

Prelude

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Mickey Fineburg's email brings everything back again.

Hi, Sarah. Remembering those good 'ol days in the neighborhood. Saw your CDs online. Sampled the links. Wow! Impressive. How did you end up in California?

I kissed Mickey under a broken pool table in my basement. We were eight, his lips warm as play dough, pressing with earnest intention. I pressed back, happy and unafraid, oblivious to Mickey's younger brother watching us. That night at the dinner table Mother looked stern and surprised. She said: *Mickey's mother called me. You're too young to start, Sarah.*

Start what? I wondered.

I do a quick search online. His company bio says he resides in Greenwich, Connecticut, after living in London for twenty-three years. Married with three children. I write Mickey back — “Thank you so much. I moved west after high school. Just read your company bio. Did you like living overseas?”

Mickey answers right away. *Loved London. New England is a shock. Remember those fires we burned? Can you believe our parents let us do that?*

I write: “Your dad wasn't too happy about it.”

In the fall, Mickey's dad and my father raked leaves from our lawns, scraping and pushing leaves into piles on our small, dead-end street, then setting those leafy mounds aflame, Mickey and I poked at truant sparks. We lit sticks and spun smoky spirals in the air.

Another message: *Lost Dad last year. Mom's doing pretty well in assisted living but her memory's gone. What about your father?*

I write back: "So sorry to hear that. My father lives with his second wife in Florida. He can't walk — bad hips — but his memory is intact."

Mickey lived next door. I knew the Fineburgs the way I knew the border of fir trees dividing our properties: always there, a part of my neighborhood. That kiss was a childhood game we played once like other games, like war or kickball or hide and seek — nothing more; his dad was someone who waved to me from behind a lawn mower.

Then Mickey writes: *I hope this doesn't sound too personal but you're up late...*

I've been through this hundreds of times, this stirring about the house at three, four a.m., this deep hour when people closest in my life — Alan, my husband — and three sons, dissolve like particles in a sea. Time at this hour doesn't follow lines but circles and dips into underwater caves. My kids all live on the East Coast, post-grads in Maine, Vermont and Massachusetts. Alan would be asleep in our bed, but he's in New York on a business trip.

I write one last time. "So nice to hear from you after so many years. Thanks for getting in touch."

Then I turn off the computer, switch off my desk light, and in the darkness move down the hall to bed, returning to the past for answers, skipping as it is easy to do in my older mind from one year to the next, to a place that is no longer there. It's as if I'm swimming toward forever, only backwards.

Chapter One

The Dinner Table

I grew up in a six-bedroom house in Soquaset, Massachusetts. Nobody spelled the name of our town correctly. Letters came to our house that said Soquashit or Sacquatics, or Socket. And Massachusetts always invited too many esses and not enough tees. The town, seven miles inland, was close enough to water by car but a good hour north of Boston. In the fifties and sixties the town flourished and became known for its excellent school system and lush neighborhoods. By the time I turned seven, Mother let me — the second oldest and only daughter of four — walk to Soquaset Square without an adult.

Our blue, clapboard house had slanted ceilings in the attic bedrooms where my oldest and youngest brothers slept; window seats in the den; and closets full of Mother's gowns, high-heeled shoes and cedar shoehorns. Neighbors admired our house for its stained glass windows in the turn of the stairs and in the dining room windows facing west. At dinner-time, when the sun exited the front yard, it left a trail of orange shadows across my plate.

“Anybody home? Hello? Anybody home?” On weeknights at a quarter to six, Father trudged up our driveway, flung open the kitchen door, and bellowed his greeting as if he expected our house to be empty and the furniture cleared out. He was a tenured professor at a small, private college, who rarely modulated his voice between podium and pantry. To think there might be a difference didn’t occur to Professor Leonard Kunitz.

“Hello? Irene! I’m home!” The kitchen door closed with a determined thud.

“Irene?”

“Coming, Leonard.”

In harmonic contrast Mother floated down from the bedroom to meet him for a pre-dinner drink. She moved without gravity, a cumulative effect of her pain pills, the ones she took three times a day. Together in the den, Father flipped two shots of vodka down his throat while Mother drank Scotch with a twist of lime and one ice cube. She took medium swallows. They smoked cigarettes in flowered armchairs, embraced by the arc of the bay windows that gave us a grand view of the backyard.

Usually dinner lasted all of twenty minutes — a frantic rush to gulp down firsts, then seconds.

“There’s more chicken in the kitchen,” Mother said. “Luanne? Could you bring what’s left?” Luanne was our Black maid from Haiti.

Father sat at the head of the table and ate like a starved child, his dark, quick eyes scooping up the slightest imperfections in everyone around him. He had small shoulders, a slight paunch, and

wore loosely tucked in shirts, blazers, knit ties, and crumpled corduroy pants, which set him apart from Mother's fastidious appearance and those of her country club peers.

"Leonard, there's plenty of rice."

Opposite him, Mother sat straight as a violin bow, her back to the kitchen. The kids sat two and two on either side. Mother's dyed blond hair was short and layered like rose petals, her favorite flower. Adorned in a suit and matching scarf, she looked streamlined as a glass vase, and fashionable, even when she came in from the garden in slacks, the dirt and thorns clinging to her gloves.

"Why don't you start the coffee now," Mother said, as Luanne carried in more chicken and rice in a covered dish and set it on the table.

"What are we having for dessert, Irene?" Father asked.

"Cookies."

Mother had petite features — tiny wrists, slim calves that she liked to show off at parties — and the largest collection of shoes in the neighborhood. On her side of the family, Grandpa Joe built a successful shoe manufacturing company, which my uncle took over and managed. Mother was the silent partner and the reason people said we were rich.

On our small street, an elderly lady, Mrs. Brenwald, lived on the other side of us. She never went outside. Every Saturday a boy from the town market delivered grocery bags to her front porch. When I had nothing to do, I crouched by the living room window and waited for her to appear behind a

curtain at night. Did she have a secret? An ugly past? My younger brother, Robert, said she was a witch but I believed that she floated in a world between earth and heaven — a harmless ghost, a lost angel.

The only evidence that Mrs. Brenwald once had an existence outside her house sat in her driveway. An antique Ford covered in a sheet was anchored to tires profoundly out of breath, squashed by endless seasons passing. More than once, Father called the police to take the car away. “A pile of crap,” he called it, but the car remained impervious even to him.

This proved to me that Mrs. Brenwald made a pivotal decision many years ago, and that she had willed her life into its present shape. I found this idea both mystifying and attractive. To form one’s destiny seemed monumental, like exploding holes through a mountain to get to the other side. But, in fact, that’s what I wanted to do.

I’d like to believe that Mother wanted that too, choosing an alternate path that even she didn’t expect.

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“Sarah, bring me *The Complete Works*, will you?” Father said. He waved his fork like a sword, stabbing it in the air while he chewed his last bite of chicken breast.

I dashed through the rooms, across carpeting green as the fairways at the country club where we belonged. In the den with its built-in bar and bookshelves, I found the book of Shakespeare housed

behind a picture of Father dressed in toddler's clothes. His thick hair fell in ringlets to his shoulders, his white apron — a popular outfit of the period — rimmed his ankles.

My great grandmother, Sarah Davida, was there too, on the shelf, staring out from her tiny village in Russia. Her name, which I inherited, meant “beloved princess” in Hebrew. She wanted to become an opera star but that was an absurd dream for a poor, Jewish farm girl. Instead, she milked cows and married a teacher from the old country, a quiet, studious man who peered over the Torah. I stared at her picture and wondered what it must have felt like to give up a dream, to stand before the mountainside, the beautiful sky beyond, and realize that she had to turn away and go back down into a small, grimy town. I didn't want that to be my fate.

She sang at *shul*. She sang to lighten her chores, she sang to her five children before bed at night; and through those children, she transported her musical seeds and they grew inside me.

*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high—*

Judy Garland's voice bubbled in my mind as I scanned the family line-up. Further down the shelf, my grandmother looked square-faced. Tired. She died when I was too young to know her, a cold turned to pneumonia. Father told us she had blue periods, dark phases signaled by closed shades. In their Brooklyn apartment, his mother drank tea on a couch “the color of flamingos!” On better days, something would



shift in her, he said — the sun warming the kitchen table in the morning — and soon the house filled with her friends from the sisterhood, temple organizers, and bake sale fundraisers. The smell of cinnamon and coffee meant good times at home. Maybe this is what Father saw in Mother when they met: a darkness familiar to him in his childhood.

“Sarah? Are you lost? We’re waiting for you!” Father called to me.

I carried the book back to the table and sat down. By then, Luanne had cleared away the plates for dessert. She was a shy, comely woman with walnut brown skin who spoke in hushed, guarded tones around my parents. She became another person when my parents went out.

“Please, sing me that bridge song again,” I asked when I found her dusting a lamp in the den. I sat on the couch and squeezed my knees to my chest to show her I meant it. *Please?* She held a dust rag in her hand. The smell of lemon polish made my nose itch. It opened the pores in my brain.

She looked out the bay windows and opened her mouth in a wide “*O — Oh, Lord, show me that bridge. I’m standing at the water, and I can’t see that bridge.*” It surprised me how she talked in a whisper yet sang solid and penetrating as an oboe.

On Sunday, her day off, she wore white hoop earrings, purple lipstick and a torso-hugging blue dress with matching hat. She walked to the end of our street. A Black man picked her up in a white Dodge Dart and brought her back late the next evening, after I was asleep.

“We’ll have our dessert and coffee now,” Mother said to Luanne. Mother straightened her shoulders whenever she spoke to what she called *the help*. Luanne nodded and headed back to the kitchen.

“Hamlet was riddled with ambiguities,” Father explained, opening the book and licking his lips. “I’ll do the openers.” He took a deep breath and boomed out the first line, “*Who’s there?*”

“Leonard, don’t shout,” Mother said, tapping her ears.

“You do it then,” he said, supremely offended. He pushed the book at me and I passed it over to Mother.

“I’d like to read Ophelia’s part.” She turned the thin pages, squinting at the words. “*Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?*” She over-enunciated ‘commerce’ and ‘honesty’ as if her mouth were pained or tied down by something I couldn’t see.

“Ophelia doesn’t hiss, Irene. Read it again.”

“I’m not hissing. *Could beauty, my lord...*”

Luanne nudged open the swinging door and placed a platter of oatmeal cookies in the middle of the table.

“Coffee?” Mother said, turning toward her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I thought we were starting after dessert,” Elliot said. My youngest brother reached for a handful of cookies but Mother stopped him.

“Start with one, luv,” Mother said.

Elliot looked like Uncle Max. Soft around the stomach, and wide-faced, he was the baby but possibly

the wisest of us all who kept his deepest thoughts to himself, preferring sedentary activities. Slow to speak, he gave the impression of excessive dreaminess.

“Okay,” he said.

“I’ll read Or-feelya,” Robert said. He spoke in high grating tones.

“O-feel-ee-ah!” Father corrected him. “Say it.”

“I’ll feel ya,” Peter joked, grabbing a cookie with long, dexterous fingers. He was pale and light-haired like me. The oldest at seventeen, he sank into his chair, lanky — all arms and legs, a shadow of a mustache defining his upper lip.

Father pounded a fist on the table. “Enough!” The storm perpetually brewing beneath his skin surfaced and made his face turn red.

Everyone was silent except for the swinging door. Luanne walked back in with two cups of coffee.

“Bring the coffee here, girl.” Father fished a cigarette from his shirt pocket and separated his saucer from his coffee cup to use it for an ashtray.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” I wanted to shout, but my words stayed mute inside my head.

“Luanne, the ashtrays are in the cupboard,” Mother said. “Above the refrigerator.” She spoke slowly, a careful movement of her lips.

Robert jumped up, pressing his hands to his ears. “I can’t listen to this family!” He ran upstairs howling. Craven and overexcited, words spat out of Robert’s mouth from the time he had taught himself to read when he was three. We heard his footsteps and the bedroom door slam. Mother pressed her lips until they whitened.

“Give me the book, Irene.”

She obeyed.

“Sarah, tell Robert to come back down here. He was not excused.” He took a cookie and pushed it whole into his mouth. His cheeks changed shape, sticking out like miniature fists. The oatmeal crumbs settled on the corners of his mouth.

“Do it now.”

I slid out. We all knew Father’s rule. Families who ate together got excused together. Anyone who veered from this cardinal regulation risked punishment. I feared for Robert who upstairs was hanging over the side of his bed reading a book. His dark hair shot up like his thoughts, abruptly and sharp.

“You’re invading my privacy,” he said.

“Dad wants you to come down.”

“I’m reading.”

“Just come down,” I said in an attempt to offer an older sister’s advice, “or he’ll blow up again.” I was three years older than Robert and knew if I stood still, he would calm down enough to reconsider. He prickled and folded his shoulders, then shoved the book under his bed and followed me down.

By now it was pitch-black outside and the large globe light above the table reflected off the windows like a bloated fish.

Robert stood in front of Father.

“You will not,” Father said, smacking Robert on the cheek, “leave the table without permission. Now you may be excused.”

Robert burst into tears and tore back upstairs. Father headed to his den office and slammed the

door. Elliot started humming. I couldn't move, paralyzed by my unintended betrayal of Robert.

"Elliot, time for a bath. Sarah, Peter, you have homework," Mother said.

"You've got to be kidding!" Peter said, shoving his chair out from the table.

Ashamed and horrified by what I'd done, I went upstairs to my desk and stared out my bedroom window at the weeping birch tree that hunkered over the driveway in the dark. Later that night, I knocked on Robert's door to apologize but he wouldn't let me in. He had pushed his bureau in front of the door.

"I'm really sorry," I said through the keyhole.

I went to bed and stayed awake a long time waiting for sleep, my raw stomach unable to settle down. The hall light shone into my room. I tried humming. The vibrations of notes calmed my nerves. Ahhh, ooooo, eeeee. *Oh Lord, show me the bridge.* I mimicked the way Luanne opened her mouth and felt the tone change on my tongue, then shiver along the path of my cheekbones.

I watched the treetops out my window, thin tall pine trees like still figures watching back, and the long backyard that curved up to the stars. The bright moon gleamed on the wooden floors and made my floor melt and become liquid as a pond. I invented songs. In this universe away from my father's explosions and Mother's thin voice, I imagined standing solo on stage singing to an auditorium filled with understanding faces. *Come and see what I see.*

I sang to the moon, the hall light, and my memory of the honey summer light when the low sun

slunk into my room in warm weather. I hummed. I changed my notes from high to low. I rolled them on my tongue. Singing was like eating. It filled a hungry feeling.