

THE  
*Reluctant*  
DAUGHTER

*by*  
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IT TOOK ME half a century to find my mother. My mother wasn't lost like the poor child whose sad face graces the poster hanging outside the convenience store that I pause to study every time I dash in to buy a carton of half-and-half for Allie's morning coffee. Nor was she lost like the small gold Jewish star my parents gave me to wear around my neck when I turned sixteen that slid off its chain one day when I wasn't looking and disappeared as completely as an ice cube melted by the sun. No, I've always known exactly where my mother is: sitting in the living room of the split-level house I grew up in on Maple Drive, a quiet tree-lined street in Oakwood, New York, a suburb smack dab in the middle of Westchester County. I can locate my mother any time I want to, but that doesn't matter. She is still missing in action. At least to me. My mother and I are so estranged, she doesn't even know that we're estranged. It's not that we don't communicate with one another. We speak on the phone once a month, sometimes once every other month, sometimes once a season. I am always the one to break the silence between us and dial my parents' number, usually during a weekday when I know my father isn't home.

It's never my idea to give my mother a ring. The thought would never even occur to me on my own. If it weren't for Allie, years could easily slip by without my mother and I having a conversation. But Allie, my sweet, kind, wonderful, not to mention drop-dead handsome as a butch can be Allie, can't seem to mind her own damn business and leave well enough alone.

It can happen on a Tuesday. Or a Thursday. At around three

o'clock, I'll climb into our just purchased, "previously loved" station wagon and drive toward Main Street to do some errands. Allie and I reside in a quaint, liberal college town on the southern tip of Maine called Paradise, and it pretty much lives up to its name with the smell of the ocean permeating the air all year long, the beauty of the landscape equally breathtaking during all four seasons, and on top of that, the many shops that hang rainbow flags in their windows, letting both the locals and the tourists know that ours is a gay-friendly town. I pull into a parking space right in front of our organic food co-op, unsuspecting, maybe even humming to myself. It's a glorious spring day and I'm generally a happy, humming type of person. After I shut the ignition, I pocket my car keys and reach into my shoulder bag for my list of things to do: *Pick up dry cleaning, drop off vacation photos...* As I scan each item planning my route, my eyes catch on something. Three little words scrawled in Allie's small slanted southpaw handwriting that make my heart beat faster. Not "I love you," which is written at the very bottom of the page underneath *buy battery for alarm clock*. No, the three little words that stop me cold, inserted between *don't forget kitty litter* and *mail car payment*, are "call your mother."

"You call your mother," I say aloud. It's a mean thing to say even if Allie is miles away at the lumberyard she manages and cannot possibly hear me. Allie would give anything to call her mother, but the woman died two decades ago, when Allie was barely twenty-seven. Allie is an only child and her mother was her only parent. They left Puerto Rico when Allie was five, first living in the Bronx with some friends they knew from the island, and then moving up to New England because Allie's mother wanted her daughter to breathe fresh air, live among grass, trees, and flowers, and be close to the sea. Allie says her mother loved her more than life itself, and she never felt like she was missing anything by not having a father, siblings, or any kind of extended family. Until her mother died, that is. After Allie lost her mother and before I came along, Allie was all alone in the world. And even though Allie is once again a part of a family of two, a family she and I have created, she still misses her mother terribly. Every year on November 11, the anniversary of her mother's death, Allie wakes up in tears, rises without a word, and lights a pure white seven-day candle in her mother's honor. Allie and I got together four years after her mother's death and at that point, she couldn't even mention her without breaking

down completely. Things are better now, but still, Allie's voice shakes and her eyes grow moist whenever she speaks of her mother.

*Call your mother.* I stare down at the words, seething. Isn't it enough that I'd sent the woman a Mother's Day card last week after spending the better part of my day off choosing it? I'd walked up and down this very street, going into the drug store, the stationery store, the bookstore, and several overpriced galleries and gift shops, browsing through racks and racks of frilly pink cards that said things like, "God couldn't be everywhere so He invented mothers." Oh please. I could hardly stomach reading that card, let alone bringing it up to the cashier and paying for it. The only card I seriously considered purchasing was one picturing an endless field of day lilies that read, "If I had a flower for each time I thought about my mother, I could walk in my garden forever." Well, that's certainly true, I mused, as I stared at the card in my hand, but then again the thoughts that run through my head on a regular basis are hardly complimentary and if my mother is anything, she is smart—smart enough to know that much and decode my hidden meaning in two seconds flat. I put the card back and looked at dozens of others, all the while knowing I would never find what I was searching for. A card that said, "Mom, I'm sending you this purely out of obligation," or "Mom, I know you did your best, but it wasn't good enough," or "Mom, we're both getting older. Do you think we'll ever heal our relationship?" But since they don't make Mother's Day cards for daughters like me—daughters who feel too hypocritical to send a "you're the greatest mother in the world" card but can't quite bring ourselves to boycott the Hallmark holiday altogether either—I do what I do every year: buy a card with a photo of a bright yellow sunflower or a vase of peach-colored roses on the outside, and on the inside where it is blank, I write, "Dear Mom, Have a wonderful Mother's Day. Love, Lydia." And that's the end of that.

Except now on top of sending a card, Allie wants me to make a follow-up call, too? "Alicia Maria Taraza, I can't believe you did this to me." I rattle the folded-up to-do list in my hands, though it is really Allie that I want to throttle. Without meaning to—or perhaps on purpose—my dearly beloved has ruined my day completely. Anybody who knows me at all knows that my day will certainly be ruined if I do call my mother. And now if I don't call my mother, my day will still be ruined because I'll feel guilty. As charged. Guilty of being the world's

worst daughter. *You can't even pick up the phone and call your own mother, bring a little happiness into her life, make her day? How can you be so selfish, so self-centered, so self-absorbed, so self-involved?*

"Don't forget self-cleaning, Mom," I say, answering my mother's voice, which is ricocheting around my head like a cold metal ball bouncing about a pinball machine. I get out of the car and fume through town, marching in and out of shops and checking off the errands on my list. I'm in a bad mood when I return to the station wagon, and the sight of the yellow parking ticket wedged behind my windshield wiper puts me over the top. "Damn it, Allie, you're paying for this," I say, snatching up the ticket. "It's your fault I forgot to feed the meter. If you hadn't messed with my list..."

I'm still muttering to myself when I pull into our driveway. At this point even I know I'm not really mad at Allie, who is only trying to help, after all. I hang up the dry cleaning, put the kitty litter in the closet, and then go in search of Mishmosh, so named for the cacophony of colors splayed across his fat little body. According to our vet, only one in about three thousand calicos is male, and though Mishmosh came from very humble beginnings—Allie and I found him mewling behind a Dunkin' Donuts dumpster covered with fleas and powdered sugar—he never lets us forget how lucky we are to reside with such a rare creature who allows us to wait on him hand and foot. I find His Highness sprawled belly-up in the middle of the queen-sized bed he begrudgingly shares with Allie and me, soaking up a spotlight of sun and getting his orange, brown, and black fur all over our vintage white chenille spread.

"Wake up, Mishmosh. I need you." He opens one eye and throws a look in my direction that clearly says *don't even think about disturbing me* but nevertheless allows me to lift his limp body and drape it over my shoulder for moral support. He even purrs in my ear as I flop down on the maroon tweed living room couch, prop my feet up on the oak coffee table Allie made for my last birthday, and dial my parents' number.

"Hello, Lydia." My mother answers on the first ring. She never sounds surprised to hear from me, no matter how long it's been since I've called. Her voice is pleasant as though this is something ordinary, just a daughter calling her mother on a weekday afternoon. "How are you?" my mother asks, and then before I can answer, says, "I got your card. Thank you."

“You’re welcome.”

That taken care of, I’m ready to hang up the phone, but my mother has other plans. I hear the click of her lighter, and the inhale and exhale of smoke, which means she’s settling herself in for a nice little chat. Since we really don’t have anything to talk about, I know she will turn to the one subject that can always be counted on: the weather. “So is it raining by you?” she asks as if on cue.

“A little.”

“By us, it’s pouring, I’m telling you, what a rainy spring we’re having. It rained so much in April—well, you know what they say, April showers bring May flowers—but it’s the middle of May and it’s still raining and the poor flowers are drowning, so enough already. And it was such a wet winter, besides. So much snow we had. And ice. I don’t mind the snow so much, but the ice storms are really the worst. Your father even stayed home one day, the driving was so terrible, and you know how bad it has to be before he’ll miss a minute at work. God forbid some nut should be out in such miserable weather to pick up his dry cleaning and find the shop closed. And now this rain. They say it’s supposed to stop tomorrow, but what do they know? Bunch of dummies, those weathermen, they’re always wrong. How you can keep your job and be wrong ninety-nine percent of the time is beyond me...”

As my mother rambles on, barely pausing for breath, I feel myself careening toward the altered state I always drift into when I speak to her on the phone. Or rather when she speaks to me. During these conversations I don’t say much. I slump down on the sofa, cradle the receiver between my neck and shoulder, and enter some sort of fugue state. Sometimes, like now, I study the ends of my hair, searching the dark strands for split ends, a habit I gave up as a teenager. A habit I *thought* I gave up as a teenager. I sigh a lot. My mother doesn’t notice.

As she talks on and on, I picture my mother sitting in one of the two matching forest green recliners in the living room, the cordless phone in one hand, her cigarette in the other. On the end table beside her there is a cup of coffee gone cold. At her feet is a pile of magazines; on her lap are a pack of playing cards and the remote control for the TV. She is wearing a blue velour bathrobe and matching slippers even though it is the middle of the day. The window shades of the room are pulled down, the burglar alarm is activated.

Even two hundred fifty miles away, I can barely breathe.

Eventually my mother ends her filibuster on the weather and asks, in a cutesy voice, “So how’s by you? What’s new like this?”

“Nothing,” I reply automatically. It’s the same one-word response I’ve given to this question for more than thirty years now, ever since I left home for college, my ticket out.

“Nothing?” my mother repeats, a hint of hurt in her voice. I’m sure she knows that something must be new in my life; after all we haven’t spoken since the middle of January. “Are you still teaching?” she asks.

“Yes,” I tell her for the hundredth time. I’ve been a tenured professor for over a decade now, but my mother always thinks I’m on the brink of being fired. “In fact, I proposed a new course for next year and it looks like it’s going to be approved. It’s called—”

“Did I tell you Selma Appelbaum’s youngest daughter finally got married?” My mother interrupts me, proving what I knew all along: she couldn’t care less about my academic career, she was just making polite conversation. “Last weekend, the wedding was. You remember Karen.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You do, Lydia. Think for a minute. They lived right around the corner from us, Karen and her sister Sharon, remember? She was the skinny one, Karen—who would ever dream it would take her so long to find a husband? For a while her parents thought maybe she’d turn out, you know...like you. But thank God, last year she finally met someone.”

*They thought maybe she’d turn out like you:* a happy, healthy lesbian living with the woman of her dreams in Paradise. She should be so lucky, I think, as my mother drones on.

“They went all-out for the wedding, over three hundred people were there, can you imagine? Her father probably had to mortgage his teeth for her dress alone, but no matter what he paid, it was worth it, she looked gorgeous. She always had a lovely figure, Karen did, not like her sister Sharon, who could still stand to lose a few pounds. You remember Sharon.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Sure you do. Who could forget Sharon and Karen? Well anyway,

the wedding was very unusual, the color scheme was bright fire engine red, I couldn't get over it, whoever heard of such a thing? The groom's mother, who was no Slenderella, believe me, looked like an overgrown tomato and..."

While my mother proceeds to trash every member of the bridal party as though she were auditioning to be Joan Rivers' co-host on *Fashion Police* the morning after the Oscars, I can't help but wonder what she would say about the outfits Allie and I wore at our wedding, which took place fourteen years ago and to which my mother was not invited. Allie, with her short sharp hair slicked back and her dark eyes shining with joy, looked positively dashing in an off-white satin shirt with wide Spanish sleeves tucked into black tuxedo pants complemented by brand new spiffy patent leather shoes. And I felt quite glamorous standing beside her with my dark curly hair piled on top of my head, wearing a cream-colored suit with a fitted jacket, knee-length pencil skirt, and matching pumps with ankle straps and four-inch heels that made me almost, but not quite tall enough to look my betrothed in the eye. Allie and I tied the knot on our second anniversary, and though the state of Maine refused to grant us our civil rights and call our union a marriage, I refused to call the event anything other than a wedding. For my money—and we spent plenty on the reception hall, the food, the cake, the flowers, the rings, and the deejay—it was a wedding like any other, legal status be damned. I knew that Sunday in September would be the happiest day of my life and though Allie tried, I could not be convinced to invite anyone who would be one iota less than overjoyed to be in attendance. And just as I knew without the slightest doubt that I wanted to become Allie's unlawfully wedded wife and spend the rest of my days, not to mention my nights with her, I was equally certain that a public declaration of our love and devotion would not be met with a rousing "Mazel tov!" from my father and mother or any other member of my family.

It's not that they don't like Allie. My parents like her just fine. Actually I'm pretty sure they like her better than me. It's that to this day, they have not gotten comfortable with the fact that they have a lesbian for a daughter. I keep thinking they're getting better, but then something happens. The last time Allie and I visited my parents was about a year ago, and things were going along relatively well—in other words, nothing disastrous had occurred—until we made the mistake of

accompanying my father to the grocery store to pick up the cheesecake my mother had ordered to serve that evening for dessert. While waiting on the bakery line, we ran into a young family that had just moved into the neighborhood. My father put his arm around my shoulder, saying, “This is my daughter, Lydia,” and then introduced me to the husband, wife, and two young children who were strapped inside their double stroller happily munching away on sugar cookies shaped like dinosaurs. Then there was an awkward pause, and just as I was about to introduce Allie, my father stepped in and did the honors. “And that’s her roommate,” he said, gesturing toward Allie and shocking us both. And though I explained the error of his ways several times, he refused to acknowledge that he’d done anything wrong. So I in turn refused to speak to him for the rest of the afternoon.

“Anyway, it was a very lovely evening,” my mother says now, wrapping up her report of the Appelbaum affair and bringing me back to the present. “Why it took so long for a pretty girl like Karen to find a man to marry, I couldn’t tell you, but all right, as they say, all’s well that ends well. She’s not forty yet so if they hurry things along, they still might be able to have a child, or I guess they could always adopt, plenty of people do. Aaron seems like a very nice guy—oh, I forgot to tell you, that’s the best part: the groom’s name is Aaron, can you believe that, Karen and Aaron? I’m telling you, everybody’s already joking they should have a boy and name him Darren. And then someone said—oh, wait. Hold on a minute, Lydia. I have another call.”

My mother’s voice disappears and I shut my eyes, exhausted. I feel like I could sleep for days. My breathing slows and I adjust Mishmosh to use him as a pillow. But before I drift off, my mother gets back on the line.

“It’s the plumber. I’ve been waiting for him to call all afternoon. I’ll speak to you later.” My mother hangs up the phone, and I, who have been known to rant and rave for hours about the rudeness of call waiting, thank God for this brilliant invention that lets me off the hook.



“IF YOU DON’T have anything nice to say, sit next to me,” read the cocktail napkins stored on the third shelf of my mother’s pantry next to an oversized box of pink Sweet’N Low packets. I suppose this would be funny if it weren’t also true.

Once a year I make my annual pilgrimage to my parents' house. Allie comes with me, knowing that if she doesn't, I'll be that much more of a basket case when I return. She's a real trouper, my Allie. I'm sure she could name at least a thousand other things she'd rather be doing on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, other than driving four and a half hours to share a meal with my parents and then driving four and a half hours back. Especially since it's turning out to be such a lovely afternoon, sunny and breezy and perfect for digging in the garden, which Allie loves to do. But Allie doesn't complain. Instead, she steers the car around the post-winter potholes that have turned the streets of our neighborhood into an obstacle course and waits until we've merged onto the highway to give me a pep talk. "Remember, it's only a movie," she says, taking her eyes off the road for a split second to glance in my direction.

"Now showing: *Night of the Living Dead*." I move my hand in front of me as though I were outlining the title on a marquee and then reach down for my purse, which is parked next to my feet. For about the twenty-seventh time since Allie backed out of our driveway, I pull a compact out of my bag, flip it open, and stare at my reflection. My mother will scrutinize my appearance like she's looking into a mirror, and the less I give her to criticize, the better. I run my fingers through my unruly dark curls, which have been recently shaped and trimmed to just barely graze my shoulders, wipe an imaginary smudge of mascara off my cheek, and stare into my own eyes, which are light brown and flecked with gold, just like my mother's. There is an expression in them I rarely see. I look scared. Small. Vulnerable. Whenever I feel like this, I remind myself that I'm a strong, independent woman. A professor of Women's Studies who has been voted teacher of the year at Paradise College. Twice. A loving and beloved spouse. A good friend. A respected member of my community. None of that matters today. Today I am a frightened child who can't do anything right. Who looks wrong, acts wrong, *is* wrong.

All too soon our southbound car ride comes to an end and we turn the corner onto my parents' street and pull up to the curb in front of the neatly trimmed shrubs that stand guard in front of their split-level home.

"The credits are rolling," Allie whispers, giving my hand a squeeze as I reach up to ring my parents' doorbell.

"Hello, hello." My father opens the front door before I have a

chance to push the buzzer. He looks so much older than he did last time I saw him, it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust, as if I've just stepped out of a very dark room directly into sunlight. The lines creasing my father's forehead are deeper than I remember, and his cheeks are more sunken in than they were a year ago. My father has always been tall and slender, unlike the women of the family, including me, who tend to all be under five feet tall and "pleasingly plump." And he has always been a snappy dresser. After all, as the owner of a chain of dry-cleaning and tailoring shops, it's part of his job to look his best. But today the royal blue shirt and gray pants he is wearing seem empty, like they are fluttering off a hanger he is handing over the counter to a customer instead of covering his skin and bones.

"Doris, c'mon. Lydia and Allie are here," my father calls upstairs. The three of us crowd the front hallway waiting for my mother to appear.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." My mother's disembodied voice precedes her down the stairs. A minute later her descent is announced by a creak: the dreaded third step from the top that always gave me away on weekend nights when I snuck into the house after midnight. As a teenager, I thought of it as the third rail, because stepping on it and inciting my father's wrath was as good as committing suicide.

"Hi, Lydia." My mother makes her entrance waving the lit cigarette wedged between the second and third finger of her right hand like Bette Davis in an old black-and-white 1940s movie. She moves in close to kiss the air next to my cheek, then turns her head to take a puff and exhale without blowing smoke in my face, which she knows would only start a fight. "Hello, Allie," my mother says, barely glancing at my butch, who got a new haircut especially for this occasion and spent close to an hour picking out and ironing the perfect outfit, a black button-down short-sleeved shirt tucked into tan khakis. My attire, on the other hand, is examined within an inch of its life as my mother looks me up, down, and back up again, until I feel like I am something to buy that she doesn't think is worth the price. I am wearing a plain black skirt and a white cotton summer sweater with lace around the collar and cuffs. Nothing she could possibly criticize.

"Have you lost weight?" my mother finally asks as she stubs out her cigarette in a porcelain ashtray shaped like an upturned hand resting on a little table by the front door. This is her usual greeting and

is somewhat of a trick question. If I had lost weight, which I haven't—nor do I want to—my mother would shower me with praise. Since I am still a perfect size fourteen, just as I was last time I visited my parents, my mother's question is her way of voicing her disappointment without seeming rude. There is no good way to answer this question. If I lie and say yes, my mother will mutter, "Hmmm." Translation: *Are you sure? You don't look any thinner.* If I tell the truth and answer, "No," my mother will say, "Too bad," and nail me with one of her withering looks of disapproval. Rather than fall into either of these traps, I plead the fifth and say nothing.

"*Vamos. Vamos.*" My father interrupts the awkward silence that has descended like a cloud and gestures for us to get going. Whenever my father is around Allie, he feels compelled to dredge up a word or two from the Introduction to Spanish class he took in high school fifty-seven years ago as a nod to her Puerto Rican heritage. He removes my mother's spring jacket from the hall closet and waves it in front of her. "*Toro, toro,*" he sings out as if my mother is a bull. My mother turns around, backs up, and slides her arms inside the sleeves. She looks shorter than I remember, and is dressed in a black pantsuit with a long jacket that she probably thinks hides her hips and gives her a slender appearance. But all it really does is make her look like she's going to a funeral.

"Where are we off to?" I ask my father as we step outside and my mother lights a fresh cigarette.

"How do you like my Caddy?" he replies, gesturing toward the gleaming black sedan parked in the driveway. My father, who grew up so poor he never thought he'd be able to afford a bicycle, let alone a car, takes great pride in trading up for the newest model every year. He explains all the car's special features to Allie and me in great detail, like a salesman on his first day at the job, while my mother finishes her cigarette, tosses it on the ground, and grinds it out underfoot. Only after we all duck inside the car and buckle up, my parents in the front seat and Allie and I, like two overgrown children, banished to the back, does my father answer my question. "We're going to Monticello's for an early dinner," he informs me as he looks over his shoulder to back out of the driveway. "Jack and Crystal are meeting us there."

Allie squeezes my shoulders, which are now hunched up around my ears; she knows I am making a supreme and heroic effort not to

groan out loud. I haven't seen my cousin Jack in ages. For good reason. My cousin Jack is the only child of my mother's twin sister Beatrice, who died of complications following a car crash many years ago when Jack and I were both sixteen. My mother and her sister were the kind of twins who did everything together. They wore matching outfits all through their childhood, they went out on double dates, and they both married good-looking grooms at a double wedding (my uncle Benny resembled Marlon Brando in his younger years; my father has aged handsomely and looks a bit like Gregory Peck). My mother and her sister even got pregnant at around the same time. There's only one thing the twins did differently, according to family lore: my mother married a *mensch* and my aunt Beatrice married a *schmuck*.

From the beginning my uncle Benny was a drinker and a gambler, not to mention a womanizer. My aunt Beatrice lay in a coma for months after the accident and he didn't even have the decency to wait until she actually stopped breathing before running off with another woman practically half her age. Of course Jack came to live with us when his mother died, so overnight he became the son my parents always wanted and the sibling I'm glad I never had. A sibling who called me "fatso" and "frizz bomb" and thought there was nothing funnier in the world than blowing into the crook of his arm to make farting noises whenever I walked by. A sibling who monopolized our only television by sitting in front of it every night and turning the channel knob until he found a football, baseball, basketball, or hockey game to watch. A sibling who always had first dibs on my father's car over the weekend. A sibling my mother adored and doted on, cooking his favorite meals, giving him money to buy comic books and records whenever he wanted, ignoring how messy his room was, the floor strewn with dirty clothes, candy bar wrappers, soda cans, and album sleeves. And it did me no good to complain about Jack's behavior or privileges. "Jack's going through a hard time," my mother reminded me every other minute. "It wouldn't kill you to think about someone other than yourself for a change and be a little nicer to him once in a while."

Jack and I overlapped in my parents' house for two miserable years—our junior and senior years of high school—and then I left for college and he stayed. And stayed. Jack made one attempt at college life, going to some big university out west somewhere, but he either dropped out or got thrown out—no one's quite sure which—halfway

through his first semester. And so Jack flew back to the Pinkowitz nest and lived with my mother and father until he was thirty. Rent-free, I might add, even though my parents made me pay room and board for the lousy—and I do mean *lousy*—three months I lived with them the summer after I graduated from college. When I pointed out how unfair that was, my mother reminded me that life wasn't fair and that the very least she could do was put a roof over her poor motherless nephew's head and put some food into his poor motherless mouth. I think of Jack as my "brousin," a cross between brother and cousin, much like brunch is a cross between breakfast and lunch. Except brunch is something to linger over and enjoy; being in Jack's company is something to get over and done with as quickly as possible. Jack hasn't changed much since his brief college career; he still likes to "party," as he puts it. A lot. As does his trophy wife Crystal, who is a dozen years younger than he is, or possibly more since she refuses to divulge her exact age. The last time I saw the two of them was a year and a half ago at their daughter Bethany's bat mitzvah.

Jack is richer than God, though I can never figure out what he actually does for a living. When asked, all he'll say is that he's in "the industry," meaning he works in show biz. Jack and Crystal own a very expensive suburban house forty minutes away from my parents, a swanky apartment on Central Park West, and a summer home in the Hamptons, right on the water. All bought without the benefit of an undergraduate degree, let alone a doctorate, as Jack likes to remind me. Though Jack is hardly religious. As I recall he got kicked out of Hebrew school for coming to Shabbat services several weeks in a row wearing a T-shirt that said "Moses was a basket case." When the time came for his only daughter to be called to the Torah, Jack did not hesitate to pull out all the stops.

Crystal and Jack sent out the invitations to Bethany's bat mitzvah in March, a good six months before the big event. I remember the day ours came. Allie had Mishmosh on her lap in a pillowcase with his hind legs sticking out so I could trim his back toenails, something he hates for me to do. The doorbell rang, startling Mishmosh, who leapt six feet in the air, scratching both of us in the process before dashing under the bed, where he stayed for several hours.

I opened the door, already annoyed at whoever had rung the bell, to see a man standing before me in a white tuxedo. White jacket and

tails, white pants, white shirt, white cummerbund, white shoes, white tie. Behind him, parked on the street in front of our tiny humble home, was a long white limousine.

“Allie, get out here. Quick,” I called over my shoulder.

“Wait a minute. I’m bleeding,” she called back.

“I don’t care. You have to see this.” I didn’t know why this gentleman was at our front door—had Allie entered some type of sweepstakes?—but I knew this was a sight I’d probably never see again in my lifetime, and I wanted Allie to see it, too.

“Miss Lydia Pinkowitz?” the man asked.

“Ms.,” I replied.

“What the—?” Allie came up behind me, pressing a towel against her gouged thigh.

The man in white brought a round silver tray out from behind his back and lifted its cover with a flourish. “My compliments,” he said with a little bow.

On the tray was an ivory-colored envelope. The names *Lydia Pinkowitz* and *Alicia Taraza* were written upon it in a delicate, elegant hand.

“It’s too beautiful to open,” I said, my voice a reverent whisper. The man bowed again and retreated to his vehicle. “You do it,” I said to Allie as the limo pulled away.

We went back into the house and Allie slit open the envelope carefully, using a wooden letter opener that had a peacock carved on its handle. “Oh no,” she said. “You’re not going to be happy.”

And I wasn’t. The card Allie pulled out of the envelope informed us that Jack and Crystal Gutman had invited us to their daughter Bethany Joy’s bat mitzvah. And with this much advance notice, it was pretty hard to think of an excuse that would get us out of it. The reception was a huge affair held in Scarsdale in the backyard of some movie mogul that Jack knew, under a tent large enough to shelter a three-ring circus. Bethany was the star of the show, and she had prepared for the part by spending hours at a nearby spa where experts had given her a full body seaweed scrub along with a manicure, a pedicure, and a makeover, and done her hair up in such an intricate style, she told me she had to sleep sitting up the night before so she wouldn’t ruin it. Everyone was dressed in their glittery sequined best, and there were so many people

there, I hoped Allie and I would simply blend into the crowd and not be noticed. But no such luck. The minute we arrived, Jack rushed over to us, slung his arm around my shoulder as if we were the most intimate of friends, and gave me a sloppy wet kiss on the cheek. Then he pulled me away from Allie to ask in a hushed voice if I wanted to “party” with him and some members of the band. When I politely declined his offer, Jack blew up. “This is the thanks I get for waiting around all afternoon for you to finally show?” he yelled loud enough to make several people turn their heads in our direction. “Lydia, you are the most ungrateful person I have ever met.” And before I had a chance to respond, he threw both hands up in the air and without another word to Allie or me, stomped away in disgust.

So I am polite but distant when I greet Jack and Crystal at the restaurant. Partly because I am not thrilled to see them, and partly because I have already started leaving my body in order to get through the evening. No one says much as we stand around the parking lot waiting for my mother to finish smoking the cigarette she lit the moment she stepped out of the car. When she is done, we enter the restaurant single file with my father leading the way. He stops in front of a small wooden podium and announces with great authority to the *maître d’* standing there, “Max Pinkowitz, table for six.” The gentleman scans his list, checks something off, and immediately takes us to a table in the middle of the room, but before Allie can sit down, I clutch her arm to stop her.

“What’s the matter?” she asks.

“You’ll see,” I say, and sure enough, just as I expected, my mother tells the *maître d’* that she doesn’t like the table he’s shown us. When asked what’s wrong with it, she shakes her head as if the answer should be obvious and says, “Just bring me to the table you were saving in case I didn’t like this one.”

Much to my amazement, this ploy always works, and tonight is no exception. Without losing his composure, the *maître d’* complies and we move *en masse* to a better spot: a quiet, round table tucked into a cozy corner. Everyone looks to my mother for approval, and after a minute she says, “It’s all right,” in a voice that conveys it isn’t, but she supposes it’s the best they can do.