

Julie Orringer

THE SMOOTHEST WAY IS FULL OF STONES

We aren't supposed to be swimming at all. It is Friday afternoon, and we're supposed to be bringing groceries home to Esty's mother so she can prepare Shabbos dinner. But it's the middle of July, and heat radiates from every leaf and blade of grass along the lake road, from the tar-papered sides of the lake cottages, from the dust that hangs in the air like sheer curtains. We throw our bikes into the shade behind the Perelmans' shed, take off our socks and shoes, and run through warm grass down to their slip of private beach, trespassing, unafraid of getting caught, because old Mr. and Mrs. Perelman won't arrive at their cottage until August, according to my cousin. Esty and I stand at the edge of the lake in our long skirts and long-sleeved shirts, and when the water surrounds our ankles it is sweetly cold.

Esty turns to me, grinning, and hikes her skirt. We walk into the water until our knees are submerged. The bottom is silty beneath our toes, slippery like clay, and tiny fish flash around our legs like sparks. We are forbidden to swim because it is immodest to show our bodies, but as far as I know there's no law against wading fully clothed. My cousin lets the hem of her skirt fall into the water and walks in all the way up to her waist, and I follow her, glad to feel water against my skin. This is the kind of thing we used to do when we were little—the secret sneaking-off into the woods, the accidental wrecking of our clothes, things we were punished for later. That was when Esty was still called Erica, before her parents got divorced, before she and her mother moved to Israel for a year and became Orthodox.

Now there is a new uncle, Uncle Shimon, and five little step-cousins. My Aunt Marla became Aunt Malka, and Erica became Esther. Erica used to talk back to her

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mother and throw bits of paper at the backs of old ladies' necks in synagogue, but in Israel she spent months repenting her old life and taking on a new one. This summer we've done nothing but pray, study Torah, cook, clean the lake cottage, and help Aunt Malka take care of the children. As we walk into the lake, I wonder if Erica still exists inside this new pious cousin.

I follow her deeper into the water, and the bottom falls away beneath us. It's hard to swim, heavy and slow, and at times it feels almost like drowning. Our denim skirts make it impossible to kick. Ahead is the Perelmans' old lake float, a raft of splintering boards suspended on orange plastic drums, and we pull hard all the way to the raft and hold onto the ladder.

"We're going to be killed when your mom sees our clothes," I say, out of breath.

"No, we won't," Esty says, pushing wet hair out of her face. "We'll make up an excuse. We'll say we fell in."

"Yeah, right," I say. "Accidentally."

Far down below, at the bottom of the lake, boulders waver in the blue light. It's exciting to think we've come this far in skirts. The slow-moving shadows of fish pass beneath us, and the sun is hot and brilliant-white. We climb onto the raft and lie down on the planks and let the sun dry our clothes. It is good just to lie there staring at the cottage with its sad vacant windows, no one inside to tell us what to do. In a few more weeks I will go home to Manhattan, back to a life in which my days are counted according to the American calendar and prayer is something we do once a year, on the High Holidays, when we visit my grandparents in Chicago.

Back in that other world, three hundred miles from here, my mother lies in a hospital bed still recovering from the birth and death of my brother. His name was Devon Michael. His birth weight was one pound, two ounces. My mother had a problem with low blood pressure, and they had to deliver him three months early, by C-section. It has been six weeks since Devon Michael lived and died, but my mother is still in the hospital fighting infection and depression. With my father working full time and me out of school, my parents decided it would be better for me to go to the Adelsteins' until my mother was out of the hospital. I didn't agree, but it seemed like a bad time to argue.

My cousin says that when I go home I should encourage my parents to keep kosher, that we should always say *b'rachot* before and after eating, that my mother and I should wear long skirts and long-sleeved shirts every day. She says all this will help my mother recover, the way it helped her mother recover from the divorce. I try to tell her how long it's been since we've even done the normal things, like go to the movies or make a big Chinese dinner in the wok. But Esty just watches me with a distant, enlightened look in her eyes and says we have to try to do what God wants. I have been here a month, and still I haven't told her any of the bad things I've done this

year—sneaked cigarettes from my friends' mothers' packs, stole naked-lady playing cards from a street vendor near Port Authority, kissed a boy from swim team behind the bleachers after a meet. I had planned to tell her all these things, thinking she'd be impressed, but soon I understood that she wouldn't.

Now Esty sits up beside me on the raft and looks toward shore. As she stares at the road beyond the Perelmans' yard, her back tenses and her eyes narrow with concentration. "Someone's coming," she says. "Look."

I sit up. Through the bushes along the lake road, there is a flash of white, somebody's shirt. Without a word we climb down into the water and swim underneath the raft, between the orange plastic drums. From the lapping shade there, we see a teenage boy with copper-colored hair and long curling peyos run from the road to the bushes beside the house. He drops to his knees and crawls through the tangle of vines, moving slowly, glancing back over his shoulder. When he reaches the backyard, he stands and brushes dead leaves from his clothes. He is tall and lanky, his long arms smooth and brown. Crouching beside the porch, he opens his backpack and takes out some kind of flat package, which he pushes deep under the porch steps. Then he gets up and runs for the road. From the shadow of the raft we can see the dust rising, and the receding flash of the boy's white shirt.

"That was Dovid Frankel," Esty says.

"How could you tell?"

"My mother bought him that green backpack in Toronto."

"Lots of people have green backpacks," I say.

"I know it was him. You'll see. His family's coming for Shabbos tonight."

She swims toward shore and I follow, my skirt heavy as an animal skin around my legs. When we drag ourselves onto the beach our clothes cling to our bodies and our hair hangs like weeds.

"You look shipwrecked," I tell my cousin.

"So do you," she says, and laughs.

We run across the Perelmans' backyard to the screened-in porch. Kneeling down, we peer into the shadows beneath the porch steps. Planes of light slant through the cracks between the boards, and we can see the paper bag far back in the shadows. Esty reaches in and grabs the bag, then shakes its contents onto the grass. What falls out is a large softcover book called *Essence of Persimmon: Eastern Sexual Secrets for Western Lives*. On the cover is a drawing of an Indian woman draped in gold-and-green silk, reclining on cushions inside a tent. One hand disappears into the shadow between her legs, and in the other she holds a tiny vial of oil. Her breasts are high and round, her eyes tapered like two slender fish. Her lips are parted in a look of ecstasy.

"Eastern sexual secrets," Esty says. "Oh, my God."

I can't speak. I can't stop staring at the woman on the cover.

My cousin opens the book and flips through the pages, some thick with text, others printed with illustrations. Moving closer to me, she begins to read aloud: "One may begin simply by pressing the flat of the hand against the open yoni, allowing heat and energy to travel into the woman's body through this most intimate space."

"Wow," I say. "The open yoni."

Esty closes the book and stuffs it into the brown paper bag. "This is obviously a sin," she says. "We can't leave it here. Dovid will come back for it."

"So?"

"You're not supposed to let your fellow Jew commit a sin."

"Is it really a sin?"

"A terrible sin," she says. "We have to hide it where no one will find it."

"Where?"

"In our closet at home. The top shelf. No one will ever know."

"But we'll know," I say, eyeing her carefully. Hiding a book like this at the top of our own closet is something Erica might have suggested, long ago.

"Of course, but we won't look at it," Esty says sternly, her brown eyes clear and fierce. "It's *tiuv*, abomination. God forbid anyone should ever look at it again."

My cousin retrieves her bike from the shed and stows the book between a bag of lettuce and a carton of yogurt. It looks harmless there, almost wholesome, in its brown paper sack. We get on our bikes and ride for home, and by the time we get there our clothes are almost dry.

Esty carries the book into the house as if it's nothing, just another brown bag among many bags. This is the kind of ingenious technique she perfected back in her Erica days, and it works equally well now. Inside, everyone is too busy with Shabbos preparations to notice anything out of the ordinary. The little step-cousins are setting the table, arranging the Shabbos candles, picking up toys, dusting the bookshelves. Aunt Malka is baking challah. She punches down dough as she talks to us.

"The children need baths," she says. "The table has to be set. The Handelmans and the Frankels are coming at seven, and I'm running late on dinner, as you know. I'm not going to ask what took you so long." She raises her eyes at us, large sharp-blue eyes identical to my mother's, with deep creases at the corners and a fringe of jet-black lash. Unlike my mother, she is tall and big-boned. In her former life she was Marla Vincent, a set dresser for the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto. Once I saw her at work, hanging purple velvet curtains at the windows of an Italian palazzo.

"Sorry we took so long," Esty says. "We'll help."

"You'd better," she says. "Shabbos is coming."

I follow my cousin down the hall and into our bedroom. On the whitewashed wall there is a picture of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, with his long steely beard and his eyes like flecks of black glass. He's on the east wall, the wall my cousin faces when she prays. His eyes seem to follow her as she drags the desk chair into the closet and stows *Essence of Persimmon* on the top shelf.

"What do we say to Dovid Frankel tonight?" I ask her.

"Nothing," she says. "We completely ignore him."

I make one last phone call to my mother before Shabbos. It's always frightening to dial the number of the hospital room because there's no telling what my mother will sound like when she answers. Sometimes she sounds like herself, quick and funny, and I can almost smell her olive-aloe soap. Other times, like today, she sounds just like she sounded when she told me Devon Michael had died.

"I can hardly hear you," she says, her own voice small and faint, somewhere far off down the line. The phone crackles with static.

"We went swimming today," I tell her, trying to speak loud. "It was hot."

Far away, almost too quiet to hear, she sighs.

"It's almost Shabbos," I say. "Aunt Malka's baking challah."

"Is she?" my mother says.

"How are you feeling?" I ask her. "When can you come home?"

"Soon, honey."

I have a sudden urge to tell her about the book we found, to ask her what we're supposed to do with something like that, to find out if she thinks it's a sin. I want to tell her about Dovid Frankel, how we saw him sneaking along the lake. I tell my mother things like this sometimes, and she seems to understand. But now she says to send her love to Aunt Malka and Uncle Shimon and Esty and all the step-cousins, and before I have a chance to really feel like her daughter again, we're already saying good-bye.

At six-thirty, the women and girls arrive. They bring steaming trays of potato kugel and berry cobbler, bottles of grape juice and sweet wine. The men are at shul, welcoming the Shabbos as if she were a bride, with the words *bo'i kallah*. Here the women do not go to synagogue on Fridays. Instead we arrange the platters of food and remove bread from the oven and fill cups with grape juice and wine. We are still working when the men and boys arrive, tromping through the kitchen and kissing their wives and daughters *good Shabbos*. My cousin, her hands full of raspberries, nudges me and nods toward a tall boy with penny-brown hair, and I know him to be Dovid Frankel, the boy from the lake, owner of *Essence of Persimmon*. I watch him as he kisses his mother,

hoists his little sister onto his hip. He is tall and tanned, with small round glasses and a slender oval face. His mouth is almost girlish, bow shaped and flushed, and his hair is close-cropped, with the exception of his luxuriously curled, shoulder-length peyos. He wears a collarless blue shirt in a fabric that looks homemade. I don't realize I'm staring at him until Esty nudges me again.

Everyone gathers around the dinner table, which we've set up on the screen porch. The men begin singing "Shalom Aleichem," swaying with the rise and fall of the melody. I feel safe, gathered in, with the song covering us like a prayer shawl and the Shabbos candles flickering on the sideboard. I pray for my mother and father. Dovid Frankel stands across from me, rocking his little sister as he sings.

Uncle Shimon, in his loose white Israeli shirt and embroidered yarmulke, stands at the head of the table. His beard is streaked with silver, and his eyes burn with a quick blue fire. As he looks around the table at his friends, his children, his new wife, I can tell he believes himself to be a lucky man. I think about my previous uncle, Michael, who has moved to Hawaii to do his astronomy research at a giant telescope there. Once he brought the family to visit us at Christmastime, and in his honor my mother set up a tiny plastic tree on our coffee table. That night we were allowed to eat candy canes and hang stockings at the fireplace, and in the morning there were silver bracelets for Esty and me, with our names engraved. Esty's bracelet said *Erica*, of course. I wonder if she still has it. I still have mine, though it is too small for me now.

Beside me, Esty looks down at her plate and fingers the satin trim at the waist of her Shabbos skirt. I catch her looking at Dovid Frankel, too, who seems oblivious to us both. From the bedroom, *Essence of Persimmon* exerts a magnetic pull I can feel in my chest. I watch Esty as we serve the soup and the gefilte fish, as we lean over Dovid Frankel's shoulder to replace his fork or remove his plates. My cousin's cheeks are flushed and her eyes keep moving toward Dovid, though sometimes they stray toward pregnant Mrs. Handelman, her belly swollen beneath the white cotton of her dress. Mrs. Handelman is Dovid Frankel's oldest sister. Her young husband, Lev, has a short blond beard and a nervous laugh. During the fish course, he tells the story of a set of false contractions that sent him and Mrs. Handelman running for the car. Mrs. Handelman, Esty whispers to me, is eighteen years old. Last year they went to school together.

We eat our chicken and kugel, and then we serve the raspberry cobbler for dessert. The little step-cousins run screaming around the table and crawl underneath. There is something wild and wonderful about the disorder of it all, a feeling so different from the quiet rhythms of our dinner table at home, with my mother asking me about my day at school and my father offering more milk or peas. Here, when everyone has finished eating, we sing the *Birkat HaMazon*. By now I know all the Hebrew words. It's strange to think that when I go home we will all just get up at the end of the meal and put our plates in the sink without singing anything, or thanking anyone.

When the prayer is over, my uncle begins to tell a story about the Belkins, a Jewish family some thirty miles up the lake whose house burned down in June. "Everything destroyed," he says. "Books, clothes, the children's toys, everything. No one was hurt, thank God. They were all visiting the wife's brother when it happened. An electrical short. Completely accidental. So when they go back to see if anything can be salvaged, the only thing not completely burnt up is the mezuzah. The doorframe? Completely burnt. But the mezuzah, fine. A little black, but fine. And so they send it to New York to have the paper checked, and you'll never believe what they find."

All the men and women and children look at my uncle, their mouths open. They blink silently in the porch light as if he were about to perform some holy miracle.

"There's an imperfection in the text," my uncle says. "In the word *asher*. The letters aleph-shin are smudged, misshapen."

Young Mr. Handelman looks stricken. "Aleph-shin," he says. "Aish."

"That's right. And who knows what that means?" Uncle Shimon looks at each of the children, but the children just sit staring, waiting for him to tell them.

"I know," Dovid Frankel says. "It means fire."

"That's right," says Uncle Shimon. "Fire."

Around the table there is a murmur of amazement, but Dovid Frankel crosses his arms over his chest and raises an eyebrow at my uncle. "Aish," he says. "That's supposed to be what made their house burn down?"

My uncle sits back in his chair, stroking his beard. "A man has to make sure his mezuzah is kosher," he says. "That's his responsibility. Who knows how the letters got smudged? Was it the scribe, just being lazy? Was it his assistant, touching the text as he moved it from one worktable to another? Maybe a drop of water fell from a cup of tea the scribe's wife was bringing to her husband. Should we blame her?"

"For God's sake, don't blame the wife," my aunt says, and all the women laugh.

"I like to have our mezuzot checked every year," says my uncle. He leans back in his chair and looks at Dovid, crossing his fingers over his belly. "We alone are responsible for our relationship with Hashem. That's what Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught us in the eighteenth century."

"We should have our mezuzah checked," Mr. Handelman says, squeezing his wife's hand. He looks with worry at her swollen belly.

"I made a mezuzah at school," says one of the little step-cousins, a red-haired boy.

"You did not," his older brother says. "You made a mezuzah cover."

Esty and I get up to clear the dessert plates from the table, and Dovid Frankel pushes his chair away from the table and stands. As we gather the plates, he opens the screen door and steps out into the night. My cousin shoots me a significant look, as if this proves that he has sinned against Hashem and is feeling the guilt. I take a stack of dessert plates into the kitchen, trying to catch a glimpse of Dovid through the

window. But it is dark outside, and all I can see is the reflection of the kitchen, with its stacks and stacks of plates that we will have to wash. When the men's voices rise again, I go to the front of the house and step outside. The night is all around me, dew-wet and smelling like milkweed and pine needles and lake wind, and the air vibrates with cicadas. The tall grass wets my ankles as I walk toward the backyard. Dovid is kicking at the clothesline frame, his sneaker making a dull hollow *clong* against the metal post. He looks up at me and says, "Hello, Esty's cousin," and then continues kicking.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

"Thinking," he says, kicking the post.

"Thinking what?"

"Does a smudged mezuzah make a family's house burn down?"

"What do you think?"

He doesn't answer. Instead he picks up a white stone from the ground and hurls it into the dark. We hear it fall into the grass, out of sight.

"Don't you believe in Hashem?" I ask him.

He squints at me. "Do you?"

"I don't know," I say. I stand silent in the dark, thinking about the one time I saw my brother before he died. He was lying in an incubator with tubes coming out of every part of his body, monitors tracing his breathing and heartbeat. His skin was transparent, his eyes closed, and all I could think was that he looked like a tiny skinny frog. Scrubbed, sterilized, gloved, I was allowed to reach in through a portal and touch his feverish skin. I felt terrible for him. *Get better, grow, kick*, I said to him silently. It was difficult to leave, knowing I might not see him again. But in the cab that night, on the way home with my father, I was imagining what might happen if he did live. The doctors had told us he could be sick forever, that he'd require constant care. I could already imagine my parents taking care of him every day, changing his tubes and diapers, measuring his tiny pulse, utterly forgetting about me. Just once, just for that instant, I wished he would die. If there is a God who can see inside mezuzahs, a God who burns people's houses for two smudged letters, then He must know that secret, too. "Sometimes I hope there's not a God," I say. "I'm in a lot of trouble if there is."

"What trouble?" Dovid says.

"Bad trouble. I can't talk about it."

"Some people around here are scared of you," Dovid says. "Some of the mothers. They think you're going to show their kids a fashion magazine or give them an unkosher cookie or tell them something they shouldn't hear."

I have never considered this. I've only imagined the influence rolling from them to me, making me more Jewish, making me try to do what the Torah teaches. "I didn't bring any magazines," I tell him. "I've been keeping kosher all summer. I've been

wearing these long-sleeved clothes. I can hardly remember what I'm like in my normal life."

"It was the same with your cousin," he says. "When she and your aunt first came here, people didn't trust them."

"I can't believe anyone wouldn't trust them," I say. "Or be scared of me."

"I'm not scared of you," he says, and reaches out and touches my arm, his hand cool and dry against my skin. I know he is not supposed to touch any woman who is not his mother or his sister. I can smell raspberries and brown sugar on his breath. I don't want to move or speak or do anything that will make him take his hand from my arm, though I know it is wrong for us to be touching and though I know he wouldn't be touching me if I were an Orthodox girl. From the house comes the sound of men laughing. Dovid Frankel steps closer, and I can feel the warmth of his chest through his shirt. For a moment I think he will kiss me. Then we hear a screen door bang, and he moves away from me and walks back toward the house.

That night, my cousin won't talk to me. She knows I was outside with Dovid Frankel, and this makes her furious. In silence we get into our nightgowns and brush our teeth and climb into bed, and I can hear her wide-awake breathing, uneven and sharp. I lie there thinking about Dovid Frankel, the way his hand felt on my arm, the knowledge that he was doing something against the rules. It gives me a strange, rolling feeling in my stomach. For the first time I wonder if I've started to *want* to become the girl I've been pretending to be, whose prayers I've been saying, whose dietary laws I've been observing. A time or two, on Shabbos, I know I've felt a kind of holy swelling in my chest, a connection to something larger than myself. I wonder if this is proof of something, if this is God marking me somehow.

In the middle of the night, I wake to find Esty gone from her bed. The closet door is closed, and from beneath the door comes a thin line of light, the light we leave on throughout Shabbos. From inside I can hear a shuffling and then a soft thump. I get out of bed and go to the closet door. "Esty," I whisper. "Are you in there?"

"Go away," my cousin whispers back.

"Open up," I say.

"No."

"Do it now, or I'll make a noise."

She opens the closet door just a crack. I slide in. The book is in her hand, open to a Japanese print of a man and woman embracing. The woman's head is thrown back, her mouth open to reveal a sliver of tongue. The man holds her tiny birdlike hands in his own. Rising up from between his legs and entering her body is a plum-colored column of flesh.

"Gross," I say.

My cousin closes the book.

"I thought you said we were never going to look at it again," I say.

"We were going to ignore Dovid Frankel, too."

"So what?"

My cousin's eyes fill, and I understand: she is in love with Dovid Frankel. Things begin to make sense: our bringing the book home, her significant looks all evening, her anger. "Esty," I say. "It's okay. Nothing happened. We just talked."

"He was looking at you during dinner," she cries.

"He doesn't like me," I say. "We talked about you."

"About me?" She wipes her eyes with her nightgown sleeve.

"That's right."

"What did he say?"

"He wanted to know if you'd ever mentioned him to me," I lie.

"And?"

"I said you told me you went to school with his sister."

My cousin sighs. "Okay," she says. "Safe answer."

"Okay," I say. "Now you have to tell me what you're doing, looking at that book."

My cousin glances down and her eyes widen, as if she's surprised to find she's been holding the book all this time. "I don't know what I'm doing," she says. "The book was here. I couldn't sleep. Finally I just got up and started looking at it."

"It's a sin," I say. "That's what you told me before."

"I know."

"So let's go to bed, okay?"

"Okay," she says.

We stand there looking at each other. Neither of us makes a move to go to bed.

"Maybe we could just look at it for a little while," I say.

"A few minutes couldn't hurt," my cousin says.

This decides it. We sit down on the wooden planking of the closet floor, and my cousin opens the book to the first chapter. We learn that we are too busy with work, domestic tasks, and social activity to remember that we must take the time to respect and enjoy our physical selves and our partners' physical selves, to reap the benefits that come from regular, loving sexual fulfillment. The book seems not to care whether "the East" means Japan, China, or India; the drawings show all kinds of Eastern people in sexual positions whose names sound like poetry: "Bamboó Flute," "The Galloping Horse," "Silkworms Spinning a Cocoon." My cousin's forehead is creased in concentration as she reads, her eyebrows nearly meeting.

"What's the orgasm?" my cousin says. "They keep talking about the orgasm."

"I don't know," I say. "Check the index."

She flips to the index, and under *orgasm* there is a long list of page numbers. We choose one at random, page 83. My cousin reads in a whisper about how to touch oneself in order to achieve the word in question. We learn that one can use one's own fingers or any object whose shape and texture one finds pleasing, though the use of electronic vibrating devices is not recommended. These can cause desensitization, the book tells us. But certain Eastern devices, such as *ben wa* balls or the String of Pearls, can greatly enhance a woman's pleasure.

"Sick," my cousin says.

"I still don't get it," I say.

"What do you think they mean by the *clitoris*?"

Though I have a vague idea, I find myself at a loss for words. My cousin looks it up in the index, and when she learns what it is she is amazed. "I thought that was where you peed from," she breathes. "How weird."

"It's weird, all right," I say.

Then she says, "I can't believe Dovid Frankel has read all this. His hands probably touched this page." She lets the book fall into her lap. It opens to a glossy drawing of a woman suspended in a swinglike contraption from the roof of a pavilion, high above a turbaned man who gazes up at her with desire and love. Two servants in long robes hold the cords that keep the woman suspended.

"Oh, my God," my cousin says, and closes the book. She looks at me with serious eyes, her mother's eyes, but deep brown, in the dim light of the closet. "We have to repent tomorrow," she says. "When we say *Shacharit* in the morning. There's a place where you can tell God what you did wrong."

"We'll repent," I say.

We stow the book on its high shelf and leave the closet. Our room is cold, the light coming in from outside a ghostly blue. We climb into our twin beds and say the *Shema*, and then the *V'ahavta*. The *V'ahavta* is the same prayer that's written inside a mezuzah, and when I say the word *asher* a sizzle of terror runs through me. Has God seen what we have just done? Are we being judged even now, as we lie in bed in the dark? I am awake for a long time, watching the cool air move the curtains, listening to the rushing of the grasses outside, the whirl of the night insects. After some time I hear a change in the rhythm of breathing from my cousin's bed, and a faint rustle beneath the sheet. I pretend to be asleep, listening to the metallic tick of her bedsprings. It seems to go on for hours, connected with the sound of insects outside, the shush of grass, the wind.

The next morning, I am the first to wake. I say the *Modeh Ani* and wash my hands in the basin we leave on the nightstand, cleansing myself as I open my eyes to this Shabbos morning. My cousin sleeps nearly sideways, her long legs hanging off the bed, covers pushed back, nightgown around her thighs. Though her limbs have not seen the sun

all summer, her skin is a deep olive. There is a bruise on her knee the size of an egg, newly purple, which I know she must have gotten as we climbed the metal ladder onto the Perelmans' float. In sleep her face is slack and flushed, her lips parted. It has never occurred to me that my cousin may be beautiful the way a woman is beautiful. With her cropped brown hair and full cheeks, she has always looked to me like a tall, sturdy child. But this morning, as she sleeps, there is a womanliness to her body that makes me feel young and unripe. I dress quietly so as not to wake her, and tiptoe out to the kitchen to find my uncle standing on the screen porch, beside the table, folding his tallis into its velvet bag so he can go to shul for morning services. Sunlight falls in through the screen and covers him with its gold dust. He is facing Jerusalem, the city where he and Aunt Malka found each other. I open the screen door and step out onto the porch.

"Rebecca," he says. "Good morning, good Shabbos." He smiles, smoothing his beard between both hands.

"Good Shabbos," I say.

"I'll be at Torah study this afternoon. After lunch."

"Okay."

"You look tired," he says. "Did you sleep?"

"I slept okay."

For a moment we stand looking at each other, my uncle still smiling. Before I can stop myself I'm asking the question that pushes its way to the front of my mind. "After a person dies," I say, "is the family supposed to have the mezuzah checked?"

My uncle's hands fall from his beard. He regards me sadly, his eyes deep and glassed with sun. "When my first wife, Bluma Sarah, died," he says, "I had everything checked. Our mezuzah, my tefillin, our ketubah. The rebbe found nothing. Finally I asked him to examine my soul, thinking I was the bearer of some imperfection. Do you know what the rebbe told me?"

"No," I say, looking at my feet, wishing I hadn't asked.

"He told me, 'Sometimes bad things just happen. You'll see why later. Or you won't. Do we always know why Hashem does what He does? *Neyn.*'"

"Oh."

"I think God wanted me to meet your aunt," says Uncle Shimon. "Maybe He wanted me to meet you, too." He tucks his tallis bag under his arm and reties his shoes. "Bluma Sarah had a saying: *Der gleichster veg iz ful mit shtainer.*"

"What's it mean?"

"The smoothest way is sometimes full of stones," he says.

All day I keep the Shabbos. This means I do not turn on a light or tear paper or write or bathe or cook or sew or do any of the hundred kinds of work involved in building

the Holy Temple. It is difficult to remember all the things one cannot do; sitting in the tall grass, playing a clumsy round of duck-duck-goose with the little step-cousins, I am tempted to pull a grass blade and split it down its fibrous center, or weave a clover chain for one of the girls. But the Shabbos is all around us, in the quiet along the road and the sound of families in their yards, and I remember and remember all day. My cousin spends most of the day alone. I see her praying in a sunlit patch of yard, swaying back and forth as she reads from her tiny Siddur; then she lies in the grass and studies Torah. When she disappears into the house I follow her. She's closed herself into our closet again, the door wedged tight against intruders. I imagine her undoing this morning's work of repentance, learning new body-part names, new positions. When I whisper through the door for her to come out, she tells me to go away.

All day I'm not allowed to use the telephone to call my mother. I walk around and around the yard, waiting for the sun to dip toward the horizon. Aunt Malka watches me from the porch, looking worried, and then she calls me over.

"What's all this pacing?" she says.

"I'm keeping Shabbos," I say.

"You can keep it right here with me," she says, patting the step beside her.

I sit down. Before us the older children are trying to teach the younger ones how to do cartwheels. They fly in awkward arcs through the long grass.

"Your mother sounds much better," she says. "You'll be going home soon."

"Probably," I say.

"There's a lady I know who lives near you," she says. "I'll give you her number. She and some other women run a mikveh near your house, on 22nd and Third."

"What's a mikveh?"

"It's the ritual bath," she says. "It cleans us spiritually. All women go. Men, too. Your mother should go when she gets out of the hospital. You can go with her, just to watch. It's lovely. You'll see." One of the little boys runs up and tosses a smooth black pebble into Aunt Malka's lap, then runs away, laughing. "We're commanded to go after childbirth," she says.

"Commanded by who?"

"By Hashem," she says, turning the pebble in her fingers. Through its center runs a translucent white ribbon of quartz.

"Even if the baby dies?" I ask her. "Do you have to go then?"

"Yes," she says. "Especially then. It's very important and beautiful. The bath is very clean, and this particular one is tiled all in pink. The women will help your mother undress and brush her hair, so the water will touch every part of her. Then she'll step down into the bath—it's very deep, and large, like a Jacuzzi—until she's completely covered. They'll tell her what *b'rachot* to say. Then she'll be clean."

"Everyone's supposed to do this?" I ask her.

"We're commanded to," she says. "Adults, anyway. For women, it's every month unless we're pregnant. When I'm here I do it right in the lake. There's a woman who had a special shed built on her property, and that's where we go in."

"What if my mother doesn't want to go?" I ask.

"If you tell her how important it is, I'm sure she'll go," she says, and hands me the black pebble. I rub it with my thumb, tracing the quartz.

My aunt gathers the little step-cousins for a walk down the lake road, tying their shoes and smoothing their hair, securing their *kippot* with metal clips. I imagine her walking into the lake, her dark curls spreading out behind her, and my skin prickles cold in the heat. When she invites me to come along on the walk, I tell her I will stay home. I lie down in the grass and watch her start off down the road, the little step-cousins circling her like honeybees.

Real bees weave above me through the grass, their bodies so velvety I want to touch them. For what feels like the first time all summer, I am alone. I rub the pebble with my thumb, imagining it to be a magic stone that will make me smaller and smaller in the tall grass. I shrink to the size of a garter snake, a leaf, a speck of dust, until I am almost invisible. There is a presence gathering around me, an iridescent light I can see through my laced eyelashes. I lie still against the earth, faint with dread, and I feel the planet spinning through space, its dizzying momentum, its unstoppable speed. It is God who makes the shadows dissolve around me. He sharpens the scent of clover. He pushes the bees past my ears, directs the sun onto my back until my skin burns through the cotton of my Shabbos dress. I want to know what He wants and do what He wants, and I let my mind fall blank, waiting to be told.

When three stars come into the sky, the family gathers for Havdalah. We stand in a circle on the grass outside, all nine of us, and we light the braided candle and sing to God, thanking Him for creating fire, *aish*. According to the tradition, we examine our fingernails in the light of that candle, to remind us of the ways God causes us to grow. Then we smell spices and drink wine for a sweet week, and finally we sing the song about Eliyahu Hanavi, the prophet who will arrive someday soon to bring the Messiah. I stand with one arm around a little step-cousin and the other around Esty. As Havdalah ends, she drifts off toward the house, one hand trailing through the long grass.

Now that Shabbos is over, the first thing I do is call my mother. Standing in the kitchen, I watch my aunt and uncle carrying children toward the house as I dial. For the first time, it occurs to me that it might be awful for my mother always to hear children in the background when I call her, and I wonder if I should wait until they go to bed. But by that time the phone's ringing, and it's my father who answers anyway.

"Hey, son," he says. It's an old game between us: he calls me son and I call him Pa, like in the Old West. This is the first time we've done it since Devon Michael was born, though, and it sounds different now.

"Hi, Pa," I say, playing the game even so, because I miss him.

"Still out on the range?"

"Indeedy."

"How's the grub?"

"Grub's not bad," I say. "How's Ma?"

He sighs. "Sleeping."

"Not good?" I say.

"I think she needs you home," he says. "She's not feeling well enough now to do much, but I'll bet if she saw her kid, she'd shape up pretty fast."

"When can I come home?"

"It looks like a couple of weeks," he says. "She's had some problems. Nothing serious, but the doctor thinks she might need IV antibiotics for a little while still."

"Aunt Malka says she should go to a ritual bath," I say. "To get spiritually clean."

There's a silence on my father's end, and I wonder if I've said something wrong. In the background I hear a woman's voice on the intercom but I can't make out what she's saying. "You there, Dad?" I say.

"I'd like to talk to your aunt," he says. "If she's around."

Something about his tone gives me pause. Even though Aunt Malka's just a few steps away, talking quietly out on the screen porch with Uncle Shimon, I tell my father she's gone out for milk. Silently I promise myself to repent this lie tomorrow, during *Shacharit*.

I can hear my father scratching his head, sharp and quick, the way he sometimes does. "You have her give me a call," he says. "All right?"

"All right," I say. "Tell mom I love her."

He says he will.

That evening, my cousin disappears during dinner. We're all eating tomatoes and cottage cheese and thick slices of rye bread with whipped butter, the kind of meal we always eat after Shabbos, and in the middle of spreading my third slice of bread I look over and Esty's gone.

"Where's your cousin?" Aunt Malka says. "She didn't touch her food."

"I'll find her," I say. I go to our room and open the closet door, but the closet is empty. The book is gone from its high shelf. I glance around the room, and it takes me a few moments to see my cousin's huddled shape beneath her bedclothes.

"Esty," I say. "What are you doing?"

She lifts her head and looks at me, her cheeks flushed. In her hand she holds a flashlight. "Reading," she whispers.

"You can't just leave dinner," I say.

"I wanted to look something up."

"Your mom wants to know what's wrong."

"Tell her I have a headache," Esty says. "Say I took some aspirin and I'm lying down."

"You want me to lie?"

She nods.

"It's against the Ten Commandments."

Esty rolls her eyes. "Like you've never lied," she says.

"Maybe I don't anymore."

"Tonight you do," she says, and pulls the bedclothes over her head, rolling toward the wall. I go out to the dinner table and sit down, pushing at my slice of rye with a tomato wedge.

"Nu," my aunt says. "What's the story?"

"She's reading," I say.

"In the middle of dinner?"

"It's all right," Uncle Shimon says. "Let her read. I wish some of these would read." He casts a hand over the heads of his own children.

"I read," says one of the little girls. "I can read the whole aleph-bet."

"That's right," her father says, and gives her another slice of bread.

I finish my dinner, and then it's left to me to do all the dishes while Aunt Malka bathes the step-cousins and gets them ready for bed. I stand there washing and looking out into the dark yard, seeing nothing, angry at my cousin and worried about her. I worry about my mother, too, lying in the hospital with intravenous antibiotics dripping into her arm, spiritually unclean. I've always assumed that my brother's death was somehow meant to punish me, since I was the one who imagined it in the first place, but now I wonder if we are all guilty. After all, we've been walking around doing exactly what we want, day in and day out, as if what God wants doesn't matter at all, as if God were as small and unimportant as the knickknacks on my grandmother's shelves, the porcelain swans and milkmaids we see when we go to her house for the High Holidays.

A thin strand of fear moves through my chest, and for a moment I feel faint. Then, as I look out through the window, I see a white shape moving across the lawn, ghostly in the dark. I stare through the screen as the figure drifts toward the road, and when it hits the yellow streetlight glow I see it's my cousin.

Drying my hands on a dish towel, I run out into the yard. Esty is far away in the dark, but I run after her as fast as I can through the wet grass. When I get to the road, she hears me coming and turns around.

"What are you doing?" I say, trying to catch my breath.

"Nothing," she says, but she's keeping one hand behind her back. I grab for the hand but she twists it away from me. I see she's holding a white envelope.

"What is it?" I say. "You're going to the post office in the middle of the night?"

"It's not the middle of the night."

"You snuck out," I say. "You don't have to sneak out just to mail a letter."

"Go inside," Esty says, giving me a little shove toward the house.

"No," I say. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll scream for your mother if you don't tell me what you're doing."

"You would," she says, "wouldn't you?"

I open my mouth as if to do it.

"It's a note to Dovid Frankel," she says. "It says if he wants to get his book back, he has to meet me at the Perelmans' tomorrow night."

"But you can't. It's forbidden."

"So what?" my cousin says. "And if you tell anybody about it, you're dead."

"You can't do anything to me," I say.

"Yes, I can," she says. "I can tell my mother this was *your* book, that you brought it from New York and have been trying to get us to read it."

"But she'll know you're lying," I say. "Dovid will tell her it's a lie."

"No, he won't."

I know she's right, that Dovid would never own up to the book. In the end he would think about how much he has to lose, compared to me. And so I stand there on the road, my throat tightening, feeling again how young I am and how foolish. Esty smooths the letter between her palms and takes a deep breath. "Now turn around," she says, "and go back into that house and pretend I'm in bed. And when I come back, I don't want to see you reading my book."

"Your book?" I say.

"Mine for now."

I turn around and stomp back toward the house, but when I get to the screen door I creep in silently. The little cousins are sleeping, after all. There is a line of light beneath my aunt and uncle's door, and I hear my uncle reading in Hebrew to Aunt Malka. I go to our bedroom and change into my nightgown and sit on the bed in the dark, trying to pray. The eyes of the Lubavitcher Rebbe stare down at me from the wall, old and fierce, and all I can think about is my cousin saying *you would, wouldn't you*, her eyes slit with spite. I brush my teeth and get into bed, and then I say the *Shema*. *Saying it alone for the first time, I imagine myself back at home in my own bed, whispering to God in the silence of my room, and the thought makes me feel so desolate I roll over and cry.* But it isn't long before I hear Esty climbing through the window and then getting ready for bed, and even though I still feel the

sting of her threat, even though I know she's ready to betray me, her presence is a comfort in the dark.

I struggle awake the next morning to find that Esty is already out of bed. From the kitchen I can hear the clink of spoons against cereal bowls and the high, plaintive voices of the step-cousins. Aunt Malka's voice rises over theirs, announcing that today we will all go blueberry picking. I sigh in relief. Blueberry picking is what I need. I say the *Shema* and wash my hands in the basin beside the bed.

My cousin is in a fine mood today, her short bangs pulled back in two blue barrettes, a red bandanna at her throat. She sings in the van on the way to the blueberry farm, and all the little cousins sing with her. My aunt looks on with pleasure. At first, I'm only pretending to have a good time, too, but then I find I no longer have to pretend. It feels good to swing a plastic bucket and make my slow way down a row of blueberry shrubs, feeling between the leaves for the sun-hot berries. My cousin acts as if nothing happened between us last night, as if we never fought, as if she never went down the road to Dovid Frankel's house in the dark. When her pail is full she helps me fill my pail, and we both eat handfuls of blueberries, staining our shirts and skirts and skin.

Back at home the cousins study Torah with Uncle Shimon, and Aunt Malka and Esty and I bake blueberry cake. Esty keeps glancing at the clock, as if she might have to run out any minute to meet Dovid. When the telephone rings, she gives a jolt, then lunges to pick it up.

"Oh, Uncle Alan," she says. "Hi."

Uncle Alan is my father. I stop stirring the cake batter and try to get the phone from my cousin, but she's already handing it to Aunt Malka.

"Hello, Alan," Aunt Malka says. I watch her face for bad news, but none seems to be forthcoming. "Yes," she says. "Yes. Yes. We certainly are." Holding the phone between her cheek and shoulder, she walks out of the kitchen and into the little girls' bedroom, then closes the door behind her.

"What's going on?" Esty says.

"I don't know." I pour the cake batter into the floured pan Esty has prepared, and we slide it into the oven. Through the wall I can hear Aunt Malka's voice rising and falling. "I think it has to do with the mikveh," I say. "I told my dad yesterday that my mom should go, and he had a strange reaction."

"She does have to go," my cousin says. "You're supposed to go to the mikveh after you've given birth or had your period. Your husband can't touch you until you do."

"Your mom already told me about that."

"There are hundreds of rules," she says, sighing. "Things we're supposed to do and not supposed to do. Maybe you'll learn about them when you're older."

"What rules?" I say. "I'm old enough."

"I can't just say them here in the kitchen."

"Yes, you can. What are the rules? What are you supposed to do?"

My cousin bends close to my ear. "You can't do it sitting or standing," she says. "You can't do it outside. You can't do it drunk. You can't do it during the day, or with the lights on. You're supposed to think about subjects of Torah while you do it. Things like that."

"You're supposed to think about subjects of Torah?"

Esty shrugs. "That's what they say."

Through the wall we hear Aunt Malka's voice approaching, and my cousin moves away from me and begins wiping flour and sugar from the countertop. Aunt Malka comes out of the bedroom, her face flushed, her brows drawn together. She's already hung up the phone.

"How's my mother?" I ask her.

"Recovering," she says, gathering the cup measures and mixing bowls.

"Am I in trouble?"

"No." She sends hot water rolling into the sink and rubs soap into the dish sponge, then begins scrubbing a bowl. She looks as if she's the one who's been punished, her mouth drawn into a grim line. "You have to do what you think is right, Rebecca," she says, "even when the people around you are doing otherwise."

"Okay," I say.

"It's not a problem right now," she says, "but when you go home it may be."

I glance at Esty. She's looking at her mother intently. "Do you really believe that?" she says. "About doing what you think is right?"

"Absolutely," her mother says. "I've always told you that."

Esty nods, and Aunt Malka continues washing dishes, unaware of what she's just condoned.

At twelve-thirty that night my cousin dresses in a skirt and shirt and covers her hair with a black scarf.

She wraps *Essence of Persimmon* in its brown paper bag and tucks it under her arm. The house is dark and quiet, everyone asleep.

"Don't do this, Esty," I whisper from my bed. "Stay home."

"If you tell anyone I'm gone, you're dead," she says.

"At least take me along," I say.

"You can't come along."

"Try and stop me."

"You know how I can stop you."

The dread eyes of the Lubavitcher Rebbe stare down at me from the wall. *Protect your cousin*, he seems to say, and though I don't know what I am supposed to protect her from, I climb out of bed and begin dressing.

"What are you doing?" Esty says.

"I'm coming along."

"This has nothing to do with you, Rebecca."

"I was with you when you found the book," I say.

Esty looks down at the brown paper bag in her hands. Her face, framed by the black scarf, is dark and serious. Finally she speaks. "You can come," she says. "But there's one condition."

"What condition?"

"If we get caught, you have to take the blame. You have to take the blame for everything."

"But that's not fair."

"That's the way it is," she says. "You decide."

We sit for a moment in the silence of our room. The curtains rise and fall at the window, beckoning us both into night. "All right," I say.

"Get dressed, then," my cousin says. "We're already late."

I finish dressing. My cousin slides the bedroom window as far as it will go, and we crawl out silently into the yard. We creep through the grass and out to the road, where no cars pass at this time of night. When I look back, the house is pale and small. I imagine Bluma Sarah hovering somewhere above the roof, keeping watch, marking our progress toward the lake.

We walk in the long grass at the side of the road, keeping out of the yellow pools of light that spill from the streetlamps. In the grass there are rustlings, chatterings, sounds that make me pull my skirt around my legs and keep close to my cousin. We do not talk. The moon is bright overhead. The few houses we pass yield no sign of life. Tree frogs call in the dark, the rubber-band twang of their throats sounding to me like *God, God, God*. The road we walk is the same road we traversed on Friday afternoon, our bicycles heavy with Shabbos groceries. I can almost see the ghosts of us passing in the other direction, our faces luminous with the secret of the book, our clothes heavy and damp with lake water. Now we are different girls, it seems to me, carrying a different kind of weight.

By the time we emerge into the Perelmans' backyard, our skirts are wet with dew. Our sneakers squelch as we tiptoe toward the screen porch. We pause in a stand of bushes, listening for Dovid Frankel, hearing nothing.

We wait. The hands on my cousin's watch read twelve fifty-five. The lake lies quiet against the shore like a sleeping animal, and the shadows of bats move across the white arc of the moon. At one o'clock, we hear someone coming. We both suck breath, grab each other's arms. We see the shadow of Frankel moving across the dew-silvered

lawn. We wait until he comes up, breathing hard, and sits down on the porch steps. Then we come out of the bushes.

Dovid jumps to his feet when he sees us. "Who's that?" he says.

"It's okay," my cousin whispers. "It's just us. Esty and Rebecca."

"Quiet," Dovid says. "Follow me."

We follow him up the steps and enter the moonlit darkness of the screen porch. For a long moment, no one says anything. It is utterly silent. All three of us seem to be holding our breath. Dovid looks at my cousin, then at me. "Where's my book?" he says.

Esty takes the brown paper bag from under her arm. She slides out *Essence of Persimmon*.

Dovid lets out a long sigh. "You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

"Are you kidding?" Esty says.

Dovid reaches for the book, but Esty holds it away from him.

"It's a sin," she says. "Looking at pictures like these. You know you're not supposed to do anything that would make you . . . that would give you . . ."

"That would make you what?" Dovid says.

"I mean, look at these people," she says, stepping into a shaft of moonlight and opening the book. She takes Dovid's flashlight and shines it on a drawing of two lovers intertwined on an open verandah, watching tigers wrestle in the tiled courtyard. She stares at the drawing as if she could will herself into the scene, touch the lovers' garments, their skin, the tiles of the courtyard, the tigers' pelts.

"There are laws," my cousin says. "You can't just do it on a porch, with tigers there. You can't do it in a garden."

"I know," Dovid says.

"I'm serious," Esty says. She moves closer to Dovid. "There are rules for us. We have to be holy. We can't act like animals. She looks up at him, so close their foreheads are almost touching. "We can't have books like this."

"What do you want me to do?" he says. "What am I supposed to do?"

My cousin rises onto her toes, and then she's kissing Dovid Frankel, and he looks startled but he doesn't pull away. The book falls from her hand. Quietly I pick it up, and I open the screen door and step out into the Perelmans' backyard. I walk through the long grass to the edge of the water and take off my shoes and socks. The water is warmer than the air, its surface still. I take one step into the lake, then another. I am all alone. I pull off my long-sleeved shirt and feel the night air on my bare skin. Then I step out of my skirt. I throw my clothes onto the shore, onto the grass. Still holding the book, I walk into the water and feel it on all parts of my body, warm, like a mouth, taking me gently in. When the sandy bottom drops away I float on my back, looking up at the spray of stars, at the dense gauze of the Milky Way. The moon spreads its thin sheet across my limbs. In my hand the book is heavy with water, and I let it fall away toward the bottom.