from below, that it develops from the perception of the significance of experience and not from the experience itself” (38).

The same principles can apply to creative nonfiction. The most sacred rule of journalism is to leave the writer out of the story because any opinion—or worse yet, any invocation of the word I—can taint the reporter’s objectivity. As I have made the transition from journalism to creative writing during the past four years, I have forced myself to step back and realize that what is important in creative nonfiction is, as Scott Russell Sanders says, “the first person singular”—the voice, the actions, and the emotions of the narrator. For “unlike scholars or journalists, who quote the opinions of others and shelter behind the hedges of neutrality, the essayist,” Sanders says, “has nowhere to hide” (658).

This memoir grew out of three essays I wrote in my first ventures into the murky waters of creative nonfiction. My life as a muckraking reporter in the small
town of Geneva, New York, was the subject of my first essay. Following the maxim to "write what you know," I had naturally turned to journalism. But this overused bit of writing advise ignores what Patricia Hampl calls "the real, the secret commandment" of writing—to "write about what matters" (*I Could* 198).

What mattered more to me at the time was not journalism but something that had become a major focus in my life—my inability to have a child. A short essay I wrote about a miscarriage opened the floodgates for me to write about infertility, a condition I had struggled with for five years. I had finally found a subject I could write about from an emotional and experiential level.

But there was also this nagging feeling that I had to write about my father—to chronicle his past before it became lost forever. Uncovering my father's history in Romania soon became an obsession, leading me to travel to Israel to interview his two surviving sisters, to visit Holocaust museums and devour books by historians and survivors. Yet along the way, I failed to see that what I was searching for was not my father's story, but my own story. For two years, I had meticulously collected the facts about his childhood in Romania, his forced servitude under the Fascist government and his eventual escape from his homeland after the Communists took control. But I could still not answer the question: What does it mean to me?

It was only after starting to write this memoir that I began to see the connective threads weaving their way through my father’s life and my own. My father’s deeply-felt patriotism, for example, had unconsciously led me to a career in journalism, a profession where I could play a meaningful role in the democracy he so
cherished. And his traditional old-European view of the world ultimately expressed itself in my intense desire to have a child. When I could not have that child, my life took an unexpected turn when I returned to my father’s world in Eastern Europe to adopt an orphan, making the final connection between his life and my own.

As a literary genre, memoir has attracted me not only as a writer but also as a reader. Contemporary fiction increasingly seems to rely on plots that move beyond credulity and to focus on experiments with form that have little interest to me. In memoir, I found a literary genre that was both authentic and believable—something, as Hampl says, that matters. While readers may hunger for the sordid confessions that memoirs offer, they also want something else—the factual experience—for the truth, or a writer’s version of the truth, can be more compelling than fiction. A memoir about growing up with alcoholic parents can have more immediate impact than a novel on the same subject. “The novelist writes disguised autobiography,” James Atlas writes in The New York Times Magazine. “The memoirist cuts to the chase” (26).

Yet memoir writing is more than a straightforward transcription of a life. Like fiction, it must have a compelling voice, well-developed characters and a wealth of detail to keep the reader hooked. It must touch on themes that a reader can identify with and that allows us into the inner workings of the author’s mind. As Tobias Wolff describes it, the memoirist must “discern a pattern from [her] experiences,” account for their significance, and then describe how “some of these experiences tell us something—not only about one’s self, but about human beings in general” (Glass 26).
Since I was a novice at memoir writing and did not fully grasp how all these elements worked together, I turned to the experienced writers in the genre to learn how they mastered their craft. From Patricia Hampl, I saw that one writer’s journey to rediscover her family’s heritage can be placed within a larger literary and historical tradition. Unlike other writers who tell their stories chronologically, Hampl grounds her memoir, *A Romantic Education*, in the literature and history that relates to the themes, places and events that she explores. She draws on F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, to create an aura of significance around her hometown, St. Paul; she then turns to the historian Francis A. Yates to place Prague in a context within the modern world. In the end, Hampl succeeds in her goal of making “something out of what my family says is nothing” because her approach uses history and literature to amplify and enrich the simple story of her Czechoslovakian background (9).

From Frank McCourt, I learned the value that humor plays in writing about the painful episodes that give memoir its drama. In *Angela’s Ashes*, McCourt’s use of comic relief is so effective that the reader often forgets that this is a book about the gut-wrenching poverty of an Irish family wracked by alcoholism. Humor keeps the reader transfixed in McCourt’s memoir, allowing the story to flow effortlessly from one scene of utter desperation to the next. The description of his illegitimate birth as the product of a “knee-trembler” is just one of many examples: “the act itself done up against a wall, man and woman up on their toes, straining so hard their knees tremble with the excitement that’s in it.” Such an act, he writes, puts his mother in an “interesting condition and, of course, there was talk” (15).
There are many other memoirs I read as I was writing my own story, and I learned something from each of them: from Elie Wiesel's *Night*, how to transform the experience of the Holocaust into words; from Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, how to create dialogue; and from Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin*, how to write about journalism within a literary context.

While the classics of the contemporary memoir often record the author's childhood, this thesis is a living, breathing narrative that has often threatened to outpace the events it was chronicling. The memoir is organized into two parts: "The Proud American," a description of my father's background and my childhood as an immigrant's daughter; and "Fulfilling the Dream," an account of how I finally became the daughter my father wanted me to be by adopting a child twenty years after his death. Everyone has a memoir, as Hampl says, but what a writer brings to her prose is what gives it meaning. My father's expectations for me and my difficulties in realizing them form a story that has been told before, but the complexities of my struggle and its connection to my family's past create a world that is uniquely my own.
Prologue

Middle of the night: a noise, a faint sound. Sitting up in my twin bed, I hear voices coming from my parents’ bedroom. It’s my father and something must be wrong. Stumbling down the hall in my nightgown, I find him in his slate blue bathrobe and curly black wig, standing in front of his closet.

He wants to go home—through the bathroom ceiling.

My father insists that Chuck, his best friend, has cut a hole directly above the toilet, now hidden by a trap door, which will lead him to his wife and children. He tells me that he wants to climb through that hole so he can leave the hospital. As he points toward the bathroom, I look at my mother and she looks at me. Aren’t we his family? Who are these other people he wants to see? I giggle nervously and wonder if it’s the brain tumor or the morphine subduing the pain.

“What are you laughing at?” my father asks angrily.

My mother walks over and says, “It’s okay Beno, try and sit down.”

My father, gaunt and frail, is dying at the age of fifty-three. There is nothing, really, that anyone can do. Cancer is just one of those struggles that has shaped his life—surviving the Fascist oppression in Romania was the first. He arrived in Canada penniless, and with a fourth-grade education and plenty of street smarts, built a small business empire in Florida: an orange juice factory, two gift shops, an apartment complex and a restaurant. Now it is all being taken away, day by day, as he lies helplessly on his bed.
The cancer crept up innocently enough, as a mild pain on his right side. When my father had visited his mother in Israel the previous summer, he coughed so much that Grandma ordered him to see a doctor. Back in Florida, he had an X-ray, but nothing showed up. It wasn’t until later that we realized the tumor was masked by scars from the tuberculosis he contracted while jailed as a teenager in Bucharest for not showing up for his job cleaning the streets. Then, he started losing his voice.

I wasn’t paying much attention to any of this because I had just transferred to the University of Chicago, where I was introduced to Plato, feminism and crime.

* * *

At dusk on a crisp fall evening, I am walking from my dorm on Greenwood Avenue to visit my older sister, Sabina, who is having dinner at a friend’s house a block away. Her transfer to the University of Chicago three years earlier had led me to this gothic-style campus surrounded by blocks of urban poverty on the city’s South Side. The house on Ellis Avenue is so close I don’t think anything of wandering over there myself, but when I get to the corner of 54th and Ellis, I see a man standing in front of an apartment building, gazing ahead into the twilight. He looks like trouble so I cross the street to the sidewalk running along a vacant parking lot.

The man trails me and steps in right beside me. “Give me your money,” he demands. I look at him and see a shiny black gun pointing at me from inside his trench coat. I hand him my wallet and he hands it back.
“Just give me your money.” I take out the few bills that I have and turn it over. Next he demands my jewelry. I take off my Timex watch with the leather band and place it in his hand. There is nothing else on me of any value.

By now we have approached the corner of a side street. The man points the gun down the street and says: “Go down there.” Suddenly, I panic, because I know what going down there means. I stand in the street crying, “Please leave me alone. Please.”

Seconds later, a white station wagon that looks like one of those unmarked police cars that patrol the neighborhood cruises down Ellis Avenue. In a flash, the man vanishes and I fly down the street.

At the South Side precinct office of the Chicago police department, I give the description of my suspect but it is too vague to be of much use: Black male, twenties, thin, with a blue knit cap over his head. The officer plugs the information into a computer and hundreds of criminals appear on the screen.

It is as hopeless as the gray Chicago sky that has cast a gloom over everything.

*   *   *

January 18, 1980: my twentieth birthday. I catch a plane at O’Hare Airport for Rochester, Minnesota, where my father has checked into the Mayo Clinic to find out why he still has the pain on his right side. That night, my mother, father, Sabina and I celebrate my birthday in an Italian restaurant buried in the maze of underground tunnels that shields us from the arctic weather outside. Though my father suspects the
worst, he puts on a cheerful smile when they bring out my cake with twenty-one tiny candles.

The next day, his fears are confirmed: It’s cancer and it’s in his lungs. For six months, his doctor in Florida has been wasting time giving him cough medicine for a sore throat. Now we find out it’s not only cancer, but it has also metastasized to his brain. *If only*, my mother will say later, *it had been caught earlier, things might have been different.* In the hallway of the massive hospital, the doctor tells my mother: “We were talking six months to a year. Now we’re talking three to six months.” After Sabina and I escort my mother into the elevator, the three of us stand there and cry. It’s inoperable and there’s nothing else we can do.

As my father begins chemotherapy, radiation and a steady downward spiral, he asks Sabina a simple question: “Why has this happened to me? I have tried to be a good person.”

There is no answer.

The decision is made that Sabina will quit graduate school and move home to help take care of our father. My mother will need to run the gift shop if my father can’t work. And once again, I am the outsider left out. As the middle child, I am too young to handle any responsibility and too old to be the baby of the family. I am the forgotten child, left alone in my room playing my flute and now left in Chicago studying the classics of Western Civilization.

When I come home for spring break, I ask my mother: “How come I’m not here to help out?”
My father, a stubborn chain-smoker, tries to explain to my eleven-year-old brother, Charles, that when he was a little boy, he didn’t know cigarettes were unhealthy. What he also didn’t know was how addictive nicotine was, which made all his attempts to quit an exercise in futility.

Charles asks: “Are you going to die, Daddy?”

My father says: “I don’t know. I’m going to get some treatment.”

* * *

There is no escape from the impending death of your father. But at the University of Chicago, I immerse myself in activity: I join the student symphony, start a group to campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment, become a reporter for the college newspaper—and discover boys. For the first time in my life, members of the opposite sex notice I exist. Not just one, but two.

The first is John Yu, a Harvard graduate who had shared an attic apartment in Cambridge with another student and me the summer after my freshman year at Boston University. When I transferred to the University of Chicago in the fall, John headed to California for medical school and insisted that we keep up a long-distance relationship. But a freshman in my humanities class, Jim Ryan, who happens to be Chinese-Irish, has his eyes on me. He wears round, wire-framed glasses and has a pure-white, all-American smile.

My parents, of course, know nothing about either John or Jim. They are of the wrong religion, but my father’s edict that I only date Jewish boys has sent me to do the
opposite. In my rebellion, I stay as far away from Hillel, the Jewish student center on
campus, as I can.

When I try to break up with John, he flies to Chicago, unannounced, arrives at
Greenwood Hall and pounds on my door. I won’t let him in and he won’t leave. The
argument escalates, attracting the attention of nearly everyone in the dorm. My
roommate arrives but can offer no advice. Three hours later, I open the dark wooden
door of my apartment, walk John to a hotel and hope that is the last I will ever see of
him.

* * *

My father loses his life, piece by piece. When he returns from the Mayo Clinic,
he sits in our living room with my mother and tries combing his thick, black hair,
which he had permed a few years earlier. Clumps of his curls just lift off onto the
comb. Then his eyelashes fall out too.

Despite the heavy doses of morphine and chemotherapy, my father insists on
keeping up some semblance of normal life. Every morning, he drives to his gift shop,
where he sells souvenirs and mesh bags of oranges and grapefruit. When the doctor
takes away his driving privileges, Sabina becomes his chauffeur. Outside the store, he
disappears into the parking lot to smoke marijuana his friend’s son has brought him.
When he walks back through the front glass door, he is smiling, relieved, if just for a
moment.

In the afternoons, Chuck comes over and sits with him in his second-floor
bedroom, overlooking our backyard pool and the Halifax River. It was along this
murky river that my father would fish for hours, once snagging a catfish that bit his foot and deposited a spiky bone into his flesh. One day, Chuck arrives and my father is sitting in a lawn chair on the back patio, his face covered with bandages.

"Beno, what the hell did you do?" Chuck asks.

His legs already unsteady, my father had tried to fix a sprinkler but had fallen flat on his face. Finding him on the concrete, Sabina had wiped up the blood on his face and patched him up. The next day, when she takes him to work, the employees are afraid to ask what happened.

*   *   *

By the time I arrive home for summer vacation, my father is bedridden. He distracts himself by reading the stock reports in the paper or watching movies on television. One afternoon, I head upstairs with a picture I've blown up of our two dogs: a pathetic-looking basset hound and a runt-like Pekinese. My father, a longtime canine lover, smiles for the first time in days. As he would have said in his Romanian-inflected English, *Thanks God*, there is still something that can cheer him up.

Though I know I should spend more time with my father, it is too hard for me to assume the caretaking role. So I decide to find a job. There is a new weekly in town, *The Daytona Beach Advocate*, and one morning I walk into its tiny storefront office with my résumé and college-paper clips. The editor, a tall, pot-bellied man named Jim, hires me for $100 a week—cash under the table.

There are rumors around town that Jim is an alcoholic and the paper won't last. But I don't notice anything unusual: Jim spends most of his time at City Hall,
where a controversy is brewing over billboard signs. I am assigned to cover the
Ormond Beach City Council, which spends most of its time debating storm sewer run-off and development easements. Between council meetings, I write features on a toy ship collector and a sand castle builder.

On a sweltering morning in July, I show up for work and find the front door padlocked, with not even a note of explanation. My newspaper job is over. At the hospital, my father suggests I go back to work at the gift shop, where I reluctantly begin selling toy alligators and orange juice wine once again.

Then John Yu reappears, and this time I can’t hide him from my parents. Though I am still in love with the Chinese-Irish freshman, John has decided to take a job as a medical intern at a hospital in Orlando so he can visit me during the summer. This is a surprise to me, and I am determined not to see him again.

If stalking had been recognized as a crime in 1980, I could have had John, an aspiring but unstable medical student, arrested. But it isn’t a crime and John begins one long summer of harassment. He shows up at the newspaper—before its demise—unannounced and won’t leave until I agree to get in his car. He appears at my parents’ house, even though he knows my father is bedridden with cancer. My father and I are home alone when John, whom my parents call “The Chinaman,” pulls up into the driveway one morning in July. Hearing the commotion downstairs, my father manages to make his way to the garage and shout at John: “Leave my daughter alone or I will call the police.”
My father does call the police but there is nothing they can do and the harassment goes on. Every evening about 9 o’clock, the phone rings and a male voice asks for me. When I pick up the receiver, there is dead silence. I know it’s him, though he doesn’t say a word.

* * *

As the summer months pass by, my father checks in and out of the hospital. When he is back in his bedroom, he hallucinates that he is in the hospital and tells my mother he wants to go home. She just walks to the sliding glass door and says, “We are home. There’s Sabina swimming in the pool.”

The progression of the disease makes my father too weak and disoriented to fight it anymore. Instead, he accepts his fate. After being confined to bed for five months, he calls Howard Kann, a man who belongs to our synagogue, and asks him to visit. When Howard walks into the bedroom, my father points to his closet and sternly says: “I’ve got a million shirts in there. Take them all.” Downstairs, we watch in bewilderment as Howard silently loads the shirts into his car.

In early August, an ambulance arrives at our house to take my father to the hospital again. This time, the doctor takes my mother aside and tells her the truth: Every organ in my father’s body has broken down—his kidneys and his heart—and barring some miracle, he will keep suffering and losing weight. The doctor recommends we remove the nutrients from his intravenous tube and two days later, my father slips into a coma.
Sabina and I sit on either side of his bed, each holding one of his hands. My mother is already making plans for the funeral, and calls the Hevra Kadisha Society, the Jewish men who must watch the body until it is buried. As we keep a vigil by his bed, Sabina and I watch his labored breathing, his chest rising up and down. Hours pass until it is pitch black outside. Then all of a sudden, he takes one enormous breath and stops. His body moves no more.

At home, I lie on my bed listening to Debussy’s *Trois Nocturnes*. The ethereal music reminds me of a peaceful place. I think of the bright white light and the tunnel I have read about in the books on dying. I play the record over and over again. It is the last time I will be able to listen to that music.

*In my dream, I am sitting in a canoe in a deep, dark place. There are voices and spirits around me. They want me to float away in my boat, but I won’t go. Finally I can resist no more. As I sail away, I feel my arm and my leg falling off.*

With my father gone, I am no longer whole.

At the funeral, there is a Masonic procession—a line of ten men who parade down the aisle wearing black suits, white gloves, maroon fez hats and carrying swords at their sides. Three of my father’s friends offer testimonials about a man who loved his country and gave selflessly to charity. Then the long row of cars passes by Temple Israel, where a new synagogue has been built with money donated in part by my father.

We ride in a black limousine to the cemetery, where we drop the ritual handful of dirt on the pine casket, decorated with an inlaid Jewish star. A year later, a gray
tombstone will be erected on this plot of ground bearing the simple epitaph: Robert Negrea, A Proud American.
Part I

The Proud American

My father (center), aboard the Sobieski, 1948
Chapter 1

Escape

"Send the Yids to Palestine and give Romania to the Romanians"

Romanian slogan

As a child growing up in a small beach town in Florida, I didn’t think much about my father’s boyhood in Romania. He didn’t talk about it and I never thought to ask. The Holocaust, I figured, was something that had happened to other people—the aging congregants in our synagogue with the numbers engraved into their wrinkled arms. If my father wasn’t like them, if he didn’t have the wrenching stories to tell about life in the concentration camps, what else was there to say?

Eighteen years after his death, I started to ask questions. Suddenly, as if I had just awoken from a long daydream, I wanted to know more. Why did my father live while half of Romania’s Jews died? What motivated this man, with his fourth grade education, to drive himself, day in and day out, to succeed? Why did he transform himself from someone who was indifferent about his Jewishness into an impassioned supporter of Israel? And why did he give away most of the money he earned to his children, an act of generosity that has allowed me to realize my own dream of adopting an orphan from the world he escaped?

In high school, I would rise at the crack of dawn on weekends and summer vacations and drive half-asleep with my father to his souvenir shop so we could open
the front door by 7 a.m.—just in case anyone wanted to buy a mesh bag of Florida oranges at that ungodly hour. The twenty-minute ride through the quiet streets of our town was always an uncomfortable silence in my father’s Pinto station wagon. Maybe I just wasn’t alert enough at daybreak to engage in conversation. Or maybe my father didn’t know what to say to his teenage daughter. But I would give anything now to relive those moments so that I could ask him all the questions I have been desperately trying to answer.

Instead, I have had to piece together fragments of his life from my mother, whose memory is unmistakably clear but who knows only sketchy details about my father’s boyhood. Over two years, I interviewed her, searching for a new twist on an old story. I flew to Israel to see my father’s two surviving sisters, Lola and Sophie. I immersed myself in the Holocaust, devouring books by rabbis, historians and survivors and roaming through all the great museums. Like the dogged reporter I once was, I accumulated many facts and filled many notebooks.

But could I come to know the real father who haunts me in memory? For no matter whom I questioned, the story never came out exactly the same. As I discovered, there are many versions of a life, alternate shades of the truth. Yet each detail I gathered made my father come alive, sometimes in ways I had not expected. In the process, my father’s history has become my history—an intricate tapestry I am still trying to unravel.

* * *
On my last trip to Israel, my cousin Shimon, a retired air force colonel, was driving my husband and me kamikaze-like along the highway to Jerusalem, where we planned to spend the weekend. From the back seat of his compact car, where I sat with a pile of notebooks and guide books on my lap, I announced to Shimon that I wanted to stop at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, to look up information about my father. He glanced back at me in the rear-view mirror with a wry expression on his face.

“What are you going to find?” he said, looking amused. “Nothing happened to the Jews in Romania.”

At that moment, whizzing by the wind-swept Judean hills, I might have believed him. For I was still in a blissful fog about my father’s country. A few years earlier, I had taken a class on Romanian culture at the local university, but all I remembered about it was that poets were revered in Romania and that Vlad the Impaler (aka Dracula) had murdered thousands of people by piercing their flesh on tall slender stakes outside his stone castle in Transylvania. Another image had lingered in my mind: listening to the radio on Christmas morning, 1989, and cringing at the news that Romanian revolutionaries had executed their Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu. Of the Holocaust in Romania, I knew only the barest facts. I had checked out a copy of the memoirs of Alexandre Safran, the former chief rabbi of Romania who had saved hundreds of Jews from the death camps, but hadn’t bothered to read it. In my state of ignorance, sitting in my cousin’s car, I wondered: compared to flying a fighter-bomber over Lebanon, surviving Romania during Second World War may have
seemed like a picnic to Shimon, who left Bucharest in 1960 when he was eight years old. But how could the destruction of 350,000 Romanian Jews mean nothing?

My cousin's mother, Lola, would tell me a different story. In her parlor in Rishon Le Zion, a suburb of Tel Aviv, she described, with much pain in her face, the pogrom in Bucharest in January 1941: the Iron Guard dragging dozens of Jews—including two rabbis—from their homes in the city's Jewish quarter and taking them to the municipal slaughterhouse. There, the fascists hanged their victims on hooks intended for cattle. They shot scores of other Jews, who had been stripped naked, in the forests on the outskirts of the city. They burned synagogues, destroyed stores and vandalized homes. At the end of three days of violence, 121 Jews were dead.

During the nightly raids, Lola said, my father would be the first to climb onto the roof of their apartment building to see what was happening. The rest of the family would stay inside, praying. But my father, who had little interest in religion, put his faith in luck. He believed in God, he once told my mother, but felt that God had somehow forgotten him. Instead, he lived by superstition. I can still remember his odd rituals, probably borrowed from ancient gypsy customs, that were supposed to ward off the evil spirits: when you enter a house, leave by the same door; after the birth of a baby, tie a large red ribbon on the crib; when you buy a house, sprinkle loose change on the floor; and if you lose something, turn a glass upside down in a corner of a room. As my father crouched on that roof in Bucharest, waiting for the fascists, I wonder what incantations he chanted to give him hope that he would be one of the lucky ones to survive.
In the far northeastern corner of Romania is a town called Botosani, a place known as the birthplace of the great poet Mihai Eminescu. My grandfather, Joseph Schwartz, moved there from Russia, where he had been captured by the German army during the First World War. In Botosani, Grandpa opened a shoe store and met his bride, Rachel, a seamstress who had a talent for cooking all the Romanian delicacies. They had eight children, four of whom died at a young age.

By the late 1930s, Botosani, as Lola recalled, had “begun to smell of war.” The town had already been a hotbed of anti-Semitism for decades: as early as 1891, Radu Ioanid writes in *The Holocaust in Romania*, the chief physician of Botosani had refused to see Jewish patients, and they were also barred from the only hospital in the town. At the onset of the Second World War, Jewish families began fleeing to Russia, even though pogroms there were already widespread. Yet my grandfather, an educated man who had read Shakespeare in Romanian, believed that his new country offered the promise of the good life, so he moved the family to Bucharest. He found work as a tailor, sewing officers’ uniforms. It was 1937, and my father was nine years old. He had just completed the fourth grade and would never return to school again.

My father’s short-lived education must have been a source of great embarrassment to him for he never admitted to me that he didn’t make it past the fourth grade. I learned this information from my mother, who found it amusing because my father had so much business savvy. But I wanted to know more: why did he leave school before he could learn to appreciate Shakespeare—like his father had
before him—calculate an algebra equation or conjugate a Latin verb? Was it because the Romanians had imposed quotas for Jewish children in the public schools—5.5 percent for primary grades and 7.5 percent in the high schools? Was it because Jewish families had to pay a tax—even though education was “free” in Romania—so their children could attend school? Was it because the Fascist government in Bucharest expelled all Jewish students and teachers from the public schools a year after the war broke out? Coincidentally, my father left school at the exact age that the Nazis dictated for Polish students in a 1940 secret memorandum by SS leader Heinrich Himmler, which I saw hanging on the wall of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum:

For the non-German population of the East, there must be no school higher than fourth grade of elementary school. The sole goal of this schooling is to teach them simple arithmetic . . . writing one’s name, and the doctrine that it is divine law to obey the Germans . . . I do not think that reading is desirable.

With the doors to public education closed, the Jewish community in Bucharest, which boasted more than 40 synagogues, responded by creating its own network of schools. They organized classes that met in the dark corners of synagogues and instructed students in the ancient teachings of the Talmud. But my father, who had no patience for learning Hebrew, did not attend. He had only one thing on his mind: getting a job.

He started working in a shoe store in Bucharest at the age of nine, cleaning and sweeping the floors. By the time he was 15, as my mother tells the story, he was
peddling shoes from the back of a motorcycle to peasants in the countryside; he later sold shoes from a booth in the Bucharest market. It is hard for me to picture my father as a budding entrepreneur when opportunities for Jews in Romania at the time were slamming shut. By 1940, the government’s campaign of Romanianization—the purification of the economy by removing Jews from the workforce—was in full gear. The Romanians drove most Jewish citizens from their jobs, passing laws barring them from working as actors, tradesmen, engineers, pharmacists, electricians, contractors and enlisted soldiers. Jewish doctors and physicians were only allowed to serve members of the “Mosaic” religion, as the Romanians called it. The Butcher’s Guild of Bucharest, the Society of Architects, the Journalists’ Union and countless other professional groups expelled their Jewish members. Yet none of this deterred my father from his determination to make a couple of lei selling shoes and stashing away his savings for the future, no matter how bleak it seemed.

Eventually, though, his freewheeling came to a halt. By 1940, the Romanians had ordered all Jewish men from the ages of eighteen to fifty-one to perform forced labor for the government, a regulation that was later expanded to include boys from the age of sixteen. My father’s job was to clean up the streets after the nightly air raids, picking up dead bodies or sweeping away the snow. I can see my father at sixteen years old, shuffling along the gutters in Bucharest with a broom in his hand, humiliated as the crowds passed by. As a Jew, his fellow citizens would not have considered him as one of their own, but in temperament and appearance, he was as full-blooded a Romanian as they were.
From here, things become somewhat fuzzy. It seems that sometime in 1942 my father did not report for air raid duty. The authorities found out, showed up at my grandparents' apartment and carted him off to jail. In my mother's version of the story, my father, who was always a sickly child, did not go to work because he couldn't: he had a cold. My Aunt Sophie remembered that my father was ill at the time and "didn't wish to make this public." Yet in another account of the story, Lola—and Shimon—insisted that my father simply decided he didn't want to clean the streets one day and played hookey. Whatever the reason, though, everyone seems to agree that he was jailed in Bucharest for nine months, where among other things, he contracted tuberculosis and learned how to sew.

*   *   *

The Romanians did not send their Jews to Auschwitz. Instead they created their own killing centers in a border region called Transnistria, a no-man's land in western Ukraine that had been seized by the Germans and given to Romania. Most of the Jews sent to Transnistria were slowly starved to death or shot by firing squad. The Holocaust historian, Raul Hilberg, estimates that of the 185,000 Jews deported to Transnistria, more than 100,000 perished between 1941 and 1944.

One of the survivors was my uncle Jackie, a soft-spoken engineer who married Sophie in Bucharest after his release from the camps. His clearest memories of his four years in Transnistria were the virtual lack of food and the overcrowding of two to three families in tiny living quarters. My father's uncle, Joseph Rachmuth, was also
sent to Transnistria, where he survived several grueling years before returning to Botosani. About this uncle, I know nothing more.

All in all, it could have turned out much worse for my father’s family, which was spared a death sentence in the concentration camps. Yet with nearly 400,000 Jews killed by the Romanians, why did my father’s family survive? The answer, as I would discover, depended on two factors: geography and politics. Even after establishing Transnistria, the Germans continued to pressure the Romanians to contribute to the “final solution” by deported the country’s remaining 300,000 Jews to Belzec, an extermination camp in Poland. Belzec was one of four killing centers where prisoners were immediately sent to the gas chambers upon arrival; nearly 600,000 Jews were killed there. But the Jews of Romania never made it to the front gates.

Since my father’s family lived in Bucharest, they were not persecuted as severely as Jews in the outlying provinces. Lola, for example, remembers that the Jews in Bucharest never had to wear the Star of David as a badge of hatred, while those who had remained in Botosani did—on the left side of the chest. And most of the Jews who were deported to Transnistria, Hilberg writes, came from the border provinces of Bukovina and Bessarabia, not Bucharest.

Still, why did Romania, a German ally and one of the most anti-Semitic countries in Europe, allow half its Jews to escape the Nazi death machine? The reason, according to Hilberg, was purely political.

By the summer of 1942, Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, had reached an agreement with the Germans to begin deportation of all Romania’s Jews. A month
before, Adolf Eichmann had stated in a report that the transports were to start in September from Romania to Poland. The only step left was for the Romanian Commissar for Jewish Affairs, Radu Lecca, to visit Berlin to discuss the details.

But when Lecca arrived in the capital in late August, Hilberg says, the top-ranking Nazi officials ignored him. Martin Luther, the representative of the German Foreign Office, did not meet with him, and another German official, Legationsrat Rademacher, was suddenly called away in the middle of a conversation with Lecca. The Germans later realized their mistake, but then made the matter worse when two Nazi officials blamed each other in a series of letters to the Romanians. By that time, though, the damage had already been done: the Romanian government reversed its decision to deport 300,000 Jews—among them my father and his family—to the death camps.

Could what Hilberg calls such “trivialities” as the brushoff of a Romanian minister and a blundering dispute between two Nazi officers have changed a decision to “deliver more than 300,000 Jews to their deaths?” (502) The Romanians were not fickle; they were opportunists. By the time the insulted minister had returned to Bucharest, the Romanians realized that the Germans would not win the war and they were no longer willing to buckle under the Nazi demands.

So my father, sitting on that roof in Bucharest, would not go to the death camps because a Romanian minister had been snubbed in Berlin. Maybe it was luck, after all.
My father always said that the Russians were worse than the Nazis, but he never explained why. When the Red Army invaded Romania in August 1944, the Soviets replaced fascism with hard-line communism and “liberated” the Jews, as Rabbi Safran called it, from the Nazis. Yet how could the Russians, despite their long history of anti-Semitism, have been worse than the Nazis? My mother remembered one incident my father told about the Russians: when he was peddling shoes in the countryside from his motorcycle, he stopped in a bar one day and a couple of Russian soldiers who were drinking vodka started calling him “pretty boy” and other lurid names. My father was afraid they were going to kill him, so he just sat down and waited until they became so drunk that they wouldn’t notice he had slipped away. When I asked Lola about the Russians, she said they drank a lot and stole watches. “But,” she added, “they didn’t kill no one.”

In his memoirs, Rabbi Safran says the Russians exerted control by infiltrating the Jewish organizations in Romania, often with Communist Jews whose loyalty to the state was unquestioned. The Communists crushed any hopes the Romanian Jews had of immigrating to Palestine, where they could at last escape the remaining vestiges of anti-Semitism. Even the Communist Jews, Safran writes, claimed that “it made no sense for the Jews living in Romania under an egalitarian Communist regime to be politically preoccupied with the Eretz Israel matter” (193). Those who disagreed with this philosophy were subjected to threats and harassment. Rabbi Safran, who had spent
years trying to rescue Romania’s Jews, would not bow to the Communist ideology; eventually he was charged with treason and forced out of the country.

My father, who did not become a Zionist until late in life, had no desire to till the soil in Palestine. When I asked my aunt what his ambition was as a teenager, she said: “Money—only money.” In a communist country, that was a difficult if not impossible commodity to find, so my father decided to escape. At eighteen years old, his dream was to get rich and there was only one place he wanted to go—America.

When he told his parents he was leaving Romania, my grandfather went to the synagogue and sat shiva, the ritual of mourning for the dead. He figured he would never see his son again. On Yom Kippur Eve, while my grandfather was in shul, my father boarded a train with a group of refugees headed for Hungary. Just before crossing the border, they carved their names into the bark of a large tree so that those coming after them would know they had made it over the line. A boy who couldn’t go any farther ran back to Bucharest and informed my grandparents that he had seen the name Beno scratched into the tree.

The band of refugees slipped into the woods where they joined a fherrer, an underground leader who had been hired to take them to freedom. By day, they went into hiding, sleeping in farmhouses or in the woods. At night, they walked for miles through the dark, towering forests of Hungary and Austria—toward the American zone in Berlin. Along the way, a soldier—either a Hungarian or a Russian (no one can remember)—stopped the group and threatened to shoot them. My father, according to
my mother, offered the soldier the only possessions he had: his watch and a piece of gold he had hidden in his shoe. The soldier then lowered his weapon and let them go.

Once they arrived in Berlin, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, an agency that had been rescuing Jews from Europe, picked up the refugees, fed them sardines and drove them by truck to Paris. It was there that my father heard the crushing news there were only two countries that would accept him: Bolivia was taking immigrants but not Jews, and Canada was taking Jews but only orphans. I can imagine his disappointment when he learned that his dream of living in America had instantly vanished. And I can guess why he ultimately chose Canada as his destination—it was closer to his promised land, where untold fortunes awaited him.

Before he could sail off to Canada, though, HIAS had to remake him into an under-aged orphan. The French police, in cooperation with the agency, staged a raid on the house where my father was staying and brought all the refugees down to headquarters. There the police made phony documents for them so that they could forge new identities. On that piece of paper, my father, Beno Schwartz, became Robert Negrea, age fourteen. Since Schwartz means “black” in Yiddish, my father took the non-Jewish sounding surname Negrea, which means “black” in Romanian. Within a matter of days, he boarded the Sobietski, an Italian ship sailing for Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The earliest photograph I have of my father shows a tall, lanky young man standing on the deck of that ship, his arms around the shoulders of two friends. His
long black hair is blowing in the wind against the backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean. In his eyes, I see a look of sheer determination, as if he were ready to take on the world.
Chapter 2
A Match Made at Ostro’s

The gateway for the refugees who flooded into Canada after the war was Pier 21, a narrow building overlooking the harbor in Halifax. When my father arrived in 1948, the port was still swarming with war brides, homeless children, camp survivors and defectors from the Communists. I can picture my father jostling his way through the crowd of new arrivals, trying to reach the train that would shuttle him to his home in Montreal: an orphanage. He was twenty-one years old and couldn’t speak a word of English—a poor prospect for an adoption. But when he reached Montreal, there was one couple who stopped by and took a liking to this lanky Romanian with ambition in his eyes. They offered to take him home and send him to school, but my father refused their kindness. All he wanted was a job, not a new family.

He found work in a drug store, took night classes in English, and rented a room from a Jewish woman named Mrs. Brown. In 1948, the Jewish Federation in Montreal had determined that immigrants needed to earn at least $25 a week to survive. If any of the refugees came up short, the federation would pay them the difference. Since my father had escaped Europe with the help of the Hebrew Immigration and Aid Society, he wasn’t alone in this strange, cold country. The Jewish community in Montreal watched over him as though he were a son lost in the world.

After arriving in Canada, my father, a smoker since adolescence, became worried whether he had fully recovered from his bout with tuberculosis. His doctor
sent him to a sanitarium in Préfontaine, a village nestled in the Laurentian Mountains two hours north of Montreal. The doctors there collapsed one of my father’s lungs, declared him healthy and free to return home. Yet surrounded by the icy blue lakes, lush mountains and resort hotels, he decided to spend the summer in the country. So he took a job waiting tables at Ostro’s Inn, a hotel nestled on a steep hill in the town of St. Faustin.

The Laurentians were a haven for Jewish families from Montreal because of their abundance of freshwater lakes and cheap cottages—a Canadian version of the Catskills. In the midst of dozens of Yiddish-speaking vacationers, many of whom were from Eastern Europe, my father probably felt at home: the Old World had transplanted itself to the picturesque countryside of Quebec.

Among the throngs of tourists who flocked to the Laurentians that summer were my mother’s parents, who had rented a small bungalow in the mountains with a menagerie of aunts, uncles and cousins. My grandparents had been vacationing in the Laurentians for at least a dozen years—despite the scare during the summer of 1939. That was the year a French priest from the village of Val David enlisted a bunch of boys and began torching all the cottages that had been rented to Jews. Word spread quickly from one family to another and when the news reached my grandmother, Bobbie, she woke her son and daughter in the middle of the night. Minutes later, they had stuffed their clothes into their suitcases and fled to a hotel. They never found out whether the priest—the galochim as Bobbie called him—had been arrested.
At the end of her first year at McGill University, my mother was a struggling piano student who had just flunked English literature and was looking for a summer job. On the advice of her best friend Rosa, she caught a streetcar to Baron De Hirsch, a Jewish charity in Montreal, where she saw a help wanted sign on the bulletin board: “Counselor needed. Helps to play piano. Call Ostro’s Inn.” The next day, she walked over to Mr. Ostrovsky’s house in the Jewish section of the city and asked if the job was still open. Though she couldn’t play anything by ear, Mr. Ostrovsky, a stout, balding man, hired her on the spot. Her salary was $10 a week.

The entertainment at Ostro’s that summer was a couple of Polish refugees the hotel had hired from Toronto. All week long, my mother would accompany the duo belting out Yiddish lider for their performances on Wednesday and Saturday nights. Or else she would practice a few Russian songs to fill up the time when the entertainers were changing costumes. Between rehearsals, she would dine with the children of the hotel guests—most of whom were Jewish laborers from Montreal—so that they could eat alone.

In the children’s dining room, my mother was served by a slim, swarthy waiter who she heard was from Romania. She thought he looked like Tyrone Power or Errol Flynn—the movie stars of her day. One evening, as he walked by, she mentioned her favorite dessert: “If you have baked apples, could you bring me more than one?” The next day at dinner, a row of sugar-glazed, warmed apples was lined up at her place at the table.
The waiter, who called himself Beno, asked her to take a walk a few nights later, after he had finished cleaning the dishes. When dinner was over, my mother went upstairs to the tiny room she shared with Mr. Ostrovsky’s niece just above the kitchen. A few moments after the cutlery had stopped clattering, she heard a knock at the door. Opening it, she was astounded: The tall Romanian was wearing a gray turtleneck, gray slacks and looked gorgeous. As they strolled around the lake in the late June twilight, he said he was treating all the waiters to a drink that night because his sister was getting married in Romania. My father, generous even when he couldn’t afford to be, didn’t want to pass up a toast to celebrate his sister’s good fortune.

As the story goes, he asked my mother out every night after that first walk around Lake Faustin. While he chatted about his future plans, my mother peppered the conversation with questions about his background in Romania, a country she knew nothing about. How did he make it to Canada alone? What had he done in Paris? Where was his family? One starlit night, he surprised her by promising her a taste of paradise: “You stick with me, and I’ll take you to Paris.” He was making $12.50 a week and probably couldn’t buy a new pair of shoes, let alone a trip to Paris. My mother looked at him, believing every word.

It wasn’t long before he had a chance to prove his loyalty. One afternoon my mother was practicing with the male singer in the dining room when he unexpectedly fondled her breast. My mother shrieked and ran into the kitchen, where she found my father counting cutlery. After hearing what had happened, he grabbed a butcher knife, charged into the dining room and threatened to emasculate the offending singer if he
touched his girl again. It is not hard to picture my father, his Romanian temper flaring, with the long blade in his hand, threatening this singer over such an insult to my mother. Needless to say, the short, stocky man was so scared he stayed away from my mother the rest of the summer.

Giddy with her new beau, my mother wrote Bobbie to tell her that she had met "a nice Romanian boy." Bobbie knew right away that he was a refugee and was afraid her dreams of a life of wealth and prestige for her daughter were about to be shattered. She and Izzie were both immigrants themselves—Bobbie had come from Austria in 1914 and Zaida, as we called him, from Ukraine in 1912. But no matter: her daughter was not going to marry a "greener." Hoping to put a stop to such nonsense, she convinced Zaida to catch a train to the Laurentians and bring their daughter home.

Once they arrived at Ostro's, Bobbie insisted that she wasn't sending her daughter to college to marry an immigrant who had just stepped off the boat, could barely speak a word of English and didn't have a cent in his pocket. She figured my mother could do better and marry a college man—someone like Harry Pinker, the budding law student, or Eddie Mandel, the future doctor—whom my mother had dated at school that year. Bobbie ordered her to pack up her clothes and come home.

But my mother, eighteen and smitten with love, would not leave. "Ma, I'm not going home," she said. "I love what I'm doing here." Yet Bobbie would not give up. Desperate to do something, she grabbed Mr. Ostrovsky and demanded that he make sure that her daughter return to her room by ten o'clock every night. Mr. Ostrovsky was not amused.
“Mrs. Cohen,” he complained, “I’m not a policeman for the people who work for me. That’s between you and your daughter. As long as she does her work, I’m not going to watch when she comes in.”

Finally, Zaida, always calm and level-headed, decided he could find nothing wrong with his daughter seeing the Romanian waiter. “Leave her alone,” he said. “She’s playing the piano and she’s playing with children. If she goes for a walk at night, what’s so terrible?”

And so the evening strolls in the cool summer twilight resumed, and after the season swept to a close, my mother decided to bring my father to meet the rest of the family. But when they arrived at the Cohen cottage twenty miles south of Ostro’s, Bobbie didn’t even say hello: she pretended not to notice that they had even walked in the front door. The couple looked around nervously until Auntie Clara, herself a Romanian, broke the silence: “You come in and sit down,” she said and offered them something to eat.

My father, though, could tell he wasn’t welcome. Instead of staying overnight, he caught a train that afternoon back to Montreal. As a refugee, he must have been accustomed to rejection, but coming from one of his own—this was something else. The next day, Auntie Clara’s daughter, Mickey, took my mother for a walk around the lake and tried to console her downcast cousin.

“Marylin,” she said, “if you feel in your heart that you love this guy, don’t jump to anything. But if you feel that you love him, you stick to your guns, regardless of what your mother says.”
My mother took the advice to heart: as she headed back to the city, she fully intended to disobey her parents and marry her Romanian waiter.

* * *

Someday, my father swore, he would own a Cadillac. But as a refugee in Montreal, all he could afford was a beat-up, second-hand car with the $1,000 Bobbie’s neighbor, Mr. Rosenblum, had lent him. With a car—no matter its condition—came the promise of more money. When he returned from the Laurentians, my father moved up the ladder from clerk at Brown’s Department Store—owned by his Romanian friend Mr. Kushmaro—to peddler, an independent salesman of sorts.

The job of peddling merchandise from one apartment house to another in the tenements of Montreal was grueling work. But my father, who had picked up French during his yearlong sojourn in Paris, was a natural at selling anything. I can imagine him climbing up and down the stairs in the working-class neighborhoods, knocking on doors and hooking customers with a smile, a twinkle in his eye, and an offer of free slippers from Zaida’s shoe factory. For many of the poor French families in Montreal, buying from peddlers like my father was the only way they could shop.

In the 1940s, the peddler’s card was the equivalent of a charge card. For a dollar’s deposit, the customers could go to Brown’s—the only store that contracted with the peddlers—and pick out a new winter coat or vacuum cleaner. For five dollars a week, they could outfit the whole family for every holiday of the year. In return, they only had to pay off their purchases once a week—plus interest.
My father peddled his way around Montreal for four years, building up a sizable clientele on his long white cards. But his success as a door-to-door salesman did not impress Bobbie. Nor did the bouquet of flowers he sent to my mother on the thirtieth of every month to commemorate their first date. Bobbie allowed her daughter to see him only on one condition: she had to accept dates from anyone else who called up.

I wonder why my father kept coming back. It was probably sheer determination to win the prize: the will to succeed. If that meant charming the in-laws, he would swallow his pride and treat them like royalty. So on Sunday afternoons, he offered to take them for a drive in his old jalopy. Since Zaida couldn’t afford a car, it must have been a thrill for my grandparents to climb into the back seat and head to Mount Royal, the steep, winding park that towered over the city, and buy an ice cream cone. On these excursions, Zaida would often gush over my father’s skill behind the wheel: “That guy could turn that car around on a dime,” he would say proudly. My father even drove them all to Plattsburgh, New York, where my mother, delirious with the notion of buying something—anything—in the States, snatched up earrings, makeup, raincoats and shoes at the Walgreens in town. To bypass Canadian customs, she and Bobbie cut off the labels on their purchases and threw away the shoes on their feet so that they could walk out wearing a brand new pair of American high heels.

But the Sunday afternoon outings were just precious pauses in the tension building over the blossoming courtship. One evening, Aunt Lilly and Uncle Martin, who lived just a few blocks down from Bobbie’s apartment on Park Avenue, stopped
by for coffee. As my mother pranced through the parlor showing off a framed picture of her handsome European beau, Auntie Lilly asked: Why do you think he’s so cute? What do you need him for? Who is he? A refugee?

My mother became hysterical, throwing herself on Bobbie’s bed sobbing, until Zaida slammed his fist on the dining room table. “Get out of here,” he shouted to Bobbie’s aunt and uncle. “I don’t want to see you in this house again.” Aunt Lillie and Uncle Martin were so upset at being thrown out of Bobbie’s apartment that they didn’t dare speak to her for another six months.

Caught between my father’s sentimental gifts and Bobbie’s obvious disapproval, my mother didn’t know where to turn. One day at her piano lesson with Mr. Blume, a German immigrant who taught at the conservatory, she broke down in tears. “You’re having problems, aren’t you?” Mr. Blume asked. My mother nodded and said she needed help. So Mr. Blume, who relied on psychology to calm his nerves whenever he performed, sent her to a woman on Côte de Neiges Road on the other side of the city.

At the third session, the psychologist asked my mother if she really wanted to marry this man. She nodded. “Well go home and tell your mother that you’re going to marry him.” And that is what she did.

“Ma,” she said after jumping off the streetcar, “if you don’t make a wedding, we’re going to elope.”

* * *
Cohen Brothers, a factory that made decorative fur strips for overshoes, was owned by the three Cohen brothers: Issie, Harry and Dave. In Montreal, where the winters turned the streets into streams of salty slush, overshoes were constantly in demand. But eventually, the overlying fur pieces that were once fashionable became passé. So the Cohen brothers launched Sterling Slipper, which made fine leather shoes, pumps and moccasins. The business was a grand success and even competed with the European imports. But the Cohen brothers were not exactly savvy businessmen; they spent much of their time making prank calls from the upstairs office on the unwitting pedestrians who came in to use the telephone on the main floor. The brothers drained most of the factory’s profits and couldn’t keep up with the payments. After one bad season, Sterling Slipper went belly up.

The day the factory closed, Bobbie and my mother were standing on the sidewalk, waiting for Issie to go home. When he finally emerged from the front door, he placed his head against the brick wall and tears trickled down his cheeks. It was the first time my mother had seen her father cry.

Bobbie was forced to take a job as a secretary at the yeshiva across the street from her apartment. Zaida and his brother Dave opened up a clothing store on Notre Dame Street with the few dollars they had. There was hardly enough money to throw a wedding, but Bobbie was determined to marry her daughter off in style. She spent her last $2,000 to rent out Temple Beth David, a Romanian schul on Hutchinson Street.
On June 3, 1952, a Tuesday night, my father and mother, still young at the ages of twenty-six and twenty-one respectively, were married in front of a crowd of two-hundred guests. The next day, they climbed into his new green car and headed south for a honeymoon in New York. My mother became ill after eating a bacon sandwich on the way down, but when she recovered, they had a blast. They browsed through the glitzy department stores in Manhattan, dined with my father’s friends from Romania, and saw two shows on Broadway: *South Pacific* and *Pal Joey*.

* * *

The newlyweds rented an $80-a-month studio on Van Horn Street that had a piano, a galley kitchen and a couch that converted into a bed. My mother’s friend Rosa had bought her kitchen service for four: a set of yellow plates, bowls, cups and saucers. As my mother was putting away her shiny new dishes, she realized she didn’t own a single kitchen towel. She called her friend Barbara and they hopped on a streetcar, heading for downtown to buy some towels. My mother thought it was hilarious that she didn’t have one kitchen towel to dry her dishes. My father was humiliated. "No kid of mine is going to get married and start out life like this—like a bunch of bums," he swore angrily upon her return with her dime store purchases. My father would spend the rest of his life making sure that his children would have all the advantages—whether that amounted to a kitchen towel or an education—he never had.
Money was tight, but my mother, enrolled in her final year of music school, helped bring in a few dollars teaching piano. Every day, from three o'clock on, she traipsed around Montreal giving lessons in the homes of the well-to-do Jewish families in Westmount and Mount Royal—at the rate of $4 an hour. Twice a year, her students would give a recital in her studio apartment and the proud mothers would sit on gray rented folded chairs with a plate of tea sandwiches in their laps, listening to minuets.

As a child growing up in Montreal, my mother liked to tell me, she had dreamed of becoming a school teacher. For entertainment, she and her friends would play school in back of her apartment building on Park Avenue, my mother scrawling the lessons in colored chalk onto the brick wall. Her decision was clinched when her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Carter, had blurted out in front of her class that my mother, Marilyn Esther Cohen, was a math illiterate. Humiliated, the scrawny child with buck teeth decided that that was not the way to teach and pledged she would one day show Mrs. Carter she could do better.

But when she entered McGill University in 1949, her hopes were quickly dashed by the Dean of Education, Professor Hughes. Shortly after matriculation, my mother and three other women, who had attended the all-Jewish Baron Byng High School and were now enrolled in the education program, were called into the dean’s office. The dean told the young women they were welcome to sign up for the bachelor of arts program in education, but the master’s degree was off limits. “I must tell you,” he said, “we do not hire Hebrew girls.”
With no prospect for a job, my mother decided to switch to music, hoping she could at least teach piano. But as things turned out, by the time she graduated in 1953, there was such a shortage of teachers that the Protestant schools (there were no public schools in Montreal) were hiring anybody—even the “Hebrew” girls. But it was too late for my mother.

* * *

At Brown’s Department Store, my father was getting antsy. In the afternoons, when the peddlers had finished their rounds, they would sit in a back room, smoking and playing cards. One day my father looked at the salesmen lounging around and he saw his future staring him in the eye. “I’ve got to get out of this,” he told my mother.

It was 1954 and my grandfather, whose store was languishing, was also looking for a new line of work. Zaida had heard a salesman mention that a general store was for sale in Rockland, a small town ninety-eight miles west of Montreal. My father suggested they take a drive the next Sunday afternoon to have a look.

The store was owned by Sam Meyerovitch, a Jewish man who had started the business in the living and dining room of his two-story house back in 1907. Eventually, he moved Magasin Meyer into the storefront next door. When my parents first stepped inside, it looked like something out of the Victorian era. The entire right wall was filled with patent drugs and a rolling ladder was leaning against the shelves to reach the bottles of medicine stacked near the ceiling. In the center of the store was a large canopy covering a huge table heaped with sewing notions: ribbons, thread,
buttons, hooks, material by the yard. There were ladies’ girdles, cotton dresses, men’s suits, shoes, coats, toothpaste, dishes and all sorts of remedies for farm animals.

My parents and grandparents had tea with Mr. Meyerovitch in his parlor, shook hands and left. The next Wednesday, Mr. Meyerovitch came to Montreal to try and strike a deal. Zaida was convinced that he should buy the store, but there was one obstacle: without a car, he wouldn’t be able to stock up on merchandise from the wholesalers in Montreal and Ottawa.

My father, though, had a car and more drive than my grandfather would ever have. I can see him looking around the store at the dusty shelves and smelling the sweet scent of success. He not only had a car, but cash to invest: After four years of peddling in Montreal, the customer accounts on his white cards were worth $18,000. It wasn’t enough to buy Magasin Meyer and the house, which together cost $24,000, but he could eventually pay it back.

When my mother’s friend, Rosa, heard she was thinking of moving to Rockland, a predominantly French Catholic town in the hinterlands of eastern Ontario, she was dumbfounded. “Are you crazy?” she said. “What’s a Jewish girl going to do there?”

But it was all settled. My father asked my mother if she wanted to live in Rockland. She asked him if he thought he could make any money. The town didn’t have a synagogue, a kosher deli or a bagel shop, but it had a quaint brick house with a white lattice balcony off the second floor and a rangy fir tree in the front yard. For the greener and his bride, that was enough.
Chapter 3

When in Rome

My sister, Sabina, came kicking and screaming into the world at the Ottawa Civic Hospital on July 26, 1956—a breech birth, my mother said. Her difficult delivery, after eighteen hours of labor, was a sign of things to come. For even as a squirming infant, Sabina did not want to play by anyone else’s rules, and she quickly made it clear that as the first-born child, she would control the household.

Sabina had my parents wrapped around her stubby little fingers by the time she could walk. When she didn’t get her way, she would kick my mother (“She had a foot like a horse,” Mom once said), run next door to my father’s store, and look up at him with her big blue eyes until he would pull a Raggedy Ann or a cuddly, stuffed dog from the shelf. With breathless excitement, she would fly home and proudly show my mother her new toy: “Look what Daddy gave me,” she would say, as if to warn my mother that she had better not boss her around.

When my parents scolded her, Sabina would hide things behind the tall gray chest in the corner of their bedroom. Suddenly, my mother’s lipstick and rouge were missing; my father’s underwear and socks had disappeared. It wasn’t until spring cleaning, when our housekeeper Muriel pulled the chest away from the wall, that Sabina’s secret stash was discovered, a heap of odds and ends piled high in her fits of anger.
In the evening, my father would spend hours drawing pictures with Sabina or painting her fingernails on the couch in our den with the green and brown diamond-patterned floor. But just as the nail polish had dried, Sabina would suddenly change her mind: "I don’t like that color. Take it off." So my father would dutifully remove the polish from his princess’s precious fingernails and paint them all over again.

When I arrived on the scene, Sabina was three and a half years old and not about to give up her place as the apple of her daddy’s eye. The day my parents brought me home from the hospital and handed me to the French nurse waiting at our house, Sabina climbed up the wooden stairs to the nursery to see what the fuss was all about.

"Here’s the baby, Sabina," my mother said, her eyes gleaming with pride.

"Here’s the baby, your new sister."

Sabina took one quick look at me and howled: “Would you please tell that kid to shut up?” Then she toddled her way back down the stairs.

By the time my parents had settled in Rockland in 1954, my grandparents were still living in the same cramped apartment in Bucharest. After the war, they had been forced to take in a contingent of Russian soldiers who ordered them to stay in their room—except for meals. Now through a relief organization, my father was sending them shipments of streptomycin, which they were selling on the black market in Romania. It was time, my father decided, for them to come live with us.

Sabina took an immediate dislike to these two strangers who suddenly showed up speaking in that strange language my parents sometimes used—Yiddish. In the
store, my parents greeted their customers in French, but at home, they would slip into Yiddish when they wanted to hide something: a family secret or a bit of neighborhood gossip. With the arrival of my grandparents, Jewish—as my mother called it—became the language of the house since that was the only way my mother could communicate with her inlaws, whom she had never met before. But Sabina could have cared less about Yiddish, Romania or the hard lives my grandparents had led in Bucharest. When my grandmother, in the few English words she knew, asked her for some help just after moving in, Sabina said curtly: “Shut up. You’re not my boss.”

With such a precocious little girl for a sister, it seemed natural that I would become the opposite to balance things out: a placid, easy-going child who got along with everyone. I was so quiet, in fact, that nobody seemed to notice me. My mother worried that my father did not pay me enough attention, but with two daughters at home, he didn’t want to choose between us; instead he retreated into the world of work. His idea of being a good father was to make a good living.

Yet even with my father off selling cows’ medicine or sewing notions, I was not starved for attention. My grandparents doted on me since Sabina wouldn’t have anything to do with them. They even gave me a Romanian name: Sherricu. When Grandpa wasn’t hunched over my mother’s sewing machine, altering suits for my father’s customers, he would strap me in my stroller and walk me up and down Edward Street, where our house was sandwiched between Magasin Meyer and a Shell gas station. Or he would push me on the swingset in the back yard, next to the arched white wooden trellis and our lonely lilac bush.
Sabina seemed to despise everyone in our town, which was so small it still had a two-room schoolhouse: grades one to four in one room, and five to eight in the other. She particularly disliked a shy Protestant boy by the name of Greg who came to play with her in the afternoons. Every day, not more than a half hour after he had arrived, Greg would walk home sobbing, passing the store where my father would be standing under the red and green awning with his arms crossed.

“Greg, what’s wrong?” my father would ask.

“Sabina smacked me,” he would say.

One afternoon my father warned Sabina that if she slapped Greg again, she would be punished. But sure enough, the next day, at precisely the same time, Greg was trudging home again in tears. This time, though, Sabina was nowhere to be found. My father cruised up and down the narrow streets of Rockland in his green car looking for her. He called our neighbors and friends and finally the police. But no one had seen Sabina.

The search party was still looking an hour and a half later when Sabina suddenly crawled out of one of the horse stables that stood against the back of the store and nonchalantly greeted my frantic father: “Hi Dad,” she said, as if nothing had happened.

Her bottom got a good whipping that day.

* * *

As the owner of a general store, my father knew just about everyone in Rockland—population 3,400. The French customers who would come in to buy a new
wool suit or a pair of winter boots would call him “Monsieur Meyer” and my mother “Mademoiselle Meyer.” On Saturday nights, when the farmers would drive into Rockland for a hair cut, they would drop their wives off at the store to browse through the hair coloring kits, print dresses and darning thread. After a beer at the town tavern, the men would return to buy some medicine for their pigs or a new pair of overalls. And when business was slow, my father would sit at the back desk with his best friend, Bill Cameron, who worked maintenance in Ottawa, playing dominoes.

Though we were the only Jewish family in town, the customers didn’t seem to mind. And those who did were given the same measure of respect as anyone else. One afternoon, a short French Canadian from Ottawa walked into the store, sat down on a stool and waited for my father to fit him into a pair of shoes.

“J’ai fait la route d’Ottawa pour éviter les Juifs,” (I came all the way from Ottawa to avoid the Jews), the man said, smiling and looking up at my father. Apparently the Jews owned most of the department stores in Ottawa and the man figured he could surely avoid dealing with such people by patronizing the smaller businesses out in the country. My father just glanced over at my mother, who was standing near the cash register, and winked.

At times like this, my father would remember one of his favorite sayings: When in Rome, do as the Romans do. That simple adage guided our life in Rockland, a town that was 90 percent French Catholic and not quite sure what to do with people who weren’t. With no synagogue for miles around, my mother joined the Ladies Aid Society of the United Church and every month, gave the report on the church
missionaries and their work in Angola. Every Christmas, we would walk down Edward Street to Beulah and Bill Cameron’s house, where we would decorate the spiny evergreen in their living room and madly tear open presents with their daughter, Donna.

There were other predictable rhythms in our life: Sunday afternoons, my father would drive to Montreal, spend the night at Bobbie’s house, rise at dawn the next morning and after leaving a ten dollar bill on the kitchen table, he would scout out the wholesalers. Wednesday afternoons, he and my mother would drive the nineteen miles to Ottawa to buy cartons of patent medicine and sewing notions, dine on Chinese food and catch a movie. And my mother would spend one day each week in the nearby town of Cumberland, giving piano lessons to students at the elementary school.

We had assimilated nearly perfectly into this quaint Canadian town when my father discovered he was deeply into debt. He had apparently bought so much merchandise that he couldn’t afford to pay his bills. The bank, which had loaned him $3,000, was now threatening to close him down.

In those days, if a Jew was in trouble, he would automatically turn to another member of the tribe for help. Who else would help a Romanian immigrant who spoke broken English and was facing bankruptcy? With nowhere else to go, my father drove to Montreal to see Issie Rosenblum, Bobbie’s neighbor who had loaned my father the money to buy his first car. Mr. Rosenblum had faith in my father and believed he had the makings of a sharp businessman: “That boy has ambition,” Mr. Rosenblum once said. “But he’s got no one to help him out.”
My father arrived at the paper mill where Mr. Rosenblum worked for his brother and explained his dilemma. Mr. Rosenblum simply said: "Follow me." He walked into the back office, where his brother Jack, the president of the mill, was sitting at his desk. He went to the safe, opened it up and pulled out a wad of bills. Counting out $3,000, he said, "Here you are," and my father’s troubles were over.

* * *

When my father came of age in Romania in the 1940s, a Jew could not think of voting—let alone aspire to a political office. But in Canada, it was possible to have a say in local government, so my father ran for the town council. The world of politics, though, even in a speck of a town like Rockland, was down and dirty: during my father’s first campaign, his tires were slashed and when he ran for re-election, someone slit his suit jacket while he was sitting in an auditorium waiting to give a speech. My mother was convinced the mischief was motivated by anti-Semitism: “If they paint a swastika on the store,” she warned, “we’re leaving.” But they never did. Instead, my father was elected to the council two times, and after each victory, a motley crew of men who looked like lumberjacks came to our house with bottles of beer to celebrate.

Of all the issues my father could have tackled as a councilman, he chose something that wasn’t an issue at all: the business hours. In Rockland, all stores had to abide by the same schedule: Wednesday afternoons, Friday nights and all day Sunday, they were ordered, by town ordinance, to close. This frustrated my mother to no end because it meant that all the stores were open on Saturday nights. And instead of
standing at the cash register, she wanted to play bridge or poker with Beulah, Bill and their friend Rosie Moffatt.

"We have no life," she complained incessantly.

For no other reason than the sake of their social life, my father proposed changing the hours so that the stores would remain open on Friday nights instead of Saturdays, and to his surprise, his fellow council members concurred. From then on, Beulah—always armed with a couple of homemade pies—Bill and Rosie whiled away their Saturday nights at our house playing cards.

The first public park in Rockland was also built under my father's political tenure: a large, grass-covered square off Main Street with its very own pool. The park was named after Simon Morris, an Englishman who had left his inheritance to the town. But when my mother took Sabina to the park for her maiden dip in the pool, they had to wait until the priest said a blessing over the water, as though it were being baptized. My mother never took Sabina back to Simon Morris Park again.

*   *   *

By the time I could walk, Sabina had devised new ways of torturing me. In the winter, she took to throwing me over headfirst in the snow banks in front of our house, where my mother would set us out to play. One day she nearly decapitated me by twirling a snow shovel round and round like a spinning top, missing my small blonde head by just a couple of inches. Since she was always angry at someone, it wasn't a surprise that one of the first sentences I could utter was: "Sabina smad."
But there was only so much abuse a two-year-old could take and I finally decided to get even. Sabina was leaning over the coffee table in the family room drawing a picture one day when I sneaked up behind her and firmly planted my teeth on her back. Craving the sublime taste of revenge so desperately, I wouldn’t let go. When my mother walked into the parlor and saw me gripped onto Sabina’s back, she decided the only way to untangle the two of us was to grab me with her teeth on my arm. I started screaming instantly and Grandma, who had been cooking in the kitchen, stormed in. She couldn’t believe her eyes. She didn’t care that I had nipped Sabina on the back, but for a mother to bite her child—her Sherricu—that was more than she could take.

“Vezi teet a mama a zameen zach tzin a kint?” (How does a mother do such a thing to a child?) she shrieked.

We all unclenched our teeth and Grandma left the room in a huff. And that was the last time I bit Sabina.

*   *   *

My parents tried to keep up some semblance of raising us Jewish in Rockland by schlepping us to Montreal for the holidays to visit Bobbie, who rivaled Grandma in the fine art of Eastern European cooking. Whereas Grandma’s cuisine had a Romanian flair with loads of spices and eggplant, Bobbie’s cooking had a Russian flavor tailored to her Ukranian husband. And whereas Grandma loved schunke—sliced ham—Bobbie kept a strictly kosher kitchen, with two sets of dishes and towels for meat and dairy and never a morsel of pork in the house. On Rosh Hashanah, the feast at Bobbie’s
house would start with cabbage soup, proceed to baked chicken with onions, varnishkes—or knishes, if we were lucky—then the sweetest honey cake you ever tasted, and to top it off, fruit compote.

We were sitting in Bobbie’s parlor one Rosh Hashanah after one of her sumptuous meals when Sabina once again started to indulge in her antics, prompting my father to order her into the bedroom my mother used to share with her brother Jerry. The cramped room was stuffed to the gills with furniture: a twin bed, a cot, a tall maple dresser and a matching chest with a mirror.

There were so many relatives milling around the apartment speaking loudly in Yiddish that everyone forgot about Sabina. Finally an hour later, my father went to the bedroom to bring his disobedient daughter back into polite company. But there was a problem: he couldn’t get in. Sabina had pushed every last stick of furniture in the room up against the heavy wooden door so no one could open it. None of the grownups staring wide-eyed in the parlor could believe that even a feisty five-year-old could muster up the strength to move such heavy furniture. But there was no underestimating Sabina.

The occasional visits to Bobbie’s house—our only connection with Yiddishkeit—could not change the reality of living in a French Catholic town. My father’s store had a steady stream of customers and my mother’s social circle now included a church group and bridge game. But she was worried that we were becoming too much like them. She enrolled Sabina in a Jewish Day School in Ottawa twice a week for kindergarten. Every Sunday morning, though, Sabina would sit at the
windowsill and watch Donna Cameron strut to church, showing off the brand new hat she had just bought in my father’s store.

“Why can’t I go to church with Donna?” Sabina asked one Sunday, as she stared out the window at the Camerons walking down the street all spiffed up.

My mother was speechless. After all, she went to the Presbyterian church once a month for meetings of the Ladies Aid Society. What could she possibly say? When she told my father that Sabina wanted to accompany Donna to church, he snapped: “That’s it. We’re moving.”

After living in Rockland for nine years, there was no longer any reason for us to stay. My grandparents, who had been with us for two years, were gone, having joined their two daughters in Israel. And my father, to tell the truth, had never liked Canada. He couldn’t understand why the people had to pay taxes to support the Queen of England. “The only reason I’m a Canadian,” he once told my mother, “is to get to America.”

A week after Sabina asked about church, my father listed Magasin Meyer for sale in the *Montreal Gazette*. We were on our way to the United States of America, that enchanted land where there were no queens.
All I remember about moving to America was something my father kept telling my mother: “There’s bugs in the steaks.” My father was a real meat-and-potatoes man and relished a well-done T-bone, but I couldn’t understand what the bugs in the steaks had to do with us leaving Canada. It wasn’t until years later that I realized there weren’t any bugs in the steaks. There were bugs in the States.

Especially the state we were heading to—Florida, which had a whole kingdom full. There were two-inch palmetto bugs that skittered across the bathroom floor late at night and would crunch like corn flakes under the heel of your shoe, roly-polies, fireflies, fruit flies, dragon flies, regular flies, mosquitoes, crickets, love bugs, and Noseeums—gnats too small to be detected by the human eye. There were other crawling critters too: slender green salamanders with lumps under their throats that always made me scream, and tiny sandcrabs that would snap at you when you poked your finger into the wet sand on the beach. We never encountered an alligator except at the Gator Farm off Highway 95 on the way to St. Augustine.

Living in the States, as my parents called it, had been my father’s dream from the start. He probably had visions of America, a place where the roads were paved with gold, from his jail cell in Romania. In the 1940s, a Jewish man didn’t have the right to move to the United States, a country where newspaper ads still proclaimed: 

*Only White Christians Apply.* But by the 1960s, it no longer mattered. My father had
his ticket to America: he was married to a Canadian girl. And of course, it didn’t hurt
that his pockets were lined with cash.

Having started out with nothing when he stepped off the boat in Halifax in
1947, my father now had something to show for himself: $50,000 from the sale of our
general store in Rockland. While living in Canada, where the long winters painted the
landscape white for months on end, he had heard that Florida had beautiful weather
and you could fish there all year long. So he invested in a piece of property in a town
called Florida Shores—nineteen miles south of Daytona Beach—where he hoped to
retire. The land was out in the middle of the woods and far from the nearest dirt road,
but at $10 down and $10 a month, it was a bargain.

Then a few years later, he saw an ad in the Montreal paper—Motel for Sale on
World’s Most Famous Beach—and he was hooked.

* * *

The maple leaves were just starting to turn red and gold when we piled into
our burgundy Chrysler in Rockland to head south. I don’t remember anything about
my first glimpse of America when we crossed over the border at the age of three. But
what stood out for my parents were the signs hanging over public rest rooms and
drinking fountains in Southern towns that said: Colored. They had never seen anything
like that in Canada.

My mother had also never seen anything like the Atlantic Ocean, glimmering
off in the distance like an oasis, just a few miles beyond the diners, gas stations and
strip shopping plazas we passed on US1. When we drove over the Florida line and
pulled up to the shore in Jacksonville, my mother, sister and I were so delirious we jumped right into the salty waves with our clothes on. My mother had never been anywhere outside Canada except for New York City and Plattsburgh, and the most exciting place I had been was the county fair in Rockland, where you could ride the Ferris wheel and buy french fries sprinkled with vinegar. My father, who of course had sailed clear across the ocean from Paris, just stood on the sand, laughing at us.

After arriving in Daytona Beach, we drove straight to the Casa Linda, the motel that had been listed for sale in the paper. Just like the ad said, the motel overlooked the ocean, but it didn’t have a pool—a definite disadvantage in Florida. Not only that, but after talking to my father and detecting a foreign accent, the owner, a man named Oliver Bell, was reluctant to sell to such a greenhorn. “You haven’t got enough money for this,” Mr. Bell said. “I’ve seen them come down before and after one season they go broke.” Trying to be helpful, he suggested my father look around and come back for his advice when he found something else.

My father inspected nearly everything for sale in Daytona, from dry cleaning businesses to grocery stores. None of it seemed too appetizing until his real estate agent, Becky Berman, showed him Gentry’s Fruits & Juices, a citrus plant that made the only fresh orange juice in town. Driving out to see the place, we found a small, green, run-down house, which was actually two army barracks joined together, standing in front of an open wood-frame fruit stand. Behind the ramshackle factory were rows and rows of orange and grapefruit trees. It must have seemed like paradise to my father because after checking with Mr. Bell, he plunked down his $50,000.
When we drove back to Canada and told my Bobbie that we were moving to Florida, she slumped down onto her couch and started sobbing. “When will I ever see you?” she cried. Bobbie, still a secretary at a yeshiva, and Zaida, a cashier at his nephew’s shoe store, could not afford to fly to Florida. Yet despite Bobbie’s pleadings, by Halloween we were in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where Sabina and I dressed up in costumes so we could go trick-or-treating in the motel.

* * *

For a child whose only impression of nature had been the solitary lilac bush in our back yard, Florida was an exotic place, full of strange-looking trees with palm fronds, blood-red hibiscus flowers and brightly-colored birds that chirped all year long. During my first winter in the little house at the plant, I would open my bedroom window every morning and pull a shiny yellow grapefruit off the tree for breakfast. In Florida, the citrus miraculously ripened in December, while up North, the plants were already dormant under mounds of snow. When it got cold and dipped into the 30s—balmy weather by Canadian standards—my father would have to stay up all night, lighting bonfires in the grove to keep the trees from freezing. But the seasons all seemed to melt into one another and Sabina and I could play hide-and-go seek among the orange trees and feed our neighbors’ horses at the back of the orange grove any time of year.

Since Sabina was now in school, most days I would amuse myself by watching the plant pump out bottle after bottle of the sweetest orange juice you ever tasted. When my father bought Gentry’s, which was no more than a large wooden shed
stacked full of orange crates, the people running it were still squeezing the fruit by hand. But my father was determined to bring modern technology to the art of making orange juice so he installed assembly-line machinery that cranked out the juice faster and more efficiently.

After the workers picked the oranges from the trees and dropped them into long wooden crates, they would load the fruit into a tank filled with water, where the brownish-looking citrus was cleaned by spinning brushes. Next, the oranges rolled straight as tin soldiers across a narrow chute that would sort them by size, with the smallest ones destined for juicing. These runt-like oranges would move up a conveyor belt and fall under a machine girded with stainless steel blades that peeled them in one fell swoop. Then they were off to be squeezed, their pulpy liquid flowing into a huge steel tank. The juice was then funneled into another machine that filled up half-gallon glass bottles, each of them circling like horses on a miniature carousel until they were whirled off to be capped.

Every week, the farmers from neighboring towns would drive to Gentry's with their pickup trucks to load up the discarded orange peels, which had been dumped onto a concrete slab next to the juicing tanks. Watching the farmers arrive one day, my father, who was always thinking up with one scheme after another, told my mother that he, too, could buy some cows to eat the orange peels.

"Beno," my mother said with exasperation. "Do what you know. What do you know about cows?"
But my father was determined to try his hand at husbandry, and before we knew it, he was the proud owner of 18 head of cattle. Not only would the cows consume the peels, my father confidently predicted, they would grow fat and we could then sell them for slaughter.

Our small herd of cattle was kept miles away on a farm near Ocala so we never caught a glimpse of our animals until my father announced one day: "This Sunday, we're going to see the cows." Sabina was thrilled: she thought she was going to ride the cows like horses. She and I knew even less about farm animals than my father did.

When we pulled up to the pasture that Sunday morning, though, our elation quickly turned to horror. The cows were so emaciated they looked half-dead, their bones sticking out on their backs.

"Jesus Christ," my father said. "What's wrong with these cows?"

The man who was supposed to be taking care of the animals said they had caught hoof-and-mouth disease. But when my father called up the Department of Agriculture, he learned that the cows had probably starved to death because they had been eating nothing but orange peels. A few days later, my father had the ravenous animals shot to death and put out of their misery. And from then on, he stuck to selling oranges and grapefruit.

* * *

On the north side of the plant were two houses: a tiny white cottage my father rented out to an old couple, and a yellow ranch the DuBois family owned. The DuBois had a girl about my age named Tammy, who, like most kids from Florida, had golden
tanned skin and stringy blonde hair. When we moved to the plant, Tammy was my only friend and we would chase each other around the plant, zigzagging our way through the orange crates, tanks and conveyer belts. After we had tired ourselves out, we would play with Gentry, the orange cat who lived in the plant’s garage.

Late one afternoon on a scorching summer day, Tammy had an idea: “Let’s go naked and run through the trees.” At four years old, I knew that taking off your clothes was sinful, but I didn’t exactly know why. At the risk of being caught, we stripped to bare skin and breezed through the orange trees in back of Tammy’s house, laughing and trying to catch each other as the hot air brushed our faces.

We were running through the yard in circles when Tammy’s father, a schoolteacher, came outside to check on his daughter. When he saw our flesh glinting through the trees, he called us over to the garage in a stern voice and pulled off his leather belt. I stood paralyzed with fear after I backed myself up against the cement wall waiting for the whip to strike Tammy’s back.

Just then my father wandered over, wearing his short-sleeved orange shirt with the white Gentry’s patch sewn onto the pocket and his black pants. I distinctly remember my father’s hands at the time because his right index finger stuck straight out like a pencil: he had paralyzed it by cutting a nerve while trying to pick at a frozen juice tank. As always, his thick black hair was slicked back with Brill Cream and his steel-blue eyes—the same color as mine—gleamed under bushy dark eyebrows.
By now it was dusk and the fireflies lit up the garage like tiny shooting stars. I could feel my heart pounding as I waited for my father to take off his belt and whip me too.

He didn’t.

Instead, he simply took my hand and led me back to the house. “Don’t ever do that again,” he said. To my amazement, that was the extent of my punishment. I was so happy: I thought I had the best daddy in the world.

* * *

Coming from Rockland, my mother considered Daytona Beach a sprawling metropolis, with palm trees on all the major streets, the tall white hotels along the beach, and plenty of stores with fancy clothes. Every day after dropping Sabina off at the red-brick elementary school on Ridgewood Avenue, she would take me downtown and push me in the stroller up and down Beach Street, window shopping. We would stop in Furchgott’s, the big department store next to the movie theater where we once saw black people protesting because they had been forced to sit in the balcony. We would visit Dunn’s Hardware, which had everything from casserole dishes to screwdrivers on the first floor and a dazzling array of toys upstairs. We would wind our way to Azen’s, the Jewish deli, for a pastrami sandwich, and then end up at the lunch counter at Woolworth’s for an ice cream soda.

The stores faced a wide park lined with stately palm trees that overlooked the Halifax River, a murky waterway that separated the mainland from the peninsula. We lived on the mainland, not far from the black neighborhoods on the other side of the
railroad tracks. The wealthier white people lived across the river on the peninsula, a narrow strip of land that jutted out between the river and the ocean. When we first moved to Daytona Beach in 1963, black people were not allowed on the peninsula after dark and rarely did we see them swimming in the ocean by day.

Once my father started making money, he bought my mother an $800 upright Kohler & Campbell piano so she could keep practicing her Schubert and Chopin. And he promised her that someday we, too, would live on the peninsula and have a house with a real back yard—not an orange grove—for his daughters to play in.

In my opinion, life in America was good—except for the green peas.

For some reason, my mother, like her mother before her, never prepared fresh vegetables. Though we lived in Florida, a state that supplied the entire country with produce of one kind or another, my mother always served canned string beans, canned corn or canned peas for dinner. Dessert wasn’t much different: With strawberries, watermelons and mangoes growing all over the state, we ate Del Monte Fruit Cocktail or Peaches in Heavy Syrup. Perhaps this tradition came from my grandmother, who could never buy such delicacies as fresh fruits and vegetables when Zaida’s slipper factory had gone bankrupt in Montreal during the Depression.

Most of the canned vegetables were edible, but the green peas tasted about as appetizing as a mouthful of rotten orange rind.

One night at supper, my mother dropped a heaping spoonful of that despicable vegetable onto my plate. I stared at the mound of peas, thinking what a misfortunate
child I was, and then looked up at my mother and announced: “I wish I had a different kind of mother."

“What kind of mother would you like to have?” she asked, her eyes growing wide.

“One that didn’t make me eat green peas,” I said. “One like Becky.”

Becky, a redhead from Pittsburgh, was the real estate agent who had sold us Gentry’s and had since become my mother’s close friend. We had already spent Thanksgiving and Passover at Becky’s house, a comfortable ranch near the river on our side of town. I liked Becky, even though her son Michael was constantly teasing me by singing that awful song, “Sher-er-er-er-er-erry Baby Sherry Sherry Baby.” And besides, I knew Becky wouldn’t make me eat green peas.

The peas were still piled on my plate when my mother called Becky after dinner and explained that I wanted her to be my mother. Quietly, into the receiver, she asked Becky to go along with her and take me in for the night.

When Sabina heard that I was leaving home for the night, she became so ecstatic that she immediately starting packing my bags. My mother thought I would just take a nightgown and toothbrush over to Becky’s, but Sabina started stuffing a suitcase with nearly everything I owned. As we were about to drive off in the Chrysler, Sabina yelled out: “Wait! You forgot your sneakers!”

That night I slept with Becky’s daughter Susie, a freckle-faced girl with wild curly brown hair who spent hours applying cold creams and other concoctions to her face. I didn’t mind sleeping with Susie because she had already spent the night in my
bed when Hurricane Hilda hit Daytona Beach earlier that year, tearing the tin roof off the plant and blowing around the traffic lights all over town.

The next morning, I ate breakfast at the big table in the dining room where we had Thanksgiving and Passover. Just as I thought, Becky promised I could have whatever I wanted while she was my mother. "You can have cake and ice cream at every meal," she said.

Before Becky had washed the breakfast dishes, my mother called to see if I wanted to come home. Becky stuck her head out from the kitchen, with the telephone in her hand, and asked me if I wanted my mother to pick me up. No, I said. I was content to stay at Becky's house where I didn't have to eat green peas.

Another day passed and my life as a runaway finally came to an end. Becky told me she had to go to work and couldn't take me to the puppet show that afternoon at the library downtown. Since my mother had already bought tickets for the show, I reluctantly packed my suitcase and waited for her to pick me up.

I never had to eat green peas again.

* * *

After surviving a freeze that swept across the groves in central Florida during our first winter, the orange juice plant was flowing at full speed and my father was earning more money than he could have imagined. Gentry's juice was now stocked in Publix and Winn-Dixie, the two major grocery stores in town, and in many of the hotels along the beach. With more demand for our juice came advertising and my father ordered a photograph taken of me, dressed in a blue and white polka-dotted
dress and holding a glass of juice in my hand. He had planned to print my picture on a brochure, but for some reason that no one can remember, the picture never got farther than the wall in the plant office.

The orange juice business was thriving, but my parents realized that a citrus plant was not the best place to raise two little girls. As we played in the gravel parking lot, my mother was constantly worrying that we would get run over by someone pulling up for a fresh gallon of juice. She thought I needed something to do so she enrolled me in a nursery school next to the Greyhound Bus Station on Ridgewood Avenue. But every day I came home crying because a girl named Yolanda, whom we later found out was retarded, pushed me onto the floor whenever we sat down on the long bench for our snack. After weeks of listening to my sobbing, my father pulled me out of the school.

My mother, in the meantime, had a dream of her own: moving to the peninsula where her growing circle of friends lived. Always afraid to tell anyone she was Jewish, my mother picked friends who were just like her. One of them, Liz Rome, another transplant from Montreal, spent weeks with my mother driving up and down streets that smelled of salty ocean air looking for a house to buy. Eventually, they found one: a white ranch with blue shutters and a crooked palm tree in the front yard that had such a long, gradual slope that you could sit on its pale prickly bark. The house had three bedrooms, a patio and a small back yard landscaped with pine trees, hedgerow bushes, periwinkle flowers and coquina rock. It was just a few yards over the border of Daytona Beach in a small town called Ormond Beach. My father whizzed through it
one afternoon and fixed his eyes on a pair of reclining leather chairs in the family room. "I'll take it," he said to the real estate agent, "if you give me the two black chairs and the kitchen table."

The price was $28,000. And within a few months, we had left the small house in front of the orange juice plant and were living three blocks from the Atlantic Ocean on the right side of town.
Of all the creatures I could have picked, the opossum became my idol in the second grade. This lowly animal, which resembles a rat more than its marsupial cousin the kangaroo, was my *raison d’être*, the key to an imaginary world of forests and fabled lands. In school, I began signing my homework Sherrie Opossum Negrea: I had no middle name and this one seemed to fit as well as any other. At Tammy Talley’s birthday party, I climbed the giant oak tree in her front yard and hung upside down from the sturdiest branch—with my party dress on—for nearly an hour. I walked around our house with my mouth scrunched up into what I called the opossum face, my lower and upper teeth showing, and my arms were cocked up to my shoulders with my hands curled down.

My father was beside himself with worry. Why did his daughter want to sign her name Opossum in school? Why couldn’t she just be normal like other girls her age? My mother, though, wasn’t worried. She thought it was cute and assured my father that I would soon forget about imitating this rat-like beast that none of us had ever seen.

I can’t remember why I identified with the opossum, but the idea probably came from one of the books about animals I checked out from the library. After school, I would ride my bicycle two miles to the Cornelia Young Library, scan the wide shelves in the cramped children’s room in the basement, and head home with a
stack of animal stories. At night, when we gathered in the family room (as immigrants, we didn’t know that this was really the Florida room as the natives called it) and watched the Ed Sullivan Show or Laugh-In, I would sit on my tiny, white vinyl rocking chair, which I always turned backwards, with my feet flopped over the rim and a book in my lap. “Why don’t you watch the show?” my father would ask. For him, staring at television was what American families did at night; they certainly didn’t read books. But even Tiny Tim tiptoeing through the tulips or the Beatles twanging their guitars on Ed Sullivan was not enough to tear me from the pages of The Mouse and the Motorcycle or Charlotte’s Web.

Perhaps I was obsessed with the opossum because it was such a sly creature that could perform any number of tricks. It could hang from trees by its long scaly tail, it could play dead when it didn’t want to be bothered, and best of all, it could have a litter of babies and nurse them right in the fur-lined pouch on its belly. The mother opossum could go about her business, foraging for food in the vast forests, swimming through fresh-water streams, or dozing in a sun-dappled field—all with her offspring safely tucked inside this ready-made compartment. When the baby opossums grew too big for the sack on her stomach, they would clamp onto the rough fur on her back, holding on for their lives as she scoured the forests for insects, berries and fruit.

If that was how motherhood worked, maybe it wasn’t so bad. But for humans, the reality seemed quite different. Motherhood was not something that impressed me. My own mother, unlike the opossum, did not have the freedom to do as she pleased once the babies started coming.
It was more than just the duties of child-rearing that brought my mother’s career in teaching piano to an end. My father, with his old-fashioned European ways, adamantly forbade my mother from working. Though it was the 1960s, the decade of *The Feminine Mystique*, which exposed the shocking truth about American housewives, the women’s movement was light years away from my father’s world, a tightly-controlled place where wives were supposed to stay home, watch their children and prepare the meals. After we moved to Florida, my mother, despite my father’s wishes, met with a local school administrator to see about getting a teaching job. But she gave up when she learned she would have to start her education all over again and earn a bachelor’s degree—at McGill she had graduated with a licentiate in music. So instead, she joined the Hadassah Club and the Palmetto Club and played mahjong and bridge games every week with the ladies from her clubs.

After getting my sister and me off to school every morning, my mother would sit in front of her cramped desk in her blue and white kitchen and call her best friend, Liz Rome, at precisely 8:15. Then she would start the day’s project: fixing dinner. My father was a picky eater, to say the least, and would not tolerate any of those American dishes like macaroni and cheese or tuna fish casserole. He could eat a steak everyday, but that was not enough: He wanted my mother to prepare the Romanian delicacies his mother had made—chopped liver, kreplach, knishes, mashed eggplant or roasted peppers. Leftovers were taboo in our house, but my mother would secretly freeze her entrees, serve them a few weeks later, and hope nobody would know the difference.
Hoping to relieve her boredom, my mother decided to try out for the chorus of the Little Theater, since her friend Cindy Schneider had also auditioned for one of the musicals. But there was one complication: My father had overheard Cindy mention that after rehearsals, the cast would often go out for a drink. To my father, that meant men and women socializing in a bar along with his wife. And that was the end of that. “Don’t even think of going,” he snapped at my mother. “You’re not going there.” As a compromise, she became a member of the Daytona Beach Choral Society, and even though the chorus sang in a church, at least it did not involve excursions to the local bars.

That is not to say that my parents never had any fun. They went out every Saturday night, and with their close friends, Chuck and Linda Rembaum, acted like a bunch of high school kids out on the town. Their first encounter with the Rembaums was at a dance at the Greek Orthodox Church; since the Jews and Greeks in Daytona Beach often did business together, they were obligated to attend each other’s social events. Chuck’s first impression of my father was of a tall man with greasy, slicked-back, black hair, wearing a brand new polyester suit and talking with a funny accent. “Must be a foreigner,” Chuck mumbled to his wife as they sat down at a table with my parents. When my father’s Greek friend, Steno, came by the table selling raffle tickets, Chuck was highly impressed when my father pulled out a $100 bill and said: “Put that for charity for the Greek church.”

Later in the evening, when my father left the table to spin my mother around the dance floor, Chuck, a television repairman and inveterate practical joker, spilled a
glass of ice water on my father’s chair. After returning to his seat, my father, known for his short fuse, jumped up and shouted: “Son of a bitch. My chair’s all wet.” Chuck dumped more water on the seat when my father had turned his head and finally he realized the joke was on him. Thus began a decade-long series of get-even pranks between my father and Chuck that involved gasoline splattered all over the back seat of my father’s new white Mercury, a feigned fist-fight on the highway en route to a seance in Cassadaga, and a pig’s foot they slipped into each other’s shoes, beds and freezers.

Despite the weekly excitement of going out on Saturday night, my mother found the routine of housework dull and tedious, and I could sense her frustration. In the 60s, they used to play a song on the radio about the ticky-tacky boxes we lived in, the cookie-cutter houses where the husband and wife kept their two children, dog, and two-car garage. I did not want that life when I grew up. I wanted to be somebody and do something. I vowed never to have children because, unlike the opossum, motherhood would imprison me in my own house, except for the weekly bridge game. There had to be something more, though I didn’t know what that something could be.

Eventually, my mother decided she would escape from the drudgery of attending the weekly social clubs by having another child. If she couldn’t teach other people’s children, she could at least have more of her own. “I’m wasting my time here,” she told my father one night when he came home from the orange juice plant. So at the age of thirty six, she became pregnant.
I was ecstatic: I would soon have a companion, a little brother or sister who wouldn’t ignore me the way my Sabina did. No matter what I did to get her attention, Sabina treated me as if I were an invisible creature and at nine years old, I decided it was time to take revenge. It was a few days after Sabina’s Bat Mitzvah and she was sitting quietly at the desk in her bedroom writing thank-you notes for all those checks that had been lavished upon her. Suddenly, I barged in armed with a water pistol, spraying her and the perfectly written letters at close range.

Sabina, who had a Romanian temper like my father, threw me out and promptly penned a letter to my parents, which she titled: “Sherrie BRAT.” The indictment began with eight complaints about me: “1. spoiled brat; 2. always making a mess never cleaning it up. ex. her room; 3. always repeating what you say; 4. starting fights; 5. coming in my room; 6. shooting water pistol all over house; 7. she’s always saying, ‘Bet me $100,000,000 and then she doesn’t want to bet; and 8. she calls me names but I ignore it but when I call her one name she starts screaming.

The letter then went on to give her side of the fight:


Sherrie came in with water pistol. I asked her to go ask Mom something about the thank you notes I was writing. (I was sitting at my desk.) She said she would only if I would let her squirt her water gun at me. I said she could ONLY if she shot it straight at me and only on me. I told her not to get it on the desk because the writing paper was out and my magazines were out too. She squirted as hard as she could and
drops of water were on me and all over the desk. I got mad. She ran into Mom and Dad’s bedroom and hid next to the bed. I went in there and told her to wipe off the water from my desk. She kept saying NO! So, I brought her to the doorway of my room and told her to wipe the desk. She said she wouldn’t and that she would squirt me again. I said she wouldn’t and I grabbed the pistol from her. Then she ran into her bedroom and slammed the door. I grabbed the handle so that she couldn’t lock it. Then she started putting chairs behind her door so that I couldn’t get in. I pushed the door open about 6 inches and squirted the gun - ONCE! Then she started slamming the door and screaming. I never screamed once! Then Mom came.

results: Then if we went to the pool and none of her friends were there she’d say: ‘Sabina has to pay with me if my friends aren’t there doesn’t she mommy?’

solution - punishment: 1) take away her water pistol. 2) stop spoiling her and treat her the way you do to me: Terrible!”

But now I didn’t have to worry about Sabina and the letter and whether she would ignore me at the pool because of the mysterious bulge in my mother’s stomach. I would soon have a younger sibling, someone I could boss around the way Sabina bossed me.

My mother was just three months pregnant, though, when something went wrong. Not feeling well, she climbed into bed one afternoon and the child who would
have been my playmate disintegrated into some clumps of blood. The dream had
disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

There didn’t seem to be any way to console my mother, who was sent to the
hospital for two days. “What happened to the baby?” I asked her in her room. “The
baby was sick,” she said. Yet despite her cool-headed explanation, my mother was
hysterical and could not stop crying. In desperation, my father called her physician, a
kind elderly man named Dr. Bonner. When he stopped by my mother’s room, he said,
“Marylin, I’m an old-time Presbyterian. I believe things happen for a reason.
Something would have been wrong with that baby. You’re young enough. You can try
again.”

* * *

I always thought that my father had pressured my mother to have another child
so that he could finally have a son, but that was not the case at all. While my mother
wanted to get pregnant again, my father was indifferent. “We’ve got two kids,” he
said. “We can travel a bit. Why do you want to tie yourself down?” But my mother
would not surrender the idea of another child, and within six months her stomach
began to bulge again.

After learning the news, I could not contain my excitement, but Sabina acted as
if there were some dreadful creature inside my mother’s navel. When my mother
showed us her distended stomach, Sabina took one look and then said: “Oh, gross.”

That summer, my parents shipped Sabina and me off to Camp Blue Star in the
foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Hendersonville, North Carolina. At Blue
Star, we learned to ride horses, slide down a mountain in the mud, and swim the back stroke in a cold, crystal clear lake. In my arts and crafts class, I happened to mention to a fellow camper that my mother was pregnant. She said that meant my parents had done "that nasty thing." I was outraged that she would accuse my parents of doing such a thing. "They would never do that," I said smartly, thinking of a movie I had seen of people "making love," which made them look like animals, sort of like two opossums. The truth was that at nine years old, I didn’t really know just where babies came from. My mother had once explained something about the man putting some kind of seed inside the mother, but I didn’t know what she was talking about.

On August 13, a sultry, sticky day, Sabina darted from her cabin, raced through the woods, and stood breathlessly outside my bunk, shouting, "It’s a boy!" In her hand was a telegram from my father: "You’ve got a baby brother." A few days later, when camp ended, we rode the bus home, my stomach full of more excitement than I could remember.

When Sabina and I walked into the house after the eight-hour trip, my mother was sitting in her rocking chair in the family room, holding a squirming baby bundled up in a blue blanket. She asked Sabina if she wanted to hold her new brother, Charles Elliot Negrea, but she shrank away in disgust. Apparently, Sabina was already mad at her helpless little baby because he would soon be taking her room. But I calmly sat down on the couch and asked my mother to hand him to me. As I cuddled this tiny human being with dark hair and slits for eyes in my lap—sort of like a mother opossum
with the baby in her pouch—I no longer felt empty inside. I didn’t need Sabina to be my companion any more because I now had a baby brother.
Chapter 6
Family Secrets

In the sixth grade, the boys would line up on the loggia at school and yell catcalls at the girls waiting to take a drink at the tall rusty water fountain. On the cusp of adolescence, some of the girls had started shaving their legs, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the boys watching them strut down the hallway for a gulp of water. Those were the same girls whose earlobes were already adorned with tiny, golden globes and whose smooth, tanned legs were in clear view from beneath their mini skirts—the fairer sex could not wear pants at Ortona Elementary School.

As I sauntered to the water fountain, my eyes staring down at the cement floor in embarrassment, the boys would leer at me, shouting “Bubble eyes!” or “Pop Eyes!” I had long, sandy blonde hair and big blue eyes that seemed to protrude from my head. My mother told me I should be proud to have such big, beautiful eyes, but in elementary school, large eyeballs were certainly no advantage. I wore braces to correct my buck teeth and dresses that nearly touched my knees.

After the daily ritual at the water fountain, the class would file back to Mrs. Kelder’s room for our lesson on Africa or Current Events. Her dry teaching in the musty classroom, however, did little to keep our hormones in check. The boys who had things other than African geography on their minds would send love notes, carefully folded into neat little squares, to the girls they thought were cute. None of
the boys ever sent me such a note except one: Lawrence Shelton. He was smart, sassy
and black.

For most of that year, I had to sit in the back corner of the cramped
classroom, right next to Mrs. Kelder’s desk, so it was no easy feat to pass a love note
to me. Mrs. Kelder said she moved my desk away from my classmates because I
talked too much. But I knew the real reason: I sat there because I was her assistant. I
knew my lessons so well (I had won fourth place in the school spelling bee) that she
asked me to teach some of the students how to read. My charges were Carla and
Edna, two black girls who rode the bus to school from the other side of town. Edna
was quiet and pleasant enough, but Carla was a surly, mouthy girl who would pin me
against the wall in the girls’ bathroom and say, “Hey girl. Gimme a quarter.” As Carla
stared into my bulging eyes, I would stand there, my heart pounding fiercely, until she
would finally give up and walk away. Then I would head back to class and teach her
how to read.

One afternoon, a folded-up piece of notebook paper with my name and a little
daisy scrawled on the front wound its way back to my desk. Inside it said: “Would you
like to go to the movies on Saturday afternoon? Lawrence.”

I was flattered but queasy. This hand-worn square of paper was the invitation
to my first date. But there was a slight problem: Lawrence had crossed the racial
divide to ask a white girl to the movies—something that wasn’t done in Florida, at
least not in 1971. In Daytona Beach, the black people lived on their side of town,
across the railroad tracks and near the mosquito-infested canal not far from my
father’s orange juice plant. The white people lived on the peninsula, the narrow strip
of land wedged between the Halifax River and the Atlantic Ocean. Black people never
came to the oceanside except to clean the white people’s houses or to cook or make
the beds in one of the hotels lining the beach. It wasn’t even until the 1960s that they
could legally swim in the Atlantic in Daytona because of the Jim Crow laws that had
banned them from the beach.

When I went home that afternoon from school, I told my mother that a black
boy had asked me to a Saturday matinee. I didn’t really want her permission, just her
reaction. “Gee, that’s nice,” she said, knowing full well it didn’t matter what color my
suitor was because she would never let me go on a date at eleven years old. But when
my father came home from work at the orange juice plant and heard what had
happened, he was livid. No daughter of his was going to date a black boy. His
Romanian temper flared into an explosion of outrage until he determined to go speak
to the school principal. I silently shrank away to my room, where I lay on my bed for
hours, my head buried in my pillow, crying. What had I done? And what was so bad
about Lawrence?

As it turned out, my father wasn’t the only one incensed by Lawrence’s
audacity. The next day, after Mrs. Kelder’s class had switched to Mr. Dodge’s room
for English, he abruptly stopped the poetry lesson to blurt out in front of my
schoolmates:

“Sherrie, are you dating Lawrence Shelton?”
“No sir,” I said, shrinking into my wooden and metal desk in utter embarrassment.

It wasn’t the first time that Mr. Dodge, a short man with black hair and mustache, had humiliated me. After I had recited the poem—*They’re changing guards at Buckingham Palace; Christopher Robin went down with Alice*—in front of the class, Mr. Dodge had stood up and imitated me, shaking his hips at the beginning of each stanza.

Mr. Dodge, I decided, was a Nazi.

* * *

At home, my parents spoke about black people only in Yiddish. Whenever they would mention the word *shvartze* at the dinner table, I knew what it meant. *Schwartz*, after all, wasn’t much different from Schwartz, the Yiddish word for black which had been my father’s surname before he changed it to Negrea, the Romanian word for black. Yiddish, the common bond between Jews from the old and new worlds, became the language my parents used to keep secrets from us. It was convenient because they could slip into Yiddish right in front of my sister and me at the table and think we didn’t have a clue about their conversation. But we knew: I was the *kleine*, Sabina was the *groise* and the black people were the *shvartzes*.

The only black people my parents came in contact with were their employees. At the orange juice plant, the two black men who worked for my father seemed to amuse him to no end. There was Abraham, who picked oranges in the groves and hauled the fruit back to the plant where it was squeezed into juice, and Eddie, who
used to slice the citrus into fruit salad and entertain himself by singing, as my mother said, like Nat King Cole.

On the way back from picking oranges at the groves one day, Abraham swerved off the highway, overturning his truck. The oranges rolled down the road in all directions like giant plushy marbles. After trying to salvage as much of the wayward fruit as he could, Abraham drove back to the plant to face the boss.

My father was mildly amused because he saw it as the perfect opportunity to pull a prank on Abraham, who was as gullible as a child.

"Abraham," he said, "Monday morning you and I have to go to jail."

"No boss," Abraham said.

"Yes sir. You better bring a toothbrush and a pair of clean underwear."

Sure enough, on Monday morning, Abraham showed up with a suitcase full of clothes, thinking he and my father would be sharing a cell that night at the city lockup. My father just looked at him and laughed until Abraham finally realized the boss was pulling his leg. He went home with the suitcase and life at the orange juice plant went on as usual.

Despite his gentle horseplay, my father definitely had an attitude that I must admit was prejudiced. In 1976, when he voted for George Wallace for president, my mother demanded to know why. "That man knows what it's all about," he explained. "Don't tell me about black people until you work with them."

Somehow, I knew that being prejudiced was wrong. That was because I was a liberal, and in the sixth grade I wanted John Lindsay to be president. Two years earlier,
I had invited Donna Farber, the poorest girl in my fourth-grade class, home to play with me. I felt I was being charitable, letting her come over to our house and climb on the swing set next to the big pine tree in our leafy back yard.

Still, there was something that gnawed at me. At school, I learned that all men were created equal. But then I heard that word schwartze in the back of my head, and I knew something wasn’t quite right: If my parents didn’t treat black people as equals, how could I?

* * *

When my family moved from the ramshackle house in front of the orange juice plant to a comfortable white ranch on the oceanside, the only black person who entered our home was Ceil, our maid. She came to our house three days a week, scrubbing our floors, washing our clothes and occasionally cooking our meals—all for $4 an hour. In the mornings, she would walk my brother, who was still a toddler, to the nearby shopping center and show him off in his stroller to the salesladies in Murphy’s, the five-and-dime store. Ceil, a stout woman whose hair was tied up in a bun at the back of her head, was someone my parents trusted and she didn’t seem to mind—or at least pretended not to mind—working for us.

One morning, I convinced my mother I was sick enough to stay home from school. I lazed around the house all morning watching television, while Mom went off to play mahjong with her friends. When it came time for lunch, Ceil heated up a can of Campbell’s chicken noodle soup on the stove. She placed the bowl of steaming liquid
on the table in front of me and I just sat there, staring at it. I don’t know why, but I didn’t want to eat it.

Finally Ceil said: “You don’t want to eat that because I’m black.”

I gazed into my bowl, speechless and my face burning beet-red, until I started to sip the yellow-colored broth.

* * *

In a few months, I would be turning 12 and that meant I had to begin studying for my Bat Mitzvah with Mr. Ziegler, the sexton at our synagogue who tutored all the kids from Hebrew School. Every week for a year, I rode my bicycle to Mr. Ziegler’s house on the river after school to learn how to chant my Haftarah, the weekly reading in Hebrew from the Book of Prophets. Each word had a special cantillation and I had to know whether to recite the syllables in a melody that climbed up the scale, went down the scale or wavered somewhere between the two. I memorized the prayers I would lead at the service the evening of my Bat Mitzvah, and I wrote a speech about my rite of passage into Judaism. I was ready for the big event.

For a Jewish child, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a milestone, and mine was no exception. My grandparents were flying in from Montreal, and my best friend, Pam, and her parents were coming from Connecticut. Nearly every Jew in the whole town was invited to share in the celebration at our synagogue, Temple Israel, housed in an old white mansion overlooking the Halifax River. The next day there would be a luncheon at Chez Brucher, a French restaurant on Seabreeze Boulevard, for all my friends and their mothers. Since my parents had few friends who weren’t Jewish, the
only Gentile people who were invited to the service were my friends from school—and Ceil.

My father insisted that Ceil, whom he considered part of the family, would want to be included in the festivities. We gave her one of the fancy invitations, and my father told her in his joking manner: “You better come to the synagogue and go to the party. If not, don’t come back to work.”

As I stood in front of the congregation that Friday night, I was so nervous that I began my the blessing before my Haftarah on the wrong tune: I chanted up the scale instead of down. Bracing myself against the lectern, wearing the orange dress decorated with the purple and brown horses that I had sewn for the occasion, I looked out over the sea of faces in the sanctuary. Everyone was there except Ceil.

The Monday after my Bat Mitzvah, Ceil didn’t show up for work so my father decided to pay her a visit at her home after leaving the orange juice plant. She let him into her tiny house in “Coloredtown,” as my mother called it, and he begged her to come back to work. She said she’d consider it. When she didn’t come the next morning, my father went back to beg her once more.

“I ain’t coming,” she said simply.

We never saw Ceil again.

*  *  *

The summer after eighth grade, I decided to take a job as a summer counselor at the YWCA downtown. The center was housed in an old white mansion on Beach Street, a street that was obviously misnamed since it faced the Halifax River and not
the Atlantic Ocean. Four days a week, I was in charge of keeping the campers amused by leading games in the basement of the big house or outside on the lawn—when they weren’t jumping into the pool to escape the scorching heat. On Tuesdays, the campers would climb aboard a school bus and head to Tuscawilla Park, where we would meet campers from the other YWCA on the black side of town.

The steamy days in the sprawling, swampy park were tense because neither the children nor the counselors knew each other. But once we started playing duck-duck-goose, hide-and-go-seek and an assortment of other games, the children seemed to forget about their differences and we all got along fine.

One sultry Tuesday, the two YWCA camps decided to take a half-hour bus trip to Ponce Inlet, a city park with a quaint lighthouse that overlooked the ocean. The children all climbed up the long flight of stairs to the top of the lighthouse and peered out over the Atlantic, the shimmering blue-green water stretching out for miles. A few minutes later, they climbed back down and scampered along the beach.

I ran after them and began digging in the sand with the campers—both black and white—because they knew me as the girl who led those silly games at Tuscawilla Park. We started building a castle and dribbled wet sand onto the smooth, grainy surface.

Suddenly, Brenda, one of the black counselors, approached me from behind as I slouched over the sculpture in progress.

“Hey honky, what are you doing with my campers?”
I mumbled something and returned to my work on the castle. But Brenda, a heavyset girl who evidently wanted to bully me, demanded an answer.

"Honky, I'm talking to you."

I stood up, and Brenda promptly shoved me back down onto the beach. The children stopped playing and looked at us, fearfully awaiting the next move. But there was no next move. I just picked myself up, brushed off the sand, and went back to the project at hand. Brenda stomped away without saying a word.

As the children and I continued piling up the mound of sand, I realized that they were all my campers, not just those whose skin color matched my own. But Brenda couldn't see beyond race, and a few days later, she was fired. I returned to Tuscawill Park the next Tuesday, and we went on playing our circle games among the willow trees.
In the summer, my friends went swimming at the beach or headed to Busch Gardens or Six Flags over Georgia with their parents. We went to Israel—not just once or twice, but when the spirit moved us, every few years. My mother recalls dragging my yellow toilet seat on my first trip over to that tiny speck of a country when I was just four years old. Our family had a calling—and an obligation—to visit Eretz Yisrael.

Except for my father, with his hankering for moving to America, everyone in his family had ended up in Israel. His sister, Lola, was the first to make aliyah in 1960, when the country was barely twelve years old. She had tried to make a life for herself in Romania after the war and had even enrolled in law school in Bucharest. But after starting her fourth year of study, she was suddenly expelled. The reason: numerus clausus. The quota had been reached for Jews.

A gutsy woman for her time, Lola had her own philosophy on life: “In order to pass the river,” she once told me, “you have to be friends with the devil.” And so, with much trepidation, she joined the Communist Party in Romania. She rose through the ranks to become a youth organizer who arranged activities and feasts for special holidays like May Day.

As a loyal Communist, Lola was invited to parties with the high-ranking commandants. At one of these gatherings, a party official asked her: “Why didn’t you
tell us that your brother is in America?” Apparently having a capitalist in the family was a cardinal sin in a Communist country like Romania.

“Why?” Lola said. “Because I knew you would throw me out.”

“You’re right,” the commandant replied and promptly escorted her to the door.

By then, Lola was more than fed up, so she convinced her husband to move to Nazaret Ilit, the Jewish section of Nazareth which had become a magnet for Romanian immigrants. A few months later, she asked my grandparents to join her in this paradise where Romanian was regularly heard on the street, where the weather was warm all year long, and where there wasn’t a Communist in sight.

* * *

While my parents were living in Rockland, where my mother was running off to church socials and taking us to Beulah’s house to decorate her Christmas tree, she would often ask my father if he wanted to move to Israel. But nothing could deter him from his determination to reach America.

“I don’t want to live with a bunch of Jews,” he would say. “I’ve suffered enough being a Jew. I don’t need to do any more or see no more.”

My father’s distaste for anything Jewish kept him away from Israel and his parents during the first five years they lived in Nazareth. In 1963, my mother, sister and I flew to Tel Aviv before my father had ever stepped foot on Israeli soil. Hoping to win him over, my mother, a Zionist from her high school days, sent back glowing letters about the sidewalk cafes in Tel Aviv, the dazzling Gulf of Eilat and soldiers marching right down the highway in northern Israel.
Finally, two years later, my father decided he couldn’t stay away any longer and flew to Israel for the first time. He came back a changed man.

“You see people walking around with numbers on their arms,” he said with excitement in his eyes when he returned. “They’re free. It’s just unbelievable.”

As my mother described it, my father, never a religious man, became a born-again Jew. Israel, which always seemed to be in a state of war, needed help, and my father took up the cause.

Our blue and white colonial-style living room in Ormond Beach, Florida, became the headquarters for a massive fundraising effort for Israel. My father was appointed president of the local chapter of the Jewish Federation, the same organization that had helped him flee Romania for Canada. He was determined to get everyone—Jewish or not—in our town to donate something. During one of the fundraising campaigns, my father sat in the lobby of the Barnett Bank for six hours waiting for the president to come out and make a pledge for Israel. When the branch manager finally emerged from her office, she gave him a check for $25. Infuriated, he handed it back and said: “Take it. I’ll give $500 in your name. You obviously need it more than I do.” Then he stormed out of the lobby, drove home and closed all his accounts at the bank.

Israel was my father’s religion, though he managed to squeeze in a little time for Judaism. On Friday nights, he would drag us to synagogue, where my best friend Pam Rome and I would sit together, devising games to pass the interminable hour-long service. One of our favorite pastimes was finding the longest word in the prayerbook.
(Nebuchadnezzar, we decided) and one Friday night we made such a fuss giggling and
shuffling pages that the rabbi called Pam’s father into his office the next week to
demand that we be punished. Luckily, in Judaism, you did not have to worry about
being sent to hell for such things, so after a few harsh words from my father, our
Friday night antics went on as usual,

*   *   *

In the summer of 1973, my mother, four-year-old brother and I boarded an El
Al plane for my third trip to Israel. After the plane took off from Kennedy airport, we
settled in for the long red-eye flight ahead. Then somewhere over the Atlantic, a
nauseating pain started gnawing at my stomach as I looked out the window at the
endless trail of clouds. I meandered to the bathroom at the back of the plane, thinking
I was sick. Instead, I found blood.

When I returned to my seat, my mother uttered the same cliché that every girl
in human history has probably heard: “You’re now a woman.” I groaned without
thinking about the meaning of her statement: My age of fertility had begun. All I could
think about was whether my fellow passengers would also discover my secret rite of
passage through a dreaded red stain on my purple bell-bottom pants.

Yet as I checked into the bathroom every half hour or so hoping to prevent
such a catastrophe, the only attention I attracted was from a middle-aged man seated
at the back of the plane. “Getting a lot of exercise, aren’t you?” he said.

Yes, I smiled sheepishly in response.
After landing at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, we took a taxi north to Nazaret Ilit, where we would be staying with my grandmother in her tiny one-bedroom apartment. After a spicy Romanian dinner, the three of us had snuggled into Grandma’s bed when my mother noticed a swarm of tiny bugs crawling all over the sheets. She said nothing and we all fell asleep. The next morning, we woke up scratching frantically—the bed bugs had struck. But Grandma, who had slept on the living room couch bug-free, sprayed the mattress with something that smelled like vinegar and the pesky insects disappeared.

Now widowed, my grandmother was a woman who lived for beauty. Before we had left the States, she had made her request from America: Helena Rubenstein powder, foundation, lipstick, moisturizer—and prunes. Grandma not only made herself beautiful, she made beautiful things. She knitted wool sweaters that she shipped to us in Florida (which were relegated to dresser drawers in our tropical climate), and she sewed intricate needlepoint pillows and wall hangings of brightly colored flowers or naked gypsy women playing cards. But most of her time was spent in the kitchen, cooking up her Romanian delicacies: venite (chopped eggplant), schnitzel (chicken dipped in egg and fried in bread crumbs), verenikes (potato dumplings), karnatzlach (spicy hamburger meat rolled into hotdogs), mamaliga, (a creamy cornmeal mixture), roasted red peppers, and a special kind of pastry filled with Turkish delights, a candied jelly dipped in confectioner’s sugar. After feasting on dinner, we would all walk down the hill to Lola’s apartment, sit on the patio and feel the summer breeze flow across our faces.
At 13, I was now old enough to work on a kibbutz with my cousin, Nira. Lola’s two children had both adopted Hebrew names when they moved to Israel, perhaps to erase the vestiges of their Romanian heritage. Nadia was now Nira, and her older brother Sorin, was Shimon. As if a true sabre, Sorin not only changed his first name, but also his last—Goldstein to Galon. But Lola and her husband, Dodo, who ran a dentist’s practice in their apartment, kept their Romanian names, first and last.

The kibbutz, Israel’s version of a communal farm, was created by the pioneers who planted the first crops in Palestine at the turn of the century. But as Nira and I headed to Kibbutz Gani Gar, just south of Nazareth in the sweltering July heat, socialism and Zionism were the last things on my mind. This was my summer vacation, I thought, not an experiment in communal living. I pictured myself spending my days playing with the dark-haired Israeli girls and cooling off in the pool. But within a day of arriving, I learned that a kibbutz is not the kind of place an American teenager should go for their summer holiday.

The first morning, our cabin of half a dozen girls awoke at 4:30 a.m. and headed to the dining room for a standard Israeli breakfast: cucumbers, red and green peppers, tomatoes, rolls, butter, jam and juice. By 6 a.m., decked out in t-shirts, shorts, sneakers and cotton hats, we were on the truck heading to the grove. Somewhere between two rows of fruit trees, the driver unloaded his charges and we started our shift of picking pears—green, hard, and hidden underneath thick clumps of leaves. Though I had lived next to an orange grove for three years, I didn’t know the first thing about farming, as the kibbutznik in charge of our crew soon found out.
Most of the pears were within arm’s reach for plucking, but some of the stubborn ones could only be picked from a ladder. On my second morning, I was happily snapping pears and dropping them in my bucket when one of the supervisors walked by. Suddenly, he began barking at me in Hebrew. I flinched in fear—I could not figure out what I had done wrong.

As the man continued yelling at me, I stared at him with unknowing eyes. The Hebrew I had learned in Hebrew School was barely enough to ask for directions to the nearest toilet, let alone decipher what this irate man was saying. Hearing the commotion, Nira finally came to my rescue and explained that the pears had to be picked with their stems intact. Somehow, the stems of my pears had been left on the tree. But what did I know? I was just an American teenager trying to pretend I was a kibbutznik, harvesting the fruits of the earth.

When pear duty was over, we headed back to the dining hall for more cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, and bread. Then my bunkmates showed me how to mop our cabin floor and we went for a dip in the pool. The next day, to my relief, we were reassigned to pick watermelons, which luckily had no stems.

After returning to Nazareth, the summer months whizzed by as I played with Nira (who spoke fluent English) and visited Jerusalem and Tel Aviv with my mother and brother. In the big cities, soldiers were everywhere—on the streets, in cafes and on buses—and they carried long rifles over their shoulders like backpacks. I stared at them while munching on falafel sandwiches and cups of salted sunflower seeds.
My father joined us in Nazareth the last two weeks of our trip and we had a family reunion—Romanian style. Whenever my father, his sisters and Grandma got together, they would start shouting to each other in Romanian, all the while eating their hot peppers and chopped eggplant. Sabina, who had spent two months touring Israel with a synagogue youth group from the states, had also driven up to Nazareth to meet us. She was 16, brash, independent, and like my father, a newly converted Zionist.

As the summer faded and the nights grew cool, I realized I had no special feeling for this strange country, where hot-tempered kibbutzniks yelled at me for snapping pears without their stems and soldiers roamed the streets with their rifles. I longed to return to Florida, where you didn’t have to pick the oranges off the trees.

On our way home, my father decided we should see another corner of the world—Greece. In Athens, we walked around the Acropolis and Parthenon and then took a cruise to the Greek Islands, enchanted places with white windmills turning on the hillsides. As we sailed through the Mediterranean in the cool evening twilight, Sabina sat alone on the deck of the ship, still swept up in her thoughts about Israel. But I had already forgotten about the pears and the soldiers and the bugs in Grandma’s bed.
Chapter 8
Beached Sandcrab

At Seabreeze Senior High School, the marching band was our version of paramilitary training. Every August, when our classmates were still sunbathing on the beach or fishing off the Main Street pier, the band was out on the school football field practicing formations of human kaleidoscopes while blaring out John Phillip Sousa marches and the theme from Aquarius. The Seabreeze Marching Sandcrabs, named after our school mascot, attracted a motley assortment of kids: the misfits, who couldn’t get into any other school club; the majorettes, who weren’t cute enough to become cheerleaders but still got to flounce their pony tails while twirling a baton; the loyalists, whose ancestors had been band members for generations before them; and the aspiring musicians, who actually wanted to learn how to play their instruments. Who else would tolerate stomping around the grass for hours on end in the sizzling heat in central Florida, wearing long-sleeved red, white and black uniforms and tall feather-plumed hats?

I joined the Marching Sandcrabs after three years of preparatory work in junior high, where the training was just as grueling but the uniforms less burdensome. Band was the only high school club that interested me and probably the only one that would accept me as a member. For in truth, I was just as much an outcast as the pimply-faced boys who signed up for band so that they too could go to football games on Friday nights and cheer on the mighty Sandcrabs. I had horrendously bad acne, a condition
that led Mr. Frye, my physics teacher, to call me to his desk one day and suggest I try Clearasil. (Gee, why hadn’t I thought of that?) By then, my mother had already dragged me to numerous dermatologists who poked and prodded at my oily face and prescribed assorted pills and creams that never seemed to help. In my three years at Seabreeze, I never once dated a boy from school nor attended a single prom—much to my father’s dismay—though I did get asked once to the big dance by my physics lab partner. But he too had skin that was pock-marked with acne and I just couldn’t bear the thought of dancing cheek-to-pimply-faced-cheek with him in the school gym.

My father couldn’t understand why a somewhat normal girl like me wouldn’t date boys or why they didn’t want to date me. In his world, a girl’s role was to pretty herself up so she could make a good catch. His dream for me was simple: marry someone—anyone—from the right religion, of course) and have kids. College and careers were nice, but I had to keep my eye on the prize. My father never spelled this out to me; it was just understood. But he made it perfectly clear to Sabina, who as the elder daughter was the first to step outside his old-fashioned European world. When Sabina went off to Tulane University and couldn’t decide whether to major in criminal justice, social work or economics, my father wrote her a letter explaining his expectations: “Our wish like any other parent some day yours too probably is that you send a — (I dare to mention child) to college and beside education to find some body and at the end setele down, this wish goes on and on and on for generations so wee are not different but you are a little different education is first and so wee realize that and wee will not argue about that.”
What came first in my world was not education, such as it was meted out at Seabreeze Senior High, but music. Coming from a long line of musicians on my maternal side (my mother’s great uncle Benny had played violin and bassoon in the Montreal Symphony), it wasn’t surprising that I too would take up an instrument. My mother, trained as a pianist at McGill University, had started me on lessons at age seven, but the sessions quickly deteriorated into one long, tortuous argument as we made our way through the red Thompson piano book, so eventually I switched to the flute. After learning how to get a sound out of the instrument and successfully blowing a note for 30 seconds, I decided I had found my calling. Instead of chasing boys and buying clothes, as my father had hoped, I spent my afternoons practicing my silver-plated Bundy for hours on end until I could play the Mozart Flute Concerto in D by heart. And with this slender, shiny instrument in my hands, my mother and I quickly reached harmonic convergence as she accompanied me to the great repertoire of classical flute music.

For a solitary child, music was a natural outlet. You didn’t need companionship to become a musician, just determination and patience, of which I had both. For after my best friend Pam left town when her father was transferred to the General Electric plant in Connecticut, I no longer had anyone to play marathon jack tournaments with, to sleep over my house and watch horror movies with, or to make trouble with at Friday night services.

When Pam deserted me, there was nothing left—except music.
By my junior year, the Marching Sandcrabs had reached new heights in excellence—we were invited to perform in the Cottonbowl Parade in Dallas on New Year’s Day. Mr. Smith, our short and stocky band director, drilled us longer and harder as we practiced marching like tin soldiers every afternoon until dusk. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event to be in the Cottonbowl Parade, and if Mr. Smith had his way, we were going to dazzle the crowds.

Despite all the excitement, though, I barely spent a second thinking about marching in this granddaddy of parades. I was ecstatic about something else: I had just been selected to play in the Florida All-State Band. Only a smattering of students from Seabreeze had passed the auditions to play in All-State that year. The few and the proud who did would converge in Orlando in February, when students from all across Florida would practice and perform in the best high school band in the state.

The day finally arrived for our trip to Dallas and after twenty-one hours on the road, the band filed out of our Greyhound bus late on the afternoon of New Year’s Eve into a blast of frigid Texas air. Standing outside with his orange megaphone, Mr. Smith barked out the orders for the evening as we huddled in the parking lot: Dinner at 6 o’clock and bedtime at 9:30 sharp since we had to be up early the next morning in tip-top shape. There would be no exceptions, no excuses, and as we had already been told, no illegal substances in our hotel rooms.

But the warning from Mr. Smith did not stop the more rambunctious of us from making party plans on the sly. It was New Year’s Eve, after all, and parade or no
parade, we were not going to bed at 9:30 p.m. My friend Jody and I had already packed two opaque shampoo bottles filled with vodka in our suitcase in preparation for the night ahead. Our friends, Rick and Bob, had brought the orange juice so we could make Screwdrivers. The only problem was how to get from our room to theirs, with Mr. Smith and numerous nosy chaperones roaming the halls.

Jody wasn't exactly my best friend, but she came close. There was something alluring about her—she had a wild streak and always seemed to be flirting with danger. She was the band's drum majorette, which entitled her to wear a red-and-white sequined leotard and march in front of everybody, leading us down the football field or down Ridgewood Avenue for the Christmas parade. Unlike me, she was pretty, with blond hair and blue eyes, and she was always asked to the prom. And best of all, she was studying piano with Mrs. Gabriel, the best teacher in town. Soon I too had signed up for lessons with Mrs. Gabriel and split my free time between practicing the flute and piano.

Jody was my ticket to popularity—that all-encompassing goal in high school. A month before our trip to Dallas, she and I had stopped by the Stavro's pizza parlor downtown after a Friday night football game and I thought I was on top of the world, sitting there eating cheese pizza with a hoard of football players surrounding us, gawking at Jody. But before her charm could rub off on me, I rose from the table to head to the bathroom and accidentally caught the tablecloth on one of the latches on my band uniform, sending all our plates and glasses crashing to the floor. The football team stood and clapped while I froze, a contorted smile on my face, red with
embarrassment. Again, I had failed. How could I ever be popular like Jody when I was just such a klutz?

* * *

It was about 9 p.m. when Jody and I scampered from our hotel room that brisk night in Dallas and raced down the hall to visit Rick and Bob. They had already set out the Dixie cups on the dark wooden desk in front of their bed and were ready to celebrate. After mixing in the vodka from the shampoo bottles, we toasted in the New Year and were laughing and joking the night away until we heard a loud knock at the door. Mr. Smith had arrived.

Jody and I looked at each other and instinctively knew there was only one place to hide. Climbing into the bathtub, we heard Mr. Smith bellow out from the doorway: “Have you seen Thomas and Negrea?” I held my breath and listened to my heart beating wildly as Mr. Smith scoured the room. Miraculously, he didn’t peek into the bathroom. Finally, a few minutes later, we made our escape back to our room, tore off our clothes and jumped into bed, pretending that we had been soundly tucked under the covers all night.

The dreaded knock came with just a second to spare.

“Where have you been?” Mr. Smith shouted.

“We’ve been here all this time,” Jody said meekly.

Mr. Smith looked into our eyes, as if he could detect the lie on our faces. “That doesn’t gel with what I’ve been hearing,” he said and abruptly slammed the door.
Jody and I looked at each other, knowing that our troubles had just begun.

* * *

The Cottonbowl parade, as far as I was concerned, was a big hoax. As we marched around several dreary blocks of deserted downtown Dallas that Saturday morning, there was virtually no one there to watch us. At one or two street corners, there were a handful of people huddled together, bundled up in coats, but that was the extent of the crowd. There were more television reporters than spectators. But on TV, as my parents described it, there appeared to be hordes of people cheering on the parade, presumably the same shivering souls we had passed on the corner.

On the bus ride back, the band members were gloating in our near-perfect performance, how we hadn't missed a step or a note along the tortuous parade route. But as I sat next to Jody, who stared silently out the window, I was overwhelmed with a sense of dread. I knew Mr. Smith, in true paramilitary style, would not let our escapade go unpunished. And as it turned out, I was right.

He handed down his sentence on Monday morning: Jody, Rick, Bob and I were expelled from band; we were ordered to spend fourth period for the rest of the year picking up trash on school grounds; and worst of all, I was barred from attending the Florida All-State convention.

Immediately, rumors spread across Seabreeze Senior High faster than a gust of wind in a hurricane. Surely, we were having sex in that hotel room, not just drinking. Why else would our punishment be so harsh? My reputation as one of the straightest girls in the school plummeted within a matter of minutes. But I didn’t care. I was too
heartsick over losing my chance at playing with the All-State Band to think about anything else.

My father was beside himself. "What kind of girl goes into a boy's hotel room?" he asked my mother. "What kind of upbringing did they think she had?"

He talked about the incident for days on end, as if I had brought a personal disgrace on our family. He grounded me on weekends and forbade me from seeing Jody, whom he called a "tramp." But seeing how disappointed I was about not going to All-State, he also seemed to sympathize with me. So he called Mr. Smith and asked him to reconsider. I was already being punished enough, he said, by being kicked out of the band. It wasn't fair that I couldn't attend All-State if I was good enough to get in.

But Mr. Smith would not relent. He wanted to make examples of the four of us so that other band members would know that they would have to keep their toes on the line on the next band trip.

With more embarrassment and shame than I felt that night in the pizza parlor, I trudged around the football field every day during band period with a huge, lime-green pail picking up trash. It was as if the four of us had been condemned to serve in some chain gang in the Deep South, except that in our case, the crime was Screwdrivers in Dixie cups at 9:30 on New Year's Eve, instead of murder or mayhem.

The days slowly crept by and I sunk deeper and deeper into my shell. I had no one to talk to and no where to turn. Finally, salvation came from one of the unlikeliest people—Father Grasso, my Latin teacher. The tall, lanky priest, who was always
telling us jokes, would often announce to our class in the middle of a lesson that I was the only student who bothered to take notes. Though I would never admit it to anyone, I liked Latin and was intrigued by The Gallic Wars: All Gaul was divided into three parts.

A month after that fateful drink in Dallas, Father Grasso wrote a letter to my father. Dear Mr. Negrea, Please do not punish Sherrie anymore because she has been punished enough and knows what she did.

It was as if God himself had spoken. My father finally calmed down and stopped talking about the my fall from grace. And eventually, life went on.

* * *

That summer, I went to study flute and composition at a music institute for high school students at Indiana University. Since I was gone, my father decided to hire Jody to work as a clerk in his souvenir shop off the highway. Sometime during the summer, Jody started dating Don, the boy who bagged the fruit. She became pregnant, and by the time I came back from Indiana, Jody had had an abortion.

In the fall, we returned to school to begin our senior year, the prime of our lives. But it was hardly the year we had looked forward to. Jody was recovering from the pain of an abortion and I had once again lost my only friend. Instead of going to football games every weekend, it was back to synagogue and babysitting my little brother when my parents went out. I had never felt so lonely as when I roamed the open-air hallways of Seabreeze Senior High with no one to talk to and no one to share a pizza with on Friday night.
In the afternoons, while the Marching Sandcrabs were revving up on the football field, I was home alone, practicing my flute. I was no longer in the band, but I still had my music.
My father and mother
Laurentians, 1949

My father, Bucharest, 1944
Woman, unknown
Sherrie and Sabina
Rockland, 1962

Untangling the Knots
Ormond Beach, 1970
Part II

Fulfilling the Dream

Patrick, Rachel and Sherrie, Moscow, 2000
Chapter 9

The Man I Couldn’t Like

Barely a year had passed since my father’s death when Bert Sales rolled into town in his white Monte Carlo, hoping to take my mother out for dinner. Bert was a bond salesman for the state of Israel who spent his days cruising up and down I-95 along Florida’s east coast, traipsing from one fundraising meeting to another. He was also a practical joker from Pittsburgh who had been divorced twice and was easily pushing 250 pounds.

Bert first met my mother while eating dinner with Chuck Rembaum, my father’s best friend and chairman of the local Israel bonds committee, at the Steak ‘N Ale the previous summer. My mother had been sitting with Linda, Chuck’s wife, at the restaurant when they were introduced. So it wasn’t surprising that a year later, when Bert decided to make his move, it was Chuck to whom he turned to make the match.

Chuck didn’t sugarcoat anything when he called my mother to tell her the news: “I’ve got this guy from Israel bonds,” he said, “this fat guy who wants to go out with you.” Unfazed, my mother told him she had nothing better to do—other than run my father’s orange juice business—and agreed to meet them at Julian’s, a steakhouse across the street from the towering white hotels on Atlantic Avenue.

At dinner, my mother had barely dug into her prime rib when Bert suddenly jumped up from his seat and wandered over to talk to a young couple sitting at the
next table. Bert could strike up a conversation with anyone at anytime—in checkout
lines, diners, movie theaters. His opening line was always, “Where are you from?”
From there, the conversation would move along as if they were all long lost friends.
After he intruded on the couple in the steakhouse, he said, “Do you see those three
people I’ve been sitting with there? They haven’t been listening to a word I’ve been
saying.” He made more small talk with the strangers before returning to entertain my
mother with more jokes. Then he called it a night and checked into the Howard
Johnson’s down the street.

The next Friday a bouquet of flowers arrived at our door. The card read:
“Good Shabbos. Pittsburgh.”

He was gone for a few weeks before he passed through town again and
decided to stop by the house. It was the middle of August and I was home after
finishing a summer job at the morning newspaper in Jacksonville and waiting to start
my senior year in college. When I sauntered downstairs, I found a bald man with gray
hair and thick glasses standing in our foyer speaking in what sounded like a
Midwestern twang. No one could have looked more different from my father than this
roly-poly of a man. He had a bulging stomach, rolls of fat under his chin and, as I
noticed immediately, he inhaled very deeply.

When he left, my mother asked my opinion of Bert. “I think he’s an old fart,” I
said.

* * *
After our introduction, I never gave Bert a chance. I couldn’t imagine that he had anything to offer my mother, even if she was now left alone with my brother in our sprawling two-story house filled with mementos of my father while Sabina and I were off at school. I couldn’t see beyond the vision of my father, the slim, swarthy man my mother had once compared to Errol Flynn. How could my mother, still caught up in her grief over my father, be attracted to a man like Bert, who besides being one of the most unattractive man I had ever met had already had a heart attack and open heart surgery?

Though my mother’s didn’t want to date a man who was such a medical risk, Bert would not give up. He soon starting making the three-and-a-half-hour trip from his apartment in West Palm Beach every weekend, just in time to check into the Howard Johnson’s and stop by for Shabbos dinner. He became such a regular at the Howard Johnson’s that the owner finally asked: “Bert—isn’t the campaign over yet?” Between visits, he would call my mother every night and ask, “Are you smiling?” If she said no, he would call again.

They had been dating for about a month when Bert decided that what my mother needed to get out of her funk was a dinner party. He insisted she go out and buy a new red blouse and invite all her friends over one evening. My mother, who had once loved throwing parties, said defiantly, “No. I’ll never entertain again.” But Bert would not stop pestering her until she had invited four couples over for the following Saturday night.
Two days before the party, she told me she was starting to get the jitters. She called her friend Barry and announced she was canceling the party. She would burst into tears, she predicted, when she saw Bert sitting at my father’s place at the dining room table. It was going to be a disaster. Sure enough, when Saturday morning finally arrived, my mother was so nervous she backed into a car parked in front of the grocery store and sprained her wrist.

But when Bert rang the doorbell that night, he confidently strolled into the house, introducing himself as “The Palm Beach Sex Symbol.” That set everyone off and Bert had no trouble keeping them laughing all night.

While Bert was carousing with my mother and her friends, my brother was still at Camp Blue Star in North Carolina—the same camp where Sabina and I had been when he was born. When he came home a few weeks later, Charles, a shy boy who wore glasses and despised sports, glommed onto the fat man immediately. When he arrived on Friday nights, Charles would scamper up the winding staircase to hide while Bert would barrel after him, yelling “Where’s the little son of a bitch?” Then after one of their wrestling matches, Charles would shout to my mother, “Should we kill him? Should we kill him?”

Bert showed Charles the things a father would teach his son: how to tie a tie, how to shave, how to play golf. Yet his favorite moments with Charles were in his sports car navigating the palm tree-lined streets of Daytona Beach, a city Bert nicknamed “Dietona” when one restaurant after another closed down. Pointing out the window at a pedestrian, Bert would say, “Ten points if I hit him;” if he saw an old
lady, it was "bonus points." Or else he would play "chicken" and drive down the
ground side of the road. When he got tired of the horseplay, he would let Charles sit on
his lap and take over the steering wheel. Bert never once had to discipline Charles
except to remind him of his own version of the golden rule. "What's the word?" Bert
would say, pointing his stubby index finger in the air. "Respect," he would answer
himself, and Charles would understand.

* * *

Secluded in the library in Chicago, reading Nietzsche, D. H. Lawrence and
Tolstoy, I was so far removed from Bert that it was easy to forget him and pretend
that nothing had changed. But I didn't realize how much things had changed. No
matter how hard I tried to ignore him, Bert had clearly become inseparable from my
mother and Charles. By the next summer, when we all gathered at an oceanside hotel
to celebrate my brother's bar mitzvah, Charles introduced Bert as "the man who
brought laughter back to our house."

And then the inevitable happened. On a bright Sunday afternoon in November,
they were married at the Halifax Club, the top floor of a bank building a block from
the ocean. The celebration was announced to everyone in town by the owner of the
Howard Johnson's, who changed the lettering on his marquee to read: Happy Day,
Bert Sales. My mother wore a white knit dress with sequins on the bodice and Bert
wore a navy suit. A county judge who was a friend of the family's performed the
ceremony in front of 50 guests. While everyone toasted the newlyweds with
champagne and frosted wedding cake, I sat in the corner and cried.
Suddenly there was no denying it: Bert was now sleeping in my mother’s king-size bed, the same bed where my father had wasted away from cancer two years earlier. He sat at my father’s place at the table and took my mother out to dinner on Saturday nights. He advised Sabina on what career she should choose—one week it was cable television producer, the next week it was promotions manager and the week after that, real estate agent. When Sabina’s car broke down in the Arizona desert on the way to a cable television convention in Los Angeles, it was Bert she called for help. He even showed up at my college graduation on a blustery weekend in December and trudged through the snow to watch me receive my diploma in the cavernous Rockefeller Chapel.

When I moved to New Jersey to work on a small daily newspaper, I started dating Mike, an Italian electronics salesman who instantly became a fan of Bert’s. Since they were both in sales, I figured, they must have understood each other. And when he and my mother visited us after one of his fundraising meetings in New York, Bert didn’t even complain that Mike wasn’t Jewish.

Still, I couldn’t accept Bert as my father. My father would always be the man with the explosive Romanian temper, the man I used to call “Sonny Boychick” in my childhood when he combed the wet tangles out of my thick wavy hair or rubbed my legs with alcohol when they became crampy during the wet humid weather. Though he was gone, my father had never really left me in my waking moments and dreams. I
couldn't see that Bert wasn't trying to replace my father—but just be my friend—until it was too late.

It was three years after the wedding when Bert decided to retire so he wouldn't have to commute four-hundred miles each weekend to see my mother. He had just turned sixty-two and his first social security check had arrived in the mail. Bert and my mother started planning vacations to places they hadn't seen—the Grand Canyon—and places they had—Israel. As a bond salesman, Bert had been a regular visitor to Israel and one of the highlights of his career had been a private meeting he had with David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister. Yet the first trip Bert planned was closer to home: He wanted to take Arnie, his son from his first marriage, and Charles golfing in Hilton Head, South Carolina.

Since he was going on a golfing jaunt with his sons, my mother decided she would visit her daughters in New York, where Sabina was now working for a cable television company. On a Friday at the end of May, I drove in from New Jersey to spend the weekend at Sabina's apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The three of us saw two shows on Broadway—M Butterfly and the Heidi Chronicles—and shopped until we could walk no more. While pushing our way through the crowds at Macy's, we passed by the racks of men's clothing.

"Father's Day is coming up," I said grudgingly. "I'll buy a present for Bert." I picked out a navy tie with white stripes—the only gift I remember giving Bert in the four years I would know him.
Since Charles was home alone for the weekend, Bert had driven up for his usual Friday night dinner. Armed with The Starving Student's Cookbook, which Bert had given him, Charles prepared a feast: roast beef, mashed potatoes, an onion and tomato salad (since Bert hated lettuce) and dessert. The next day, Bert headed to St. Augustine to have dinner with Faye, his daughter from his first marriage who was now living in Jacksonville.

By 11 o'clock that night, Bert had still not come home and Charles, figuring that the dinner had simply run late, went to sleep. Three hours later, the doorbell rang. Charles stumbled downstairs and found a police officer standing on the front porch.

"Does Bert Sales live here?" the officer asked.

Yes, Charles said, he does.

"Well, I hate to inform you, but he's passed away."

Bert had suffered a heart attack, the officer said, while driving home along the back roads of central Florida. Though he had lost thirty pounds, Bert had been a prime candidate for another attack because he had already had open-heart surgery. When the pounding in his chest finally came, he had managed to find his way to a friend's house in a desolate town off the highway but died after being rushed to the hospital.

Charles went upstairs and cried himself to asleep.

The next day, as I drove to the newspaper's bureau office in a basement next to the county courthouse, the sky was overcast. By mid-afternoon, it had turned pitch black as a storm blew into town. Suddenly, a deafening bolt of thunder crashed
through the air as if God himself had spoken. I immediately looked out the window and felt a sense of foreboding: something was wrong.

After my mother had left New York that morning, she had called home from Atlanta to tell Bert that her plane was running late. Charles, back from a driver's ed class at the high school, answered the phone and said he would let Bert know. But when she arrived in Daytona, she found Chuck and her friend Jean Edelman waiting to pick her up.

“Where is Bert?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“Come into the car and I’ll tell you,” Chuck said.

But Chuck could not bring himself to explain what had happened so my mother started peppering him with questions: Is he sick? Is he in the hospital? And, finally, is he dead? Unable to hide the truth anymore, Jean looked her in the eye and told her.

When my mother got home and found a crowd of her friends talking in hushed voices in our family room, the memories of my father’s death flooded back into her mind. All she could say was, “Not again. Not again.” For the second time in five years, she would have to bury a husband.

Sabina and I flew to Daytona and then we all headed back north to Pittsburgh for the funeral, with Bert’s coffin in baggage. On a muggy spring afternoon, he was buried next to his parents at the Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of the city. This time, I didn’t cry as he was lowered into the ground, wearing my navy blue tie.
Chapter 10

Exposing Pinky

The office was directly above Guard's Cards, one of a handful of stores still open for business downtown. It was a tiny room, a cubbyhole really, that had a huge wooden desk, a black swivel chair, a rotary telephone, an antiquated computer and a bathroom. The stucco walls were bare except for two large windows overlooking a parking lot on Seneca Street. This was the Geneva bureau of the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, my entree, I thought, into the world of big-time journalism.

I had fallen into newspapers by accident. At Boston University, where I had gone to study flute, it did not take long to realize I did not have the steel nerves or the talent for a career in performance. While wandering around campus one day, I volunteered to write a couple of music reviews for the college paper. When one of the copy editors quit, I offered to fill in and was instantly hooked on news.

I landed my first job at The Daily Record, a small newspaper in northern New Jersey. After a six-month stint on the night police beat, I was assigned to cover three suburban towns: Denville, where the city manager, a crusty old man with greasy hair, refused to tell me what was in the town budget ("Why do you keep asking about the budget?" he would say. "Women always want to know about money"); Randolph, where the town officials were shocked when an adult book store opened on the main highway; and Mount Olive, where the head of the town's international trade zone would not speak to me. Bored with suburban politics, I asked for a transfer to the
paper's bureau in rural Sussex County, a remote backwater where dairy farms still
dotted the countryside. For two years, I worked in a basement office next to the
courthouse and covered the annual farm and horse show, a woman on trial for
stabbing her husband to death in their bed and a horse breeder who artificially
inseminated his mares.

And then it was time to move on. In journalism, reporters must always be
heading off to larger and larger papers or else their careers are sunk. So after four
years in New Jersey, I left for upstate New York to work in the Geneva bureau of the
Rochester paper for $450 a week. My salary was paltry enough, but I didn’t care. It
was enough to rent my own place on Pulteney Street, a small brick house painted
white that had cobblestones from the Civil War era in its clammy basement. The
refrigerator didn’t work (and the landlord wouldn’t fix it), the shower leaked from the
second floor to the foyer and the wind whipped through the brick walls which had no
insulation. But the house did have a tiny yard for my golden retriever, Tawny, who had
barked incessantly during the six-hour drive from New Jersey in my beat-up white
Chevy Cavalier.

My office in Geneva was 47 miles away from the *Democrat and Chronicle*
newsroom in downtown Rochester, which meant that it was up to me to determine the
news of the day, write up the stories and send them via computer to the city desk.
With an expansive territory of two rural counties and the city of Geneva in which to
mine stories, there seemed to be plenty of news to cover.
The first Tuesday after moving to town, I walked over to City Hall at 7 p.m. for my first Geneva city council meeting. After stepping inside the wood-paneled chamber on the second floor, I slipped to the back of the room and sat at the press table with Frank, a stubby radio reporter who looked like he had just walked out of *The Front Page*. For the next two hours, I watched Frank doze on and off, his double chin bobbing up and down on his chest, as a band of irate citizens took turns upbraiding the mayor for proposing a traffic light on their street. The meeting may have put Frank to sleep, but it gave me a rush of adrenaline as I watched the citizens in hand-to-hand combat with their local government. I was anything but bored—this was democracy in action and I was here to record it. My father, a Democrat in every sense of the word, would have been proud.

Geneva’s mayor was a short, pudgy man named Frank J. Cecere Jr.—known to the locals as Pinky. He owned Pinky’s Restaurant & Bar, an establishment across from City Hall downtown, and split his time between running the city and serving up burgers and beer. When I arrived in town, he was waging a tough reelection battle and was embroiled in a $60 million lakefront project that was supposed to bring a hotel, offices and condominiums to the northern shore of Seneca Lake but was now on the verge of collapse.

*   *   *

When I had told my friends in New Jersey that I was moving to Geneva, New York, one of them had laughed and asked if that was somewhere near Siberia. Though it was more snowy than New Jersey, Geneva—population 15,000—was
situated on the northern shore of Seneca Lake, the deepest (632 feet) of the Finger Lakes, which legend has it were carved out by the hand print of God. The Finger Lakes: the very words enchanted me, conjuring up images of rolling vineyards, pristine countryside and crystal blue waters. I pictured myself spending weekends exploring waterfalls and gorges, wineries and wooded hiking trails that stretched from lake to lake.

But the reality, as it turned out, did not match the illusion. The Finger Lakes were beautiful, as I caught my first glimpse of them, but I was moving to Geneva, a city that offered a collection of seedy bars, Italian restaurants, a golf shooting range, one strip shopping plaza and one gum-splattered movie theater downtown for entertainment. Yes, it was home to Hobart and William Smith Colleges, a school that attracted wealthy preppy kids from around the Northeast, but the school kept its distance from the tawdry world of Geneva politics. After sampling the spaghetti plate at The Chanticleer Restaurant and the salmon at The Crow's Nest, I decided to spend my weekends bar hopping with the reporters in Rochester.

* * *

If I was going to have a professional relationship with Pinky, I wanted it to start out in proper form. After watching him bang the gavel at the council meeting, I called Pinky's office and asked if I could sit down with him and chat, but the mayor, I was told, was too busy. Instead he sloughed me off to the city manager, Stephen Sarkozy, who was evasive in response to my questions about the lakefront project, though rumors about the development's demise were swirling around town.
I called Pinky at his restaurant one morning to ask him if the developer was backing out of the project because of delays in reaching a deal with the city.

"I can’t talk about that," Pinky barked. "Why are you always asking me about the lakefront project?"

But if Pinky wouldn’t talk to me, his Republican opponent, a burly man named Jack Starr, would. Just before he announced his election campaign, I bought Jack a hamburger and cup of coffee at the Downey Flake Do-Nut Shop on Exchange Street, a diner that looked like it had frozen in time back in the 1950s. In gratitude, Jack passed along a tip. Pinky’s brother, he said, had apparently run an election registration "special" at his restaurant, the Holiday Bar & Grill, to drum up support for the mayor.

College students were promised free drinks if they registered to vote—a violation of state election law. While the students were guzzling beers at the bar, the mayor’s brother was spinning tales of Pinky’s success in office, hoping to win their votes.

Pinky himself stopped by the party but couldn’t understand what the fuss was all about.

"He did it for his brother," Pinky explained. "He thinks I’m doing a good job."

My front-page article, headlined "Voter registration scandal brews in Geneva bar," sent Pinky into a rage. He started slamming the phone on me in his restaurant when I called for comment on my story du jour. Then two days after the story appeared, I was standing in Olde World Italia, a delicatessen on Exchange Street, waiting to buy a cheese sandwich when a gruff-looking man approached me. I immediately recognized him as one of the mayor’s supporters and a local Vietnam War
veteran. He was a hefty man who had long straggly hair and wore torn up jeans and a shabby-looking jacket.

"We'd like to know where you live," he said, staring at me.

I didn't know what to say. Before I could think of a response, another customer in line advised, "I'd take that as a threat if I were you."

By the time I had finished my sandwich at my office, I had forgotten about the incident. But when I mentioned it to my assignment editor, Mary, she insisted I report it immediately to the police.

"You never know what this guy will do," she said. "I wouldn't want to find out."

So on a bright October afternoon, I trudged down to the City Hall to file a complaint, dead-sure I would become the laughingstock of the Geneva Police Department as I requested an investigation of the remark in the delicatessen.

* * *

With a contested election on my hands, I was too busy to care that here I was, twenty-seven, single and living in a town that had one gum-splattered movie theater downtown. My life had settled into a set of predictable patterns: Every night after work, I would walk my dog past the colonial townhouses on Main Street where I could see the frigid waters of Seneca Lake glistening through the trees. On Friday nights, I would drive to Newark, a small town twenty minutes north of Geneva, where Leslie, another bureau reporter, and I would meet for pizza and then a beer at a honky-tonk bar that blared country music. And on Sundays, I would take Tawny to a
state park on the east side of the lake and then spend the rest of the afternoon in the laundromat.

A week before the election, Jack Starr passed along another tip: the mayor and the city manager had been meeting secretly with the council to discuss the lakefront project. By splitting the nine-member board into groups of four, the mayor was able to circumvent the state’s open meetings law since there wasn’t a quorum present. And without a quorum, he was not obligated to notify the public and the press about the meeting. The night before the article appeared at the top of the front page under the headline “Geneva council slamming Door on Open Meetings Law?” I could not sleep. What if my facts were wrong? What if Pinky sued me?

It was a tough job defending democracy.

Election night finally came and when all the votes were counted, Pinky had lost. In a post-mortem interview the next day, he exclaimed, “This is all because of you,” and then hung up the phone. Whom else could he blame? The Geneva paper, The Finger Lakes Times, had not written a word about the mayor’s shenanigans. It had left the dirty work to someone else.

The election euphoria over, I was now bored and restless. I had spent seven months digging up stories on Pinky and was left with a new mayor who was too straight-laced to make any news, a two-story house with a refrigerator that still didn’t work and the same greasy-spoon restaurants and bars. I had convinced my editors in Rochester to move the Geneva bureau to a more visible location and they had humored me by renting a former lingerie shop on Exchange Street downtown, two
doors north of the gum-splattered movie theater. But the office, as it turned out, had a hole in the roof, and most mornings I had to chase out a flock of pigeons with a broom.

* * *

It was a Saturday night a few months later when I was home alone with Tawny. The phone rang and when I picked up the receiver, I heard a man in a deep, raspy voice say: "Sherrie, we're going to come over and rape you. We know about your second-floor bedroom."

My heart stopped. I carefully hung up the receiver and stood in my bedroom staring at my window, which overlooked a one-lane side street. The white venetian blinds were down. How did the caller know where my bedroom was? Who could it be? Another of Pinky's henchmen? Or a student from Hobart and William Smith Colleges?

After a sleepless night, I woke up the next morning and called the Geneva police, who were by now quite familiar with me. Two hours later, an officer came over, asked a few questions and left. I felt ashamed and embarrassed that I was calling the police over a prank phone call, but I was all alone in this town and there was nothing else I could do.

As I walked Tawny the next night, the quiet streets of Geneva suddenly turned into a surreal nether world with bushes that came to life and alleys that throbbed with psychopathic men ready to pounce on me. But I was determined not to succumb to my fears. I armed myself with a pocketknife as we strolled around the neighborhood,
down Main Street, up to Routes 5 and 20 past the entrance to the colleges and back
down Pulteney Street. I felt very alone in this strange town planted in the middle of
acres of cornfields. A friend from New Jersey convinced me to buy a motion-detector
burglar alarm for the foyer of my house in case my attacker broke in. So every night I
whisked Tawny up the stairs, raced back down, switched on the alarm and then ran up
after her before I set it off myself.

By now, life in Geneva had become unbearable—even New Jersey was starting
to look good. My idyllic vision of the Finger Lakes was a blur, buried deep in my past.

Hoping to jolt myself out of despair, I joined the pit orchestra of a theater group
performing the Mikado at the Waterloo High School, but during a rehearsal my
wooden piccolo cracked in half. That night, I dug through the boxes in my spare
bedroom to search for my resume. I was ready to move on. I was fraying at the edges,
and like my piccolo, my tough exterior was about to fall apart.

*   *   *

If my father had walked through the forests of Europe for days without water
or food, I could surely stand another few months in Geneva. I was not going to give
up. I worked in the bureau for another half a year, chasing the pigeons every morning
and walking my dog with a pocketknife after work, until one afternoon Claude, the
metro editor, called to say that he was looking for a reporter to cover City Hall in
Rochester. I had done a fine job writing about Pinky, he said, and the mayor of
Rochester was about to launch his re-election campaign. Was I interested in the job?
I could barely contain my excitement—my escape had finally arrived. Three weeks later, I hit the road with my car stuffed with my clothes and my dog, ready to tackle another town and another mayor.
Chapter 11

Judeo-Irish

The next mayor I was assigned to cover was a crusty old Irishman who had a habit of hanging up on reporters whenever his temper flared. Thomas P. Ryan Jr. had been mayor of Rochester, New York, for 15 years when I took over the City Hall beat. If he won another term, he would become the longest-serving mayor in the city's history. During his tenure, he had seen many reporters come and go, but he had apparently never had to deal with anyone like me.

My first encounter with Mumbles, as the old-timers in the newsroom called him, was pleasant enough. We sat in his dark paneled office on the second floor of City Hall and discussed the long-awaited end to the reconstruction of Main Street and the gleaming new road and brick-paved sidewalks that would magically turn around Rochester's downtown. The mayor repeated all his favorite lines about why downtown was in a slump and why all the stores were fleeing to the suburbs and I wrote up a front-page story about his vision for a revitalized city center.

All was going well until a few months later, when I began working on a story on the downtown skyway system. Rochester had been convinced by some ingenious urban planner that it needed to build a maze of pedestrian bridges linking its office buildings to its sagging downtown mall. In theory, these glass and metal tunnels would allow downtown workers to move about during the bitter winters, encouraging them to shop when they might have just stayed put at their desks. But there was an
underside to the skyways, as I found out: Merchants on the ground floor had lost customers who now traveled along the bridges, and as one sociologist suggested, the skyways were creating a double-class society, with the white office workers on the second level and the minorities and bus riders on the ground.

Mayor Ryan didn’t take too kindly to this theory about the evils of skyways—why would he when he had spent thousands of city dollars building them? As I presented the sociological view of skyways to him on the phone, he suddenly exploded. “What are you talking about?” he shouted. “My wife rides the bus downtown everyday to work.” Before I could explain that I wasn’t incriminating his wife, who was probably a fine lady, he slammed down the phone and ran into the city council office, where he continued to berate me in front of the staff.

Thus the freeze began. The mayor would not return my phone calls or grant me interviews no matter how many times a day I left him messages. I started inserting disclaimers into my stories: The mayor did not return several phone calls yesterday, The mayor was not available for comment, or The mayor hung up before he could be questioned on the matter. The editors became concerned, since Ryan was in the midst of a re-election campaign that demanded daily coverage. As the standoff continued, the newspaper decided to run an editorial urging the mayor to please return my calls.

“In three weeks, city voters will choose a mayor,” it read. “Ideally, you’ll consider the issues carefully. Which candidate knows more? Whose judgment is better? Who’s the right man for the job?
So what do you do when one of the candidates—in this case, Mayor Thomas P. Ryan Jr.—won’t answer a reporter’s questions? Won’t return repeated phone calls? Hangs up on the reporter?

You have that much less information on which to make a decision.

Mayor Ryan (who, as always, returned our call) says the *Democrat and Chronicle* reporter ‘does not respect my time. When I say, ‘I’ve got to go,’ she asks another question. It’s constant,’ he complains.

But why refuse to return calls? “I don’t want the public getting any more misinformation than they already have.”

Sorry, your honor, not good enough. When so many readers get nothing from you, the public is shortchanged. Let’s face it: Reporters ask questions. That’s their job. Sometimes officials dislike not only the questions but the reporters who ask them.

But that’s by the way. What’s important is this: As a voter, you want information. You want it now. And you have every right to expect it from those who ask for your vote.”

Despite this public reprimand, the mayor would not relent, and for the next year and a half, he would not grant me an interview. When I needed his comment for a story, I had to corner him at press conferences or chase him down at ribbon cuttings or parades. His overwhelming re-election victory only reinforced his resolve to ignore me, probably in the hope that if this went on long enough, I would surely be replaced.
The mayor's chief rival, a liberal Italian councilman named John G. Erb, blamed the problem not on my reporting but on my ethnicity. "The Romanians and the Irish don't get along," he would say laughing. "What do you expect?"

Months later, though, I would meet an Irishman who would prove him wrong, though in many respects, he was just as stubborn as Mayor Thomas P. Ryan Jr. This Irishman wasn't a politician, but my future husband.

* * *

To keep my mother happy, I had joined the mailing list of a Jewish singles group and occasionally forced myself to attend Saturday night dances where I would meet men I would never dream of dating. At one of these affairs, I had chatted with an elderly man who then called me at my office every day for a week asking to take me out to dinner. One day an envelope arrived in the mail from the group with an invitation to yet another dance. But tucked behind the announcement was a sheet titled "The Mazel Match," a list of ads from the Jewish lovelorn seeking companionship. As I glanced over the notices, one of them caught my eye:

SJM, 38. Professional, trim, moderately athletic (swims, runs, cycles, skis cross country), bilingual English/French. Interests: books, classical and Celtic music, travel, felines, light cuisine, quiet conversation. Seeks enduring friendship with SJF, 32-42 of similar disposition.
Though I despised cats and had once given one away, I found the ad intriguing. I wrote a short note back with the greeting “Dear Monsieur,” giving a brief description of myself.

A few days later, the telephone rang and I heard a deep, raspy voice on the other end of the line. The caller had a vaguely foreign accent and took long, deep breaths before each sentence. His name was Patrick, and before I could jump to any conclusions, he assured me he was Jewish. I told him I would love to talk, but I was busy packing for a road trip the next morning to Newark, New Jersey. Mayor Ryan’s wish had come true—I had been taken off the City Hall beat and was now working on a series on poverty in Rochester; since Newark had rebuilt one of its poorest slums, a neighborhood with towering public housing projects, I was heading there to write a story. As the conversation ended, I promised to call when I returned.

Patrick drove two hours to Rochester on Labor Day in a torrential rain storm from Ithaca, where he was head of copy cataloging at the Cornell University Library. When he walked into Oscar’s, a restaurant near my apartment, I saw a tall, lanky man with chestnut hair wearing a plaid shirt, khaki slacks, a navy windbreaker and a beret. Minutes later, while munching on quesadillas and salad, we discovered we had several mutual interests: We had both lived on the South Side of Chicago, we were both middle children, we were both vegetarians (“cut from the same grain,” Patrick said) and we both were dog lovers, despite his four cats. Yet there was a major difference: Patrick was an observant Jew—he kept kosher, prayed every morning and did not drive a car or use electricity on the Sabbath—and I clearly was not.
* * *

From the moment I spoke to him, I knew Patrick was a convert—it must have been his name. How many Jews are named Patrick? Like his singles ad, I found this fascinating: Why would a kid from the backwaters of eastern Maryland, born Roman Catholic and reared Episcopalian, become a Jew at the age of 19? There was no simple answer, and Patrick is still trying to explain it to me to this day.

He said his journey to Judaism had begun at the age of 15, when the priest at his church had taken the youth group to visit the nearest synagogue—in Salisbury, Maryland. Half a dozen kids piled into the priest’s station wagon and they headed down Maryland’s Eastern Shore for Friday night services. All Patrick remembers is that the rabbi gave a brief introduction to the prayers and that his younger brother Kevin ate three pieces of cake at the reception afterwards, prompting the priest to say, “Kevin, that’s gluttony.”

Patrick was not a typical teenager. While his schoolmates were playing baseball or riding bicycles around town, Patrick, a geeky kid who did not like sports, was poring over the History of the Jews, The Sacred Books of the Jews and The Six Day War. His father, a retired army lieutenant colonel, was an avid reader of history and had numerous books on Jews in his library, though he was not above making anti-Semitic remarks. After Patrick’s sister Margaret drowned in Williston Lake at the age of 11, the family stopped attending the Catholic church. They joined the Episcopal church, but by then Patrick was already having doubts about Christianity: How could the church insist on the oneness of God while claiming at the same time that he was
represented in three persons? And why was Jesus considered a better or more important human being than anyone else on the earth?

With no friends and an angry, alcoholic father who ignored him, Patrick found his escape in Judaism. To Patrick, his father was a total stranger, someone who had never had a conversation with him. He remembers his father ordering him and his two brothers to spend their summer days weeding his vegetable garden in the relentless heat, without being allowed to take regular water breaks. At the dinner table, Patrick, his mother and brothers often ate silently while his father read a book or a magazine. As he later realized, Patrick was not only looking for an escape, but also for another father—the real father—a God with whom he could have a direct relationship.

By the time he entered Western Maryland College, Patrick was set on converting. In his freshman year, he took a bus from campus to a synagogue near Baltimore and hitchhiked back after services. The rabbi, skeptical about this nervous, long-haired teenager, insisted on two things: Patrick would have to learn Hebrew and complete the synagogue’s confirmation exam. A year later, he turned in the test with nearly all of 163 questions answered correctly, and the summer after his sophomore year, he was circumcised—for the second time—and immersed in the ritual bath for conversion.

I can imagine how ecstatic Patrick must have been finally being accepted as a newly minted Jew after years of rejection by his father. But like many converts, Patrick was naïve about the consequences of joining a new religion. He had no idea that people from the different branches of Judaism bickered endlessly with each other over
minute details of religious practice. And so Patrick was taken aback when a few years later, an Orthodox Jew from Baltimore told him that there was a problem with his conversion. The man’s rabbi said that while he understood his intentions, Patrick was still not Jewish: He had converted through the Conservative movement and that was not acceptable to those of the Orthodox persuasion.

Back at home, there was more trouble. Patrick’s father was furious over the conversion and refused to speak to him. After failing to reconcile, the father and son would not see each other for 13 years as Patrick was banned from the house.

In his junior year of college, Patrick went to study literature in France, where he had lived for three years as a young child while his father was stationed abroad. With him he brought a prayer book and a set of tefillin—the leather boxes and straps containing Biblical passages that Jewish men wear on their head and right arm when they *daven* in the morning. He began attending a Sephardic synagogue and wearing his yarmulke every day while darting in and out of classes at the University of Strasbourg. As he walked along the street, the students would taunt him by yelling, “Chapeau! Chapeau!” In the stores, the clerks would hand him money that had been printed by the Vichy government—the collaborationist regime that had sent the Jews to the concentration camps—and Patrick was tempted to throw it back at them.

Despite everything he had done to be accepted, Patrick had alienated himself even further—from his family, from other Jews and even from strangers on the street.

* * *
By the time I met Patrick, he had undergone another conversion—and a third circumcision—under an Orthodox rabbi and had also been divorced. But when he moved to Ithaca to work at Cornell, he disassociated himself from any of the synagogues in town because he decided to build a small ranch out in the country, where it was too far to walk to shul. He lived alone with his four cats and recited the prayers each morning in their company.

After my initial curiosity wore off, I gradually began to wonder whether I could date an observant Jew. My father had wanted me to marry someone Jewish, but did he have to be this Jewish? I started to complain to Patrick about what seemed to be an endless list of restrictions that observance requires: keeping kosher; buying a separate set of dishes for Passover; not driving, riding a bike or listening to music on the Sabbath; waiting until after sundown on Saturday nights to go out with my friends. What seemed to bother me the most was observing the Sabbath.

"I can’t stay in the house for 24 hours,” I said gloomily after one of our long discussions on religion. “I will go crazy.”

But Patrick brushed off my concerns and simply said, “These things take time.” He had already made a concession—agreeing not to wear his yarmulke out in public—and thought we could work things out. This constant reminder of his Jewishness had made me feel uncomfortable in a way I didn’t fully understand. Somewhere, deep inside me, I sensed my mother’s reluctance to tell strangers that she was Jewish, a vestige of her fear growing up during the 1930s. I remembered my father’s changing
his name to the non-Jewish sounding Romanian word for 'black'. Religion was not something we announced to the world.

On a chilly November day when the trees were bare and the leaves were withering on the ground, Patrick and I were walking Tawny along a country road near his house when he suddenly asked me if I wanted to have children.

"I think I so," I said. "Why not?" Now that I was in my thirties and the idea of marriage had become more palatable, the thought of having children didn’t make me shudder as it once had. I could have a career and children too—at least that was what the feminist magazines said. Besides, I didn’t want to grow old in a big house alone, without children running in and out with their runny noses.

That evening, Patrick and I were eating sushi in a Japanese restaurant when he asked me, in the most unromantic way, if I would like to “make our relationship permanent.” I looked at him in disbelief.

"Patrick," I said, “we’ve only been dating three months. I can’t make that decision now.”

I was scared—scared of losing my freedom and scared of marrying a man who actually practiced his religion. Secretly I was embarrassed by his rituals and observances. I, the immigrant’s daughter, wanted to meld into that great American melting pot and be the same as everyone else. Patrick, though, wanted to be different, and different he was.

He was one of the brightest people I had ever met. Talking to him was like conversing with a walking encyclopedia able to rattle off more obscure historical facts
than I could have ever imagined. He wrote me poetry—always in sonnet form—made me bread and bought me tapes of Celtic music. We had similar tastes in food, furnishings (we both owned the same white-tiled kitchen table and the same blue and white bedspread), movies and music. Yet religion was becoming a widening rift that neither of us seemed willing to cross. When I asked Patrick why he was trying to observe all 613 of the commandments in the Torah, he said he had no choice.

“A convert becomes a Jew promising to try to observe all the commandments,” he said. “Native-born Jews don’t have to make any such declaration.”

As one of those native-born Jews, I viewed religion as something you had a choice about. You could attend synagogue if you wanted, you could eat kosher chicken or ham, and you could drive your car to shul on Shabbos if you lived too far. I didn’t feel any need to become more observant than I was, which wasn’t very much at all.

When our attempts to resolve our differences reached an impasse, Patrick and I decided to go for counseling. On a Friday afternoon, we walked into the office of a therapist I had seen to discuss my relationship with my mother, which had become tense as I continued to remain—purposely, she thought—single. We sat on the couch and Patrick began describing his childhood in the home of an angry, alcoholic army veteran. Three sessions later, the therapist declared that as a child of an alcoholic, Patrick had resorted to religion as a framework to give order to his life. That made sense, but it didn’t help us decide when we could go to the movies on Saturday nights.
The therapist predicted that the marriage would not work and warned me not to come back when it didn’t.

With nowhere else to turn, we went to see the rabbi at my synagogue, a large Conservative congregation in Rochester. The rabbi, a kind, elderly man, said he understood our dilemma but thought it would be useless to try to force me to observe the Sabbath.

“That is something you have to come to yourself,” he said. “Otherwise it will feel like you’re in prison.”

Finally after weeks of discussion, Patrick and I came up with a compromise: We wouldn’t observe the Sabbath until the last minute by waiting until those three stars appeared in the sky on Saturday nights. I could still go out to dinner with my friends and we could lead a somewhat “normal” life. There would be many other compromises that would have to be made, such as whether I would keep kosher, but things were already moving in that direction. When my family had joined us for Thanksgiving the previous year, I had served a *traife* turkey with all the trimmings. By the following year, though, my turkey was kosher and there was no butter at the table.

Patrick proposed two more times before I gave him the answer he wanted. On a cloudless summer day, we were hiking along the gorge of a state park blooming with perennials when we started talking about where we would have our wedding—in a park or a restaurant, a banquet hall or a synagogue. Later that day, as we ate somosas at our favorite Indian restaurant, there was more talk of wedding plans. Suddenly I interrupted Patrick to remind him that I still hadn’t answered his question.
“Well?” he asked nervously.

“The answer is yes,” I said just as nervously.

We raised our glasses in a toast, drove back to my apartment and called my mother to tell her the news. She was so relieved that all she could do was cry.

* * *

My wedding was held on August 20, 1995, a blazing hot day, at Temple Beth El in Rochester. With so many relatives gathered around, among them my cousin Shimon from Israel, there was much to celebrate. First: At the age of thirty-five, I was finally getting married. Second: My future husband was not a goy.

As Patrick paced back and forth in the hallway, I sweltered under my ivory satin wedding gown, with its pearl beaded bodice and thick petticoat. Patrick wore a black tuxedo with a emerald green bow tie—his salute to the old country. When the harpist began strumming Erik Satie’s *Trois Gymnopedies*—my selection for our wedding march—I stood outside the chapel with my mother and brother at my sides. Sabina, in a green and white flowered dress, waited in front of me with her son Tobie screaming wildly at her feet. My mother tugged at my satin gown so we could start down the aisle, but I didn’t want to budge. I started to choke up as I felt the passage of my life moving before me—the future awaiting me in the chapel and the past slipping away from me in the hallway outside. I didn’t know whether to catch up with the unknown or stay behind with the familiar. There was another reason for my hesitation: Someone was missing from the procession—my father.
At the reception afterwards, though, after we had danced ourselves into a frenzy in a whirling, winding hora, my father joined the simcha through his best friend, Chuck. Raising a glass of champagne, Chuck stood before the guests to toast the bride and groom, and through his words, invited my father’s presence into the room.

“Before I came to Rochester this weekend,” he said, looking straight into my eyes, “I went to the cemetery to visit your father, my friend, Bob. I stood before his grave and I told him about all the wonderful things that have happened in your life. I told him about your being a newspaper reporter here in Rochester. I told him about Patrick. And I told him I was going to your wedding.”

“But I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to say. And a moment passed and the answer came. He said, ‘Thanks God you are able to be there and whatever you say will be okay. But no jokes.’”

There was a muffled break in the silence as he ended with a prayer: Baruch atah Adonai elohaynu melech ha’olam she-he-cheyanu vekimanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh. Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and helped us to reach this day.
They wheeled my mother into the operating room the day before Thanksgiving. As I paced up and down the waiting room, a neurosurgeon removed a brain tumor the size of grape from the back of her head. Though Patrick and my brother sat with me in the empty lounge, I was a complete wreck. While I sipped a cup of machine-bought coffee, questions kept flashing through my mind: What if the surgeon severs a nerve, leaving my mother paralyzed or speaking gibberish? What would I tell my grandmother, who was scheduled to fly into town when my mother was released, bringing three generations of women into our house to quibble over such details as how often I should mop the kitchen floor, how I could possibly prepare dinner every night after work or why we were adopting a stray fifty-five-pound golden retriever named Gracie.

And then it happened. I discovered I was pregnant.

While my mother was recovering from her surgery in the hospital, I was at home peeing into tiny plastic cups to see if I had conceived. Doctors had predicted I would have difficulty getting pregnant, so Patrick and I were reluctant to believe the tests. But after the magic blue plus sign appeared twice on the plastic pregnancy kit, there was no denying it anymore. Patrick’s persistent questions about whether we should have children were suddenly a foregone conclusion.
We were now living in a four-bedroom white colonial with black shutters in Canandaigua, a small town 30 miles south of Rochester but not quite midway between our two jobs. I had fallen in love with the house when I first saw it—the perennial garden in the front yard, the living room with the built-in painted bookshelves and the sun room with the large bright windows. The house was much too big for two people, even with three cats and one dog, but the real estate agent had simply smiled and said, “You can grow into it.” We could have children to fill up those spare bedrooms and then our big white colonial wouldn’t seem empty at all.

* * *

For something that women look forward to all their lives, pregnancy, as I soon discovered, was more of a headache than anything else. My newfound elation quickly turned to anxiety as I began reading some of the pregnancy manuals my doctor had recommended. One of them, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, explained the harsh reality for expectant women over the age of 35: “*The major reproductive risk faced by a woman in your age group is not becoming pregnant at all because of decreased fertility. Once she’s overcome that and become pregnant, she also faces a greater chance of having a baby with Down’s syndrome*” (28).

Then there was the question of diet. The book insisted I drink at least eight eight-ounce glasses of fluid a day and eat four servings of protein, two of Vitamin C, four of calcium, three of green leafy and yellow vegetables and fruits, two more of any other vegetables and fruits, five of whole grains and legumes, four of high fat foods;
and an unspecified amount of iron. This small feast had to be consumed every day. No wonder pregnant women get morning sickness.

After my mother left the hospital, with the tumor and most of her hair gone, she moved into our house where I planned to take care of her for the next two months. With nothing to do except feed my mother and grandmother and chase down our new dog, I had plenty of time to plot my extraordinary diet. I was obsessed with trying to eat the proper portions of the eight food groups every day. When I ran out of cantaloupe on a frigid December night, I sent Patrick to the grocery store to buy apricots, and before he had even left the house, he was complaining about the price of such tropical delicacies in the dead of winter.

“But I need my daily serving of yellow fruit,” I yelled. With my mother and grandmother nonchalantly listening in and Patrick trying to calm me down, he quietly headed out into the snow to pick up a week’s supply of apricots.

As my mother devoured novel after novel on our living room couch, I spent my free moments poring over pregnancy manuals, looking for some kernel of hope that would overcome my fears. At thirty-six, I was lumped into the category of high-risk pregnancies and so I worried incessantly about whether my baby would have Down’s syndrome, spina bifida, or any number of diseases or defects. But at the same time, there were rare moments when I escaped into a fantasy land, a place where I was holding a squirming baby in an adorable pink and white jumpsuit, wrapping her in my arms.
Patrick, an amateur linguist, had a different dream for our child. He wanted to teach the baby French—the language he learned as a toddler living abroad—and Hebrew before the poor child could even walk. And though I was barely two months pregnant, he was already asking questions about circumcision. If it’s a boy, who will circumcise our child? And if the circumcision must be eight days after the baby’s birth, what will we do if that day falls on the Sabbath?

* * *

In the days when my mother had children, pregnancy was one of those mysterious but necessary conditions women just had to bear. During their nine months of anticipation, pregnant women did not learn much about the fetus nestled inside their womb. Was it a boy or a girl? Was there anything wrong with the baby? In the old days, those questions weren’t answered until the day the child came screaming into the world, head first.

But this was the 1990s, and thanks to the invention of ultrasound, pregnant women could find out endless details about the tiny beings growing inside them. Within weeks of conception, they could see their baby developing in its embryonic sac and watch its heart beating in its chest. The first baby picture in this new era of medicine was not taken in the hospital nursery the day of delivery, but at the first ultrasound in the obstetrician’s office.

The day before New Year’s, I walked into my doctor’s office for my first ultrasound with great expectations. Wearing a pale blue hospital gown and lying on the table, I waited breathlessly for Dr. Hess to walk in and take the first picture of my
baby. In Rochester, Dr. Hess was known as the man who could help any woman achieve the sublime state of pregnancy. When my previous doctor had told me that I had a fibroid, a benign tumor growing on my uterus, and that it could give me trouble getting pregnant—but not to worry, I should just read this stack of pamphlets on infertility she had plopped on her desk—I went home and abruptly had my medical records switched to Dr. Hess's office.

It was late afternoon when Dr. Hess entered the room, dressed casually in a sport shirt, tie and slacks. He asked if I had brought my husband to the exam, as if Patrick should be here to witness this momentous occasion.

No, I hadn't.

"Well," he said, "we can send a picture home for him."

As he rubbed the ultrasound monitor over my stomach, he asked if we had New Year's plans. Just a quiet dinner at a Chinese restaurant, I said. He glanced at the dark computer screen which revealed a black blob in the center—the embryonic sac. But as he moved the monitor back and forth, searching for signs of life, nothing else appeared. No heartbeat and no baby curled up into fetal position. Well, Dr. Hess said, it may be too early to detect the baby's organs and I should try another ultrasound in a week.

Back for my second exam, I once again put on the pale blue gown but this time I was hooked up to a larger ultrasound machine in a lab at the hospital. Watching the technician slide the monitor across my stomach, I said, "Can you see the fetus?"
But instead of answering my question, she asked that I wait for the doctor and disappeared into the hallway with the negatives—the snapshots that were to be my baby’s first pictures—leaving me in the darkened room. A few interminable minutes later, the radiologist, a woman with blond hair wearing a white coat, came in to break the news.

“There is no viable fetus,” she said.

* * *

There are no prayers for a baby who was never born, no rituals for mourning a child who never was. Should I say kaddish, the prayer for the dead? Should I tell my friends and relatives, most of whom didn’t even know I was pregnant in the first place? Or will they think I am ridiculous, grieving over a two-month-old fetus?

Back in the car, I called my mother on my cell phone, telling her, “I never have any luck.” I had failed myself and I had failed my father, whose dream for me had suddenly vanished. Then for some reason, I thought of my sister and I suddenly became angry. How could she have aborted her child, I asked my mother, just after the birth of her first son because, as she had said, the “timing wasn’t right?” I thought of that baby and wondered whether it had been a boy or a girl and why it couldn’t be mine.

Arriving home that night, there were words of comfort from my mother, my grandmother and Patrick. But I didn’t want to talk. After stroking my dog on the floor, I went upstairs, lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. My mother sat by the bed and told me about the time she had also miscarried in her third month of
pregnancy. At eight years old, I was at summer camp and couldn’t wait to come home and meet my baby sister or baby brother. Instead, I found my mother in bed, where she lay depressed, crying for days.

At dinner, after several moments of awkward silence, my grandmother tried to console me. “Maybe it’s for the best,” she said.

“How can this be for the best?”

“Well, there could have been something wrong.”

In my mind, I pictured Lillian, my mother’s cousin, who grew up being called a mongoloid, before her condition became classified as Down’s syndrome. Lillian had lived with her parents until she died a few years ago at the age of 50. I could still see her sitting on the living room couch in their dark apartment in south Florida, with her big eyes and sagging flowered dresses, speaking in Yiddish to her mother. It was a life, I thought, that was filled with more sadness than joy.

* * *

Two weeks later, I was dressed again in the light blue gown, lying on the table at the hospital, where Dr. Hess removed what was left of my baby. The day before holidays never seem to be lucky for me. It was the day before my thirty-seventh birthday and I was determined not to let a miscarriage or a D&C (dilation and curettage) keep me from going out. So the next night, a bone-chilling January evening, Patrick, my mother, and her friend Hank (whom she had met at a square dance in Rochester), treated me to dinner and made polite small talk, avoiding the subject of babies.
Three days later, just as I was finally starting to think about something else, there was more bad news. Dr. Hess called to tell me that my baby wasn’t a baby after all. It was a “blighted ovum,” an egg that had been fertilized but which had never fully developed. The child that never was had become the fetus that never was.

* * *

When my mother lost her baby, she became inconsolable about the child who had died in her womb. But when my pregnancy went awry nearly four decades later, I resolved not to stay home, obsessing about my broken dream. I wanted to go back to work and reenter the world. Soon I would forget about my dead baby and life would go on.

But at the office, it seemed that every female of childbearing age was now pregnant, walking around with swelling bellies and that serene look of contentment on their faces. They clumped together in clusters around the newsroom, giddily swapping stories of baby-kicking feet and where to find the best daycare in town. I could have been part of their fertility club, but I wasn’t. As always, I was the outsider looking in. When one of my coworkers with a bulging belly approached me, I quickly exchanged greetings and then walked the other way.

Why is it that when you are trying to get pregnant, pregnant women are everywhere? Is it because you are more attuned to them, or by some strange phenomenon, are there really more of them strutting around? Besides the protruding bellies in the newsroom, one of my closest friends, Elaine, had also become pregnant. When I told her about my miscarriage over lunch downtown, she seemed concerned
but then didn’t call me for nearly two months. She later explained that she didn’t want to hurt me by reminding me of what I didn’t want to see. Instead of protecting me, though, her avoidance made me feel like a leper.

My friend Ruth was even more chipper when hearing the news. “Gee,” she said, “I hope you’re not one of these people whose life will not be complete without having a baby.” She was single and had little interest in marriage. She didn’t understand.

A married woman without a child, especially one over the bewitching age of thirty-five, is seen as an oddity, someone who doesn’t quite fit in. This became painfully clear to me when once again I resumed my identity as Woman Without Child. At a party of a hiking group in our town, the hostess introduced herself to Patrick and me and asked whether I had children. When I said no, she seemed incredulous that someone my age could be childless, and after turning to chat with another mother in the room, she asked the same question again. When I repeated myself, she abruptly walked away. Apparently, without a toddler or two at home, I was not worth her time.

As another upstate winter covered grass and fields with snow, my mother was ready to fly back to Florida. Her hair had grown back—with the exception of one stubborn bald spot—and her seizures had stopped. But my wounds had only healed superficially. During my short-lived pregnancy, the surge of estrogen in my body had fueled the growth of more fibroids around my uterus, some of them the size of grapefruits. If I became pregnant again, these benign tumors could suffocate or push
out a developing fetus. So on the advice of Dr. Hess, I began a regimen of drug therapy to prepare for more surgery. For three months I was injected with a strange substance that gave me hot flashes—waves of fire that swept over me on the most sweltering summer days. In the month of July, I bought three window fans to cool down the heat rising from both inside and outside myself.

In August, the month I was supposed to have my baby, I was back in the pale blue gown at the hospital for surgery to remove the fibroids. After the procedure, I stayed in a small concrete room, which felt like a prison cell, in the maternity ward for five days before I could go home. Then during my eight-week recovery, Patrick and I drove to the Lake Champlain Islands in Vermont, where we saw Breton dancing at a bagpipers' convention; to Montreal, where we wandered around the old French quarter and later ate the best bagels in the world; and then to Rockland, where we visited Beulah in the house where we had lived when I was born. When we returned, Dr. Hess said if I wanted to, I could tackle another pregnancy.

Patrick squirmed and talked of delays. But I was ready to hope once again.
In God's Hands

Fall in upstate New York: the leaves were turning golden brown, the air was clear and crisp and once again I was sitting in synagogue, listening to the cantor recite the Rosh Hashanah prayers. The sanctuary, always cold and sterile, was overcrowded with people, many of them catching up on gossip instead of following along in the prayer book with the congregation. It could have been any New Year, but when the reading about Hannah started, I knew something was terribly wrong.

Hannah, as her story is told in the first Book of Samuel, was a woman who could not have a child. She was married to Elkanah, who also had a wife named Peninah. When Elkanah and his two wives went to the temple in Shiloh for the annual sacrifice, Peninah, who had been blessed with many sons and daughters, taunted Hannah because she was childless. One year, when Elkanah and his two wives arrived at the temple, Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband asked her why she was so sad. "Am I not better to thee than ten sons?" he said. But Hannah would not answer and instead went to the door post of the temple and prayed so intensely for a child that Eli, the high priest, accused her of being drunk. When Hannah said she had not touched any wine but was in anguish because "the Lord had closed her womb," Eli asked God to grant her wish. Not long after that, "the Lord remembered her," and Hannah had a son, the future prophet Samuel.
The message from the passage was unmistakably clear—Hannah was able to have a child because she had prayed to God. And after hearing her plea, God had granted her wish just as he had to some of the most prominent women in the Bible: Sarah, who gave birth to Isaac when she was 90 years old, and Rachel, who had Joseph after years of infertility. This all-encompassing power of God resonated with me as I read the prayers for Rosh Hoshanah, the day when it is inscribed in the Book of Life “how many shall pass by, and how many be born; who shall live and who shall die.”

As I looked around the sanctuary at all the young mothers with their squirming babies on their laps, I felt the tears that overcame Hannah as she watched Penninah and her children. And I wondered why I could not fulfill the first mitzvah in the Torah—“Be fruitful and multiply.” Like Hannah, I had prayed, every day, for a child, but God had not granted my wish. Was there a reason why God wanted me to remain “barren,” as infertile women were described in the Torah? Was I being judged or tested in his eyes?

*   *   *

Over the past year, Patrick and I had undergone a battery of fertility tests, which showed that we both had problems. After my fibroid operation, Patrick was advised to undergo minor surgery that would remove a cluster of varicose veins. The surgery was deemed a success and once again we were full of hope. Yet months passed and the child we longed for still did not come. Finally Dr. Hess suggested we try artificial insemination.
"I think you have a reasonable chance of success," he said as we sat in his office, listening to a complicated explanation of the procedures we would have to follow to let technology accomplish what we alone could not.

The first step was an ultrasound to determine whether my ovaries were intact. To undergo this procedure, I would need a full bladder and would have to consume 48 ounces of liquid an hour before the test. As I huddled at my desk in the newsroom trying to drink six glasses of water in quick succession, I started to feel queasy. Looking at the clock on the wall, I saw that the appointment was just 15 minutes away, so I stood up and dashed out to the hallway. But after grabbing my coat from the closet, the liquid contents of my stomach suddenly landed on the floor, just a few feet from the newsroom coffee pot. An editorial writer who had just walked by exclaimed, "Oh gross!" as I cowered beneath my wool coat, trying to mop up the mess with a fistful of paper towels from the bathroom.

This was my introduction to the world of high-tech conception.

Every night for the next two weeks, Patrick would mix two to four ampoules of a powdered drug called Fertinex with a liquid solvent from another bottle. Then as I lay on our bed with my eyes buried in my pillow, he would inject the solution with a long hypodermic needle. The shot was supposed to stimulate my ovaries to produce a batch of follicles which would release a large number of eggs. Then after four days of injections, the tests would begin. Every morning before 9 o'clock, I would arrive at the lab for a blood test that would monitor my estrogen level; in the afternoon, I would dart out of the office for an ultrasound to see how many follicles I had grown. When
there were enough follicles to boost the chance that maybe, just maybe, one of them would be fertilized, I would be artificially inseminated at Dr. Hess's office with Patrick's sperm. Then we would wait for the results.

Our first cycle ended during a visit to Patrick's brother and sister-in-law at their home in Rhode Island just after Christmas. The day after arriving, we were eating brunch in their dining room when I suddenly started to feel crampy. An hour later, while Patrick's sister-in-law, nephew and two nieces were in the kitchen debating whether to go for a walk around a lake or roller skating, I stood in the bathroom watching all my precious eggs go down the drain in one bloody mess. I could not believe that technology had let me down.

Dr. Hess said it was not unusual for the procedure to fail the first time. After all, he said, there's only a 25 to 30 percent chance for a woman to conceive during any one cycle. So he encouraged us to try again. For two more weeks I lay on our bed every night as Patrick stabbed me with hypodermic needles. But this time, when the telltale sign of defeat came, I became convinced that the outcome was out of my doctor's control and in the hands of someone else.

"God is punishing me," I told Patrick one night as we were eating dinner.

"Why would he do that?" he asked. "Maybe he is punishing me."

Patrick knew I was still not observing Judaism the way that he did, though I had given up listening to music and shopping on Saturdays and had bought that extra set of dishes for Passover. He did not complain, but still I felt that somehow I just didn't measure up.
I wasn’t religious enough, I wasn’t moral enough, I just wasn’t good enough for God to grant me that one wish that he had granted to Hannah, Sarah and Rachel. If it was all in God’s hands, could technology override his power? Was it a matter of biology or divine intervention? And if technology could accomplish what two people could not, how could I believe those prayers on the high holidays—words I had been chanting since a child—that it was God who decides how many shall be born?

My desire to get pregnant became an obsession—I could think of little else. How could I, when it seemed there were pregnant women everywhere—at work, on my street, in the grocery store. Were they somehow more moral and perfect that God had granted them that sublime condition known as pregnancy, while I only got a husband, a golden retriever and two aging felines? What had these women with bulging stomachs done to deserve children that I had not?

As the prospect of another set of shots and ultrasounds loomed ahead, Patrick began to question our attempt to conceive at all. Maybe, he said, we should just be satisfied with what we had.

“You’ve got a good job, a nice house and a wonderful dog. Why do you need children?”

“Because,” I said, trying to explain my surging maternal urges. “I don’t want to go to work, come home, go to bed and then do it all over again the next day. There’s got to be something more.”

I felt empty and I ached to hold a baby in my arms. The job and the house and
the dog were not enough. I wanted to cuddle a child in my lap, watch her smile into my eyes and know that she was mine. Only then could I feel complete.

Since the injections were not producing any results, I started thinking about alternatives. One night, I brought up the possibility of adopting, a topic that soon became the subject of our daily dinner conversation, much to Patrick’s dismay. His initial reaction to the idea was simple—it was out of the question. “Adoption is a man’s right to choose,” he said in a sarcastic reference to my feminist convictions. Yet every night, I attempted to convince him that adoption was okay and that children who were adopted turned out just fine until he became so annoyed that he declared a moratorium on the subject.

Not one to give up, I decided to launch a new tactic. Carol, a distant cousin who lived in Montreal, had adopted two children, and Patrick and I had met her and her family while visiting Canada the previous summer. I urged Patrick to call her in the hope that she would convince him to change his mind.

Carol, who had spent ten years trying to conceive, had adopted her children as infants from birth mothers in the United States and Canada. She had chosen not to adopt internationally because she said that children in Russia and China—the two largest suppliers of adopted children—were typically dropped off at orphanages right after birth and there was usually little information available about the parents.

“T’m a person who needs to know a lot,” she said to us on the phone. “I would not be comfortable not knowing where my child comes from.”
Yet to adopt domestically was not so easy. Prospective parents had to write a glowing letter explaining why they wanted a child, include a picture of themselves, pass it on to a lawyer or an adoption agency, and then hope that it would attract the attention of one of the few unmarried pregnant teenagers willing to give up her child (only 2 percent of single mothers in the United States put their children up for adoption—a figure that had declined drastically since abortion had become legal). Some people even set up 800-numbers, Carol said, so that birth mothers could contact them at home. But even if you were miraculously picked from among the thousands of letters submitted by the thousands of desperate couples (one out of every six couples in the United States is infertile), the birth mother could always change her mind. And the fact that we were Jewish, Carol admitted, could become an obstacle if the birth mother wanted her child raised by a couple from her own religion.

The conversation with Carol did little to persuade Patrick. When I brought up the topic again, he was blunt: He did not feel comfortable advertising himself to a birth mother and he did not feel comfortable adopting, period.

“Blood lines are very important in our family,” he said one night while I was washing clothes.

“What?” I asked incredulously. “You want to pass on the genes of your raging alcoholic father?”

“It’s the end of my line,” he said. “I regret it, but I can’t do anything about it.”

There was nothing more I could say. The subject was closed.
Barnes & Noble must have been invented for desperate people like me. With nowhere else to turn, I decided to take matters into my own hands by loading up on self-help manuals: *Taking Charge of Your Fertility: The Definitive Guide to Natural Birth Control and Pregnancy Achievement*, *Surviving Infertility*, *The Couples Guide to Fertility*, *Preventing Miscarriage*, and *Surviving Pregnancy Loss*. For Patrick, I bought *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption and the Jewish Couple*, written by a rabbi who had adopted two children. If he didn’t want to talk about adoption, at least he might be tempted to read about it.

One book, *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*, claimed that if couples followed what it called the Fertility Awareness Method, they could achieve pregnancy naturally, even if they had been led to believe they were infertile. The method amounted to: 1) taking your basal body temperature every morning before you rose from bed; 2) monitoring your cervical fluid, the sign of that all-important event—ovulation; and 3) timing sex appropriately. It sounded simple, but the details were exceedingly complex. To follow the Fertility Awareness Method, you had to “chart your fertility signs,” by: 1) identifying the day your basal body temperature rises at least two-tenths of a degree higher than it had been the previous six days; 2) highlighting the last six temperatures before the rise; 3) locating the highest of those six highlighted temperatures; and 4) drawing a cover line one-tenth of a degree above the highest of that cluster of six days preceding the rise. All this charting of circles and lines was supposed to tell you when the optimal time of conception could occur.
For three months, I connected dots, highlighted and unhighlighted, drew cover lines, and checked my basal body temperature and fluids daily. But still nothing happened. Then Patrick and I tried one more cycle of artificial insemination and again it didn’t work.

I began to see the futility of trying to get pregnant at the age of thirty-seven. Though the feminists had proclaimed that I could have it all, they had forgotten to tell me that you had to have it all sooner, rather than later. As one pamphlet I picked up at Dr. Hess’s office noted, the chances of getting pregnant decline sharply after the age of thirty-five as the incidence of miscarriage and birth defects rises.

Perhaps it was in God’s hands after all. The fertility drugs, follicles and artificial inseminations would amount to nothing if he felt that I did not deserve children. Swaying back to the side of religion, I decided to see if God would reward me if I did something undeniably spiritual, something that would set me right in his eyes: Taking the plunge in the mikvah. If God could test me, couldn’t I test him?

When I grew up in Daytona Beach in the 1960s, there was no Orthodox synagogue in our town and no ritual bath where women could “cleanse” themselves after their menstrual periods. I had only a vague idea of this mystical place called the mikvah and had never met anyone who had actually taken the plunge. People who converted to Judaism in our town, my mother said, were taken down to the foamy Atlantic Ocean for their ritual dunking, though I never understood how they managed to dip stark naked right into the water. My opinion of the mikvah was not crystallized
until years later when I read Letty Cottin Pogrebin’s book, *Deborah, Golda and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America*.

Pogrebin, a founding editor of *Ms.* magazine, viewed the mikvah laws as misogynist. These laws dictated that women were considered “ritually impure” during the period of menstruation plus an additional seven days—a minimum of twelve days a month, 144 days or nearly five months a year. The woman who was menstruating, Pogrebin wrote, had supposedly been “defiled by death because of the loss of her egg, the embryo that never was.” During this time of desecration, Pogrebin said, she was “unfit, not just for holy activities but for lovemaking; her husband [was] not allowed to touch her or even receive an object from her hand” (63).

Just before we were married, Patrick had asked me to visit the mikvah, a traditional Jewish custom before a wedding. I refused. As a strident feminist (I had organized my own group to campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment in college), I could not justify the idea that a woman, as if dirty from her natural cycle, could only purge herself of the deathly taint of menstruation and attain spiritual purity through immersion in this sacred bath.

But now, brushing aside any negative impressions I may have had, I called the Orthodox synagogue that operated the mikvah in Rochester and was given the names of three women I could contact for an appointment. I called one of them; she wasn’t home. When the next woman answered, I told her I wanted to visit the mikvah.

“Have you ever been to the mikvah before?” she asked.
I said that I hadn’t.

“Well, have you discussed your cycle with your rabbi?”

“My rabbi?” I was stunned. This woman wanted me to discuss my menstrual period with my rabbi, so he could determine whether I was ready for a dip in the mikvah. She couldn’t be serious. But she was.

When she asked about my rabbi again, I became testy and insisted that I was ready to visit the mikvah, rabbi or no rabbi. After warning that I could have “no stains,” she reluctantly agreed to let me enter this holy sanctuary a few days later after work.

It was a chilly spring night when I stepped into the small brick building behind the Beth Hakneses Hachodosh synagogue and found myself standing in a waiting room lined with a bulletin board and a mirror with a few blow dryers on a shelf. A woman wearing a long dress and scarf—traditional Orthodox attire—greeted me at the door. Her name was Risha and she said she would be my guide.

Risha led me back down a hallway into a dressing room with a shower to the right and an open doorway that led to a small concrete pool on the left. She asked if I had ever been here before and I told her I hadn’t. I was not Orthodox, I said; I went to the Conservative synagogue.

“Well,” she said. “We have several women from the Conservative synagogue who come here every month. They like it very much. You’ll see. The mikvah is a very nice experience.”
Risha then instructed me on the preparation for my immersion. I would have to strip down, remove all jewelry, scrub myself in the shower and clean every crevice of my body—fingernails, ears, teeth. Apparently you had to be spanking clean before you could become ritually pure.

When I was ready, Risha came back and directed me to walk down three steps into the pool that had been filled with about four feet of warm water. She told me to completely dunk myself three times, each time reading the prayer that was wrapped in cellophane and floating on top of the tepid water: Baruch atah Adonai Elohenu Melekh Ha’olam, asher kideshanu be mitzvotav ve-tzivanu al ha-tevilah. Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the world, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning immersion.

I dunked myself, said the prayer, stepped out of the pool and got dressed. Minutes later, when Risha met me in the waiting room, I noticed she was holding a light blue-covered book in her hand.

"I want to loan you this," she said smiling. "I got it in Brooklyn and I keep giving away copies to women who come here. They have all said how helpful it has been."

I thanked her and she said, "Don’t worry about it. You can give it back whenever you want."

When I arrived home, I began thumbing through the pages of the book with the two red roses on the cover, The Secret of Jewish Femininity. I quickly learned that the mikvah was just one of the many requirements of what were called the "family
"purity" laws concerning sexual relations—the secret to Jewish femininity. These laws mandated, among other things, that: married couples sleep in separate beds so that they would not be able to touch each other during the wife’s menstruation; a woman who has her period must sit at a different place at the dinner table than usual or have an additional person sit between her and her husband; and a woman may not use birth control unless she receives special permission from her rabbi.

An hour later, I closed the book and a wave of depression came over me, flooding me like the warm water of the mikvah. I could feel the blood coursing through my veins, red hot. I knew I would never return to the mikvah again.

* * *

On my thirty-eighth birthday, Patrick took me to dinner at a quaint restaurant in a small village about twenty minutes from our home. As we sat down and ordered our vegetarian entrees, I tried not to think about my biological clock going through meltdown. The minutes ticked by in silence until Patrick suddenly said, “Well, if you want to, we can adopt a little girl.”

I looked at him in surprise. I had not brought up the adoption issue for weeks, though Patrick knew it was on my mind.

“Why do you want a girl?” I asked with an uncontrollable grin on my face.

“I don’t feel comfortable passing on my name to a boy,” he said. “And I’ve always wanted to have a girl since my sister drowned.”

That was fine with me, I said, even though I thought his reason for not wanting to adopt a boy was bizarre.
“I always wanted a girl anyway.”

We had finally come to an agreement about how to become parents, but we were not ready to start the adoption process yet. Having jumped onto the fertility roller coaster, with my doctor’s encouragement, we could not seem to get off. Dr. Hess often told me that though he and his wife had adopted their children, if she were trying to get pregnant today, she would undoubtedly succeed. Well, I thought, if Mrs. Hess could have a baby in the 1990s, why couldn’t I? Each drug, each procedure and each test seemed to offer the slightest glimmer of hope that I too could have a child with minimal help from the high-tech world of reproductive medicine.

After our fourth attempt at artificial insemination failed, however, Dr. Hess had to admit defeat. He advised us to take the gamble on the sweepstakes in infertility treatment: in vitro fertilization.

“I think that will give you the greatest chance of success,” he said.

Though our insurance would not cover it, I convinced Patrick we should try it, just once. He reluctantly agreed and we made an appointment with the infertility clinic at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester.

A few weeks later, Patrick and I were sitting nervously in a tiny office on the hospital’s fifth floor as Dr. Phipps, a slim man with gray hair walked in and shook our hands. He then sat at a desk opposite us and silently pored over the thick file of my failed attempts at getting pregnant. Finally he turned around to give us his assessment. It was not promising.
"I'm concerned with the amount of drugs you've been taking," he said. "There may be a problem with your ovarian reserve."

I did not understand. Over the past year, I had produced enough eggs to supply an entire fertility clinic single-handedly. And I had simply taken the amount of drugs that had been prescribed to me. Besides, wasn't this the place that produced miracles for people like us, couples who thought they could never have a child?

Apparently, miracles were not what Dr. Phipps had in mind for us. He said he would let us try the procedure if we wanted to, but he was not hopeful that it would produce what the clinic called "a live birth." Patrick and I left the hospital grim-faced and as we headed home, I felt dejected and let down, once again, by the unfulfilled promise that technology had seemed to offer us.

It was autumn again and a few days later I was back in synagogue for Rosh Hashanah, reading about Hannah. When I showed up at a "healing" service on Yom Kippur, I sat next to my friend Deborah, whose sister was dying of cancer. She asked how our "project" was going and I told her it seemed hopeless.

"Have you ever considered acupuncture?" she asked.

No, I said, my eyes widening, I hadn't.

"Well," she said. "I know a woman who got pregnant after years of not being able to have a baby by doing acupuncture. It really works."

She herself went to a local acupuncturist once a year for a "tune-up" to get her body back in shape. With her bright-eyed encouragement, she gave me her
acupuncturist’s name and a week later, I was sitting in the office of Dr. David P.J. Hung.

When I explained my problem to him, he nodded and smiled.

“Yes,” he said. “I had a woman with the same problem. She had acupuncture and a year later, she had triplets.”

I agreed to give it a try. If medical technology couldn’t help me, why not try something that was 4,000 years old?

A few minutes later, I walked into a small room across from the doctor’s office, undressed, put on a thin blue gown and lay down on the examination table, feeling as if I were a voodoo doll. Then Dr. Hung came in and announced that he was going to insert thirteen tiny needles into my body, from my ears down to my ankles, at designated “acupuncture points.” Since I had inherited my father’s Romanian superstitions, I asked that he change the number. He agreed and proceeded to tap fifteen silver needles into my skin, each one producing a strange tingling sensation. For the next month, I came back to Dr. Hung’s office to be pricked by his needles, twice a week, wondering all the while if I had truly gone insane.

* * *

Two weeks after starting acupuncture, there was a small notice in the newspaper I worked for: Three couples would be speaking about their experiences adopting children from Russia, Guatemala and Romania. I stared at that word, Romania, and I felt like a child opening her first birthday present. It was a gift, a way
out of the endless appointments with the fertility doctors, lab technicians and acupuncturists.

I thought of my father and how proud he would be knowing that I was rescuing a child from a Romanian orphanage. This had to be my destiny. I convinced Patrick to attend the meeting and my expectations soared.

When we arrived at Jewish Family Service, which was sponsoring the meeting, however, the representative from the adoption agency said the couples who would be speaking that night had all adopted children from Russia. My hopes dashed, I glanced around the room and noticed three toddlers, all blond-haired, blue-eyed and happily trailing their newly adoptive parents. Suddenly I forgot about Romania. I could not take my eyes off those children.

The adoption agency, Cradle of Hope, had been founded by a woman who had adopted two children—a boy from the U.S. and a daughter from Romania. Yet the agency, based in Silver Spring, Maryland, had not brought any children back from Romania for the past eight years because the child protective system there was being overhauled. Though it was hoping to launch its Romanian program again next year, the social worker from the agency, Chris Blimmel, pointed out that the children adopted from Romania were older—at least two years by the time they came home.

But Russia was a different story. There were more than 500,000 children waiting to be adopted in Russian orphanages and they were available as young as infants all the way to school age. The children were generally healthy, and even though
alcohol was prevalent in Russia, fetal alcohol syndrome could be ruled out in children through an examination of facial features via photographs and videos.

“We have more kids in Russia than we have families for,” the social worker said.

After arriving home, I asked Patrick if he would consider adopting a baby from Russia. Though I still harbored a romantic dream of saving a child in Romania, Russia seemed to offer an easier route for us to become parents. Besides, I thought, both of my grandfathers were from the Ukraine, and though it was now independent from Russia, they had considered themselves full-blooded Russians.

Patrick, though, was not interested in adopting a Russian child. “I don’t like Russian culture,” he said. “I never have.”

“What?” I cried. “You don’t like Tschaikovsky or Rachmaninoff? Didn’t you study Russian in college?”

“Yes, I did. But I just don’t like Russian culture. Sorry.”

The door to becoming a parent had opened ever so slightly for me that night as I finally saw my future in front of me: the mother of a Russian orphan. And once again, it had been slammed shut.

* * *

The shots now came morning and night. At 6:30 a.m., Patrick would inject me with a drug called Follistim, which felt as if he was pouring salt into an open wound. Then at 10 p.m., he would give me the less painful drug Humegon. For 10 to 12 days, I also had to take nightly injections of Lupron, which shut off my reproductive system.
so that the fertility drugs could take over. While covering a speech on urban
development one night downtown, I rushed back to the newsroom and shot myself up
with Lupron in the ladies' restroom. For a kid who used to run around the doctor's
office in terror whenever I needed a vaccination, I was proud to shoot that needle into
my thigh without even shedding a tear.

Then in the middle of all of the injections, ultrasounds and blood tests, the
fertility doctors at the hospital decided they wanted to cancel our attempt at in vitro
fertilization. I could not believe that we had come this far to have our hopes crushed
again. The problem was I was not producing enough follicles, as Dr. Phipps had
predicted, which plummeted my chances to get pregnant. I insisted, though, that they
go ahead and let this nightmare end with such finality that I would never be tempted to
relive it again.

The day finally arrived for the doctors to "retrieve" my eggs and combine them
with Patrick's sperm in a petri dish. A few minutes before 7 a.m. on a raw wet
December morning, I rushed to the hospital with Patrick's sperm sample in a test tube
tucked under my jacket. As I walked into the clinic, I was led to the back room where
a nurse started to explain our options for freezing any sperm that would not be used.

Just before she handed me a form to sign, I looked up, and to my utter
astonishment, a man who was the head of a local social service agency, someone I had
interviewed more than a dozen times as a newspaper reporter, walked in front of us
with a collection tube in his hand. He was headed for a room where a stackful of porn
magazines and videos were piled on a table. We looked at each other and did not say a
word. If it were ever possible to die from sheer embarrassment, I think I came very close as I sat in that hallway with the form to freeze my husband's sperm on my lap.

Three days later, Patrick and I returned to the hospital and I undressed, donned a hospital gown and lay waiting on an examination table. A woman who identified herself as an embryologist walked in and told us that she did not have good news. Only two embryos had been hatched from all the eggs I had produced and they were not subdividing at a fast enough rate that would insure that they would continue to grow to become one of those "live births" the clinic prided itself on in its brochures.

The embryologist pointed to a monitor attached to the wall near the ceiling where our two embryos seemed to be free floating in space on the screen. Each had split into two cells, which were clearly visible from the examination table. These formless beings could have become our test tube babies, our children we would love and send to college, but it was not meant to be. They were transferred into my uterus via a long needle, and a few days later, they died a quiet invisible death.

* * *

We had arrived at the end of the road and were out of luck and money, having squandered nearly $6,000 on our gamble with high tech conception. Dr. Phipps said my chances of giving birth, if we tried in vitro again, were at most 5 percent because of my age and that "ovarian reserve issue." If we were to become parents, I told Patrick as we drove home, we would have to adopt someone else's child from somewhere halfway across the world.
As I began to read about the children in the orphanages in Russia, a country that was imploding as it made the switch from communism to capitalism, it slowly dawned on me that adoption was not a “last resort,” as I had been led to believe. It was the best choice for Patrick and me to help a lost child and for that child to help two hopeless parents.

A reporter from my newspaper had just traveled to Novgorod, a city north of Moscow, with an American delegation to convince the Russians to transform their system of orphanages to one of foster care. Of the two million Russian children who are homeless, she wrote in an article about the trip, about 650,000 of them live in institutions and the rest live on the streets. Ten percent of the children who are not adopted end up committing suicide after a year on their own. Two-thirds of the boys are jailed within two years of leaving the orphanage and 60 percent of the girls turn to prostitution.

"With so many children waiting in orphanages, I don't even know why I wanted to have my own child in the first place," I said to Patrick, forgetting the obsession to get pregnant that had overwhelmed me for three straight years.

After reading the adoption stories I plied him with and discussing it with his mother (who was wholeheartedly in favor of the idea), Patrick finally had a change of heart and said we could adopt a child from Russia. He justified his decision on the Jewish principle of *tikun olam*: If you save the life of one child, it is as if you are saving the whole world.
Maybe this was God's plan for us all along.

But there was still one obstacle left for us to overcome. Patrick did not want to move ahead with the adoption until he resolved another thorny issue: the child's conversion. He insisted that we have our child converted by an Orthodox rabbi so that her Jewishness would never be challenged, as his had years earlier.

So he wrote a letter to the rabbi of the largest Orthodox synagogue in Rochester, explaining that we were planning to adopt a child and that we wanted him to convert her. Weeks passed by and there was no answer from the rabbi. Patrick called the rabbi's office and several more weeks went by. The rabbi, I finally concluded, did not want to talk to us.

Not knowing where else to turn, Patrick drove to a tiny Sephardic synagogue in Rochester one morning and introduced himself to the rabbi there, a kind elderly man from England named Jacob Pearlman. He asked the rabbi, who was Orthodox, to meet with us and he agreed.

Early on a bright spring day, Patrick and I arrived for Shacharit morning services at the schul, which met in a converted classroom of a larger Orthodox synagogue. As the men prayed in the front of the sanctuary wearing their tallitot and tefillin, the women—just two of us that day—were relegated to the back of the room behind the mehitza, a white lattice border separating the sexes. As I stood there with the prayer book in my hand, I felt like Rosa Parks sitting in the back of the bus. But I did not say a word.
After services, everyone gathered around three long tables for bagels and coffee and when the old men had stopped telling jokes and headed home, the rabbi led us into the synagogue library. Seated around a long wooden table, we explained that we were planning to adopt a child and wanted him to perform the conversion.

The rabbi glanced at us with a look of confusion. He asked if we had been treated for our “problem,” and I said that yes, we had seen many doctors. Well, the rabbi said, he still could not believe that there was any reason why we couldn’t have children—on our own—if we had faith.

“We know of people who adopt a child and then get pregnant,” he said. “Who knows why? You’ve got to believe that something can happen. You’ve got to keep hope alive.”

Though I was skeptical of this man, I suddenly had this eerie feeling that he knew something I didn’t. I wanted to step inside his shoes and see the world with his eyes. If anyone could explain the mystery behind conception to me, it was not the fertility doctors, the gynecologists or the acupuncturists. It was this rabbi. And there was just one question I wanted to ask: Why could Sarah have a child at 90 years old and Hannah have a son after years of infertility, but I, who had prayed to God everyday, was still childless?

The rabbi looked at me, at the tears in my eyes and started speaking. To my surprise, he did not believe it was because of God that Hannah had become pregnant. According to the traditional interpretation, he said, Hannah had had a child because
she had received a special blessing from the priest who had watched her pray, thinking she had been drunk.

“I’m not implying anything about you,” the rabbi said looking at me intently, “but Hannah was praying at a very high level. We never know why these things happen. Some say it’s a test.”

“A test of what?”

“A test that this may eventually bring you to a higher level of observance.”

That, of course, he said, was something I would have to strive for before he would agree to convert our child. It would be a gradual process, he explained, but it would have to be something I wanted to do.

Still, the rabbi said it wasn’t too late for us to meet a “great man,” someone who could give us a special blessing. When I mentioned that we were planning to visit Israel that summer, the rabbi’s eyes lit up. We could meet a “great man” in Israel, he said, and we could also visit Rachel’s tomb, a place where women “in my condition” went to pray.

The rabbi warned that I would first have to adopt the right attitude. “You can’t just say, ‘I don’t think this will matter,’ ” he said. “You have to believe that something can happen.”

As Patrick and I rode home together in silence, I thought of what the rabbi said and I wondered what I would do on all those Saturdays now that I would have to wait until those three stars came out in the sky before dashing out to dinner and a movie. It
didn’t take long for an idea to come to mind: Shakespeare wrote 38 plays, I thought.

And I’ve read less than half of them.
Chapter 14

Israel, Again

In the middle of August, Patrick and I boarded an El Al flight in New York bound for Israel, armed with the name of a “great man” (a rabbi in Jerusalem) and the telephone numbers of my father’s sisters, nephews and niece. Though it was my fifth trip to Eretz Yisrael, I had not been back for 12 years, and even before we had landed at Ben-Gurion Airport, I could tell that it was a different place.

Dozing off and on during the flight, I was suddenly jarred upright in my seat at nightfall, when at 33,000 feet above the Atlantic, the cabin was overtaken by a sea of bobbing black hats. It was time for Ma’ariv, the evening prayers, and a hoard of yeshiva students had begun davening en masse. Many of them wore long black kaftans—the coats Hasidic Jews wore in eighteenth-century Poland—long beards and payos—the curled sideburns I used to wear as a fashion statement back in the 60s. They dutifully faced the left flank of the plane—toward Jerusalem—as they prayed in a repetitive rocking motion.

These young men in Hasidic dress fascinated me—I could not help staring. If their praying was what Rabbi Pearlman meant by observing Judaism, I felt as if I belonged to another religion entirely. I noticed there were no women standing among the minyan in the plane. The few that accompanied the yeshiva students sat silently watching, their heads covered with loose knitted caps (which Patrick called slinkies)
and their bodies hidden beneath long-sleeved flowing dresses, in keeping with the religious tradition of modesty.

When we landed in Israel, the yeshiva students swarmed into the baggage area and began unloading dozens of boxes, trunks and suitcases from the conveyor belt for their school year abroad. What should have taken ten minutes became an hour-and-a-half ordeal as the baggage claim area was overwhelmed with all the luggage the yeshiva students had carried with them. Finally, Patrick and I found our suitcases and rolled them to the lobby, where my cousin Shimon was impatiently waiting for us.

Chatting about Israeli politics, Shimon drove us to our hotel, a towering white edifice overlooking the Mediterranean. Since retiring as a colonel in the Israeli Defense Force, Shimon had become a shopping mall developer, and like many Israelis, he talked incessantly on his car cell phone. After dropping us off at our hotel, he picked us up a few hours later—with his wife and two of his children—to take us to dinner.

Sitting at a café a block away from the beach, I caught up on family gossip with Shimon’s wife, Elana, a Romanian-born psychologist who was wearing a t-shirt, tight blue jeans and large sneakers. When she asked about our trip, I explained why we had been delayed at the airport.

“The plane was loaded with yeshiva boys,” I said. “Each one had about five pieces of luggage.”

“And they were all full of shit,” Elana replied bluntly.

I looked at her with surprise and then glanced at Patrick, whose eyebrows were raised at sharp angles.
“They’re all from New York,” Elana complained. “There are no Israelis who look like that. They don’t look Jewish. I don’t know what they look like.”

* * *

Maybe I just hadn’t noticed it during my previous visits, but it suddenly hit me squarely in the face: Israel had become a country polarized into two camps: the “haves”—those who had religion; and the “have nots”—those who did not. My relatives, as Elana so brazenly reminded me, belonged to the latter camp. When my mother had visited Israel a few years back, Shimon barbecued pork chops for her in his back yard—on Shabbat no less. On Rosh Hashanah, when I was in synagogue accounting for my sins, Shimon and his wife were vacationing in a time-share in Eilat. By living in Israel, they felt they were living their religion, while we guilt-ridden Jews back in the states had to agonize over keeping kosher, driving on the Sabbath and making it to the synagogue with some semblance of regularity.

Somehow, it just didn’t seem fair.

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I had come to Israel because I wanted to learn about my father. There were the stories I wanted to hear about Romania—many of them already familiar to me—from my father’s two surviving sisters, Lola and Sophie. There were museums that had archived records of Holocaust survivors, and I wanted to find my father’s name among them. But there was another reason for our trip: I was on a fertility mission, to see if in the Holy Land, Patrick and I could receive the right blessing or visit the proper religious shrine so that we could finally have a child.
The day after arriving, still exhausted from jet lag, we sat with Lola in her small sweltering apartment in Rishon Le Zion, a suburb outside Tel Aviv, sipping coffee and nibbling on pastry while I asked her questions about Romania. Lola couldn’t understand why I wanted to dig into my father’s dark past, but she answered my questions for nearly two hours until she had to quit in exhaustion. My attempts to see Sophie were not so successful; her husband, Jackie, was recovering from surgery and asked that we cancel the visit we had arranged after arriving. We rescheduled and finally made it to their apartment in Bat Yam, another Tel Aviv suburb, two days before we left for home. But after chatting for less than an hour, Jackie became so uncomfortable that he asked that we end our visit. Since Sophie did not speak English and relied on her husband to translate, her memories of those painful years in Romania were lost to me forever.

And so Patrick and I spent our time wandering around Tel Aviv, which had transformed itself from a vast stretch of sand dunes to a cosmopolitan city with glitzy department stores, towering skyscrapers, art galleries, sidewalk cafes, and restaurants offering food from every corner of the world. As Israel’s center of commerce and culture, Tel Aviv is virtually a secular city, and not surprisingly it was where nearly all of my father’s family lived. You did not see men in kaftans or women in long dresses strolling down Dizengoff Street, known for its fashionable boutiques and cafes. Instead, you saw women in tight halter tops and mini-skirts and men sporting black blazers and gold chains. And on Friday nights, when religious families were home ushering in the Sabbath, the sidewalk cafes in Tel Aviv were brimming with people.
Yet in Jerusalem, a city steeped in ancient history, the religious were everywhere, hurrying along the sidewalks on the way to evening prayers in their black coats and hats, sitting at the cafes in the cool of the evening, and running the falafel stands and souvenir shops. Unlike America, where being Jewish meant picking and choosing how you observed your religion, in Israel there did not seem to be any middle ground.

The first thing Patrick and I did after checking into a rundown hotel in downtown Jerusalem was to call our “great man”—the rabbi whose name we had carried with us from Rabbi Pearlman in Rochester. It was Friday afternoon, and when Patrick called, the rabbi was not home. Since the Sabbath was approaching, it was unlikely we would be able to get in touch with him before leaving town.

Suddenly, I didn’t care.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “What could he have done anyway?”

The thought of finding this “great man,” I had to admit, had offended me ever since Rabbi Pearlman had suggested it. Why did I need a rabbi to help me pray? If I couldn’t pray on my own, then why bother at all? Couldn’t I have a direct relationship with God without the interference of a clergyman, whom I would probably have to give a donation for his time? Patrick did not seem enthused about the idea either, and so we dropped the search for the renowned rabbi.

The next day, after Patrick had returned from services (I had slept in), we set out in the 90-plus-degree heat for the Old City, the ancient section of Jerusalem enclosed by stone walls built by the Turks in the sixteenth-century. The sweltering heat
was so unbearable that halfway there, I begged Patrick to stop somewhere so we could cool off with the modern convenience of air conditioning. We wandered into the King David Hotel and as the cool air brushed our sweaty faces, the opulent and geometrically-patterned lobby brought back memories of when I had stayed there with my mother and sister more than 30 years ago.

Like a magnet drawing us toward it, the Western Wall, the massive relic from the Second Temple, which had been destroyed in 70 C.E., beckoned us. At the Kotel, as the Israelis call it, Patrick went off to pray on the men’s side on the left while I headed to the women’s section on the right. The segregation of the sexes at the Wall, a point of contention among feminists who advocate mixed praying, was marked by a five-foot high wooden barricade, or mehitza. On my walk down, I slipped past the guard who was handing out blue cotton shawls to women who were not dressed modestly enough: apparently, my cotton flowered skirt, purple t-shirt and black canvas sandals somehow passed muster.

Facing the warm pale stones covered with moss, I was distracted by a striking young girl with an olive complexion and a long black pony tail, who was rocking back and forth praying, just like the Hasidic men on other side of the mehitza. No matter how much I longed for a child, I realized I could never pray like her and once again I seemed doomed to failure. I turned to the miniature prayer book Patrick had lent me and silently read a psalm. I could not pray for the child I so desperately wanted because as Patrick had once reminded me, it was against Jewish law to make any personal requests on the Sabbath.
My conversation with God would have to come another day. Walking back to a stone bench at the back of the huge plaza facing the wall, I noticed that the same olive-skinned girl who had been worshipping next to me was now sitting near Patrick. As the two of us sat baking in the sun, the girl suddenly walked over to us.

“Excuse me. Do you speak English?” she asked. “I think I'm suffering from heat prostration. Do you know what I should do?”

Her name was Hannah, a ninth-grader from Pittsburgh, and she had walked an hour and a half from her friend’s house in a Jerusalem suburb to the Kotel wearing a long navy skirt, a ribbed navy sweater, a vest, stockings and high-heeled suede shoes. She had obviously overdressed herself and walked in the scorching heat to observe the Sabbath in her fashion of modesty, but I could not help thinking that she had put her health and life at risk by venturing out alone in one of the most dangerous corners of the world.

I asked Hannah to at least take off her vest so she could cool off, but she replied with a grudging “maybe.” As we talked, I could tell she was troubled about how to reconcile herself with the religious observance she seemed to embrace, as was evident by her behavior on this Saturday afternoon. After high school, she said, she wanted to study at a Jewish seminary, but her father was insisting that she head off to college and pursue a career. But she didn’t seem too interested in a career. She wanted to be observant, but she admitted there were consequences, especially for women.

“There's a lot of domestic violence in Israel,” she said.
“Domestic violence?” I said, looking surprised. “Do you mean wife beating?”

“Oh yes. The religious women decide they want to be independent and their husbands don’t like it. Then their husbands won’t grant them a get (a Jewish divorce). It’s a real problem. These women need education. They’re stuck because they can’t get jobs.”

As the blazing sun set over the hills of Jerusalem, Hannah refused our offer to walk with us, and I worried whether she would make it back to her friends safely. After saying goodbye, we began winding our way through the narrow passages of the Old City, passing the Armenian, Christian and Muslim quarters. For several days, I could not erase the image of Hannah from my mind, and as I thought of her, I became angry—at her friends for allowing her to make her journey alone and at the rules of tradition that would not let her see it any other way.

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In the summer of 1999, Israel, for a brief interlude, was not fighting a war. Instead, it was fighting itself. The big news that August was whether Prime Minister Ehud Barak would allow a huge piece of a metal turbine to be moved from a military plant near Tel Aviv to the coastal city of Ashkelon on the Sabbath. The piece of machinery weighed 250 tons and was so wide that it would cause traffic jams if it was transported on a weekday. The only alternative was to move it on Saturday, when most Israelis hunker down for the Sabbath and the roads are relatively clear. This scrap of metal nearly toppled the Israeli government as the religious politicians threatened to break away from Barak’s coalition if the turbine was moved on Sabbath,
when all work is prohibited. After charges and counter-charges and an appeal to the
Israeli Supreme Court, it was finally decided that the turbine would roll on a Saturday.
As the truck crawled its way down the highway, secular Israelis stood by on the side
of the road, cheering in delight.

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A few hours after leaving Hannah, Patrick and I met my cousin Nira and her
husband, Yisrael, for dinner in a café on a side street in downtown Jerusalem. Nira,
who had picked pears with me on a kibbutz when we were teenagers, was now a
social worker who, coincidentally, specialized in adoption; her husband was a lawyer.

As we dug into our salads and pasta, I told Nira about our plans to adopt a
child from Russia. Then, as if I were still unsure of myself, I asked her if there were
any children available to be adopted in Israel.

That, she said, depended on what type of baby you wanted.

"Most couples are going to Russia and South America. There are a lot of
Ethiopian babies available for adoption, but Israelis don't want to take them."

Unlike America, where black babies are rarely available for adoption, racial
preferences in Israel had left many Ethiopian infants in abusive families. Brushing racial
politics aside, though, Nira was enthusiastic about our plans to adopt a child from a
Russian orphanage.

"You can build good families through adoption," she said, looking at me with
her dark brown eyes.
After dinner, we strolled along Ben Yehuda Street, a bustling pedestrian mall in the center of Jerusalem. Earlier that day, when Patrick and I had walked by, the cobble-stoned street had been empty, the falafel stands and souvenir shops closed and not a soul in sight. Yet minutes after the Sabbath ended at nightfall, the street suddenly came alive as thousands of people thronged the sidewalks or sat at long tables in the center of the street, sipping cappuccino or beer. As we pushed past the crowds, I saw rabbis with long beards and payos, rail-thin women in mini skirts, yeshiva students in black hats and street musicians playing guitars, all out together enjoying themselves on this warm Saturday night.

For a moment, I caught a glimpse of an Israel in harmony, a place where everyone seemed to get along.

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By 9 a.m. the next morning, Patrick and I had boarded a bus headed for Rachel’s Tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem. The memorial where Rachel died in childbirth is on Palestinian territory, and as we entered the dusty town, I noticed a stark contrast from the lush landscape of Jerusalem: The yellowed buildings were faded and decrepit, and old men with wrinkled skin were begging on the sidewalks.

We climbed off the bus, walked across the street and entered an imposing stone building, where we washed our hands—as required by the religious authorities—and then separated into the segregated sections for prayer. At the back of the dark cavern, a handful of women and children were standing in front of what appeared to be
a crypt covered with a drape of blue and gold velvet. A few of the women were sobbing as they prayed, oblivious to my imposing glances.

Rabbi Pearlman had said that this was the place where “women in my condition” should go, so here I was in front of the tomb of Rachel, the matriarch who had told her husband: “Give me children, or else I die.” After years of infertility, Rachel finally gave birth to Joseph and died a few years later while in labor with her second son, Benjamin.

Standing in front of the velvet cloth, with the weeping women behind me, I prayed, as perhaps they did, for God to give me a child. But there was a hollow ring to my words, silent though they were, as if I were not sincere. For I no longer wanted my own child, but the child who did not have a mother, the child who was waiting for me in an orphanage somewhere in Russia. I prayed for my adopted child and asked God to bring me to her.

Afterwards, I stood in the back of the makeshift chapel, staring at the Biblical quotations about Rachel that hung on the stone walls: “Thus saith the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; She refuseth to be comforted for her children, Because they are not.” On another wall: “And Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath, which is Beth-lehem; And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave, that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave unto this day.”

I walked down a few stairs into a dark room where a woman was lighting candles on a small white table. I lit a tall candle, planted it on the mound of melting wax and stepped outside into the blinding sunshine.
It was Sunday afternoon, our last day in Jerusalem, so Patrick and I headed to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum on the outskirts of Jerusalem, to search for information about my father. As my luck would have it, though, I discovered that the library at the museum had been closed for renovations for the entire summer. One of the librarians suggested I write a letter requesting the information a few months later, but seeing the disappointment on my face, she allowed me to copy a handful of articles about Romania before leaving. (My attempts to learn about my father at Beth Hatefutsoth, the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, were just as unsuccessful: the computer database there listed 2,908 Schwartzes but not a single Beno among them.)

Later that day, as Patrick and I strolled beneath the cedar trees among the tombstones of Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin and other famous Israeli leaders at the Mt. Herzl National Memorial Park, we decided we would name our child Rachel—for my grandmother, who was buried in this country of desert and stone, and for the matriarch who had suffered as I did.

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If Jerusalem is the sacred city on the hill, then Eilat resembles Miami Beach in the depths of the desert. With its towering hotels circling the Gulf of Eilat, the city is a popular getaway in winter, when snow can fall on Jerusalem while this southernmost tip of Israel is still basking in 70-degree sunshine. In the dead of August, the temperature had climbed to 111 degrees the day Patrick and I arrived, and a few hours later, as we walked along the boardwalk, it felt as if we were slowly melting, sweat drop by sweat drop, in a large open-air oven.
For three days, we tried to escape the crushing heat by swimming in the clear, blue green water (which itself was 84 degrees), submerging in a submarine to see the sparkling fish and coral reefs, and strolling along the shore at dusk, when the Israeli tourists began folk dancing on the cement plazas. Back at the hotel one night, I watched a bulging belly dancer entertain a lobbyful of tourists and their gawking children, while Patrick (who was too curtain-lace Irish for such amusement) stayed in the room reading Icelandic sagas.

The next day we boarded a bus for the three-hour trip (at least it was air-conditioned) through the Negev Desert to Tel Aviv. On our last night in Israel, I convinced Patrick to try a Hungarian restaurant across the city in a shopping mall, which I had seen advertised in a tourist magazine. Little did we know that the mall, on Ibn Gvirol Street, was right next to the plaza where Yitzhak Rabin had been assassinated by a religious extremist in 1995 at his last peace rally.

After we had ordered our goulash and drinks, we suddenly heard a man shouting in the atrium of the mall, next to a large fountain surrounded by palm trees. Turning around, I saw three police officers try to subdue the man, who was wearing a yarmulke and appeared to be middle-aged. They locked him into handcuffs as he continued to struggle and yell in Hebrew.

I asked the waitress what was happening and she explained that opponents of Rabin, the man who initiated the peace process with the Palestinians, often came to the mall to spew hatred about him.
“Some of the people who wanted Rabin killed speak very loudly about it,” she said. “The police don’t want them to speak about it so they arrest them.”

The waitress was not reluctant to give her own opinion of the people who were still shouting against Rabin four years after his death.

“The religious people are their own worst enemies,” she said. “It’s not religion that drives them. It’s fanaticism.”

When we had finished dinner, we passed the memorial for Rabin in the square where he had been shot by a twenty-five-year-old Orthodox Jewish law student. The former prime minister’s picture leaned against a granite rock, flanked by two glass cases filled with mementos of his career. “Yitzchak, we shall remember,” said a hand-scrawled note that lay on one of the dark rocks and fluttered in the cool evening breeze.

The next morning, we caught a bus for Ben-Gurion Airport, Patrick with a bad case of the stomach flu and myself with lingering doubts about this divisive country. I had come to Israel to learn about my father and to see, once again, the country he had loved and worked for much of his life. And I left with a twinge of bitterness about the place that had once seemed like another home to me and about the people who were tearing it apart, all in the name of religion.
Chapter 15

Making a Choice

If I thought that infertility treatments were intense, I had no idea what awaited me in the adoption process. It would take twenty-two months from the day we signed our names and handed over our first check to the day we brought our daughter home. By the time it was all over, we would spend close to $30,000—most of it paid for by my father's investments—and travel to Russia three times to adopt our child.

The first step in this long journey was the home study—an inspection of our home, our finances, our fertility problems, our views on parenting and child discipline, our religious background, our education, our families, our careers, our hobbies, and our physical and mental health. No square inch of our private lives was left unturned. We were even asked to compile a list of every address we had occupied for the past twenty-five years so that the state could determine whether we had ever been charged with child abuse.

The paper chase seemed to generate enough documents to pave every road in our small town. Our dossier—the set of documents that would be sent to the Russian government—included two copies of the following: our marriage certificate, our birth certificates, medical letters verifying we had no life-threatening diseases, a written description of our house, letters verifying our employment, copies of our passports and police clearances. Each document had to be notarized, certified by our county
clerk and apostilled by the state—a process that took months to complete. On top of all that, three of our friends had to write letters recommending us as suitable parents and we had to compile two sets of photographs of our family celebrations, our house, the baby’s room, the neighborhood school and park.

I approached the mountain of paperwork we had to collect as if it were a part-time job. The adoption of our child had, in fact, become my part-time job since I had just resigned from the newspaper after 16 years in journalism. Where I had once written about poverty, redlining and the great social ills of the day, I was now spending my time—under the orders of my editors—covering street cleanups, drug marches, festivals and other “positive” news about neighborhood groups in the city of Rochester. When my stories starting sounding like rewrites of rewrites, I decided I had had enough and went back to school for my master’s degree in creative writing.

Patrick did not hesitate to show disgust with every step of the adoption process, especially when he and I had to take—for the second time—tests to prove that we did not have AIDS, hepatitis, syphilis or lung cancer. Our scramble for paperwork had dragged on so long that our first set of medical documents had already expired—by Russian law they were only valid for six months.

“A couple of teenagers in Appalachia can have a kid, but they don’t have to do any of this,” Patrick complained. “Yet we have to prove we’re not criminals.”

“Yes, but it’s still better than fertility treatments. At least there will be a child for us at the end of the road.”
To become adoptive parents, Patrick and I had to be fingerprinted—not once, but twice for Patrick, and in my case, three times. Though we had already rolled our fingerprints in those smelly ink-pads at our town police department, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service required its own set before it could issue the all-important I-171H form—a document stating that we were allowed to adopt a foreign orphan.

Patrick and I trudged to the nearest INS office 70 miles away in Syracuse and smudged our fingers in the black ink, made small talk with the federal agents, turned around and drove back home. A month later, though, our social worker called to say that my fingerprints had been rejected. So once again, I put my car back in cruise control on the State Thruway and headed back to Syracuse.

When my fingerprints failed to register a third time (a problem, as I found out, that my mother had had when she became a U.S. citizen), the INS called me back for “questioning.” I was dumbfounded what the federal government could possible question me about—I had never been charged with murder, robbery or assault and my most serious violation was barreling down the highway at 73 mph. But brushing aside my skepticism, I drove back to Syracuse on a sweltering July afternoon and walked back into the familiar drab office downtown.

The INS officer led me into a back room, where he instructed me to sit down at a long wooden table. He then looked me in the eye, and with the utmost seriousness, said, “Do you swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”
Yes sir, I did.

He then proceeded to ask me a series of questions: Had I ever been issued a traffic ticket? (Yes, four times, for speeding.) Had I ever been arrested? (No sir, I hadn’t.) Had I ever been fingerprinted by a law enforcement agent? (Only since I had decided to adopt.) Had I ever been fined, held in custody or ordered to pay restitution? (Only for my speeding tickets.)

When the grilling was over, I decided to ask the officer one myself: “Do you think this will satisfy them?”

“Yes,” he said, getting up from the table, and then added, “You came all this way for what—five minutes?”

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The leap from trying to conceive to adopting a child had been a relatively easy one for me to make. After all, it was my only option left. But as I took one step forward into the adoption abyss with each notarized document I produced, I began to wonder how I had ever made this decision in the first place. The more I read, the more daunting the prospects became. What if our child had reactive attachment disorder—a condition caused by the lack of nurturing in the orphanage—and refused to bond with us? One particularly sensational article in *The New York Times Magazine* described a five-year-old girl, adopted from a Moscow orphanage, who “arrived at her new home in the States so angry at herself and everyone else that she crawled around on the floor for three months until her knees were bloody, refusing to stand up when anyone was looking. One night, the girl threatened to kill her new mother and father and her three
new siblings while they slept” (26). Psychologist after psychologist in the article discussed the “deprived babies” in Eastern European orphanages as if they were rats in some Pavlovian experiment. Children raised in orphanages, one developmental neuropsychologist said, “have to be taught the ability to recognize emotions by visual and auditory cues before they can learn to feel them.” For such children, he added, “Love is an abstract concept” (30). Another adoption specialist advised parents not to expect too much out of these children. “You have to be able to say, ‘Well, I’d really like to have a brain surgeon, but if I get a kid who grows up to be a McDonald’s worker who needs to be living in some sort of supportive-living setup, I’ll love him just as much’ ” (38).

Then there was fetal alcohol syndrome, a pervasive problem among children in Russia, where drinking had been spiraling out of control since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Russians, I read in astonishment, held the world record in alcohol consumption, with the average citizen downing 4.4 gallons of alcohol a year. Among children referred for adoption from Russian orphanages, one adoption specialist reported that 12 percent had medical records that indicated some level of maternal alcohol use.

As each article on the desperate state of orphanage children filled me with despair, my dream once again seemed to be slipping through my hands. But not one to give up, I tried to reassure myself by seeking out parents whose adopted children had defied the odds and were actually thriving. So on a wet November morning, I dragged my mother, who was visiting from Florida, to an adoption conference at an elementary
school in a Rochester suburb, where we spent the day sitting in workshops titled: Attachment Bonding, Attachments to be Developed, Adoption is Forever: Journey of the Adopted Heart, Eastern European Adoptions, and Effective Advocacy for Your Child: A Lifetime Commitment.

By the end of the day, I was sitting bleary-eyed at a session called Decisions, Decisions, Decisions, where a pediatrician from Rochester was summing up the prognosis of children with fetal alcohol syndrome: “With alcohol, you’re pickling the brain right from the start,” he said matter-of-factly. “It affects all the organs. That’s why you get all these facial features.”

Sitting a row behind me was a woman named Joan, who introduced herself to me after the workshop ended. Joan said she was afraid to adopt from Russia because of the risk of fetal alcohol syndrome. Instead, she was trying to find her baby the old-fashioned way: through word of mouth. After we chatted a few minutes, she handed me a bright pink business card decorated with a teddy bear holding four balloons, each inscribed with the letters B-A-B-Y. Across the top was the heading, Loving Family Needs Your Help! followed by a description of a “happy, secure and loving family looking to adopt an infant.” The card asked anyone who knew of someone thinking of adoption to call a special 800-number. And on the back were the family interests: “picnics, travel (Disney, lakes, mountains), camping (yes, in a tent), ice skating, family bike rides, snow angels, beach barbecues and plenty of hugging and kissing.”

Joan had been trying to adopt for more than a year and sympathized with my dilemma. Trying to help me out, she mailed me an article a week later on prenatal
alcohol exposure that she had picked up at another adoption conference. School-age children with fetal alcohol syndrome, the paper said, were easy to anger, had speech difficulties, visual and perceptual difficulties, poor peer relationships and uneven development. By the time these children were adolescents and adults, they faced other problems: difficulty with the concept of time, difficulty with maintaining good hygiene and holding jobs, sexually inappropriate behavior, risk of substance abuse and low self-esteem.

I showed the article to Patrick after a feeling of hopelessness had once again come over me.

“This racks you up your whole life,” he said, looking up after he had finished.

“Yes it does. Well, we could switch countries, maybe try Colombia.” That was where my pediatrician had suggested trying when I had expressed concerns about children adopted from Russia.

But Patrick was not ready to give up. “Look,” he said, “we take a risk either way. If we don’t go ahead, there’s a risk of what that decision could mean to our relationship and to us. If we go ahead and adopt a child that seems okay and then has problems later on, what are you going to do?”

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Patrick’s questions, which had seemed so remote and hypothetical, suddenly became real just ten days later, when Barbara Cubby, the social worker from our adoption agency, called with a “referral”—a baby who could be ours if we agreed to adopt her.
"I have a little girl I’d like to talk to you about," Barbara said cheerfully when I answered the phone.

As she began describing the baby’s measurements, I could barely contain my excitement. Her name was Anya, she was seven months old, and she lived in an orphanage in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. The Russian medical report described her as “active, lively and cheerful. Holds her head up very well. Fixes her gaze, takes a toy. Her sleep is quiet and long enough. Appetite is good.” She weighed 11.4 pounds, was 24 inches tall and her head circumference was 14.96 inches. Everything sounded on target until the social worker mentioned that Anya’s mother had syphilis and that Anya had a condition called cavernous hemangioma.

“What is that?” I asked, feeling as if she had just popped my big bright balloon.

“That’s something you’ll have to investigate,” she said but pointed out that Anya had a blood-red mark, the size of a quarter, on the left side of her forehead.

Before hanging up, she promised to send pictures and a video of Anya by express mail so they would arrive the next morning. Patrick and I then had three days to decide whether we would proceed with the adoption.

It was Friday afternoon, and I knew my pediatrician, who herself had adopted a baby from China, had the day off. How could I find out what cavernous hemangioma was? Not knowing where to turn, I called my friend Elaine, whose husband Stan was a pediatrician. He wasn’t home, but she promised he would call back.

The afternoon slowly dragged on and by evening, my curiosity about this condition had become overwhelming. Unable to wait any longer, I logged onto the
Internet and typed the words “cavernous hemangioma” into a search engine. In a matter of seconds, a string of web pages appeared on the screen and after a click of my mouse, I saw some of the most heart-wrenching pictures I have ever seen.

There was Rebecca, a child whose birthmark had spread across her face and had covered her left upper lip and 75 percent of her nose by the time she was two months old. After researching physicians in Canada and the United States, Rebecca’s parents were told that she would need three surgeries to remove the hemangiomas, which were congenital benign tumors made up of newly-formed blood vessels.

Rebecca’s case was similar to the other stories submitted to an online support page for people with hemangiomas. There was Juliann, whose birthmark was obstructing her left nostril when she drank from a bottle. And there was Pamela, who was born with a hemangioma the size of a green pea on the right side of her neck and eventually had four surgeries to remove more than thirteen tumors. At age forty-three, she still had more tumors growing in her glands and lower lip and she suffered migraine headaches from the accumulation of blood vessels.

As I looked at the pictures of children with the huge port wine-colored birthmarks creeping over their eyes and noses, I turned to Patrick and said: “I can’t do this.”

My father wanted me to have a child, but maybe this wasn’t the child for me. I knew that my resolve to rescue a child from an orphanage had quickly faded when I had seen the pictures of the children with their deforming birthmarks. I didn’t want a
perfect child, but was it asking too much to adopt a child who would give us joy and happiness, and not endless grief and worry?

"We can’t afford to adopt a child and then pay for multiple surgeries,” I said calmly. “I know it sounds selfish, but I just can’t do this.”

By then, the phone was ringing. It was our friend Stan, the pediatrician. I described the condition to him and he immediately knew what it was. He described a colleague he had worked with once who had a red hemangioma covering half of his face. Surgery just could not provide any relief.

"This is a child with a lot of major medical problems,” he said. “It’s major, major. If you’re going to deal with it, you have to be prepared.”

Just after hanging up, the phone rang again. This time it was Sabina. Though she was happy that we finally had a real child to consider adopting, she understood my misgivings.

"This kid is not going to have a good life if you’re not happy with her,” she said. “So don’t think you have to take her.”

The next morning, a white Federal Express package arrived in our breezeway, and with much hesitation, I tore open the envelope. Inside were two pictures of a squirming infant with a shock of black hair and brown slits for eyes. I flipped on the video and watched her play on a huge white crib with a rattle. She could not crawl and wriggled from side to side on her back. The camera zoomed in on the pink birthmark at the corner of her left eyebrow and then the brief video was over.
I quietly put the tape back in the package along with the pictures and closed the envelope. There had been no spark, no connection with this child, regardless of her medical problems.

I had not yet found my daughter.

Patrick, always one to side with the underdog, was more reluctant to give up on Anya.

"Other than the mark on her head, she looks like a cute kid," he said after watching the video. Then he qualified his statement: "I guess they all look like that: kind of ugly, no hair."

But I could not stop thinking about all the surgeries that would be needed to stop the birthmark from spreading and about the nagging questions in my mind about Anya's birthmother. If she had syphilis, what kind of lifestyle did she lead? And if she had led an unsavory lifestyle, did that make her more likely to have been an alcoholic or drug addict?

Patrick knew he could not force me to adopt Anya so on Monday, I called our social worker to tell her we could not accept the referral. My voice quivering with guilt, I explained that there were too many risks involved and that we could not afford the adoption and numerous surgeries after bringing her home.

"I think you need to view this as a learning process and as an educational experience to find out what you and your family can accept," Barbara said. "It's not a cheap date. I understand that. You can only do what you can do."
Three days later it was Thanksgiving, and Patrick and I were all alone—except for our dog and two cats. I had not invited any friends or my family from out of town for dinner because I was bogged down with a Hemingway paper for graduate school. And no invitations had come our way. As I busied myself making pumpkin pie and a vegetable casserole, the holiday closed in on me with a flood of loneliness, depression and guilt.

“This is why we should have a child,” I pleaded with Patrick, my hands rolling the dough. “So we’ll never be alone.”

* * *

The holidays were finally over and a January thaw had set in, the temperatures hovering below freezing. On a dreary sunless day, I was painting our basement since we were planning to move to Ithaca so Patrick would not have to commute an hour and a half each way to work. White paint was dripping from my hands as I heard our social worker chirp into our answering machine, “I have a little girl I’d like to tell you about.”

Her name was Elvira, she was eight months old and she lived in an orphanage in Moscow. Immediately the image of a television news show that had exposed the dreadful conditions inside a Moscow orphanage, a place where children were treated like mental patients and left to vegetate in long dingy hallways, sprung into my mind. Were the orphanages in Moscow were really that horrible? They varied, Barbara said, depending on how many donations and how much support they received.
Yet the good news was that with the exception of a hernia operation just after birth, Elvira had been given a clean bill of health. Her birthmother was a twenty-three secretary who lived in Tataria in west-central Russia, the homeland of the Tatars, a Turkic-speaking people who are predominantly Muslim. As she stated in her letter of relinquishment, she was single and could not afford to raise the child. So she had come to Moscow to give birth to her daughter and then had abandoned her in the hospital six days later.

As the social worked droned on about the baby’s birthweight, height and head circumference, she came to a strange term—perinatal encephalopathy—and my heart stopped. I didn’t know much about babies, but I knew that meant brain damage, point blank. When I sounded alarmed, Barbara explained that the diagnosis was listed on the referrals of nearly every child adopted from Russia and that one of the most prominent American adoption specialists, Dr. Dana Johnson, had yet to see a child adopted from Russia who had brain damage. Barbara assured me that the referral was a good one and that we would probably be able to adopt her by her first birthday in May.

“This is one of the best ones that I’ve seen lately,” she said. “It’s not just the medical. She’s tracking well on the video. This is a spontaneous child who does show her emotions.”

Just then in the background, I heard one of the office workers at the adoption agency yell: “Tell her that Tartar women are beautiful and that the Number Two in the Miss Universe contest two years ago was from Tatar.”
I did not want a beauty queen, but her words made me smile. The next morning, another Federal Express package arrived on our doorstep and this time I ripped open the package. Inside were two color photos of a round-cheeked baby with dazzling blue eyes and light brown hair. She had four small red bumps over her right eye, three of them covered with some type of blue dye, which the social worker said were probably insect bites since most orphanages did not screen their windows. She sat on her caregiver's lap in a white and yellow jumpsuit and short-sleeved blue shirt, staring straight ahead with her big eyes. "She is active, smiles a lot, engages in emotional contact, smiles and coos in response to speech addressed to her, rolls over from her back to her stomach and vice versa," the medical report read. "She coos variably and vocalizes; reaches for a toy, grasps it, examines it and pulls it into her mouth."

Watching the video later that night with Patrick, I saw her squirming on her back on a large plastic blue crib as a handful of women coaxed her in Russian to grab a rattle hanging by a string.

"I think she's probably a feisty little kid," Patrick said, looking amused. "She seems to be doing things at six months that should be done."

Yet as novice parents, we had no clue whether a six-month-old should be crawling, sitting up, babbling, turning over or grasping rattles, strings or toys. To find out if her development was on target, we sent the video to two pediatricians with experience in reviewing referrals for international adoption. The first, Dr. Ira Chasnoff, was a specialist in fetal alcohol syndrome, still a major concern of mine. After
reviewing the video and the medical report, Dr. Chasnoff called me from his office in Chicago to tell me he saw no facial features of fetal alcohol syndrome, but he had other concerns.

“Overall, even though she’s six months in the video, she’s functioning at the three-month level,” he said, explaining that she could not roll over nor grab the rattle dangling in front of her. “The bottom line is: Is she an adoptable baby? Yes. I think she looks pretty good, compared to other children we’ve seen.”

Confirming our social worker, Dr. Chasnoff said he saw that diagnosis of perinatal encephalopathy in all Russian adopted children. “You should pay no attention to it,” he said. “One of the reasons they put that is to discourage domestic adoptions. They make a lot of money on the foreign adoptions.”

His final advice: “Go over and get her out of there.”

The next night, though, our second expert, Dr. Jerri Ann Jenista, called us from her home in Michigan with a less-than-glowing assessment.

“Moscow is a very bad place for babies,” she began. “Winters are even worse for babies. Drugs and alcohol are a major problem in Moscow. It’s not like New York. It’s ten times worse.”

She warned us that the courts in Moscow are highly congested and that even if we were able to adopt Elvira at one year old, her development would be “considerably behind.” Her height and weight, she pointed out, were already off the growth charts.
"I would be very hesitant to commit to this child," she advised. "Every day that she’s there is another day of neglect. Every day that you’re in an orphanage is another day of loss."

"The bottom line is in November I think she was a relatively salvageable child," she concluded. "She still may be next year, but the issue is she’ll be more behind."

As I hung up the phone, the euphoria that had washed over me ever since I had caught a glimpse of this baby was draining out of me like a fast-flowing faucet. My mother had even gone so far as to tell me that she looked like me, with her big blue eyes and rose-shaped mouth.

"What should we do?" I asked Patrick after I gave him the doctor’s prognosis.

He didn’t know and seemed as glum as I was. With my reporter’s instinct to research to death, I suggested we send out the video and medical report to two more doctors and then make our decision. Secretly, I clung onto the hope that they would give us a more positive picture of this child because I did not want to lose her.

In the meantime, there was another avenue to investigate. Cradle of Hope had given us the names of two families who had adopted children from the same orphanage Elvira was living in, Baby Home No. 8.

I called the first woman on the list, Ann, a stay-at-home mother who lived in Mendham, New Jersey. She had adopted two boys, both at twenty-one months old, from Baby Home No. 8. Before I could even open my mouth, she bubbled over with enthusiasm.
“It’s a wonderful place—nothing like the horror stores that you hear,” she said. “I can’t say enough about how well they treated the children.”

The caregivers had cried, she said, when they had whisked their boys out of the orphanage. Both of the boys could not walk before they were 16 months old, but she boasted, “A little TLC goes a long way.”

A few days later, Dr. Dana Johnson, director of an international adoption clinic at the University of Minnesota, called to give his assessment. “She’s a cute baby,” he said. “She’s just a doll.” Yes, her growth was not good, but that was typical of children who live in orphanages. And he did not seem overly concerned that she would be irreparably delayed if left in the orphanage until she turned one.

“Quite frequently, children at that age are quite resilient and they do very well,” he said.

His comforting words were all I needed. I was ready to go ahead, and so was Patrick, even without waiting for the last doctor to call us back. All we had to do now was wait until Elvira’s first birthday, just four short months away, and then fly to Russia and pick her up.

“Sometimes these things do work out,” Patrick said after I called the social worker to give her the news.

“Sometimes,” I said smiling.
Chapter 16

Waiting for Elvira

There's an old Jewish superstition my mother always reminded me about when it came to babies: When pregnant, you should not buy anything—not a stitch of clothing, a crib or even a teddy bear—until that child is home safely in your arms. What if something were to happen to the baby, God forbid, and you came home from the hospital empty-handed? What if your child was born with some terrible disease? Your house would be filled with all these painful reminders of the child you had dreamed of and there would be no escape from the misfortune that had suddenly shattered your world.

After waiting more than a year to adopt our baby, however, I could not keep myself away from the stores that sold those fluffy crib sets, umbrella strollers, changing tables and yellow wooden ducks on strings. The months of paperwork had finally come to an end and Patrick and I had just signed the last document that would be forwarded to Russia for our dossier. We had agreed on our daughter's official name—Rachel Elvira Stevens (though I still couldn't bring myself to call her Rachel). If everything went on schedule, we would be arriving in Moscow in just two months—in time for Elvira's first birthday in May, as our social worker had promised.

Since I was childless, I was starting from scratch. We needed a crib, a dresser, a stroller, a high chair, toys, plastic dishes and clothes. Sabina had promised to send me half a dozen or so boxes of hand-me-downs from her two sons, who were now six
and nine, but I couldn't imagine dressing our precious little girl in clothes that would make her look a GI Joe soldier in army fatigues.

By March, the pressure was mounting and my mother was making me frantic. You can't wait any longer, she said, you need to buy at least the crib. You may need to order it and that could take weeks. So off I went to a suburban shopping plaza and walked into a store called USA Baby, where I planned to violate that Jewish superstition in a big way.

The crib that caught my eye—a natural birch bed with arched railings on each side—was made in Italy and as my luck would have it, the store was all sold out. The sales clerk could not persuade me to change my mind. I had to have that crib for my baby. She explained that the suppliers had just told the store's owner that there was a longshoremen's strike in Italy and if it was settled soon, another order of cribs could be shipped out at the beginning of May. Her crib would arrive just in time for Elvira to have something to sleep on when she got off that plane from Moscow.

So I ordered the crib, I bought a dresser, a stroller, a high chair and a yellow wooden duck on a string and then that old Jewish superstition played out my worst fears. It didn't matter whether the longshoremen in Italy were on strike for six more months or whether our crib sat in its box in a port on the Mediterranean until the middle of summer because we would not be bringing our baby home in time for her first birthday. In fact, we now had no clue when we would be able to get her out of the orphanage.
If the adoption process had seemed difficult until now, it was only going to get worse. The Russian government had intervened and decided to bring the adoption system to a dead halt. Hoping to clean up the bribery and child trafficking that had become an integral part of the adoption process in some regions of Russia, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree that would give the government more control by requiring all adoptive agencies working in the country to become accredited. The law mandating registration of foreign agencies had actually been passed by the Russian Duma in 1998 but did not take effect until April 20, 2000—just two months before we were supposed to pick up our daughter in Moscow.

The news about the decree spread instantly to thousands of anxious American couples waiting to bring home their Russian children through what had become the source of everything you ever wanted to know about adoption—the Internet. When I first read about Putin's decree via e-mail, though, I decided to brush it off. We had already made it through sixteen months in the adoption process and I refused to believe there could be any more delays.

"I just can't worry about this," I told a friend one night after our graduate seminar on Yeats and Joyce. "We've got enough to worry about."

But a few days later, I was sitting in the office of our pediatrician who was advising us on how to take care of our baby when I realized I could no longer remain in denial. The pediatrician had just attended an international adoption conference in Washington where she had heard that all adoptions in Russia had been stopped in their tracks.
"I hope that they will be able to continue processing adoptions that are already in the pipeline," she said, "but what they were saying at this conference is that all of Russia is shutting down."

I immediately went home and called our social worker to ask what was going on.

"It's not true that all of Russia is closing down," she said, "but there will be delays. We just can't say how long it will be."

Scattered around our house, meanwhile, were bags of stuffed animals, child safety locks, sippy cups, crib sheets and brand-new baby jumpers—size twelve months. All I could do was stash them in a corner and wonder how much longer I would have to wait to hold that child in my arms.

* * *

The days dragged on and still there was no word from our social worker about when we would be able to see our daughter. By now, I was home writing my master's thesis and trying to sell our house so that we could move to Ithaca. Every afternoon, I would leave to run errands as prospective buyers toured our house, hoping that I would return to find that magic message on our answering machine saying that yes, we were going to Russia. But every afternoon I would come home and there would be dead silence on my machine. My only consolation was contacting other anxious parents also waiting to travel to Russia to pick up their children. Unlike many of these parents, though, I could not watch our child's video or gaze at her picture every
waking moment. It was too difficult to look into her eyes and think of her languishing in that orphanage without anyone to pick her up when she cried.

In May, Patrick was scheduled to set up an exhibition on Icelandic sagas at the Library of Congress in Washington, and I urged him to go with me to meet the director of our adoption agency, Cradle of Hope, in Silver Spring to demand some answers.

After getting lost in Washington, we somehow found the agency—with the help of my brother's directions via our cell phone—in a large building on a side street in downtown Silver Spring. We were introduced to Barbara Cubby, our social worker, and then led into a conference room where there was a huge map of Russia taped to the wall. Colored stick pins dotted the map, showing the cities where Cradle of Hope was working with orphanages to find children for adoptive couples in America.

Then Linda Perilstein, the executive director who started the agency after adopting a baby girl from Romania in 1990, walked in. She said she had just called her staff in Russia to see if they could get an update on our case, but all she could determine was that our file was being processed at the Moscow Adoption Center. She still had no answers to my urgent questions: When could we see our child? And when would the courts start scheduling adoption hearings so we could bring her home?

"We don't even know when it's going to start," she said grimly.

The conversation in the long narrow room did little more than confirm what I already knew—the climate surrounding international adoption in Russia had become
mired in controversy and it appeared that the situation was out of the agency's control. Despite the poverty gripping much of Russia since the fall of Communism, the idea of exporting the country's future—its children—to America was appalling to many Russian politicians. In 1999, Russia became the leading exporter of adopted children, with 4,348 kids placed in American homes. A few sensational cases had only added more fuel to the fire surrounding international adoption. In 1996, a two-year-old boy adopted from Russia died with severe bruises on his body and his mother was convicted of murdering him and sentenced to 22 years in prison. And in 1997 two newly adopted four-year-old Russian girls had been slapped and screamed at by their parents on the flight home from Moscow and the couple was charged with assault, harassment, and endangering a child.

Since the new decree had gone into effect, judges in most regions in Russia were not hearing adopting cases until the accreditation process was complete. Yet by working the system, Cradle of Hope had been able to schedule a hearing for one American couple with a sympathetic judge in Moscow.

"If you could arrange a deal like that for us," I said to Linda, "I'll buy you dinner."

But she admitted there didn't seem to be any shortcut to move our case forward and after an hour of asking questions, Patrick and I left the office with our adoption hopelessly in limbo.

* * *
Then a week later, everything changed. Our social worker called to say that the agency was sending families whose cases were stalled on "first trips," where they would travel to Russia and meet their child. They would then request a letter from the Ministry of Education, which oversees the adoption system, stating that their child was available to be placed with an American family. Under Russian law, every orphan put up for adoption had to be listed on a national databank for three months, during which time the child would be available only to Russian families. If no one claimed the child, as was often the case, the orphan would be taken off the databank and the adoption could proceed.

The release letter from the Ministry of Education was the key to completing an adoption. No case could move forward until this document was issued. To make things more frustrating, Elvira had already come off the databank two months ago, yet there was no way we could get hold of this letter. While the adoption agency had been able to secure release letters without any problems in the past, its hands were now tied because it had not yet been accredited by the Russian government.

Taking this "first trip" would add another $5,000 to our adoption expenses, but I didn't care. I was willing to do whatever it took to get Elvira out of the orphanage. I called Barbara to tell her that Patrick and I wanted to take a "first trip"—all we wanted to know was when we could travel. She said we might be able to take the trip in June, but she would let us know.

The days passed and I waited anxiously for her phone call.
It never came.

Instead, in late May, she called with some astonishing news: The Moscow Adoption Center, which processes all adoption cases in the Moscow region, was closing for two and a half months beginning in mid-June. The entire staff was taking a vacation and no adoptions in Moscow would proceed until the end of the summer.

I could not believe what I was hearing.

"You have got to be kidding. The entire staff is leaving and all these children are going to sit there in the orphanage all summer?"

"I've seen this happen before," Barbara said. "They take long vacations."

Words kept darting from the receiver into my ear but they meant nothing. Again and again, I asked her to explain how the adoption center could close for nearly the entire summer.

"I can't imagine this ever happening here," I said.

"I know it's hard," she said, trying to calm me down. "Your child is in the orphanage getting older."

Of everything that had happened during the seventeen tortuous months that we had been trying to adopt a child, nothing hurt as much as this. The Russian government changing the adoption laws was one thing, but having our child waste away in an orphanage while the bureaucrats went on holiday was beyond my comprehension. When I called Patrick to tell him the news, I broke down in tears.
It wasn't until a few days later that I thought of something my father used to say: The Russians were worse than the Germans, he often told my mother. And finally I understood why.

* * *

Summer had arrived, my perennial garden was in full bloom and I could now preoccupy myself with learning Russian and moving. We had sold our colonial in Canandaigua, bought a remodeled 1939 tan house in Ithaca and were preparing to move in mid-July. All that we had left to do was pack up our small library of nearly two-thousand books and all the baby furniture, clothes and stuffed animals lying around the house.

My mother was helping me wrap our china one night when I heard from my friend Kris, who was in the process of adopting a three-year-old boy from the same orphanage where Elvira was staying. During the long months of waiting, I had called our adoption agency to see if any other couple would be visiting Elvira's orphanage so that they could take some pictures of her. It turned out that there was a couple adopting from the same orphanage who happened to live in Pittsford, New York, just twenty minutes away from our house.

After speaking to Kris, I immediately set out for the toy store and bought a pink teddy bear, a musical clown and a rattle to send to Elvira. I also picked up a small photo album and filled it with pictures of Patrick and me, our dog and two cats. Patrick then spent two nights labeling each photo with captions in Russian in his
halting Cyrillic handwriting. Finally we included a card for Elvira wishing her a happy birthday since she had just turned one.

Yet when Kris returned from her first trip to Moscow (her court hearing had been scheduled long before the laws had been changed), she was heartbroken. The staff working for the adoption agency would not let her see our daughter, let alone take her picture. Once again, as had been the case at many points in our adoption journey, I was flabbergasted. The doubts I had once had about adoption resurfaced in my mind: Maybe there was something wrong with Elvira and the orphanage was trying to hide it. Why else would they not let Kris see her?

After a phone call to our social worker, the problem was ironed out and when Kris returned to Moscow to bring her son home, she was finally allowed to see Elvira.

"Your daughter is just absolutely adorable," she reported. "She's got real light blue eyes. I don't think there's one thing wrong with that girl. She's still real fair. Her hair is sandy blonde. And she's starting to walk. She walked around holding things and they also stood her up on her own. It's very obvious that this orphanage takes care of these kids. For a one-year-old to be walking—that's really great."

In the pictures, which my mother and I picked up the next day, Elvira was wearing a long-sleeved pink and white striped knit dress, thick tights and red leather shoes. She had the saddest expression on her face and was standing in a large room holding onto a wooden table. A large fluffy white rabbit was sitting against the wall and a few other toys were scattered around the nursery.
"She looks like a little old lady," my mother said as we stared at the photos in my car. "She just needs someone to take care of her."

The five pictures were the first proof that we had a living, breathing child who was waiting for us in Russia to bring her home. I longed to watch her take her first steps and to hear her say her first words. But that was not to be. Her caretakers alone would witness these milestones, if they even bothered to pay attention. When I would be able to see her was still a question that no one could answer.

* * *

And then the phone call finally came—in a roundabout way. Kelley, a friend in Cincinnati who had been waiting as long as we had to adopt a baby girl from Russia, called to say that she had just been told by her social worker that she and her husband would make their first trip to Moscow in mid-September.

"That's great," I said. "But I wonder why they haven't called me?"

After hanging up with Kelley, I immediately called the adoption agency to find out whether we too would be traveling to Russia. I was so frantic that I didn't ask for my social worker, but instead requested the head of the agency, who immediately got on the phone to say that she had good news for us. We were going to Russia in two weeks to meet our daughter. Within minutes, my life suddenly turned into a whirlwind of plane reservations, visas, hotel rooms and interpreter's fees. My father's dream for me was no longer just a dream and my life was about to change forever.
Chapter 17
Ya Tvoya Mama

Moscow was just as I pictured it: gray skies, a wet drizzle and a chill in the air, even though it was late August. By the time we stepped off the plane, we had been traveling for ten hours, with stops in Detroit and Amsterdam, and our eyes were bloodshot from jet lag. We followed the crowd through Sheremetyevo Airport to the sign for the passport check—by now I could read the words in Russian, after six months of practice. The stern-looking customs officer in the dark green uniform stamped our passports and we inched along the edge of the airport, looking from face to face for someone who would lead us away. Finally we saw a tall blond woman carrying a sign that said Cradle of Hope. Her name was Natasha and she would be our interpreter during our three trips to Russia and a valuable source of advice to two people who knew little about children.

It was already 3:30 p.m. and our itinerary for the day was to find our hotel, eat dinner and get some sleep. It was too late to meet Elvira at the orphanage—that would have to wait until tomorrow. As we drove through the congested traffic toward the center of the city, Natasha pointed out three iron anti-tank obstacles on the side of the road, a memorial to the site where the Red Army had pushed the Nazis back from Moscow. On the other side of the highway was a symbol of the new Russia—an IKEA store, a taste of the spirit of capitalism that was slowly creeping its way into Moscow.
We had booked a room at the Arhat Hotel, which had been recommended to us by our New York City travel agency. My travel book, *Moscow Guide*, had also praised the hotel, formerly owned by the Communist Party’s Central Committee and now under state ownership. “The hotel’s sales pitch,” the guidebook said, “is that the Arbat will remind you of a ‘small comfortable and quiet hotel like those you might find in Switzerland or on the side streets of Paris.’” It prided itself on safety, and the manager was quoted as saying you would not “encounter rowdy nouveau-riche types nor frivolous girls in his establishment” (164).

As the guide book had said, the hotel looked like a Soviet-style apartment building—except for the row of international flags planted on its portico—and sat across a side street from a large vacant lot. The place had a worn-down feel to it—the carpets in the lobby were fraying and the elevators were so small Patrick and I could barely squeeze into one with our two suitcases and carry-on bags. But it was just two blocks from Arbat Street, Moscow’s version of Greenwich Village, complete with outdoor cafes, souvenir shops and street musicians of every kind.

After checking in, we headed out for an Italian restaurant Natasha had recommended. It was dusk and I felt as if I were sleepwalking in a misty fog. But as we turned the corner onto the brick-paved street, I was jolted awake by a nine piece string orchestra playing Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. A large crowd of well-dressed Muscovites stood in front of the group listening intently, and I wondered whether a string ensemble playing chamber music would attract such interest back home. Patrick and I strolled past the souvenir stands and bars until we found the restaurant, and we
sat outside munching down pizzas with our jackets on until heading back to the hotel for the night.

Our room at the Arbat was divided into two sections by long thick curtains: a parlor with a couch, two chairs, a coffee table and a television, and a sleeping quarter with two twin beds that had mattresses no more than an inch thick. On top of each bed was a sheet with a huge hole in the middle of it, and on top of that a quilted comforter and then a bedspread.

"Communist-style sheets," I said to Patrick as I pulled one off my bed and tried to figure out what the hole was for. "Do you wear these to sleep?"

"I don't know," Patrick mumbled as he climbed beneath the bedding with his book.

After a few nights, I realized that you were supposed to fit the comforter inside the sheet, through the large hole on top. But that night, it didn't matter what I did with it. I was so nervous about meeting our daughter the next morning that I didn't sleep for more than two or three hours.

* * *

Orphanage No. 8 is on the north side of Moscow, a half-hour drive from our hotel in good traffic. Our driver, Alexi, arrived with Natasha to pick us up at 9:30 since we had a 10:30 appointment with the orphanage director and didn't want to be late. Crawling along in heavy traffic, we passed Olympic Stadium, built for the 1980 Moscow games which the United States boycotted because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. On the same street we passed another landmark: a massive statue of a
pair of peasant workers clutching a hammer and sickle. The bronze peasants looked as tall as the Statue of Liberty—a monumental display of Soviet might. A few minutes later, we turned off the busy thoroughfare, wound our way through a residential neighborhood and then squared another corner onto a quiet side street. At the end of the road, the car stopped in front a huge two-story yellow building surrounded by a tall black wrought-iron gate, with a uniformed guard at the entrance. The paint was visibly peeling but there was an intricate decorative white trim around the windows and cornice. In front, pine saplings and pink phlox were growing on a strip of weedy grass. Over the front door was a sign that read Dom Rebyenka No. 8—Baby Home No. 8, the orphanage where our daughter had lived since she was twenty nine days old.

The first thing I noticed when I walked inside was the smell—a pungent mixture of urine, cooked meat and cleaning fluid. The walls were painted pale green and were decorated with hanging bouquets of plastic flowers and a mosaic of a Russian peasant woman. We followed Natasha up the stairs and down a hallway where she pointed at a bench for us to sit down. At the end of the corridor, a group of women stood in pale-colored smocks chatting in Russian. We nervously waited until a middle-aged woman with curly brown hair and wearing a pink doctor’s coat motioned for us to come into her office.

“Zdahrstvuyte,” I said in my primitive Russian.

Patrick and I shook the woman’s hand and then she smiled politely, stepped behind her desk and we all sat down.
The director, Tatiana Nekrasova, was a pediatrician who spoke matter-of-factly about the hundred children who were entrusted to her care. About thirty of these children, the lucky ones who would discover a world beyond the orphanage walls, were adopted each year. Tatiana looked at me with her hands folded on her desk as I began asking her questions about Elvira. Judging by her blunt words, translated to us via Natasha, I knew immediately that she was someone we could trust.

"She is doing wonderfully," she said. "There are no special problems about health for her. But of course, all of the children staying at the orphanage have problems. The problems are psycho-neurological development. Because of the orphanage, they don't get enough tenderness and attention that they would get with a mother."

Elvira’s biological mother, Tatiana said, had relinquished her when she was six days old and had not seen her since. Her birthmother had been single and poor, and Tatiana speculated that she had probably come to Moscow to survive and make some money. During her pregnancy, she had not seen a doctor—one of the reasons why Elvira had been diagnosed with perinatal encephalopathy. The child had also shown symptoms of “neurological pathology;” at times, she could become excited and she didn’t sleep well. Yet overall, Tatiana said, “She’s not a bad girl.”

In May, a battery of tests had been conducted by a special commission of doctors, including a gastroenterologist, an orthopedist, an ophthalmologist and a surgeon. None of these doctors had found anything wrong with Elvira except for a small umbilical hernia growing at her navel.
“My own grandchild,” Tatiana said, “has never been examined in detail like these children. He hasn’t even got one tenth of the examinations she’s had—because he lives at home with his mother.”

Yet despite her reassurances, I could not stop asking questions. I wanted to know every detail about my child, and subconsciously, I must have realized that the more we talked, the longer I could put off the inevitable. I had traveled halfway around the world to meet my daughter, but I was too afraid to leave this room and go see her. What if I burst into tears? What if I didn’t like her? And what if she didn’t like me?

Finally Tatiana stood up and I knew the interview was over. We presented her with half of our donations for the orphanage (the other half would come with us on another trip), which we had crammed into a large suitcase—fifteen dresses and fifteen pairs of pants and shirts. Then we walked around the corner and down another hallway, where Tatiana stopped in a doorway and extended her arm, inviting us into a large playroom.

“Elvira,” she called out, smiling broadly as we filed past her into the room.

Seated at the end of a low wooden table in front of us was a little girl in a red and white checkered dress with a large square lace collar. She had large blue eyes and cropped dirty blond hair. She was now fifteen months old—we were no longer adopting a baby anymore but a full-grown toddler. She stared straight ahead as Patrick and I walked in and sat down at each side of the small table. Then we all stared at one another.
“Zdrahstvuy, Elvira,” I said meekly.

Elvira looked at me with a blank expression on her face. I had expected her to smile, or at least cry, but she did nothing. I then produced a pink teddy bear from my bag, the same doll I had tried to send her for her first birthday but which never made it into her hands. As I shook the bear in front of her, she seemed completely bewildered by these two strangers who were suddenly paying an inordinate amount of attention to her and thrusting toys in her face.

Watching her, I noticed what appeared to be a large scab on her left cheek. One of the caregivers in the room said a little boy had bitten her when they were riding together in a stroller—a casualty of orphanage life. I could not picture this small boy taking a bite out of this defenseless child’s cheek and it made me sad to think that I was not there to protect her.

No matter how many times I rattled the teddy bear, Elvira did not flinch. I did not want to bombard her just yet with my carefully rehearsed line—Ya tvoya mama (I am your mother)—but I didn’t know what else to do. Patrick looked at me from across the table and did not say a word. Finally, a few awkward moments later, one of the caretakers corralled the three of us into another playroom across the hall for lunch.

The room was bright, with sunlight streaming in through a row of large windows, and had a wood-tile floor with a red oriental rug in the center. In one corner was a piano, where one of the caregivers played songs for the children’s music class. There were tricycles, stuffed animal dolls, plastic trucks, a small seesaw, and a dozen small wooden chairs standing against the wall. This was not the portrait of one of
those bleak, cheerless orphanages, where the children lay in their cribs all day, that I had seen on television. It looked like a day care center, except here the children stayed 24 hours a day.

Reappearing in the doorway, the caregiver returned with a large bowl of soup and set it down on a long wooden table. She sat Elvira on a small chair, pushed it up to the table and tied two bibs around her neck—one plastic and one cloth. Though I wanted to feed her, Elvira grabbed the soup spoon, which was so big it barely fit into her mouth, and ravenously started lapping up the yellow broth.

"Maladyets (Good girl)," I said, with the pride that only a mother could have.

"Umnitsa (Little smart one)," Natasha added, as she watched the two of us.

When the next course arrived—ground hamburger, mashed potatoes and bread—I grabbed the spoon this time and Elvira took mouthful after mouthful from me, gulping down every morsel as if she hadn’t eaten in days. Then she picked up the few remaining crumbs of meat and potato on the plate with her fingers and shoved them into her mouth. I had never seen a child so hungry.

"She’s a chazer (a pig)—like her father," I joked.

Patrick laughed and said, “That’s the first word of Yiddish she’ll learn.”

Lunch ended with “dessert”—some fruit juice served in a flowered tea cup—so I reached into my black bag and gave her three small animal crackers. Then I worked up the courage to pick up my daughter for the first time. But Elvira, who had been perfectly silent for the past hour, didn’t like this at all and she let out a shriek at full throttle. Not knowing what to do, I handed her to Patrick, who started fumbling with
her in his arms until I gave him a quick lesson in Child Rearing 101—when you hold a baby, you must put one hand underneath to support her and the other hand across her back. That much I knew, but not much more.

After figuring out what to do with his arms, Patrick reverted to Russian to calm her down. "*Vsyo budyet khoroshho* (Everything will be all right)," he said and suddenly she stopped crying. He then carried her into the next room where the rest of her group of fifteen toddlers were already lying half-asleep on their small wooden beds. (To my surprise, there wasn't a crib in sight.) The caretaker took off Elvira's dress, put her to bed in her undershirt and underwear (she had been weaned off diapers at one year old), and laid her new pink teddy bear next to her head. We then waved goodbye and tiptoed out the door, our long-awaited meeting with our daughter finally over.

Later that day, as we feasted on boiled potatoes with dill and butter and pancakes with sour cream and apricot jam at a Russian-cuisine restaurant, Patrick could not stop talking about the child about to become his daughter.

"I was amazed at how much she ate," he said. "This is not a child who's apathetic or depressed. This is a child who wants to do things."

I was relieved that he was so taken with her, but there was a question nagging at my conscience—what we should name her. After seeing her with her caretakers, I suddenly had had a change of heart about giving her a new name. "She already knows her name is Elvira so why should we confuse her?" I said. "Why don't we just call her Ella, like the orphanage director did?" But Patrick insisted that we change her name—
preferably to a Hebrew one. By giving her our own name, she would become our child.

This was one argument I wasn’t going to win. But in the larger scheme of things, it probably didn’t matter. We had met our child, and for me, that was enough. I thought of Patrick’s words at the orphanage—Vsyo budyet khorosho—and for the first time in months, a sense of calm and contentment came over me.

* * *

I did not find Moscow an attractive city. Everything was built on a grand scale, overwhelming any human perspective. From our hotel, we could see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a towering concrete skyscraper that stood on the site of one of the dozens of churches Stalin had demolished during the heyday of communism. The hulking edifice was just around the corner from our hotel and was so tall it served as a landmark whenever we were lost. Driving around Moscow, I noticed that some of the avenues were ten lanes wide, and even with that amount of pavement, the roads were constantly ensnarled in gridlock. There was very little landscaping to soothe the eye from all this concrete. The grass along the sidewalks was left to grow wild and there were few flowers in sight, except for the plantings around Red Square.

Still there were glimmers of architectural beauty. The onion-shaped domes of St. Basil’s Cathedral, glazed in striking shades of terra cotta, dark green, gold, rust and pale blue, were unlike anything I had ever seen. The Tolstoy museum, an Empire-style yellow mansion with white columns in front, was situated in a quaint neighborhood of pastel-colored facades. The Pushkin Museum was an impressive
marble building where we saw an exhibit of gold treasures from Troy and a show of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. And at the Armory museum at the Kremlin, we were dazzled by the dozens of glass cases of state treasures: glistening jewels, Fabergé eggs, ruby and diamond-studded crowns, embroidered royal gowns, sixteenth-century carriages and enamel-painted royal thrones.

By now, Patrick had not only changed his mind about adoption but about his distaste for Russian culture. He was amazed at the flawless classical music we heard on Arbat Street every night, the craftsmanship of the art in the museums and the energy the Russians seemed to bring to transforming their country into a free-market economy.

"The Russians have so much talent," he said. "They just don't have a way to channel it."

At Red Square one afternoon, Patrick, Natasha and I stood at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, watching three young soldiers in dress uniform goose-step across the plaza in front of the Kremlin wall.

"They still march like Communists," I said, not knowing whether my remark would offend Natasha. I was intensely curious about the Communists—the people who had driven my father from Romania and were still a vibrant force in Russian politics. I asked her if the Russian people still had any affection for the Communists.

"I think people are tired of loving and hating," she said. "I don't think they ever loved Communism. They respected the leaders—Stalin, and Lenin—Grandpa," the man whose embalmed body lay in a mausoleum just a few hundred yards away.
During our daily visits to the orphanage, I was so preoccupied with attending to every whim of my daughter that I didn’t pay much attention to the children around her. I had heard stories about people adopting from orphanages who cried when they saw the other unwanted children they would have to leave behind. But I was not in that camp. Maybe after sixteen years of newspaper reporting I had seen too many sad-faced children in dilapidated houses in poor ghetto neighborhoods. It wasn’t that I didn’t care about the other children in the orphanage—it’s just that I had been shell shocked. I did notice the chubby boy with blond hair, the one who had bitten Elvira on the cheek, lying on the floor in the playroom, crying and banging his head against the wall. I saw a blond girl who seemed to have the facial feature we had been warned about—the flat and smooth skin above her mouth that was a telltale sign of fetal alcohol syndrome. And I saw a little girl with red hair who looked at me with such longing eyes that I wanted to adopt her too.

Every morning, the caretakers allowed us to take Elvira outside to a section of the orphanage grounds cordoned off for her group. The children played on a wooden platform in a large open-air shed, covered with a tin roof held up by posts, with two caretakers watching over them. There was a swing set near the shed but it was too rusty to use. And behind the orphanage was an incinerator that was blasting foul-smelling fumes into the air which the children inhaled each day.

By our second day in Moscow, the sun emerged to beat down on our shoulders as we strolled Elvira around the orphanage grounds. Despite the balmy
weather, the children were dressed as if it were winter: heavy tights and dresses for the girls, pants and shirts for the boys, then an outer layer for both of pants, sweaters, hats, and on some days, snowsuits. The Russians are known for dressing their children warmly.

After the children had played outside one morning, the caretakers herded them back inside the orphanage to get ready for lunch. As I carried Elvira up the concrete steps inside to the playroom, one of the caretakers snapped at me. “Don’t spoil her. She can walk up the stairs herself. But once someone carries her, then she doesn’t want to go anymore.”

Why she thought a fifteen-month-old child, who had just learned how to walk, could climb up the cold hard concrete stairs was something that amazed me. This caregiver was a young blond woman who, I noticed, tended to be brusque with the children. It was the older caretakers—the women who looked like babushkas—who were the ones picking up the children and hugging them, giving them the affection they so desperately craved.

The young caregiver’s words rang through my ears like discordant music. How was it possible to spoil a child in an orphanage? Hadn’t these children been deprived of enough already? Like any new adoptive parents, Patrick and I, in fact, were doing everything we could to spoil Elvira. For by now, she wanted to be held constantly in our arms. She would not allow either of us to put her down—not even to sit with her on our lap. It was as if she were trying to make up for all the attention she had missed
as a baby. Though she barely could talk or react to our attempts at speaking Russian, I knew that she needed us just as much as we needed her.

As I walked around the play yard the next morning with her, my arms beginning to ache, I whispered in her ear, *Ya tvoya mama.* And to my relief, she didn’t even cry.

* * *

The new adoption regulations in Russia required us to visit Elvira three times before deciding whether we wanted her to be our child. In our case, that was a foregone conclusion because we knew she was meant to be our daughter the first day we met her.

Still, the Russians like their rules and regulations so we went through the motions for the sake of protocol. After our third visit to the orphanage, Dima, our regular driver, took us to the State Department of Education, Section for Abandoned Children, to officially apply to adopt Elvira.

We met our coordinator, Anya, who worked for Cradle of Hope’s Moscow office, at a small brick building set back from a commercial street lined with ice cream carts. After signing an application form in the lobby, we sat down on a bench with Natasha while Anya disappeared into the next room to present our dossier. We chatted about post-Cold War politics, about Natasha’s son in college and listened to her tell us Russian jokes. By now, an hour had passed and I was beginning to wonder what was taking so long. Then Anya and a heavyset woman emerged from the office, speaking
loudly in Russian. I looked at Patrick and he looked and me and I knew something had to be wrong.

Our months of collecting documents, certifying, notarizing and apostilling them, had all apparently been rejected because a single sheet of paper—our approval from the INS—did not show our new address in Ithaca. The official would not accept our dossier until the address was changed, the new document was certified, notarized and apostilled, and we had two days left in Moscow to compile the proper paperwork.

Once again, I could not believe we had come this far, only to face yet another setback. How could we get a document from the INS in Buffalo, New York, to Moscow in two days?

"It's not a problem," Anya insisted. "You'll get through this somehow."

Trying to make us feel better, she said the official had been nice to us because she had agreed to send a request to the state databank to have Elvira removed from the registry so that she would officially be available for adoption. But Anya admitted that we could not apply for a court date to complete the adoption until our documents were straightened out.

Patrick seemed nonplused by the news and to my annoyance, started cracking jokes.

"You know that extra piece of luggage we brought? If Elvira would be very quiet, we could carry her on board. And I won't tell anyone."

During the ride back to the hotel, I sank into a silence of anger and depression. Seeing the disappointment on my face, Natasha suggested that maybe the U.S.
Embassy could help us out of our dilemma. But back in our room, I decided to call our adoption agency in Maryland to see if there was any way they could get the document from the INS and send it to Moscow in two days.

Chris Blimmel, the agency’s director of international programs, took the call and seemed just as surprised as we were that our documents had not been accepted. He said many clients had moved in the middle of their adoption process but had not been required to submit another approval letter from the INS.

“This is a new one to us,” he said.

“Well, if anything like this was going to happen,” I said, “it was going to happen to Patrick and me.”

Chris said he would call the Buffalo INS office to see if they could fax the document to Moscow, but he couldn’t promise the letter could be sent before we left the country. Given the eight-hour time difference between Moscow and New York, we didn’t even have two days to get the new document—we had less than 36 hours.

* * *

The next morning, we arrived at the orphanage to find Elvira ill. She had a 100-degree fever, an earache and she was not herself. The day before she had smiled at us for the first time as we threw a big green ball to her as she sat on her rabbit-shaped turquoise tricycle. But now, she was crying uncontrollably as she stood with the other children in a circle in music class, the caregiver playing the piano in the background. She stopped her sobbing momentarily when I picked her up and walked into the next
playroom. As I paced the room with her, I asked the caregiver if she could take a nap because she seemed exhausted.

The answer was direct and firm. There could be no change from the schedule for any child in her group. Nap time was after lunch and there could be no exceptions.

After holding her in my arms for nearly an hour and then feeding her lunch, I handed her over to one of the caregivers. As we said goodbye, I felt like crying with her, only my tears weren’t because of her pain but because of the cruelty of the system that would not let me take her home with us. We still did not have the INS document and we would be leaving Moscow the next day without submitting our application to adopt her to the court.

That night, Patrick and I sat in an outdoor café on Arbat Street and toasted our daughter—our little Tatar. We laughed at how she had slapped Patrick on the face that morning and how she had curiously touched his beard. As we talked, I realized that we had reached common ground as a couple and now shared the same goal—getting our daughter out of the orphanage.

I reminded Patrick of how far he had come from his initial opposition to adopting, and he reminded me about how he had once said that adopting was a “man’s right to choose.”

We talked about buying a swing set, finding the time to walk our dog when we finally brought our child home and how drastically our lives would change. Patrick then thanked me for upfronting the money for the trip and I told him that I hadn’t paid for it—my father had.
"I think he would be proud of what you’re doing and the motives behind it,” he said. Then with some hesitation, he asked, “Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?”

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think the same thing I always did, and that is that you can only improve the world one human being at a time.”
Chapter 18
Our Landed Immigrant

Six weeks later, we were back in Sheremetyevo Airport, looking for Natasha. The INS had reissued its approval letter, our dossier had been accepted and we now had a court date to make our case to adopt Elvira. We had put together her crib, filled her new dresser with clothes, decorated her room with a small herd of stuffed animal dolls and had been waiting impatiently for the day we could finally bring her home.

This time, our red eye arrived at 7:45 a.m. so we drove straight from the airport to the orphanage. For the past six weeks, I had agonized over whether Elvira would recognize me when I returned or treat me as a complete stranger. Deep down, I felt that she would know who I was, but just in case, I had stashed a box of animal crackers in my black vinyl carry-on. Perhaps the taste of cookies would jog her memory.

It was now the middle of October and the pink phlox that had bloomed in front of the orphanage was gone, replaced by overgrown clumps of grass. The leaden skies were soaked with a drape of cold mist—the sort of gloomy weather that reminded me of a scene from one of those Russian spy thriller films.

When we walked into the orphanage, we found Elvira in one of the playrooms dressed in a pink jumper, a long-sleeved yellow shirt and tiny blue tennis shoes. Looking up from her toy, she stared blankly at me as if I were just another caregiver.
starting her eight-hour shift. But she also didn’t cry when I scooped her up in my arms and gave her a hug.

As we became reacquainted with each other, I noticed that something about her was different. Her hair had grown in, the scab mark had disappeared from her cheek and her mouth was full of budding white teeth. Instead of timidly toddling across the room, she now ran—at full speed. She flitted from one toy to another, stacking a few blocks on the table, racing away to spin a top and then bolting to the doorway to slap at the leaves on a dusty plastic plant. As I chased her around the playroom, she squealed with delight, thrilled with her secret that I was just about to catch her.

Exhausted once again from jet lag, Patrick stood in the playroom that rainy Friday morning, picked up Elvira and showed her the small photo album of ourselves we had left at the orphanage in August. The first picture showed Patrick and me standing on the overlook in front of Taughannock Falls, the highest waterfall in the Finger Lakes, just north of Ithaca. I pointed to Patrick in the picture and said papa—conveniently the Russian word for father—and Elvira repeated the word. Patrick and I looked at each other and nearly keeled over from shock. Then I danced around the two of them singing papa, papa, papa, whirling in pure joy.

* * *

The next day was Sukkot, the Jewish harvest festival, and Patrick and I set out after breakfast for the closest synagogue to our hotel, the Chabad Lubavitch Synagogue on Bolshaya Bronnaya Street. As we walked down New Arbat Street, we
stopped to watch a motorcade whiz by with President Vladimir Putin safely inside his bullet-proof limousine. Turning down a quiet tree-lined street, we found the synagogue, a stately white building enclosed by a black wrought-iron gate, in the center of the block. In 1939, the rabbi of this Hasidic congregation had been murdered on the front steps by the Soviet secret police because he would not renounce his religion in favor of Communism. The synagogue was shut down and converted into a Soviet culture club with live theater inside. But in 1991, it was revived as a house of worship and a community center for Jews throughout Moscow. As Patrick and I approached it, we could see it was primed for Sukkot, with a long, narrow wooden hut covered with thick branches of pine needles snaking around the left side of the building where the festive meal would be held.

After making our way past the guards, Patrick joined the men praying on the first floor and I headed for the women’s section. At the top of the stairs, I could see a handful of women dressed in long flowing skirts with veils on their heads, praying at the edge of a balcony that overlooked the men. As I took my place on one of the benches, I suddenly felt bewildered and confused. I had grabbed a Russian prayer book off the shelf and was blindly thumbing through the pages when one of the women interrupted me. I was apparently reading the wrong prayer book—the one for the High Holidays—and she kindly handed me another one in Hebrew.

The service moved along briskly until it came time for the Torah reading. Suddenly an argument erupted between the rabbi and a congregant called up to the podium. As the men shouted at each other, everything stopped and I looked uneasily
at the other women on the balcony. None of them said a word until the chanting resumed and then they returned to their prayer books as if nothing had happened.

Afterward, the rabbi invited Patrick and me to join the congregation for lunch in the sukkot. A young man named Ivan, whom Patrick had met during the service, invited us to sit with him and his mother at their table. Shivering in the open air, we filled our plates with potato salad, bread and eggplant and listened to Ivan, an aspiring filmmaker, tell us that the synagogue had just marked the anniversary of a bombing a year ago. Nearly two-hundred people had arrived at the synagogue to celebrate the first haircutting of a three-year-old boy—a tradition in Hasidic communities. Just before the festivities began, though, the rabbi’s son heard something ticking in the sanctuary. It turned out to be a concealed explosive. The police carried it outside where it was detonated by a bomb-disposal robot a few hours later.

The ghosts of anti-Semitism, which had haunted my father in Romania, were still a menacing shadow in Russia.

* * *

On our first trip to Moscow, Patrick and I had met an Italian couple adopting a four-year-old girl from the same orphanage where Elvira was staying. The couple had just come back from their court hearing when they met us strolling Elvira outside and were happy to learn that Patrick spoke a little Italian. A few minutes earlier, I had watched the woman walking along the edge of the playground, looking for her daughter. When she spotted her, she held out her arms and yelled “Mama Zdyes!”
(Mama is here). Her daughter immediately jumped off her swing and came running into the woman’s arms.

When Patrick and I visited the orphanage after our day at the synagogue, I decided that I too wanted my child leap into my arms. Elvira was in music class that morning, standing in a circle with the other children from her group. As the orphanage director opened the door to the playroom, I stood in the hallway, spread my arms apart, and yelled “Mama Zdyes!”

Elvira turned and came racing toward me. As I lifted her off the ground, a huge smile spread across my face, and for the first time, I felt that she was mine.

* * *

We spent the morning of our court hearing pushing Elvira around the playroom on her turquoise tricycle. It was the last time we would see her on this trip—under Russian law, an adopted child cannot be released into the custody of her new parents until ten days after the court hearing. As our social worker had explained it, this waiting period was intended to allow the adoptive parents time to change their minds. While some couples chose to stay in Russia during the ten-day period, lengthening their total stay to nearly three weeks, we decided to fly back to New York and make a third trip back. By my calculations, this would save us nearly $1,000 in expenses for hotel rooms, meals, transportation and interpreter fees.

As Patrick wheeled Elvira around the playroom that morning in his navy suit, I sang nursery rhymes and watched them circle around and around on the red oriental rug. Like most of the children in the orphanage, Elvira rarely smiled or talked; she
spent most of her days moving about in silence. But as she took a lap past me on her tricycle, I tickled her stomach and she burst out into laughter. Seeing her smile made all the months of paperwork, all the delays and all the waiting seem worthwhile.

At the courthouse, we waited outside the hearing room with a group of adoptive parents from New York City. Among them was a single woman named Gingha who was adopting an eighteen-month-old girl. Gingha said this was her second daughter; her first was from Romania. When I asked her about the condition of the orphanages in Romania, she said they were dismal—row after row of cribs, a few caregivers standing in the corner and not a toy in sight. Gingha said the only reason her Romanian daughter, now two, had received any attention at all was because her crib was next to the doorway and the caregivers had to pass it each time they entered the room.

After we chatted for an hour and a half, the clerk finally called us in and we walked into a small courtroom and sat down at the end of a long table. Facing us was the judge, a stout woman with short graying hair, and a wooden replica of the double-headed eagle, the emblem of Russia, hanging on the wall. Next to me was Natasha, who would interpret for us during the proceeding, and seated around the table was the orphanage director, an official from the Moscow Department of Education and the prosecutor.

The first question Judge Nazarova asked was if we had any objections to bring to the court. When I stood and said Nyet, she smiled and everyone seemed to relax.
Patrick and I had agreed that I should be the first one to stand and answer the judge’s questions since I had been the one pushing the adoption all along. After giving my name and address, I braced myself for her inquisition.

“Why did you want to adopt from Russia?” she asked, staring at me in my navy wool suit.

For days, I had been afraid that I would tremble before our Russian judge, the woman who now held the power to grant us a child. My voice would shake uncontrollably and I would be left speechless. But instead of falling apart, I stared her straight in the eye and calmly gave my answer.

“We were unable to have children,” I said. “We heard there were many children in orphanages in Russia. My father and grandparents were from Eastern Europe and that’s why we decided to adopt from Russia.”

She asked what our family income was ($65,000), whether I worked (no, I was a graduate student), how the child would be cared for (by me initially) and how I related to the child (better each time). Then she asked Patrick to stand, and after a few preliminary questions, the prosecutor took over. A striking young woman in a blue uniform, she gave me the impression that there was probably a friendly human being beneath her hard exterior.

Her question took Patrick by surprise: “Do you think your income is adequate to support the child since your wife is not working?”

Patrick said he had worked in libraries for twenty-one years, he was considered a full librarian at his university and that Elvira would by covered by his health
insurance. He said he knew about Elvira’s medical conditions and that he was willing to take care of them. The prosecutor then rested her case. As he sat down, I breathed a sigh of relief—the grilling was over.

Then Tatiana, the orphanage director, spoke. She described how Elvira had lived in the orphanage since she was twenty-nine days old and how no one from her birth family had ever come to visit her. She said she had shown Elvira to several Russian couples, but none of them had been interested in adopting her because of her ethnicity—her Tatar ancestry. In Russia, prejudice is apparently based on ethnicity, not race.

The judge then asked everyone to leave the courtroom while she made her decision. We filed out into the hallway and just a few minutes later, the clerk called us back in. Our adoption had been approved. After twenty-two months of paperwork, we were officially parents.

As the judge read her decision and Natasha translated it for me, I looked down at my lap, hoping that I could hide the tears welling up in my eyes. Then I glanced over at Tatiana with my glassy eyes and she walked over to hug me, as a mother would embrace her daughter.

* * *

When you remove a child from an orphanage, the adoption books warned, you should expect her to grieve for the loss of her caregivers. The child may cry inconsolably, experience night terrors and awaken from sleep calling out to the people
who had once cared for her. She may reject attaching to her new parents and seek out strangers who resemble the caregiver she left behind.

After flying back to New York, recovering from jet lag and then taking off for Russia eleven days later, I was petrified at how Elvira would react when I walked her out the door of the orphanage for good. There was one caregiver I knew she was attached to, a sweet old woman named Valentina, who would often sit with Elvira on her lap and stroke her full belly after lunch. I expected Elvira to cry when Valentina kissed her goodbye and cling to her with all the strength she had.

It was November 1—Patrick’s forty-sixth birthday—when we arrived at the orphanage on a bright cloudless morning to take Elvira on the next leg of her life journey. We had been instructed to bring a set of clothes with us because it was Russian custom to hand over the orphan naked. (“You’re adopting the child, not the clothes,” Natasha had said.) We met Tatiana in her office and presented her with our last suitcase full of donations—a requirement for Russian adoptions. As she unpacked the pile of sweatpants, sweatshirts and toy wind-up radios, her eyes now grew watery. She thanked us and said, “We’ll be waiting for news from you.”

In the playroom, I tried to distract Elvira by blowing bubbles before I tackled the job of changing her. I had dreaded this moment because Elvira had thrown a tantrum during our last trip when I had tried to tie her shoelace. But she didn’t whine at all as I pulled off her dress and discovered an unpleasant surprise: a completely soiled child. Valentina kindly offered to bathe her, and when they returned, we dressed Elvira in an orange pantsuit, with flowers and hearts embroidered on the front. As
Patrick held her, Valentina came over to say goodbye. But when she tried to hug her, Elvira gave her a little slap. She wanted no part of this old life. Perhaps she knew we were about to whisk her away and everything was about to change.

As a farewell present, I gave the other children in Elvira’s group animal crackers, which they ravenously grabbed from my hands. We then all sat down on the little wooden chairs in the playroom for a group photo—a memento for Elvira. As we posed for the camera, I could not help thinking about the future of the other children and how sad it was that they had not yet found parents who would care for them. There was the little girl with the red hair who smiled every time I looked at her, the sad-faced blond boy who had bitten Elvira on the cheek, and the olive-skinned boy who looked so dejected. I knew that two of the children in the room had adoptive parents waiting in the wings, couples who were now winding their way through the tedious bureaucracy of the Russian government. I could only hope that the other children would some day find families who would save them from a life confined within these orphanage walls.

As I walked out the door with Elvira cradled in my arms, I was caught up in a bittersweet moment of sorrow and joy. I knew that Valentina and the other caregivers had loved my child and would miss her now that she was gone. But I could also feel a breath of freedom as I led Elvira outside into the fresh air, away from the musty rooms where there could never be a future for her. She was now my child and her life in the orphanage would soon become a distant, if not forgotten, memory in her mind.
Those last few days in Moscow were a roller coaster ride of highs and lows.
There was the exhilarating feeling of pushing this little girl, whom I could now call Rachel (or more precisely Rachel Elvira, so she could still hear her old name), down the street and watching people look at the two of us as just another mother and child. At the age of forty, I was now part of the motherhood club—a Woman with Child—and the loneliness that had filled the long days as I waited for my daughter were gone.

Our first stop after leaving the orphanage was a city hospital where a Russian doctor examined Rachel—a requirement for the American embassy. The doctor did not tell us anything we didn’t already know: Rachel was developmentally delayed, she had a minor case of rickets and she had an umbilical hernia that would require surgery. “She seems to be quite a healthy little girl,” he said. As we rose to leave his office, the doctor made a parting suggestion to Patrick: “Buy a shotgun. You’ll need it to keep the boys away from her.”

We celebrated our first day of parenthood by eating dinner in an elegant Russian-cuisine restaurant on the ground floor of the President Hotel, where we were staying on this last trip. Strangely enough, we were the only people in the restaurant, which was probably a good thing since it was our first meal out with Rachel. As I toasted Patrick’s birthday with a glass of wine, he looked at his daughter stuffing fistfuls of mashed potatoes into her mouth and said, “I came to Moscow and all I got was you, kid.”
Then there were the nights of sheer desperation as Rachel cried insconsolably, as the adoption books had predicted, and would not go to sleep, no matter how long we held her, read to her (in Russian), sang to her, or pushed her around the room in her umbrella stroller. Perhaps she was grieving for Valentina, in spite of her brush-off at their farewell. Or perhaps the changes were just too much for a seventeen-month-old to handle—moving from a state-run orphanage to a 210-room hotel with chandeliers, elevators, escalators, long dark hallways, strange people and strange food.

There was more paperwork to fill out before we could leave Moscow. The first document we needed was a visa for Rachel from the American Embassy. After a sleepless night, we arrived at the embassy the next morning and found it packed with other American couples and their squirming adoptive children. As we sat in the waiting room, the children played with each other and the parents compared notes on orphanages, medical reports (yes, my daughter too has rickets), tips for surviving those long nights in the hotel and the long plane ride home.

When our names were finally called and we introduced ourselves to the embassy’s vice consul, Paul Fujimura, I felt a sense of relief to finally be able to talk to an official involved in this process who was American. Mr. Fujimura asked if we had picked up any anti-American sentiment at our court hearing and I mentioned that I found it odd that the prosecutor had questioned Patrick’s salary when the average Russian citizen doesn’t earn more than $90 a month.

Mr. Fujimura smiled and said that the question reflected the ambivalence the Russians feel toward foreigners adopting their children.
“There’s a nationalist element in Russia that believes that Russia’s children should die in Russia,” he said. “The children are the future and hope of the country. In Soviet days, the state used to take care of them and that’s why these orphanages were built. But now they’ve come to realize that it isn’t working anymore, and psychologically it’s a big blow.”

That night we ate dinner in a restaurant in our hotel with a woman named Kristin, who was adopting two five-year-old twins with Down’s syndrome from the Arkhangelsk region in northern Russia. Kristin, who was from a small town in Wisconsin, had already adopted an eighteen-month-old girl from New Jersey with Down’s syndrome and she also had two teenagers of her own.

When Kristin had arrived at the orphanage to meet the twins, the official from the Ministry of Education had told her that she could not believe that she wanted to adopt two children with Down’s syndrome. Kristin tried to explain her motives, but the official accused her of lying, as if she suspected that she wanted the children to sell their body parts—a common scare tactic Russian politicians used when railing against international adoption.

“Children with Down’s syndrome are a gift from God,” Kristin said. “They give unconditional love. Not many people do that.”

Strolling Rachel back to our room, I could not stop thinking about Kristin and the picture of the twin girls she had showed us at dinner. I admired her courage and her willingness to help these children. But I did not think I could be as brave as she
was. For me, it was enough to travel halfway around the world, take a child out of an orphanage and then claim her as my own.

* * *

The flight back from Moscow was a test of our nerves and patience as newly adoptive parents. When we arrived at Sheremetyevo Airport three hours before our departure, we discovered that we did not have three seats together on our Aeroflot plane and that the reservations we had made on the phone had never been recorded. Then as we went through the passport check, the customs official demanded to open a sealed package of documents—papers that we had been told under no circumstance to remove until we met with the INS officials at the airport in New York. The customs official continued to argue with us until I demanded to see her supervisor, who simply inspected a photocopy of our adoption decree from the court and let us on our way.

On the plane, we sat with Rachel on our laps for the entire ten-hour flight as she threw nearly every morsel of food we gave her on the floor, as she screamed for what seemed like an eternity and as the passengers sitting near us handed us toys, keys, chocolate—anything to keep her quiet.

When the plane finally descended into JFK, I felt a lump in my throat as I whispered to Rachel, “You’re in America now.” We had landed in the country that had brought my father two generations ago on a different journey from Eastern Europe and Canada. A place where my daughter, just as my father’s daughter, would grow up in a family with more opportunity than she could have ever imagined.
Inside the airport, the passengers were routed into two lines—one for citizens and one for non-citizens. I felt a pang of disappointment as Patrick motioned for me to stroll Rachel over to the left side of the queue with all the Russian tourists. Rachel would not become an American citizen for another three months and until then she was still a Russian. As we waited to pass through customs, a television was blasting a Sunday afternoon football game over our heads. We were finally home.

Inching our way through the line, Patrick looked at his daughter, clutching her pink teddy bear, and said, “You’re a landed immigrant, kid.”

The circle was now complete.
Afterword

After arriving home with Rachel, weeks pass before anyone from our families can meet her. I have asked my mother to give Rachel and me some time to get used to each other before she flies up for a visit. But then my mother's doctor finds another tumor lodged near her brain and she again starts making the circuit of specialists for second opinions. Patrick's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease eighteen months before the adoption and cannot travel on her own. And our siblings, with the exception of my brother, are just too busy with their own children to make the trip to upstate New York.

At Thanksgiving, Charles finally arrives and spends the weekend wrestling with Rachel on the floor and carrying her around our house on his shoulders. Then a month later, my mother, who is spared more brain surgery, walks into our kitchen, and with tears streaming down her face, says hello to her granddaughter.

On a brisk December afternoon, my mother joins us at the mikvah in Rochester—the place where I had gone in my futile attempt to overcome my infertility—and watches as Patrick submerges Rachel in the tepid pool. With three rabbis supervising and Rachel screaming during the entire ceremony, our daughter is officially converted to Judaism.

As Rachel is welcomed into our family, into the synagogue in our new town and into the homes of our friends, there is still someone whom I long she could meet: my father.
I have often asked my mother what my father would have thought of my decision to adopt a child. Would he approve of the way I carried out his dream for me? Or would he look with a wary eye on this child whom I plucked out of an orphanage in Moscow, a child about whose background I know very little at all? Would he have asked, as many of our acquaintances and even some of our relatives did, why I had to go all the way to Russia to find my child?

I will never know what my father would have said if he had met Rachel. I can only guess from the clues in his life that I have pieced together. There is the story my mother tells about my father’s own willingness to adopt a child. After the Hungarian revolution in 1956, my parents heard that hoards of refugees, many of them Jewish, were flocking to Canada. My mother thought there might be a child—someone like my father, who had no money or relatives when he arrived in Montreal—who would be left stranded. Though she already had Sabina, my mother asked my father if he would adopt a couple of Hungarian orphans. “That’s not a bad idea,” he said.

But when my father called the Jewish agency in Montreal that was resettling the refugees, he learned there weren’t any children who had immigrated without their families. And my parents quickly forgot about their adoption scheme and went on to have two more children of their own.

My father never talked about any of this to me. In fact, he never spoke about anything personal. I can only imagine from this bit of information that he would have been proud to know that I adopted an orphan from Russia. When he fled Romania after the war, someone was there to help him, from the beginning of his journey to the
end. Now, in my own way, I have done what I can to help a child who, like my father, could only dream of a better life. I hope I am repaying the kindness those strangers paid to my father.

* * *

As a new mother with a toddler on my hands, there are days when my father would not have been proud of me. I did not realize how much patience I would need to care for a seventeen-month-old child before I actually brought Rachel home. In these first few months home with her, she clings to me as if she were about to drown in the strange, unfamiliar rooms of our house. I cannot get dressed in the morning or make dinner at night without her demanding to be held, and when I pick her up and then try to put her down, her crying drives me to distraction. One morning, as she is having a temper tantrum at the top of our stairs, I pick her up and toss her high up into the air—thinking, of course, that she will land safely in my arms. But instead, she flies over my shoulder and rolls down the stairs, twirling around and around like a human tumbleweed. My heart stops as I helplessly watch her, horrified that I must have surely inflicted brain damage, or something much worse. Yet she survives with just a pink bruise on her forehead while I spend days chastising myself for being such a bad mother.

The moments of joy and discovery, though, far outweigh any momentary anxiety I have as Patrick and I watch Rachel change from the somber little girl we had met at the orphanage into a laughing, exuberant toddler who loves to chase our cats, pull our dog’s tail and roll around with us on the carpet in our family room. Friends
who visit us that first month cannot believe that Rachel had lived in an orphanage for nearly a year and a half. She looks just like a normal child, they say, though she is small for her age. "She's doing everything that an eighteen-month-old should be doing," our friend Stan, the pediatrician, says during a visit on Thanksgiving weekend.

* * *

Now that we are finally parents, it doesn't take long before Patrick is arriving home from work a few minutes early, opening the kitchen door and scooping Rachel up into his arms. Then he walks her downstairs where they feed our two cats in the basement and then head back up to fill the dog's bowl. Though he would never come out and admit it, I can tell Patrick relishes his new role as a father. It is as if he is living the childhood he never had.

Sitting with Rachel on his shoulders one weekend watching a video of Bambi, Patrick looks over at me and says, "Hey, you never told me about this. These skunks have blue eyes. This is as funny as hell."

After a few weeks home, I ask him, "So, are you glad that we adopted Rachel?"

"Well," he says, "she doesn't discuss military history with me."

"Neither do I."

"Well, that's why we adopted her, isn't it?"

The adoption changes me in other ways. Long before our trips to Russia, I had decided to start a second master's degree and switch careers from journalism to teaching high school. But once I have my daughter, I realize that I cannot justify the
thought of taking her out of an orphanage and placing her in full-time daycare. It would be moving her from one institution to another—what would be the point? So for now, I am home with her—literally living the dream of my father—catching a few minutes here and there to write and wondering what I should do next.

*    *    *

During those interminable months when I was taking fertility drugs, friends would often tell me that once we started the adoption process, I would undoubtedly get pregnant. This had happened to their friends, their relatives, their acquaintances—everyone, it seemed, who had chosen to adopt. I always responded by saying Yes, but . . . that will never happen to me.

And yet it does. By the time I return from our third trip to Russia, I am pregnant, though I don’t know it at the time. Then one morning it dawns on me that the reason I am exhausted all the time may not be Rachel. It’s my hormones wreaking havoc on my body. For two months, I am in a pregnancy panic, rereading all the manuals about how many glasses of milk I should drink each day, how often I should check my weight and whether I should refrain from picking up anything heavy—even Rachel. The pregnancy progresses farther than my first one did; at eleven weeks the ultrasound shows that my fetus has a real live heartbeat, a tiny flickering light on the black screen. I fantasize about a sibling for Rachel and how the four of us, sitting together at our kitchen table, will finally feel like a family.

But then everything stops. At my second ultrasound appointment, there is no longer a heartbeat and there is no longer a growing fetus. Instead there is another
tearful phone call to Patrick, telling him the baby is dead. More surgery to remove the fetal tissue and more agonizing questions about what went wrong.

When I call my mother that morning to break the news to her, she cannot believe what I am saying. Then as the words finally sink in, she says, “It just wasn’t meant for you to have your own child. But you have your own child—Rachel.”

We could adopt again, she says. We should count the good things in our lives—and Rachel is one of them.

While my mother tries to console me on the phone, Rachel runs across the room with a yellow wooden duck in her hand, yelling *mama, mama, mama*. I look at her and that familiar feeling of failure slowly recedes in my mind. As a friend will later tell me, it doesn’t matter how I create my family—just as long as I have one.

Somewhere my father must be smiling.
Works Cited


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