

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WORLD: A NOVEL

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THESIS ABSTRACT

A Different Kind of World: A Novel

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A novel about the Saks family, a family of Italian Jews living in Brooklyn during World War II. When George Saks is reported missing in action, Miriam, his wife, struggles to understand her son, Arthur. As radio's golden age is nearing its end, Arthur discovers that he has a talent that he hopes will bring his father back.

Prologue

1942

Early morning in Los Angeles was cool even in the summer months, before the sun could penetrate the streets and burn the skin of directors as they traversed their lots. An American Army unit lined up for six-thirty roll call outside a radio studio on Santa Monica Boulevard. After release by the captain, eight of these troops went up into the offices. They stood dutifully next to their desks for a moment before regrouping to go out to breakfast down the street near Gower, it being too early in the morning to write comedy. The coffee was free for uniformed troops and the waitresses made a point of putting large scoops of butter next to the toast, as if the men were going to war soon. Maybe a few of them would. These were days when everything was very much, as a few of them liked to say, touch and go.

Trouble had already come of this coffee shop ritual. A by-the-book major who had been sent in from Fort Dix discovered the absence of the corporals in the writing room and the next day sent them to the parking lot to pull weeds. If they refused to do their work, he would give them work to do. When the officers, producers and agents who had worked with the big studios, found the boys pulling clumps of dandelion root out of the dirt plots between the pavement, they asked the major to send them back to their desks. These guys were it, they told him. Without them, there would be no show.

The officers explained to the major that you can punish a landscaper by making him write comedy, but you cannot punish a comedy writer by making him do landscaping. The writers returned to their desks in a small room that faced the parking lot and looked

out the window for long stretches of time. Soon the sound of typewriters clicking in sporadic bursts could be heard in the hallway and the show came together, sure as it always did. Jokes were steadily produced the way uniforms and tents were pushed out of workshops by women in Chicago and Milwaukee.

Almost every day, the halls in the station were full of talent. The officers who were talent agents before they were drafted brought in names like Allen, Hope, and Horne. Even Raymond Wilkes, the biggest radio star to ever live, was seen waiting in a greenlit hallway outside the studio, holding a paper cup of coffee. The shows were recorded onto transcription discs and shipped to every corner of the world for the morale-boosting entertainment of men in bases in the Pacific, Northern Ireland, Germany, France.

Many thousands of miles across an ocean, George Saks unpacked the discs when they arrived in the Naval mail service. He lingered on the descriptions and then walked them through the echoing hallways to the recreation tent in the east bay. Men gathered for a break from the constant heat, sitting on benches around a wood-cased record player. George cued the record himself and leaned back into the thick air, his hands forming a hammock behind his neck.

One day a package of three discs containing a performance hosted by Raymond Wilkes, George's favorite radio star, was on route to the base. But George would not see it. After weeks of duty in the mail room, where he spent the long hours scribbling in his journal, he had been summoned by an air siren to report to his battle station. He had no experience in battle, no training since he had reported to the Naval base in San Diego for basic training. He had been trained in how to hold a gun while also developing an adverse skin reaction sun exposure. His lower lip appeared to double in size and it flaked daily.

As fighters buzzed the island in shattering arcs, George squatted behind an anti-missile gun. In training, he thought he had blown his eardrum after the first time he fired it, but over time he discovered that his body was not as weak as he had feared. Now he arced the gun upward and positioned it to point at the blue sky. The weight of the machine pushed his body into the ship's metal. He felt the solidness of the ship and his feet connected to it.

But his mind was not on the sounds of the ship or on the planes that he knew through the rumble in his ribs were headed for the island. His mind was on his son.

He wished he had said more to his son before he left. He could only hope that his apparent interest in the oddball and the clever was a sign that his mind was alive. Maybe his son was already coming to know what he knew, that there is a space next the one in we live in now, a space no less serious or vital, that can only be accessed through what makes us laugh. It is this second space that tells us who we are, even when the real world shows us something different. He wanted, now, to tell his son these things.

An obscene rattle grew louder and something that was both thunder and not split the sky. George squatted alone in a turret behind the machine. His squad was huddled in a communications tent, tapping out signals across the sea. Others manned guns, squeezed into turrets that broke out from the top of the battle vessel. The air in the ship was dense and yellow in the narrow corridors, where true solitude was rare. It was now, looking out over the horizon, that George felt the most alone.

Chapter One

If they were rich, which Miriam's parents were not, they may have objected to George. They were old world people from the Jewish quarter of Rome and a steely focus guided them after they sailed to join relatives in Brooklyn. Miriam was born an American, and for a long time she did not consider men as potential husbands. She was more interested in knowing men who danced well. The neighborhood dances took place in the cellars of the Italian families. The cellar in Miriam cousin Luisa's building was so packed with people on a Friday night that it was sometimes difficult to recognize who was dancing in front of her in the dark. Luisa played Perry Como records and the cellar became very warm. Miriam, sweating quickly through her dress, felt an unexpected thrill when a body pressed up close to her. She had been a thoughtful and even a shy girl with a fondness for her father, but she was nonetheless delighted by dancing and by the new possibilities that it revealed to her.

Miriam was never formally introduced to George, she was rather exposed to him when he paraded into Luisa's cellar one evening wearing a newspaper hat. Miriam remembered thinking he looked like an imbecile. At the time, she had already fallen in love with Harold. Harold, who removed his glasses when he had something thoughtful to say. Harold, who insisted that she eat the lemon pie at the coffee shop. He was irresistible with a force that was disarming. He was her first object of urgent desire and she was certain that her clumsy love, if returned, was the real thing. Harold, whose father was a Catholic. There was a boundary placed on Miriam's knowing Harold in the tactile way she wanted to know him — to run her fingers down his rumpled shirt front and through

his hair, dark and soft as a kitten's. It was like being allowed just one exception to walk into Eden's lush gardens, unchallenged and uninhibited, and then yanked out by God himself, who shouldn't have let her in in the first place.

When she thought about Harold now, with his slender fingers and the dimple in this left cheek when he smiled, it was with a pang of girlish nostalgia. She astonished herself with her emotional foolishness. She counted herself lucky because if things had been different and she had married Harold, she would have missed her chance with George, who had been waiting patiently in the wings.

They had always lived meanly, and it was for this reason that Miriam's mother did not say anything about love to her on her wedding day. She learned important skills, like how to hold most things together with an egg and a handful of breadcrumbs and how to sew an outfit for every season. Her wedding dinner was presided over by her father, who had invited everybody from the neighborhood, including some who he well knew did not care for his style of humor. He told animated stories and laughed too hard at the punchlines until the wine ran out. Miriam was eighteen. George was twenty. In the washroom on her wedding night, the mirror reflected a pair of dark eyebrows that nearly met at the middle of her nose. They were her father's eyebrows, a gift from his Sicilian mother. She found a pair of tweezers buried behind a bottle of witch hazel in the medicine cabinet. She clenched her jaw and poked at the skin between her eyes, removing the hairs one by one in pursuit of the thin, high arches of Fay Wray.

In February Arthur was born. They were living in a three-room apartment on a

crowded Italian block in Midwood. Miriam's life turned indoors. She rolled pasta on a wood plank that she placed over the ironing board in the kitchen.

George was clever and resourceful and he got a job in a big apartment building in Manhattan. Once a week he took her to the movie palace. When she asked him where he had got the money, he told her he saved a little bit every month for the pictures, so she could feel rich. She believed him, despite the forgotten electricity bill that left eating by candlelight one winter week. There were other forgotten bills. Miriam arranged them neatly on the table and waited for George to tend to them, one after another. She said nothing to him about it. She did not want to insult his dignity. She also very much enjoyed the films.

Arthur had a lumpiness about him that she found irresistible.

Amore, she called to him in his crib. *Amore mio*.

She tried to hide his lumps, preserving them for herself, by dressing him in outfits that she made on her sewing machine from Fortunoff's. She made him one outfit that she was especially fond of, a knitted one-piece suit and bonnet in sky blue with a delicate white ruffle. It made him look amusingly like the round-cheeked baby on the label of the beautiful cakes from the Naples bakery that her father used to bring to her as a child.

One morning Miriam took Arthur to visit her mother on Eighty-seventh Street. She rode the elevated train to Queensboro Plaza and went down the chilly steps to wait for the bus. Two women were waiting there in fine hats and good shoes.

"How old is he?" one of the woman asked Miriam. In her arms, Arthur was attentive

to no one thing in particular, but when the woman spoke his dark-brown eyes landed directly on her. Miriam hoisted him higher on her hip, attempting to conceal that her back was starting to give.

“He will be two years soon,” Miriam said. The women had inched closer and Miriam could smell their dress starch.

“What a darling,” one woman said.

“Positively a prince,” the other woman said and extended her hand. She tapped Arthur’s swirl of fluffy hair, a downy mess that Miriam loved to feel with her fingers and lips when she lifted him, red-faced and drowsy, from his naps.

“I don’t know why we don’t dress our babies like this, we all seem to treat them like they should match the drapes.” The two of them cackled with laughter that made Miriam’s face grow hot. She was struck by the woman’s words, “We all.” She thought about her husband’s family name, Sacco, which his father changed on his citizenship documents in America. She herself had been Salamucci.

Later that afternoon, as Arthur slept in the parlor of her parents’ house, she told her mother about the old woman and she started, unexpectedly, to cry. Her mother, not looking up from ironing a shirt sleeve, told her that she would have to be less sensitive. *Maria, essere meno stupido. Sei Italiano*, she said. And that seemed to settle the matter as far as she was concerned.

Arthur was a curious boy who was often drifting out of focus. She noticed the way he sat at the breakfast table, his attention always on some small thing in front of him that was invisible to her.

Sometimes he alarmed her. One day on the way home from shopping Miriam took Arthur's hand as they came off a subway car onto the platform.

"Why is your hand wet?" she asked, looking down at the top of his head. In response, Arthur looked up at her and showed her his entire tongue.

They walked the length of the platform and when Miriam saw the sign pointing toward the exit for "Station and Street" she felt Arthur's hand slip out of hers. She spun around and he was right behind her, standing next to a newsstand. She called to him. "Arthur, what are you doing?" He was distracted, not by the busy sweeps and voices in the station, but by his own voice. He was projecting it through his mouth and letting his lips burble, no more than that, but he had seemed to have reached a speed and tenor that garnered his full attention. Soon a few people standing in front of the newspapers noticed.

Why would he possibly choose this time and place to do something like this? "Stop that," she said, moving closer to him. He stopped briefly to look up at her.

"Can I buy a comic book?"

"No."

His face slipped into a mask of recognition and disappointment. The mask always registered the same bitter truth. Momentarily, he began the lip-burbling again, which rang out like an odd sort of drum beat. They were walking down the stairs hand-in-hand while he burred, harder in some moments than others, pausing to refill his lungs for the effort. It bothered Miriam that he was so unaware of her presence. He often seemed to be that way — unaware.

Miriam travelled uptown to the building where George worked to bring him a clean

shirt. He stood behind a desk under an enormous mirror framed in polished dark cherry wood. He had told her much about the residents of the building. Mr. Tyler, who spoke to him with his finger in his right ear, and Mrs. Meyer who had increasingly a lot to say about her family in Germany. Miriam delivered the shirt and waited quietly while George spoke with Mrs. Meyer. He was serious when he worked. He never broke into the smile that revealed his upper teeth. Instead his smile was small and respectful of his role. He listened and nodded. When something was asked of him he moved swiftly, with a swish of his blue coat, to pick up the telephone or to take a package from a tenant. When the lobby had emptied of anyone except for George and Miriam, he turned to her and said something in a flinty German accent that mimicked Mrs. Meyer. Though she knew it was not appropriate, Miriam couldn't stop herself from laughing.

One evening, when she was about to lay the table for dinner, George and Arthur were making all kinds of noise in the parlor. George was riffing on an old story that men in his family told at big dinners. She knew the story well, having listened to a different version of it from her own father many times. There were small differences. The character in George's version was a farmer, for instance, who had gone out to feed the pig and found it missing. Arthur was supplying the noises of the animals.

Miriam set down the cutlery and went to join them. George paused and looked at her. She wiped her hands on her apron.

"Go on Mir, you know the next part."

She paused, finding her mind had gone completely blank. "Oh no, never mind," she said, going flush and turning back to the kitchen.

“Go on then, what were you going to say?” George called.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Miriam said, feeling herself smiling and feeling dumb.

The weather was turning damp and Miriam was making Arthur a new winter coat. He had been wearing his gray one, even though the seams were coming loose at the shoulders. She wanted to repair it for him, but he wouldn’t let her have it. He deliberately wore it around the apartment so she couldn’t get her hands on it. Finally, she was able to take it from where it was hanging over the back of a chair in his bedroom. Before she could begin repairing it he found it sitting next to her sewing machine and he wore it to the movie house. So she was making him a new one, navy blue, to compliment his dark coloring.

She smelled the coat before she laundered it. It had the weedy, significant odor of a boy. He was so unknowable to her sometimes. Even though it took her breath away when she looked at him and she saw George. When they sat together in lamplight and listened to the evening programs she noticed her husband’s nose and chin in Arthur’s profile.

In her school days in Italy, short a time though that was, she remembered listening to a story that concerned penguins in the Patagonian islands. She did could not remember where this story had been written or if it had been a true story. The story was that a penguin travelled for many days and nights to the coast to catch food for its family. When it returned to the group, the journey had been so harrowing and the wait had been so cold and hungry for the family that it is possible the penguin would not recognize its mate or even its offspring amid the other hungry penguins, and the family would starve.

Who would not recognize her own child? She thought.

Arthur walked in the back door while she was holding a spool of blue thread up to the lamp. He went straight to the washroom, waving his mother off, and he emerged with a red patch on the fleshy part of his cheek under his right eye.

“What happened?” Miriam asked with alarm.

“I’ll be fine,” Arthur said. He did not look at her. He moved his foot under a kitchen chair and pushed it away from him, scraping it against the floor. Arthur saw the unfinished coat where she had spread it on the kitchen table to mark where she would sew the buttons. He lifted it carefully against her protest and slipped it on, pulling the front closed and turning the collar to his chin. He stood oddly erect and raised his hands above him to form a diamond-shape with his fingers, and then he began to sing a sort of tune. After a moment she recognized the song, it was the introduction to a religious program that came on WCBS on Sunday mornings in which an Irish priest would talk in a pleasant voice about stories from the bible. Arthur’s voice lilted like wind blowing sideways through a field. Despite herself, Miriam clapped her hands and laughed.

The telegram was delivered by a man wearing a uniform. She was called to the door by one of the children of the family who lived on the first floor. “Mrs. Saks!” the child screamed up the stairway. Miriam laid her apron over the back of a chair and when she reached the door she saw the officer standing there on the top step, his eyes on his hands. A little jump inside of her matched the pitch of the child’s scream. In a moment that lasted no longer than it took for the officer to extend the telegram toward her with a slight bow of his head, her life changed.

She took the telegram and held it in her hand. A clay flowerpot was on the stoop. She

had filled it with a handful of iris seeds in the spring and she could see how dry the soil was. She kept forgetting to water it. The iris had nonetheless bloomed a deep blue.

“The Secretary of War wishes to inform you that George Saks is missing after an attack at Midway Island base in which he served his duty at his post. Any information about his recovery will be sent to you directly.” Nothing more.

She took a sharp breath and collapsed so quickly that the Navy man could not catch her in time. She was on the floor now and she could do nothing else but stare up at him as he moved toward her. He had a broad face. “I am sorry Ma’am. Try to be strong.” He must have said other things too. His name. Lieutenant Whittaker. She detected a fresh cigarette on his breath. She felt suddenly that if she did not have a cigarette soon, her body, her mind, everything would fail. She placed her hand on the door frame. Whittaker was pulling her up. She was feeling so ill that she feared she would have to make a bigger fuss than he was anticipating.

“I am sorry Ma’am.”

She tried to thank him. The hallway was almost full dark after she closed the door. A light had gone out last week and it had not yet been fixed. She smelled her pan of sauce that was burning on the stove. Her life, ruined, returned slowly into focus and she thought of Arthur. She began to feel the solidness of the floor. The place inside of her where her heart had nearly jumped out, abandoned ship, would have to be patched. She returned to her apartment.

George’s last letter was still on her nightstand.

December 15, 1944

Dear Mir,

I thought about you last night in my bunk. Then I did a stupid thing and thought about God again. I know what you're going to say, but it gets awfully dull around the barracks when we are waiting for orders. You may already suspect that this is going to be one of those letters, prepare yourself.

I notice after a certain amount of self-love, the kind that happens once every other Tuesday when I can manage to say goodnight to my dignity for a half-hour or so, I have a rather remarkable feeling. This feeling appears at the very peak of the euphoric moment, if you catch my drift, and suddenly everything is more beautiful than I have ever given it credit for. So okay, you are having a good laugh now, I assume, and you are saying, "I married a real son of a bitch who thinks he just worked out what everyone has always known." This feeling surely does not belong to me alone, and if it is proof of the existence of some unspeakable real beauty, then I am comforted, that's all it is.

Are we surrounded by this clear and painless euphoria all the time? Or is it God who is everywhere, in everything? I don't believe he is here. Not where I am, at least. Then I get to the final possibility, that everything is nothing, and I need to see your photo again before I sleep.

How is Arthur?

A thousand kisses,

George

March 15, 1942

Midway Naval Base

Dear Mir,

I was thinking about our wedding recently. That dress that you and your mother made. I still smile when I think about that. Remember that spat we had over your aunt Elena? I didn't want to invite her to our wedding. That afternoon that I met her in your mother's house with all that she had to say about negroes and their savagery was enough for me to know her. You said something that made me give in, do you remember? You said that she was kind to you when you were a girl. You said she took you and your sisters to the seaside and showed you the boats. You said she bought you a vanilla cone and stood patiently with you while it dripped between your shoes.

Maybe she was kind. You said at the time that we might be able to see different sides to people, and that they might not be all bad. But you are wrong, Mir. We cannot look away from the dark sides in people's souls. I will never forgive people of their evil natures again. This is a firm change. There is no going back.

All my love,

George

Chapter Two

Arthur was born in 1936, the year that the Orpheum Theater in Brooklyn closed its doors. His father told him a story of the maternity hall where he had lay swaddled like a stamped parcel. His mother had knitted a periwinkle cap, small as a doorknob. He was surrounded by babies that had all, like him, recently had their first glimpses of the world and found it not to their liking. They shrieked in their discomfort or they slept in futile protest. Arthur, his father liked to say, had a pressed red face that made him, with the periwinkle cap, rather like a submarine captain. "I knew you were my boy with a face like that."

In its most successful days the Orpheum had rivaled Broadway's ticket sales. It played vaudeilles and musicals, as well as some of the bigger melodramas of the twenties. It sold out eight weeks in a row when a famous dancer from Budapest played both the heroine and the villain in Snow White. But when it closed, few people noticed. They were eating bean stew and women had disappeared into the city to find jobs serving tea or attaching buttons in shirt factories.

In one of Arthur's earliest memories he was in his mother's bed, a fever forcing his eyes shut. The blurred outlines in front of him made him feel safe. He felt himself drift in and out of sleep. On the vanity were her dolls, all standing upright like they had walked in through a tiny door from another world. All their garments were knitted and sewn by hand in her own steady patterns. Arthur's favorite wore a yellow dress and had layers of skirt that folded a hundred times. One held a coffee-colored fur in her arms that Arthur loved to run the tips of his fingers over. They were never moved from her vanity

and on rare occasions, once every few years, a new one appeared.

One afternoon Arthur returned from school and found his father in the living room alone. It was so startling that Arthur must have jumped, because his father felt the need to explain that his second shift had been cancelled that day.

“Let’s go see a picture,” he said.

They walked side-by-side to the theater on Third Avenue. Arthur did not linger in his usual spots, the barber pole, the comic rack at the news stand. He felt his father’s eyes on him.

The theater was playing a comedy. His father handed him a pink ticket stub along with two pennies for sweets. Arthur held them like he had just been handed rare jewels.

“Save some to throw at the screen if the picture is lousy.”

“Can I?”

“Well, give it a chance first.”

“I don’t want to throw it.”

“Keep it then, it’s yours.”

“But what if the picture is lousy?”

It was quite the opposite. The characters were clever and stupid at the same time. Real and imaginary. The auditorium reverberated with laughter, but it still did not feel as good as his father laughing next to him.

“What do you know?” Arthur’s father said as they left. “Those guys did it again.”

Arthur had preferred the young woman in the picture, but this was before he really understood the magic of Groucho.

From his bedroom on the second floor, Arthur liked to watch his father return home from his work in Manhattan. He watched from his bed as his father walked up the street and lit a cigarette. He smoked unlike others, as if to muffle his existence. He walked with a slight hunch and there was something violent in the way he swung a paper bag in his hand jerkily back and forth.

Most nights it was possible for Arthur to delay his bedtime up to an hour by asking his father to tell stories. Eventually his mother would leave her warm sewing machine and come into the kitchen to send him to bed. When he was in bed, he could only think of his hunger. He thought about a cut of a roast from his grandmother's holiday meal, a cover of fat melting on the edge. That year there had not been a roast, but a stamp-sized square of beef steak, dry as paper. He dreamed of lunchtime the next day, when he would open his tin of chocolate pudding in the cafeteria and peel off the slender round of skin.

To avoid the topic of food, he counted water spots on the ceiling and listened to a chair scrape the floor, a glass being set on a surface. The mumble of the Raymond Wilkes program, his father's nightly ritual, came though the door. It sounded like it was under water. Periodically a burst of energy rose like the crash of a sparkling wave, and then his father's raucous laugh emerged in the night.

Laughter drew Arthur out of his bed one night. He pushed on the kitchen door and saw his father in one of the straight-backed chairs at the table. He was leaning back and holding a glass loosely in his left hand. His eyes were closed and his laugh was deep, as if

it originated in his lower ribs. Arthur's father always seemed able to devise operations with some string and a few wood blocks, and this time he had constructed a foot rest which was suspended from the chair, so that he could sit back in it like he was in a toboggan. He was tall, taller even than Arthur's grandmother in Queens, and the contraption made him look like he was suspended in air.

It was likely that one could pass a pharmacy or a red brick church and find himself underneath the spontaneous combustion of a couple on a stoop negotiating in Italian. He imitated them, rounding out the sounds in quick stops and starts, plotting out the beats one after another.

One afternoon he clanged his shoe against the metal baseboard of the back door to the kitchen and with a strained sound, as though his throat were obstructed, he called out, "Milkman!"

"Hello?" his mother's voice came from inside.

"Milkman!" Arthur called again in the high, raspy voice.

"Just a minute, please!" she called.

"Milkman!" Arthur called again.

His mother opened the kitchen door and saw Arthur. She looked past his shag of hair to the porch. His mother looked searchingly at him for several moments until her eyes registered that he was the milkman. These moments were triumphant.

"How did you do that?" she asked with alarm.

He began doing other voices. He practiced voices that he had heard on the radio. His favorite was Baby Snooks. He also tried doing the heroes from the westerns and the

upstairs neighbor and the cashier at the drug store, but he was funnier when he did girls. He learned accents. Hard T's and a missing R's. He mimicked the Jews in his own family, sounding their ch's out in the back of his throat and rolling his tongue for the Rs. The essence of language, like the soul of a neighborhood, is in its feeling. It was not the words, like so many people thought, that made one a Greek, or an Italian, or a Jew. There was movement behind language. Arthur mimicked people not with words, but with rhythms, the reliable, repeating sounds of people — the slow, plodding tempo of Mr. Simon from upstairs, the durational rapidity of the Italian barber. His father had a deep baseline and a smooth, fricative pop.

He heard language everywhere. On the bus with his mother, in the bodega over the subway, in the park where his father took him to fly his homemade kite. The words of Italian, Yiddish, Polish swirled in the air and he inhaled them like aromas, each with a distinctive note. Within the barber's speech he detected black pepper and vodka. The quiet Asian florist on the corner had rose and pine in her greeting. The white American kids at school spoke as if they were made of milk and browned toast, while the perfect, rounded English of his teachers savored of black coffee. In his own mother's words, he detected plump black grapes that had ripened in the sun.

When Arthur tried a voice he stuck with it long enough to feel the mysterious connection inside of himself lock into place. It did not always happen, those two sides over a cavern being lashed together with a sacred bridge, and when it did not he lumbered along in a wavering register for a while. When it did happen he knew it instantly, his face contorted and his eyes fixed in a point in front of him, and he ran free.

After his father left for the Navy, the house went quiet. His mother only listened to the evening news broadcast to hear about the war, but there were no more quiz programs or family comedies. There was no more Wilkes.

Soon a letter arrived that was addressed to Arthur. His father was in California in a place by the sea where there were even more ships being built than the ones Arthur had seen when his father took him to look at the Navy Yard in Brooklyn. His father promised to write to him every week. He stored the first letter in a Ritz Cracker tin that he placed under his mattress.

February 5, 1942

San Diego

Dear Art,

You will be proud of your old Dad when you hear how much effort it requires for me to put this pen to paper right now. They are putting us thorough so much work in what they call “basic” training that it is the very last morsel of effort I have to give. And I give it so that you can hear your father driveling on about himself from California, of all places. I have discovered that this is where they keep the light that we miss all winter. They wear us out every day in under that sun. I have trouble knowing what to do when it is time to get into bed at night. Anyway.

Thank you for your letter. I am very excited to hear that Groucho and the brothers

have a new film out. I don't suppose we will get it here on base anytime soon. I would be happy if you would provide me with a synopsis of the funny bits in your future letters. That is, if you do plan to continue writing and you do not get too wrapped up in all the others things you do. Everything is going just fine over here. I shouldn't complain. They keep us fed and clothed. Never had any trouble with the physical stuff. Of course, too many more days of this and I may come home a few inches shorter. Your old Dad will be home before you know it. Take care of your Ma for me.

Lots of love,

Your Pa

After Arthur read the letter four times through, he assumed a position spread out on the rug in the parlor and kept vigil of the nightly programs. *Dinner with Judith* at six, *The Hal Williams Hour* at seven fifteen, and *Clover Tobacco Presents Raymond Wilkes* at nine. He intended to provide a detailed reports to his father. He took the position naturally, spreading his limbs on the rug like spokes of the sun.

Wilkes was a fast-talker, like all the other hosts. "People who live in glass houses, shouldn't," he said one night. He waited one beat, two. As he listened a lightness emerged in Arthur's mind, which usually felt as heavy as soaked wood. Over time, he began to retreat to the rug as if it were an oasis. Within the Wilkes program there was a hint of new life where higher things were possible.

Wilkes had a deep, guttural voice with which he announced the guests and played straight man to many acts. Arthur found a way around an "O" that produced a round

quality which, if he puffed out his chest enough to deepen his register, had a faint resemblance to Wilkes. And if not Wilkes, exactly, then certainly a man.

Arthur sat on low wall on a clear autumn day outside the two-story stone building where he went to school. He watched a group of boys form a baseball game in the yard. It was a familiar ritual. A bat was flung onto the ground near home plate. After another moment, some silent influence made Arthur step down off the wall.

One of the boys looked at Arthur's mitt, a souvenir that his father had brought home from the Dodgers stadium. "Left field," he said.

Arthur took his position and what seemed like a great deal of time passed. In the distance boys were running, catching, throwing in quick starts and short stops. It was unclear when his time would come. All at once everyone seemed to turn their heads and look at him. Arthur smiled. In the next instant he ducked when the arc of a ball fell toward him.

"Come on!" yelled a boy from the infield.

Another play gave Arthur the chance to save himself. The ball cracked high toward a cloud. He thought about the one thing that one of the boys had said after shoving him into the outfield, "Don't take your eyes off the ball."

He moved his arm up next to his head first, then he moved his feet, stepping two steps to the left, then two steps back. This should be easier. It must be a matter of instinct, to know where to stand. There must have been a moment that the ball made its sling down in the air that Arthur could have used to determine his footing. If there was, he missed it. A few seconds later he was watching the ball thud onto the grass.

“Whadya, blind?”

The grass bent sideways with the breeze and the game continued. The athletic boys were Polish and Romanian, the sons of stout, strong men who used to fill the neighborhood taverns in the afternoons. They were all in the war now.

The word buzzed into Arthur’s head, “blind.” The boy who said it had elongated the middle and stretched it out.

The bell rang for lunch and Arthur dragged his father’s mitt off his hand. He walked toward the others, who were gathered near home plate. He felt his back hunch as he approached. He had decided then, in the moment it took to whisk the hair out of his eyes, that he would try the voice that had been practicing for weeks. He was not sure that it was ready, but the decision was made.

“Sorry fellas, I don’t know what came over me.” He was loud enough that his voice lifted above the heads of the group and fell into the circle. His voice, which had been nestled in his gut, emerged into the air fully-formed, like a jewel. He felt himself do a kind of swagger that he had developed with this voice. The boys did not seem to know what had just happened. One of them looked at Arthur for a beat longer than the others and a slow smile emerged. Arthur’s head fell to one side, almost touching his left ear. There was little doubt that they all recognized it; the smarmy brother with the thick eyebrows and the greasepaint mustache. But their circle remained tight. Arthur was left standing near the chain-link fence. He let his eyes fall on them once more before going to the cafeteria.

At school there were egg and pepperoni sandwiches wrapped in paper that the

younger children set on the radiator to warm at lunchtime. In winter the classrooms smelled of ripe provolone. When men in coveralls came to paint part of the cafeteria they called to kids in a mutual language and the kids responded to like it was their mothers calling to them.

The music teacher was Mr. Rushing. His eyes were light as steel and they seemed to flash when a student played her chords. His hair was gray and trim and he wore checked shirts that he tucked neatly into his trousers so that the buttons lined up. He had no accent, his clear teacher tones could have been from anywhere, but there was something underneath. A mild, nearly imperceptible lilt that his voice took after he played one of his Mozart records for the class or when he was pleased with rehearsal. He was interesting.

“I would adore an extra milk,” Arthur said in the voice that he had developed for Mr. Rushing. He said it while he stood in line for lunch, his arms springing backward involuntarily as he said it. Margaret Sillwater, whose arm he had just jostled, was holding her tray quietly. Arthur had always paid careful attention to her voice, like a mouse. She looked at him like she did not even know him.

Arthur’s teacher was Mrs. Phillips, who drew perfect circles with chalk and spoke assuredly about nouns and verbs under an American flag. Mrs. Phillips always looked at Arthur as if he was wearing broken eye glasses.

The people of New Guinea have six words for “family,” Mrs. Phillips said to the room one day after lunch. Grace Wolfer wanted to know where New Guinea was.

“Far from here,” Mrs. Phillips said.

“Farther than Japan?” someone said.

“I suspect so.” Mrs. Phillips looked down at the book that was open on her desk. “But Japan is also very, very far away from Brooklyn.”

One day, something happened that gave Mrs. Phillips another opportunity to name something in the world that was far away. Snow had melted into puddles in the corner under the coat rack and everyone was seated when she asked a new boy to stand. He had a small, brown-flecked face. When he spoke, it sounded like his tongue had been attached to the top of his mouth. He said his name was Hiram.

The last new student, Richard Paradiso, had moved from Queens. Someone asked where Hiram came from. He said Poland.

“Is that in America?” Grace asked.

“No,” he said, looking at his desk.

“How do you know English?” said Richard Paradiso.

“My father taught me. He had a job to teach English in Warsaw,” he said. His mother could only say “thank you,” which she did every chance she got. Now, because of the war, they were going to be Americans. Mrs. Phillips said this and it brought everyone’s attention to her again. The war was not something anyone had anything to say about.

Mrs. Phillips turned to the blackboard and the squeak of a map being pulled down revealed the irregular outlines filled in with blocks of red, yellow, blue and green.

Europe.

“Hiram, can you come show us where you came from?” she asked.

Hiram blinked several times and looked at Mrs. Phillips with alarm, then he stood meaningfully from his desk and walked to the map. With his back turned to the class he

reached up high and placed a small finger on a spot in a part of the map that was a color that Mrs. Phillips called “lilac.”

“Why is it called Polen?” Gertrude Schiller asked.

“Has that always been there?” Grace said. “I don’t remember seeing it.”

Mrs. Phillips thanked Hiram and sent him back to his desk. After he sat, he watched limply as Mrs. Phillips rolled the map up on its wheel and began to write the spelling lesson on the blackboard.

One afternoon as Arthur made his way to the drug store for a jar of pomade and cotton swabs to work on his hair, he came upon a small boy who stood like an overgrown bird next to the news stand. It was Hiram. Arthur saw him close the comic he had been reviewing and calmly slip it under the belt of his pants. He walked away from the newsstand with a slinking rhythm and a slight side-to-side bop of his head. Arthur was surprised that he raised no one’s attention.

Later, when Arthur was cutting through a sandy lane on the south side of the park, he saw the boy again. He was sitting against the brick wall of the subway station with the pilfered comic in his lap.

“I hope that’s worth it,” Arthur said.

Hiram looked at Arthur. Behind him the tops of trees shuttered in the afternoon breeze. He was squinting in the sun, which had emerged from behind a cloud the color of fresh milk.

“I don’t know you,” he said. Which was a good point, and Arthur felt put on the spot.

A bus pass was pinned to the handle of the boy’s satchel.

“I’m Arthur.”

“Hiram.” He pushed himself up from the ground. He stood at Arthur’s chin.

They walked together to the bus stop, kicking dry leaves and glancing toward where the sun was setting behind the trees. There was an easiness between them, as if Arthur’s approach earlier had happened as a result of a mutual consideration.

“Tell me a joke,” Hiram said.

“What?”

“I saw you in the lunch hall.”

Hiram’s face was focused on a point just in front of him on the sidewalk. He walked quickly with short, uneven steps.

It wouldn’t hurt to use one he had heard on the wireless the previous evening.

“A man asks a waiter if the restaurant serves crabs,” Arthur paused.

“Yeah?”

“And the waiter says, sure, we serve anyone here.”

Hiram did not lift his gaze from the sidewalk, but Arthur could see that he was smiling. He invited Arthur to his home to see his collection of toy trucks with working levers.

They passed under the awning of the movie house, which was playing a comedy. A poster was displayed in the window box next to the entrance. When Arthur saw the figures on the poster he stopped abruptly. He felt Hiram stop next to him and they were silent for a moment. There were three large heads on the poster with their eyes cast sideways toward something in the background — a circus tent with a pointed red top. On the largest head were eyebrows as thick as brooms.

The desire to walk into the theater, to choose a seat and smell its musk of smoke and perfume, to fall back as the picture rolled, was so strong that he felt his ear fall over to his left shoulder. He wished more than ever in that he had a nickel.

Hiram spent several minutes studying the poster. Arthur was aware that Hiram was studying it as an outsider, and that he perhaps looks foolish. He turned away, urging himself to put the film out of his mind temporarily.

“Shall we go in?” Hiram asked. He produced a dime from his pocket and held it in his small hand.

Arthur was often mystified by Hiram, who arrived one day at the bus stop where they had begun to meet before school. One day Hiram brought a comic book and gave it to Arthur with no explanation. On taking it, Arthur saw that there was an illustration of an enormous beautiful lady on the cover who appeared to be trouncing through a cityscape. She was grazing the top of the Empire State Building with her round hip. Not knowing what to do with it, Arthur took the comic home and placed it on his desk where he looked at it for an entire glorious hour.

One afternoon Hiram asked about it.

“What did you think?”

“About what?”

“bout the girl.” Hiram had begun to say “how bout” in the way the announcer on the western programs introduced the newest installment. It nearly suited him.

“I liked it,” Arthur said, and Hiram laughed.

Arthur flushed. He remembered waking recently in his bed at night, his body wedged

into the corner against the wall. He had been rubbing against the wall in his sleep. In his dream, he was walking in a music shop. There were shining brass instruments standing high as corn stalks against the walls. He walked through them and became lost. The shop had become a maze. There was an empty rack and he walked into it. It was soft and warm. He became fixed there, rubbing up and down. After he woke, tiny constellations in his body began to explode.

Arthur was in a strange mood until he got home, when he went directly into his room and removed the comic from his top desk drawer.

One afternoon Arthur rode the bus with Hiram and walked with him under the elevated railroad tracks to a three story house on Eighty-eighth Street. The kitchen was filled with the steamy smell of chicken broth, as though it could be intensified. "Hello" Hiram's mother said after turning from the stove to look at Arthur. Their introduction having taken place, she put a bowl of broth in front of each of them. She continued to do so every day that Arthur appeared in her kitchen. There were bits of fat floating on the surface and pieces of celery and carrot in the broth. It was so delicious that Arthur felt as if he was going into another world when he ate it. Arthur also knew that if his mother were to find out, she would not be happy.

Hiram took Arthur into the parlor where a man was sitting at a long dining table. There were papers arranged in piles around him and the man was hunched over, holding a magnifying glass in such a concentrated fashion that he might have been repairing the spring on a clock. "My father," Hiram said as they walked by him. The man looked up as if they had startled him. He appeared to notice Arthur over the rims of half-moon

spectacles. He nodded at them once.

They went into a bedroom in the back of the apartment and Hiram opened a closet by the window.

“He is trying to bring some of our family over from Poland,” he said.

Hiram nearly disappeared into the closet. Arthur noticed the double bed and the housedress hanging on a hook behind the door. This was Hiram’s parents’ bedroom. After a moment Hiram re-emerged holding a black case. It looked like an instrument case. Arthur realized that he had not known that Hiram played an instrument, but it seemed silly to assume that he did not. There was so much Arthur did not know about Hiram.

The case unlatched with shining brass clasps that made a loud click. Hiram opened the box and moved his hands into it. It was lined in red velvet. What he lifted out was not a horn, not an instrument at all, but a bulky mass that Hiram handled with great care. He placed the mass on the bed and Arthur moved closer to him. Arthur could feel Hiram’s breath as he unrolled a soft pile of material in a red and white checked pattern. He straightened it and lifted the small wooden head upright. There were two onyx eyes, a nose, and a thin line that was upturned into a smile.

“It was my grandfather’s” Hiram said. He picked it up and sat on the edge of the bed. Behind the neck there was a fold through which a hand could be slipped through. Hiram held the figure with his right hand and put his left hand into the fold. It sat upright now, on Hiram’s knee.

“Why do you have it?” Arthur said.

“When my Grandfather could not come with us, my father let me take it,” Hiram said,

looking down at the dummy. “My mother did not want me to.”

It was a wonderful doll. It was even more than a doll, in fact. Something he had never even seen in his mother’s newsprint catalogues, which contained hundreds of photographs of dolls dressed as matadors from Spain and German hikers and Egyptian princesses. Hiram looked at him in that way he did, like he was trying to find himself within the layers of Arthur’s mind.

“She packed my shoes in her own trunk, so I could fit him in mine.”

Meanwhile the object was staring directly at the open closet door. With a gentle turn of his wrist, Hiram made him look out the window.

“What’s he called?” Arthur asked.

“Vladek.”

There were tiny hands sewn from cloth at the ends of the limp arms. Vladek’s hair was the color of chestnuts from the street cart. It was horse hair, Hiram said. It was straight and fine.

“My grandfather dressed him in a dozen different costumes. This was my favorite one, the farmer. But he had others for the show.”

“The show?”

“In Warsaw, yes. He told jokes. And Vladek was his partner.”

This was such a surprise that Arthur felt his gaze shoot to the doll, to Vladek. He felt strange, like he just realized that he had been overlooking something important. He noticed that Hiram was looking at him again. “Where is he now? Your grandfather?”

“He went to Prague,” Hiram said, quietly enough to caution Arthur against pressing him more.

“I would love to see it,” Arthur said.

“Me too. I wish you could see my grandfather in his show. He could do any voice you asked him. French, British, he could do it with hardly any practice.”

Arthur said nothing to this. He touched the latch on the edge of the case. It was smooth as seaglass.

“Like you, Arthur.”

After Vladek was installed safely in his case and the case was put into the closet under the piles of winter coats, and after they had gone out the kitchen door to look at comics in the shop, Arthur found himself imagining something for the first time. He could find a way to that second world for himself, to perform in it and make it his world always. He needed a stage.

They gave Vladek a new name, something that would be a better fit for Arthur. Hiram began arriving at the bus stop carrying the instrument case that contained what they were now calling Dante. After school they would remove Dante from the case and sit in the gym changing room after everyone had left to go home. Arthur tried out his best voices and accents and Hiram showed him how to handle Dante, how to grasp him with two fingers at the neck and make gentle movements to turn his head side to side. Otherwise, Hiram explained, it looks too much like a doll.

One morning Hiram arrived at the bus stop. His hair was pressed to one side of his head so it looked like the flat side of a loaf of bread. On his chin was a bruise the shape of an egg. The wind on the avenue blew a sign on its hinges. On the bus, Hiram did not talk

about the bruise. His uncle, who had lived in America for years before the war began, cut pipe for new homes in the Russian neighborhoods. He burrowed underneath foundations to fuse the pipes so that water could run out of bathtubs and down toilets. This was how Hiram had explained it. He knew because he was required to assist his uncle while he crawled underneath a house and listened to him curse. His uncle directed him to slip into narrow spaces in the wood planks and pull pipe through. Deep under the frame of the house there was soft dirt that smelled quietly of moss. Hiram could move between the spaces without getting caught, but occasionally he would put his hand onto a nail or a splinter of wood. Once a raccoon hissed at him and he hit his head on a wood beam. His uncle handed him heavy pieces of pipe through a narrow hole. The masculine body that took up so much space as a husband and an uncle and a man who once owned a painting business made his work loud and tense. Hiram knew when the job was finished because the cursing stopped and he heard a funny rubbing sound, like a rodent scrambling in the dirt, and his uncle's feet would emerge from under the foundation, followed by his backside and then the back of his head covered in construction dust.

Hiram looked tired, and yet it was not disinterest that Arthur read in his face, but an intensity.

"I need your help," Hiram said.

Arthur stepped closer. "Okay," he said.

The bus turned noisily around the corner. Hiram motioned for Arthur to take a small slip of newsprint out of his hand.

"This is the phone number of the house where my uncle lives," he said. "I need to you call it and pretend to be a man – a threatening man."

“Threatening?”

“You know, that one you do.”

Arthur thought about the times he had changed his voice to imitate the men they would see roaming the streets around the cinema. He had pinched his nose and pushed measured bursts of air out of his lungs to mimic their gruffness. The words he used meant nothing, but they moved together with fluidity, like a song. This had always made Hiram laugh.

“Tell whoever answers the phone that you have seen the kid working, and that you know which number house he lives in if you see him working again. And that he will be sorry.” Hiram was almost tearful.

Arthur thought of his mother, who answered the phone in his house most of the time, and what she would do if she discovered someone was kidding around with her.

“He will probably think the call is for one of the Italians in the apartment above him, he is always complaining about how much trouble they get into,” Hiram said. There was a pause. “No offense,” he said.

Arthur didn’t know what to say. He thought of the bruise that Hiram had on his chin that day. Now this urgency.

“Make it clear you are talking about me,” Hiram said.

“Can you tell your parents?” Arthur said quietly.

“No,” Hiram said. “They have other things to worry about.”

“The next time your uncle comes, tell your father you will not go.”

“I can’t.” Hiram looked in the direction of the bus. His shoulders sloped from holding his books, as if the books were filled with lead bearings.

“I’ll give you another magazine,” Hiram said finally. Arthur felt he had no choice but to do it.

That night he waited for his mother to wash the dishes. He went into the hallway and picked up the phone that they shared with the upstairs apartment. The line buzzed for a moment before he heard a click. He heard a man’s voice.

“Hello?”

Arthur hesitated. “We’ve seen the boy,” he barked, his voice far too loud. “We know where you live.”

“Who is this?”

“The boy,” Arthur said, struggling to keep his throat tense as he pushed the words out. The force with which he spoke caused a grainy scraping in his throat. “Who you send under houses.”

“I don’t understand.” He said. His voice was measured.

“Watch your ass.” Arthur said, and hung up. He didn’t know why he said that last part. He felt like laughing, like making a punchline out of the whole thing that would make Hiram laugh and forget his sadness. Arthur checked that his mother had not noticed the phone call.

An icy chill had entered the air and Hiram was not waiting at the bus stop. He was not in school either, and when Arthur walked to the bus stop that afternoon he expected to see him there holding the black case.

Arthur was eager to tell Hiram about a man he had seen that morning on the bus. He

was taller than most men, and he seemed to have to fold his body at the waist to enter the bus. Arthur noticed how thin he was. His cheekbones were pronounced under his eyes.

There were a couple of girls in green school uniforms in the seat behind Arthur. A desire within him grew. He wanted to crack through one of the girls' carefully-held smiles. He wanted to look down at their legs, at their navy blue stockings. He considered the thin man. How would the man sound? It could be a whisp of nothing, like a heavy curtain falling. Or it could have an unexpected force and volume that would catch the girls by surprise.

The thin man boarded the bus and sat in the front. Arthur would have to pass him when he got off at his stop, which was coming up. The girls exited at Third Street and an elderly man took their seat. Arthur watched the thin man by shifting in his seat to get a good look at him. The man's head was larger than his body. His eyelids appeared heavy and there was something not right about his face. It had a destructed quality. The streetcar rounded a sharp turn along the waterfront and when it slowed for the next stop, the thin man stood, holding the handrail above him with a delicate grip. Arthur stood too. He watched the thin man depart, and then he stepped off the streetcar into the gray sunlight.

The thin man walked slowly, so Arthur had to measure his distance carefully as he followed him. They walked along the waterfront, passing cargo ships and dockyards. The street was alive with the Brooklynese language. Men shouted commands and jokes to one another. Everything was shouted. The thin man did not speak to anyone, and he was not spoken to. He haled himself to a dock and stood before it, pausing before heading down the gangway. Arthur watched him from a short distance. He appeared to be adjusting something in his hands. A cigarette, maybe. After a moment he moved on down

the platform to the dock and nothing was revealed. He had simply been staring into his empty hands.

Arthur watched him take careful steps toward the busy dock, where men were lifting and sorting crates from a ship. His unsteady gait was undeniable now. He had a slight limp. The man eventually disappeared, consumed by movement and the repetitive actions of muscles, blood, and lungs.

A short time later, Arthur was searching for light in the windows of Hiram's house. There was movement behind one of the windows. He went to the the back stairs that led to Hiram's kitchen door. He knocked. Hiram's mother opened the door and a quick look of surprise crossed her face. She brought him inside and directed him with her finger to sit at the table. Hiram's father was there, sitting over his paperwork.

Arthur turned around and looked behind him at Hiram's mother who stood by the stove, her cheeks and ears were flushed. With one hand she held the side of the counter to stabilize her body. In her other hand she held a metal spoon, hot with steam. She lifted her eyes and met Arthur's gaze.

"Do you want something to eat?" she said.

Arthur's stomach made a knot and he moistened his lips. "Where is Hiram?" he asked.

Hiram's father looked up again from his documents and his eyes met Arthur through the tops of his spectacles. There was a stained coffee mug in front of him and spent cigarettes in an ashtray.

"Hiram had to go away," he said. "His uncle is working on a new property out

east.”

“What is Hiram doing out there?”

Hiram’s father had lowered his eyes to his work, but it was clear he had heard Arthur.

“Come sit down, dear.”

“I’m not hungry,” Arthur said. He feared in that moment that he was going to be sick.

Arthur walked slowly down the steps from the back door to the house. He broke gradually into a jog after he passed the front steps and he wound around the corner onto Flatbush Avenue. It had grown dark. Traffic stood in gridlock, fumes swirling. Arthur could hear his heart beating. It rose above the noise of the street. He felt Hiram’s absence. The late edition was piled on the street by the newsstand. Men in overcoats crowded near the stand to buy cigarettes. Saleswomen were leaving the department store and walking quickly, their pocketbooks folded against their sides. Hiram’s uncle knew it was him. He thought of Hiram, scared, on his knees in a dark place. Arthur felt like he could send his voice to the moon.

Without Hiram and without Dante, Arthur had nowhere to be after school. When the 138 bus swung its door open on the corner, Arthur had his hands plunged deep into the trash bin. He was so occupied with inspecting a discarded late edition for coffee and food stains that he only looked up when headlights flooded the curb where he stood. “You with them?” the driver’s gruff voice surprised him. He sat squat in his seat like a bullfrog, his cap squeezed onto his head. The last of a group of three boys had just disappeared

through the open door.

He sat next to a man wearing a gray coat the color of coal. The bus shifted gears and a high-pitched sound rose like a bad note above the noise of the motor. Then a sudden call and a rustle. The boys were messing around up front.

Arthur smoothed the newspaper onto his lap. There was a photograph of the crew from an American Navy ship that was departing from New York and was surrounded by band instruments and the cast of a popular musical. On closer inspection, it was the two main stars of the musical. They were standing on a bandstand looking rich and gay. The female star was holding a bunch of flowers and was extending a single rose to a sailor. Arthur could feel the man looking at him.

“That horrible events over there.” the man said shaking his head. Arthur heard this word, “horrible,” turning it around in his head. The man was looking at the photograph under the headline.

The last letter Arthur had received from his father had come nearly two weeks before, just after school let out for the summer.

May 15, 1942

Dear Art,

If there is anything I can tell you, son, it is that you should pay attention to your studies. Some of the guys here are real smart-alecs. But they know a thing or too. One of them studied chemistry, as a matter of fact. He works for a medicine company that is

trying to cure all sorts of illness. With a brain like his, who knows what a man can do in this world. He will probably go on to cure us all of the plague one day. Anyway, I want that for you too. So keep it up, will you? Don't fall short on your old Pop.

I'm a proud father, so I can tell you I love you without feeling awkward about it. Go ahead, now, let me just say it and don't give me any of that flak of yours. I know you love me too, but you are my boy, and that is one of those things that boys don't say to their fathers. Don't worry though, I know the truth.

Take care of your mother and make sure she drinks her milk and eats her greens.

Always,

Your Pa

The old man next to him was telling him about his wife. She went to the church every day and lit a candle at the alter of Santa Maria, holy mother of mercy. After a moment, he looked away.

Arthur smoothed the newspaper again, and then he made two folds so it became a triangle. He made smaller folds on the sides, the way his father had taught him. He joined the two ends to expose a pocket. The man looked down at him with interest. "What is this, you make?" the man said. Arthur admired the hat, holding it without clear intention for a moment, and then he placed it on his head. A few people turned their heads to consider Arthur and seemed, for a moment, to react, but the possibility disappeared. The man laughed a light, foreign laugh.

Arthur remembered his mother and father speaking in their parents' language when

he was younger. After dinner, his father would put Guy Lombardo on the Victrola and his mother would rest her arms on Arthur's shoulders.

Arturo, balla con me, she would say, and they would dance, laughing when she stepped on his toes in her stockinged feet.

After the war started and it felt like an unseen tidal wave drawing ever closer to Brooklyn, his mother spoke only English. When his father volunteered for the Navy his mother hesitated to even boil water for macaroni. "Orange cheese," she would say, "and canned vegetables. This is what Americans eat."

The bus wheezed and slowed to turn at a corner. The boys up front had gone quiet. When the bus jerked to a stop at Seventh Street, Arthur stood and waited while a baby carriage was moved to the side for him to pass. He left the hat on his head while he passed the boys and saluted them with one hand to his forehead. "Gentlemen," he said. Within his mimicry there was a silliness that was too much for the boys, for whom performance took place in half-second reactions and athletic magic.

Like the recoil of a gun, one of the boys sprang forward in his seat and grabbed Arthur hard by the shoulder. The next instant Arthur was plopped hard into a seat between two of them. After a moment, the bus began to move again.

"What's your deal, Napoleon?" the boy who had grabbed him said. He had a tangle of hair and a dark patch of growth over his lip.

"That was may stop."

"Come a few more with us." Arthur cursed himself for misreading the group. These boys were not the joking type.

Twenty minutes later he was pushed from the second step of the bus onto the street.

He was in a neighborhood far from his own. The boys followed. He could see the man he had sat next to sitting by the window as the bus drove away. The signs of delight that had been there earlier had vanished from his face.

He heard the boys' laughter even after they had rounded the corner. The newspaper hat had been knocked off his head and was sinking into a puddle.

It was still light when he turned onto Seventy-sixth Street. He knew his mother would be sitting next to the fan in the kitchen when he walked in, mending for one of her jobs. She would ask to use his eyes. As her eyesight declined she sometimes asked him to thread a needle.

When Arthur went into the apartment, it was quiet. The kitchen light was off. "Mother!" he called.

She appeared from the bedroom then. He could see she had been laying down. Her face was pale and her hair fell in dark waves passed her shoulders. Strands of white and gray surrounded her ears. Arthur was startled. She took almost as much care with her own appearance as she did with her dolls.

The telegram lay face up on the table. It was the first time Arthur had seen a real telegram, having heard about them so many times in radio storylines. At the top was an American flag with an eagle in the background. Arthur did not read the entire telegram, though it was not more than one sentence long.

"The Secretary of War wishes you to know..." it began.

Arthur's mother, having not yet made a sound, let out a small kind of wail behind him. He heard her continue in this way as she returned to the bedroom. He realized that

the telegram was a replacement for his father's next letter. He realized all in this moment that now he was going to have to reach his father some other way. He did not yet know how, but he knew that he would figure out a way to do it. He missed Hiram desperately.

Chapter Three

1943

Miriam had given her coffee ration cards to her father, whose health was declining. She used to love putting up the coffee. She relished the ceremony, the way she measured the coffee with a scoop into the canister and clamped the coffee pot over the flame. She loved the smell — like burned wood and molasses. Without the ritual, she felt the emptiness of the days.

Three months she had received the telegram informing her that her husband was lost, she was smoking a cigarette in the kitchen while she sewed a button onto a frayed pair of trousers. A pan of chicken was on the stove, ready for reheating. There was a can of sweet potatoes in syrup to go with it, the last vegetable she had on the shelf. She had not enjoyed her appetite for many weeks.

Mr. Simon who worked the night shift at the sugar plant by the river always rushed from the second floor when the phone rang in the hall. He knocked on the door of the parlor with two swift knocks and shouted, “Telephone!” with a voice that was deep, like the coal man’s.

“Mrs. Saks, it’s Ruth Cohen.” she said.

“Who?”

“Hiram’s mother,” she said. The name struck Miriam as distantly familiar.

“I thought you should know, Arthur has been here almost every day.”

“Arthur has been...?”

“Here. At my house.”

“Why is that?” Miriam said.

“How should I know! But Hiram is not coming home for a couple of weeks, and here your son is eating two bowls of chicken broth and nearly a package of crackers every afternoon. And I don’t mean to sound — He is welcome here. I just thought you would want to know.”

She did not know that Hiram had gone away or, in fact, that Arthur had been spending time at his house at all. She stopped herself from asking Mrs. Cohen where they lived. That would only complicate things. “Okay,” she said.

“I am just phoning to let you know.”

“I am sorry he imposed himself on you like that. I owe you gratitude for letting him hang around.”

“Oh! Don’t thank me. I didn’t call you to be thanked,” Mrs. Cohen said. “It is not a bother to me, I can manage him. I thought you would want to know just as I would.”

“I see.”

“I will hang up now. Have a pleasant morning, Mrs. Saks.”

She stood by the phone for a moment before returning to the apartment. And what? What do you want from me? Arthur had brought a boy home one afternoon, she remembered now. She had looked up from her sewing machine and saw them go into Arthur’s bedroom and shut the door. He was such a small boy, he must have been about half her son’s size. She supposed she had offered him something. A glass of water.

The gin was in a cabinet next to the sideboard, where she had put it away after the last time she used it. They were not a family who drank. She had a glass of wine at her wedding and, in the early days of their marriage, George had been the entertainer. When cousins and friends came by to play *Scopa* he would bring out a bottle of clear gin that he

had procured on his way home from Manhattan. But they were never drinkers the way Americans could be.

Miriam took her glass to the kitchen table where she had stuck the needle and thread into the belt of the trousers. Her eyes were tired. That was always hard, resetting her focus after breaking her concentration. A moment passed and she had already finished the gin. Her mind made calculations about Arthur in that moment that she did not intend. Hiram, the tiny boy, was the only time she had seen him with a friend. She remembered now that she had been surprised to see Arthur with someone his own age. She was pleased. She had even felt relief.

Miriam was learning to drive. The high school was offering a surplus of courses for women in subjects like electricity repair and auto maintenance. Miriam's mother thought it shocking, but there was no hope that she would understand. As her husband lay in bed dying, her mind was listing steadily toward its exit from the world. The life her daughter had was no longer a real concern. At least, Miriam thought, she would not be one of those pitiable women who signed up for the English course.

There were ten women in the course with her. Two of them had their husband's delivery trucks parked outside their buildings. One of them wanted to drive her husband's taxi. One woman's husband had given her a Pontiac just before he was drafted and now it sat unused outside her house in Rockaway Beach.

It had become clear that Miriam could not rely on the income she made from the mending jobs that people would bring to her apartment. She took George's disappearance as a signal that things were now up to her, and though she did not have the slightest idea

what to do about it, she continued to sew. She hemmed curtains, darned wool socks, she let out dresses for women who were starting to show. She sat all day at her machine or in the kitchen with her needle and thread. Her eyes burned. With a car, she would be able to deliver orders to her clients and pick up materials too.

Italians talked, as they do, and it didn't take long before she could expand to clients outside of her neighborhood. She sewed overcoats for a Jewish shop owner in Williamsburg. He arrived every Friday with a fresh load of material, which he piled heavily onto the table. Miriam's work was the same quality as the shops downtown in Manhattan, and he responded well to this. He never declined her offer to stay for coffee. He was a widower, this Mr. Weiskopf, who had emigrated from Germany in the twenties, lucky to escape Hanover at a time when nobody could afford to buy a loaf of bread. He did not insist on speaking Yiddish to her. He wanted both milk and sugar in his coffee, which she added with as light a touch as she could get away with, to save it for Arthur.

One day he told her she was beautiful. He held his hands at his midline, where his belly pushed out over his belt, and he looked at the floor as though he were waiting to be told he could stay for dinner. This would not do. She needed more clients. She would need money to buy a car and she would need to learn, of all the things that terrified her in the world, how to drive it.

The car was a black Plymouth with strong tires and a thin steering wheel that brought Miriam unexpected delight to hold, which she did in the ten o'clock and the two o'clock position. She bought it off the driving instructor, a round and talkative older man named Mr. Martin, who asked her what she planned to drive. "I have just the thing," he said after

she told him she had not decided yet. She did not know enough about a car to know if the price he had asked for, two hundred dollars, was a fair price, but she had enough saved in her dresser drawer to pay for it.

She drove it first to Prospect Park, where she had three clients in a red brick apartment complex across from the park's south entrance. People drove faster than they did when she was in the car with the instructor. Her first time on the road in driving school was feared by all the students, but for Miriam it had felt fluid, like she was floating on water. As she pressed her car forward into lane of traffic the instructor said something and she looked at him, thinking he wanted her to, but when their eyes met his tone was almost a panic. "Eyes on the road!" he would half-shout. She did not feel, in the end, that they had really got to know each other in a way that made her comfortable. When she was finally alone, scooting her bumper across the lane to merge into traffic, she felt better on the ocean roads, enclosed in her capsule.

Evenings were hard because she lost the light and that is when she felt the eye strain the most. She slept late and Arthur was usually gone by the time she emerged from her bedroom. He returned home late, often after dark. She would hear the back door close and then the ice box open, that was how she knew that he was home and that she could put her mind at ease. She still had a son. He ate the food she prepared for him. Now she waited without knowing exactly what she was waiting for. She waited for her son to need her.

One such evening Miriam had left a chicken leg and boiled potatoes on a plate for Arthur by the sink in the kitchen. She was in her sewing chair where she had taken a

glass of gin with an ice cube, which had been helping to ease her eye pain. Arthur surprised her when she looked up from sewing a pocket onto an overcoat. She was a little too warm, though it was a chilly night outside. He was standing behind her quietly as she hunched over the machine. How long had he been watching her?

“Can I turn the radio on?” he said. His voice was stiff and mature. “We can catch the second run of Wilkes,” he said.

“All right.”

Arthur turned to leave and paused. He turned back to Miriam. She had not taken her eyes off him. His cheekbones, always her favorite part of him when he was a baby, were still her favorite part. He had George’s close-set eyes. Her love for him overcame her with such a ferocity that she had to turn back to the machine. She knew how silly she looked to Arthur, how uninspiring. She always felt that George had completed her in this way, had been her creative second half. She didn’t know how he came up with the stories he told. They just seemed to be there in his mind. Now she did not want Arthur to consider her at all. In fact, she preferred it if he went elsewhere and left her alone to her work. She had so much to do, but she did not have what Arthur seemed to value most. She had nothing to say.

After a week, the car did not start. It was a clear fall day and she was bouncing slightly on the seat as she turned the ignition. She quietly enjoyed that little bounce. She was on her way to pick up an order of dress panels for a Russian dressmaker in Sheepshead Bay. The engine chugged and turned, but the eventual mechanical growl that turned the car to life never came. After many tries she did not know what else to do, so

she closed the door gently behind her and went inside the apartment to call the dressmaker and tell him she would be late.

Later she sat on the bus with a bolt of material in her lap. She had taken as much as she could carry. The dressmaker was not happy after he had given her tea and asked her where she had parked her car.

“I took the bus,” Miriam said.

“You said you had a car.”

“I do.” They both looked at the four piled of cotton fabric on the dressmaker’s work table.

“I do not know how you women are going to get on,” he said. He appeared to have said this with genuine sorrow. Around Miriam on the bare wood floor there were headless mannequins wearing several different patterns of dresses in styles that were current, but far from wonderful. There were two brown dresses with slim belts and one with a blue floral pattern. One extraordinary figure stood in the corner with a fur stole draped over its shoulder. Miriam could smell its musk when she passed it coming in. “Fox,” the tailor had told her, smiling with unconcealed pride. She did not ask if there was a woman who lived in the house, but she could feel that there was not, that that there never had been. That there probably never would be. But the images of women surrounded them in the broad shoulders of the dresses and in their slim waists, the key-hole necklines. Miriam’s own cotton dress that fell below her knee felt as tired and out-of-date as she knew it looked.

On the bus she perspired under the weight of the fabric that she had folded clumsily

onto her lap. She was powerless to move as people got up and sat down next to her. Finally she heaved the pile with her off the bus and took three breaks as she made her way home. Her arms burned after the effort and, as she passed the car outside her house, she was determined to find a way to repair it without getting fleeced.

She had not said anything to Arthur about the phone call from Mrs. Cohen, but she noticed that he was appearing more often at home. He came and went, taking peanut butter sandwiches with him into his bedroom. She noticed him take other things too. A potato sack, an empty tin of evaporated milk. She asked him one evening what he was working on. The way he looked back at her actually made her consider him more seriously. “Has something happened?” she asked. She did not know what she meant by this, but the moment she said it she knew they were both thinking of George.

“Nothing,” Arthur said. “When Hiram gets home, I want to show him something.”

“Your friend Hiram? Where has he gone?”

Arthur said nothing.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Miriam said.

“I can’t talk about it yet,” he said, “it’s still in process,” and he returned to his room and closed the door.

In process. Miriam thought of the cabinet under the sideboard. The gin. Later, Miriam heard him. She had had a drink after cleaning the pan that she had used to heat up the tomato soup they had for dinner. She sank into a chair. A voice that was not Arthur’s came through the wall, but she knew that it was his voice. Her body tensed. She stood and felt herself waver slightly. She should have eaten more.

She walked to his door and stood still for a moment. She would have sworn there were two people in the room. He was talking to someone. *What do you think?* She heard him say. *Never heard that one before.*

Who was he talking to? It was better, at least, than talking about going into the Army. It was better than talking about going to war. All of a sudden Miriam wanted to know where George was, and a quick sharpness in her revealed that she would not be able to go on if he did not return. She would not be able to understand her son the way George did. He always put her at ease. He told her Arthur was normal. Normal!

She returned to the other room to turn off the sewing machine. She should go to bed. Tomorrow she needed to find a repairman for the car, and she was tired.

Livia Marcos learned about her husband Giovanni's death in February and she still wept when she went out to buy meat for the children. Josie Alessandro, who had unexpectedly received her husband Sidney's dog tags in the mail one day, kept them in a drawer next to her rosary, even though she was living with another man.

As she waited for her own news of the definitive nature of George's death, Miriam continued to write to her husband. She wrote to him about her sewing work. When he returned home, she would happily stop. She wrote about taking her mother to temple on the Sabbath, where her mother showed more signs of recognition of the world around her than she did at home. She received no response and no news, but not one of her letters came back to her. Who was receiving them? Was anybody reading them?

She wrote to him about Arthur. He was changing more quickly than she could keep track. There was the call from Mrs. Cohen. There were the days that he returned home

with a scrape or a bruise that he would not explain. And more recently there were his conversations alone in his bedroom, every night. He listened to the radio every evening with a strange sort of intensity. It was even as if he was not enjoying it at all. She wrote pages, all address to "My dear George." She stamped each letter and dropped into the box, all addressed to that island with the odd name - Midway.

George once talked about an apartment in the building where he worked. He was called up and directed into a dark closet with a candlestick to repair a broken fuse. After he fixed it, the woman asked him to stay for coffee. She was a regal old widow, George had explained, inviting the doorman to sit down and socialize. So he did. Not long after that, the same fuse blew in the same apartment. He returned and dutifully flipped it into its proper position, emerging from between cashmere coats and furs in the closet to the woman's expectant smile in the hall. He stayed again. This time she served cake. Miriam knew what he was telling her. The woman certainly knew how to flip the fuse herself, which she did when she wanted to instigate a visit from George. It only ever happened on the hours when he was on duty.

As he told the story they were drinking Miriam's coffee in the parlor. A record was on the Victrola. George was in the mood he got into sometimes that made him share more than he needed to with Miriam. There were some things she simply did not want to know.

"It was a one-man job!" George practically shouted. He laughed hard at this. He must have slipped some brandy into his coffee cup. This was rare, but he must have.

This happened around the time that George received news about his cousin, Rene. She had fallen out of a tree that she had climbed into to look at a bird's nest. She died

shortly after the fall.

Miriam had already known about Rene. She was cleaning out the wardrobe and she opened a cigar box one day that she always thought George had used to store his shoe shine kit. But it was full of letters. There were dozens from Rene, the handwriting even and beautiful, the mark of a thoughtful schoolgirl. Not every one of them spoke of love, but the ones that did matched the high emotion with which she wrote of the wild flowers on the side of the lane that led to her house and the goat they kept in the barn, which ran wildly in circles when she went out to milk it and it always made her laugh.

There was one letter addressed to Rene that was signed by George. It had not been sent.

October 3, 1932

Dearest Rene,

It has become fruitless, after three long years, to imagine your face the way it is now. I imagine there have been some minor changes, some marks of wisdom or a wrinkle or two. I remember your face the day you left and I think of it often. It has an everyday shape, like a rusted joint in a pipe. I say that not to offend you, though I know what you are doing now, turning up your mouth at one side and scolding me. I will take your abuse, so long as it is loving.

I have a reason to make that particular analogy. I spend quite some time in this new job laying on the floor and looking up into the dark undersides of sinks or kneeling before

a stuck toilet. I hope that one day I may move into a job at the door of the building, where my occupation is to greet people and ensure that their moods are fine enough to return to the nest. Many times when I am well-wedged into a dark crevice under the gleaming porcelain of an East Eighty-sixth Street kitchen sink I think of your face, and I tell you, these are moments when I remember that I am alive.

I admit I am not accountable only for innocent thoughts. I have tried many times to remember you in your nightgown, your hair falling past your shoulders, the way I saw you when I went to help after your mother had that serious attack of asthma. But do not be so hasty to tear this letter to pieces and throw it down the well. I keep that image deep in my mind, well hidden. I do not know if your father was right to refuse us our wish to be together. I remember what it was like standing in his grocery in the early light of the Lower East Side. New York always has so much promise in the early morning, don't you think? Anyway, I remember, after his quick response that seemed to lack patience or understanding, I saw something in his eye that seemed to say he was sorry. It was only a flash. It was as if he wanted to say that if his daughter was to marry the son of his sister, it would have to be in a different kind of world.

My life now involves Miriam, who makes me smile when she thinks nobody is watching her. Those serious faces she makes, the look of concentration. She, like me, does not believe in God, and this is an area where we find we can begin most things. From this, we are building a life. I think I will love her.

Yours,

George

In the days after she read the letter, Miriam worked very hard to hide her feelings, and she supposed it had made her seem cold. On the inside she was cracked like the breastbone of the raw chicken that she pressed into with the heel of her hand. This was the best way to fit it into the pot.

Over time, she thought about Rene only a few times a month, and then not at all. When George received the news and told Miriam that his cousin had died, she saw him suffer. She consoled him, as she felt a genuine tenderness toward him as he worked to conceal his pain. Her future was clearer now than even before. Nevertheless, there was a question that never left her mind. Did George love her like he thought he would? She didn't know.

Soon they were eating dull and unattractive portions of food that came out of cans. Rations were imposed on dairy, meat and sugar. Arthur complained only once, when he had taken a bite of soup and involuntarily cried out. After emptying the can into a pan, she had forgotten to light the stove. Miriam found that she was tired. She was hungry too, but could not bring herself to eat more than once a day.

“Not a big surprise, your low energy,” the doctor had told her, “rations being what they are.”

The doctor seemed to always want Miriam to think that he knew her moods and habits. She never believed this to be true, not since he had put her to sleep and brought Arthur into her world. “And how is the mother?” he always asked when she brought Arthur in for his check-ups. She had stopped by his office this morning only in hopes

that he could give her something for her fatigue.

“Unless you are going to have a baby.” He looked at her with a careful smile.

“Wouldn’t be the first in recent weeks.” It was true that many women in the neighborhood had begun to show a few months after their husbands had left for the war.

Miriam could not bring it to mind, for some reason she had lost track, but she was sure she had bled. She thought then of the smell of her breath, of the tablespoon of gin that she had poured into her water glass that morning. He looked at her as though he could smell it.

“No,” Miriam said. “No, that would be impossible.”

“Would it?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How about we do a test. Just to be safe.” He was standing directly in front of her where she sat on the examination table. The heels of her shoes clicked against each other lightly. She felt cornered in the little room. A diagram was pinned to the wall, a bisected illustration of a human head. Her ordinary urge to comply had escaped her and been replaced with something else. She did not know what it was.

“No,” Miriam said.

She could think only of her terror before Arthur’s birth, through all the strange things that women told her about it, her mother’s advice to eat whole pieces of garlic to stimulate the contractions, a warning that a baby that does not take the breast may have weak resistance. The counting backward from ten as a mask was lowered around your face. And then the desperate illusion, after she woke from a space darker and emptier than any dream, that something had gone wrong. She had confessed this, foolishly, to the

doctor at one of Arthur's first check-ups. He had laughed at her, actually laughed, and told her that he could see to all kinds of problems at birth, but he could not fix a baby that had nothing wrong with it. Maybe it would be a very long time before Miriam could let go of her fear.

Miriam had paid to have the car fixed in a garage and she already had three clients waiting for her to pick up material. She drove across the bridge and bumped onto the stone lane in the old neighborhood where George was born. A tailor worked out of a ground-floor shop on this lane. His family lived above in a two-room apartment, two little girls and their mother, who was expecting a third.

"It will be a girl," the tailor said. He emerged from the back of his shop with a box of buttons. Miriam was to sew them onto a set of fifty overcoats. "They are always girls on my side of the family. I don't expect my luck to change."

"In my mother's family there were six," Miriam said.

"Girls? The thought of it."

"Do your girls like dolls?"

"These are hard times, Mrs. Saks."

"Yes."

"I need this by Tuesday."

Miriam drove uptown to the apartment in a red brick building that imposed on the corner of Fifth Avenue. A doorman in a red jacket opened the door for her and greeted her with a tap to his cap. Across the street was the brown and gold-tipped park and the

zoo.

The apartment was on the eleventh floor. It belonged to Mr. Carroll, a wealthy garment man who had moved a portion of his business out of a factory on East Eleventh Street when the war started. The elevator doors opened and a man stood there to slide open the grate.

Miriam carried a black travelling case at her side. In it she had one of her dolls, the one she called Autumn. She was greeted at the door to the apartment at the end of the hall by Mrs. Carroll, a woman no older than herself. She held the door open and looked to Miriam like a woman who can afford Max Factor lipstick and rouge.

“Come in,” she said, looking at the case in Miriam’s hand.

They sat on soft chairs in a dark parlor, though the day was fine outside. On a polished wood sideboard Miriam noticed a collection of extraordinary dolls. They were arranged in three neat rows, with a platform to better observe the detail of those in the back. They wore day dresses and ball gowns, some were wrapped in silk robes and kimonos. One wore a hooded cape of yellow gold. There were layers of lace and crinoline. There was one whose long dark hair was braided and tied atop the crown of her head. She wore a sheath of leather that had been embroidered with hundreds of brilliant little beads.

“I believe you met my husband,” she woman said.

“I met a man who works for him. He came to my home to pick up an order.”

“An order?”

“I sewed dress panels for your husband.”

The woman’s face changed slightly at the mention of this. A woman dealing business

with her husband.

“He phoned me and said you may be interested in this doll.”

“He told me that you were offering it for sale,” she said. “That is why I am interested.”

“My dolls are ordinarily in my bedroom, but I had taken them out that day,” Miriam said. “I suppose so that I could place them on sale, so to speak.”

“So to speak? So it is for sale?”

Miriam hesitated. “Yes.”

“May I see it?”

Miriam leaned over to unclasp the case. As she did, she felt the woman staring at her, her breathing becoming heavy. She lifted the doll onto the coffee table between them. The brown ringlets of hair were undisturbed by the trip in the suitcase. Her dress had a square-lined neck and wide sleeves in a red and blue checked pattern. It was a style from two decades ago on the boardwalk in September. It brought a wave of pride to Miriam just to see the checkers, the colors.

“My my,” Mrs. Carroll said.

Over the dress, cut in a way that allowed it fall open, the doll wore a knee-length linen jacket in a red that looked like it had been washed by sunshine. The stitching at the shoulders gave it a slight puff, creating a silhouette that made her look like her life were gentle as the lapping waves on the beach.

Mrs. Carroll was leaning toward the doll now, her hand extended. With a light movement, she touched a fold of the jacket. “I’m wild about her,” she said, almost whispering.

Watching her, Miriam felt something rush over her. The way she imagined her dolls before they took form, the way she chose a doll's blank body and head from a catalogue and walked deliberately around the bins of the fabric store. She sewed and embroidered patterns onto soft undergarments that were smooth as the inside of a clam shell. She had contained herself in her sewing room as her belly grew large with Arthur. She sat there in the early mornings when Arthur was feeding every two hours. She drew and knitted and created. All of it drove her into a space of permanent quiet. She spoke of this feeling to no one, not even those who admired her dolls.

"Thank you so much for bringing her," Mrs. Carroll was now saying. Miriam removed her eyes from the doll and again saw the woman's face. "My husband will pay you."

"I'm sorry. I cannot leave without the payment," Miriam said.

Mrs. Carroll stayed in her position lingering over the doll for a moment before she seemed to hear Miriam's meaning. She looked at Miriam, and then gave a short nod of her head. She excused herself and left the room. After a moment, she returned with fifty dollars in a white envelope. Possibly money for some delivery later. Hers was the more important delivery, she seemed to be saying as she extended the envelope to Miriam.

Her errands finished, Miriam drove to Brooklyn. After the bridge she turned onto the High Street and crossed under the shaded overpass and onto a cobbled street that led to the waterfront. She continued to the end of the road, parking on the side of a street next to a windowless factory. The river breeze greeted her as she walked to its edge. From there it looked neglected and brown. A ship was on the water, heading into the Naval Yard to

the north. She watched its silent movement.

A plan in her mind was almost fully formed. She would send Arthur far away, to a school where the draft could not touch its typeface and telegrams to him. For this she would need money, quite a bit more. Her head was sore on the inside, like the back of her throat had been scraped with a spoon. What she wanted, more than anything, was a drink.

Chapter Four

Arthur was rushing on Seventy-fifth Street on his way to somewhere when he passed an open shop door where he could hear machines whirring and there he spied a hunk of wood laying in sawdust. It was oblong-shaped and roughly hewn on one side. Arthur stopped long enough to imagine eyes and a nose on it.

He ducked into the doorway and saw the back of a man in gray work pants standing at a high bench. A dog barked wildly, startling Arthur and causing another man's voice to call out. The man appeared in front of Arthur a moment later.

"Be careful. He don't like people he don't know."

Clover-like impressions were in the sawdust where the dog had been. Now he was somewhere out of view, probably tied up.

"Can I have that?" Arthur pointed at the hunk of wood that had rolled against the door.

The man seemed to take a minute to consider the piece that Arthur had indicated, or maybe it was to consider Arthur. He picked it up himself and handed it to Arthur, who had backed out of the doorway and was nearly setting off down the street again.

In his bedroom later, Arthur stuck the head on top of a linen onion bag that he had filled with stuffing from his pillow and dried beans that he had squirreled out of the pantry. He held the head at arm's length and considered the two ink marks that he had made where eyes could be. The wood was heavy and it flopped over to one side if he did not hold it up by its chin. It was hardly a likeness of Dante, but it would help him to practice his routine. It would be ready by the time Hiram returned home.

Arthur stopped into Hiram's kitchen every day after school to see if his friend had returned. Hiram's father looked at Arthur for too long the last time he was there, for the briefest moment pulling him into the terrible circle of concerns that received his attention. Arthur was in the kitchen with Hiram's mother eating an apple that she had sliced for him and placed on a plate. The apple went down his throat in unwieldy pieces. He swallowed hard.

"Will Hiram be home this week?" he said.

"He may not be."

"When will he be home?" The question was so familiar that it had lost the force of its inquiry. Mrs. Cohen did not turn to look at him.

"We have to be patient," she said, more to herself than to Arthur.

She ironed shirts on a long board that was spread across the kitchen tile. Her strong movements produced heat that crackled in the air. "Is your mother expecting you?" she asked.

Sometimes his mother forgot to call him for dinner. There was no more macaroni or pork, because of the rations, she had told him. Bread was fresh only once every two weeks and the canned vegetables were sometimes only partly warmed through. Arthur thought about what Mrs. Phillips said about the war, that it was here with us, too. He thought about his father. Did he have to eat wax beans too? Were they translucent as garden insects? Did he have to eat cold spinach? Arthur ate it because he was hungry. He imagined his father did the same wherever he was, but Arthur hated spinach.

Arthur came in through the kitchen door one afternoon. It was still early and the winter light was coming in through the curtain. There was a pot of warm water on the stove with the lid on it and his mother's eyeglasses lay next to it. He saw them there and did not think it strange until he heard the hum of her sewing machine.

In her sewing alcove, his mother sat in her chair feeding a piece of material into the machine. Her shoe was on the pedal. She always worked swiftly so that the piles of dresses and shirts and trousers she produced grew like artificial mountains. But there was something different in her movement, a nodding rhythm that did not feel right. "Mother," Arthur said.

She jumped and turned to look at him. It was not recognition on her face, but surprise, like something was out of place.

"Don't you need these?" He extended his hand with the glasses. She looked at Arthur and then at the glasses, then back to Arthur.

"Yes," she said. Her voice was raspy, like she had not spoken aloud in some time.

Arthur watched her put them on. She did so slowly, as though it required concentration. The room smelled of the heat of the sewing machine. When she turned toward him, he knew she had been drinking.

He left her alone. He went back into the kitchen and stood on a chair to reach the wireless radio and take it off its ledge by the window. He carried it, dust pressing onto his shirt, into his bedroom and shut the door.

His little bedroom was lit by a streetlamp's yellow evening glow. He set the wireless on his desk and pulled his chair aside to reach the dummy he had made, which he had

concealed under a flannel blanket. Once he had the dummy situated on his knee he turned the knob on the dial to the correct frequency. The program would begin soon.

He thought of Hiram's bedroom, of his trucks with the working levers. He thought of seeing Hiram's father, his head bowed toward a pile of documents, at his place at the dining table as they crept to the parlor. Hiram would switch on the radio and they would wait for the drum and trumpet sequence that introduced the Wilkes program. "Ladies and gentlemen, here's Raymond Wilkes!" a voice would say.

Wilkes told jokes for the first ten minutes of every show. After America was attacked and was about to go to war, Wilkes was there, reliable as ever.

At Hiram's house, they would lay in opposite directions in a velvet sofa that made Arthur sneeze. During the program, they did not say a word to each other. At first it was only Arthur who laughed at Wilkes' punchlines. Hiram maintained a studious interest in the show and in Arthur, whose laughter was a cue for him to smile. One day, Hiram proclaimed one of the recurring guests to be his favorite. And then there was the joke that Hiram would not let go.

Wilkes was talking to a character who complained that his trumpet didn't sound right anymore. He had tried everything. He had cleaned it and had the owner at the music shop look at it, but every time he played a note, it was dead.

"Let me see that. Give it here," Wilkes had said.

There was a pause in which the audience was heard murmuring.

"There, Wilkes said. "Here you go. Blow us a tune on that thing."

The man played a cheerful tune and was met by applause.

“That’s fantastic! I bet you could even raise the dead.”

“Oh no, I won’t go there,” Wilkes said.

“Why not?”

“You can always revive a dead note, but people, when they go, they go.”

This was not very memorable, but Hiram talked about it for days afterward. He kept saying that line, “when they go, they go.”

“What’s so great about that joke?” Arthur finally asked.

“It’s like music,” Hiram said. “There are no added words or notes. It’s just right.”

Arthur thought about it. There must have been a reason why it sounded so good to Hiram. It must be because Wilkes always got the best lines, and he made things sound good.

When it was time, Arthur turned up the volume knob on the radio. The reception crackled and a drumroll emerged, followed by the familiar trumpet refrain. He looked toward the door. The master of ceremonies, a Mr. Hal Lombardi, boomed into Arthur’s quiet room with the introductions. It was even more pleasing than he had anticipated, to hear Hal Lombardi’s voice again. It had been many weeks that Hiram had been gone and Arthur had last heard the announcer.

Wilkes appeared and started the show. Arthur held the dummy in front of him, using his first finger and thumb to manipulate the head side to side. He felt the evening wrap around him. The pain he held inside for Hiram, instead of becoming smaller in the midst of his love for Wilkes, grew harder to bear.

It was a slim volume. He had found it in a junk shop near the laundry. On its cover was simply, *Ventriloquism*.

A week had passed and Hiram was still gone. Arthur returned home one afternoon from the bus and found a letter on the kitchen table addressed to him in small, uneven handwriting. It had been torn roughly open and the letter refolded and placed back inside. His mother, Arthur realized after reading it, must have thought it was from his father. But it was from Hiram. He had been working on a stretch of chilly farmland in eastern Long Island with his uncle. The work would be finished soon and he would be allowed to return to Brooklyn.

Arthur paid a nickel for the book and he read half of it standing outside the window of the shop, where old glass lanterns and jewelry cases were pushed to the front. The skill of projecting two or more voices is called voice diffusion. It was what the book said about a ventriloquist's dummy that caught Arthur's interest.

A dummy should be advertised as a living character and should be used by the performer to present a distinctive opposite behavior to his own. For example, the pair can make up a teacher and a student, a father and a daughter, a doctor and a patient. There should be no time that the dummy and the performer are in complete agreement, because that will damage the illusion that there are two voices, when in reality it is a singular voice behind the pair.

The theater sat on the south side of the avenue in a windy path. Seven letters hung over the frame of the door — ORPHEUM. It was late morning when Arthur tried the door and he found it unlocked. The low ceiling in the lobby cast a quiet shelter over the

space. The carpet smelled of stale smoke. Two men stood in the back, near the doors to the auditorium. They wore suits like in the films.

One of the men was preoccupied, looking in the direction of the open door to the theater, but the other man turned his head and looked directly at Arthur. His thin hair was slicked back, stuck to the top of his head. He said something that made his companion shift his focus away from the stage.

Arthur forgot what he had planned to say, though he could feel the one's attention on him. He said nothing.

"Are you here for the show, kid?" the man shouted to him.

Arthur did not even attempt to shout back. He merely nodded.

"Son of a gun," said the man. "This is the best show in town. Of course you want to see it. I want to see it. I want to see it and I am in it. That's how funny this show is."

Arthur, being entirely open to any ideas, waited at that moment for something to be proposed.

"I think if you want to see the show then you should see this god-damned show. You got a ticket?"

"No," Arthur said.

"You don't see the show without a ticket. These shows, you know. People buy tickets."

The man's point was not clear, and though Arthur did not understand, he knew he was being mocked. The man's shoulders hung forward, though he was tall, and Arthur saw him then as a man who knew work.

His mother had not said anything about the radio and she had not moved it from his bedroom.

The routine needed another evening's worth of polishing. He had already tested the voices on a group of kids in the lunch room, where Carol, who was known to enter into laughing fits that made her wet her pants, had laughed so hard that she wept and then she went suspiciously quiet.

When he ran through the full act in his bedroom he imagined himself on a stage, the lights blurring his vision and his mother and father in the audience. He imagined his mother with cool eyes and a quiet smile instead of her puffed eyes and the way she always looked like she was hiding bad news. He would begin his act in Dante's voice.

"I have to tell you something," Dante said.

"Go on."

"I'm not a man."

"What does that mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Well."

"I don't think anyone else here is having trouble with it."

"Who's having trouble?"

"So?"

"So you're not a man."

"Right."

"You're made of wood."

"Wood?"

“Pine, to be exact. Isn’t that what you meant?”

“No. I’m a woman!” This in a voice that was neither woman nor man, but a picky, newspaper hawker of a boy who thinks he is mimicking a woman’s accent.

“What kind of woman?”

“That’s right, some kind of woman.”

“You’re no woman.”

“I’m more woman than you’ll ever be.”

Arthur did not know if his parents would like the act. He could not imagine them laughing at it. In his mind his father’s face was open and focused. His regard for the act was respectful. It was as important to him as his own work. His mother would be wearing her red dress.

The day was dry and cold in January when, hanging his coat in the classroom, he saw Hiram’s trim blue coat there. He was already in his seat near the front of the classroom and his eyes locked on Arthur when he arrived. He had been waiting for him. He had grown, or he looked like he had. He had been gone for only seven weeks.

Many of the kids in their class had forgotten about the new boy from Europe. Mrs. Phillips had stopped reading his name from the register. Perhaps she had spoken to Hiram’s mother.

At lunchtime Hiram told Arthur some things and, Arthur knew, he kept others hidden. His uncle had asked him to sort a crate of valves and the copper turned his hands black. There was no electricity in the house they stayed in. The farm grew tomatoes and green garlic in the summer. In the winter the beds were colder than they were in

Brooklyn. He was not allowed to change for bed until his uncle had lit the lantern.

“Where you homesick?”

“He said it would be like the winter cabin we had in Poland, where we used to ice skate on the lake.”

“Was it like that?”

“No. It wasn’t like that.”

After class was released they walked together to the place behind the baseball field where a wall divided the lawn from the trash bins where a man in a paper cap dumped a tray of sodden vegetables. Arthur pulled his dummy out of a denim satchel.

“Just imagine it’s Dante,” he said.

Hiram looked surprised. His eyes darted to his feet.

“He wasn’t in the closet when I got home,” he said. “I think my mother hid him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Arthur said. He did not know if this was true. He waited for Hiram to say something, but he didn’t. He simply looked at the crack in the pavement where a wad of grass had pushed through. Arthur tried to begin, but he could not remember what to say first. He could not think of what the first joke should be. He could not imagine Hiram laughing now.

The dummy looked different in the chilly sunlight. It occurred to Arthur that he had never, up until now, left his bedroom with it. He looked at the oblong head with the piece of foil that he had crafted by hand to make him look like he was wearing a peaked cap. On the sack that was the body Arthur had sewn three black buttons. He had also attached two lengths of fabric that he had cut from his mother’s scrap basket. These, the

arms, hanged limply at the sides. Looking down at it, Arthur felt like he was seeing it for the first time. He was embarrassed by it. Hiram turned toward the sound of another tray of lunch remains being tipped into a dumpster.

“What do you have to show me?” Hiram said finally.

“I wrote an act.”

Hiram looked hard at the dummy for the first time. “You made this for your act,” he said. He did not seem to expect an answer.

“It’s temporary.” Arthur felt his neck tilt toward the right. He tapped his ear lightly with his shoulder.

“Okay. How does it go?”

“I can’t remember the first joke.”

“You wrote a whole act?”

“I timed it. It’s seventeen minutes.”

“Well it’s going to be a lot longer than that, when you feel out the audience,” Hiram said.

Arthur considered this.

“What characters do you have?”

Arthur adjusted the foil hat on the dummy. “There’s a ship captain and a drunken first mate and there’s a country bumpkin and a taxi driver.”

“How do you start?”

“It’s just me and him in the beginning.”

Hiram looked at him with a steady gaze. Something had lighted in his eyes.

“Let’s hear it.”

Chapter Five

If there was traffic on Flatbush Avenue again Miriam would be too late to go to the butcher again. She had picked up a pair of Arthur's trousers in his bedroom one morning and found that he had been cinching them closed with a safety pin. He was growing thin. She rebuked herself harshly in that moment.

She gathered two loads from clients in Clinton Hill and dropped off an order dress fronts there. She raced onto the road and used the Pontiac's beastly power to drive across town. In her pocketbook was seventy-five dollars for her savings, but first she would buy her meat ration as well as plenty of flour, milk and sugar to make a cake. Perhaps even some beer as a reward for herself. She never allowed herself to have a beer. It would be a festive dinner.

The butcher was pulling a shade down in the window when she arrived. Inside she examined the contents of the case. "I was just about to take it into the back," he said.

"Two steaks," she said. "And a pound of the chopped liver."

"Must be a big occasion," he said.

"Hurry please." She still needed to go to the grocery.

The butcher turned away and pulled a sheet of brown paper into the air. Miriam was itchy, like she could not stand in one position for long. Outside the shop the spring light had been steadily covered by a gray expanse of cloud. Soon dusk would come.

"Have you been away?"

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"It's been some time since I have seen you. Mrs. Saks, is it?"

"Yes." She did not know the butcher's name.

“How is the family?” He worked deliberately to wrap the meat. When she did not answer, he handed it over the case to her as though he had not taken offense at all. “Get an onion for the chopped liver,” he said cheerfully.

Miriam carried the paper bag with her to the grocery so she could finish the shopping before going back to the car. It smelled strongly of meat, a raw odor that overwhelmed her all of a sudden. She paused, looked into the bag. What had he given her? The urge to return to the shop and dump the contents of the bag onto the butcher’s counter was strong. Instead she became sick, there on the sidewalk. Her only reaction as she wretched was to look for a trash bin. When she did not see one, she vomited into the paper bag with their banquet.

My god, what a fool. She had managed to contain it. There were one or two people on the street behind her. She did not dare to turn back and let them see her confusion. She felt spent. She went walked to the car after leaving the bag rolled up tightly behind her. She sat in the driver’s seat and looked at her lap for several minutes. The first time this had happened she had stupidly known nothing. Nothing at all. She had not even known that her bleeding was related. Her mother only told her after the sickness started. Now she had been through it. She should know the signs. The doctor had said to her that it would not be a surprise.

She drove home. If it was a sign she took no heed of it and she lifted the heavy packs of fabric out of the car one by one and heaved them up the steps to the door. Her father had died in February when the snow paused. Her mother no longer recognized Arthur’s

name, and yet when he was born she had slept on the sofa in the parlor for two weeks and came to Miriam in the night while she was still learning how to pull him into her breast. Would she be able to do it now alone? Was that the way of things?

The liquor shelf under the sideboard had long been empty. When she took the payment from the second client that day Miriam did not allow her mind to flash to one thought in particular. Not until later, when she was sitting behind the Pontiac's perfect circle of a wheel, did she allow herself to think of it. She could buy a bottle of gin. She could refill the shelf. The thought occurred to her and everything around her was charged with relief.

And now? What now. She needed one drink now. At a bare minimum she needed one drink to keep herself from coming undone. She dropped the fabric on the dining table and waited, listening. The house was quiet. It would take no more than ten minutes. The tavern down the street, the one with the thick yellow-tinted glass that she used to walk passed without even a thought about it, was open. She could have one drink and then she would be able to think seriously about dinner.

There was a knock on the door, interrupting her scheming. Mr. Simon stood there importantly, holding a parcel. "I told them I would give it to you," he said.

"Who?"

"They rang the bell and asked for you, Mrs. Saks," he said, looking accused. "I told them you were not in, because I had knocked several times and you did not come to the door."

"It's true, I wasn't in."

“Right, so. Here it is.” He handed her the parcel, a heavy box that he tipped into her arms too quickly and she lost it. He let out a ridiculous sort of cry as it landed on the floor.

“Don’t worry,” she said, hurrying him. “Thank you.” She bent to pick up the box.

Without a word he turned and ascended to his door. Miriam had never been into his apartment. He was a bachelor and lonely, and she thought it must be rough.

Who was “they?” The postman? The box had not been sent through the postal service. On its label was the eagle holding the two laurels that she had seen before. Underneath was stamped “United States Department of Navy.”

She stabbed the edge of the box with a pair of fabric shears. Inside was another box, this one made of varnished pine. There was a label stuck under a thin metal clip. It was George’s handwriting, elegant and looped, “Giorgio Sacco.” A latch in front had broken. She lifted the lid and her stomach plunged. There were his shirts, two of them folded neatly on top, a toilet kit in a case tucked beside them, and a small photograph that she had taken in Coney Island on the boardwalk. She was tanned from the sun and she wore a dress she had made from green and blue checked gingham. Slowly, as though she did not want to contract an illness, she touched one of the shirts. She lifted it gently and brought it to her lips and to her nose. Underneath the other shirt was a bundle. It looked like letters, but on closer inspection they were not addressed to anyone. Each page of the onionskin paper had only one or two long sentences in George’s handwriting.

She read one of the pages, then another. Their relation to one another was difficult to understand. Then she realized what they were. He had been writing down jokes, one on each page, and keeping them in his foot locker.

“A sailor was showing a couple of officers from the Bronx a monastery in New Guinea. ‘For hundreds of years,’ the sailor explained, ‘not a stone of this cloister has been touched. Nothing has been repaired.’ One of the officers looked around, ‘we must have the same landlord,’ he said.”

There were many of these jokes, maybe one hundred or more. As she looked at every one, searching for a personal address, something about his intentions, and, finding none, a dread settled in the core of her stomach. She had considered, beneath it all, that he had been given the opportunity to wander out of service, and perhaps he had wandered somewhere in the world where he could not be found. But this could not be true now. Somehow it was clear that he would never have left this behind. She could feel his voice in the jokes just as clear as if they had been letters to her. For the first time, Miriam knew that she was alone.

Chapter Six

1946

The wood shop on Seventy-fifth Street was owned by a Mr. Gill. Arthur was poking around in the ally where a hammer could be heard banging in a yard behind the shop. When he had gone in through the front door, a man in torn overalls had told him that Mr. Gill was busy.

He reached the yard from behind a pile of trash cans and he saw Mr. Gill hunched over a work bench with his hammer, his brow turned down so that only the top of his nose was visible. When he looked up, Arthur was there holding an instrument case. Inside was a new Dante, one that Arthur had paid Mr. Gill twenty dollars to carve for him.

In the front of the shop a woman was hollering over a phone. She sat in the middle of a pile of papers that were stacked from the floor to her elbow. If there was a desk, it was buried underneath. An enormous black dog lay on sawdust like a sack of concrete with its head on its paws. Mr. Gill said something to it in his soft voice.

Arthur had learned several things about the shop. He knew that Mr. Gill built models, ones that helped design the airplanes that the Air Force used during the war. He knew that the machines in the shop were more powerful than the strength of hundreds of dock workers put together. When he made Dante, Mr. Gill carved the head out of a single piece of wood using an electric saw and a long, flat shaving tool.

The shop roared with the sound of machines.

The first time Arthur had gone in early one morning before school. Mr. Gill was not there, but one of his men was drinking a cup of coffee at a long flat table. Arthur had

brought a plan with him, drawn on a thin piece of drafting paper.

“It’s too short,” said the man.

“Too short?”

“The dimensions you have here, they are too small for a store mannequin.”

“It’s not that kind of mannequin,” Arthur said, looking narrowly at his drawing.

“What is it, a doll?”

“It’s a kind of doll.” Gill Junior had taken the sketch out of Arthur’s hands now and he was examining it.

“It’s very unusual,” he said. He gave the sketch back to Arthur and returned to the machine.

Later, Mr. Gill looked at Arthur’s sketch and handed it back to him.

“What do you think you’re gonna do with that?” he had asked.

“I’m going to teach it to talk,” Arthur had said.

Now Arthur was back. The air in the shop was so hot that he had begun to sweat. He removed Dante from the case and felt in his pocket for the small triangle that he was carrying. The nose, a small piece of geometry, had broken off.

“What happened?” Mr. Gill asked.

“It broke when I put him in the case,” Arthur lied.

In fact his mother had finally discovered Dante in his hiding place. He did not know how she had found him because she rarely left her bedroom anymore. He also did not know how the nose came to be dislocated from the head. He only knew he needed to repair it before the show on Thursday night.

“I can glue it, but it won’t be the same as before.”

Arthur stood next to Mr. Gill at a work table. On it, there was a plan for a job that had been hand-drawn on blue and white-lined paper. Within the dozens of overlapping circles and lines on the page, Arthur recognized a propeller.

The noise from the seats in the house was starting to come through to the backstage closet where Arthur had burrowed himself a small dressing room. His shirtfront was unbuttoned and he had not yet pinned on his bow tie. Though her light was on, his mother had not made a sound as he crept out the kitchen door. He imagined her again, as he did the last time, sitting with the crowd. Her coughing attacks would pause for him and she would be freed for a few moments to feel delight. He let out a quick laugh, buttoned his shirt up to the collar, and turned his mind to the crowd.

When he walked across the stage for the first time two weeks ago he almost bumped into the microphone stand. He had no reason to doubt that the act was funny, and yet, when he looked out over the haze of scattered heads through the bleeding stage lights, everything seemed doubtful.

Hiram had finished writing a full act, twenty whole minutes of dialogue, which he had handed to Arthur one afternoon in his bedroom. For a long time, Arthur would remember his surprise at how good it was. There was word play and there were gags that unraveled in your mind like a wheel of licorice. It is only when it you have unspooled it that you realize how much it contains. Arthur's surprise didn't come from the jokes, though, but by the discovery that what he had been playing at all along was not really comedy, but an attempt at mimicking comedy. Hiram's act proved that life was comedy. It did not live in the radio or in the cinema. It was everywhere around us. Now Arthur had

to make the act sing.

The act on before Arthur was a magician. He introduced himself as the *Maharaja* and pulled snakes out of an oilcloth sack. It was his Scottish ancestry that made his face turn bolt red halfway through the act, which dampened the illusion somewhat. Arthur could hear him on the stage, describing his next trick with his booming voice. If Arthur were to call himself the Maharaja, a name that suggested such a distant and magical upbringing, he would not sound like that. He would speed it up a little bit and allow each word to lean on the next, the same way he did his cowboys. Only he would turn the Americanness inside-out. The pace would not be as slow. It would feel slick and luscious as his snakes.

Arthur had no reason to doubt that his act was funny, yet when he stood on the stage and looked out over the hazy scattering of heads that he could make out through the bleeding stage lights, everything seemed doubtful. The stage hand called to Arthur from the offstage wing where he sat with a flask that reflected his chin. “Kid with the puppet, you’re on!”

He heard his footsteps on the floorboards of the stage and then the lights, as usual, flooded his vision when he toward the house. The audience may be full or it may be only half-filled. He could not tell. Arthur proceeded cautiously but, upon recognizing that there is no caution to be found when one is having a conversation with a wooden object, he hunted for the groove that he so often fell into when he did voices. He was still very conscious of his own shape on the stage, of its roundness and oddness. He felt time unroll and then squeeze in on itself, so that every breath felt like a long exhale.

“Good evening,” he began in his own voice. “I would like you to meet my friend here.”

Not long after he started the routine Arthur heard Hiram laugh from somewhere in the sparse audience. He thought about Hiram sitting on the edge of the step behind his mother's kitchen door, thinking over his jokes, laughing at his voice, and he felt himself slip into his groove. Sometimes Hiram merely smiled and nodded his head, saying, "that's it Art, you got it." This was enough to put him at ease.

A few minutes must have passed before Arthur felt the first real cascade of laughter. It started somewhere in the middle of the audience and it rippled outward in concentric circles. The punchline he had delivered seemed to come to life for the first time. He continued the routine with his attention full on Dante, who was steadily acquiring a soft power. Another laugh, this one even bigger, popped like a bubble over the gold fabric of the house seats.

Soon there was no distinction between short giggling spurts or the staccato laugh or Hiram's loyal support. The audience had gathered an unspoken consensus. There was no doubt now. Every line that Arthur delivered in his own voice and in the drawn-out, accented voice of Dante, was winning. One laugh had not exhausted before another began. The release was gradual, but for some time the entire audience was wrapped up in laughter loud enough to move the stage hand out of his folding chair where he sat chewing on a cigar in the wing of the stage.

In the days after the show people were in their kitchens and workshops and on line for meat at the butcher and they were talking about Dante. In those moments they were not thinking about the men who had returned to them from the war with half-minds. They were not thinking about the dead. They were not thinking about their anger at God.

Within delight, they had found the tiniest crook of solace, like birdsong in the heart of winter.

Three weeks later, the owner of the Orpheum, the son of a film projector, waited with heavily controlled patience until there was a knock on the sturdy stage door behind the screen. Hiram stood there, not much taller than the top step. Taylor removed the excitement from his expression and told him that he supposed he could use Arthur again under the same terms— five dollars if the house was half-full. He would sell tickets for three dollars this time. After Hiram accepted the offer, Taylor locked the door to the theater and went to the restaurant on Fifth Street for a piece of chocolate pie. Finally, luck was coming his way.

Chapter Seven

1953

Arthur circled the block once so that he could see the people lined up outside the cafe from the other side of the street. Were they going to laugh? There were as many ladies as there were men. The ladies usually warmed to him faster. They smoked cigarettes and stood close, fingers grazing hems. The evening was clear and sticky with his own foul perspiration. Summer in New York.

At some point, Arthur had accepted the fact that he had to leave the neighborhood if he wanted to try something new. He had taken the train to the Union Square and walked the six blocks south the way that Stanley, the cafe's booker, had instructed him, but he had not told him what to do once he found the place and got a too-early glance at his audience.

His hands found his trouser pockets. Inside one of them was damp and spongy. He held his hand in place for a moment while he quietly panicked. He pulled out a brown apple core and then quickly re-deposited it in his pocket. He attempted to exude casual indifference. As he crossed the street he felt a women's gaze land on him. He felt his usual solitude in public. The familiar loneliness that he knew in crowds. He longed for the energy he felt when he was on the stage and the first laugh rippled in the room.

He felt a hand grasp his shoulder from behind. "What are you doing here?" Stanley stood with one foot off the curb. He was a shark in motion, always keeping the crowd engaged.

"You said I would go on. I'm sure it was tonight." The women in front of Arthur glanced back at him again. Her red lipstick made a smear of color over her shoulder.

“Yeah, but what are you doing out here? Come in through the back door.”

Arthur followed him sheepishly. He had his own door to use, a back door. They went through a busy kitchen and passed a row of plates heaped with clams, their shells gaping under harsh lights. In the front room there a small stage with a curtain that only created the illusion of a backstage. A lone waiter leaned against the wall. A drummer was playing a solo. There was also a man at a piano. The room was filled with a blanket of smoke.

“You’re on next,” Stanley had not moved from Arthur’s side.

Arthur turned to Stanley, who was consulting a sheet of paper that had been stuck to the stage curtain.

“What’s the matter?” Stanley said.

“You want me to go after this?”

Stanley had been tapping his shoe to the beat of the music. He paused. He looked at Arthur with attention and understanding in a way that was almost brotherly.

“I know,” he said. “Consider it a challenge.”

Arthur’s voice was suddenly absent. He was aware of his heartbeat over the snakelike hiss of the drum solo. His heart was taking over his body. It was a lesson. He should have never left Brooklyn.

The stage went quiet. The drummer was the first to stand. He removed his cap and nodded his head in a quick bow. He gestured to the man who was sitting at the piano. This man looked at the audience, but he did not stand. Chairs screeched on tile and more people filed into fill empty seats. All those couples.

Arthur swallowed. He wondered if he could pray? How does one begin? Stanley

put his palm firmly on Arthur's shoulder.

"Go get 'em."

Arthur willed his body into motion. His heart banged into his ribs as he walked to the center of the stage. He looked toward the audience, and for a moment he saw them. There was still the din of conversation and laughter. Smoke rose above tables. A dozen, maybe more, white glinting eyeballs were looking back at him. A floodlight engulfed him.

Eighteen minutes later Arthur walked through the ten or twelve tables with candles nearly burned out. He had been met by his own wave of applause. He saw an overfilled ashtray, a woman's shoulders anchored to a chair by a hairy hand. As Arthur moved toward the bar at the back of the room a man nudged his chin toward Arthur with a flick of his stringy dark hair. Arthur paused in front of the bar.

"Jimmy wants to talk to you," the kid said.

"Jimmy?"

"Jimmy Frankel."

"Listen, I don't want to make trouble."

The kid halted as if he were confused. "About your act!" He said. "He likes your act."

Arthur tried to make out the other figures in the darkness around the bar. Something inside of him jumped, a sudden relief.

"Who is Jimmy?"

"He's my uncle. He books talent at Willet's."

“Willet’s?”

“In the Catskills, man.”

A talent booker from the Catskills. It dawned on Arthur was what happening. He felt his fear wash away and leave behind something fresh. It was pride.

“I thought you stunk,” the kid said.

Outside the city Arthur felt out of step with the world. The mountains were the chilly opposite of Brooklyn. The sleek motors on the two-lane highway, the full swath of clouded blue sky, and the hills of pine and birch all promised a wild, unharnessed kind of life. He did not know until he arrived what he had actually been hired to do. Jimmy Frankel booked acts for the evening shows, but he also located and hired MCs for Bingo and Simon Says, clowns for children’s birthday parties, and any number of tummelers who served the resort’s guests. When Arthur arrived on a Tuesday, he was shown into a sunny, airless room where a small wood stage came up to his knees when he stood before it. In a box there were a dozen or so hand puppets wearing gowns and black capes. One of the puppets had a hooked nose with a tiny fabric wart on its end. He was told he would have a show every day at 4:30, before parents collected their children for dinner. He was given a one-week tryout.

It was mid-morning on a Friday, the day that some people check in and others check out. He had spent two days developing voices for a princess, a bread baker, a farmer, and an old crone. The kids laughed hardest at the bread baker’s French accent.

Arthur sat in the lounge where it was cool. Young women appeared with mineral

powder on their sunburned noses. A boy was promised ice cream by a hopeful grandfather. Many guests slept through breakfast and had just emerged from their rooms wearing sunglasses to dampen the after-effects of Thursday night, when people really let go at Willet's Resort.

A window in the lounge looked over a horizon of trees over which the light of a cloudless sky waned, giving the lounge a capsular quality, like a car at the high point of a Ferris wheel. The walls were covered in blue and gold wallpaper, a gesture toward the urbane taste of the city. They were unlike the bare, yellow walls in the cramped quarters that he had been shown to over the dining room.

There was a group of three women next to where Arthur sat. Their woven bags full of knitting and magazines were spilled onto the coffee table. The green tendrils of two large plants hung behind them, bringing the outside in, reminding Arthur of his mother driving them to see the spring flower show at B. Altman.

They had a card game going, and one of the women had just told the group the news about the comedian who would perform after dinner that evening. She had heard it through one of the girls in the "Social Programs" department the night before, she said.

"The real Raymond Wilkes," she said.

"What do you mean, the real one?" asked a woman as she placed an ace over a king.

"Well you know, he used to be a big celebrity."

"Yeah, but where has he been?"

"What else does he have to do?" said another.

The women laughed.

Arthur listened to them as if they were talking about the weather. Wilkes' name

emerged so unexpectedly from these women in their floral patterns and pearl earrings that he nearly mistook it for something else. But it was no mistake. His gut turned a full revolution inside of him.

“Excuse me, Madam, may I ask you to repeat that?” Arthur said. The three women looked at him. He was too near their conversation not to eavesdrop, but their attitudes were silly anyhow, as though they were the interrupters, never the interrupted.

Wilkes’ film work was not a failure from the beginning. His first appearance in a 1946 comedy for MGM was as a painter who arrives at the home of the main characters. He erased any potential for physical comedy from the part, arriving in the scene with a straight, unwavering posture that did not bend an inch. However, he delivered his lines so seamlessly that it was questionable whether he was sticking to the script. He was wildly funny. His reputation for stealing jokes had been around for as long as Arthur could remember, but it was the rumors of affairs and arguments between Wilkes and his co-stars in Hollywood that led many to believe he had been shown the way back to New York.

“Repeat what, sir?” said one of the women. Streaks of silver-white in her hair made it shine in the light that came in from the window.

“Wilkes, you said? Raymond Wilkes?”

“That’s right.” Her expression showed mild surprise as Arthur stood to leave.

He passed through the glass doors in the lobby and felt an urge to run out into the grounds as fast as he could. The resort’s open landscape wrapped around a pair of wide, two-tiered buildings, separated by a lawn that led to a swimming pool. Outside were

clusters of activity. If there was a loner in this mix, Arthur would not know how to find him.

Green reclining pool chairs lined the lawn outside the parlor, abutting a rectangular swimming pool. Splashes erupted from the pool. Children were visible under shallow ripples, torpedoing to the depths and emerging at the surface, gulping and choking.

The swimming pool was proctored by women in fashion sunglasses who raised their freckled arms, their costume jewelry jingling, to direct their conversations. Men slept in the chairs with their shirts unbuttoned. Arthur paused briefly at a distance, considering the pool chairs as though he was in need of one for his afternoon nap.

A man sitting not far from where Arthur stood made an effort to catch his eye. Though he was reclining, Arthur could tell he was a squat man. Hair sprouted from his ears. His legs were stretched out in front of him, exposing his bare feet to the sun. An open newspaper lay at his knees.

“One of these water rats yours?” the man asked.

“I’m not married,” Arthur said.

The man seemed to blink, as if focusing on Arthur more closely. He smiled slightly and made as if he was going to lean back into his nap.

“Did you hear the news?” Arthur found himself saying.

The man paused and sat up again. “What news is that?” he asked.

“Raymond Wilkes,” Arthur said. There was a pause in which a wild shriek emerged from a small boy on the diving board, followed by a splash. Arthur did not know how to continue.

“Yeah?” the man eventually said.

Arthur tried to imagine himself in the other man's situation. Fatherly circles around his eyes and a smoker's cough. The skin of his chest turning pink under tangles of dark hair. Arthur searched his mind for a joke, a witticism. A way to bring himself into the circle of educated working men who populated the resort. His fair skin, always responding to alcohol or embarrassment by flushing crimson, had started to color in the cheeks. He considered his best voices, those German or Italian characters that were an easy laugh. The man leaned his head back on the lounge chair and closed his eyes. Arthur made to hike back up to his airless bedroom and hunker down until show time.

On the lawn there was a handwritten sign that advertised a dance contest on Saturday night. Next to it was a card table on which sat a pitcher of lemonade. A woman was there too. She was tall, one of those square-shouldered types. Hearty and strong.

"Sign you and your lady up for the contest?" she asked Arthur cheerfully as he passed.

Arthur stopped. She was tan and freckled. Her blonde hair showed from under her kerchief.

"I'm disqualified," he said.

The woman was already handing an ink pen in Arthur's direction. She rested it on the card table. "Why is that?"

"I work here," Arthur said.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, a laugh bouncing behind her eyes.

"That's all right."

"I'm Irma."

"I guess you work in social programs," Arthur said.

“Yes,” said Irma.

“Tell me something. How did you get him?”

“Him?”

“Raymond Wilkes,” Arthur said.

“Oh,” a thread of recognition appeared behind her eyes. “Tonight. Yes.”

She didn’t know Wilkes. Had no idea who he was. The realization that there were people unaware of Wilkes was like learning the earth was round. This was not the first time this had happened, but it always hit Arthur unexpectedly and he had to stagger back to the conversation like a lame horse.

“I believe the situation was that he knows the owner here,” Irma said, looking past Arthur to a space between the edge of the trees out of which two young men and a girl had just emerged. “Am I going to get your name?” she said. She looked at him cleverly.

“I’m Arthur Sacks. I’m a soon to be very beloved puppet master here.”

Irma laughed. “Perhaps I will see you tonight.”

It wasn’t like the club in the city. It was a dining hall, with fifty or more round tables surrounding a stage. Large crystal fixtures lit the room.

Arthur sat with the other staff at a table in the kitchen. He sat elbow to elbow with the man next to him. The waiters had prepared themselves for the dinner shift by placing towels in the freezer and then draping them around the back of their necks. They waited for instructions from the floor manager. One of them, a young man with a wave of dark ginger hair slicked across his head like a hero in a war film, asked about the musical number that the band was rehearsing. What was it?

“Beats me,” someone else said.

“I thought one or two of you might be the musical type,” the ginger man said. His voice trailed off. Nobody attempted to answer him. Everyone was nervous, Arthur thought. Or maybe it was just he who was nervous. He felt the kind of excitement that he felt before a show.

Finally the kitchen manager appeared and dispatched the waiters with the night’s menu. In the dining room, the resort’s gossiping pastime commenced after a brief pause while people took seats at the tables. The band began to play.

Arthur was used to the simple, hungry preferences among the working men in his neighborhood — pot roast with extra salt, butter and peppered potatoes alongside a scorched piece of meat - did not prepare Arthur for the gluttony of the diners at the resort. Third and even fourth portions marked the ethos of the resort menu, which seemed to be, “just say when.” Desserts towered with layers of cream and sponge. The service displayed the finest chest-squeezing excess that Willets’ guests had ever seen.

As plates emerged from the kitchen on the arms of the waiters, the cymbals crashed. A voice cracked over a microphone. A strange stillness seemed to occur as a voice introduced Raymond Wilkes.

Even before the man walked onto the stage, Arthur had recognized him. It was not in his look or in his style of dress, but in a way of being. He took a microphone from its stand, looked out over the dining room with a busy, all-at-once expression, and he called out to the crowd with a voice that was more familiar than Arthur’s own.

“Good evening!”

The crowd, though busily unobservant a moment earlier, was moved to a wave of applause that seemed to build to a single kinetic movement. He waited, it seemed for several minutes, until the room was silent, and he began.

He lifted the microphone close to his lips as though he were securing it there. He calmly smoothed the pocket on his dinner jacket with his other hand. His voice was measured as he pointed out the various features of the mountains that he had always loved - the air, the water, the smell of fresh horse shit in the morning. As he built up to his real material, he lifted his voice to a note and a pattern that traced the groves in the wood plank ceiling. The energy of his words filled the room suddenly and completely. Arthur stood still as stone outside the kitchen door. He thought of his father. The ice swirling in his glass, the radio warm in the kitchen. Even as a child he could see in his father's attitude a force of will that revealed his desire to laugh.

"Has anyone ever told him that he looks like an animal?" said one waiter to another. They were standing nearby, empty serving trays leaning against their knees. Arthur had not noticed that they were standing there.

The other waiter leaned back on his heels for a moment. He touched the tip of his nose as a thought passed through his mind. "What kind of animal?" he asked.

"No animal in particular. I suppose it's more like a spirit of character."

That's right, Arthur thought. He could smell a laugh.

There was a quieter period that passed while Wilkes took the crowd into his confidence. He proceeded steadily, as if walking along a straight line of chalk on the stage. Arthur recognized a classic gag, one involving a pancake counter, a confused customer, and a ceiling fan. Piece by piece, he peeled back the lining on a joke that hit its

high note and was met with an electric ripple of laughter. He delicately replaced that note with a higher one, and then another even higher. The crowd ran into his arms. Just like that, they were his.

The band had started up again. Arthur was standing near a pile of soiled dishes staring, dumb-struck, at the flaky remains of Beef Wellington when he heard the floor manager call to a waiter.

“This needs to go to the talent’s room backstage,” the floor manager said, indicating a plate of beef and vegetables with a circle of brown sauce.

Arthur was beside him by the time the waiter had lifted the plate off the hot counter.

“Let me,” Arthur said.

The waiter looked quickly into Arthur’s eyes as though he did not have time to argue. He set the plate down and dropped a soiled linen cloth next to it.

“You can go through there.” He pointed to a door in the back of the kitchen that Arthur had not noticed before.

Arthur took the plate and wrapped a set of silverware in a clean napkin. He went through the door, which led to a narrow hallway in which the band were moving toward him. He backed up to let them pass, holding the plate above his head like a waiter. He moved forward to where the hallway appeared to end and found a closed door on his right. He knocked.

He heard a voice from behind the door. “Yeah?”

Arthur opened the door. Wilkes had not undressed, had in fact not even removed his dinner jacket. He was sitting in a low-slung chair. He held a cigarette in his slender

fingers and the strands of hair that had fallen out of place were, from this closer perspective, gray. His eyes were glassy from exertion and, with his pointed chin and narrow nose, he indeed had an animal look about him.

“I have dinner for you,” Arthur said.

Wilkes nodded. “I won’t eat it,” he said. “But bring it in. Have a seat.”

Arthur saw then that Wilkes was not alone in the room. Irma was there, seated to the right of the doorway. She had changed into a yellow patterned dress, her freckled shoulders exposed.

“Have you already eaten?” Wilkes asked Irma.

“Yes, before the show,” she said softly. Arthur thought of her in her short pants and her hair under a kerchief a few hours earlier on the lawn. He could not imagine a reason for her to be here now. She was looking at him. He wondered what she was thinking.

“Hello again,” she said.

“Hello.”

Arthur closed the door behind him. The knowledge he shared with Wilkes emerged in Arthur’s mind — the temperature of an audience, its airless energy pulling the world down around his ears. He knew an audience’s hunger and its expectations. A full room is greedy. There are few people who can stand in the middle of such a room and make strangers laugh. This was how Wilkes won his rooms, by pulling people in. He was a man who, when he saw something or someone he wanted, he would surely take it.

Irma’s eyes were silent. Arthur tried to clear his mind, to tell Wilkes a part of the story of his life that involved his radio show. After a few awkward moments of silence he could think of nothing to say. Following this was a powerful knowledge of his future

disappointment. Despite this, Wilkes seemed only half-conscious that anyone else was in the room. Surprisingly, Irma broke the silence.

“This is Arthur Sacks,” she said. “He is a gifted puppeteer.”

Wilkes looked at her when she said this and was moved to stand from his chair, which he did with a surprising source of energy. He walked to Irma and laid his hand on her bare shoulder, looking into her face.

“What is that you said, you lovely thing?”

Irma flushed. “Arthur Sacks,” she said. “We met earlier. He is a performer here.”

“What’s this puppet act you have going?” Wilkes said, startling Arthur by looking directly at him for the first time.

“I do voices,” Arthur said. “It’s a children’s show.”

“Nothing wrong with those. They build showmanship.” He was stroking Irma’s back now.

“I have a routine I do, back in New York.”

“With the puppets?” Irma asked.

“No, not with the puppets. I had to work with those on the fly. I have a ventriloquist act with a dummy. Dante, I call him.”

“Dante,” Wilkes said, expelling the word like he was measuring it. He looked at Irma again. “So, doll, have you ever wanted to see New York City?”

Arthur woke the next morning in his stifling room. He dressed in his trousers and shirt from the day before and left the top buttons undone. He was sweating through his undershirt already. Outside he felt some relief as a breeze picked up in the avenue

between the main building and the dining room. He circled the dining room, taking in the building's size from the outside. The night before a few guests were too drunk or too tired to stand from their tables. He helped them to the lobby where they could find their own ways to their rooms.

The glass doors opened and closed as couples walked out of the guest quarters on their way to breakfast. A woman carrying an inner tube exited with two young children who wore swim caps and bathing suits. Then Wilkes emerged alone. He carried a single garment bag. A driver got out of a car that had been waiting and opened the passenger door. For the briefest moment before he ducked his head into the car, they locked eyes. Arthur's reaction must have seemed strange, he felt himself raising his eyebrows and smiling like an idiot. In response, Wilkes offered a brief, unsmiling nod.

Something had been born in Arthur in the unexpected hours in which he felt he had moved from one side of his life to the next. Two of his worlds, the one in which his body survived and the one in which he truly lived, were briefly bridged. After crossing, he would never feel the same way again. Irma, too, was a part of it all. This held an excitement that was rising steadily in him. He was pleased that, though Wilkes had flashed into and out of his life, Irma held a permanent space at the resort. He wondered if she would hear that he had been hired for the remainder of the summer. He wondered what she would think of that.