

What Was Hers

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“Give a shake,” Pop hollered, rattling the bathroom door to get Izzy out.

Eyes closed, Ruth was in bed with her new husband Al in one of their faraway enlisted-man rented rooms before he shipped out. Eyes open, she was home alone in her narrow twin less than ten feet from the commotion, Indian summer the only thing making her sweat.

She lingered over dressing—maybe Pop would get called out on an early plumbing job—checking stockings for holes, bending to straighten seams. When her last pair of nylons was shot, she’d have to settle for cotton stockings like so many girls at work, for the war effort. Ruth worked the early shift bent over a microscope at the lab where she’d met Al, who was somewhere in the Pacific now—his letters arrived with all the important words blacked out so they read like a child’s grammar lesson, fourth grade conjunctions—*if...and.... but....* Now her deskmate was Valerie, a short birdlike brunette whose knees didn’t reach the way Al’s had, his trousers skimming Ruth’s stocking leg her very first day on the job. In a month they’d set a wedding date, never mind Ruth hadn’t yet asked his birthday or his middle name.

After Al enlisted in the Navy, preferring a hammock to a fox-hole, she traveled with him to his postings—from Jacksonville to Puget Sound—faraway places where people acted as if they’d never seen a Jew before. Now here she was back home in Newark, taking the bus downtown to the lab, giving piano lessons in the cramped living room after work, helping her mother peel potatoes or onions or apples for strudel, hand-writing weekly bills for her father’s plumbing customers, as if she’d never left.

Ruth stepped into the high-heeled pumps she’d taken to wearing lately. Every part of her was long and lanky, from her sallow face, with its random freckles that looked more like blemishes, to

her size-nine feet. Even at the wedding she'd worn flats with her Orbach's suit, thinking not to make Al self-conscious about being shorter. Then, on his last night before shipping out, he whispered in her ear, in the dark, that he'd fallen in love with her because of her height—how proud he felt to have a statuesque glamour girl on his arm. Statuesque, he said. Al, who never seemed much for words in the light of day. Glamour girl.

The kitchen telephone rang—a leaky sink somewhere, or a busted water heater—time for Ruth to open the bedroom door, her door at last. She'd grown up sleeping on the living room couch. Her brother Joe—younger, but a boy—had the bedroom until he went off to Virginia to become a doctor. Lucky Joe, who'd failed his army physical on discovery of a heart murmur, secret protection lurking all those years inside a strong man's chest. Now youngest brother Izzy had the couch, and Ruth had the bedroom with its solid hardwood door, her own, different, protection.

This morning it was her mother on the phone, not her father hollering at some customer to hold his horses. Ma, who never got calls, yet here she was nodding as if the person on the other end could see. When she hung up, she stood for a moment, still, then returned to her usual self, spitting into a skillet to see if it was hot enough to fry an egg.

Ruth's father was at the table bent over the *Forverts*. He read the Yiddish paper first, then local politics and obituaries in the *Star-Ledger*. "She has a head like a horse," Pop snorted, licking the tip of a pencil and circling something on the page—some new office construction in need of a plumber or a meeting of the brotherhood from his town in the old country. Black hairs curled at the back of his neck exposed above the U of his undershirt.

"Who?" Ruth asked. Only Izzy shrugged over his eggs. Izzy had proper freckles across his pale nose to match his boisterous red hair—an all-American boy with a strap of schoolbooks at his feet, except for the chopped-herring sandwich in his lunch sack. Then he unfolded from the table, six feet practically overnight and desperate

to finish high school before getting drafted.

"Meet me at the bank," Pop said without looking up at Ruth. God forbid he should forget this was payday at the lab. Now that Ruth was living back home, he figured what was hers was his. She had to hike crosstown at lunchtime every other Monday so he could hand her check and deposit slip with his bankbook to one of the young tellers—Claire or Lucille, never matronly Mrs. DaRosa—and put out his hand for a few dollars back. Then he'd lick a blackened thumb to peel off a couple of bills for Ruth—coffee and bus fare.

Ruth grabbed her lunch Ma'd packed, applying lipstick on the fly, Izzy lumbering after. She'd pick up breakfast coffee and a nickel roll from the Italian deli near the plant.

"Who phoned?" she asked out on the street.

"Fanny, I guess," Izzy said. Fanny was Ma's unmarried cousin who worked in the garment district, powdered her face, and always added something unexpected to her black suits—pearl buttons, a snippet of gold braid. Schmattes, Pop called her getups, but they weren't rags. Pop wouldn't recognize style if it bit him.

"So early?" Ruth's long legs kept easy pace with Izzy.

"Must be important." From New York to Newark was long distance.

"It's probably money," Ruth said.

"It's always money." Izzy turned toward school as if heading into battle.

Ruth continued alone, her narrow skirt hugging her bottom the way Al's hand might, nudging her uphill to the bus stop.

In her friend Millie's kitchen after work, Ruth scanned the *Evening News* for word from the Pacific. At home she'd have to start with Europe, reading aloud to Ma, who never heard from her family in Russia anymore on account of the war. At Millie's she could study the paper in peace while Millie's mom fixed iced coffee and store-bought cookies. Millie's mother was born American.

Tonight the headlines were all Italy. "It's the other side of the

dateline over there,” Millie said. “Whatever you’re looking for hasn’t happened yet.” Millie was in personnel at the lab, had gotten Ruth the job working opposite Al after watching patiently for a vacancy at a two-man desk with a nice Jewish boy.

“It’s tomorrow there, not yesterday,” Ruth said. “Whatever’s happened happened, even if the paper doesn’t say so.”

“Never mind, honey,” Millie’s mom said. “We’re going shopping for Rosh Hashanah. Come, you’ll feel better.” Millie’s mother bought Millie a new dress for the holidays every year, thinking to catch a fella’s eye in shul, but Millie kept her eyes on her prayerbook, patting her hair to be sure her wig was on straight. Millie’d lost her real hair to some dermatologic disorder that only a few close girlfriends knew about. That’s why she gave Al to Ruth instead of keeping him for herself. Millie had secrets she wouldn’t share with any man.

“Her ma’s waiting,” Millie said. She understood about Pop and the bank and no money for a new dress.

First thing inside the door, before saying hello to Ma, who was gruffly massaging a chicken, Ruth riffled through the envelopes on the kitchen counter, looking for one of Al’s patchwork letters. If she found one, she’d climb into bed with it, alone, behind her locked door. Ma could beat the hell out of that chicken by herself.

Finding only bills, Ruth rolled up her sleeves and started peeling an onion for the cavity of the chicken. There’d be the root end of a carrot in there, too, and the leafy celery top nobody otherwise ate. Ruth did the onion first, to get the tears out of the way.

“Shah, Ruthie,” her mother said. “Tomorrow will come a letter.” She started in on another onion with her big kitchen knife, rapid-fire slicing and not a single tear nor a drop of blood shed.

Then Ma lit the gas, loaded the chicken into the oven with a final slap, and told Ruth about her cousin Fanny needing an abortion. She told it straight, no introduction or explanation, bent over dirty pots in the sink, so Ruth shouldn’t see her face during the telling.

“Who?” Ruth said. “How?”

“Who is a no-good married man she been seeing already for

years. And if you don’t know how, I feel sorry for Al come the end of this war.”

“You know what I mean, Ma. Fanny’s too old.” Fanny was older than Ma, the first to come to America, alone, the brave one as far as Ruth was concerned. She had Ma’s nose and the same wrinkles around her eyes, Fanny’s carefully concealed by pancake makeup.

“How old you think my mother was when my sister was born?” Ruth’s mother had sisters back in Russia, one born after she and Pop left for America, the same age as Ruth. Ruth’s mother and her mother had been pregnant at the same time. And now, with no letters from home, who knew?

Just then Lilly Smoltz arrived for her piano lesson, scrubbed the way her mama cleaned her up every week. Ruth sat next to her at the old upright, the one she used to practice on downstairs at Mrs. Malter’s when she was a kid. When she got good enough to earn a few bucks, Pop and Mr. Malter carried the piano up with the brute strength of their arms and backs.

The living room was musty from Izzy’s rumpled bedsheets and masculine underwear stuffed in a breakfront meant for china and knickknacks. Ruth wished for an electric fan like Millie had in her bedroom. Millie also had a big double bed in her room, even though she never expected to share it. Ruth hadn’t ever pictured a double bed in what she thought of as Fanny’s tiny downtown apartment. Fanny never invited the family to come to her; she came to the family, arriving from time to time off the bus, with her pocketbook and her packages.

As Lilly Smoltz stumbled over scales, the aroma of roasting chicken distracted Ruth. She considered the possibility of Fanny’s swelling abdomen while her own flat belly rumbled with hunger.

Of course it was about money. Fanny needed money for the abortion. A doctor she had, if you could call it such—Fanny had New York friends with unexpected knowledge. But it cost a hundred dollars, Ma said. A hundred dollars, when a house call for the flu was less than a buck.

Ruth used to think of Fanny as rich, because she brought chocolates when she came to visit and bits of bright fabric stitched into clothes for Ruth's doll, also a gift from Fanny, a handmade rag doll that appeared out of Fanny's big pocketbook one long-ago happy birthday. But those were childhood ideas of rich. Ruth had long since understood that the doll clothes were fabric scraps smuggled out of the shop in Fanny's pocketbook, just like the fancy buttons and trim that kept changing the look of Fanny's same old black suit. And the chocolates? Maybe gifts from the long-time no goodnik.

At dinner that night, Ma asked Pop for money to buy Ruth a new mattress, something Ruth didn't know she needed.

"It's not right," her mother said, "a woman to sleep where a growing boy been. I know what Joey does on that mattress. Regular. Who you think changes the sheets?"

Izzy's face flushed red as his hair.

"Whadaya think, I'm made of money?" Pop retorted. Every extra nickel he was saving for Joe's tuition down in Virginia—fifteen hundred unimaginable dollars.

In the end, Pop reached into his pocket and peeled off three dollar bills for Ma to buy a brisket for the holidays. But he'd expect to eat that brisket on Wednesday night after shul.

Tuesday after work, while a pot of Rosh Hashanah soup

simmered on the stove, Ruth sat at the kitchen table with her mother making a list—how to raise a hundred dollars for Fanny:

1. Sell something. All Ma owned of value was a pair of earrings from Russia that she wore every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Golden in color, they were probably just brass, but the only thing left that her mother had once touched.

2. Ask Al's parents. Al had authorized the government to mail his paycheck to his parents, who earned pennies stitching bedsheets and undershorts in their basement tailor shop. Ruth could travel to Brooklyn to beg a few dollars, which some would say were rightfully

hers, but they needed the money to eat, Al claimed. He was a good and caring son. He would be a good husband.

3. Ask Millie. This was a real but horrifying possibility. Her parents had a little money from her father's liquor store, and her mother might understand, being born in America. But this was not something Ruth could talk to Millie about. She could talk about pimple creams and breath mints, but not about the one thing that was the rationale for such bodily improvements. Not about sex. Sex and its messy aftermath. Not with Millie, who she'd always thought would end up like Fanny. Alone.

It turned out to be a short list, too short. The family circle Ruth didn't bother to write down. That was Pop's family—his brothers and their wives that he'd once saved his nickels to bring over. Fanny was Ma's relative, and Pop would never ask the brothers for money to help her, just like he'd never brought the rest of Ma's family out of Europe when there was still a chance. If Pop didn't care about them, they didn't exist.

"We'll get from Papa," Ma announced nonetheless.

"He won't give, Ma. You tried."

"Then we don't ask."

"From his pockets? When you wash his pants?"

"Nah," her mother spat. "You think he got a hundred dollars in his pocket? Anyway, he holds onto those pants like glue. Even when he takes a bath, he puts them on the bathroom hook where he can keep an eye. The bank, that's another story. You know where he keeps that book with the money. You know them ladies."

"We can't," Ruth said. "Pop has to sign."

"So? You been signing his name all these years on the bills. And how much in that bank you earned? More than a hundred I bet." Ma removed her glasses to wipe on her apron, the better to focus on Ruth eye-to-eye, no wavery glass in between. "If we don't help, Fanny tries to do it herself," she said. "There are ways, you don't wanna know."

That night Ruth lay in bed listening to the sounds of the apartment quieting down—her father passing gas in the bathroom, Izzy’s jazz on the living room radio turned down low. She closed her eyes and touched her breasts the way Al would, trying not to think what would happen if there wasn’t enough money for Joe to stay down in Virginia, if he came back home to reclaim his bed, his door. A married woman shouldn’t have to sleep on the living room couch.

On Wednesday, Ruth left work early to help her mother with Rosh Hashanah. “I’ll cover for you,” Valerie said, “she’ll never miss you,” referring to old Miss Milgram, their boss, who took her power seriously with all the men gone to war. Valerie kicked off her shoes and stretched bare feet onto Ruth’s chair—she’d taken to drawing those fake seams up the back of her legs with eyebrow pencil, while Miss Milgram wore patriotic cotton hose that left her legs the color of overripe apricots. “I’ll say you’re in the bathroom with a bad case of the monthlies,” Valerie laughed. “She don’t remember woman problems. You coulda left at noon and she’d believe me!”

Pop and Izzy walked to shul for evening davening while Ruth and her mother set out dishes and wine glasses on Ma’s lace tablecloth and counted up how much money they’d scrounged together without resorting to anything illegal. Ruth had some piano lesson money that hadn’t already been spent and breakfast money from skipping her morning roll and coffee. Ma had saved a dollar on the brisket by buying second cut, although Pop would curse the butcher for fatty meat. There was a sugar bowl in the kitchen where Ma kept coins rescued from the couch cushions and occasionally from the washing machine if Pop was careless, and a small loan could be obtained from Millie ostensibly for Ruth to make one of those phonograph recordings they’d been discussing to mail overseas to Al. Millie would want to come along to make the record, but Ruth could say it would be personal, and Millie’d assume she was going to talk dirty.

They figured they could come up with eighteen dollars, maybe nineteen if Pop lay down on the couch for a nap after shul tomorrow. You weren’t supposed to carry money in your pockets on the holidays, but that never stopped Pop.

At supper, Pop sure enough cursed the gristly brisket. Ma took away his plate and brought more soup with a gizzard and heart that nobody else cared to eat. He lifted the bowl to his lips for the last slurp, then went off to bed exhausted from a hard day of plumbing and praying, while Ruth’s mother stayed in the kitchen to grind up the leftover meat for stuffing inside a knish.

They spent the next day in shul, Pop and Izzy in the sanctuary and Ruth with her mother up in the women’s balcony. “They should switch places with us,” Ruth commented, peering down at the motley group of aging men and boys left home from the war. “There are more of us.” The balcony was crowded with robust women and fatherless children past a certain age—hardly anyone home to make babies nowadays.

“You should live so long,” Ruth’s mother said, patting her hand. Ma wore a drab brown dress and hat along with her mother’s earrings, golden light dancing off her earlobes when she bent her head, not in prayer but in quiet communion with someone’s three-year-old clambering back and forth across the row of old ladies’ laced-up feet. Her prayer book remained unopened on her lap.

This was Ruth’s second Rosh Hashanah as a married lady. Last year in Jacksonville, when Al couldn’t get off base for the holiday, Ruth secretly lazed in her room listening to the radio. She didn’t know if Al would be down there right now chanting under a prayer shawl, or would he be gabbing on the sidelines like Pop, shaking hands and swapping stories? Would he pray for her if she told him about theft and abortion? Would she tell him?

A young mother with a plump baby sat next to Ruth and leaned over the railing to make sly eye contact with her husband down below, peeking from beneath his prayer shawl, pale and myopic. What

illness kept him home from the war, allowing him to create this baby reaching gluttonously for the breast?

Ruth and her mother left shul early to get a meal on the table. “So,” Ma said. “OK for Monday, you and me?”

“I don’t know, Ma,” Ruth said. She knew her mother meant the plan to go to the bank for Pop’s money. Ma’s plan.

“What’s not to know?” her mother said matter-of-factly. “Fanny needs.” She paused. “And Fanny, we can help.” Ruth suspected Ma was thinking of the rest of her family back in Europe. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Ruth walked to shul with Pop and Izzy, while Ma stayed home. Ma didn’t believe in prayer, said it had never served her well.

On Sunday morning Pop got called out early—an Italian lady with a leak under the sink, a flood in her kitchen, and Sunday dinner to get on the table before her family got home from church. Ruth could hear the hysterical pitch of her voice from the receiver at Pop’s ear, an accented jumble of vowels and the occasional hard-spat consonant. Pop tried to explain about turning off the valve, but between his English and hers, forget it. He dragged Izzy out of bed to help, even though he always said Izzy was useless on a plumbing job, not like Joe, who could bend pipe with his bare hands.

While they were out was a good time for Ma and Ruth to look for the bankbook.

“You show me where,” Ma said. “I take. You don’t even gotta touch.”

“His brown workpants. The ones he wore last payday,” Ruth said.

But last week’s workpants were already washed and back in the closet, neatly ironed by Ma, pockets empty. Ma felt under his side of the mattress, used a hairpin to pick open the box where he kept his burial insurance and secret Masonic papers.

When they came home for lunch, Ruth sneaked out to the truck to check the hidden compartment of Pop’s toolbox, underneath

the ratchet wrenches, while Ma kept him busy with gefilte fish and boiled eggs and questions about the Italian lady. How many children? A healthy meal, she feeds them? She and Pop hadn’t had such a lengthy conversation since God knows when, but the bankbook was nowhere to be found.

After lunch, Pop hoisted himself from the table and actually pecked Ma on the cheek before leaving with a handful of phone messages. Izzy had sidled off to the toilet, but Pop rattled the bathroom door, demanding he get his tuchis back in the truck or else.

“Must be in the pants he’s wearing,” Ruth said later, as Ma washed and she dried.

“I will get tonight, after you and Izzy are asleep. When he washes up in the bathroom.”

“You said he takes his pants into the bathroom.”

“Not always.” Ma crossed her arms, waiting for the kettle to whistle.

Pop was tired that night. He’d wrenched his back pulling out a cracked toilet and sat with a hot-water bottle after supper, counting his day’s earnings, smoothing a few dollar bills, sorting nickels and dimes and hand-written IOUs. When a coin rolled under the stove, he knelt on the floor with a wooden ruler, poking and cursing until it danced back out, even though it turned out to be just a penny. Then he pushed himself up and went off to bed looking stooped and old.

But Ma was as good as her word. Later, Ruth heard a few moments of creaking bedsprings and feral grunting coming from her parents’ bedroom, followed by the sound of water running and Pop whistling in the bathroom. She tried not to imagine her father naked at the sink, stretching and soaping his flaccid penis, scrubbing away all musky traces of her mother.

Once again Ruth skipped Monday lunch, even though it wasn’t payday, this time to meet Ma at the bank. Ma insisted on coming, leaving the brisket knish in a warm oven for Pop’s midday meal, along with a story about going to the women’s doctor—something

about bleeding, he wouldn't want to hear more.

Ruth found Ma out front in the noontime sun, in her brown shul dress and hat, and guided her into the cool interior, to one of the high desks with deposit and withdrawal slips in neat cubbyholes. Ma unclasped her pocketbook and handed over the bankbook, still warm from where the pocketbook had been clutched against her chest. The paper was soft and worn, with just a hint of the aroma of Pop's spittle from licking his finger to page through, assessing his worth.

Ruth turned to the latest balance: \$1,053.69. Not enough for Joe's tuition. Ruth imagined Pop calculating how many dollars he'd get paid at the end of each job, if he got paid, keeping a mental tally against the payment deadline for Joe. Ruth could withdraw the eighty-two dollars she and Ma needed to make a hundred for Fanny, or she could withdraw eighty-two cents—either way, Pop would surely notice.

Ruth dipped a pen into the inkwell and wrote EIGHTY-TWO DOLLARS on a withdrawal slip. At the x, she dipped again and signed Pop's name. Moe Robin. She blotted, trying to act casual. Was the M too rounded, in a feminine way? Had she added the right flourish at the end of Robin, the way Pop drew it out to a final dot of confirmation? She could tear this one up and try again, but that might attract more attention than a slightly imperfect signature during the lunch-hour rush. But where was the lunch-hour rush? The one day Ruth needed a crowd, the bank seemed unusually empty.

"Stay here," Ruth whispered, placing a firm hand on Ma's forearm. She would be conspicuous enough in front of the teller without Ma by her side. Ruth considered the tellers, Claire and Lucille, with several patrons each in their lines, and old Mrs. DaRosa helping a lady in white gloves with nobody else waiting. Mrs. DaRosa wouldn't be so familiar with Pop's signature, and the shortest line would make for the quickest getaway.

Ruth positioned herself at Mrs. DaRosa's station while the old teller's schoolteacherly voice instructed the white-gloved lady on

the intricacies of writing a check. Mrs. DaRosa was an anomaly. Teller jobs were usually reserved for the young girls, the Claires and Lucilles who dropped out of high school, wore makeup, and stood in the alley out back on break smoking and snapping gum and talking about boys. Mrs. DaRosa had married young before her husband shipped out to the first war where he died, so they said, and she'd been at the bank ever since. Ruth imagined her black oxfords planted firmly behind the first window on the left, glasses dangling from their chain over her black-clothed bosom all these years, as if she'd been farsighted back in the twelfth grade.

Claire's and Lucille's lines dwindled as Mrs. DaRosa patiently walked the white-gloved lady through check writing once again, but Ruth stood her ground. It was at this very window that Mrs. DaRosa had typed the forms when Pop brought eleven-year-old Ruth to open her first dime-a-week savings account. She'd been tall for her age, bony and flat-chested despite the pangs of her first menstruation, red-faced that her mother had told Pop. But he'd been surprisingly proud, not shaming, gifting her a silver dollar and bringing her to make her first deposit. While Mrs. DaRosa had lifted her glasses to her nose for typing, Ruth had stared at that year's pointy-breasted girls behind the other windows and wondered if they were staring back, knowing her secret.

Suddenly, Ruth was face to face with Mrs. DaRosa, handing over the withdrawal slip with Pop's bankbook. Mrs. DaRosa lifted watery eyes to gaze at Ruth over her glasses. Once, Ruth was sure she'd seen Mrs. DaRosa cluck disapprovingly when, in a hurry to repair a burst boiler, Pop had let her handle his deposit of Ruth's paycheck into his account. Now the old lady held the bankbook in one hand and the withdrawal slip in the other while her eyes perused the cavernous space of the bank, past the uniformed guard at the front door, past Ma standing alone in some unanchored middle space, then up and down Ruth's very body, coming to rest in the vague vicinity of her midsection. Then she briskly stamped the withdrawal slip and counted out the bills onto the counter.

“Next,” she called. She was already glancing past Ruth.

Ma had sex again with Pop that night. When Ruth heard him

whistling and washing in the bathroom, she knew Ma was returning the bankbook to his pocket. He’d spent the day on a big job running pipes for a restaurant, and then the customer had stiffed him, said come back tomorrow for your money—a blessing in disguise because it meant he hadn’t headed straight for the bank, reaching for his missing bankbook.

The blessing didn’t last. When Ruth came home from work on Tuesday she found Ma in the kitchen stirring cut-up chicken and potatoes for Pop’s favorite stew, usually a good night. But Pop stormed home wild about his missing eighty-two dollars, pointing to the dated withdrawal in the bankbook, hollering Ma was a thief, threatening to call the police—and this the time of year, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when he was supposed to be asking forgiveness.

Tall Ruth felt small next to Ma, who drew back her shoulders and faced Pop with a stare of bewildered innocence. He raged and tore apart the apartment, slamming drawers and snatching sofa cushions, then back into the kitchen, his anger puffing his chest, filling the room. When he approached Ma with a raised hand, she flicked her own thin fingers, motioning Ruth to her room like a child. But Ruth had never been that child with a room to hide in whenever Pop was angry at she-never-knew-what. So she stayed beside Ma, the thrum of her breath countering the roar of Pop’s fury.

“Come,” Ma taunted, spreading her arms, palms up to heaven. “You think I got it on me? Have a look.” And she unbuttoned her blouse, right there in the kitchen, yanked up the cotton underwaist, revealing a white flash of belly unused to the light of day. No bills fell out, no cash on the kitchen floor. Ma had hidden the money safely, even Ruth didn’t know where. She tried to imagine a place Pop wouldn’t look—the dirty laundry hamper? the drawer where Ma kept her monthly rags?

Pop advanced, raised hand looming, big as a frying pan, then starting to fall. But not at Ma’s face. There on the counter lay the knife Ma had used to dismember the chicken, its sharp blade glistening pink from fat and bits of sinew. Ruth’s mind flew, measuring the distance between each of them and the knife, who’d reach it first, Pop or Ma or could it be herself? Even Pop’s hand seemed to pause while she imagined, the kitchen suddenly quiet as if everyone had stopped breathing.

Then the door flew open and Izzy stumbled in, full of excuses, studying late at the library or so he said, banging the door shut with a jolt that Ruth felt from her heels to her hair. Pop must have felt it too. His hand moved again, grabbing not the knife but the nearby wooden spoon, flinging it across the room, spraying hot brown gravy over the floor and part of the wall, barely missing Izzy’s pale face as he ducked.

“Cover yourself,” Pop snarled, waiting for Ma to pull her blouse over her breasts before marching to the sink to wash for dinner.

Ma wiped up the gravy and served the stew like it was an ordinary night, Pop tearing apart a chicken leg, all the while carrying on that he was poor now.

“As if you wasn’t before,” Ma muttered.

Pop threatened he’d have to send for Joe to come home.

“Why he needs to go so far anyway?” Ma said, “with his heart murder.”

“Heart murmur,” Pop sneered, “and it don’t stop him, strong like ox.”

“Murmur, shmurmur,” Ma said. “You don’t got enough money anyway.” She’d seen the balance. She knew how much medical school cost.

“Whadayou know?” Pop said. “I make.”

“So now you make a little more.” She plopped another chicken leg onto his plate.

Ruth took the train to New York the Sunday after Yom

Kippur, alone. Ma never went into the city. She met up with Fanny at Schrafft's, Fanny's favorite. Fanny liked a nice meal of chicken à la king served by a waitress. When Ruth arrived, she was already seated, sipping hot tea, wearing a black hat edged with some kind of fringe set aslant over a cap of dark finger curls. A pair of white gloves lay across her pocketbook. She was short like Ma, with the same plump bosom resting amiably on the table. She didn't get up, so Ruth couldn't see what was happening down below—her belly already straining the buttons of her skirt?

"She'll have ice cream," Fanny told the waitress she'd summoned with a crook of her finger. "Hot fudge, yes? For me, enough with the tea."

Ruth waited until the dripping plate of ice cream appeared in front of her before handing over the money, folded discreetly into one of Pop's billing envelopes rubber stamped MOE ROBIN PLUMBING AND HEATING. She laid it on the white tablecloth between them without touching hands. Something about this exchange made her feel closer to Fanny despite their age difference, like equals, united in shared female business.

Two ladies nibbling cream-cheese sandwiches at the next table gazed sideways as Ruth lifted her hand from the envelope. The restaurant hummed with female voices, the occasional portly older gentleman caught out on a Sunday walk with his wife looking large and out-of-place. In the far corner was a soldier in uniform, a pretty girl at his side—all his limbs intact? Ruth tried not to stare.

"Who is he?" Ruth dared to ask, leaning closer. Fanny smelled of talcum powder and rose water and just the slightest hint of sweat. "How did you meet?"

"A businessman," Fanny said, pouring tea from a china pot. "Very nice suit. Used to ride my streetcar, only he got off more uptown, a nicer neighborhood. One day ... stayed on."

"And the baby? What does he say about the baby?"

Fanny set down her teacup and removed her eyeglasses, peer-

ing at Ruth with deep-set eyes. "Ruthaleh, Ruthaleh," she said.

"Some things you can't tell a fella. You should know, a married lady."

Fanny dabbed at her face with her napkin, her black brow in stark contrast to white-powdered cheeks. "So, whadaya hear from Al?" she said at last, setting her glasses back on her nose, staring at Ruth's ice cream without reaching for a taste.

"Not enough," Ruth said, her stomach clenching around the sudden cold. "Every few weeks a letter like a crossword puzzle, half the squares blacked out."

"Men, all talk or none," Fanny said, lifting her face with a crooked smile. "And us, never satisfied. But Al's okay, I guarantee, just too busy to write. Mine, on the other hand, such a talker, every other day saying he gonna leave his wife."

"What if this time he means it?" Ruth glimpsed the envelope on the tabletop between them.

"If ... if ..." Fanny reapplied her lipstick right there at the table, a deep red the color of Shabbos wine. "If my grandmother had a beard, she'd be my grandfather." When she returned the lipstick to her pocketbook, she slid the envelope off the table and snapped it shut inside as well.

"Tell your Mama I will pay back," she said. "Me, she can trust." Then she slipped her hands into her gloves, finger by finger, working the supple white cloth, only slightly soiled, over each knuckle, palm, and wrist. When she rose to leave, she didn't look pregnant, just voluptuous in the breasts and in the hips, standing so erect that Ruth found herself sitting up straighter. The ladies at the next table glanced across briefly. But the few older gentlemen in white collars and ties turned to stare as Fanny passed, waiting until the heavy plate glass door slammed shut behind her before turning back to their food and their wives.