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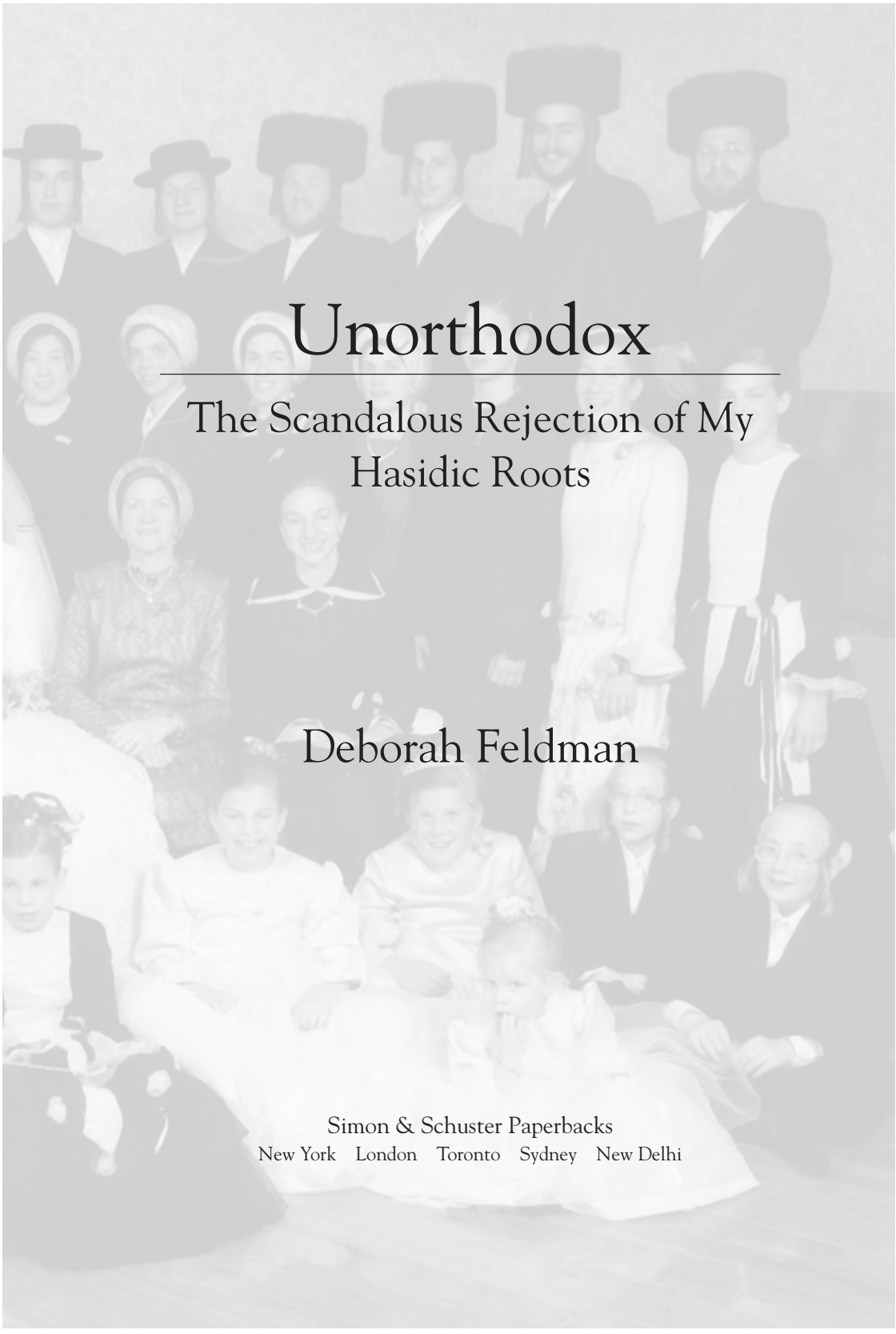
—*The Jewish Daily Forward*

"*Unorthodox* is painfully good. . . . Unlike so many other authors who have left Orthodoxy and written about it, [Feldman's] heart is not hardened by hatred, and her spirit is wounded but intact. . . . She is a sensitive and talented writer."

—JewishJournal.com

"Compulsively readable . . . a unique coming-of-age story that manages to speak personally to anyone who has ever felt like an outsider in her own life. Feldman bravely lays her soul bare, unflinchingly sharing intimate thoughts and ideas unthinkable within the deeply religious existence of the Satmars."

—*School Library Journal*



Unorthodox

The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots

Deborah Feldman

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A Note from the Author

Satu Mare (Hungarian for Saint Mary), or Satmar, in Yiddish, is a city on the border of Hungary and Romania. So how did a Hasidic sect come to be named after a Christian saint? Well, on his mission to rescue prominent Jews from certain death during World War II, Hungarian Jewish lawyer and journalist Rudolf Kasztner saved the life of the rabbi from that city. This rabbi later immigrated to America and amassed a large following of other survivors, forming a Hasidic sect that he named after his hometown. Other surviving rabbis followed suit, naming their own sects after the towns they had come from in an effort to preserve the memory of the shtetls and communities that had been wiped out in the Holocaust.

Hasidic Jews in America eagerly returned to a heritage that had been on the verge of disappearing, donning traditional dress and speaking only in Yiddish, as their ancestors had done. Many deliberately opposed the creation of the State of Israel, believing that the genocide of the Jews had come as a punishment for assimilation and Zionism. Most important, though, Hasidic Jews focused on reproduction, wanting to replace the many who had perished and to swell their ranks once more. To this day, Hasidic communities continue to grow rapidly, in what is seen as the ultimate revenge against Hitler.

The names and identifying characteristics of everyone in this book have been changed. While all the incidents described in this book are true, certain events have been compressed, consolidated, or reordered to protect the identities of the people involved and ensure continuity of the narrative. All dialogue is as close an approximation as possible to actual conversations that took place, to the best of my recollection.

Unorthodox

Prologue

On the eve of my twenty-fourth birthday I interview my mother. We meet at a vegetarian restaurant in Manhattan, one that announces itself as organic and farm-fresh, and despite my recent penchant for all things pork and shellfish, I am looking forward to the simplicity the meal promises. The waiter who serves us is conspicuously gentile-looking, with scruffy blond hair and big blue eyes. He treats us like royalty because we are on the Upper East Side and are prepared to shell out a hundred bucks for a lunch consisting largely of vegetables. I think it is ironic that he doesn't know that the two of us are outsiders, that he automatically takes our existence for granted. I never thought this day would come.

Before we met, I told my mother that I had some questions for her. Although we've spent more time together over the past year than we did in all my teenage years put together, thus far I've mostly avoided talking about the past. Perhaps I did not want to know. Maybe I didn't want to find out that whatever information had been fed to me about my mother was wrong, or maybe I didn't want to accept that it was right. Still, publishing my life story calls for scrupulous honesty, and not just my own.

A year ago to this date I left the Hasidic community for good. I am twenty-four and I still have my whole life ahead of me. My son's future is chock-full of possibilities. I feel as if I have made it to the starting line of a race just in time to hear the gun go off. Looking at my mother, I understand that there might be similarities between us, but the differences are more glaringly obvious. She was older when she left, and she didn't take me with her. Her journey speaks more of a struggle for security than

happiness. Our dreams hover above us like clouds, and mine seem bigger and fluffier than her wispy strip of cirrus high in a winter sky.

As far back as I can remember, I have always wanted everything from life, everything it can possibly give me. This desire separates me from people who are willing to settle for less. I cannot even comprehend how people's desires can be small, their ambitions narrow and limited, when the possibilities are so endless. I do not know my mother well enough to understand her dreams; for all I know, they seem big and important to her, and I want to respect that. Surely, for all our differences, there is that thread of common ground, that choice we both made for the better.

My mother was born and raised in a German Jewish community in England. While her family was religious, they were not Hasidic. A child of divorce, she describes her young self as troubled, awkward, and unhappy. Her chances of marrying, let alone marrying well, were slim, she tells me. The waiter puts a plate of polenta fries and some black beans in front of her, and she shoves her fork in a fry.

When the choice of marrying my father came along, it seemed like a dream, she says between bites. His family was wealthy, and they were desperate to marry him off. He had siblings waiting for him to get engaged so that they could start their own lives. He was twenty-four, unthinkably old for a good Jewish boy, too old to be single. The older they get, the less likely they are to be married off. Rachel, my mother, was my father's last shot.

Everyone in my mother's life was thrilled for her, she remembers. She would get to go to America! They were offering a beautiful, brand-new apartment, fully furnished. They offered to pay for everything. She would receive beautiful clothes and jewelry. There were many sisters-in-law who were excited to become her friends.

"So they were nice to you?" I ask, referring to my aunts and uncles, who, I remember, mostly looked down on me for reasons I could never fully grasp.

"In the beginning, yes," she says. "I was the new toy from England, you know. The thin, pretty girl with the funny accent."

She saved them all, the younger ones. They were spared the fate of

getting older in their singlehood. In the beginning, they were grateful to see their brother married off.

"I made him into a mensch," my mother tells me. "I made sure he always looked neat. He couldn't take care of himself, but I did. I made him look better; they didn't have to be so ashamed of him anymore."

Shame is all I can recall of my feelings for my father. When I knew him, he was always shabby and dirty, and his behavior was childlike and inappropriate.

"What do you think of my father now?" I ask. "What do you think is wrong with him?"

"Oh, I don't know. Delusional, I suppose. Mentally ill."

"Really? You think it's all that? You don't think he was just plain mentally retarded?"

"Well, he saw a psychiatrist once after we were married, and the psychiatrist told me he was pretty sure your father had some sort of personality disorder, but there was no way to tell, because your father refused to cooperate with further testing and never went back for treatment."

"Well, I don't know," I say thoughtfully. "Aunt Chaya told me once that he was diagnosed as a child, with retardation. She said his IQ was sixty-six. There's not much you can do about that."

"They didn't even try, though," my mother insists. "They could have gotten him some treatment."

I nod. "So in the beginning, they were nice to you. But what happened after?" I remember my aunts talking about my mother behind her back, saying hateful things.

"Well, after the fuss calmed down, they started to ignore me. They would do things and leave me out of it. They looked down on me because I was from a poor family, and they had all married money and come from money and they lived different lives. Your father couldn't earn any money, and neither could I, so your grandfather supported us. But he was stingy, counting out the bare minimum for groceries. He was very smart, your *zeide,* but he didn't understand people. He was out of touch with reality."

I still feel a little sting when someone says something bad about my family, as if I have to defend them.

"Your *bubbe,* on the other hand, she had respect for me, I could tell. No one ever listened to her, and certainly she was more intelligent and open-minded than anyone gave her credit for."

"Oh, I agree with that!" I'm thrilled to find we have some common ground, one family member whom we both see the same way. "She was like that to me too; she respected me even when everyone else thought I was just troublesome."

"Yes, well . . . she had no power, though."

"True."

So in the end she had nothing to cling to, my mother. No husband, no family, no home. In college, she would exist, would have purpose, direction. You leave when there's nothing left to stay for; you go where you can be useful, where people accept you.

The waiter comes to the table holding a chocolate brownie with a candle stuck in it. "Happy birthday to you . . . ," he sings softly, meeting my eyes for a second. I look down, feeling my cheeks redden.

"Blow out the candle," my mother urges, taking out her camera. I want to laugh. I bet the waiter thinks that I'm just like every other birthday girl going out with her mom, and that we do this every year. Would anyone guess that my mother missed most of my birthdays growing up? How can she be so quick to jump back into things? Does it feel natural to her? It certainly doesn't feel that way to me.

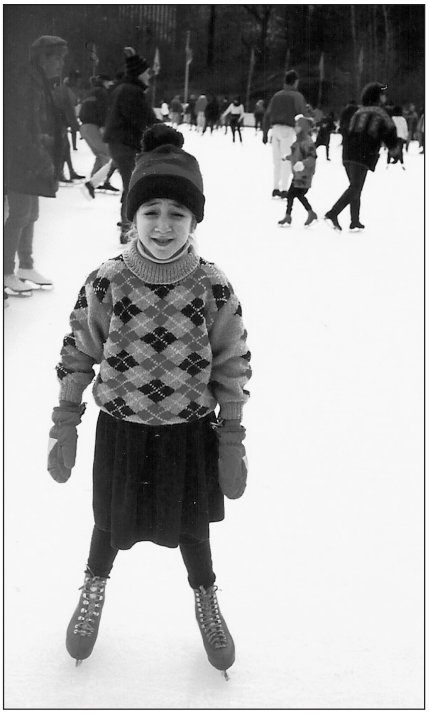
After both of us have devoured the brownie, she pauses and wipes her mouth. She says that she wanted to take me with her, but she couldn't. She had no money. My father's family threatened to make her life miserable if she tried to take me away. Chaya, the oldest aunt, was the worst, she says. "I would visit you and she would treat me like garbage, like I wasn't your mother, had never given birth to you. Who gave her the right, when she wasn't even blood?" Chaya married the family's oldest son and immediately took control of everything, my mother recalls. She always had to be the boss, arranging everything, asserting her opinions everywhere.

And when my mother left my father for good, Chaya took control of me too. She decided that I would live with my grandparents, that I would go to Satmar school, that I would marry a good Satmar boy from a

religious family. It was Chaya who, in the end, taught me to take control of my own life, to become iron-fisted like she was, and not let anyone else force me to be unhappy.

It was Chaya who convinced Zeidy to talk to the matchmaker, I learned, even though I had only just turned seventeen. In essence, she was my matchmaker; she was the one who decided to whom I was to be married. I'd like to hold her responsible for everything I went through as a result, but I am too wise for that. I know the way of our world, and the way people get swept along in the powerful current of our age-old traditions.

August 2010
New York City



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In Search of My Secret Power

Matilda longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding and honourable and intelligent. The fact that they were none of those things was something she had to put up with. . . .

Being very small and very young, the only power Matilda had over anyone in her family was brainpower.

—*From* Matilda, *by Roald Dahl*

My father holds my hand as he fumbles with the keys to the warehouse. The streets are strangely empty and silent in this industrial section of Williamsburg. Above, the stars glow faintly in the night sky; nearby, occasional cars whoosh ghostlike along the expressway. I look down at my patent leather shoes tapping impatiently on the sidewalk and I bite my lip to stop the impulse. I'm grateful to be here. It's not every week that Tatty takes me with him.

One of my father's many odd jobs is turning the ovens on at Beigel's kosher bakery when Shabbos is over. Every Jewish business must cease for the duration of the Shabbos, and the law requires that a Jew be the one to set things in motion again. My father easily qualifies for a job with

such simple requirements. The gentile laborers are already working when he gets there, preparing the dough, shaping it into rolls and loaves, and when my father walks through the vast warehouse flipping the switches, a humming and whirring sound starts up and builds momentum as we move through the cavernous rooms. This is one of the weeks he takes me with him, and I find it exciting to be surrounded by all this hustle and know that my father is at the center of it, that these people must wait for him to arrive before business can go on as usual. I feel important just knowing that he is important too. The workers nod to him as he passes, smiling even if he is late, and they pat me on the head with powdery, gloved hands. By the time my father is done with the last section, the entire factory is pulsating with the sound of mixing machines and conveyor belts. The cement floor vibrates slightly beneath my feet. I watch the trays slide into the ovens and come out the other end with shiny golden rolls all in a row, as my father makes conversation with the workers while munching on an egg *kichel*.

Bubby loves egg *kichel*. We always bring her some after our trips to the bakery. In the front room of the warehouse there are shelves stocked with sealed and packed boxes of various baked goods ready to be shipped in the morning, and on our way out, we will take as many as we can carry. There are the famous kosher cupcakes with rainbow sprinkles on top; the loaves of babka, cinnamon- and chocolate-flavored; the seven-layer cake heavy with margarine; the mini black-and-white cookies that I only like to eat the chocolate part from. Whatever my father selects on his way out will get dropped off at my grandparents' house later, dumped on the dining room table like bounty, and I will get to taste it all.

What can measure up to this kind of wealth, the abundance of sweets and confections scattered across a damask tablecloth like goods at an auction? Tonight I will fall easily into sleep with the taste of frosting still in the crevices of my teeth, crumbs melting into the pockets on either side of my mouth.

This is one of the few good moments I share with my father. Often he gives me very little reason to be proud of him. His shirts have yellow spots under the arms even though Bubby does most of his laundry, and his smile is too wide and silly, like a clown's. When he comes to

visit me at Bubby's house, he brings me Klein's ice cream bars dipped in chocolate and looks at me expectantly as I eat, waiting for my remarks of appreciation. This is being a father, he must think—supplying me with treats. Then he leaves as suddenly as he arrives, off on another one of his "errands."

People employ him out of pity, I know. They hire him to drive them around, deliver packages, anything they think he is capable of doing without making mistakes. He doesn't understand this; he thinks he is performing a valuable service.

My father performs many errands, but the only ones he allows me to participate in are the occasional trips to the bakery and the even rarer ones to the airport. The airport trips are more exciting, but they only happen a couple of times a year. I know it's strange for me to enjoy visiting the airport itself, when I know I will never even get on a plane, but I find it thrilling to stand next to my father as he waits for the person he is supposed to pick up, watching the crowds hurrying to and fro with their luggage squealing loudly behind them, knowing that they are all going somewhere, purposefully. What a marvelous world this is, I think, where birds touch down briefly before magically reappearing at another airport somewhere halfway across the planet. If I had a wish, it would be to always be traveling, from one airport to another. To be freed from the prison of staying still.

After my father drops me off at the house, I might not see him again for a while, maybe weeks, unless I run into him on the street, and then I will hide my face and pretend not to see him, so that I don't get called over and introduced to whomever he is speaking to. I can't stand the looks of curious pity people give me when they find out I am his daughter.

"This is your *maideleh*?" they croon condescendingly, pinching my cheek or lifting my chin with a crooked finger. Then they peer at me closely, looking for some sign that I am indeed the offspring of this man, so they can later say, "*Nebach,* poor little soul, it's her fault that she was born? In her face you can see it, she's not all here."

Bubby is the only person who thinks I'm one hundred percent all here. With her you can tell she never questions it. She doesn't judge people. She never came to conclusions about my father either, but maybe

that was just denial. When she tells stories of my father at my age, she paints him as lovably mischievous. He was always too skinny, so she would try anything to get him to eat. Whatever he wanted he got, but he couldn't leave the table until his plate was empty. One time he tied his chicken drumstick to a piece of string and dangled it out the window to the cats in the yard so he wouldn't have to stay stuck at the table for hours while everyone was outside playing. When Bubby came back, he showed her his empty plate and she asked, "Where are the bones? You can't eat the bones too." That's how she knew.

I wanted to admire my father for his ingenious idea, but my bubble of pride burst when Bubby told me he wasn't even smart enough to think ahead, to pull the string back up so he could place the freshly gnawed bones back on the plate. At eleven years old, I wished for a more shrewd execution of what could have been an excellent plan.

By the time he was a teenager, his innocent mischief was no longer charming. He couldn't sit still in yeshiva, so Zeidy sent him to Gershom Feldman's boot camp in upstate New York, where they ran a yeshiva for troublesome kids—like regular yeshiva, only with beatings if you misbehaved. It didn't cure my father's strange behavior.

Perhaps in a child, eccentricity is more easily forgiven. But who can explain an adult who hoards cake for months, until the smell of mold is unbearable? Who can explain the row of bottles in the refrigerator, each containing the pink liquid antibiotics that children take, that my father insists on imbibing every day for some invisible illness that no doctor can detect?

Bubby still tries to take care of him. She cooks beef especially for him, even though Zeidy doesn't eat beef since the scandal ten years ago, when some of the kosher beef turned out to be not kosher after all. Bubby still cooks for all her sons, even the married ones. They have wives now to take care of them, but they still come by for dinner, and Bubby acts like it's the most natural thing in the world. At ten o'clock each night she wipes down the kitchen counters and jokingly declares the "restaurant" closed.

I eat here too, and I even sleep here most of the time, because my mother never seems to be around anymore and my father can't be de-

pended on to take care of me. When I was very little, I remember my mother used to read books to me before I fell asleep, stories about hungry caterpillars and Clifford the big red dog. In Bubby's house the only books around are prayer books. Before I go to sleep, I say the Shema prayer.

I'd like to read books again, because those are the only happy memories I have, of being read to, but my English isn't very good, and I have no way of obtaining books on my own. So instead I nourish myself with cupcakes from Beigel's, and egg *kichel*. Bubby takes such particular pleasure and excitement in food that I can't help but get caught up in her enthusiasm.

Bubby's kitchen is like the center of the world. It is where everyone congregates to chatter and gossip, while Bubby pours ingredients into the electric mixer or stirs the ever-present pots on the stove. Somber talks take place with Zeidy behind closed doors, but good news is always shared in the kitchen. Ever since I can remember, I've always gravitated toward the small white-tiled room, often fogged with cooking vapors. As a toddler I crawled down the one flight of stairs from our apartment on the third floor to Bubby's kitchen on the second floor, edging cautiously down each linoleum-covered step with my chubby baby legs, hoping that a reward of cherry-flavored Jell-O was in it for me at the end of my labors.

It is in this kitchen that I have always felt safe. From what, I cannot articulate, except to say that in the kitchen I did not feel that familiar sense of being lost in a strange land, where no one knew who I was or what language I spoke. In the kitchen I felt like I had reached the place from which I came, and I never wanted to be pulled back into the chaos again.

I usually curl up on the little leather stool stashed between the table and the fridge and watch as Bubby mixes the batter for chocolate cake, waiting for the spatula that I always get to lick clean. Before Shabbos, Bubby stuffs whole beef livers into the meat grinder with a wooden pestle, adding handfuls of caramelized onions every so often and holding a bowl underneath to catch the creamy chopped liver oozing out of the grinder. Some mornings she mixes premium-quality Dutch cocoa and whole milk in a pot and boils it to a bubble, serving up a rich, dark hot chocolate that I sweeten with lumps of sugar. Her scrambled eggs

are swathed in buttery slicks; her *boondash,* or the Hungarian version of French toast, is always crisp and perfectly browned. I like watching her prepare food even more than I like eating it. I love how the house fills with the scents; they travel slowly through the railroad-style apartment, entering each room consecutively like a delicate train of smells. I wake up in the morning in my little room all the way at the other end of the house and sniff expectantly, trying to guess what Bubby is working on that day. She always wakes up early, and there are always food preparations under way by the time I open my eyes.

If Zeidy isn't home, Bubby sings. She hums wordless tunes in her thin, feathery voice as she skillfully whisks a fluffy tower of meringue in a shiny steel bowl. This one is a Viennese waltz, she tells me, or a Hungarian rhapsody. Tunes from her childhood, she says, her memories of Budapest. When Zeidy comes home, she stops the humming. I know women are not allowed to sing, but in front of family it is permitted. Still, Zeidy encourages singing only on Shabbos. Since the Temple was destroyed, he says, we shouldn't sing or listen to music unless it's a special occasion. Sometimes Bubby takes the old tape recorder that my father gave me and plays the cassette of my cousin's wedding music over and over, at a low volume so she can hear if someone's coming. She shuts it off at the merest sound of creaking in the hallway.

Her father was a *Kohain,* she reminds me. He could trace his legacy all the way back to the Temple priests. *Kohains* are renowned for having beautiful, deep voices. Zeidy can't carry a tune for the life of him, but he loves to sing the songs his father used to sing back in Europe, the traditional Shabbos melodies that his flat voice distorts into tuneless rambles. Bubby shakes her head and smiles at his attempts. She's long since given up trying to sing along. Zeidy makes everyone sing out of tune, his loud, flat warblings drowning out everyone else's voice until a melody becomes impossible to distinguish. Only one of her sons inherited her voice, Bubby says. The rest are like their father. I tell her I was chosen for a solo in a school choir, that maybe I did inherit my strong, clear voice from her family. I want her to be proud of me.

Bubby never asks how I'm doing in school. She doesn't concern herself with my activities. It's almost as if she doesn't really want to get to

know me for who I truly am. She's like that with everyone. I think it's because her whole family was murdered in the concentration camps, and she no longer has the energy to connect emotionally with people.

All she ever worries about is if I'm eating enough. Enough slices of rye bread spread thickly with butter, enough plates of hearty vegetable soup, enough squares of moist, glistening apple strudel. It seems as if Bubby is constantly putting food in front of me, even at the most inappropriate of moments. Taste this roast turkey at breakfast. Try this coleslaw at midnight. Whatever's cooking, that's what's available. There are no bags of potato chips in the pantry, no boxes of cereal even. Everything that is served in Bubby's house is freshly made from scratch.

Zeidy is the one who asks me about school, but mostly just to check if I'm behaving myself. He only wants to hear that I'm conducting myself properly so no one will say he has a disobedient granddaughter. Last week before Yom Kippur he advised me to repent so I could start the year anew, magically transformed into a quiet, God-fearing young girl. It was my first fast; although according to the Torah I become a woman at age twelve, girls start fasting at eleven just to try it out. There is a whole world of new rules in store for me when I cross the bridge from childhood to adulthood. This next year is a sort of practice run.

There are only a few days left before the next holiday, Sukkot. Zeidy needs me to help build the sukkah, the little wooden hut we will all spend eight days eating inside. To lay the bamboo roof, he needs someone to hand him each stick as he perches on top of the ladder, rolling the heavy rods into place on top of the freshly nailed beams. The dowels clatter loudly as they fall into place. Somehow I always end up with this job, which can get boring after hours of standing at the foot of the ladder, passing each individual rod into Zeidy's waiting hands.

Still, I like feeling useful. Even though the rods are at least ten years old and have been stored in the cellar all year, they smell fresh and sweet. I roll them back and forth between my palms, and the surface feels cool to the touch, polished to a sheen by years of use. Zeidy lifts each one up slowly and deliberately. There aren't many domestic tasks that Zeidy is willing to take on, but any form of work related to the preparation for the holidays he makes time for. Sukkot is one of my favorites, since it is

spent outdoors in crisp fall weather. As the days begin to taper, I soak up every last remnant of sunshine on Bubby's porch, even if I have to wrap myself in multiple layers of sweaters to keep off the chill. I lie on a bed arranged from three wooden chairs, tilting my face up to the sun that falls haphazardly through the narrow alley between a cluster of back-to-back brownstone tenements. There is nothing more soothing than the feeling of a pale autumn sun on my skin, and I linger until the rays peer weakly above a bleak, dusty horizon.

Sukkot is a long holiday, but it has four days in the middle of it that are somewhat nonceremonious. There are no laws about driving or spending money on those days, called Chol Hamoed, and they are generally spent like any other weekday, except that no work is allowed, and so most people go on family trips. My cousins always go somewhere on Chol Hamoed, and I'm confident that I will end up tagging along with some of them. Last year we went to Coney Island. This year, Mimi says we will go ice-skating in the park.

Mimi is one of the few cousins who are nice to me. I think it's because her father is divorced. Now her mother is married to some other man who's not in our family, but Mimi still comes to Bubby's house a lot to see her father, my uncle Sinai. Sometimes I think our family is divided in half, with the problems on one side and the perfect people on the other. Only the ones with problems will talk to me. No matter, Mimi is so much fun to be around. She is in high school and gets to travel on her own, and she blow-dries her honey-colored hair into a flip.

After two antsy days of my helping Bubby serve the holiday meals, carrying the trays of food from the kitchen to the sukkah and back, Chol Hamoed is finally here. Mimi comes to pick me up in the morning. I am dressed and ready, having followed her instructions perfectly. Thick tights and a pair of socks on top, a heavy sweater over my shirt to keep me warm, puffy mittens for my hands, and a hat as well. I feel swollen and awkward but well prepared. Mimi is wearing a chic charcoal-colored woolen coat with a velvet collar and velvet gloves, and I am jealous of her elegance. I look like a mismatched monkey, the weight of the mittens dragging my arms down comically.

Ice-skating is magical. At first I wobble unsteadily on rented skates, grasping the wall of the rink tightly as I make my way around it, but I get the hang of it very quickly, and once I do, it's like I'm flying. I push off with each foot and then close my eyes through the smooth glide that follows, keeping my back straight like Mimi said to. I have never felt so free.

I can hear the sound of laughter, but it sounds distant, lost in the rush of air whipping past my ears. The sound of skates scraping over the ice is loudest, and I become lost in its rhythm. My motions become repetitive and trancelike and I wish life could be like this all the time. Every time I open my eyes, I expect to be somewhere else.

Two hours pass, and I find that I am ravenous. It is a new kind of hunger, perhaps the hunger that comes from delicious exhaustion, and the emptiness inside me, for once, is pleasant. Mimi has packed kosher sandwiches for us. We hunker down on a bench outside the rink to eat them.

As I munch enthusiastically on my tuna on rye, I notice a family at the picnic table next to us, specifically a girl who looks my age. Unlike me, she appears suitably dressed for ice-skating, with a much shorter shirt and thick, brightly colored tights. She even has furry earmuffs on.

She sees me looking at her and slides off the bench. She holds out a closed palm to me, and when she opens it, there's candy, in a shiny silver wrapper. I've never seen candy like that before.

"Are you Jewish?" I ask, to make sure it's kosher.

"Uh-huh," she says. "I even go to Hebrew school and everything. I know the aleph-bet. My name's Stephanie."

I take the chocolate from her cautiously. Hershey's, it says. *Hersh* is Yiddish for "deer." It's also a common Jewish name for boys. The *ey* tacked on the end makes it an affectionate nickname. I wonder what kind of man Hershey is, if his children are proud of him when they see his name stamped on candy wrappers. If only I were lucky enough to have a father like that. Before I can open the chocolate bar to see what it looks like inside, Mimi looks over with a stern face and shakes her head from side to side in warning.

"Thank you," I say to Stephanie, clenching my fist around the bar until it disappears from sight. She tosses her head and runs back to her table.

"You can't eat the chocolate," Mimi announces as soon as Stephanie is out of earshot. "It's not kosher."

"But she's Jewish! She said so herself! Why can't I eat it?"

"Because not all Jews keep kosher. And even the ones that do, it's not always kosher enough. Look, see that mark on the wrapper? It says OUD. That means it's kosher dairy. It's not *cholov Yisroel* dairy, which means the milk that went into it didn't have the proper rabbinical supervision. Zeidy would be horrified if you brought this into his house."

Mimi takes the chocolate from my hand and drops it into the garbage can next to us.

"I will get you another chocolate," she says. "Later, when we get back. A kosher one. You can have a La-Hit wafer; you like those, right?"

I nod, placated. As I finish my tuna sandwich, I gaze thoughtfully at Stephanie, who is executing jumps on the rubber floor. The serrated front points of her skates make dull thuds each time she lands, her poise perfect. *How can you be Jewish and not keep kosher?* I wonder. *How can you know the aleph-bet but still eat Hershey's chocolate? Doesn't she know any better?*

Aunt Chaya has her most disapproving face on. She's sitting next to me at the holiday table, teaching me how to eat my soup without slurping. Her glare is frightening enough to provide incentive for a fast, effective lesson. I live in fear of attracting her attention; it's never positive. Aunt Chaya has always been behind every major decision made about my life, even if I don't really see her very often anymore. I used to live with her, back when my mother had just left for good, driving off in her little black Honda while everyone on the street poked their heads out the window to witness the spectacle. Perhaps she was the first woman in Williamsburg to drive.

I was very unhappy living at my aunt Chaya's. She would yell at me every time I cried, but the more I tried to stop, the more the tears would fall, betraying me. I begged to come live with Bubby, and even though my grandparents were old and had finished raising their children a long time ago, eventually I was allowed to move back. Zeidy still takes advice from Chaya about how to raise me, and I wonder what makes her the expert,

with three daughters who took off their seamed stockings as soon as they graduated from school, and moved to Borough Park after they got married.

Before Sukkot, Bubby sent me up to Chaya's apartment on the fourth floor to help her clean for the holiday. Chaya had laid out mousetraps, because despite twice-weekly visits from the exterminator, we have always had a mouse problem, just like everyone else who lives in an old house in Williamsburg. Chaya always smears extra peanut butter on the sticky yellow trays and slips them under the furniture. When I got there, she was checking all the traps. She steered one out from under the stove with a broom, and there, making pitiful chirping sounds, was a mouse, squirming desperately on the tray. There was no way to remove it once it was stuck, I realized, but still I longed for a more merciful solution, like catching a bug and releasing it on the street. But before I could say a word, Chaya picked up the trap with two hands and folded it in half in one quick, slapping motion between her two palms, instantly crushing the mouse to death.

I gaped for a moment. I had never seen anyone get rid of a mouse with such relish. When Bubby found one, it was usually already dead, and she wrapped it in plastic bags and took it down to the garbage can in the front yard. A few months ago I opened one of my dresser drawers and found a family of mice nesting in a folded sweater of mine: nine pink, writhing creatures, each the size of my thumb, skittering happily amidst a hillock of shredded aluminum foil and paper that I supposed their mother had provided. I let them stay for a week without telling anyone of my discovery. One day they were gone. I had, stupidly, just allowed ten more full-grown mice to frolic freely in our house, while Bubby fretted constantly about how to get rid of them.

It's not that I like mice. I just don't like killing things. Zeidy thinks that compassion like mine is inappropriate, misplaced. It's like having compassion is a good thing, but I don't use it right or something. I feel bad for things I shouldn't feel bad for. I should have more compassion for the people who are trying to raise me, he says. I should work harder to make him proud.

All my aunts and uncles are hard on their children, it seems to me. They berate them, embarrass them, and yell at them. This is *chinuch,*