



Modern Girls

By Jennifer S. Brown

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In 1935, Dottie Krasinsky is the epitome of the modern girl. A bookkeeper in Midtown Manhattan, Dottie steals kisses from her steady beau, meets her girlfriends for drinks, and eyes the latest fashions. Yet at heart, she is a dutiful daughter, living with her Yiddish-speaking parents on the Lower East Side. So when, after a single careless night, she finds herself in a family way by a charismatic but unsuitable man, she is desperate: unwed, unsure, and running out of options.

After the birth of five children—and twenty years as a housewife—Dottie's immigrant mother, Rose, is itching to return to the social activism she embraced as a young woman. With strikes and breadlines at home and National Socialism rising in Europe, there is much more important work to do than cooking and cleaning. So when she realizes that she, too, is pregnant, she struggles to reconcile her longings with her faith.

As mother and daughter wrestle with unthinkable choices, they are forced to confront their beliefs, the changing world, and the fact that their lives will never again be the same....

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Editorial Review

Review

“Brown deftly sketches the historical context of two Lower East Side women's domestic tribulations, alternating between their stories, reflecting upon the social consequences faced by women in different generations...A clear-eyed view of the sharp, difficult choices facing women on the cusp of equality.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A moving debut, portraying the sacrifices a mother and daughter make in order to save face for their family.”—*Booklist*

“A thought-provoking story about parents and their children.”—PopSugar

“The novel is not only a nostalgic portrait of an earlier era but a feminist reminder of how limited and circumscribed were women's opportunities and choices just a few generations ago...Satisfying both emotionally and narratively...Its suspenseful plot and warm emotional tone should appeal to a wide audience.”—*New York Journal of Books*

“With its compelling storyline, a well-researched historical setting, protagonists who are authentic and strong, and beautifully written prose, *Modern Girls* is, without a doubt, one of my favorite books of 2016 to date. The story drew me in from the very opening pages, and I was reluctant to let go of the characters once I finished the book. I predict it has a bright future as a book club favorite.”—*Historical Novels Review*

“Well-researched and thought-provoking...[Readers] will get a deeper understanding of Jewish culture that can be applied to any immigrant background.”—*WorkingMother.com*

“Brown pens the story of a Jewish immigrant mother and unmarried daughter, both pregnant and neither planning on it, in 1930s New York City. The result is a thought-provoking tale of parents and children and the sacrifices they make for one another. Exploring our dreams and choices and the way they intersect to form our lives, *Modern Girls* is a heartwarming, haunting and memorable debut.”—Pam Jenoff, international bestselling author of *The Last Summer at Chelsea Beach*

“Be prepared to lose yourself in a mother-daughter tale unlike any other. With one generation entrenched in the old world and the other struggling to make her way in the new, Brown expertly handles the complex nuances of family secrets guarded along with impossible choices made in the name of love and honor. Original and unique, you'll find yourself rooting for Dottie and Rose the whole way through.”—Renee Rosen, author of *White Collar Girl*

About the Author

Jennifer S. Brown has published fiction and creative nonfiction in *Fiction Southeast*, *The Best Women's Travel Writing*, *The Southeast Review*, *The Sierra Nevada Review*, and the *Bellevue Literary Review*, among other places. Her essay “The Codeine of Jordan” was selected as a notable essay in *The Best American Travel Writing* in 2012. She holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Washington.

This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof

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Dottie

Friday, August 16, 1935

My lower back ached as I sat, shoulders rounded, hunched over like a number 9, on the wooden stool at my desk at Dover Insurance. I shifted my bottom, unable to find a comfortable position, as I picked up the statement atop the stack. I didn't feel right: I had no fever, but my stomach sloshed and I needed another couple hours of sleep. The digits, though, drew me in, and I became absorbed in the dance of the numbers, the way they could come together and apart, making wonderful new combinations.

I didn't initially notice the new girl standing over my desk. "Dottie," she said, prompting me to look up. "Mr. Dover said to ask you if I had problems." She thrust her ledger under my nose. "The totals aren't matching up."

I scanned the column, my eye drawn instantly to the error. "Here," I said, pointing. "You've added the debits instead of subtracting." My eye ran up and down the page again, and handing her back the book, I said, "The total should be \$1,365.43."

She looked at the other paper in her hand, which listed the number she was supposed to match, and looked back at me wide-eyed. "How did you do that?"

I shrugged and she stared at me, bewildered, before walking away. I could calculate as fast as the tabulating machine. The skill was so natural that I was always surprised when others couldn't do it.

I turned back to my statement. The numbers were a relief because the rest of my brain was stuffed with cotton balls. What was wrong with me? Even before work, the morning had begun inauspiciously. When I attempted to fasten my brand-new dress—the dress that Ma had spent two evenings refashioning so it looked like it came from the pages of McCall's instead of the racks at Ohrbach's—the back zipper stuck. Pulling off the dress, I could slide the zipper up and down just fine, but when I glided the fabric over my head again, it bunched gracelessly at the waist, and I needed to suck in my stomach as far as it would go. I made Alfie tug the pull closed. "Lay off the egg creams," he'd said, unhappy at having to help his big sister get dressed. My body filled the fabric oddly, my bosom spilling out the top. Then, at breakfast, my bloated fingers were clumsy, and Ma scolded me when a glass slipped from my hand. I picked at the farina, which lay in a congealed blob in the bowl, then slid the dish over to my youngest brother, Eugene, who gobbled it down, but not before Ma spotted us. "My food isn't good enough for your Midtown ways?" Ma said, and yet, she hurried me to the door: "Don't be late for work."

Trying to shake the fog from my mind, I copied numbers from the statements to the ledger. Mr. Renke submitted a quarterly premium of \$11.82 for his accident insurance policy, which guaranteed \$100 a month for up to twenty-four months should he become disabled due to an automobile accident, a calamity in an elevator, a wall collapsing, or any of the other misfortunes that might befall him. The numbers shimmied in my head, and while I double-checked the totals on the machine as my job required, I had no doubt they were correct. Math is so simple. A plus B always equals C.

Numbers comforted me, soothed me. They were absolute, unequivocal, the opposite of what I was feeling at

that moment. Taking a deep breath, I put down my pen and looked toward the high windows. The sliver of sky visible was devoid of clouds, just a wash of blue. A breeze from the fan in the corner ruffled my papers, and I put a hand atop them to keep them from flying away.

My dress constricted my stomach, making me squirm, which embarrassed me. I was no longer a schoolchild, but a mature woman of nineteen, and I certainly knew how to conduct myself in my place of work, which didn't entail flopping in my seat like a marionette. Would I have to start reducing? Zelda did the grapefruit diet after having her baby, but Ma would never let me get away with that. Ma always tried to fatten me up even though this wasn't the Old Country, where a woman was prized for a bit of flesh around the waist. This was New York City and all I wanted was to look like Claudette Colbert. My boyfriend, Abe, was dreamy—strong arms and devilishly handsome chocolate brown eyes—and while he thought I was beautiful no matter what, I didn't want to test that by plumping up like a matzo ball in broth.

The next statement: Mr. Norquist paid \$12.65, the monthly premium on his \$3,000 life insurance policy. I flipped to the correct page in my ledger, found the column, and entered it. Three thousand dollars. What couldn't I do if I had \$3,000? Abe and I would be able to afford not only to marry and rent an apartment, but to furnish it with the finest trousseau out of House & Garden, and I would have no worries and a wardrobe from Saks.

My eyes skated over the room, watching the girls at work. Irene, as tiny as my seven-year-old brother, Eugene, typed letters to those delinquent on their payments. Florence dawdled, inputting numbers as I did, although three times more slowly, her pen looping in lazy circles. The other girls worked diligently, if not always precisely, only occasionally glancing at the clock or daydreaming out the window. Our head bookkeeper, Mr. Herbert, had quit a week before, so an idle loll enveloped the room, and the tabulating machines weren't clacking as quickly as they normally did.

I picked up the next statement and tried to revel in the numbers, in the slippery feel of a three, the kiss of a two, the hiss of a six. But I was so aware of my body, of the way it filled my dress; I couldn't get comfortable.

Irene passed my desk as I pulled the fabric from my waist, trying to stretch it out a bit.

"Are you feeling all right?" she whispered. In the quiet room, though, her voice echoed. None of the other girls paid any mind.

"I'm just feeling out of sorts," I said, trying discreetly to pull up my stockings a bit. "I don't know why."

"Maybe it's your time," she whispered even lower.

"My what?" I asked, in a normal voice.

Irene's face washed in a warm blush. Leaning into me, she spoke into my ear. "You know. Your monthly."

I nodded. "Perhaps."

Irene set down the papers on Mr. Herbert's former desk and returned to her own.

That must be it, I thought. My monthly. I scooted the papers aside and looked at the calendar blotter on my desk. When was the last time I'd had my courses? Was I due?

My pen idly swirled in the air above the numbers. It was August 16. Let's see. . . . I didn't recall having it in July, but skipping a month wasn't unusual.

The pen froze.

But what about June? Did I have it in June?

Beads of perspiration formed on my forehead. I looked up and around the room to see if anyone noticed the consternation that must have shown on my face, but all the girls were involved in their own work, their own daydreams. What did I do in June? Abe and I went to the theater twice and the café once. We picnicked in the park with Linda and Ralph. We swam and played baseball at Camp Eden. Think, Dottie, think! No. Not once did I need to excuse myself to take care of things.

Returning to the calendar, I stared. June was clean.

I chewed on the end of the pen hard enough that I cracked the celluloid. My brain flew frantically back in time, back to May, back to the one weekend I hadn't been with Abe. That was May 24. I counted. May 24 to August 16. Eighty-four days. Twelve weeks. The bloated fingers. The burgeoning bosom. My choking waist. May 24. And since then, not a sign of my courses.

Act normal, I told myself, picking up the next form. If need be, I could work by rote. Copy numbers from statement into ledger. Add the credits. Subtract the debits. My hands made the motions while my mind desperately sought to make reason. One night. That's all it had been: one night. A fight between me and Abe. A night alone at Cold Spring. But then, I hadn't exactly been alone, had I? If I had, I wouldn't be haunted by that night. I tried to take breaths to calm myself. My hand was quivering, causing droplets of ink to splatter on the desk. I set the pen in the inkwell and placed my palms flat on the surface to steady them.

Slowly exhaling, I sat frozen, until my body settled. The most important thing was to act normally. The stack of papers on my desk was finished. My reputation as a worker meant standing up and moving to Mr. Herbert's former desk to retrieve another stack.

After scooping up new papers, I turned to go back to my desk, self-consciously placing my hand over my belly, as if to shield it, even as I knew there was nothing to be seen. I caught Florence's eye. She looked at the papers in my hands and rolled her eyes. She used to tell me to slow down; my work was going to make the rest of them look bad. I tried at first—I wanted Florence and her girls to like me—but I soon realized Florence was never going to be friends with the Jew in the office, and to work slowly was boring. My cheeks flushed, and I was sure Florence could see behind the papers, could read my secret as easily as I read the numbers. I felt exposed, humiliated.

My mind raced: Had it really been twelve weeks? I was careless in my counting of days, irregular in my time. Nothing unusual. But twelve weeks? Even I should have noticed that by now. And what would I tell Abe?

Sitting back at my table, I vowed to get through as many statements as I could before the lunch bell chimed. I needed the reliability, the honesty of the numbers.

I let myself drown in numbers—premiums for accident insurance, life insurance, fire insurance: \$12.34, \$7.56, \$27.92. The minute my mind wandered from the ledgers, I forced it back: \$34.23, \$7.91, \$43.34. So lost was I that I missed the ringing of the bell and didn't realize it was noon until the babble of the girls' chatter broke my concentration. They gathered their clutches and hats to go out for food as I sat dumbly at my desk. I never accompanied them, but I longed to today, anything to keep these thoughts from my mind. But going out to lunch with them was an impossibility. The girls thought me cheap, chalked it up to my being a Jew. I always said to them, if I had an extra forty cents, it would look so much nicer as a hat on my head than a meal I'd forget in an hour. The truth, though, is the food around the Midtown office was all treif,

so Ma packed me a kosher lunch each morning. I was the only girl from the East Side working at Dover—the others were Italians, Irish, and Germans who commuted from Brooklyn and Queens.

I had no desire to eat, but I had to maintain appearances, so I made the motions of pulling out my lunch pail and unwrapping my sandwich. On her way to the door, Florence wrinkled her nose at the food on my desk. “What in heaven’s name is that?”

The sandwich looked particularly unappetizing. But I coerced a smile and said, “Pickled calf’s tongue.”

“Ew. Is that Yid food?” The girls behind her giggled.

“It’s scrumptious,” I said, keeping the smile plastered on my face. With great show, I picked up the sandwich and took a large bite. “Mmmm,” I murmured, trying to sound enthusiastic. Ma’s doughy wheat bread stuck to my upper palate, but I managed to give Florence a full-mouthed grin while trying to dislodge the bread stuck on my teeth with my tongue. Normally Ma’s sandwiches were delicious, but that day the tongue was slimy and the bread heavy and grainy. I swallowed, the food rebelling on its way down, and said nothing more.

Florence’s eyes narrowed, and with a sniff, she turned on her little green ankle-strapped heel, straightened her hat, and left the office, her coterie of coiffed sheep trailing behind. I could hear them bleating down the hall as they headed to the Automat for lunch.

My stomach lurched, so I put down the sandwich, nauseated by the sight of it. I was about to toss it in the wastebasket when the front door of the office opened and Mr. Dover walked in. Florence would be annoyed to have missed him. She—and a number of the other girls—had a thing for the boss.

“Ah, Dorothea,” Mr. Dover said, approaching my desk.

“Mr. Dover,” I said, nodding my head. Did he notice how my leg trembled?

He spied the food on my desk and said, “Please, don’t let me interrupt your lunch.”

“No interruption, sir,” I said.

“Please. Eat your sandwich. I want to chat, but I’d feel terrible if I disrupted your lunch break.” Sitting on a stool, he gave me a paternal smile, as he removed his fedora and placed it on the table beside him.

Feeling trapped, I once again picked up the sandwich and choked down a bite. I gave Mr. Dover a wan grin. Making sure I swallowed completely before speaking, I said, “Delicious.” My stomach roared its disapproval.

Mr. Dover chuckled. Perched as he was, he looked oversized. His body didn’t fit at the desk that was the right size for the petite Irene. Row after row of tables and stools filled the room. At each table sat a tabulating machine or a typewriter and books with loose-leaf ledger sheets. I often thought we looked like overgrown schoolchildren at our desks, whispering, working, behaving impishly.

“So, Dorothea,” Mr. Dover said. His face was handsome, even with the receding hairline. Those chiseled cheeks, deep-set blue eyes. No wonder the girls were mad about him. Of course, he didn’t hold a candle to Abe. Besides, Mr. Dover was a shaygetz. I could no more fathom mooning over a non-Jew than I could imagine eating a ham sandwich. “You have a talent for numbers, don’t you?”

“I do,” I said.

Mr. Dover's laugh was deep and sincere. I didn't see the point in false modesty. Since grammar school, I've excelled in mathematics.

"You enjoy working with numbers?" he asked.

"Very much, sir," I said. "If you do the numbers properly, you'll always get the expected outcome." My mind alighted on May 24 and the expected outcome, the horrific, dreaded outcome. "I find it much less complicated than—well, just about anything else."

"How refreshing to meet a girl who knows her strengths. So many girls try to hide behind ignorance."

I didn't want him to think me unkind, so I didn't point out that for many of these girls, the ignorance wasn't exactly feigned. Instead I said, "I find, sir, there is nothing to be gained from that."

Mr. Dover nodded sagely. He was old—probably a full ten years older than me, making him twenty-nine, maybe even thirty—and he projected an air of confidence that comes from privilege and age. "Are you planning on marrying anytime soon, Dorothea?"

A heat crawled into my cheeks as I considered how to answer him. I tried not to fidget, but I found myself tugging my dress, making sure my knees were more than well covered and my belly was hidden. Could others tell? I wasn't used to discussing such intimate matters with a man with whom I was not well acquainted. Mr. Dover must have sensed my discomfort, as he immediately corrected himself. "What I am given to say is that since Mr. Herbert left, I have been overwhelmed trying to perform the duties of head bookkeeper as well as manage the rest of the affairs of the office. I recognize the superiority of your work, and I would like to offer you the position of head bookkeeper, but I'm afraid you will leave us soon to start a family."

With a flinch, I wondered what he suspected. But no, I realized, he was speaking in generalities. A ray of hope rose through me, an honest smile that couldn't help but bubble to the surface. Was he promoting me?

"I have a beau," I said, "but we are not yet engaged. I would also hope, sir, you would perhaps consider keeping me on if I do get married."

Getting married, which I had longed for during these past three years in which Abe and I dated, was fast becoming a necessity. May 24 to August 16. How much time did that give me? Could I convince Abe to marry me? Would he pretend the child was his? Even as the picture painted itself in my head, I knew the ridiculousness of it. Abe would no more marry me and have another man's child than he would run for president. He would be humiliated. Abe would despise me if he knew the truth. No, it was essential Abe never find out.

Mr. Dover said, "I'm afraid that would be up to your husband, now, wouldn't it? So how about it? Would you like to be the head bookkeeper? I've interviewed some men for the position, but I have decided you are significantly more qualified."

As he spoke, my mind did the math. How long did I have for Abe to reasonably think the baby was his, just early? A week? Two at the most. How long till my belly protruded, till my shame was declared to the world?

"I should add," Mr. Dover said, "that this comes with a raise. You'd be earning twenty-three dollars and fifty cents a week."

I perked up. Abe and I hadn't married before now because we couldn't afford it. More money meant we

could afford a place to live that much sooner and perhaps this would convince him it was finally the time to marry. Trying to hide my excitement, I simply nodded at my boss. I knew I probably wasn't more qualified than the men, just cheaper. Yet this was a substantial raise, and I was pleased. This could be my salvation.

"That's a yes?" Mr. Dover said, a hint of tease in his voice.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Thank you, sir."

"Very good."

Right then the front door to the office opened again, and Florence bounded in, followed by her pals. "Irene, I can't believe you left my clutch behind. You took the lipstick from it and then didn't bother bringing it?"

"Sorry," Irene said.

Florence stopped abruptly when she saw Mr. Dover. "Well, well," she said, her voice suddenly overflowing with syrup. Looking suspiciously at me, she stepped closer to our handsome boss. "Mr. Dover! Fancy seeing you at the tabulation tables. Have you a sudden call to work the numbers yourself?" She tried to bat her eyes seductively, but she merely looked like she had an eyelash caught beneath her lid.

Mr. Dover spread his charm over the women. "As long as you're here, I have good news."

"Oh?" Florence said. She beamed at Mr. Dover, but as he stood and glanced around, she gave me a look full of arsenic.

"I've promoted Dorothea to head bookkeeper. She will take over for Mr. Herbert, so you will all now report directly to her. Dorothea, you may move your belongings to Mr. Herbert's table."

Under the watchful eye of the girls, I gathered my sweater, my purse, and the lunch—which was a little awkward, juggling the sandwich and napkin. Holding them all in front of my stomach, of which I was suddenly so aware, I moved to the head of the room. A single table faced the office, like the teacher's desk in grammar school. Nothing distinguished it except for its location and that it had a chair instead of a stool, and yet, a swell of pride rushed through me as I turned and faced the room, seated in my new location.

Mr. Dover said, "Congratulations, Dorothea, on work well done. I'm confident we'll see more of the same in the future." He nodded at the girls, and then retreated to his office behind my new post.

The girls stood speechless, looking to Florence for cues on how to react. Irene timidly said, "Congrats, Dottie. You deserve it," before Florence's narrowed eyes had her sputtering to silence.

With a self-satisfied smile, I ostentatiously glanced at the large ticking hands of the clock on the wall between the windows and said, "You girls better hurry along. Lunch ends in eighteen minutes."

"You haven't eaten much of your sandwich," Florence said. "I knew that Yid food tasted terrible."

With great show, I picked up the sandwich again and took a large bite, the meat flaccid in my mouth, as I pointed to the clock.

With a sharp intake of breath, Florence spun around and strode from the room, the other girls trotting to keep up. How long would it take Florence to realize she still didn't have her clutch?

I sat down, chewing slowly, hoping that would make the sandwich go down easier. I threw back my

shoulders, feeling taller somehow from this vantage point. This was my solution. Abe would be proud of my promotion, proud of my raise. And perhaps we could marry—soon!—in time to solve the problem before anyone but me knew it existed.

Yet even the idea of a solution didn't stop my stomach from mutinying completely. Without even thinking, I grabbed the wastebasket next to my desk and crudely unswallowed the contents of my stomach. Tears threatened.

Two weeks. I had only two weeks.

Rose

Friday, August 16

I couldn't stop sweating. How many Shabbeses have I made in August? I wondered. If Dottie were here, she'd calculate, without even paper and pencil, the number of August Shabbeses I've had in my thirty-nine years. Except she'd be wrong. Because I've seen forty-two years of Shabbeses, not thirty-nine. Only Perle—the one who has been by my side since we were in the cradle back home—knows the truth of my age, but Perle can be trusted to take my secret to the grave. The point is that this was not my first August Shabbes, but still I suffered so.

The sweat rolled from me like water streaming from a pump. With the dishrag I wiped my forehead before holding the chicken over the gas flame of the stove, just long enough to singe the bird. The smell of the gas stung my nostrils. I leaned toward the window over the kitchen sink, but even the breeze up here on the fourth floor wasn't enough to cut the smothering closeness of the humid air.

With well-practiced hands, I pulled the pinfeathers from the carcass, but wooziness washed through me, so I moved to sit at the small kitchen table. Kashering a chicken was no difficult task, but it was important to be meticulous with the required steps; one small nick in the wrong place and the entire chicken would be rendered unkosher, inedible. Preparing chickens for Shabbes I've been doing since my hands were large enough to grasp the feathers, and of all the things that changed when I came to America, cooking chickens wasn't one of them. True, here I had a gas stove and a sink with a running tap, a vast improvement over a wood-burning stove and water retrieved from a well. And back home in Russia, there were Shabbeses when we had no chicken, but—thank God—they were few and far between.

Why was I so tired? I had my suspicions. Whispered among the women, referred to vaguely, was . . . what did they say? About how a woman's body changed. Her courses stopped coming. And it had been nearly three months since last I had my time. But wasn't forty-two too young for this? Of course that other possibility—the other reason a woman's courses stopped coming—had crossed my mind, but that was ridiculous. Forty-two was definitely too old for that.

My leg throbbed more than usual, the old injury flaring even though no cloud was in sight. My leg was as good a barometer as any on a ship at sea. I cut the fowl's nails, sliced off its head, and, turning back the skin at the nape, chopped the neck as close to the body as I could.

A commotion on the street distracted me for a moment, but who had time for such nonsense? I needed to focus on my task. I couldn't afford another chicken if this one wasn't kashered properly.

The sweat dripped down the back of my neck, into the collar of my dress. I attempted to wipe away the perspiration, but didn't want the chicken juice to drip into my hair. While bathing would be a proper way to usher in the day of rest, it was a luxury reserved for a less busy day.

My skin itched and the dampness not only cloaked me but seeped within. Trying to disregard my discomfort, I made an incision just below the bird's breastbone. Wrenching my hand inside the hole, I pulled at the fat and entrails until they yanked loose. Yet as my hand freed the greasy viscera, my stomach churned in a familiar way.

How could it be? I'd never heard of digestion troubles as a symptom of a woman's change. They were a symptom of . . . "No!" I said out loud, before making sure the boys weren't there to hear me. Of course if they were there, they would merely assume I was speaking to them. It was the word I uttered most to my three sons.

Shaking my head to force out unpleasant thoughts, I waited for the feeling to pass. It subsided—a bit—and I fished out the entrails, placing them in a bowl. Deborah went to the new butcher the next block over, who kashered the chicken for her, but those chickens were three cents more a pound, and I had better things on which to spend my money. For nineteen years, I'd been keeping a secret stash, tucked in a tea tin at the bottom of my delicates drawer. Whenever I had spare change, it went into that tin. Just this morning, as I dropped a nickel in, I realized I had reached ninety dollars. If I had paid someone else to kasher my chickens, my tin would be empty. Besides, how could I trust someone else to kasher my meat properly? Some things must be done oneself.

Looking back at the chicken, I removed the liver from the gall. This was the most delicate step; the gall is not kosher, and if it broke, I wouldn't be able to use the liver. This was one of the most important duties of being a wife, and I had no idea how Dottie was going to manage it when she made her own home with Abe. So many things Dottie never learned. Chasing her father around, looking after her brothers, daydreaming with her fashion magazines. Yet, lack of kashering skills aside, Dottie had done well for herself. Working in Midtown, with all those numbers. A bookkeeper was a respectable job. Dottie would do something with her life. It was for her I saved my pennies. But still. A woman had to also know how to keep a home. Although, at the pace Abe moved, there was time to teach her before he proposed.

I dumped the entrails in a pan and covered them with water. These would sit until after Shabbes, when I would use them to flavor the stew I would make on Sunday for the coming week. The head I would save to make a soup, but for now, I took the chicken and let it soak so I could sit and enjoy my cup of tea and the morning mail. I had a letter from my brother Yussel I was anxious to read.

This was my only moment to myself, when Ben was at work at the garage, Dottie at her office, and the boys had been shooed off to play. On most mornings, I'd sit at the table, spread open the *Forverts*, the daily Yiddish paper, and consume the news as if it were a morning snack. But when I had a letter from family, it was as if I had a feast.

Using a table knife, I gingerly slit open the envelope, not wanting to rip even a single word. Pulling out the thick sheet of paper, I smiled at the still-childish scrawl in which my baby brother wrote. The Yiddish lines slanted downward, as if trying to escape the page. No one would know, looking at this writing, that Yussel was a learned man of thirty-three years. A glance at the top told me the letter was written less than three weeks ago. The mail moved quickly these days.

"Dearest sister," the letter began. "At the outset I can write you that Gerda, the children, and I are healthy, and we are hoping to hear good things from you and to see each other in good health. I received your letter Friday morning and read with pleasure that you are well. I am pleased to hear of your work with the

Women's Committee of the Socialist Party, a worthy cause to support. But I beg of you, please do not worry so for us."

Yussel wasted too much time on pleasantries. I brushed my hand across the creases of the paper, trying to make the words easier to read, but the sweat on my arm blurred the ink. Alarmed, I blotted the page and dried myself on the kitchen cloth. The letter continued: "Tensions are building between the Free City of Danzig and Poland over Danzig's seeming embrace of Germany, but so far it has no effect on us Jews. The Poles are only interested in the Poles. If anything, I'm profiting from the politics, as my business is flourishing with the new demand for photos for identity cards. My studio is so busy that I have taken on a second apprentice."

Was Yussel telling the truth? Or shielding me from his hardships? Even the American newspapers reported on the Poles' discrimination against the Jews. Frustratingly, though I am the elder, Yussel tries to protect me, and it was clear my brother needed to get out of Poland. It was no better than Russia, although at least in Poland no one was trying to conscript him. Warsaw had always been meant as a temporary stop, on the way to the port in Danzig. In 1924, Yussel had saved enough money to bribe Russian officials for a passport, yet he arrived in Poland only to discover that the United States had closed: No visas were being issued to Jews. So he settled in Warsaw. Married. Had a son and two daughters. And he waited.

"We hear alarming news from Gerda's relations in Munich, and they are working with the relief organizations to leave. Priority is being given to the Jews fleeing Germany. Perhaps if we had settled there instead of Warsaw, we would have better luck obtaining visas. I have been in contact with—" My attention was diverted by the pounding of feet on the stairs leading to the apartment. I recognized the lumbering footfalls of Alfie and the gentler ones of Eugene trailing behind. Just ten minutes, I pleaded to no one in particular. Continue on up to the roof and give me ten minutes of peace.

But who gives a mother peace? The steps stopped and the door opened so forcefully it banged against the wall behind it.

"You need to slam the door so?" I bellowed to Alfie in Yiddish.

"Ma," he called back.

"Wipe your feet. Don't go bringing the street into the house." The way we yelled at each other, you'd think we lived in a Park Avenue mansion, and not the two-bedroom apartment that was about as big as a streetcar. My eyes didn't leave the letter, though. I read, "I have been in contact with the HIAS representative and he believes a visa to Cuba is attainable. Luckily between the studio, the money from Gerda selling eggs, plus what the children bring in, we have plenty to soothe officials who may be less than eager to grant us papers."

Alfie came into the kitchen. "Ma, I need two cents to buy the paper," he said in English. Eugene trailed behind him, his eyes half-hidden by his cap, not that he ever looked folks in the eye. That boy. As shy as a bride on her wedding night.

"There's a paper on the dining table." It irritated me that my younger boys refused to speak in our own language. My English was fine—I understood everything said to me—but I preferred to use my mother tongue, and I wished my children had the courtesy to respond to me in Yiddish.

"Yitzak has gone to yeshiva," Yussel wrote, "fulfilling the dreams of Mama, may her memory be a blessing. God willing, we will be far from Hitler and the insanity of Poland soon. Write, dear sister, as soon as you can, if you haven't written until now. Be healthy, both you and yours. From me, your eternally devoted brother, Yussel."

Alfie hopped a few steps to the next room, before saying, “Not the Yiddish paper, Ma. I need the Herald Tribune.” Coming back to the kitchen, he pulled at my sleeve and pointed to the kitchen window. “Don’tcha hear ’em?”

With an exasperated sigh, I set the letter down. I would reread it five more times today, trying to understand the meaning behind the words. But now, I gave my attention to my boys. Tilting my head slightly, I let myself tune in to the noise of the street, the noise I had been trying to ignore. It rang out clearly. The newsboy called, “Extra, extra! Will Rogers and Wiley Post killed at Point Barrow! Extra, extra!” His voice grew louder and softer as he walked closer to and then farther from the apartment on his march up and down the block. I groaned as I heaved myself from the table, my leg twitching in pain as I hobbled to the window. It wasn’t easy to see through the blackened glass—how many times had I scrubbed the bottom clean only to have it clouded over with dust and ash before I’d finished the top pane?—but looking down, I couldn’t miss the flood of children.

“Your father will have an English paper when he gets home,” I said, distracted by the children who were pouring out of doors, tumbling down steps, and running through the streets to hear the news. All those children and my leg was throbbing and the chicken entrails, soaking beneath my nose, made my stomach seethe.

“Ma, I can’t wait,” Alfie said.

Eugene piped up behind him. “It’s Will Rogers, Ma. Will Rogers! And he’s dead.”

Some actor who wouldn’t have known these boys from Adam dies and they’re all up in arms? Will Rogers. Feh.

But all those children. Swarming. Massing in the road. Children everywhere. Every apartment on Tenth Street housed throngs of children. In my own house, there were four. Seven-year-old Eugene. Nineteen-year-old Dottie. Izzy at seventeen. And ten-year-old Alfie. Oh, Alfie. Joey would have been ten as well but . . .

The sounds echoed through the street and the children scampered about. No doubt the children outnumbered the adults.

The roiling in my stomach threatened to erupt, and I was grateful I hadn’t eaten yet, that there was nothing to return. That nausea that was so familiar and so unwelcome. Despair settled over me. Please, Hashem, let this be my change. Seeing all those children brought a deluge of unwelcome thoughts. Thoughts of Joey; thoughts of Yussel—who was a twelve-year-old boy last I saw him—trapped in Europe; thoughts of what this sickness I was experiencing might be.

The voice of the newsboy faded as he made his way down the street again, pausing at each newly outstretched hand.

All those children.

“Are you crying?” Alfie asked, his voice tainted more with fear than concern.

Raising my hand to my cheek, I realized it was indeed wet.

“It’s okay, Ma,” Eugene said, always anxious at anyone’s distress. “You won’t be sad about Will Rogers forever. This too shall pass.”

I wanted to smile, but I couldn’t force my lips to move. My baby quoting back to me what I often said to the

children. This too shall pass. It worked for scrapes and frights and playground injustices. It was a lie that was easy to believe when you were a child. But as an adult, I well knew some things hurt for a lifetime.

Pulling up my apron, I wiped my face. "Just some sweat dripping into my eye." I scuttled over to the kitchen cupboard and pulled out the tin with my grocery money, fishing out two copper coins for Alfie. "Here." I shoved them at him. "Go."

Alfie paused a moment, knowing that if I gave in so quickly, then surely something was wrong. But the boy had enough smarts to take the coins and leave before I could change my mind.

"Thanks," he said, as he bounded with Eugene out the front door, slamming it behind him.

"Don't slam the door," I yelled.

Back at the window, I stared out. Those children. Teasing and taunting one another. Children everywhere. So many children. Too many children.

Despite the emptiness of my stomach, another wave rose through my chest. Quickly reaching toward the sink, I vacated what little there was in my belly. I paused over the sink, afraid if I moved too quickly, more sickness would come.

Glancing back out the window, I saw Alfie running down the street, trailed by four other boys, waving a newspaper in his hand. Eugene could barely keep up.

I refused to allow the notion of babies to take root. This was old age. Pure and simple. No more children, I thought. I am done with children. But then, when did God ever listen to the plans of a Yiddishe mama?

Dottie

That night, walking home from work, I dawdled. I should have taken the elevated, or at least the streetcar, to make sure I arrived in plenty of time for Shabbos, but the idea of facing my mother was more than I could bear. I told myself I didn't want to end up sick on a crowded train, but it was simply an excuse. I shouldn't have been walking; my limbs were leaden, my feelings vacillating with each footfall between exhilaration at my new promotion and a growing fright at the way my body was betraying me.

With my mind distracted, I didn't notice where I stepped, and my heel caught in a crack in the sidewalk. As I lunged forward, my clutch flying from my hands, I let out an unladylike "Ow!" as I landed on my knee. A rip in my stocking. Just what I needed. A man passing by reached out and took my arm, helping me to my feet. He leaned down to pick up my purse and handed it to me. "Are you all right, miss?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said, going for what I hoped was a smile. "Nothing bruised but my pride."

The man touched the brim of his hat and continued on his way, not a care in the world. Probably going home to his wife. And children. In a lovely uptown apartment with a new Kelvinator and a Westinghouse electric range, and a dinette set from Bloomingdale's and a powder room full of Helena Rubinstein cosmetics. To the life that should be mine. To the life I coveted more than anything. Me. Abe. Children of our own. A kitchen out of House & Garden. Abe would work at the store during the day, Ma would watch the kids for a few hours, and I'd continue at the insurance company. The picture was dreamy and I smiled before remembering I had botched it all up.

What if I told Abe I had been attacked? That a man forced himself on me?

No. That would never work. Then Abe would spend his life looking with abhorrence at the child, constantly searching her face, wondering to whom she belonged. And would Abe want to touch me, knowing I had been touched by another? How much worse would it be if he knew it hadn't been an attack, that I'd been merely drunk and foolish?

Leaning down, I brushed the dirt from my dress. The run in my stocking stretched down my leg, a train track scaling my thigh. The indignity was too much, so as tears threatened, I hobbled on my tender ankle and sat on a bench. Crossing my sore ankle over the other, I reached down and rubbed the bone. Nothing serious. But what if it had been serious? How easy it is to slip, on the stairs at home, perhaps a tumble down the front stoop. With my luck, though, I'd merely be in the same position, but with a broken arm or leg.

The men and women on their way home all looked so purposeful, so free. I tried to concentrate on them, conjuring their stories, but no matter how I tried to ignore my thoughts, they kept taunting me, like Izzy used to do with the mice he'd captured in the apartment when we were kids. I'd run and scream and close my eyes and try not to see the beady eyes of the rodents that Izzy swung in front of my face, as he laughed and called me a crybaby. The mice repulsed me, yet I had sympathy for them. It wasn't their fault they were just trying to survive. If only they would do it elsewhere. At night I dreamed of those tiny wriggling creatures as they squealed to be free, only to be squashed by the hand of my younger brother. Right now I had about as much future as those mice. I suddenly wished Izzy had been kinder to them.

Glancing at the sky, I saw that the sun was starting its late summer descent, and I realized I'd need to dash to be on time even if home was the last place I wanted to be, with the boys arguing, my father proselytizing, my mother prying. My mother. I would have to tell my mother. The thought caught me short, made me gasp for breath as a sudden burst of sweat erupted across my brow.

I unclasped my purse and reached for a handkerchief to blot my forehead, and once again I saw the letters. The letters. My cheeks warmed and I looked around guiltily, as if caught in the act. Those letters confirmed my disgrace, held my shame in its entirety.

I had no need to pull out the paper, although my fingers moved of their own accord, caressing the thick, heavy cream card stock that bespoke wealth. The return address was engraved, and the raised type felt smooth and rich to my touch. Why had I kept them? With the thoughts of the day circling in my head, I determined to rid myself of this evidence once and for all. If the baby had been Abe's, well, there would have been a fuss, but with a quick wedding and an "early" delivery, it would be forgotten in a matter of months. But this? This pushed past the boundaries of decency.

I stood, and with just a ghost of an ache in my ankle, I walked toward the trash bin on the corner. Yet, when I reached it, I didn't stop, and the letters found their way back into my purse. When a droplet of sweat slid down my nose, I reached again for the handkerchief, dabbing my face as I hurried to Tenth Street.

The scenery changed dramatically as I left the sophistication of Midtown and sank back into the depths of the lower East Side, of home. Fedoras were traded for yarmulkes. Children walking hand in hand with mothers changed into ragamuffins darting through the streets. Storefronts gave way to peddlers hawking their wares. As much as I tried to retain the dignity of the highly proficient bookkeeper—make that highly proficient head bookkeeper—when I descended into my own neighborhood, I reverted to the Dottie whose life revolved around doing the dishes, watching my brothers, and arguing with Ma about going to shul. I couldn't hold on to white silk when diving into a pit of mud, no matter how hard I tried.

I approached our building barely in time for the lighting of the Shabbes candles. As usual, Mr. Baum was

sitting on the stoop with his newspaper.

“Good evening, Mr. Baum,” I said.

“Gut Shabbes, Dottie,” he said, licking his finger to turn the page.

I knew I was really late when Mrs. Baum stuck her head out the front window and yelled in broken English, “Mr. Baum! Upstairs, your tuchus you get.” So I hurried past him into the building, where the smell of Mrs. Anscher’s boiled cabbages nearly knocked me down. Our building was so claustrophobic it was as if we lived with our neighbors instead of beside them.

I rushed up the three flights of stairs, and stopped at the top, fighting for breath. My body wouldn’t allow me to forget my troubles. In high school, I’d run track, and while it had been nearly two years since I graduated, a quick sprint up the stairs should be nothing. I took a moment to catch my breath and regain my composure, and when I looked down, I noticed my arm was clutching my chest, that my bosom ached in a new way, nothing like the growing pains I’d experienced not so long ago. Panic settled in, making it difficult for me to calm. But I had to. I couldn’t give myself away to my mother.

A door opened and I steeled myself, a forced grin on my face, to prepare for the family member obviously sent to find me. But no, it was the door from across the hallway. “Dottie,” a tiny voice called out.

My facade melted, replaced by a genuine smile. “Alice,” I said, squatting down to her eye level. “What are you doing roaming when it’s about to be Shabbes?”

Alice toddled to me, her two-year-old legs roly-polying her along. “Dottie,” she repeated, allowing me to sweep her into my arms. I wrapped her in my embrace and picked her up. Her hair was delicate and curly and when my nose brushed against a lock of it, the smell of talcum powder made me wistful for the days when my brothers were this tiny. Zelda often teased me for stealing sniffs of her baby, but that baby scent was heavenly and I couldn’t resist. A shiver ran up my spine at the thought of babies.

Stroking Alice’s arm, I marveled at the dewy softness of it. “Does your mama know where you are?” I asked.

“Kitty cat,” Alice said, and I laughed.

“There are no kitty cats here, you silly goose.” I carried her to her door, and pushing it open slightly, I called in, “Mrs. Kaplan? Did you lose something?”

Mrs. Kaplan came out of her kitchen, her hair recently styled for Friday night. “How did you get out?” she exclaimed, taking Alice from my arms. “You naughty little girl.”

“Kitty cat!” Alice said again.

Mrs. Kaplan rolled her eyes. “Thank you, Dottie. Gut Shabbes.”

“Gut Shabbes to you,” I said, giving Alice’s nose a little tweak before heading back to the hallway, making sure to pull the Kaplans’ door tight so Alice couldn’t escape again.

The encounter lightened my mood, enabling me to enter the chaos that was my home on a Friday night. The flimsy door slammed against the wall, and I cringed, waiting for the yell I knew was coming: “Don’t bang the door,” Ma said from the kitchen.

“Sorry,” I called as I walked in.

Alfie and Eugene were screaming, running through the house carrying papers folded into airplanes. “Boom boom boom boom!” yelled Eugene, dive-bombing his plane into the furniture all around. He ran past me. “Boom boom boom!”

My youngest brother could put a smile on my face even as I suffered the trials of Job. I grabbed him the next time he passed and planted a kiss on the top of his head as I said, “Boom boom boom to you.”

“No war on Shabbes,” Ma said from the kitchen, where she was putting the finishing touches on dinner.

“Boys will be boys,” my father called back to Ma from the main room, where he was splayed on the couch, reading *The Nation*, his feet propped on the table. I gave Tateh a pointed look—Ma never allowed feet on furniture—but he just put his finger to his lips and gave me a grin.

“Boys can be boys when it’s not Shabbes. On Shabbes they can be a little more God-fearing.”

“I’m here,” a voice announced loudly from outside the front door. Bang went the door as a large man with a jacket that didn’t quite reach his wrists entered the apartment. His size dwarfed the room.

“The door,” Ma called yet again. “Stamp your feet, Heshie. Don’t bring in all the dirt of the city.”

“Let your brother be,” Tateh said. “He just walked in.”

That’s the way it always went in the apartment. So much noise, so much yelling. Ma and Tateh never truly fought, but their voices were loud enough that strangers would think they were constantly bickering. The prying neighbors didn’t need cups against the walls to hear every word said.

The smells of home—the ever-present reek of liver, of schmaltz, of carp boiling on the stove—caused an uproar in my stomach, immediately deflating my mood, reminding me of my misfortunes. Always the smells permeated, overwhelming even the sweet scent of baking challah and roasting tzimmes. Ma never escaped them, but I went to great extremes before leaving the apartment to douse myself in the cheap toilet water I bought at Ohrbach’s so as not to bring the stink of the East Side into my Midtown office.

I laid my clutch on the table next to the couch, giving my father a peck on the forehead and greeting Uncle Heshie, who plopped down next to him and picked up the *Herald Tribune*. This was the couch I slept on every night, a deep green velvet, fraying at the edges. My lips pursed as I surveyed the scene, like I did every evening, hoping my mother had done something—anything—to improve our home. But no. I used to leave magazines for Ma to look at, to inspire her, but stopped when I saw she had used the pages from the summer issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* to wrap chicken bones. Ma didn’t see the wisdom of spending money on “appearances,” so we still had the old glass-doored cabinet of books piled every which way, threatening to burst open and rain tomes down on me while I slept. And next to the cabinet was the ancient Victrola on which Tateh played the classical records he purchased with money that could have gone for a new couch. The newest object in the apartment was the radio, bought two years ago.

“A good day, Dottala?” Tateh asked, barely lowering his magazine.

“Why, yes—,” I started, but I was interrupted by Ma walking into the room.

“So, now you’re home?” Ma said.

“Good Shabbes, Ma.” I smoothed out my dress, hoping she didn’t notice its snugness.

“Good Shabbes, bubelah.”

Ma bent over to speak quietly to Uncle Heshie. “A letter came from Yussel today.”

Uncle Heshie looked up. “And?”

Ma shrugged. “Nothing has changed.” From her apron pocket, she pulled a sheet of paper and handed it to her brother, who began to read it right away. “Hesh, don’t you know anyone who knows anyone?” she asked while his eyes scanned the page. “Someone at Tammany Hall with the ear of a senator? Someone who could get Yussel a visa?”

Still reading, Uncle Heshie shook his head.

Alfie bounded into the room, screeching, “And the Allies go boom boom boom!”

“What did I say about that ruckus on Shabbes, Alfie?” Ma said, straightening up, and looking around to see what else needed to be done.

“It’s not a ruckus, Ma,” Alfie said. “It’s the Great War. I’m Frank Luke and I’m shooting down German reconnaissance balloons.”

“No war is great,” Uncle Heshie said, taking the airplane from Alfie as it flew past, though his eyes never left the letter.

“Aw, Uncle Heshie,” Alfie said.

If nothing more than to stop the squabbling, I asked in Yiddish, “Do you need help, Ma?” As the only girl in the family, it was my responsibility to help with the domestic chores, but it was difficult to keep the reluctance from my tone.

I wished I shared the enthusiasm of my friends. Linda would be marrying Ralph as soon as they could, and she spent every free moment learning how to be a good and dutiful wife. And Zelda, my closest friend, was not only married, but with a baby. While she moaned about her chores—“This life is drudgery,” she’d say—she had a grin on her face and a glow in her cheeks. I knew I would have to take on the same tasks when Abe and I married, but I didn’t relish the idea. In my dreams, I kept working—either at his store or perhaps, now, at the insurance office—and hired a girl to take care of the house. But those were fantasies.

“Everything is done,” Ma said with such firmness that I took it as a reprimand.

My ears reddened as I guiltily remembered how I’d dawdled coming home, and I said, “It’s not like I can just leave work whenever I feel like.”

“Leave work? Who said anything about leaving work? I just said everything’s done. Now shush. We need to light the candles.” Ma placed the candlesticks on the thin sideboard crammed between the table and the wall. The room overflowed with furniture: sideboard next to dining table next to couch next to coffee table beside credenza and Victrola. People had to turn sideways to make room for one another, and yet still Eugene and Alfie, with a freshly folded airplane, managed to climb over and under feet as they raced through the small space.

Bustling through the drawers, Ma said, “Where are those matches?”

I shot Alfie a look as he ran past, and he surreptitiously smuggled a box of matches from his pocket into my

hand as he continued, “Boom boom boom!” He gave me a mildly worried glance, but I winked at him, willing to keep his secret. If Ma knew about Alfie sneaking cigarettes on the street, she’d hide his backside but good.

“Here they are,” I said, handing her the matches. But Ma was no dip and she looked hard at Alfie; he avoided her eye by rushing into the bathroom.

“Go ahead and light the candles,” Ma said.

I struck the match on the side of the box. The wisp of smoke and the crackle of the match head brought me a moment’s relief as it welcomed in the peace of Shabbes. I lit each of the four tall white candles one by one, admiring the silver holders Ma had brought from the Old World, the one treasure her mother had owned, the one thing her mother had sent with her to the New World.

When the flames stood tall, Ma and I both waved our hands over our eyes, and sang the blessing together. “Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melkch ha-olam, asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav vitzivanu, l’hadlik ner shel Shabbes.” With my eyes still closed, I took a deep breath. Ma had taught me that right after the blessing was recited, the gates of heaven briefly opened for the prayers of women. A special moment only for us. Silently I sent up my plea. Please, dear God in heaven. No.

My solitude was interrupted when I was knocked in the legs by Eugene as he ran past me with his airplane, taking a tumble to the floor. Glancing up, I saw my mother also awakened from reverie. What had she been asking for?

Shaking her head, Ma said, “All of you! Off to your father for your blessings while I get food on the table.”

Uncle Heshie rose and scooped up Eugene. “Come on, scamp,” he said, lifting the boy over the back of the couch and handing him to Tateh.

“Isidore,” Ma called. “Come out for Shabbes.”

From the back bedroom the three boys shared, Izzy appeared, tall and thin, on the cusp of manhood but still boylike in his movements.

Ma walked into the kitchen, her limp more pronounced than usual. I followed her in, saying, “I can put things on the table.”

“Shah, shah. Get your blessing. Then you help.”

Blessing. I was nineteen years old and still being blessed as if I were nine. I opened my mouth to complain—again—but my mother cut me off before I could start. “Until you are married, you are a child.”

My hand moved to my belly of its own accord. When she found out, would she still think me a child? When she knew the shame of what I had done, would she even consider me a daughter?

Retreating to the main room, I waited for my father to finish blessing the boys. When they were done, I stooped unceremoniously so my father could reach the top of my head from his seated position. I was as tall as he was and the whole process felt humiliating. Tateh recited the words in Hebrew. May God make you like Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah. May God grant you favor and peace.

Sarah and Rachel hadn’t brought disgrace upon their families. I kissed my tateh and, fighting tears, retreated to the kitchen. Ma held a platter of chicken.

"I got it, Ma," I said, and she handed it over. Her steps were uneven. "Is it going to rain tonight?" I asked.

Ma peered out the window. "Do you see clouds?"

"No," I said, walking to the table. "But your leg is bothering you."

Returning to the kitchen for more platters, I saw what I would have sworn was a blush on my mother's cheeks, not that my mother ever blushed.

"My leg has seen worse things than standing all day cooking." She turned away from me quickly.

I stifled a groan. Picking a platter of boiled potatoes with parsley from the counter, I said, "I know, Ma." I had heard the story so many times I could recite it in my sleep. The czar's army. The horse trampling her. Her leg that had never quite healed properly. I snuck a look at Ma from the corner of my eye, trying to picture her as a young woman in the midst of a political protest. But it was too hard to imagine. Ma, with her always-flushed face and her doughy figure, could never have been nineteen.

"Come," Ma said to everyone. "Dinner."

The family gathered. Some Shabbeses three or four guests would cram around the table. Tonight only Uncle Heshie joined us. Ma's bachelor brother, who lived all the way up in the Bronx, was a Shabbes regular.

I took my seat next to Eugene, where I could easily help him cut his food and keep him away from Alfie. Those two couldn't sit together for more than five minutes without turning into fighter planes or battleships or whatever the game of the day was. Across from me were Alfie and Izzy, and Tateh held court at the head of the table. Ma always sat at the foot, ready to dart into the kitchen as needed. She practically ate standing, jumping up and down so often, piling more food on plates, retrieving the forgotten salt, grabbing a rag to clean a spill.

For exactly two minutes and forty-eight seconds—I had often counted it in my head—the table sat quietly while Tateh recited the blessings over the wine and the challah. And then, the eruption of boys. Hands flew into the platters of food, and—as she did every night—Ma reprimanded. "Boys!" Her tone was stern, but we were all so used to it that we barely paid attention. "Your father and Uncle Heshie first." Her hand reached out and smacked the wrist of the nearest child, who tonight was Alfie.

"Ow!" Alfie said.

"I'll give you something to 'Ow' about," Ma said.

I rolled my eyes. Nothing ever changed. Tateh took his time, reaching toward the platters and grabbing one of the chicken legs.

"Aw, I want a pulke," Eugene said.

"There are two," Ma said.

"But I want one, too," Alfie said.

"You got it last week." Eugene's little voice rose to match that of his big brother.

While the boys argued, Izzy kept his eye on Tateh and as soon as our father's plate was filled and Uncle Heshie had grabbed a breast, Izzy—without a word—grabbed the other leg, brought it to his mouth, and took

a big bite.

“Not fair!” said Eugene as Alfie said, “Why, I oughta—”

“Enough!” Ma said. “Stop your bickering. There’s plenty more chicken to go around.”

Uncle Heshie laughed. “I was hoping for another Braddock-Baer match right at the table.”

“I’m Braddock,” Eugene said. He sat taller in his seat, puffing his chest.

“Yes, and I’m Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” Ma said. “Now eat the chicken you have.”

“But I want dark meat,” Eugene said.

Ma’s temper was nearing a breaking point, so I took a thigh off the platter and served it to Eugene. I leaned close to him and whispered, “This is better than the pulke. Bigger chunks of meat for a growing boy like you.” So near to Eugene, I breathed in the scent of boy: the salt of his sweat, the faint smell of penny candy lingering on his cheeks, the sweet musk of his skin. For just a moment, the world was right. I kissed him on the temple of his forehead and Eugene looked up and smiled. Sometimes I wished the world could be just me and Eugene. My favorite moments were when he came to me: crawling onto my couch after a bad dream, looking for a bandage when he scraped his knee, telling me what happened on the school yard.

I cut Eugene’s chicken into small pieces. To me, the chicken seemed rubbery and sick, which I knew wasn’t true; Ma cooked the best chicken. Truthfully, I felt rubbery and sick, and I didn’t know how I was going to choke down the meat. I took the paltriest serving I could without attracting Ma’s attention, but Ma’s eyes were on my plate in a heartbeat.

“You’re too good for the chicken? Eat more.”

It was easier to place more food on my plate than to argue with Ma. When she wasn’t looking, though, I slipped a few pieces off my plate onto Eugene’s. Eugene waggled his eyebrows at me, so I stuck out my tongue and tried to touch my nose with it, which made him giggle.

Across the table, Uncle Heshie said to Alfie, “So Baer’s hands have been deemed healthy enough to fight Joe Louis.”

“Eh, Baer is washed up,” Alfie said. “Give me Braddock any day.”

“Don’t think you can count him out yet,” Izzy said, and he and Alfie began to squabble back and forth.

Heshie laughed and winked at me. “Look at these two, fighting about fighters.”

I smiled, but I couldn’t make the edges of my mouth go up quite far enough as I pushed the chicken about my plate. I didn’t think there was any way to successfully swallow the food and keep it down, so I just pretended to bring a forkful to my mouth.

At the other end of the table, Tateh took a large bite of chicken and said, “Did you read about those crazy British?”

“Tateh,” I said. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.” My family ate like we lived in a boardinghouse. I took a chunk of chicken on my fork and cut it delicately into four pieces. My napkin was on my lap and my elbows were off the table.

Ignoring me, Tateh went on. "They think Eden puts his foot down and Mussolini abandons the idea of war with Ethiopia? Fools."

Ma snapped irritably, which meant she hadn't had a chance to sit with her Forverts. When she did, she enjoyed arguing politics. "I should know what's happening in Ethiopia? As if I have time to sit and read the whole paper? With a bushel of boys and Shabbes to prepare?"

I cut each of the four pieces of chicken into four pieces. Sixteen pieces. Could each one be cut yet four more times? Sixty-four pieces, which I could then make into two hundred and fifty-six shreds. How many times could I divide the chicken into fours?

"Mussolini will not accept economic concessions. He's looking for farmland," Tateh said.

"Mussolini and his buddy Hitler are going to drag us into war," Uncle Heshie said.

"Would that be the worst thing?" Ma asked.

"War is a capitalistic tool, Rose." Uncle Heshie waved his fork, as if punctuating the air. "We shouldn't be fighting other nations; we should be banding together to promote the cause of the working class."

"The socialist cause is all well and fine, except that fascism is a greater evil than capitalism. Mussolini supports Hitler. I will stand by the socialists right up to the line where Jewish lives are at stake."

While I often acted as if the political talk held no interest for me, it was hard to stay silent; politics was in the very air in our house. My parents lived their causes, and I could no more remain ignorant than I could not breathe. While lying on my couch at night, I often picked up the Forverts from the table next to me, and it was difficult to keep my opinions to myself. "Jewish lives are definitely at stake. Did you read that over a hundred thousand people attended Julius Streicher's anti-Jewish rally in Berlin?" This, however, turned out to be a poor move on my part, as it only drew Ma's attention to my plate.

"Dottala, you think I don't see what you're doing? Stop playing and start eating."

To distract Ma from my food, I set down my fork and knife and announced, "I have news."

"News?" Ma appeared alarmed. "What news? Who's sick?"

Always it was like this. Assuming the worst, assuming something terrible befell family or friends. "No one's sick, Ma." Her pessimism irked me. "Not all news is bad news." Of course, my real news was as bad as it gets, but I was trying not to think of that.

"Nu? You have good news? So share already," Ma said.

"I would, Ma, if you'd let me get a word in."

"Now, now," Tateh said, ever the calming voice when it came to me and Ma. "What's your news?"

At this point, I didn't even want to tell them, but forced into a corner, I said, "I received a promotion today."

"A promotion!" Ma's face instantly drained of the worry, replaced by a beaming smile. "Bubelah. I'm so proud."

The tiniest of smiles crossed my face. "I'm now the head bookkeeper of the office. The girls all report to

me.”

“A head bookkeeper? My daughter the head bookkeeper.” Ma fluttered her hands happily before placing them on her cheeks. She beamed with delight. “Wait until Lana hears about this. She was just bragging about her daughter’s new sewing job the other day. Not my daughter! No manual labor for her. A head bookkeeper.” Ma had spent long hours hunched over pieces of fabric and took pride in the fact that I was not working with my hands. In school, whenever Izzy or I brought home a less-than-perfect grade, she’d say, “You will work with your mind, not your hands! Do better.”

“Didja get a raise?” Alfie asked.

Leave it to Alfie to bring up the money. That boy was a hustler, fast on his way to life as a goon, if he didn’t watch himself. He was always scrounging for work, looking to make a dollar. He chopped wood in the street to sell for firewood, which would have been fine if he didn’t spend his earnings on cigarettes and crap games. Trying to turn a buck into a five-spot was his only objective.

I arched my eyebrow at Alfie. “It’s undignified to discuss finances,” I said. Low-class was what I was thinking, but I knew that would earn a scolding from Ma.

“Aw, come on,” Alfie said.

Izzy looked at me. “Well, didja?”

With a sigh, I said, “I did.” For just a moment I hesitated. “A big one.”

“How much?” Alfie asked.

I waited for someone to correct him, but not only did no one do so. They were all looking at me for an answer. “I’ll be earning”—I paused dramatically, wanting to revel in my new riches—“twenty-three dollars and fifty cents a week.” My mind toyed with the numbers. That was \$1,222 a year. Every week, I gave my parents \$12 of my paycheck. If I now gave them \$15 a week, I’d have \$442 a year just for me. Enough to have a nice stash of cash for an apartment with Abe.

“Murder!” Alfie said. “That’s aces, Dottie.”

“Language, Alfie,” Ma said.

“Impressive,” Uncle Heshie said, and Tateh beamed his approval.

A furrow appeared on Ma’s forehead. “Maybe now you’ll save a little?”

“Ma, I just got the promotion. Let me enjoy it.” Ma could sound like a broken record: “Save a little. Save a little. Save a little.” Truth be told, I wanted to save money, but I couldn’t go about dressed in shmattas. Especially now. A new dress was called for. After all, the ones I owned didn’t seem to fit anymore. I pushed down a rising gag.

“How are you and Abe going to afford an apartment and all the furnishings if you don’t start saving a little?” Tateh asked.

“Not you, too,” I said.

Ma shrugged. “If you don’t want to save enough to get married and start your own family, who am I to say

anything?”

“And yet that never stops you, does it?” Izzy said. His teasing lightened the mood, and Tateh laughed even as Ma sat unsure of whether to reprimand or chuckle. Izzy was filling out; he was taller and less gangly than he had been just a year ago. Though he was seventeen and had graduated high school, in my mind, he was still the little kid in glasses who ran with a bad gang, with Lefty Iskowitz and No Legs Grossman. No Legs had wooden stumps and crutches, but he hadn’t let it stop him from being one of the fastest delinquents on the street. But now the gang wasn’t so bad and the boys were growing up. Lefty worked as a foreman at the brass and copper company, and No Legs was learning tailoring. Not many jobs for a man with no legs—he’d been crushed by a streetcar as a toddler—but he had good hands and a gentle way with a needle. Izzy, though, was to start night school in September to earn a law degree. Izzy was in-between, not a child, not an adult, and I felt an unease during his moments of maturity, as he turned into a man I didn’t recognize as my younger brother.

“Well, this is wonderful. A toast,” Tateh said, lifting his glass filled with sweet wine. “L’chaim.”

“L’chaim,” we all said, raising our glasses. I tried to hold on to this moment, this joy. Would it be my last? I would have to tell Ma, but not yet. I wanted to clutch this happiness for at least a few days longer. And who knew? Maybe I’d wake the next morning with my courses. Maybe this was all a mistake. A miscalculation.

And so we continued our meal as Alfie and Eugene gossiped about Will Rogers and the New York Giants, as Tateh discussed union politics with Uncle Heshie, as Ma nervously surveyed the table, making sure everyone had enough. Izzy devoured his third plate of food, while I tried to nibble at the chicken, each swallow accompanied by a hard bone of fear.

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