

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black tank top and light-colored pants, is sitting on a white windowsill. She is looking out of a large window at a city skyline. The Empire State Building is prominent in the background. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. White curtains are visible on the right side of the window.

**WHAT**  
**MATTERS**

**MOST**

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# PROLOGUE

S U M M E R 1 9 6 3

**E**stelle held the letter from Spain in her hands. It was the night before her wedding, the last time she'd sleep in her childhood room on Morris Avenue with the sagging twin beds, the chipped dresser made of faux wood and the faded pink curtains that had yellowed around the edges. She sat in her old rocker that her mother had decorated with rose bouquet decals a decade before, boxes, taped closed, filled with her first year medical texts at her feet. Across the narrow room, the largest container was positioned with its sides up, filled with her poodle skirt, a few jumpers, and her old dungarees, the rest her mother was to donate to B'nai B'rith. She envisioned the plain brown moving carton as a gigantic Jack-in-the-Box, its lid open, with a Jester in a tri-colored hat primed to pop out: surprise.

The real surprise was that this message should arrive this week, after years of no contact. With all the preparations for the wedding — the final fitting of the dress after Estelle had dropped five pounds from nerves, the rehearsal dinner at the Pierre Hotel, compliments of her future in-laws, the bachelor party at Peter Luger's Steakhouse — she hadn't allowed herself a moment to ponder the significance of the letter's timing.

Until the moment when she glimpsed its crinkled presence in her apartment's mail slot, she'd felt invincible, having taunted the fates: see, even a *kurveh*, a whore, can start a new life! For three days, she'd carried this missive in her pocketbook along with her red lipstick compact with the tiny mirror and a coin purse. She gazed now at the envelope adorned with colorful airmail Espana stamps,

addressed to her in his swooping black calligraphy.

Carefully, she ran her fingernail under the lip of the envelope to loosen its hold. She could hear herself breathing above the sound of her mother washing the dinner plates and her father listening to *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. Before reading, she glanced at the door to her room, then at her closet, as if expecting one of her parents, primed to catch her in this illicit act, to jump out of the shadows.

*Estella Mi Querida,*

*I have lost some of my English being so long out of your wonderful country. Forgive me. A long time passes since we saw each other but I have not forgotten. I am hoping that you have not forgotten either. I have not heard from you years ago when I sent you letters. I am giving you the place I will be when I am coming to New York in two months time. If you write to me I will know that you want the same as me. I am looking forward to that, Estella. ¿Tú recuerdas?*

*My love to you, belleza.*

His name was scribbled and would be indecipherable to anyone not familiar with his script. The signature, self-important in its illegibility, was inconsequential to Estelle. She planned to ignore this correspondence as she had the others. She would never confess the significance he'd held, how the memory of him was one she'd never have the luxury of discarding, how their relationship had left a residue in her heart clear enough to be detected by an X-Ray or a loved one.

# PART ONE

GEORGIE, 2000

## ONE

**H**er father's funeral was packed with patients, those clever thieves whom Georgie had imagined faking stomach aches and fevers all those years, in order to steal him — his sepia eyes, half-cocked smile and warm hands — away from her. One of the taller girls, with little buds of breasts, stepped up to the rabbi's pulpit to read a eulogy in a fluty voice. In one hand, she clutched the satin ribbon of her black purse, while with the other she busily tucked her scotch-colored hair behind her flushed ear.

"Dr. Merkin wasn't like the doctors who stick a cold stethoscope on your chest and call you by the wrong name. He actually talked to *me* not to, you know, my mom while *pretending* to talk to me. When I got really sick with pneumonia last year, he showed up at my house with the Narnia series which, you know, is something doctors just don't do anymore these days."

The girl shook her head and took a big, dramatic breath. "I'll never forget him."

*So earnest. Of course she'll forget,* Georgie thought, jealousy aching like an old scar that should have healed decades ago.

A month before he died — when he'd received the ominous news that the cancer had spread to his liver — Adam Merkin had set out to write a letter to each and every one of his pediatric clients. None of the letters contained instructions about caring for their bodies once he was no longer there to do it for them. Instead, they were wistful reminiscences of his youth — tales of canoeing in the lakes of Vermont during summer break, or stories about camping trips with his boyhood friends — mixed with encouragement and well wishes.

*Johnny, don't give up the violin when the going gets tough, as I know you have it in you to persist. Ashley, thank you so much for the beautiful drawing of my waiting room. The daisies you added were an excellent touch. I'm sorry I never placed a vase of them next to the tank of guppies.*

Georgie had secretly longed to receive a missive too, yet could barely admit this wish to herself. She couldn't permit the childish thought to mingle in her brain with its more sophisticated rivals.

She remembered now her father's reaction to the death of a terminal patient, a girl who died of leukemia at seven, Georgie's own age at the time. That night, she'd awoken to her father's gulping sobs, and had imagined baby seals being clubbed to death, their skulls crushed even as their animal screams rang into the Arctic air. Her second grade teacher had been lecturing their class on cruelty to animals all that week. Georgie heard her mother cooing, "Ssh, now Adam. You did everything possible for her. No one could have done more."

Georgie had tiptoed to the hall bathroom and, once in the narrow space, slipped and banged her knee on the pipe that curled like the bottom of an S under the sink. She'd lain, balled up on the floor, legs close to her chin, and licked her wound. Her mouth had gone dry, and had a metallic taste in it. She must have fallen asleep on the black and white tiles because, in the morning, her mother propped her into a standing position.

"What are you doing here?" Estelle asked in a tired voice.

"I heard Daddy crying last night. I was scared."

"I'm sorry about that, Georgie. But your father was very upset."

"Me, too. He was crying because a little girl died."

"C'mon, out of here now," her mother had sighed. "You're fine. This isn't about you."

In the most literal sense, her mother had been right. Now, her father's death was not about her either. So it shouldn't have mattered that Georgie read nothing, wrote nothing in commemoration. Or that she did not, could not, cry, that it took all her energy just to breathe. Still, both the rabbi and her Aunt Lily had questioned her about saying a few words. "Darling, you should get up there and memorialize Adam. You're the writer in the family, after all," Lily had said. "You're looking wonderful, so thin."

Georgie's mother, Estelle Merkin, OB/GYN, did deliver a

eulogy, imposing in her Donna Karan mourning suit, her hair slicked back in the tightest of pony tails, her inky eyes staring fiercely at the back of the room, her mouth a red circle emitting perfect diction.

When the services were over people flooded around both mother and daughter, some weeping, others shaking their heads. "Why should such a lovely man, such a wonderful, caring doctor, be taken while my father-in-law, the nastiest man alive is still in excellent health at 85 years old?" asked a woman with mottled skin.

A nurse in Adam's office—a zaftig woman with blond curls and dimples—squeezed Georgie's forearm so hard she left a faint mark. "This was far and away *the* best funeral I've ever been to. Believe me, honey," the fat woman clucked, bearing down on her flesh. "I've been to more than my share and this was a class act."

Luke Carter, Georgie's ex-husband, kissed his former mother-in-law. He was all dressed up in his Prada wing-tipped shoes and black Italian suit with the starched white shirt, the too-tight collar causing a web of rash to spread. Georgie had the urge to elbow him and ask, "Attending another fundraiser with your mother, for Read America hosted by Barbara Bush?" But the truth was: she was grateful for his attendance.

"Call me tomorrow, Georgie," Luke said, paler than usual with his feathery hair rising up in the wind. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other and squinted into the sky.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Georgie and Luke's son Jesse asked. His round-eyed face scrunched up in concern, this nine-year-old protector of his mother's heart. The lifted eyebrows, the steady, piercing gaze, were birthrights, as noted by several maternity nurses: "He's so intelligent, but a little worrier," was the standard line. After her divorce, Georgie joked that her son assumed the role of E.T. to her Elliot, an empathetic, perceptive being, wise for his age and in-sync with her every mood. She needed to tread lightly when in pain, to never forget her maternal responsibility to shelter her son, both physically and emotionally.

Georgie nodded now. Her head felt fuzzy as if wrapped in cobwebs, and her sinuses were clogged. She touched her boy's silky skin and smiled. "Sure, honey. Go home with daddy. Watch *Episode 1* and order up Chinese. I'll be in to get you first thing in the morning."

"Okay," he agreed, his brows still knitted together.

Out of nowhere, Estelle appeared, and sidled up to Jesse. "I'm glad you were here and I know Grandpa would be too. You're the only one I wanted to see today," she whispered loudly.

Georgie's cousin Nina accompanied her to the limousine that would drive them to the cemetery. "Everyone is saying that this is the best funeral they've ever been to," she said.

"In our family, competition is brutal even in death," Georgie said, floating above her feelings like a slab of ice on water. "Wait till we get back to my mom's. There will be a can-you-top-this race for the most brilliant accomplishment of the year."

"Don't forget  
the bathing suit  
competition," Nina  
said.

"It's the number one draw, bigger than the talent show. Cousin Alex's a shoo-in to win in a bikini, that is if you're partial to the Holocaust survivor look, very big in our circles."

Georgie looked at her and smiled. Nina was all hair, hands, impossibly long legs and size ten feet, well-dressed, five-foot-ten and model-thin no matter how many calories she consumed, pink-complected with symmetrical patches of freckles running from either side of her nose, a killer smile. Nina the Good: mother of two sweet girls, wife to gastroenterologist Elliot Shulman, and eagerly sought-after psychologist. Her client list included C.E.O.s; fashion models desperate to keep their prisoner-of-war look and teenage anorexics whose parents spent much of their million dollar salaries to keep them out of trouble. She was Georgie's best friend and her lighthouse. Two years ago, Nina had beckoned Georgie out to suburban New Jersey with promises that if she and Jesse moved there from Manhattan they'd have a saner life.

Knollwood Park Cemetery was New York's equivalent of a rush-hour subway for the dead. It was overcrowded, with a view of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. As several Merkin women hiked up to the family plot, the damp air whistled its chilly tune. The sun was nowhere to be seen but the moon hung, a wafer in the gray afternoon sky, on a day so bleak and ashen-colored you could almost hear the trees sigh in despair of ever again turning green. Estelle vowed, "I'll get my husband out of here. Adam should be

someplace beautiful, restful, someplace he'd like. A little churchyard in New England." She was as spectacular as Scarlett O'Hara who'd never go hungry again.

"Ma, we're Jewish."

"Never mind. I'll figure it out. You wait and see."

"Okay," Georgie said, and grabbed her mother's elbow to steady her. "Let me help you. I'm worried about you." Finally, after the long rolling years of childhood in which she'd prayed for her mother's approbation, maybe now there would be a way in, a niche into her soft crevice of sorrow.

But Estelle's eyes snapped furiously. "I'm fine," she said, letting her daughter close only for the brief stint uphill, wind crackling in their ears. Then she pulled away. "I meant to ask, what's with the pants? Couldn't you have found a dress, this once, for your father's funeral, even one of those shapeless smocks Eileen Fisher makes for old widows like me?"

"Ma, what do you want me to wear at my age, mini skirts? I'm not twenty-two anymore."

Suddenly, Estelle gasped as if asthmatic. Georgie wanted to scream, "Get a doctor," but, of course, almost everyone there was one. Estelle whipped around to face her daughter. She said, "I see you *did* have the presence of mind to get a pricey haircut with highlights."

Georgie felt herself blink too quickly as she replied, "You just said I looked shabby."

"I did not say that. I said that pants are too casual. Do you think Dad would care if your hair was streaked?"

"You look like you just went shopping at Saks."

It had always been this way, her mother's insistence on perfection in body as well as in mind, performed magically, without makeup or mirrors. The code: hard work was paramount but only if it was noble and of service, lipstick was acceptable but those pots and wands Georgie had begun collecting as a teenager were a sign of puerile vanity. Beauty was something that should shoot through a woman, as it had Estelle, like a waterfall, iridescent and sugar white.

"Lily bought this suit for me. She tossed things at me and I got dressed." Estelle shook her head. "I don't want to argue with you now. It's disrespectful."

At the burial site Georgie stood apart from the crowd at first,

eyeing the tombs of her dead relatives. There were the tasteful granite stones commemorating her paternal grandparents, Ruth and Eddie Merkin, who had lived long purposeful lives as a high school French teacher and an otolaryngologist, respectively. They died quickly and without fuss, within a year of each other – her grandfather of a stroke, her grandmother of a heart attack – missing their son’s first battle with cancer.

To the left, Georgie’s great-grandparents were buried, Eddie’s shmegeggy of a father and his whiz of a mother who’d sold newspapers to Wall Street brokers at a kiosk for thirty years, scribbling down the stock tips she overheard and slowly building up an inheritance for her two thankless daughters and the star of her life, her doctor son. To the right, were Georgie’s maternal grandparents, uneasy in their patch of earth, perpetual outsiders in their adopted country’s soil. The Russian inscription on their tombs reflected Grandpa Jacob’s bitterness for all he had forsaken, a dignified life as professor of Mathematics in Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv, to be stuck behind a deli counter all day, slicing kosher meat and scooping potato salad into plastic tubs.

Georgie walked over to join the others and saw that Saul Lieberman, her father’s second cousin, was passing out his card to shivering guests. He was standing far enough away from the rabbi so as not to disturb the Hebrew prayer he was reciting and which few of the clan could follow anyway.

“Rochelle is done with Princeton law school this spring and will be coming to work for my firm next fall. She made law review again,” he boasted, cocking his balding head, the tips of his large flat ears reddened from the cold. “Gotta hand it to that kid, she’s a marvel. I always knew she was smart, but not that she was the smartest damn one in the family.”

“Wonder what Rochelle’s older brother, cousin Bob, would say to that?” Nina asked as she shimmied up to Georgie. She leaned against some stranger’s tombstone, holding one shoe in her hand and massaging her long narrow toes. “These things are killing my feet.”

“I heard through the grapevine that Cousin Bob’s a drug dealer working the U.S. Mexican border. Tainted the pure bloodline,” Georgie joked.

“Actually, he’s an orthodontist with three kids, living in Short

Hills.”

“My recollection is so much more romantic.”

The Merkin women were all there, one looking more handsome than the next, as fit and trim as Hollywood’s finest, with bright eyes and flawless skin. They glowed with achievement, as did the men, their advanced degrees combed into their coiffed hair, shining from their good leather shoes and straight porcelain teeth. But Georgie knew that there were individual clan members who couldn’t manage to snap their lives like clean linen drying in the wind. There were the pill poppers and the bulimics among them. Yet, when they flocked together, she still felt that ancient push-pull of disdain and envy tugging in her chest.

Alex Merkin Grossberg – the plastic surgeon second cousin married to another plastic surgeon – approached the two women in her burgundy suit, her designer pumps poking tiny holes in the ground. “Hi Nina, Georgie. I’m so sorry about your dad. Everyone agrees he was the nicest man in the whole extended family.”

“Thanks,” Georgie said.

Through pursed collagened lips, Alex said, “I heard you made contributing editor at *Elle*.”

That’s great. Aunt Lily told my mom.” She squinted into the sky as if the non-existent sun was blinding her. “I don’t have time to read *an-y-thing*. But you guys do some pieces on beauty, right? If you ever need to interview me about anything from lipoplasty to breast augmentation, don’t hesitate to call.”

“Thanks. But my specialty is more psychological these days,” Georgie said, biting on her mouth, tweaking the truth; she was still stuck writing more health and beauty articles than she wanted. “Has been for years now, actually.”

“How you doing?” Nina asked in her shrink voice.

“I’m doing well,” Alex said, her pretty cheeks all flushed. “You know, performing lots of lipos and fat grafting. Everyone seems to want a miracle.” She threw up her hands. “Whatever happened to good old fashion dieting and exercise, I don’t know?”

Nina smiled and shrugged. “Me either. But not bad for business, I’m sure.” She raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes at Georgie, just like when they were kids.

The rabbi was wrapping it up, reciting a Hebrew prayer that not one of the reformed Merkins could comprehend. Soon, he would

request that the family shovel dirt into the grave, another mysterious practice. "Excuse me. I think I need to get closer," Georgie said.

Later, in the limo — one eye glancing her mother's way for signs of stress fractures — Georgie broke the ice with, "What's with Alex's fat lips? Can't she tell that she's overdone it, that it looks like someone punched her?"

"She's obviously anorexic," Nina responded, as if this non sequitur answered the question.

"She is very thin," Aunt Lily, Nina's mother, agreed, as she fussed with the collar of her washed-wool beige coat. She smelled of Shalimar and whatever face powder she'd been using since time immemorial to achieve that French old lady scent. Her hair — dyed an orangey red — was tamed into a chignon that she ran her hand over, chronically, to check on its position, her signature gold charm bracelet rattling down her arm. That Lily was Adam's sister was as hard to fathom as imagining Jimmy Carter sharing DNA with Nancy Reagan.

"Ah, leave her alone. Alex is a very pretty girl," said Uncle Art, a pricey gastroenterologist with an office on Central Park West. Georgie and her father used to joke that Art's patients confused the abbreviation HMO with designer initials. From the look of him — this short stocky man with bushy eyebrows and a pear-shaped nose who wore pinkie rings, raccoon coats, and silk pajamas — one might have guessed professional gambler or producer of "classy" porn. Blinking at the sight of her uncle now, Georgie conceded that she'd never call him in a medical emergency.

"Maybe she thinks starving herself is glamorous," Estelle said. "She should visit Sloan-Kettering if she wants to see glamorous." Estelle turned to gaze out the window at the overcast sky. "What do I care if Alex starves herself? My husband is dead. Adam would have loved to be able to eat these last few weeks. He had no appetite anymore."

Georgie's heart rate quickened while nausea rose into her throat. She pictured her father that last time she'd seen him, the night before he died, lying on the E.R. gurney, his face jaundiced, the startled gaze of those yellow eyes, how they darted around, death's fluid running like a river into his irises, drying up his mouth, a man made out of twigs tied loosely with twine. For one moment, he was able to focus. He raised his fleshless arm and pointed to some piece

of equipment, offering his potassium levels to the other doctors, one of the team to the end.

"I know dear," Lily said, taking Estelle's hand in hers.

"Ma, don't," Georgie said, piling her hand on top of Lily's as if they were gearing up for a game. "Don't even think about Alex. Really. Don't talk to her if she upsets you."

Estelle shrugged and slipped her hand back into her own lap. "Everyone upsets me. The fact that they're alive and Adam's not."

The Merkins' seven-room apartment remained unchanged despite the loss of one of its essential occupants. Everything was in its rightful place yet the air felt static, centuries old, the living room like a museum exhibit partitioned off from the visitors by a solid velvet robe. The flowery aroma permeated the air, eliminating all traces of dog musk. Cancer had been driven from this house but its ghost remained, hidden in the wood of Grandma Ruth's Wegner chairs, brewing in the excellent espresso, radiating out of the one hundred watt bulbs in the pewter trumpet lamps. Estelle had cleaned out the "cancer room," Adam's den that had been filled with morphine tablets, samples of Buspar, containers of Shark Cartilage, Nutrivir powder, JAMA and internet articles on breakthrough treatments and books with uplifting titles like: *Conquering Cancer* and *The Cancer Diet*. Now, in time to sit Shiva, the den had no sign of disease or of Adam, not even his red flannel jersey that he'd always flung on the back of his Lazy boy chair. Even the scent of him—Mennen deodorant, the original chalky Tums and a hint of sour dog on flesh—had been banished. "Wow," Georgie whispered under her breath. "Mom's one cool customer."

Charlene, the Merkins' housekeeper and cook for the last three decades, greeted the guests. "Oh honey," she embraced Georgie in her corpulent arms; her skin was warm and smelled of the kitchen, pot roast and her famous gravy. It felt like a holiday.

"Look at all this food, Charlene," Georgie said, tearing off her gloves with her teeth.

"Yes, Miss. There's those biscuits you like and bagels and that lox and white fish in the living room." Meaning that Jewish food, the attraction of which Charlene still didn't understand after all these years.

"Why don't you help Charlene take some of the trays out?"

Estelle asked her daughter.

"No, Dr. Merkin. I don't need Miss Georgia's help. She's been through enough. You too, go rest, Ma'am."

Estelle nodded. Charlene was one of the few people in the world from whom she would take instruction.

"Where's Odysseus?" Georgie asked, searching for Adam's old Sheepdog mix and sidekick, the beloved mutt she'd adopted for her father at the ASPCA after she'd received the glorious news that his first bout of lymphoma had gone into remission.

"Your mother put him in the kennel for the week, you know," Charlene said, shaking her head. "That dog's a gonner. Your mother never did care for him."

Georgie joined Nina in the living room with its grand piano, polished wood floor, sleek Danish furniture, and view of Central Park. "I got us some white wine from the kitchen," Nina said. "Thought you might need a glass."

"Thanks. I will as soon as the cousins arrive and start drumming up patients again."

"If only one of our relatives owned an auto repair shop," Nina sighed as she handed Georgie a goblet. "The Audi is in constant need of attention. I hate European cars. Elliot is pathetic for wanting it, his stout little phallic symbol."

"Being a mechanic is too low class. Maybe on my mother's side of the family, there are still some Ackermans who recall their immigrant status." Georgie took a sip. It was a very dry Chardonnay. She felt remarkably light, giddy even. It couldn't have been from the wine, not that quickly and not from so little.

"So should I scope out the food?" Nina asked. "See if there's any of those cheese balls your mom always orders from *Marina's*?"

"Absolutely. Get me a brioche to shove it into and some cantaloupe slices."

Squeezing her cousin's hand hard, Nina said, "I'll be right back."

Georgie turned to see cousins, friends, and colleagues arriving in a pack and – just for a moment – seemed to glimpse her father skirting through the crowd in his Hush Puppy shoes and old trench coat. He waved right at her, his long narrow face broken into a plaintive smile, his earnest brown eyes crinkled behind his reading glasses.

Striding past all the MDs and PhDs convened in the hallway, she swung open the kitchen door and beckoned Nina to join her in what had once been her bedroom and was now Estelle's study. They sat side by side on the plush aubergine couch and ate their goodies.

"Do you think it's required of me to talk to any of those people?" Georgie asked before slugging another mouthful of wine.

"Well," Nina said, "Your mother might find it rude if you don't but your dad wouldn't have cared."

When she swallowed, Georgie noticed how dry and tight her throat felt. "He'd have hidden in here with us," she said. How many times had he ducked out of family gatherings to answer the anxious calls of parents or just to escape the "BS floating around the room"?

"You know how lucky you were to have a dad like him?"

"Christ, Nina. I don't feel especially lucky right now."

"But you are, regardless." She shot Georgie a familiar look that meant: Uncle Art was not Adam.

"I never got enough of him, between my mother and his patients." She glanced over at Nina, another card-carrying member of the Merkin medical cult, wife of, daughter of, niece of, the cult that Georgie—in her selection of a career and a husband—had made sure not to perpetuate. "Sorry. I know I shouldn't complain. Maybe I just expected too much from him, from men in general."

Nina shrugged. "Or too little." She leaned her head on Georgie's shoulder, causing her plate to slide and her bagel to land, cream cheese first, on one of Estelle's prized Persian rugs. "Whoops!" Nina exclaimed, lifting up her lint-filled lunch. "I have to clean this up or she'll kill me."

"Leave it," Georgie said. "My mother doesn't have to know who did it."

"If only there were children here we could blame it on."

"Nina? It's weird but it seems like my father is still here."

"That's perfectly normal."

"Okay, because I thought I might be freaking out."

Nina inhaled deeply and reached inside her purse. "Want one just in case?" she asked. Her palm was long, the color of an eggshell. One sad-looking blue Valium sat in the center.

"Oh my God, Nina. Where did you get that? No one's taken those since 1975."

"My mother, of course. Remember?"

The last time was more than two decades ago, behind Temple Emanu-El on 5th Avenue. Aunt Lily still had her stash.

"You're a shrink. Couldn't you get someone to prescribe something of *this* century?" Georgie asked. "Never mind. I have some Klonopin at home that my mother gave me. It makes me loopy but not valium-depressed."

"Loopy is good, kid." A bit sternly, Nina added, "Just don't take it and drink."

"I won't. I took one last night and I think it made me hallucinate because this morning when I woke up, I heard my dad's voice telling me to call my mother, that she needed me."

Nina was nodding, her kinky russet-colored curls bouncing around her face. "She does. Your mom *does* need you now."

Georgie shrugged, the taste of cheese and wine stinging her tongue. "My mother never needed anyone, except maybe my father, in her entire life."

"Hey," Nina said, "she just doesn't show it. You know how prickly your mom can be."

"It's hard to be there for someone who won't let you near her. She seems pretty furious with me, even more so than usual. At the cemetery, she criticized my clothes and my hair cut."

Nina touched the caramel-brown bob. "Your hair is cute. What's wrong with it?"

Georgie shook her head. "No, the fact that I got it cut."

"Oh." Her cheeks looked hot. "It will get better. It'll take a while but Stellie will come around. She's just losing it right now."

Georgie nodded, yes, yes, but was thinking, when was it *ever* better? At any rate, the adrenaline of rage was less frightening than the alternative: crumbling grief. She had never witnessed her mother in a state of emotional disrepair and dreaded even the notion of Estelle's noble, imperious face cascading into the wordless horror of loss, a woman no longer able to galvanize herself into action. All of Georgie's life, her mother had been as regal and independent as Queen Elizabeth I who not only headed the last Tudor monarchy and established England as a major European power but never married, never had a child, and certainly never went to medical school. Georgie didn't think she could bear it, losing the familiarity of two parents at once.

"She's not falling apart, that's good, incredible really. You have to admire her for it," Nina said.

"I do." Admiration and anger were permanently wound around Georgie's heart, intertwined like a pair of socks. "I think that no matter what, my mom is strong enough to be okay."

"Stellie will be right as rain," said Aunt Lily, who had poked her head in, diamond earrings slapping her jawbone. "We were looking for you, dear. Come be polite and say hello to the guests."

Georgie rose with her half-eaten brioche because, while there might not be needs, there would always be requirements.

Vases, pots, and baskets of flowers everywhere. Stargazer lilies, heather, gerberas, snapdragons, delphinium and yellow roses. Adam would have sneezed, muttered about his "damn relatives" — not because he'd have recognized that displaying flowers was against Jewish custom but because of the allergens — and he would have sneaked out for a walk on Fifth Avenue.

How Georgie wished she could go with him.

For the rest of the afternoon, Georgie hovered politely, nodding and smiling and adding little to the various conversations. Looking around, she felt like the scandalous Countess Olenska, in *The Age of Innocence*, estranged from her husband while the other members of fine society were all respectably married or — in her mother's case — widowed. None was divorced. She picked at a plate of noodles in peanut sauce and finished off three large pieces of eggplant sautéed with onions. Nina stayed by her side for much of the day and, at one point, they insisted on helping Charlene in the kitchen, brewing coffee, and then serving French Roast in demi-cups. The desserts included marble cheesecake, German chocolate cake, and a warm pecan pie with whipped cream. A celebratory feast.

Slightly buzzed, Georgie watched her mother converse with the physician cousins, her fellow veterans of the cause: monitoring and mending other people's private places.

Although an obstetrician, Estelle never fell in love with either the babies or their mothers. It was the mechanical act of childbirth she marveled at, its primitive accomplishment that filled her with satisfaction, the separating of two people who moments before had existed as one. This was the miracle she had recounted over late dinners while a young Georgie imagined her mother's work as snapping the long end off the wishbone. Yet Estelle's favorite

tales from medical school ran towards stories of pathology rounds, students playing practical jokes on each other while the bone-saw screamed its way through corpse after corpse. One time she'd returned home with a piece of earlobe clinging to her medical bag. Another time, a friend had taken a slide of someone's brain, stuck it in an envelope and slid it into her jacket pocket.

Georgie's parents shared this story with each other every spring, a ritual ingrained in the couple's unique Haggadah.

"It was my first year at Columbia," Adam would begin. "I was friends with an intern in neurosurgery and, for Passover, neither one of us could make it home. Shira invited me to a Seder for the patients on her ward."

"How thoughtful," Estelle would say, nodding, bolstering him to "go on, go on."

"What I didn't realize until the day we were doing the service was," here he would always smile slyly, "that they were all coma patients."

Inevitable as the platter of bitter herbs, haroset and parsley was Estelle's delighted gasp, her hands springing to her mouth, a blush coming to her cheeks.

"When we asked why, on this night, do we recline, the answer was because we're comatose!"

"Oh, that's great." Estelle would break out in a fit of girlish giggles.

"Shira was an interesting girl. . . ."

"But not as interesting?" She would nudge him, flirtatiously.

Adam would turn to his wife, eyes luminous with love.

"She was just a friend taking pity on a new kid on the block, an embarrassingly homesick boy several years her junior."

It was even more than a husband that Estelle had lost, Georgie knew. She had lost the guiding doctrine of her life. Medicine had always been a constant, her companion for the long haul. The only time Georgie had been welcomed unequivocally into her mother's sanctuary, the hospital setting had already lost its allure for Estelle. Georgie had accompanied her parents to the oncologist at the last, worst moment. "I'm terribly sorry," the doctor had said quietly, gazing down, his skin an ashy tone, like frayed paper. "The cancer has spread to the liver and stomach." When he looked up, his eyes were sad and tired, a watery blue, leaking a bit out of the corners.

Moments later, the oncologist cornered Estelle and Georgie scurrying on the way to the ladies room. He'd warned them, "Prepare yourself. It won't be long." "Don't say that to me," Estelle had hissed back, then tumbled into the glare of the bathroom's fluorescent lights. Georgie followed, dry mouthed, as if slapped by frigid winter's hand. In the mirror, Estelle's face had a mustard-yellow cast, her eyes looked cavernous and old. "I never believed this could happen to Adam and me," she whispered, as if unaware of Georgie's presence at the next sink. "I always thought we were protected. Magical thinking. Ridiculous. Old lady," she added accusingly at her reflection. "Widow."

"Ma, Dad's still here," Georgie had said, dizzy, reaching for the porcelain basin to steady herself.

"Don't you go falling apart on me," Estelle snapped, eyeing her daughter. "You're just going to have to keep yourself together this time, Georgia. Focus on your father, not yourself."

Most of the guests had cleared out by nightfall. At Estelle's insistence, Charlene had gone home without finishing the dishes, heaving herself out of her housedress (into what looked like another one) and picking up her fake leather pocketbook with one hand and a canvas bag with the other. Lily was speaking softly to Estelle.

Georgie had collected glasses and was inside the kitchen, unseen. "Have you gotten back to Daniel yet?" Lily asked.

There was something in the tone of her voice that caught Georgie's interest.

"Who's Daniel?" she asked a few minutes later, re-emerging into the living room.

"Oh," Lily said, blushing, her already pink cheeks deepening in color.

"An old friend from the Bronx," Estelle said evenly. "No one you've ever met."

A question was weighing down Georgie's tongue. Like confetti, pieces of a recent memory fluttered through her mind, the weekend before her father died. She'd visited with him, and later admonished herself for not foreseeing the inevitable in his bony hands with the skin loosening around the knuckles, the disheveled beard, and the crane legs. Despite his condition, he'd been walking around, talking to Jesse about buying him a new fishing rod, his mobility a red

herring for Georgie who'd absurdly convinced herself that a dying man would have to be bedridden. During that afternoon, her mother had mentioned a man named Daniel. Georgie was certain of this.

"I was wondering, would you like me to pick up Odysseus for you, Ma?" she asked. "I don't mind doing it. Tell me what I can do."

"I don't think so. I think I'll leave him for a few more days. I just can't deal with him right now."

Georgie nodded thinking, poor boy, poor thing. You've just lost the only one who loved you here.