



**YOU ARE
ONE OF THEM**
A NOVEL
ELLIOTT HOLT

YOU ARE
ONE OF THEM



Elliott Holt

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Version_2

*For my mother,
who wasn't afraid of anything*



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Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two,
three, so as to be together, and whispering together, in the dark.

—Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

PROLOGUE

IN MOSCOW I was always cold. I suppose that's what Russia is known for. Winter. But it is winter to a degree I could not have imagined before I moved there. Winter not of the pristine, romantic *Doctor Zhivago* variety but a season so insistent and hateful that all hope freezes with your toes. The snow is cleared away too quickly to soften the city, so the streets are slushy with resentment. And I felt like the other young women trudging through that slush: sullen and tired, with a bluish tint to the skin below the eyes that suggests insomnia or malnutrition or a hangover. Or all of the above. Every day brought news of a drunk who froze to death. I saw one: slumped over on a bench on Tverskoy Boulevard with a bottle between his legs and icicles decorating his fingers. Distilled into something so pure and solid that I didn't recognize it as death until I got up close. The babushka next to me summoned the police.

I cracked under the weight of the cold. My only recourse was to eat. I inhaled entire packages of English tea biscuits in one sitting. They came stacked in a tube, and when I found myself halfway through one, I decided I might as well finish it. I polished off a whole tube every night after work and then pinched the extra flesh around my hips in the bathtub and thought, *At least I'm warm.*

It was 1996. At the English-language newspaper where I worked, the other expats were always joking. Russia, with all its quirks, was funny. There was a sign at Sheremetyevo Airport, perched at the entrance to the short-term-parking lot, which had been translated into English as ACUTE CARE PARKING. It was a sign better suited to a hospital, where everything is dire. And at the smaller airports, the ones for regional flights, the Russian word for "exit," *vykhod*, was translated into English as GET OUT. A ticket to Sochi, for example, said you would be departing from Get Out #4. I laughed with them, but I knew that eventually these mistranslations would be corrected, that Russia would grow out of its awkward teenage capitalism and become smooth and nonchalant. You could see the growing pains in the pomaded hair of the nightclub bouncers, in the tinted windows of the Mercedes sedans on Tverskaya, in the garish sequins on the Versace mannequins posing in a shop around the corner from the Bolshoi Theater.

At the infamous Hungry Duck, I watched intoxicated Russian girls strip on top of the bar and then tumble into the greedy arms of American businessmen. American men still had cachet then; as an American woman, I hugged the sidelines. ("Sarah," said the Russian men at my office, "why you don't wear the skirts? Are you the feminist?" They always laughed, and it was a deep, carnivorous sound that made me feel daintier than I am.) Everyone in Moscow was ravenous, and the potential for anarchy—I could feel its kaleidoscope effect—made a lot of foreigners giddy. Most of the reporters at my paper spoke some Russian. But among the copy editors, many of whom were fresh out of Russian-studies programs and itching to put their years in the

language lab to good use, the hierarchy was built on who spoke Russian best. They were not gunning for careers in journalism; they just wanted to be in the new post-Soviet Moscow—the wild, wild East—and this job paid the bills. The Americans with Russian girlfriends—“pillow dictionaries,” they called them, aware that these lanky, mysterious women were far better-looking than anyone they’d touched back home—began to sound like natives. They were peacocks, preening with slang. In the office each morning, they’d pull off their boots and slide their feet into their *tapochki* and head to the kitchen for instant coffee—Nescafé was our only option then—and they’d never mention their past lives in Wisconsin or Nevada or wherever they escaped from. “Oy,” they said, and “*Bozhe moy*,” which means “my God” but has anguish in Russian that just doesn’t translate. A little bravado goes a long way toward hiding the loneliness. You can reinvent yourself with a different alphabet.

On Saturdays at the giant Izmailovo Market, tourists haggled for Oriental rugs and *matryoshka* dolls painted to resemble Soviet leaders—Lenin fits into Stalin, who fits into Khrushchev, who fits into Brezhnev, who fits into Andropov, who fits into Gorbachev, who fits into Yeltsin. History reduced to kitsch. While shopping for Christmas gifts once, I stopped by a booth where a spindly drunk was selling old Soviet stamps. And there, pinned like a butterfly to a tattered red velvet display cushion, was Jenny. Her image barely warped by time. “*Skolko?*” I said. The man asked too much. He had the deadened eyes of a person who hasn’t been sober for years, and I didn’t feel like bargaining, so I handed him the money. He could smell my desperation. He put the stamp in a Ziploc bag, and on the way back home on the Metro I studied her through the plastic. My best friend, commemorated like a cosmonaut. Her name had been transliterated into Cyrillic: ДЖЕННИФЕР ДЖОНС, it said above the smiling photo of her freckled face. A five-kopeck stamp from the postal service of the USSR. I had just paid ten dollars for something that was originally worth next to nothing.

Conspiracy theorists will tell you that Jennifer Jones’s death was not an accident. They will tell you that her plane crashed not because of mechanical failure, not because the pilot was suffering from dizzy spells, but because the CIA shot it down. She had become a Soviet pawn they say, too sympathetic to the party. Others say that the KGB was responsible, that after the press took pictures of her smiling at the Kremlin and quoted her saying how nice the Russians were, they needed to quit while they were ahead. I’ve read the official reports. I heard the pundits spew their Sunday-morning-talk-show ire. But I don’t recognize the Jennifer Jones I knew in their versions of the story.

Some people will tell you that all of it was propaganda, that she was just a pawn in someone else’s game, but the letter—the original letter—was real. It came from a real place of fear. The threat used to be so tangible. I was prepared to lose the people I loved best. My mother, with her fuzzy hair and lemon-colored corduroys; our dog, Pip; and Jenny. Always Jenny, whose last act must have been storing her tray table in its upright and locked position. Yuri Andropov wished her the best in her young life. Maybe this blessing was a curse.

Or maybe her luck just ran out.

PART 1



1.

THE FIRST DEFECTOR was my sister.

I don't remember her, but I have watched the surviving Super 8 footage so many times that the scenes have seared themselves on my brain like memories. In the film, Isabel (Izzy, for short), four years old, dances on a beach. She is twirling, around and around and around again, until she falls in the sand. There is grace in her fall; she does not tumble in a heap but composes herself like a ballerina. She wears a bathing suit with the stars-and-stripes design that the U.S. swim team wore in the 1972 Summer Games in Munich. It is the same suit that Mark Spitz wore when he swam to gold seven times. On Izzy the Speedo bunches near her armpits but is taut across her stomach. Her body has already lost most of its toddler pudginess. Her legs are long and lean and are beginning to show muscle definition. My parents were both athletes; Izzy's coordination and flexibility suggest that she, too, will win many races. But her belly still protrudes slightly like a baby's, and there are small pockets of fat on her upper thighs. Her hair is startlingly blond and tousled by the wind. Her eyes are green and transparent as sea glass. Behind her the ocean is calm. Her expression betrays—already!—a hint of skepticism. She is the sort of child who is universally declared beautiful. She looks directly at the camera, unafraid of meeting its gaze. My mother hovers at the right side of the frame in sunglasses and a wide-brimmed straw hat. She wears a pink paisley bikini, and she holds me, a juicy nine-month-old with a half-gnawed banana in my right hand, on her lap. The camera rests for a moment on my face, but I am blurry, and before the focus can be adjusted, the lens turns abruptly back to Izzy, who is kneeling in the sand, strangely reverent and, judging from her moving lips and rhythmically tilting head, singing something. The camera pans to my mother once more. She is laughing, head thrown back.

Three minutes of footage, shot in August of 1973, exactly one year before Nixon resigned. There are several notable things about this short film: (1) My mother looks relaxed and happy. Half of her face is obscured by the hat, yes, but the smile she wears is an irrepressible one. She is laughing at her older daughter, squeezing her younger one. She is all lightness and joy. (2) The camera lingers on her lovely legs for at least four seconds, which suggests that my father the auteur was, at this point, still very much in love with (or at least attracted to) my mother. (3) My sister is alive.

Just three months after this scene on the beach, Izzy died of meningitis. It was the sort of freak occurrence about which every parent has nightmares: a sudden fever that won't go down, a frantic call to the pediatrician—supposedly one of the city's best—and six hours later, despite said pediatrician's reassurances that "it was nothing to

worry about,” a visit to the emergency room at Georgetown University Hospital, where my sister’s meningitis was diagnosed too late to save her. It had already infected her spine and her brain.

This happened on November 7, 1973: my first birthday. Forever after that it was tainted. My parents could never bring themselves to celebrate it convincingly. During every subsequent birthday, they would excuse themselves at various points and disappear into their own private corners to grieve. At my fifth birthday party—the first one I remember—I could hear my mother’s wails from the laundry room in the basement. The sound was so alarming that the clown who had been hired to make balloon animals kept popping her creations. She seemed skittish. “Why is your mom crying?” the kids from my kindergarten class wanted to know. “I had a sister, and then she died,” I said. I used to deliver this information matter-of-factly. It was no more weighty than the fact that our house was stucco or that my father was British. I was three when my parents told me I’d had a sister, and it was a relief to know that there was an explanation for the absence I’d felt for so long in my limbic memory. I’d reach for a baby doll—a doll I later learned had belonged to her—and picture it cradled in another set of arms. Sitting beneath our dining-room table once when I was four—I liked to crawl into private spaces to play—I was overcome with *déjà vu*. I was sure I had sat in the same spot with Izzy. It must have been just before she died. I must have been eleven months old. I could almost hear a breathy, high-pitched voice urging me to “smile, little Sarah, smile!”

And soaking in the tub, even now as an adult, I sometimes sense the memory of bath time with my sister. My foot touching hers under the water as the tub filled, the sight of her leaning back to tip her blond head under the faucet. Letters of the alphabet in primary colors stuck on the porcelain sides of the tub, arranged in almost-words, and my mother crouched on the floor beside us, her sleeves rolled up so that her blouse didn’t get wet as she washed our hair. And after we were pulled from the water, did we wriggle free of our towel cocoons and chase each other around the house naked? Did I make her laugh? I have no proof that it didn’t happen. I feel certain it did.

Intuitively I knew that something was missing long before I knew how to articulate it. Long before I knew that most people’s parents slept in the same bedroom, that most people’s mothers weren’t afraid to leave the house, that some children had never seen their parents cry, I knew that something was off in my family. “Your poor parents,” people would say to me when I was older and I told them the story. But no one seemed to understand that I felt the loss, too. My sister was in heaven, my mother said, with my mother’s parents, who also died too young for me to meet them. I mourned the sister I didn’t get to know. I longed to share secrets and clothes. I wanted a co-conspirator. I was jealous of the kids with siblings, who rolled their eyes at each other behind their parents’ backs, who counted on the unconditional loyalty only a sister or a brother can provide.

I loved watching that film of my sister. My parents had bought the camera right before that beach trip, so there is no earlier footage of her. There are some photographs, of course, but it was a thrill for me to see her move. Her right hand ebbed and flowed through the air, replicating the motion of the waves behind her. Her body language was like a tide pulling me in; I recognized it somewhere deep inside myself.

If she had lived, I know that we would be the kind of adult siblings about whom people say, “Their mannerisms are the same.”

My mother liked to watch our home movies every Saturday night, but screening them was a labor-intensive process. You had to set up the projector on the end table we used as a base, thread the reel through the machine—“Careful, careful!” my mother would say to my father—and sometimes, when the projector overheated, the film would burn and darkness would spread across the image on the living-room wall. It was terrifying to watch the dark blot fill the screen, as if our past were being annihilated right in front of us. It happened so quickly: one moment bright with life and then, suddenly, nothing but darkness. We lost many precious moments in this way—“Stop it, stop it, turn it off!” my mother would cry as my father fumbled with the projector, trying to save the rest of the reel from being fried—including the establishing shots of Izzy on the beach. A zoom into her cherubic face and then we watched that face melt. “My baby girl!” my mother whimpered while the loose strand of film flapped hysterically and my father struggled to turn off the machine. The manic whirring stopped, and then we were all quiet as my father put the reel away in its gray steel case.

“Sometimes I think we should just let it burn,” he said one evening.

“It’s the only one we have of her,” said my mother.

“But we’ve got to let go, Alice. We’ve got to look forward.”

She launched her iciest stare at him. “Is there something better on the horizon?”

I could tell he wanted to erupt. I don’t know if he locked up his rage because I was in the room or because he had already given up on my mom.

We didn’t watch the Izzy footage again after that—my mother was afraid the rest of the reel would be destroyed, so she hid it inside a hatbox in her closet. But when I was old enough to operate the projector, I sneaked late-night viewings of my sister. I would wait until I was sure my mother was asleep and then creep into her dressing room. She kept the hatbox on the top shelf, and as I reached for it, my hand would graze the silks of the dresses my mother had long ago stopped wearing. She retired her glamour when my sister died. (“You may not believe this,” my father said, “but at Radcliffe your mother was always the life of the party.”)

In the dark of the living room, where I set up the projector in the same place we always watched home movies, Izzy’s sequence of movements—turn, turn, fall, kneel—became a sort of meditation. I realize that I see all my memories this way. Everything I remember unspools in the flickering silence of Super 8 film. Each scene begins with the trembling red stripe of the Kodak logo and ends with the sound of the reel spinning, spinning, spinning until someone shuts it down.

2.

I MET JENNIFER JONES in 1980.

It was the summer of the Moscow Olympics, and I was devastated that the American athletes were denied the chance to compete because of the boycott. I was a gymnast then, and although I was not good enough to be an Olympic hopeful—I was too tall and too scared of turning somersaults on the balance beam—there was an older girl named Amanda at my gymnastics club who had made the U.S. team. She was sixteen; by the time the L.A. games rolled around, she'd be twenty and past her prime.

Why, I remember asking my mother, did the Soviet athletes have “СССР” on the backs of their uniforms instead of USSR? She explained that the Russians had a different alphabet, that in Cyrillic what looked to us like a *C* sounded like an *S* and what looked like a *P* sounded like *R*, and the Russian name for the Soviet Union—the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—was abbreviated as СССР. This was a mind-blowing concept for an eight-year-old. It had never before occurred to me that there could be other alphabets, that somewhere out in the world people were arranging entirely different shapes into words. Like most American children of my generation, I had learned the alphabet watching *Sesame Street*. When episodes were brought to us by the letter *S*, I always smiled, because *S* was my letter, and now my mother was telling me that in the Russian alphabet the *S* looked like a *C*. She might as well have told me that I didn't exist. It was like money, she said. Different countries have different currencies, and you have to exchange them. Different coins and different letters sometimes. I knew about foreign currency. My father had given me a few English pounds.

The Olympic boycott was one of many signs that 1980 was a turning point in the Cold War: tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were escalating. Whenever my mother said this, I thought of escalators. For years escalators had scared me, a phobia caused by the steep ones of the D.C. Metro, which plummet straight into darkness. Riding down into the stations induced such panic in me that for several years we didn't ride the Metro at all. *What are you so afraid of?* my father asked me when I was six, as if I could rationally analyze my fear. He wasn't afraid of anything, my father, or didn't seem to be, and until my phobia of escalators developed, he thought I was like him. *You're turning into your mother's child*, he said to me.

We were on the steamy July sidewalk outside the Dupont Circle station. He had promised to take me to the Air and Space Museum if, and only if, I agreed to ride the Metro to the Mall. Now we were at an impasse. We stood at the top of the station entrance, looking down the short flight of stairs that led to the main escalator. I wasn't

afraid of these steps, but I knew that if I descended into the station, I would be trapped. My father would drag me onto the escalator, he would tug me like a stubborn dog on a leash. I didn't want to turn into my mother's child. I knew that she was not normal, that her anxiety was crippling.

What are you so afraid of? my father asked again. This time his tone was frustrated, patronizing. *You are my flesh and blood*, he seemed to be saying. *Isn't it time you acted like it?* To my father, fear was weakness. To my mother it was preparation. I looked at him. He was so tall. Six foot four in bare feet. He was wearing a sport coat and a button-down shirt. Even on weekends, even in the heat, he dressed up. He never wore jeans. They were, he thought, too American. This dapper, impatient Englishman seemed, suddenly, like a stranger. He crossed his arms. *Sarah*, he said. *You used to ride the bloody things all the time.*

I know, I said. I could remember stepping gingerly onto the top step, careful to make sure my shoelaces didn't catch in the spinning belt. Then clutching the handrail and looking forward, not down, as my stomach sank. The D.C. Metro has an earthy, mineral smell that reminds you you're plunging straight into bedrock. The cavernous stations are so deep and cold that you half expect to see stalactites dangling from the stone ceilings. The New York and Moscow subways hum with civilization; they smell of human exertion and alcohol-saturated despair. But in Washington, where the trains are not as crowded, where the walls are not tainted with advertisements, the Metro feels almost organic. It's as if the stations were hollowed out by some primal force. Even the platforms used to scare me. The lights at the edge flashed to warn that a train was coming, then turned a threatening red as the train pulled in to the station. I was always afraid I'd fall onto the track.

I can't, I said to my father. *I just can't.*

Fine. I give up, he said. *Let's go home.*

We trudged along Q Street toward our car. He walked ahead of me, let his back show his disappointment. I had failed. A month later he left.

• • •

SO THE SECOND defector was my father.

There was another woman involved—there usually is in these situations—but my mother was so unstable that he probably would have left even if he hadn't met someone else. My mother had an anxiety disorder, and her panic attacks were triggered by a wide variety of daily activities: driving over bridges, flying (or any kind of travel, really), heights (she wouldn't go above the fourth floor of any building), crowds (tourist-riddled museums had to be avoided), and confined spaces of all sorts (Metro cars, movie theaters, and elevators were all off-limits). The panic developed after my sister died—a not-atypical response to such trauma, her psychotherapist said—and my mother no longer felt safe anywhere. She could be her usual charming self—she had a coquettish streak, and in those days she and my father still entertained people—but she was also capable of wild mood swings. It was not uncommon for her to disappear in the middle of a dinner party. My father would find her hiding in the bathtub, fully dressed, while her guests pretended not to notice her absence. Most

people tolerated my mother's behavior as mere eccentricity; she was beautiful, so she got away with a lot. She insisted on keeping all the lights on at night; she couldn't bear the dark. She couldn't sleep without pharmaceutical aid. She became obsessed with preparing for disaster, as if vigilance alone could save us. She slathered my face with sunscreen even on cloudy days. She stockpiled batteries and medications and took my temperature every morning as a precaution.

My father was a pragmatist. My sister's death confirmed his worldview: that terrible things happen despite your best efforts and when you least expect them, so there was no point living paralyzed by fear. For my mother, Izzy's sudden death was a reminder that she could never let down her guard, that to relax even for a moment was to open the door to danger. My father took me to the places she wouldn't go: to the dentist, whose office was on the seventh floor of a Bethesda high-rise; to my gymnastics classes that were located in Virginia and required a trip across Key Bridge. He did his best to compensate for my mother's agoraphobia. But the more neurotic she became, the less time he spent at home.

And then one day he'd had enough. He was exhausted, he said. He couldn't do it anymore. This was 1979. In the wake of Watergate, every institution—including marriage—seemed to be falling apart. ("Of course your parents split up," college friends said to me later. "Statistically speaking, it's incredibly likely for a marriage to end after a child dies.") My father had moved to Washington to work for the IMF as an economist, and when he left my mother, he went back to London to join an investment bank. He said he was leaving my mother, not me, but after that I was lucky to see him once a year. The first year he flew in for a long weekend, took a suite at the Mayflower Hotel, and escorted me around like a tourist. He watched me scramble over the giant bronze dinosaur outside the Museum of Natural History. We went paddleboating in the Tidal Basin. We climbed to the top of the Washington Monument and took in the broad expanse of Constitution Avenue from above. When people asked my mother about her husband, she said, "He repatriated." But he defected. Once he left, he was gone for good.



HE'D BEEN GONE for about a year when Jennifer Jones moved into the house across the street from us. It was Labor Day weekend. On that Saturday I watched the movers unload a couch, covered in plastic, from the truck. As the men unloaded other furniture, our dog, Pip, was on his hind legs, pressed against the narrow window above the mail slot, frantically barking. "What's he looking at?" said my mother from the dining room. The table was covered with paper—she had turned the room into a makeshift office.

"Someone's moving into the Goldmans' house," I said.

"I'm glad it finally sold."

The house was a stately Queen Anne in white clapboard with black shutters and a wraparound front porch that was typical of Cleveland Park. I always thought of our neighborhood as a community of giant dollhouses.

"Maybe they'll let us use their pool," I said. Several houses on our street had

pools, but we were not well enough acquainted with the owners to have access to them.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” she said.

But my hopes were never up. Our house had no room for hope.

A brown Chevrolet station wagon with suitcases strapped to its roof pulled up in front of the house. Before the motor was off, a back door opened and a girl tumbled out. She had two neat braids that reached her shoulders. She was wearing blue shorts and a blue-and-yellow-striped polo shirt and carried a cage of some kind (later I’d learn that it contained her cat, Hexa). Pip couldn’t hold himself up anymore and dropped to all fours, but he continued to bark as he paced back and forth behind me.

“Pip, quiet,” I said. Silencing him was useless; he continued to yap. Like most herding dogs, he had a brittle nervous system. He was like my mother that way. The irony is that my parents got Pip because my mother thought she would feel safer and calmer with a dog. Instead his anxiety fed off hers and then his barking made her more anxious.

A man and a woman—presumably the girl’s parents—emerged from the front seats of the car. The woman had short, feathered hair and wore a white blouse with tiny red flowers embroidered around the collar. The man had glasses with thick tortoiseshell frames. The houses on that side of the street were on a hill, so they looked down on us. I watched the girl scamper up the long flight of steps to the front door. Later I’d count those steps; there were twenty-one. The sloping lawn on either side of them was impenetrable with ivy. The girl tried the door, then spun around impatiently to check her parents’ progress. “Come on!” I heard her shout. When her father reached the porch, she stepped aside to let him open the door. And then they were inside, out of sight. The movers were lugging stuff up the steps.

“There’s a girl,” I said. “She looks like she’s about my age.”

“You should go say hello.”

“Now?”

“Not now. Tomorrow maybe. Let them get settled.”

It wasn’t until Monday—Labor Day—that we actually met. I was walking Pip down the street when I heard a promising voice say, “Can I pet your dog?”

I turned around, and there she was. My new neighbor. “Sure.”

She came closer and crouched to extend a hand for Pip to sniff. “Like Lassie,” she said.

“Lassie was a collie,” I said. “My dog’s a Shetland sheepdog.”

“Mini-Lassie,” she said. “Boy or girl?”

“Boy. His name’s Pip.”

Pip allowed her to scratch him behind his ears. “I want a dog,” she said. “But my dad won’t let me get one.”

“I live across the street from you,” I said, and pointed at my house. It was pebbled stucco, charcoal gray with white shutters and a mansard roof. From the outside it looked normal.

“I’m Jenny,” she said. “I’m from Ohio. The Buckeye State.”

“Sarah,” I said. “I’ve never lived in a state.”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t a state,” I said.

“My dad says Washington, D.C., is the most important city in the world.” She had the zeal of a convert.

I shrugged. Washington was always more impressive to newcomers: the aspiring politicians at Georgetown University, the freshman representatives who traded state legislatures for the U.S. Capitol, the idealistic reporters determined to be the next Woodward and Bernstein, the tourists who sweated outside the White House hoping to spot the president. For those of us who lived there, Washington was not glamorous. It is a swampy city of wonks, a factory town where everyone—the lawyers, consultants, think-tank strategists, journalists, and diplomats—works in the same business. And the languid pace of life in the leafy enclaves of northwest Washington is so far from urban bustle that it’s hard to believe you’re in a city at all. Even then I knew I wanted to live in New York. I’d been there just once, but before my father had even hailed a taxi outside Penn Station, I remember thinking, *Now, this is a real city.*

Jenny had turned eight in June; I would be eight in November. We were both entering third grade at John Eaton. And when school started the next day, Jenny and I were in the same class. Our teacher, Mrs. Haynes, was a woman in her fifties who wore a pearl choker and blew her nose into monogrammed handkerchiefs. When she discovered that I had already met “the new girl,” she let us colonize adjoining desks. Jenny and I spent that first recess on the swings, where we exchanged information about our lives as we flew higher and higher.

Your sister died? she said as she moved through the air, her white kneesocks extending straight out over the blacktop.

Why did you move? I asked as I pumped my legs as hard as I could.

We covered the basics: Her father had been transferred from his consulting firm’s Dayton office; her mother was a nurse who hadn’t found a job in D.C. yet. Jenny had always wanted a sister; I had been cheated of mine. And so that’s it: we were friends. Jenny invited me to her house after school.

The Joneses had moved in only three days before, but already the boxes were unpacked. Books were on shelves, paintings were on walls. At my house there were boxes that my mother had not opened for years. Her dressing room was so cluttered that she had to climb over stuff to get to her closet. Our house was like a museum, filled with relics. She kept all of Izzy’s clothes stored in a trunk in her bedroom. There were piles of paper on every surface. The floors were covered with Oriental rugs that trapped dog hair and dust. My mother kept the curtains drawn—she felt safer that way—so our house was like a tomb. And the slightest provocation (a ringing phone, the arriving mail) was enough to send Pip into a frenzy.

Jenny’s house was bright and modern. Although it had been built at the turn of the century like ours, it had been renovated in the 1960s, and the kitchen opened into a spacious family room with lots of windows and skylights. The ceilings were high, and the rooms were sparsely furnished with midcentury pieces. It was a house that seemed to look forward, not back. The floors were polished wood, and Jenny slid around pretending to surf.

We went swimming that afternoon, and I can still remember my first glimpse of Jenny underwater. We sank beneath the surface in unison and sat cross-legged on the bottom of the pool in a breath-holding contest. She wore a canary yellow bathing suit and green goggles, and I could see her eyes open wide and staring at me, her rival. I

had no goggles, but I forced my eyes open despite the sting of chlorine. From above, the pool looked glassy and hard, a surface that must be broken with force, but below, it was soft and beckoning, a membrane through which light sieved like sugar. The sunlight webbed across Jenny's skin and through her hair, giving it a reddish tint, and the bubbles of air streaming from her nose added to the impressionistic effect. Suddenly she stretched her mouth open in a ludicrous way and stuck out her tongue. My laughter forced me up for air. "I win!" Jenny announced as she triumphed from below.

For the next two weeks, I swam at her house every day until the pool had to be closed for the season. They had a diving board, and Jenny and I took turns executing tricks and giving them ridiculous names. It wasn't a cannonball when I folded my body into a tight tuck, it was a "popcorn kernel," and when I did backflips—thanks to gymnastics, diving came easily to me—I dubbed them "rewinds." Mrs. Jones was our lifeguard. She watched us from a lounge chair at the shallow end and clapped whenever either of us completed a dive.

"It's so nice to meet you," said Mrs. Jones the first afternoon I was there. She had the perky delivery of a cheerleader. She made us a snack—peanut butter on celery sticks—and asked about my family. What did my dad do? she wanted to know. Her flat midwestern A's made it sound like "Daaad."

"He lives in London," I said.

"London, England? Gosh, that's far away," she said.

"They're divorced," I said. And though divorce was common in our Washington circles, Mrs. Jones looked shocked. I liked her innocence: troubled thoughts rushed across her face like clouds and were gone just as quickly. She was a clear sky.

"What a shame," she said. "What a terrible shame."

"It's okay," I said. "Some people just aren't meant to live together."

"What about your mom? What does she do?"

"She works for nuclear disarmament," I said.

It was only after my father left that my mother had begun to worry about nuclear war. She learned to channel her anxiety. The good thing was that she started leaving the house to attend disarmament-movement meetings. She got over her fear of the dark so that she could turn our basement into a fallout shelter.

My mother mapped out scenarios, calculating the reach of the radioactive fallout if the blast hit Kansas City, say, or Washington. She drew ominous red circles in our Rand-McNally to mark the circumference of destruction. At the kitchen table, the hanging lamp created a tunnel of light under which she envisioned doom. She'd press her slide rule across swaths of U.S. territory. The fifty states were rendered in pastels—yellow, orange, and green—but as I squinted at them, the crimson lines that my mother etched around their innocent metropolises gave the whole nation a fiery hue. "Look," she'd say, pointing at the Midwest of her childhood. The corn-soaked plains where her hopscotch squares had been overshadowed by stories of Hiroshima.

"What," I'd say, moving into her orbit. It was not a question when I said it, because I knew the answer. She always wanted to show me the same things. Missile silos dotting the prairies. Air force bases with nuclear weapons stacked neatly underground, ready to violate the vast blue skies. She marked the location of these Russian targets with black stars. My mother wouldn't look at me, but she took my

arm, pulled me close. And then, with one cool hand, she guided my stuttering finger across the page. For a moment she was still. Unusual for a woman who was generally so high-strung. Who fretted through rooms, who would often shake her hands—as if spattering water—when she was thinking. She never realized she was doing it. Sometimes I’d call her from a friend’s house and hear the flutter in her voice. “You’re shaking your hands, aren’t you?” I’d say. “No,” she’d say, and then pause, and I knew she was startled by the sight of her own manic fingers.

I liked to flip the atlas to the Soviet Union, its borders drawn in a muted red. I couldn’t even fit the top of my pinkie inside Luxembourg but could press both my palms onto the Soviet sprawl. The Russians fascinated me. My mother and I watched clips of Brezhnev on the evening news—his chest clotted with medals, his eyebrows bristling under his fur hat—but it was ordinary Russians I was curious about. Moscow, as the capital of the other superpower, struck me as Washington’s twin. Was there an eight-year-old girl somewhere in Moscow whose sister had also died, whose father had also left? “They live in communal apartments,” my mother said. “So that eight-year-old probably shares a bathroom with nine other people.”

Some parents might have hesitated to expose their children to the gloomy realities of the hydrodynamic front, but I was six when my mother explained the concept of half-life. I was seven when she began stocking our basement with canned goods. Baked beans and tuna fish. Creamed corn. Beef jerky. Whole peaches in syrup. My mother did not hide anything from me. I knew that Khrushchev had promised to bury us. I knew that Carter had ordered the Olympic boycott because the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. In those days I’d squint at the sun, knowing that it could vanish, that omnivorous darkness could descend at any time. That a mushroom cloud could swallow us whole or leave us to shrivel in an eternal winter. In my nightmares the landscape was as barren as a photographic negative, the reverse of everything I knew. A world silent and still. Was I scared? Yes, but the fear was so constant that it was like a hum barely audible below our daily chatter. I went to school, I came home. I went to gymnastics. I practiced the piano. I did my homework. But the bomb was always on my mind.

Jenny and I settled into a rhythm that fall. We walked the two blocks to school together—we’d meet outside our houses at exactly five minutes past eight and arrive before the opening bell rang at eight-fifteen. After school, on the three days I didn’t have gymnastics, we’d go to her house and do our homework and, more often than not, bake brownies. There were always Duncan Hines mixes in the cupboard. Mrs. Jones was always there to ask about our day. She smiled a lot. At first it made me nervous—there was something unsettling about all that grinning—but my mother said that people smiled more in Ohio.

We rode our bicycles around the oak-canopied streets of our neighborhood. There were a lot of kids in Cleveland Park. They congregated on the Macomb Street playground or at the community club on Highland Street. We were all allowed to roam without supervision until dusk, when a chorus—mostly the accented voices of nannies and housekeepers—summoned everyone home for dinner. For years I had lingered on the fringes of the other kids’ society—I would occasionally be drafted into kickball when their numbers were uneven—but now Jenny was with me. She could have picked anyone to be her friend. I’ve come to understand that some people are suns that

pull others into their orbit. The first time we went to the Macomb Street playground together, the others swarmed around Jenny like mosquitoes around a light. She dictated the terms of the interaction. Before they could ask her name, she announced it. Before they could ask where she was from, she told them. “Do you call soda ‘pop’?” asked one of the older boys when he found out she was from the Midwest. His name was Josh, and he was in sixth grade. He and his younger brother lived two blocks away from me but had never acknowledged my presence. “I do,” Jenny said without apology. “Pop is way more fun to say. POP!” Josh invited her to join their soccer game. But Jenny chose me. We ignored the others and created our own world.

The National Cathedral was just a few blocks away from us, and the Bishop’s Garden—with its labyrinth of hedges—became our favorite place to play. In the garden we were princesses and fairies, we were orphans and spies. The gargoyles towering above us became monsters we had to escape; the cathedral bells chimed to celebrate make-believe weddings. We held summits in the gazebo. And in a crack that we discovered in the ten-foot wall that encircled the garden, we began to leave each other secret messages. An average piece of ruled paper could be folded into sixteenths and squirreled in the masonry’s hole without detection. The messages lacked consequence: since we saw each other almost every day, we didn’t need them to communicate. But it was exciting to slip across Woodley Road and up the hill—the cathedral is on the highest point in Washington—to check for messages. She’d leave notes for me on the afternoons I was at gymnastics; I’d retrieve them on Sunday mornings while she and her parents were at church. My mother was agnostic, so my exposure to God was limited to the cathedral police (the “God Squad”) who periodically mazed through the Bishop’s Garden on patrol. Eventually I’d end up at a school that was nominally Episcopalian, but it was only really religious about getting its alumnae into the Ivy League. Jenny and I never signed our notes in case a stranger found them. “*This message will self-destruct,*” I wrote. Or “*Burn after reading.*” Sometimes Jenny’s notes were in pig latin. “*Athmay omeworkhay uckssay,*” said one.

At dinnertime—the Joneses sat down promptly at six-thirty with cloth napkins and everything—I scuttled back to my house, where we usually ate in front of the TV so my mother could watch the news. We didn’t yet have a microwave, but my mother favored dishes that were easy to prepare; we had spaghetti sauced with Ragú at least twice a week. For vegetables she relied on bags of frozen peas.

“It’s strange that the Joneses bought a house here,” my mother said not long after they moved in.

“Why?”

“Because most people in our neighborhood are Democrats. Cleveland Park is a liberal stronghold. You’d think they’d want to be in McLean or Arlington. All those Pentagon types are in northern Virginia.”

“Mr. Jones doesn’t work at the Pentagon,” I said.

“No,” she said. “But his company’s out there in the suburbs somewhere. They consult for the government. Strategy for defense agencies, that kind of thing.”

“Are they Republicans?”

“They claim they’re independents,” she said, “but Linda is so smitten with Nancy Reagan. You should have heard her talking about Nancy’s hair.”

Reagan’s campaign against détente infuriated my mother. She couldn’t bear to get