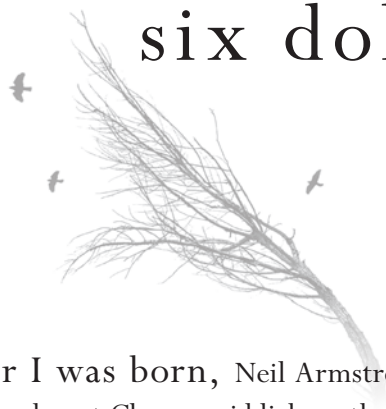
a spoon and six dolls



The summer I was born, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, Ted Kennedy put Chappaquiddick on the map, and my parents, along with my uncle Jake and me, set out on a pilgrimage to Woodstock. Only Jake got there. Midway across the George Washington Bridge, our car began sputtering, losing steam by the second. We made it just to the tollbooth. My father, who'd had reservations from the start, saw this as a sign that maybe the trip just wasn't meant to be. My mother accused him of being smug.

Cars passed by, there were offers of help, but the engine had died. Jake, at my mother's insistence, hitched a ride with a blond girl in a red Corvette. "I want details," she said, kissing him goodbye. It took two hours before a tow truck finally came and carted my parents and me back to Brooklyn. I wailed, my mother was silent, my father and the driver talked. "I could kick myself for not hitching a ride, too," my mother always says when she tells the story of that infamous day. Her voice is like glass: cold, clear, transparent with subtext. *If it wasn't for your father . . .* Eventually she softens; the news reports, she had to admit, gave her second thoughts about being in a sea of mud with a nursing infant. Besides, my father had recently purchased an elaborate new sound system. All weekend long they

listened to the crystal-clear voices of their favorite WNEW-FM disc jockeys bring up-to-the-minute coverage right into our living room; it was almost like being there.

A need to rationalize any simple twist of fate colors my father's perspective. "The last time I saw Jimmy Briggs was on a chopper leaving Saigon, and here he turns up driving the tow truck that takes us back home—that's more than just coincidence, even for a cynic like me." All the way back to Brooklyn, they talked about the endless nights and rain-drenched days in Vietnam, the buddies who had died and those still alive. They talked about Woodstock, too, which they agreed was nothing more than one big antiwar demonstration masquerading as a party. Not that my father wouldn't have loved to hear Jimi Hendrix and the Butterfield Blues Band and Santana and the Jefferson Airplane live, on the same stage, within the space of a few days.

The starting point for Jake is a spoon he came across at a small shop in the town of Woodstock. Candy, the girl he drove up with, wanted to go antiquing before heading over to Yasgur's farm. So they browsed antique shops—she bought an old piano stool that barely fit in the trunk of her car—had lunch in a funky café, and stopped in a gift shop, where Jake found the small wooden spoon that he bought as a present for me.

Shaped like a flower petal and inscribed with the words Make Love, Not War, the spoon ended up being more ornament than utensil. My mother kept it on the windowsill in the kitchen, next to the stained-glass sun that illuminated the window like a bright, smiling orange. Supposedly, it was the source of my first word. Squirming in my high chair, I'd point to the spoon. "Boon," I'd say, refusing to eat until my mother gave me the smooth-as-pearl spoon to hold while she fed me. When it came time for me to start feeding myself, the spoon mysteriously disappeared. My mother accused my father of "accidentally" throwing it away. My grandmother, who had recently

bought me a silver spoon from Tiffany, said it was just as well. "Wood splinters," she reminded my mother. The admonishment irked my mother almost as much as did the disappearance of her one and only memento from Woodstock. "And silver tarnishes," she said.

The summer I turned five, I stopped—quite suddenly, it seemed—playing with my dolls. To my mother, a social worker, it was no big deal, just some latent anxiety over my parents' impending marriage. My grandmother, who was less prone to psychoanalyzing my behavior, immediately went out and bought me a new doll. The way she saw it, I was bored with dolls that looked like babies, so she got me a "more mature" one, with a silky black bob for hair and a red satin dress. Instead of putting her in the large basket where I kept my other dolls, I placed her on a green wicker chair in my room. The chair had a flat floral pillow, and, enthroned in it, she took on the aura of a princess.

I told my grandmother I loved the doll, just so she'd stop saying, "I hope you don't think you're too old for dolls already." Giving up dolls, she believed, meant I was growing up too quickly. Like my mother, though, she had totally misjudged the situation. Six tiny dolls, not the kind you could cradle in your arms and squeeze and pretend to feed, had captured my imagination.

"Every night when you go to sleep," said Jake, when he gave me the small painted box that contained the dolls, "you tell these dolls your troubles and they take them away." He had recently returned from a trip to Guatemala, filled with stories about dusty pyramids jutting through lush jungle foliage, and a king known as Great-Jaguar-Paw, and a ten-year-old girl named Carmelita who lived in a village called Chichicastenango. I laughed, tried repeating the tongue twister—*Chichi . . . Chichicha . . . Chichicas*—and laughed some more. It was Carmelita who, after a dream one night in which she saw herself flying on the back of a bird, had made

the cloth purse that Jake gave me along with the dolls. I'd never seen anything like it. Running along the edge was a braid of black cotton that framed the remarkable bird woven into cross-stitches of red, blue, green, and purple. I traced the bird with my finger. Its beak was too large for its body, and its feathers, spread across the purse, reminded me of a king's robe. In short, there was nothing about this image that should have conjured flight. But, like all things that become the sum of their parts, the bird soared.

The name of this rare bird, Jake told me, was quetzal, and once, when he was sitting in the square with Carmelita, he saw one perched in a tree. He was about to take a picture, with Carmelita in the foreground, when, out of nowhere, it seemed, like a small boulder, her grandmother came barreling in front of him. She didn't say a word to Jake, just put her hand over the camera lens, and when he asked her why she did it, she pursed her lips, looked him squarely in the eyes, and said, with all the wisdom and superstition of a culture he later came to understand, "If you take a picture, you take away the soul." She then handed Jake a box of trouble dolls. For a child he loved.

I immediately turned my attention to the dolls, which lay in a jumble on the coffee table. At first glance, there was nothing striking about the six stick figures of paper and wire. Three of them wore woven skirts (one red and blue, one purple, and one blue and white), and three wore pants. Their shirts, each a different color, were made of threads coiled across them like shawls, and they all seemed to have the same face of painted dots and lopsided smiles. In a way, I liked their tininess, though I really did not know what to make of them. I tried standing them up; they fell down. I shook them as if they were dice, then dropped them to see if they would come up face up or face down; five out of six, or all six, always landed face up, which made me pay particular attention to the way their arms, outstretched like the arms of wooden soldiers on the march, were forever poised in a gesture of giving.

I picked up the dolls one by one and lined them up in my hand. They had no weight to them, they were hollow, but lying side by side in my hand they were somehow transformed, right before my eyes, into a flesh-and-blood family. Mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, and two more—maybe a girl and her uncle—became a unit that, if Jake was right, would somehow dissolve my troubles, whatever they might be.

I gently placed the dolls, one by one, in their box, slid the box into my precious new purse, and gave Jake a kiss of thanks. Then I took him by the hand and led him to the door. "Let's go to Chichicastenango," I said.

"Right now?" Jake asked.

"Right now."

"Don't we need to pack first?" No one indulged my whims the way Jake did.

"Nah—it's better to travel light."

Jake let out a hearty laugh, told me I had wisdom beyond my years. I didn't really know what was so funny—I was simply saying what my mother said to me whenever we went away for a weekend and I wanted to take half my toys with me—but I laughed along as we headed out the door. It was a soft summer afternoon, the kind of day that rings with the voices of children and the bells of ice cream trucks, and we made our way to the park, past baseball fields, and deeper into the park, where we sat ourselves on a shaded bench alongside a lake, pretending we were in Chichicastenango. All around us were children with olive eyes and thick, black, shiny hair, Carmelita's the thickest and shiniest of all. It was siesta time, Jake explained, and while the fathers slept and the mothers fed the leftovers from lunch to hungry dogs and cats, the children skipped around the square, singing their favorite songs, and Carmelita sat close by in the shade of a tree, humming along and patiently weaving dreams.

"If you live long enough, you see everything" is an adage that haunted my childhood and that, perhaps more than any other, captures the sum total of my grandmother's wisdom. She, like Jake, had a flair for narrative, and she always began with a phrase that set the tone for the drama that was about to unfold. I might be sitting at the kitchen table, playing tic-tac-toe with her or watching her unscramble the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle while I nibbled on cookies with rainbow sprinkles that she baked for me, when the phone would ring. No matter who called, no matter what the greeting—What's new? How's everything?—Grandma, letting out a deep sigh, would say, "Don't ask," or "You shouldn't know from it," or some equally weighty expression of dismay. She would then unburden herself of the day's or the week's or the month's disaster, leaving me temporarily to my own devices of amusement. My choices, as long as I remained in the kitchen, were to continue scratching out *X*'s and *O*'s by myself; start one of the half dozen or so jigsaw puzzles Grandma kept in her house ostensibly for me, or, as was more often the case, finish one she had already begun to piece together; get my crayons and color in the patterns on paper napkins—an art I learned from Jake; and, of course, to continue to eat cookies.

Each choice had its obvious satisfaction, but sooner or later the urgency in Grandma's voice and the way it registered an absolute command of life's inconsistencies, its rewards and punishments, or its debt to God (inconsistent or unfathomable as He may be) would distract me. Immediately I would become transfixed by this small, powerful woman. I mentally recorded her sighs and commentary, the reflexive way she reached for a cigarette and lit it as soon as she began a phone conversation, the way her forehead wrinkled when she became agitated. There was no telling what valuable insights into the complex web of life I might pick up just from listening to

my grandmother and observing her mannerisms as she paced back and forth entangled in phone wire or, tired of pacing, leaned forward on the washing machine, nodding as she listened, smoking as she talked, all the time gazing thoughtfully out the window. The drama invariably centered on relatives or friends who were having problems—Grandpa's bad heart, Aunt Vivian's on again–off again affair with the "married *I*-talian," the constant fights between Grandma's lifelong friend Sophie and her lazy son Arnold—and the way she told it always left me feeling that struggle was the norm and unfettered happiness the exception.

That's not to say that all was hopeless. With struggle, Grandma implied, comes hope, or at least vindication. And nothing I have ever heard expressed hope more poetically than an eight-word phrase filled with the cadence of the shtetl: "If you live long enough, you see everything." How long, I wondered, did one have to live to live long enough? My father's father died of a stroke at fifty, and I never knew him, and his mother died when I was four, so I barely knew her. Did they live long enough? Did they see everything? I decided one day, when we were playing tic-tac-toe, to ask Grandma Ruth if Grandma Lilly had lived long enough to see everything.

"Who puts these ideas into your head?" My grandmother leaned back in her chair, folded her arms.

I smiled at her. "You. The other day you said to Mommy, 'If you live long enough, you see everything.' You were telling her that Arnold got a job working for an accountant."

My grandmother, about to take her turn, held her pencil in midair. "What else did I say?"

I rattled off everything I'd heard her say about Arnold and Sophie: he's a big boy, she babies him too much, he should be supporting her, not the other way around.

"What are you—five going on twenty?"

I took my grandmother's remark as a compliment.

"Oh—one more thing. You said there are worse problems than a sensitive nose."

Arnold, you see, suffered from hyperosmia. Odors that were mildly offensive to most people were unbearable to him, and fragrant smells were simply overpowering. Consequently, Sophie could never wear perfume (which she insisted was no major sacrifice), and even her cooking had to be tempered. Onions did more than bring tears to Arnold's eyes, and if Sophie cooked cabbage or cauliflower, she had to do it when Arnold was out of the house, which wasn't often, since his condition had turned him into a virtual hermit. Jake, who was six years younger than Arnold, once told me how helpless he felt when the other kids in the neighborhood made fun of Arnold, calling him the Schnoz or Elephant Nose, and when they did nasty things, like deliberately farting in his presence and then laughing while Arnold, stoic as ever, took a handkerchief to cover his nose. If it looked as if he were going to sneeze or blow his nose, one of them would incite the others into running from the monsoon of snot their meager imaginations conjured and Arnold would be left standing, handkerchief over his nose, until he mustered the strength to make his way home.

"I don't suppose you remember everything your mother said, too."

I nodded. My mother said the best thing Sophie could do now was to tell Arnold to find an apartment. Grandma became indignant. You don't send your only child out into the streets the minute he gets a job, she insisted. To which my mother replied, you're missing the point. No, Grandma shot back, *you're* missing the point. Frankly, I didn't know what the point was, much less who was missing it. I knew only that something about Arnold made me sad. And something about his getting a job made Grandma feel good. "I tell you," Grandma said to my mother, her face one big smile of pride, "if you live long enough, you see everything."

"Well," said Grandma, returning to my original question, "I would guess that your grandma Lilly—may she rest in peace—would have liked to see a few more things. After all, she was only fifty-two when she died. But with a granddaughter like you"—she kissed my forehead—"I guess what I'm trying to say is that she knew you, she knew what it was to have a grandchild. What else is there?"

The phone rang. It was Sophie.

"Got a minute, Ruth?" she bellowed. Sophie's voice was loud, and even though the receiver was against Grandma's ear, I could hear everything Sophie said.

"The job is kaput."

"What do you mean, kaput?"

Arnold had apparently gotten into a fight with his boss about the deodorizer in the office bathroom. The scent made him so sick that he couldn't bear to use the bathroom. I imagined Arnold, in the checkered cap he always wore even when he was indoors, eyes cast downward, asking his boss if they could do without the deodorizer.

"His boss says, 'What are you—some kind of nut?' Which was not the thing to say to my Arnold."

"The *f*-word, Ruth—he said the *f*-word to his boss." And he was out the door.

"I didn't bring my son up to talk like that," Sophie went on. "I taught him respect—and this is what he does?" Sophie told Arnold to go back to the office, apologize to his boss. "And you know what he said to me?"

"*Oy vey*," sighed Grandma, reaching for a pack of L&Ms, tapping it against the wall, and pulling out a cigarette. "I don't know how else to say this, Sophie, but maybe he needs help." Grandma, who was never one to mince words, uncharacteristically treaded lightly. "Could you maybe get him to go to someone? You know what I mean—a psychiatrist or something?" she suggested.

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with him that a good job wouldn't cure. But it's not easy, with a problem like he's got."

"There you go, babying him again."

"Say that one more time, Ruth, and I'll hang up."

Grandma changed the subject.

"I have a genius for a granddaughter, Sophie. Beats me at tic-tac-toe all the time now. And you should see her do jigsaw puzzles, not to mention the things that come out of her mouth! Not five minutes before you called, the *shaina maideleh a*sks me if I think her grandma Lilly lived long enough. Don't tell me—I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *What kind of question is that from a five-year-old?* And I'm telling you this is no ordinary five-year-old. She reads. Excuse me? You don't believe it? Well, believe me, she's been reading since she was three. That's what I said—reading."

Grandma was stretching the truth a little. At three, I was memorizing, not reading. At five, I was just beginning to read.

"But you know something?" Grandma continued, taking a drag of her cigarette, quickly followed by a sigh and another drag. "It's no big deal to read. I'll tell you what *is* a big deal. The *shaina maideleh* thinks. Who knows, maybe she'll be a doctor one day, although if the doctors around today are any indication, she's heads above them already. I swear, I don't know who she gets her brains from. I'd like to say she inherited them from my daughter, but Susie was no genius. A smart girl, yes, but no Mensa material. And her father . . . well, I shouldn't talk."

Grandma, of course, continued to talk, oblivious to my presence. "You shouldn't know from it, Sophie. A man lives with a woman, then waits five years after they have a baby to marry her. You explain it to me."

"Be thankful they're getting married," I heard Sophie say as I slipped out of the kitchen, leaving behind the puzzle and the cookies and the unwinnable game of tic-tac-toe.

Exactly forty-four days passed between the time my parents announced their plans to get married and the actual day of their wedding. In that month and a half, I contracted chicken pox, my mother called off the wedding two times, my father had a wisdom tooth extracted, Jake took off for Australia, and Grandma became sentimental to the point of tears nearly every time she looked at a picture of her mother. "Susie was her favorite," she would explain, as her face twitched with a measure of loss and expectations unfulfilled, and I don't know how I understood what I understood, but I always said, "Don't worry, Grandma. You'll come to my wedding."

"I should live so long." The tone of Grandma's voice was a mix of despondency and hope—Jewish hyperbole was what my mother called it—that sometimes had the effect of worrying me.

"How does God decide how long people live?" I asked her.

"Well, He's got this very big book, and as soon as you're born, your name goes into it, along with your birth date and the day you're going to die, although it's entirely possible that your name goes in before you're born, since God has to know that, too—why else would He be God?"

The biggest book I'd ever seen was the oversize dictionary my father kept on the bottom shelf of his bookcase. The writing was tiny, and I liked turning to the color plates of birds and butterflies, cats and monkeys. I could not lift the book, but I could manage to pull it from the bookshelf to the floor whenever I wanted to look through it. Now I was being presented with the idea of a tome that would have to be even bigger than the four-inch-thick book of words that I was sure made me smarter each time I opened it. Where did God keep such a monumental and precious record of life and death? Could anyone besides Him see the book? And what would happen if He lost it?

I doubt that Grandma ever thought much about this book except as a metaphor of faith, and the answers she gave me reflected the simple fact that God was an assumption to her, an assumption as unquestioned as air and water are for life.

"God doesn't lose things," she said, "and I can guarantee you that He keeps the book in a very safe place, because the truth is, people are not supposed to know when they're going to die." She was rolling out dough for cookies and became pensive for a moment. "Although I wonder if it would really make a difference, because no one ever believes it's coming, except maybe if you're really, really, really sick. Sure, you always hear stories about people who have cancer or something like that and are told they have six months to live, so they cash in their life savings and take a trip around the world. But most people, if they knew the exact time and day they were going to die, they just wouldn't believe it was coming."

"Why?"

"I wish I had a dime for every time you asked that question; I'd be a very rich lady." She wiped her hands on her apron, started shaping cookies. Stars, crescents, four-leaf clovers began to materialize, along with an answer for me. "Human nature, I guess. Know what that means?"

"Uh-uh." I grabbed some rainbow sprinkles from a bowl, dotted cookies with them.

"It's just the way people are."

My next question made her wince. "Do children die?"

She knew she could get away with telling me about a mythical book of names, but an out-and-out lie did not sit well with her. "They're not supposed to," she said, "but sometimes they do."

She could have stopped right there, because this was one of the few times when I really did not want any more information than I'd been given, but it was early evening and she was staring out the window across the driveway to the gray ranch house, almost identical

to hers, where her friend Lena had lived until the thing that was not supposed to happen to children happened to one of hers. It was a car accident, he was twenty, and the impact of going sixty-five miles an hour into a stone wall killed him instantly. Grandma spared me the details, told me only that when God takes a child you try to tell yourself that He must have some good reason. "But the truth is," she said, still staring at the gray house, abandoned before it could even be sold, standing empty like a shrine to the thing that's not supposed to happen, "no mother wants to outlive her child."

Grandma put her hand across her eyes and the way she did it made me think of a night a year earlier when I found her at the kitchen table, head bowed, one hand across her brow, the other covering a nearly empty glass of scotch. I was supposed to be asleep, but I was restless, so I went downstairs. Grandma looked up at me, her lips quivering with the tears she tried to hold back. When I told her that her eyes were very red and she should go to sleep, she smiled, lips still quivering. Then she pulled me close, held me tightly against her soft bosom, and I could feel her body shake with tears. "You shouldn't know from it," she said. "You should never, never know from it." Grandma finished off the glass of scotch, took a deep breath, told me how skinny Lena had gotten and how gorgeous she had once been, with her violet eyes and jet-black hair, and how they had to dope her up just to get her to stand near the grave of her son for the short, simple ceremony in which they unveiled his stone.

I have no memory at all of Lena's son (who was the same age as Jake), and the encounters I had with Lena before she moved to Florida were, thankfully, brief. She had the trembling smile of someone forever in mourning. "You're beautiful. Live your life," she would say, putting her hand to my cheek or my chin. Making me cringe. Like water spots on an exquisite silk dress, pain and loss shaded the violet beauty in her face and turned her pink-white skin a pale gray.

"You're beautiful. Live your life." That's all she could manage to say to me before she retreated into the house that had become her cave. Curtains drawn, afraid of the harsh sunlight, Lena spent her days watching soap operas and popping Valiums into her mouth like lozenges. "Come on over for a cup of coffee," Grandma would call across the driveway, and once in a while she did, though all she could bring herself to talk about were memories of Michael. *Remember the tree house Michael built with Jake when they were boys, and how we couldn't get them down from it? And remember how the girls were always after them both—that's how handsome they were?* Grandma would nod—what else could she do or say?—and that affirmation spoke worlds to me about the secrets mothers share and the things I was not supposed to know from.

"Well, I'm never going to die," I said, with all the assurance of my youth.

"Well, I'm very glad to hear that." Grandma bent down, kissed the top of my head. The cookies were ready to go into the oven.

Forty-four days. How would I ever get through them? I had my very own vision of a wedding, with my mother in a white satin gown studded with pearls and I in something equally extravagant, and my father looking very handsome in a Fred Astaire tuxedo and top hat as he bowed to my mother and asked, "May I have this dance?" I had never been to a wedding, and the fact that my very first was to be my parents' only enhanced the magic. From the moment I woke up until the moment I went to sleep, my head was filled with images of soft white and sugar. A soft white veil and a soft satin train. Sugar roses on each tier of a three-tier cake filled with buttercream and chocolate. A bride and groom framed in a plastic heart crowning the cake, so real to me I could taste the icing on my finger.

My anticipation was overshadowed only by the fear that something terrible would happen to Jake in Australia and he would not make it back for the wedding.

"For the life of me, I don't understand it, Sophie," I overheard Grandma say. "He can't stay in one place. He's got this travel bug. Takes a job for three months, doesn't spend a penny of his earnings, saves it all up for a trip. 'Settle down,' I tell him, but he won't hear of it." Grandma had traced Jake's wanderlust to his time in Vietnam, which, as she saw it, had brought about a very unwelcome transformation in her baby boy.

"You tell me," she went on. "What bright Jewish boy drops out of college in 1971 and lets himself be drafted, *knowing* he's probably going to end up in that jungle? It's unheard of. Something's got to be wrong. You think you have troubles with Arnold and his nose? I'll tell you what trouble is. Trouble is having four grown, seemingly normal children, not one of whom is married. Yes, I know Susie is getting married; you don't have to remind me. But she's not exactly doing it the conventional way."

It was Jake, it seemed, who troubled Grandma most. "Something is just not right with him, and I can't put my finger on it. He's a very bright boy. And very artistic. You should see how he draws! But he's home less than one month from the jungles of Guatemala before he's off to God knows where. I'm telling you, something happened to him in Vietnam. Something he won't talk about." Grandma sometimes bit her lip when she was worried. Like now.

"If I tell him it's time he looked for a serious job, not these fly-by-night ones he takes, he tells me he's going to do that as soon as he gets back from Australia. But he said the same thing after he got back from Guatemala."

Grandma shook her head, let out a deep sigh. "*Oy gut*, Sophie—what are we going to do with these overgrown kids of ours?"

"Speak for yourself."

"Knock it off, Sophie. Your son is a big baby—he's afraid to get a job, afraid to go out and socialize. My son, on the other hand, I just *wish* he were more afraid of things. And I wish he would stay

in one place for more than a month. You shouldn't know from it. There are all kinds of bugs in the jungle—bugs you and I never even heard of. Who knows what diseases they carry! And there are crocodiles. If you ask me, this is not a healthy way to live."

It was then that I remembered the calendar I'd found in a box in the attic, and when Grandma finished her conversation with Sophie, I asked her about it. Jake had sent the calendar to her when he was on leave in Australia. He had another five months to go in Vietnam and thought Grandma might worry less if she pictured him in the land of kangaroos and button-nosed koala bears. "I'm a long way from home," he wrote, "but days quickly pass into months, and before you know it I'll be kissing your always comforting cheek." He scrawled, "I love you" and signed off with the suggestion that Grandma mark off the days till his return.

Grandma began doing just that—marking an *X* each day on the calendar—but stopped on Jake's birthday, February 29. Superstition gets you in the funniest ways, she told me the day I asked her about the calendar, and maybe it was her emotions as well, but she simply could not scratch an *X* through Jake's birthday. Her explanation was simple and straightforward: days pass much too slowly when you count them, and she was never one for measuring time. She also figured she would know when he was coming home.

"When you're a mother, you feel these things," she said. "Don't ask me how. That's just the way it is. You'll be going about your business, not thinking about anything in particular, when suddenly you'll find yourself drinking a tenth cup of coffee to calm yourself down, knowing that defies all logic, but you just poured salt instead of sugar in the rice pudding, so who cares about logic? Or you'll find yourself yelling at the checkout girl in the supermarket for being too slow, when she's really no slower than usual, and after all how is she supposed to know you're expecting an important phone call any day now and it can only be good news because you will

not accept anything but good news?" Grandma gently touched my cheek, pushed a wisp of hair behind my ear. "You shouldn't know from it," she said, "but one day you'll be a mother and you will."

A much more pressing concern to me than what I would one day know when I became a mother was whether I could keep the calendar. This very week, this very month, this very hour, Jake was on the other side of the world. I knew a little something about the planets and how they revolved around the sun and none of it, in truth, made sense. If the earth was always spinning, then we should all be walking around dizzy, and maybe we were but didn't know it because we had gotten so used to it. Equally unfathomable to me was the vastness of the earth. It would take nearly an entire day to get from New York to Australia by plane, Jake told me, showing me on a globe he kept in his room the distance he would be traveling. I followed the arc his finger made, tried hard to understand how a globe that measured two feet around could encompass the world.

When Jake was gone, I took to playing what I believed to be a very clever game. I would go into his room, place my finger on New York, close my eyes, lift my finger, spin the globe, and count. If I counted to ten, my finger always landed on Australia. And while the globe spun around, I tried to imagine a place where animals had names like kookaburra, wallaby, and dingo. A place where people once made paintings right on rock, and if you stood very still, Jake said, you could feel the colors and taste the marsh and smell the kookaburra before you heard it and believe, for a minute or two or three, that you were on the very edge of time. This very week, this very day, this very hour, Jake might be admiring a rock painting or weaving his way through coral in the Great Barrier Reef or boating down a river in search of crocodiles while I, halfway around the world, dreamed of sugar roses and white lace and tried very hard to understand how forty-four days could simultaneously pass so swiftly and so slowly.

Grandma seemed only too glad to relinquish the calendar, and the reminder it was of a time dictated by anxiousness of the worst kind. And when I told her of my plans to *X* off the days until my parents' wedding, she laughed. "You're in the wrong year."

"Makes no difference," I said. "The same days come every year, don't they?"

Grandma thought that was a very wise answer, and rather than give me a lesson in the passing of days into months, she leafed through the calendar with me. There was a patch of cotton clouds enhancing February's Sydney skyline, and the emus of April danced off the page and it was no small irony (as Grandma pointed out) that May, the month Jake returned, was graced with a kangaroo and her cub tucked safely in her pouch. July, my starting point (coincidentally, the month of my birthday), showed purple starfish bathed in the dreamy blue light of the sea, and August presented a stark view of the outback that seemed to change from day to day once I began my fastidious accounting of time. Some days the landscape was welcoming and I imagined myself right there with Jake, hiking along a dusty road or climbing steep rocks of red or stopping for a picnic lunch near a watering hole that turned out to be a mirage. Other days it was absolutely forbidding and I was sure I saw a crocodile's head jutting from the craggy recesses of a cave. How, I wondered, could the same pictures look so different from day to day?

I looked at myself in the mirror. It was August 1. My face was spotted with pox, my mother had just canceled the wedding for the first time because my father had been out all night—just catching up with friends, he said, losing track of time—and my fear that Jake might be devoured by a crocodile was so strong that I took my copy of *Peter Pan*, ripped it up page by page, and flushed it down the toilet.

Two days later, I received three postcards from Jake.

Dear Rachel:

Right now I'm looking at a pearl-white moon casting shadows on a crocodile's back. When a crocodile is resting, he's so still you can mistake him for a log. But when he's swimming, he looks like he's carrying the river between his jaws—that's how much command he has. Will write again soon.

xxx Jake

Dear Rachel:

I made friends with a kangaroo and saw a koala bear nestled in a tree just like the one on the front of this postcard. It did not seem to me a very comfortable position for sleeping, but the koala didn't seem to mind. Unlike you, koalas seem to cherish sleep. In fact, on a typical day they're asleep more than they're awake.

xxx Jake

Dear Rachel:

Tomorrow I'm off to an island of surprises—birds in every color of the rainbow and luscious flowers and trees with leaves so thick they're like tents. They say here that Dreamtime People created the world, and I don't exactly know who these people were but I can tell you I feel as if I'm going from dream to dream. This is a very special part of the world—I hope you'll visit it one day.

Love and a hug, Jake

I taped the postcards on the wall alongside my bed, where I kept the calendar and a picture of a bride that I had cut from a magazine. I liked looking at the images and touching the gloss of the paper and wondering what Dreamtime People dreamed about and why brides always wore white and whether the moon was full in Australia when it was full here. I knew that if it was midday for me, it was the very wee hours of the next day for Jake, and there was something very exciting about thinking that Jake was in tomorrow. At bedtime I'd

pet the sleeping koala bear and study the rock formations on the calendar and, just before I shut off the light, remind the bride, with a kiss and a whisper, that the wedding was one day closer.

In the morning before I got out of bed, my eyes still crusted with sleep, I'd perform my first ritualistic act of the day: marking an *X* on the calendar. I needed to touch each day, to see the calendar fill up with *X*'s as forty-four became forty-three and forty-three became forty-two and thirty-three became thirty-two and thirty-one and thirty.

On August 20, I received a package from Jake. It came wrapped in sturdy brown paper over a layer of soft brown paper that crinkled to the touch. Inside the wrapping was a book filled with pictures of undersea coral, and taped to the back cover was a teardrop stone, also coral, on a gold chain. *I found this at the bottom of the sea*, Jake wrote. *I think it belonged to a mermaid.*

I showed my mother the necklace, asked her to put it on for me. As she fastened it around my neck, all the power of mermaids and witches (good and bad) and little old men who spin straw from gold radiated through me. I closed my eyes, saw blue—waves of blue erratic as the peaks Jake made with my Etch A Sketch—and darting through the blue was Jake. Iridescent Jake. Jake the fish. Jake the red-cloaked pirate in search of undersea treasures and the stories they unlocked. If I had in fact been under the sea, I would suddenly have found myself gasping for air in total blackness when my mother informed me (in her mildly impatient, finish-your-breakfast tone of voice) that the wedding was off. This was the second time the wedding had been called off, and when I asked her why, she looked down, fidgeted, said nothing. And looking down, always down, except for a momentary glance my way, she fidgeted, stammered, stopped one inch short of kicking the wall, then turned to me, eyes up, steely, hard, uncertain whether to cry or to scream.

"Let's go outside," she said. We had the garden apartment of

a brownstone in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, and it was a cloudy day and I was about to burst into tears because just the day before we had bought my dress for the wedding. I had chosen it myself and loved everything about it, particularly the scalloped bottom and violet ribbon running through the hemline. To me, this was more than a dress. Peeking through each and every eyelet that comprised the fabric were intimations of Cinderella and fancy balls and a glass slipper for my delicate foot alone.

We sat down on a stone bench in the garden, and my mother, elbow propped on her knee, chin resting in her palm, began speaking.

"Your father and I . . ." She faltered, took my hand, rubbed her thumb across it. "Your father and I . . ." She was clutching my hand now.

"Ouch," I said. "You're hurting me."

She let go, looked at me apologetically, touched my face lightly. "You have your father's eyes," she said, "and his cheekbones." She was smiling now, almost in a trance. "Did I ever tell you how we met? Or where?"

I shook my head.

"It was in the subway. I remember it was a crowded train—probably rush hour—and the lights went out. Suddenly I felt someone's hand on my behind." My mother laughed, quickly explained it was not my father who grabbed her. (He would enter the picture when the train came to a stop at Grand Central Station.) Not one to be intimidated by a rush-hour subway pervert, my mother rammed her elbow into his ribs.

"I'm telling you, the guy didn't know what hit him. He was wearing an army-green jacket—that's a detail you can't forget—and when he doubled over from the jab I gave him, he looked like a sick turtle. It never occurred to me that I was dealing with a combination pervert-pickpocket until I was off the train and realized my

wallet was missing. That's where your father comes in. He had been eyeing me on the train, trying to figure out a way to strike up a conversation or something. Of course I wasn't aware of it, but even if I had been, I probably would have ignored him because I wasn't in the habit of picking up men in the subway. Anyway, your father was a witness to the pickpocketing and had to think fast: Should he follow the pickpocket and try to retrieve my wallet, or should he follow me? He followed the pickpocket, told him he was an undercover cop, and easily retrieved my wallet. Now, Grand Central Station is pretty big, but I guess your father and I were destined to meet that day, because he found me near one of the ticket booths, frantically fishing through my knapsack for my wallet. I admit I was a little suspicious when he handed it to me and asked, 'Is this what you're looking for?' I mean, how did I know he wasn't in cahoots with the pickpocket-pervert? But he had a very convincing and clean way about him. And he had the sexi . . ." Her cheeks flushed. "He had the most beautiful blue eyes I'd ever seen."

My mother stopped talking and looked up at the sky intently, as if she were watching a movie, which in a way she was. Clouds were moving in a montage that I would piece together, scene by scene, over the years, but today, as she thought about marriage and tried to make sense of love, the images belonged to my mother and would run together something like this: A man and a woman are boating on a lake in Central Park. It is early summer 1967, and he (first lieutenant Robert Schneider) rows; then she (undergraduate Susan Cohen) takes her turn; then he rows and she drifts, he wanting to rest his head in her lap, she fixing her gaze on his eyes, crystal blue and glistening in the sun. The scene shifts, and they are under a tree, he (first lieutenant Robert Schneider) caught up in the smile and voice and long, beautiful legs of this woman who he does not know whether he'll ever see again, she (undergraduate Susan Cohen) seduced by this strong, handsome man who makes

no assumptions, a perfect gentleman in a time that seems to value imperfection. Holding hands now, they talk about her preference for vanilla and his for chocolate and the cuts they like on the Beatles' latest album, and their palms are sweaty now on this early-summer day, but still they hold hands, talking about anything and everything, it seems, but his imminent departure for Vietnam and her opposition to the war.

Now they are on her doorstep, kissing good night, a long, passionate kiss that will hold her through all the letters filled with lines from Simon and Garfunkel and the Beatles and Leonard Cohen and my father's own strains of corny love. He writes very little of the gritty side of life as a soldier in Vietnam, and she writes nothing of her opposition to the war. She is in love with the love letters, and, politics aside, she is in love with a soldier. He returns, wants to marry; she does not. Three months later she wants to marry; he does not. They separate for two months; then he calls. And in a smoke-filled Greenwich Village bar they meet for a drink, she telling herself this really is love, he swearing never to let her get away again.

I tugged at my mother's dress to bring her back to Earth. "Where was I?"

"You weren't born yet."

This simply made no sense to me. "Was I dead before I was born?"

"No—you just weren't born yet."

This was my very first moment of truth. I had been told (hard as it was for me to believe) that babies start out inside their mothers and keep growing until they're ready to be born. The part about pushing their way through the birth canal was even less plausible, and I'd sooner have believed it took a magician's hand to spirit baby from womb. But that was all in the abstract. Now, for the very first time, I was face-to-face with an unsettling reality. Beneath her

white, Indian-cotton summer dress, almost transparent in sunlight, was a tan, athletic woman with strong, beautiful legs and marshmallow breasts that I liked to touch with my very small hands, sometimes even pretending I could still drink from them. And now this tan, athletic woman who was my mother was telling me about a time before Rachel at a time when I needed to believe, more than ever, that there was nothing before Rachel.

My mother stood up, started pacing. "Rachel, I'm a little upset. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. Should I get married? Shouldn't I get married? What's the point of it all? We've been living together happily for five years now—what's the point of getting married? What I'm trying to say is that this is not a good time for me to tell you about the birds and the bees."

"I'm not asking about birds and bees!" I screamed. *"I want to know how I got born!"*

"Didn't anyone ever tell you about the stork?" I turned to see my father coming into the backyard. His face was swollen (he'd just had a wisdom tooth pulled), and he looked sad. I ran over to him—"Daddy! Daddy!"—and he scooped me up in a game we liked to play, he the trapeze, I the daring young girl who flew through the air with the greatest of ease, he singing, me flying—"Higher, Daddy! Higher!" It was a game we loved to play, only today, not knowing how I got born, not even knowing whether this woman who was my mother and this man who was my father would be there to catch me when the trapeze snapped, as it seemed about to right now, I threw my arms around my father, clinging, Daddy, clinging. Then, uncontrollably, I began to cry.

"This is a very interesting way to wash a shirt," my father teased me, as he carried me over to a chair, where I sat in his lap, my face still buried in his shoulder.

"Are you and Mommy going to live together?" I sobbed.

"As far as I know, we are." He did not sound convincing, and I

hit him. Delirious with anger and disappointment, fists closed tight and hard, I hit him with all the force I could muster. I punched him in the chest and I hit his neck, and with what must have looked like the deliberateness of a boxer, I landed a punch on his jaw. I was not aiming for his jaw, mind you, and when I saw the blood trickle out of the side of his mouth, I gasped. My mother scrambled inside for a towel and some ice, and the bleeding stopped, and there was no reproach at all, not even a wince of pain. So I hit him again. Only this time he blocked my punch by grabbing my wrists.

"I hate you!" I screamed. "I hate you both! I don't care if you never get married anyway, because I'm gonna live with Jake when he gets back." This seemed to upset my father more than being punched.

"Over my dead body," he said, spitting out the words, still holding the towel to his cheek. "Even if your mother and I never get married, even if we stop living together, you will not live with Jake."

I had hit a very sore spot, and I plowed right in. "Yes, I will," I sang. "I'm five years old now, and I can do whatever I want, and if I want to live with Jake, I will."

My father's eyes, a deep crystal blue, flared red, and in them I saw dragons. One. Two. Three. Ten dragons breathing fire, blue fire, red fire, yellow fire streaked with green. His cheek swollen, eyes flaring, he had become as large as a dragon right before my eyes, and when his arm reached out to grab me or hit me, I don't know what, my body shook. I had never been hit by either of my parents, though there were times when my grating whine ("oh please oh please oh please let me have gum") or my shrieks of insistence about absolutely hating the very same chicken I had loved yesterday (and the day before and the day before) were provocation enough. But everything happened so fast—my father's fingers had just brushed my arm when my mother deflected him—that only for

an instant was I really terrified of being physically hurt. Much more frightening to me was something I could not identify in my father, something that changed his very countenance and that I would one day understand as the desperation of a man who believed himself on the verge of losing everything that he loved.

The realization that he had come so close to hurting me embarrassed my father, and without saying a word he left, deliberately slamming first the back door, then the front door, then, loudest of all, the car door. I cringed. There was a large oak tree in our backyard, and when we had first moved here I had been intimidated by its thick trunk, which reminded me of the nasty trees in *The Wizard of Oz*, and its network of bulging roots. Fear turned to awe one day as I watched ants make their way along the trails carved by the roots and disappear into a hole. Just a little larger, I thought, sitting there in the hum of a silence left by slamming doors, and this would be a perfect hole for Alice and her White Rabbit and me.

"Is Daddy coming back?" I asked my mother. She bit her lips, brushed some dead leaves on the ground with her foot, picked up the wrapper of a straw that I had probably dropped, and finally, when there was nothing more within easy reach to distract her, pulled me close and started to sob.

"I'm all mixed up, Bunny," she cried to me. "Sometimes I want to get married, sometimes I don't. We're happy, right? So why change things? Why not just leave things the way they are?" Then she said it was "hippo"-something to get married after five years of living together, and at last I had a clue. Somehow, in some odd way, a hippopotamus had interfered with their wedding plans.

"It's totally hypocritical," she said again, letting go of me.

I started to feel cold, though the sun was still shining strong, and I went inside, to my room. I threw myself on my bed but could not stay still. I jumped up to tear the picture of the bride from the wall. Pulled my dress from the closet door, slipped it on, refusing

to take it off for dinner, which I insisted on having in my room by myself, refusing to take it off even at bedtime.

"Do you want to talk about this?" my mother asked. I shook my head. She kissed me good night and left the room. Sleep did not come easily. Running through my head were visions of wedding cakes, and in the shadows across the ceiling was the hippopotamus, a massive, unattractive animal that, in the part of my soul forever keyed to childhood, will always represent an enormous obstacle to love or, at the least, something that can crush it with the weight of one leg.

Just when sleep seemed to take hold, I was awakened by voices in the living room. I got out of bed, opened the door, stopped short before heading down the foyer. The TV was on, and the voices sounded breathy, and I could not really hear what they were saying or doing, and not being able to hear what they were saying or doing made my heartbeat accelerate with a peculiar, unknown feeling. The sounds were becoming more breathy, and my heart was beating along as if I were a part of whatever they were saying or doing. I could no longer stand it, being alone in my room with wedding cakes that looked like hippopotamuses, and my heart was beating so fast I knew I was not supposed to walk into the living room right then, but I did. And when I saw my mother half-undressed on top of my father, I felt only mildly embarrassed. I had been told a little something about how mothers and fathers kiss and hug in a way they don't kiss and hug children, but my first glimpse (and a glimpse was all it was) into the lovemaking acrobatics of adults was particularly painful. I felt excluded, and it seemed to me selfish—even a little cruel—for my parents to keep me from their reunion.

My mouth was dry and I needed a drink, so I asked for a glass of water, and the way I asked it, or just the mere asking, made my parents laugh.

"That's not funny!" I blasted them, gulping down the water very

quickly and running back to bed, where, as soon as I lay down, I was overcome with a terrible stomachache that could be soothed only by my mother, then my father, then my mother, then my father lying next to me and rubbing my belly. As a child I was not particularly prone to bellyaches, but I had my share, and the timing of this one gave me great satisfaction. Maybe spite had turned my stomach acid, or simple jealousy, or maybe, as my mother suggested, bologna was not a good thing to eat under any circumstances, particularly not when you have chicken pox. "That's baloney!" said my father, bringing a smile to my mother's face while she rubbed my belly and he put a cold towel to my head, which was once again filled with thoughts of sugar-laced cakes. Maybe spite had turned my stomach sour, or simple jealousy, or maybe just some bad bologna, but in those tender moments when my mother's hands were on my belly and my father's on my head, I grasped the power of sickness. I could have stopped right there, I suppose—I had what I wanted. But the sour taste in my mouth grew stronger and the pain in my belly more intense, and maybe it was spite that came up, or jealousy, but my father would insist he saw pieces of bologna in the pool of vomit on the floor. Throwing up is disgusting to write about, even more unpleasant to experience, but when I threw up on my father's pants and my mother's dress I was not aware of spite, or jealousy, or even bologna, only that maybe the wedding was going to take place and maybe it wasn't, but my parents, for better or for worse, would have no reunion that night.

At the bottom of my grandmother's large mahogany armoire is a drawer she calls her junk drawer, and rummaging through it was a favorite pastime of mine. There was always some new treasure to unearth: scarves screened with flowers or abstract designs or the names of celebrated cities, wallets in all sizes and shapes,

bobby pins still in their cardboard, hairnets, batteries, rubber bands, packs of writing pads and pens.

The night before my parents' wedding, while Grandma took a bath, I sat myself on the floor in front of the drawer and began combing through it to see if any new knickknack had been thrown in. Like the magician who pulls out the endless scarf from his sleeve and somehow comes up with a rabbit, I reached deep into the drawer. At the very bottom—under the red-and-gold scarf that had coins hanging from its fringes and turned me into a gypsy making my way through the Black Forest—was a rectangular black box, plain except for the red letters spelling an unfamiliar word—S-C-R-A-T-C-H-O-M-A-T-I-C—and a drawing of a woman holding something against her back.

I opened the box to find a plastic hand attached to a thin metal rod. The fingers, about the size of a baby's, were curled, and the tips looked like tiny fake fingernails. Also in the box was a cylinder that looked like the body of a flashlight. I picked up the cylinder, put it next to the rod with the hand, and quickly figured out how to attach them. Then I turned on a switch and was jolted by a vibration in my palm. Imitating the woman on the box, I reached behind me, placed the plastic hand under my shirt, started to laugh at the sensation of plastic fingers vibrating against my back. The lower part of my back started to itch. I repositioned the Scratch-O-Matic. The spot beneath my shoulder blade cried out for scratching. I slid the plastic hand along my back. Relief was never so much fun.

I was very much in a gypsy mood, so I put the red-and-gold scarf on my head, enjoying the jingling of the coins as they hit against each other, and tiptoed into the bathroom, back scratcher in hand. Grandma was in a sea of bubbles, wet cotton balls on her eyes, beads of sweat on her forehead, and I could never have anticipated that I would end up drenched and in tears as Grandma jumped from the bathtub, screaming from shock more imagined than real. All I did

was put the back scratcher to her neck. She opened her eyes and let out a howl, and I dropped the Scratch-O-Matic into the bathtub. That made Grandma howl even more and scream at me for trying to kill her.

"Help!" she cried out. "I'm being electrocuted. Help!" Grandma quickly hopped out of the tub, splashing me in the process, and reached for a towel. "Don't you put so much as one finger in that water," she warned me. "There's electricity in there."

"Shouldn't we drain the water from the tub?" I asked.

"No!" she snapped. "Just hand me my bathrobe—and let's get out of here." Grandma was in a frenzy and had me believing that sparks of electricity were about to burst from the water the way popcorn explodes in a pan. Under the assumption that electrocution can come in stages, she believed herself to be in the first stage of acute electrocution, a condition marked by dizziness and tingling, and headed for her bed, where she collapsed.

At the sight of her lying there, and the thought that I might have accidentally been responsible for her death by battery, I burst into tears. No one was home—Jake and Grandpa had gone out on a mysterious mission whose purpose would unfold the next day at the wedding—and I panicked. The phone on Grandma's night table caught my eye. I picked up the receiver, started to dial my phone number, 241-9848, got only as far as the first 4. I dropped the receiver back in the cradle. My parents were not home; they were at a hotel in the city. *What am I going to do?*

Dial 911, I thought. *That's what my mother said to do in an emergency.*

Terrified, I dialed the three digits. A woman answered, identified herself, asked me what was wrong.

"My grandmother . . ." I stammered. "My grandmother. . ." No other words came out. How could I possibly say, or even believe, that I had killed my grandmother? I tried again. "My grandmother . . . I think my grandmother . . ." I felt as if a ten-pound drum were

inside me, beating, beating, beating. *I think my grandmother is dead, I think my grandmother is dead, I think my grandmother is dead.* I began sobbing pitifully. "My grandmother . . ."

The woman on the other end of the receiver remained calm. "Can you tell me where your grandmother lives?" she asked.

"She lives here," I answered.

"The address, I mean. Can you tell me the address?"

"I don't know it," I cried.

"Do you know the street?"

With each question, an eternity seemed to be passing.

Yes. Yes. Yes. I knew the street. "Avenue Z!" I blurted out. "Near Sheepshead Bay."

"What's your grandmother's name?"

"Grandma Ruth."

"That's very good. Now, what about her last name?"

"Cohen—Grandma Ruth Cohen."

The next question put me over the edge. "Can you spell that?"

"Cohen! Cohen! Cohen!" I shouted into the receiver. "I'm five years old. I can read, but I can't spell names. My grandmother is . . . she needs help. Can you *please* send someone over here?"

"I'll tell you what," said the woman, who I imagined wearing a police cap and a short-sleeved blue police shirt. "If you can read the telephone number on the phone, we'll be there very quickly." I did as I was told.

I don't know how long it took the police to arrive. But in the time between the call and their arrival, I seemed to have covered a lot of ground. I was afraid to go near my grandmother or to touch her or to even look at her. And I was equally afraid to leave the room. So I stood against the bedroom door, waiting for the police, thinking what I would say to them.

My grandmother was taking a bath. I wanted to play. It was an accident.

I glanced at Grandma, who still had not budged. *This is nothing*

more than a bad dream, I told myself. She couldn't be dead. It was just not possible. I loved her too much.

I closed my eyes, hoping that the suggestion of a dream—bad or good—would shatter the reality. Sounds took over. The dripping bathtub faucet. The hum of the air conditioner. The excruciating tick of Grandpa's alarm clock. I covered my ears, trying to drive away the sounds, but they became only more pronounced, bringing with them visions more and more terrifying. Red Riding Hood's wolf was circling the bed and Captain Hook's crocodile was ticking along after me and all I could do was run out of the room, out of breath, up the stairs to the guest room that, by all appearances, had become my room. Toys, dolls, books, games, and puzzles that Grandma kept neatly in baskets between visits from me were all over the floor. And in the middle of the mess I saw the reason for the terror that had driven me upstairs. Without wasting a moment, I opened the purse Jake had given me, pulled out the box of trouble dolls, dashed downstairs to Grandma's room, and laid them out, one by one, on her dresser.

You have to help me, I told each and every one of them. *I did something awful, and I need your help very badly.* I picked up the one wearing a blue-and-white woven skirt. *Bring Grandma back*, I pleaded. *Please bring her back.*

Something told me to take the tiny doll and place her on the bed next to Grandma, which I did, not pausing long enough to realize that Grandma was breathing and of course had not died. When I was older and better able to reflect on why I hadn't done the obvious—that is, put my ear against her heart—I could not come up with a satisfactory answer. I was five years old. I panicked. Case dismissed.

In the process, of course, I learned the overwhelming power of guilt. To believe, even for a minute, that you've killed someone you love is unbearable. My body went cold, hot. Cold again, hot again. I

couldn't stand still. I couldn't move. My legs buckled under me. My arms went limp. My hands became clammy. I cried, told myself this was a bad dream, laughed to will it away. Grandma was not dead, could not be dead; it was simply not possible. Not on the eve of the day my parents were to be married.

My thoughts went from the ridiculous to the sublime. I had to run away, get away, go someplace very far. The airport, I thought. I had to get to the airport. Jake had a friend who was a pilot, and once, when we took a ride to the airport, his friend let us sit in the cockpit of a parked plane, pretending we were flying to the moon. "Maybe you'll be the first woman astronaut," Jake had said. He loved to fly and wanted to be an astronaut himself, but only a certain kind of man became an astronaut, he told me, and he wasn't that kind of man.

The airport, I thought. *Somehow I have to get to the airport.*

I heard sirens, then a commotion as the front door opened. Jake and Grandpa had arrived at the same time as the police. It sounded like troops were marching through the house. Grandma lifted her head from the pillow, and at the sight of her—alive—I could feel the blood draining from me. I ran to Jake, collapsed in his arms, heard Grandpa's starchy voice above everything.

"What the H is going on?" he asked.

The two police officers went over to Grandma. One of them, husky, knelt at the side of the bed, took her pulse.

"Easy," he said, helping her sit up. "Looks like you passed out. Your granddaughter over here called us."

Everybody looked at me. "I thought . . ." I burst out crying. "Grandma was taking a bath and I wanted to scratch her back and the back scratcher fell in the bathtub and she thought I electrocuted her." Nobody knew what I was talking about until Grandpa, who had gone to the bathroom to investigate, returned with a broad smile on his face and the soaking-wet, battery-operated back scratcher in his hand.

Grandma was not pleased that Grandpa was laughing. "Sure, it's funny," she said sarcastically. "Remind me to laugh the next time you burn your hand taking a potato from the oven."

Grandpa turned to Jake. "Sonny Boy, will you please tell your mother that batteries don't electrocute people?"

Jake carried me over the bed, propped me against a pillow right next to Grandma. I reached out to touch her arm, to see if *this* was now the dream, and was overcome by the feel of warm flesh. I opened my mouth to say something, *anything*—I'm sorry, I'll never scare you again—but not a word came out. Even when Jake, cupping Grandma's hand, repeated that batteries don't electrocute people, not a peep came out of me. I had crossed a very fine line between reality and imagination, a line so fine that nothing seemed real to me and nothing—not Jake's words, not my grandmother's soft, spongy flesh—could reassure me of my innocence.

"I don't care what you say," Grandma insisted. "I felt a shock."

"Bet it felt good," teased Grandpa, as he placed the instrument of imagined doom on the bed. Jake dried it off, inside and out, and turned on the switch.

"Still works, Mom. Want to give it a try?" The back scratcher had been a present from Jake to Grandma before he had gone off to Vietnam. "If ever you get blue thinking about me when I'm away," he had written in a note accompanying the present, "take this out and tickle your back."

Ignoring Jake, Grandma turned to me. "Look at her in that babushka," she smiled. "Is that a face!" She kissed me, and my cheeks burned with dry tears. Whatever had left me speechless had also taken away my tears. I wanted to run out of the room, far away, where I would not have to hear another word about the bath that Grandma said took ten years from her life, or see the smirk of the skinny police officer who said this was one for the books, or hear the voice of the husky one telling me I did a good thing by

calling. Clutching my box of trouble dolls tightly, I squeezed my eyes shut, imagining I *was* out of the room, when suddenly I felt the beginning of a warm trickle between my legs. I quickly jumped up, embarrassed but at the same time relieved that my escape was within reach.

No sooner was I off the bed than Grandpa, camera in hand, yelled, "Hold it!" To admit that I couldn't hold it would only have furthered my embarrassment, so I stood stock-still—and held it—while Grandpa, who treasured candid moments and had made a hobby of chronicling them with the Polaroid camera that Jake, Susie, and Vivian had given to him after his heart attack—snapped a picture. Jake tried to divert him, and Grandma threatened to rip up the photo, but Grandpa had learned to be quick.

"Look at this." In the palm of his hand, which seemed forever coated with sawdust from his years as a carpenter, was a photo in the making. Before my very eyes, a blank piece of paper turned iridescent with images. First I saw the head of a girl who I thought was Carmelita, and in the background her grandmother, but very quickly the images sharpened and there was Grandma, despite her professed annoyance with Grandpa, grinning broadly; and the two police officers, also smiling; and Jake, not smiling, holding up the back scratcher; and me, looking very twisted and not very happy. When Jake told me that the Indians in Guatemala wouldn't let him take their picture because they thought the camera would somehow suck up their souls, I did not understand what they were afraid of. Now I think I do. To someone who was not there on that peculiar night, the photo would be very funny, but how would anyone know that Jake was holding up his hand not to show off the present he had given Grandma, but to stop Grandpa from taking away my soul?

The police finally left, and after graciously thanking them for their help, Grandma turned on Grandpa, once again threatening to rip up the photo. Grandpa was not intimidated. He knew as well as

she did that one day in the not-very-distant future she would look for the photo, not to rip it up but as an embellishment to her telling of the crazy night she thought she had been electrocuted by a gypsy in a babushka (the night before Susie's wedding, no less), and how two very handsome policemen saved her life.

For me, on the other hand, there would always be hidden images shadowing the anguished face of a five-year-old in a babushka, images of my grandmother as she jumped up from a peaceful bath, soaking wet and naked and shrieking, and of me calling the police, thinking she was dead and waiting waiting waiting until they arrived and to my surprise and joy resurrected her, though in time I would laugh, too, at the funniest images, the ones never photographed: those of Jake when we were alone upstairs, huddled in a tent made of blankets, and he ceremoniously untied the scarf jingling with coins, which I had forgotten I was still wearing, and put it on himself. He looked silly in the scarf, and I told him so, and that only made him do sillier things, especially when I pretended to take his picture as he made a giant, drooping bow tie out of the scarf, then coiled it like a turban and shook his head so the coins would sing. The turban fell apart from the shaking and became a veil, and I pronounced Jake queen of the gypsies and myself the king, which made him laugh so hard that his sides hurt, and his laughter made me laugh, though of course I would not get the joke for many years. And even when I did come to understand how much a part timing and innocence play in humor, I would never laugh at the idea of Jake as a queen, only at the image of him in a gypsy scarf, the most heartwarming image from that peculiar night (and the funniest), the photo never taken, the one that Jake said was "up here" (pointing to his head), as if to remind me that things all too often are not what they seem to be.