



# Dirty Genes

A Story of  
Abandonment and Renewal

Esther Minskoff

# **DIRTY GENES**

Esther Minskoff

OBOOKO EDITION

© Copyright 2011 Esther Minskoff

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. This book must not be offered for sale.  
Thank you for your support.

Contact me at: [eminskoff@gmail.com](mailto:eminskoff@gmail.com)

Discuss the book with me and others at Minskoff Books on Facebook

## CHAPTER 1

Thank God there was a Starbucks across the street from the funeral home. At 7:00 that morning, Abra had taken the subway from her midtown Manhattan hotel to Queens so she could find an unobtrusive spot to observe the funeral. She had been shaking since she got on the subway. The trembling was especially noticeable around her neck. She thought she looked like someone with Parkinson's or Katherine Hepburn, in her old age when she shook like a leaf in a hurricane. But when she looked at her reflection in the subway window, she saw that she wasn't shaking on the outside, only on the inside. As she gazed at her reflection in the glass, she began to ease. The rhythmic rocking of the subway soothed her.

It didn't really matter if someone saw her sitting in Starbucks looking at the funeral home. No one would recognize her. She was not the same Abra who was last in Queens 16 years ago. She didn't even have the same last name. Then she was Abra Ginzberg, now she was Abra Berg. She had chopped off the first half of her name the same way she had chopped off the first half of her life.

She got off at the Queens Boulevard subway stop and as she walked up the steps to the street, she felt as if she were rising from a grave. She pictured herself like a figure in a horror movie - a transparent ghost in a white shroud wafting up from a coffin with arms outstretched and hair flying. She was coming back from her afterlife to her first life.

Before she saw the street, she felt it. With each step, her ears were bombarded by the sounds of traffic – buses moaning and groaning, cars beeping and screeching, people rushing up and down the steps speaking English with thick New York accents or babbling in incomprehensible tongues. The smells engulfed her. They permeated her skin and were absorbed by her cells. She felt that she would forever reek of exhaust fumes and frying oils expelled into the street air from the restaurants. By the time she reached the top step she was immersed in 1990, the last time she had walked these streets.

She headed in the direction of Goldstein & Simms Funeral Home. What a name for a funeral home, Jewish and WASP. That way almost everybody was a potential customer, whatever their religion. All they needed to do was add names like Hussain and Chang and they would cover everyone. As she walked, she recognized every inch of the streets. She had spent so much of her teen years walking these streets to do the family shopping. Not shopping for clothes, music, or jewelry, like other teenagers. No, shopping for life's necessities.

The funeral home was three blocks from the house where she lived the first 18 years of her life. She stayed glued to Queens Boulevard not daring to venture anywhere near 17<sup>th</sup> Street. She didn't want to get a passing glimpse of the house or the street even though her family no longer lived there.

She searched the stores along the way to find those that had withstood time. There were still the kosher butcher, candy store, grocery, and cleaners. They looked so small and dingy.

They probably had always been small and dingy when she shopped in them, but the 16 years had shrunk them further and made them seedier and grayer. The grocery store still had fruit displayed out front. In 1990, she considered it old-fashioned and unsanitary, but now she thought it looked almost quaint. Like what you would see on the streets of some of Europe's cities. Open air fruit markets in London or Paris were charming. Open air fruit markets in Queens with circling flies and dirty, germ-laden hands pawing the merchandise were disgusting. What bacteria and deadly viruses were transferred from those hands to those tomatoes? Years ago, when she had to buy the produce that was only in outside bins, she dug to the bottom to find the fruit that had been least contaminated. After she got home, she washed this produce as if she were an obsessive compulsive washing her hands.

But now there were new stores. There was Barnes and Noble, Old Navy, and, of course, the ever-present Starbucks. There were all types of ethnic restaurants and even a halal market to counterbalance the kosher butcher. She shifted her attention from the stores to the hordes of people on the street. She recalled that the streets had always been jammed no matter the time. In New York, people looked like automatons, especially early in the morning. The ones rushing to the subway looked like they had been wound up tight, like toy tops that start turning in perfect circles and gradually wobble until they fall. So many were talking on their cells, and still others were holding the cells to their ears for security or their downloading of brain cancer waves. Who were they talking to so early in the morning? If you didn't see the phones, you would think that they were the schizophrenics wandering the streets talking to their demons. They really sounded crazy because they spoke in loud voices as if they were yelling orders to underlings. Why did people have to scream when they were on cells? They didn't do that with land line phones. There were only a few facial expressions visible on these early morning rushers – preoccupation, worry, anger, but never smiles or eagerness.

There were women shopping at the old stores at this early hour. The old stores weren't like the new ones that opened at 10. The old ones opened early and stayed open late to accommodate people who worked long hours and had long commutes and, of course, to make more money. She noticed that some of the stores had different owners. In the candy store, there were now Asians in place of the old Jewish couple who had kept the store open from 6 AM till midnight. When had those people slept? Where had they slept? They never made conversation when Abra bought cigarettes for her mother or candy for Rachel and Noah. They never looked in her eyes even though she had been in the store countless times. They exuded anger and hate, not for Abra, but for life, their lives.

Abra remembered her morning shopping trips at 7 before she left for school. She had to make sure that there was enough food for her parents while she was at school. She knew the location of everything in the grocery store. She could find the soup shelves with her eyes closed. She bought gallons of soup, especially Campbell's chicken noodle. Everyone loved that along with thick slabs of challah slathered with butter. Suddenly she realized that the

Jewish bakery was gone. Everyday she bought challah and bagels and bialeys. They never got stale because they were eaten three meals a day. Where had the bakery been? She thought maybe that was where the Thai restaurant was. What a trade – pad thai for challah.

She also remembered the night visits to the pharmacy. She must have been 12 when she started going to the pharmacy to get medicine for whatever was wrong with the kids or her parents. Wasn't she afraid to walk the streets at night even though they were well-lit and filled with people? She couldn't remember what she thought. She only remembered her actions. She did what had to be done and she didn't think about it. Now she was reflective about every action she took. Now she was alone – she wasn't responsible for anyone but herself. Then she had the weight of the Ginzberg world on her shoulders, and what a heavy world that was. But she never consciously thought about it. From an early age she knew she was responsible for the whole family, but she always knew she wouldn't be chained to them for her whole life. She knew she would make her great escape.

She walked slowly and examined the women who rushed by her. Some were dressed for work and pushing kids in strollers or holding their hands, probably taking them to day care. These women looked so harried, so frantic, like the day had opened with hundreds of hours of things for them to do in the next confining 24 hours. She wondered if she had looked like that when she went off for her morning shopping. Rachel and Noah didn't go to day care. When they weren't in school, Abra was their baby sitter. Even if day care had been available, no one would have taken such damaged kids. She was even her mother and father's baby sitter. It was a shame there had been no parent day care where she could leave them. Oh, how she needed respite from her never-ending responsibilities.

The neighborhood had changed over the last 16 years, but it also hadn't changed. There were still lots of Jews, but they were different now. There were lots of old Jews. The younger ones had moved to the suburbs or the exurbs for a different geography, one with distance between people. In Queens, people were squashed together in their apartments, on the streets, and in the stores. There was no greenery. Everything was gray and concrete. The younger Jews had opted for space, greenery, and the proverbial white picket fence. Now, there were also foreign Jews, especially Russians, on the first stop before they, too, moved on in search of space and greenery. To add spice to the neighborhood, there were a number of non-Jews from all parts of the Arab world, Asia, and Latin America. This old Jewish neighborhood of New York was dissolving.

Abra knew diversity first hand. She worked for the Fairfax County schools in Virginia, one of the most diverse school systems in the country. There were kids from hundreds of countries speaking a babel of languages. She had to test and counsel kids who spoke Urdu, Kurdish, Tagalog, and languages no one had heard before the kids arrived on the school's doorstep. But Fairfax County diversity wasn't the same as Queens diversity. Fairfax had started with a small white WASP population, while Queens had started with a large population of Jews, some

American born and others from European countries. There had never been a “real American WASP” in Abra’s Queens.

Although she worked in a multicultural melting pot, Abra lived in an enclave of mostly affluent American-born whites. Her personal life was like a small island of white bread floating in a huge ocean of humus. Her friends were primarily white, with a sprinkling of Asians, all American born, all well-educated, and all middle class.

She was surprised that she remembered the stores so vividly. She even recalled some of the big cracks in the sidewalk. She had always walked with her head down determined to carry out her missions and careful not to trip on the jagged pieces of concrete sticking up. She made thousands of trips to the grocery, pharmacy, and different government offices. She was the lifeline to the outside world for the people who lived in apartment 2D at 4313 17<sup>th</sup> Street. She was the official representative who spoke to the world on behalf of the Ginzberg family. She made telephone calls and filled out forms. She was even the one who did the banking. From an early age, she knew how to deposit the government disability checks that supported them. She started writing checks for rent, electricity, and telephone when she was 10. Using her best penmanship she completed each section and then had her father sign on the signature line. He wrote like a child with large, shaky letters bunched together. Jacob A. Ginzberg. A for Aaron. Everyone in the family had biblical names, although no one read the Bible or went to synagogue.

Today Abra worked with kids who acted on behalf of their parents dealing with the demands of living and working in a foreign culture. These kids were like UN translators as they ably spoke English to doctors, lawyers, policemen, landlords, and translated back into their parents’ tongue. But it was different from what she had done. The parents of these kids usually made the decisions, and the kids were only translators. Abra had to make decisions for people who didn’t have the mental capacity to do so. Her parents had grown up in the culture, but hadn’t absorbed it. They were children in adults’ bodies.

She entered Starbucks and ordered her usual grande skinny latte. As she looked around, she again confirmed that Starbucks was the equalizer for all cultural groups. There were Hispanic construction workers, Asians in business suits, and blacks with government ID tags around their necks. All were buying exotic coffees that were alien to their cultures, in fact they were alien to everyone’s culture. These were coffees that were created to unite all Americans, and now all coffee consumers of the world. People of all nations loved caramel macchiato, although no one knew what it was.

She picked up a much-read New York Post and settled on a stool at a window counter facing the funeral home. She looked at the paper and thought about yesterday. Was it only yesterday that she had seen the newspaper article about Rachel’s drowning? A picture on the front page of a New York tabloid was how Abra learned that her sister died. That picture pulled her back 16 years to a place she never wanted to revisit. She was at National Airport on her



way to Charleston for a professional development workshop on computerized assessment of ADHD and OCD. As she reached for a USA Today, her eyes were drawn to the picture and headline of the adjoining New York Post. The headline “Retarded woman drowns in park lake,” was plastered over a picture of Rachel. How did she know it was her sister? She hadn’t seen her in 16 years. She knew. She just knew. She knew even before she read the article.

She bought the paper and found an empty gate. She sat facing the field so no one could see her face or her rapt interest in what she was reading. Her eyes skimmed the article in a second and then went back and devoured it word by word, punctuation mark by punctuation mark. Her face was so close to the paper that her nose almost touched Rachel’s picture.

On the front page was Rachel’s school picture when she was about 16. Inside, there were pictures of the lake and the front of the group home where Rachel lived. The text was short. *Rachel Ginzberg, a 32 year old woman with moderate mental retardation, drowned in the lake at Hillside Park yesterday. Ginzberg was a resident of the Oak Valley Home for Adults, a group home for adults with disabilities. She was on an outing with five other residents of the home and three counselors. She had become separated from the group while taking a walk. When the counselors learned that she was missing, they called 911 and searched for her. An hour later, police found her in the lake. A jogger, who refused to give his name, recalled seeing her running through the park crying hysterically. He thought she was screaming “A-B” over and over. The counselors refused to be interviewed. An investigation into the incident is pending.*

*A-B.* Abra tried to teach Rachel to read some of the letters of the alphabet, but she could only remember A-B. Sometimes she called Abra A-B, mostly when she wanted Abra to read to her. She loved when Abra read books to her, especially books about baby animals. They would both make the sounds of a kitten, a puppy, and a duckling. Abra said meow. Rachel said something like meow. Abra said arf. Rachel said something like arf. Abra said quack. Rachel said something like quack. Those books always calmed Rachel when she was agitated and nothing else worked. The sight of Abra taking out her books, especially the baby animal books immediately sedated Rachel. She might have been a great reader had she been born with 100 more IQ points.

Why had she called out for Abra in her final moments? Did she still remember Abra after 16 years? Did she think that Abra would somehow materialize from behind the trees and carry her off to safety? Why had she gone into the lake? She didn’t even like to take a bath so why had she gone into a huge bathtub? What went through that poor lost child’s head those last minutes of her life? How did she get into the deep water in the lake? When Abra thought of Rachel’s hysteria and frantic searching, she was weakened with feelings of pity.

She continued reading. *Ginzberg is survived by her parents, Jacob and Miriam Ginzberg of 3457 Seaview Rd in Brooklyn and a brother, Noah, 31, of the Wakefield Home for Adults in Queens. The funeral will be held at the Goldstein and Simms Funeral Home in Queens on*

*Thursday.* No mention of Abra. Her parents didn't even think of adding her name. She was no longer part of the Ginzberg family. She shouldn't have been surprised. She deserted them 16 years ago, and they accepted it. They had no choice. What did they think of Abra after all these years? Did they put her out of their minds just as Abra had put them out of her mind?

After reading the article several times, she knew that she had to go to New York. She had to have some closure on what happened. She had placed her family in an isolation chamber in her brain. Weeks would go by without Abra ever thinking of them. But now, she had to know what had happened to her family over the past 16 years. Her mind went into action mode as she mentally listed all the things she had to do in the next few minutes. This is what she did best – organize, systematize, prioritize. First, she called Beth, her college roommate, who was also attending the Charleston meeting. She wasn't answering her cell so she was probably with a client. She left a message saying that something had come up and that she would be arriving on Thursday, instead of Wednesday. She told her that they would still have time to stay up late and talk as they downed glass after glass of pinot grigio. Beth was Abra's closest friend even though they only saw each other at professional meetings and some holidays. Their friendship dated back to the first day of college when they had been randomly paired as roommates. Beth, too, had chosen a career as a psychologist. She was married and had a 5 year old son. Even though she and Abra loved each other dearly, Beth didn't have much time for Abra. Her existence centered around her work and family. Abra's existence centered around her work and keeping vigil over her buried memories.

Abra went to the US Air gate and changed her ticket for a Thursday afternoon flight from New York to Charleston. The changes would cost a fortune, but she couldn't think about money right now. Then she went to the US Air shuttle gate and bought a ticket for the next plane to La Guardia. She called the Marriott in midtown Manhattan where she had occasionally stayed when she attended professional meetings in the past and made a reservation for that night at a rate that would have made Shylock shout "usury." Then she called the Charleston Marriott to cancel her Wednesday night stay.

On the shuttle, she closed her mind to all the memories that were trying to escape from the isolation chamber where they had been quarantined. She took out her book of New York Times crossword puzzles and solved page after page at a faster than usual clip. She shut out her surroundings and focused on the pages of black and white squares. She was trying to fight off the images of the past that were trying to invade her consciousness. She knew that the images always fluttered around her subconscious, but she worked hard at keeping them on the outskirts of immediate awareness. She smiled faintly when she had to come up with a 9 letter word for AWOL: d-e-s-e-r-t-i-o-n.

When she arrived in New York, she took the shuttle to midtown and then a cab to her hotel. She loved staying at the midtown Marriott because of its location. Being in the middle of the bustle of the city made it possible for her walk out of the hotel and stand in the center of



Times Square below the shimmering images projected on the bordering buildings. The whole world was pictured on those signs – the Lion King, Smirnov vodka, and Calvin Klein undies. She especially loved nights in Times Square – there was no darkness, just bright, pulsating lights. On this trip, she wouldn't get a chance to walk down to the village and sit in Washington Square. Nor would she be able to walk to Central Park and see the zoo as an adult, something she had never done as a child. She was going to Queens. That wasn't New York City; that was hell. Although she had been to the city many times over the last 16 years, she had never considered crossing the river to Queens. To her, Queens was as far from Manhattan as Australia.

When she got to her room, she checked her laptop for the address and phone number of the funeral home. She called for specifics about the funeral. It was at 10 o'clock on Thursday. Then she checked the conference program. She would only miss the opening dinner and keynote speech. She could still get the 2 days of training that she needed for certification to use the tests. She had planned to get to the conference a day early so that she could visit the school where she had interned eight years earlier. She was glad that she was flying home on Sunday. At least, that would give her time to see her friends, the Nelsons, and walk through the charming streets of Charleston. She would transport herself to other times... to the days of the Civil War and the Revolution. She would hear Porgy and Bess singing or the guns of Fort Sumter introducing the Civil War. This was a perfect city for Abra to forget the here-and-now and transport herself to the past, to romanticized times that were made real for her in books and movies. She envisioned herself in a hoop skirt holding a parasol as she strolled the cobblestone streets. Sometimes her dress and parasol were a vivid blue, sometimes a bright yellow. Her blond hair was in ringlets covered by a bonnet. Her full face covered with freckles and her lips sparkling with a light coating of pink lipstick. Smiling coyly up at Rhett Butler and fluttering her pale blue eyes. Yeah – sure. Jewish Abra Berg walking in a hoop skirt in Charleston in 1860.

She certainly wasn't wearing a hoop skirt now. She was outfitted in a professional uniform of a beige linen pant suit with a white silk blouse and three inch spiked taupe sandals. Her jewelry was limited to a gold chain around her neck and pearl studs in her ears. No blond ringlets for her. Her jet black straight hair looked like it had been ironed. Since the age of 18, she had worn the same hair style, cut shoulder length straight across. She wore the Veronica Lake look with the hair falling over her left eye, except when she was at work and used a barrette to keep her hair behind her ear. Her black eyes appeared even blacker because the whites of her eyes looked bleached with no tinges of gray or pink. To accentuate her large black eyes and long lashes, she used a black liner on her upper and lower lids and thick mascara. The whites of her large eyes and the bright red lipstick she wore gave her a vivid Technicolor look. She never had freckles, not with her dark complexion. When she tanned, she looked like the many immigrants of color from all points of the globe. She didn't have a round

face. She had the Ginzberg long horse face. She, Rachel, and Noah all had long horse faces, like Jacob. They looked like they were related to English royalty with their world-renown horse faces. The Ginzbergs and their cousin, Prince Charles.

And she certainly wouldn't be looking up at Rhett Butler because with her 3 inch heels, she was 5'10". She probably would be taller than Clark Gable, the true Rhett Butler. He would have to coyly look up to her or she would have to painfully bend her knees to shorten herself.

She emptied her latte and looked through today's Post for more information on the drowning. The paper was filled with pictures of yesterday's gangland killing of a Mafia boss in Little Italy. The drowning was old news, literally and figuratively. There was not much to read in the paper so she found a New York Times. For a few minutes, she was absorbed by articles on what was happening in the world...famines in Africa, coups in Asia, melting ice bergs in Antarctica. Why do they call it news, when there was nothing new about this information? It was the same old stuff. They should call it the olds, not the news.

At about 9:45 a black stretch limo pulled up at the entrance of the funeral home. The funeral home worker ants rushed out to open the limo door. They looked like bugs in their black suits and white shirts and their fluttery, obsequious movements. She had always wondered what kind of personality enjoyed working in the funeral home business. How did they cope with the endless grief of everyone they encountered? Were these people like other professionals – did they make jokes about their clientele? And who was their clientele – the dead or the survivors?

She caught fleeting visions of her family as they exited the limo. She tried to take mental photographs of them, but everything was happening too fast. She couldn't stop them in time. First out was her father. He was as huge as ever, but now his hair was all gray. He was stooped over and looked like a puppet whose master had forgotten to pull up the strings making the puppet flop around. He didn't look like he was 6'3". Next was her mother, covered with a black veil making her invisible. Abra couldn't tell if she had changed. A worker ant brought a wheel chair for her and briskly pushed her through the front door. Then came her brother, Noah. He had put on weight. She remembered him as a skinny, pimply-faced kid. She couldn't see his face clearly so she didn't know if he was still pimply. An older woman got out after Noah. She took his arm and assertively guided him in. She must be an aide or a nurse who was there to help Noah cope with the incomprehensible. His sister, Rachel, had died. His sister, Abra, had died 16 years before and now he had no siblings. Although Abra had only fleeting impressions of Jacob, Miriam, and Noah, she knew who they were. She had spent 365 days a year for 18 years knowing them.

They survived these last 16 years without her. Somehow they had been able to find someone to shop and cook and pay the bills. They didn't die without her. Rachel died, but not because Abra left. She died because she was a frightened 32-year old with the intelligence of a four year old. The four year old got lost and panicked. The four year old fell into the lake and

drowned because she couldn't swim. The four year old didn't die because Abra wasn't there even though she called her name. Abra had to keep repeating that to herself to make sure there were no doubts creeping into her mind. She had to make sure that she didn't feel any tinges of guilt about Rachel's death. Even if she hadn't left the family, she wouldn't have been able to save Rachel. She kept repeating that to herself like a Zen mantra. "I couldn't have saved Rachel. I couldn't have saved Rachel. I couldn't have saved Rachel."

She became aware that she wasn't the only one who had come early to watch the funeral. The paparazzi were there. She hadn't noticed them at first because she was totally focused on the family. There were so many of them. They snapped one picture after another as each family member was rushed from the limo to the funeral home. Fortunately, they were kept back by barriers. Otherwise, they would have been in the family's faces. The Ginzberg family was getting their 15 minutes of fame. Tomorrow, she would see these pictures on the front pages of all the New York papers no matter how many Mafia killings there were. New Yorkers, like everyone else, loved to see grief. There were even a few TV reporters standing in front of a barricade with the funeral home in the background. Fortunately, they couldn't get close and thrust microphones in the grieving family's faces and ask "How do you feel?" That had to be the stupidest question in the world. "How do you think we feel after losing a daughter?" But this was just another way our society basks in the grief of others. Maybe it was a superstitious way of saying "If this terrible thing happened to this person, it won't happen to me."

Abra watched as the mourners entered the funeral home. Who were all these people? She was sure that most were here because of the notoriety of the case. There were few surviving relatives. Abra's paternal grandparents were dead. She didn't know about her maternal grandparents. There were many professionals, probably from the social services agencies and group home that governed Rachel's life. There were probably lawyers too, eager to sue the group home and the city for negligence. Maybe, at last, the Ginzberg family would get rich. They would get rich by the newest, most stylish method – wealth by lawsuit.

Abra couldn't keep sitting in Starbucks. Even though no one was watching her, she felt restless. She left and walked to a Barnes and Noble down the street. She leafed through the best sellers without seeing any words. She went to the psychology section to see what the charlatans were telling the masses about having "good psyches" and how to raise "Garrison Keillor children who were all above average." She didn't bother to look through any of the books. She knew the glib advice that poured from TV talk shows and self help books. She frequently had to cope with parents who would challenge her by saying "But Dr. Phil says..."

She walked back to Starbucks and waited for the family to emerge. Slightly before 11, a hearse came from around the back of the funeral home. The family limo lined up behind it. The funeral home ants whisked each family member into the limo as quickly as they had been whisked in an hour earlier. The paparazzi snapped their pictures again. The TV reporters gave their on-the-spot coverage of nothing. The mourners streamed out and got into cars in the

adjoining parking lot. Abra didn't wait for the procession to leave. There was nothing more for her to see. What she witnessed confirmed that her family had survived without her. She walked to the subway station and took a train back to Manhattan. She went to her hotel to collect her suitcase and took a cab to LaGuardia to catch her flight to Charleston. She vowed to never again see any of her family. She vowed to never again see Queens. This was a momentary drop-in that she would never repeat. She couldn't. The pain in her soul was searing, threatening to break through the steel armor she had painstakingly constructed over the last 16 years.

## CHAPTER 2

After a day that seemed like a lifetime, Abra got to Charleston at about 10. She had to change planes in Charlotte, and as usual, there was a delay. When she got off the plane in Charleston, she immediately felt transformed. The heat and humidity of the September night told her that she had clicked her sparkly red shoes and left Oz and now she was in Kansas. Well, not exactly Kansas, especially if you listened to the Southern drawls of the people around her. She felt her body relax and her facial muscles lighten.

She treasured the year that she spent across the river in Wando County serving her school psych internship. When she finished, she would have stayed to work, but she needed money and South Carolina schools were notorious for upholding their Civil War past and paying slave wages. So she opted to work in wealthy Fairfax County, Virginia.

She got a cab and went to the hotel. Fortunately, it was dark and she didn't have to see the belt of poverty and decay surrounding the beautiful historical center of the city. She always felt like closing her eyes when she drove outside of the city center. She didn't want to see the clusters of black men idly standing around drinking booze from paper bags, the scrawny children running without destination, nor the rotting buildings with peeling paint and boarded-up windows. She just wanted to see the restored houses, the upscale, over-priced shops, the aromatic restaurants with their southern cooking, and the sophisticated, well dressed strollers. She didn't want to mar her fantasies of Revolutionary or Civil War Charleston with the realities of slavery, racism, and poverty. Charleston was like her life; it had the ugly part like Abra's first 18 years and it had the lovely part like Abra's last 16 years.

When she got to the hotel, she checked in and got the second key to the room that she and Beth were sharing. They were in room 234. She laughed aloud. That was their dorm room

number at Lee Hall in college. She couldn't believe that Beth had been able to get that room. It couldn't be chance. Abra knocked gently because she wasn't sure if Beth was sleeping. Being away from the demands of a 5 year old was a welcomed respite for Beth so she was probably sleeping or reading.

"Is that you Abra?" Beth croaked sleepily.

Abra followed with a "Yep."

The ever-careful Beth looked through the peephole, unhooked the chain, opened the door, and hugged Abra tightly. It had been almost a year since they had last seen each other, although they were in almost daily contact by e-mail or phone.

Standing before Abra was a sleepy version of the same Beth from 1990. She never changed inside or out. She had the same sturdy athletic build despite birthing a baby and her refusal to do exercise which she thought was a waste of time. She was physically strong, and it showed. She looked like a 1800's farm wife who could easily bale hay, build fences, and carry two buckets of water from the well. Beth had always been plain on the outside. She wore little make-up; her thick light brown hair was cut short in a shag; and she wore washable, durable clothes from J.C. Penny. She hated ironing so her clothes had a slept-in appearance. Wrinkled clothing on some people was fashionable, but on Beth it was just plain wrinkled. But when Beth looked at you, the inside came out. She had an intense stare that seemed to say, "Communicate with me. Share with me. I want to know you." Then there were her eyes, which perpetually twinkled, giving her the appearance of always laughing. And when she did laugh, her eyes almost disappeared.

Beth was a congenital nurturer. She was born to care about others. She unselfishly loved her husband, Tom, and their son, Clay. She loved all the people she worked with at her job as a psychologist in a community mental health agency. And, of course, she loved Abra from the first day they met at Jackson College. Abra didn't know the source of the Beth's wellspring of loving kindness, but she was so thankful that she was a recipient of it. Beth helped to make Abra into the person she had become by introducing her to a happy, beautiful world and showing her how to live in it comfortably. But even Beth didn't know about Abra's past. Now was time for show-and-tell. Abra needed to tell her about the first 18 years of her life and give up the lie that she had no family, except for Miss Benjamin.

Beth said, "I am so wiped out, I can't even talk. I just have to sleep. Clay was up sick all last night so I am totally exhausted. We'll talk every second when we're not absorbing great knowledge. I love you. Damn, you always look gorgeous, even at midnight after traveling all day." They kissed and Beth jumped back into bed and immediately fell back asleep. Abra leisurely unpacked and thought back to August 22, 1990.

Abra had been truly blessed when she was paired with Beth. God, or fate, had sent Beth to guide Abra in her new life. She could distinctly remember every second of that first day when she arrived at college with Miss Benjamin. They had driven the seven hours from New York to

Jackson College in the lovely town of Linz in the center of the historic Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Arriving at Jackson College was like landing a space ship on Mars and being greeted by pumpkin-headed green aliens.

The day started in sticky, cramped Queens and ended in tranquil, bucolic Linz. Miss Benjamin had picked Abra up at 7:00 AM and loaded into her car the three suitcases that contained all the belongings that Abra carried into her new life. Eighteen years of life packed into those three suitcases.

Abra waited at the curb so Miss Benjamin didn't see Abra say good-bye to her family. She didn't see the hysteria, she didn't hear the screaming and sobbing, she didn't feel the wrenching pain of the separation. She didn't witness the cord being cut; she didn't see Abra open the apartment door with a black and white world on one side and enter a Technicolor world on the other side, just like the Wizard of Oz. After they had driven a while, Miss Benjamin gingerly tried to initiate conversation about Abra's departure. "I know it was hard leaving the family. Did your bubbe and zayda help out?"

Abra turned her face to the side window and said, "Oh Miss B., I don't want to talk about it now or ever." Her voice dripped with sadness.

Miss Benjamin, in her ever-supportive way, said, "I understand. We'll talk about it someday when you're ready."

Looking at her reflection in the window, Abra replied, "I'll never be ready. I just want to bury my life up until an hour ago into a bottomless grave."

Abra left her family that day in August and never went back physically, but she went back mentally thousands of times. She would never forget her grandmother holding Rachel on her lap and her grandfather clasping his hands around Noah's chest as she picked up her suitcases and fled. Despite being severely retarded, Rachel and Noah understood what was happening. They knew that Abra was leaving forever. They sensed that their lifeline was disappearing, leaving them to drown. Abra wouldn't be there to comfort them in the middle of the night when they had nightmares with demons created by their stunted imaginations. Abra wouldn't be there to clean them when they vomited or had diarrhea. Abra wouldn't be there to calm them with quiet songs when they were trembling with agitation or fear. They wouldn't hear incomprehensible words from world history and Spanish high school textbooks read by Abra as she did her homework while taking care of them. Abra wouldn't be there to hold them in her arms when the world had been cruel to them. They wouldn't be caressed by Abra as she gently gave them long, soothing strokes and sent the message that they were valuable humans even though God forgot to give them their full ration of brain power.

Abra had chosen Jackson College because of Miss Benjamin, her freshman English teacher. Miss Benjamin had been to Jackson for a conference on English women mystery writers. She thought it was the most ideal school for Abra, unlike Barnard College where she had gone. Barnard in Manhattan was too close to Queens. Jackson's picturesque campus was

nestled in a small town hundreds of miles away in Virginia. When she was at the conference at Jackson, Miss Benjamin became friendly with the head of the English department, Emily Weaver. They shared a passion for English mystery writers, especially Ruth Rendell and P. D. James. After the conference, they communicated frequently and Emily visited Miss Benjamin once when she was in New York. So when Abra and Miss Benjamin were doing college planning for Abra, Jackson came up as an option. Really it wasn't college planning, it was planning a break from the prison that Abra had been locked in for 18 years.

Abra was ranked twentieth in a class of 500, had SAT scores of 1480, and was financially needy so she was a prime candidate for a scholarship. Jackson was upgrading the academic status of its student body because it had so many legacies, students whose family had attended Jackson over the years, but were mediocre, unmotivated students. They also wanted a more diverse student body, and a Jewish student from New York City would add diversity since most of the students were Christians from the mid-Atlantic states. Jackson fit their mutual needs. For Abra, it was far from New York City and her family and a place to re-invent herself. For Jackson, it was a high achieving diverse student.

Abra had never visited Jackson before August 22<sup>nd</sup>. She couldn't get away from her family for a few days so she applied by mail and interviewed by phone and videotape. When they drove onto the campus, Abra couldn't catch her breath. This was her dream come true. An idyllic college campus with students lying in the grass reading books and chatting or leisurely walking on the paths, not on the grass. Everyone was white and well dressed. There were no crowds. There was no noise. There were no raised voices. There were no smells of fried food and bus diesel. There was grass, not grass, but acres and acres of lawn. It wasn't grass like a park, it was grass like the Earth's skin.

When they arrived at Jackson, they drove to Lee Hall, Abra's new home. The dorm looked majestic to her. The gray stone exterior and the white columns looked like a movie set plantation. There were even white rockers on the porch. As they climbed the steps, they were greeted by a freshman advisor with a yellow smiley face name tag with Laura ornately scripted on it. She was a pretty, blond sophomore from Richmond who spoke with a drawl and exuded Southern charm from every pore. She was dressed in a pink sleeveless top and plaid shorts and wore white sneakers with no socks. Around her neck she wore a thin gold chain and in her ears were pearl studs. Abra studied her clothing. Someday she wanted to look just like her. Now she was wearing a navy polo shirt, jeans, and sneakers with thick athletic socks. Her bubble told her that she always had to wear socks so her feet wouldn't sweat. And she wore her only jewelry, gold hoops that Miss Benjamin had given her for graduation. The high school graduation ring that her grandparents bought her was left in Queens along with the high school yearbook documenting Abra's accomplishments.

Laura turned away to greet another freshman and her parents. Abra didn't look at the girl, she examined the parents. They were so attractive and exuberant. They shared their daughter's



excitement of going to college. The father was wearing a pink polo shirt and plaid shorts, a plaid much like Laura's shorts. Abra had never seen a man wear pink before. She couldn't imagine any male on 17<sup>th</sup> Street wearing pink. It would be like an announcement that he was gay. The mother was wearing mauve Capri pants and a matching top. Abra looked at Miss Benjamin. She was short, maybe 5'1", and stout. The words fire hydrant always came to mind when she looked at Miss Benjamin's figure. She was wearing a denim skirt with a bright flowered shirt along with her wedgies. But what made Miss Benjamin so different from the parents was her face. Her face was pudgy and she had jowls that moved whenever she did. She had brown spots randomly splattered on her cheeks. Her black eyes were buried behind thick frameless glasses. She looked so foreign when compared to the people around her. Not foreign like a foreign country, but foreign like a different culture. She certainly looked Jewish. But as Abra looked at Miss Benjamin, she saw that she was completely comfortable with herself. She smiled warmly at everyone. She didn't know she was foreign. She felt that she fit in wherever she was. She probably thought that she was attractive and stylish. What a woman! Abra hoped that someday she would feel as comfortable with herself as Miss Benjamin.

"Hi y'all. I'm Laura. Welcome to Jackson and welcome to Lee Hall, your home away from home." Abra was afraid to talk. Her vocal cords were frozen. Her New York accent sounded coarse next to Laura's accent. Laura had a high pitched, feminine voice while Abra had a deep, almost masculine voice.

"Hi Laura, I'm Abra Ginzberg. I'm so glad to be here." Abra, who at Knox High School was the commander of the English language sounded like an aphasic groping for the right words.

Before Laura could act on the assumption that Miss Benjamin was Abra's mother, Miss Benjamin interjected, "Hi Laura. I'm Edith Benjamin, Abra's cousin. I drove her down and I'll be helping her get settled."

Laura accepted this explanation as if it were usual for someone other than parents to bring a freshman to campus, especially at an old Southern school like Jackson. Laura consulted the list on her clipboard and said that Abra would be in room 234 with Beth King. Abra already knew her roommate's name. During the summer, she received a letter from the housing office with Beth's name, address, and phone number. When Abra phoned, Beth's mother told her that Beth was spending the summer in England and wouldn't be back until a few days before school started. Abra was apprehensive about meeting Beth. She imagined that she would be gorgeous and sophisticated. She knew that Beth would look at Abra with disappointment. She was unlucky enough to be stuck with a Jew from New York who was really a rube without any culture. She would probably ask to be moved to another room so that she could have a better roommate.

Laura said that Beth had arrived earlier in the day. She gave Abra directions to the room. "Abra honey, I'm sorry I can't take you to the room, but I'm the greeter and I have to wait here.

I'll see you at our freshmen meeting tonight at 8 in the lounge. Oh Abra, you're going to love Jackson and I think there are a lot of guys who are going to love having you here. You're so gorgeous!!" She gushed the compliment as if it were a well-known fact. It sounded so genuine. No one had ever called Abra gorgeous before. People had talked about how smart she was and how kind she was, but never how she looked. She thought Laura might be visually impaired. And certainly, no one had ever called her honey. Most assuredly, she was in the South now.

With hammering heart and sweat-soaked palms, Abra walked to room 234. She was filled with the apprehension that all college freshmen feel upon meeting their new roommate, but more. She was filled with anxiety about entering the new world she so wanted to fit into. The door was wide open and there was a girl standing at a bed unpacking her suitcase. When she turned around, Abra noticed that the girl's face was covered with freckles making her look like a child star of a sit-com about the "average" American family. Abra had never met anyone with so many freckles. Freckles were not big in Queens. As soon as she saw Abra, the girl's twinkling blue eyes exploded and she ran at Abra and hugged her tightly. "I'm thrilled to meet you. It's Abra with the long a – right? What a unique name. Not like plain old Beth." She immediately started chattering. Beth was a congenital marathon talker. She never let silences slip into a conversation. She pointed out the furniture arrangement and showed how they would split everything in half.

"This bed, dresser, and desk are yours. Can you believe there's only one arm chair. We'll have to take turns sitting on each other's lap when we want to read." She waited for Abra to smile, and then continued, "I'm glad that we didn't have a chance to get bedspreads and curtains before we got here. We need to get a sense of the room before we buy anything. Later this week we'll go down to Penny's. What do you think of yellow sunflowers, like Van Gogh's painting? I hope we can find something like that." She didn't wait for an answer to continue. "We only have this one narrow window with that huge tree blocking out the sun. We need to brighten up the room, but I think our sparkling personalities will do lots to brighten up this place, don't you?" Abra didn't know what Van Gogh's flowers looked like. She was at a loss for what to say.

Fortunately Miss Benjamin came in lugging a suitcase. She gave her usual self introduction. "Hi, I'm Edith Benjamin, Abra's cousin."

Beth hugged her too as she apologized for her parents not being there to meet them. "My folks had to get back for my brother Jeff's baseball game. He's the pitcher on his team and he's in some kind of championship. I don't keep track of all that jock stuff."

Miss Benjamin offered, "I'm staying at the Bates Motel tonight. Well, it's not really the Bates Motel, but it sure does look a bit spooky. Anyhow, I'd love to have you join Abra and me for a last supper."

Beth answered, "I'd be absolutely elated. I hate the thought of being alone on my first night at college." Beth always used the superlative. That was her approach to life: enjoy, find the positive wherever it may lurk, and love to the utmost.

Miss Benjamin left to check into the motel and said that she would pick them up at 6:00 for dinner at a local steak house.

Abra, the ever-compulsive law abider, said, "We have to be back by 8. We can't be late for our first meeting."

Miss Benjamin gave her a knowing look and said with mock annoyance, "Would I make you late for your first meeting?" Abra nervously looked at her knowing that the time was getting near, the time of her emancipation.

She unpacked as she and Beth chatted about the classes that they were taking. As Abra talked, she felt a growing sense of happiness rise in her chest. She never felt happiness before, not even when she gave a speech representing the importance of character at the National Honor Society assembly or her thank you speech when she received two scholarships at the senior awards dinner. She felt this change in her body. She felt lighter. She felt like laughing. But suddenly she started to cry, to sob in uncontrollable spasms. Tears flooded her cheeks. Snot ran out of her nose. She was leaking fluids from all parts of her face.

Beth immediately hugged her. "Abra, don't cry. I understand how you must feel. You're sad and lonely being so far from New York. You're probably thinking why on earth did I pick this God-forsaken little college in the middle of nowhere USA."

How wrong Beth was! She was crying because she was being freed from incarceration, but she couldn't tell Beth. She couldn't tell anyone. Her tears were washing away her past and she was feeling pure exhilaration and eagerness at starting her new life.

They left their unpacking for later, washed up, and then went down to rock on the porch rockers and wait for Miss Benjamin to pick them up. Abra had never sat on a porch before. She knew that she would spend many hours rocking on this porch and looking out at the serene quad. The movement of the chair made Abra feel like a baby being rocked. How appropriate for being born with a new identity.

When Miss Benjamin picked them up, she took pictures of the girls in the rockers and some of just Abra smiling. Then Beth took pictures of Miss Benjamin and Abra. How Abra treasured those pictures, especially the ones showing them hugging. She would look at them thousands of times over the years. They documented this historic day in Abra's life.

At dinner, they had huge steaks. Miss Benjamin joked that this would be the last time that the girls would have real food and that they should get ready for institutional food now that they were being institutionalized. All three women laughed deeply as the seeds of friendship took root. Beth was so accepting of Abra. She didn't ask personal questions. She waited for Abra to volunteer information.

Beth chatted non-stop about England. “I spent the summer with a family in north London. I was the nanny for their two kids. I was the American Mary Poppins. They had lots of dough and we traveled a lot. We went to the Lake District and Scotland. I have a trillion pictures that I’ll bore you with later. It was a life altering experience. I hope you can go to England someday too.” And when Abra went to England three years later, she, too, had a life altering experience.

Miss Benjamin talked about her love of English women mystery writers. “Beth, you’re not the only Anglophile. I’m passionate about English women mystery writers. Have you heard of Dorothy Tey or Ruth Rendell? Of course you haven’t. Why would you? I’m planning to go to England next summer and travel to some of the places these women have written about. I want you to give me names of places you think I should go to. Not many people get to spend two months living and traveling in England.”

Beth steered the conversation to a question about the relationship between Miss Benjamin and Abra. “How are you two related?”

Miss Benjamin explained, “Well we’re distant cousins, but I was also Abra’s freshmen English teacher. Abra’s parents are dead. Abra lived with her grandparents and they couldn’t drive her down so I volunteered.” Abra had trained Miss Benjamin to lie expertly. She was her co-conspirator. She was so good at this role that she would probably have passed a lie detector test. She had never objected to this role even though it must have bothered her to lie when she was basically an honest person. Miss Benjamin knew that she could only be Abra’s parent surrogate on Abra’s terms.

Abra said, “Even though Miss Benjamin’s my cousin, I can’t call her by her first name because she was my teacher. It sounds nutsy, but I just can’t say Edith. I usually call her Miss B.”

Beth said, “Then I’ll call you Miss B too, if that’s ok with you.”

The three smiled as if agreeing not to go near to the real issue, Abra’s family. That was an issue to remain entombed for 16 years.

Like everyone who met Abra, Beth asked about the origin of her name. “Abra, I’ve never heard that name before. Where’d it come from?”

Abra responded with her pat answer. “It’s the female form of Abraham. My parents had biblical names, Jacob and Miriam, and they wanted their first child to be named Abraham. Unfortunately, my gender made that name impossible so they took the first four letters and that’s how I became Abra. I thought I was the only Abra in the world. At least, the only one that I knew of until Miss B introduced me to Abra in John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*.”

When they arrived back at Lee Hall, Beth sensed that Abra wanted to be alone with Miss Benjamin for their good-byes so she hugged Miss Benjamin and told her that she was sure that she would see her again. She was right. She would see her many times over the next 16 years.

Miss Benjamin said that she was going to meet with Emily Weaver the next morning, and then return home. “I’m having breakfast with Dr. Weaver. We may go to England together next summer. Abra, I’m also going to ask her to be available for you if you need any help. I know you don’t want me to do this, but you never know when you’ll need someone locally. I know that you’re worried that I’ll tell her about your family. I won’t.”

There were many times over the next four years that Abra called on Emily Weaver for help. Dr. Weaver became more than a teacher. She, too, became a pillar of support for Abra. Although she never knew the details about Abra’s previous life, she had suspicions that Abra’s simple description of her parents being dead concealed secrets.

Abra looked at Miss Benjamin and said words that she never thought she would say to any human being, “I love you. You’re my savior. Without you, I wouldn’t have a life. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for what you’ve done for me.” Abra never shared emotions. That was not part of the life she had lived. When she told her parents and grandparents that she was going away to college, they said, “We need you. You can’t go.” They didn’t say we love you.

Miss Benjamin couldn’t talk. Her glasses fogged up because of the endless flow of tears. Her jowls shook uncontrollably. Tall, thin Abra hugged short, plump Miss Benjamin. Miss Benjamin tried to talk, but all that came out was “You’re my daughter.”

Abra said, “Oh I so wish you had been my mother these last 18 years.”

### **CHAPTER 3**

Abra’s four years at Jackson College were a time of daily change as she molded herself into the person she dreamed of becoming. Her college life was a hemisphere away from her precollege life. She never dreamed that it would be so easy to go from hell to heaven in a seven hour drive. Abra got up every morning thinking of just one thing – herself. She didn’t think of what she had to do for her parents or Rachel or Noah. She was the center of the universe. And that is the way she wanted her life to be forever. Maybe it was selfish, but she felt that she had paid her dues of selflessness for the last 18 years.

During her freshman year, she wondered about her family daily. Were they eating well? Were they getting their medicines? Were Rachel and Noah doing okay at school? By her sophomore year, she thought of them sporadically and by her junior year, they were almost entirely absent from her daily consciousness. She was amazed at how easy it had been to erase

them from her life. She felt like she had been born at age 18 when she entered Jackson College. She harbored no guilt about banishing her family from her mental life as she had banished them from her physical life. This was what she had to do to survive. She visualized the Ginzberg family as passengers on a sinking ship with one life preserver. Abra slipped into it as she pried off the desperate grasping fingers of Noah, Rachel, Jacob, and Miriam. At the end of her reverie, she calmly watched her family disappear into the icy water.

Abra popped out of bed every morning, alert and ready to savor whatever the day would bring. The girls in the dorm made fun of her suggesting that her perpetually happy mood was attributable to chemical support. She insisted she was on a natural high and good-naturedly offered to take a drug test or have her room searched. Fortunately, Beth was like that too so they became known as the bubbly twins.

Some of the people who knew Abra wondered why she didn't show any sadness about the death of her family, but they usually concluded that she was covering up her real feelings. A few even broached the subject to Beth. Sheila, a girl who lived in the next dorm room, once asked Beth: "Does Abra ever talk about her family?"

Beth responded much the way Abra would have if she had been asked the question. "No. She doesn't like to share her feelings. She's coped with her losses in the past and she's reached a stage of acceptance. She's moving on with her life."

Sheila pursued the subject. "It just seems that sometimes she would show some sadness or negativity. She's just not normal. She's too positive. She's too happy, especially when you consider that her parents are dead and she has no real family except for that fat lady."

"Abra's the most normal person I know. But she's also the most private. She doesn't want people to know about her past and I respect that. You should too." That put an end to any conversations about Abra with Beth. But most people still wondered, only they didn't verbalize their questions to Abra or Beth. Sometimes in late night gossip fests, they conjured up stories about Abra's parents being murdered by a mad killer and Abra being the sole survivor, or Abra's parents being killed in an automobile accident, or Abra's father killing her mother and then committing suicide. A few went so far as to fantasize that Abra killed her parents and did not have to go to jail because she was going to Jackson and it was definitely a penal institution.

What Abra loved most about college was learning. She was the rare student who read all the assignments as well as supplementary readings. Whenever possible, she studied, especially during the late night hours when there was total quiet in the dorm study room. No sounds coming from outside, no sounds from girls talking, and no sounds from girls sleeping. There was never total quiet in Queens, especially on hot summer nights when people kept their windows open searching for a cool breeze. On 17<sup>th</sup> Street, Abra heard the summer night sounds of the city: whizzing window air conditioners, snoring of sleep apniacs, crying of colicky babies, grunts and moans of sexual coupling, and arguments over infidelity or money.

She loved late night studying when she communed with her books. She shut her eyes and concentrated on absorbing knowledge through osmosis. She thrived on words and ideas. She loved writing papers so she could use words that she couldn't use in her everyday speaking vocabulary. She created metaphors like "jaundiced leaves" in a freshman essay on what she liked about Jackson's campus. She would never say jaundiced leaves when dining with her friends over mac and cheese. She would link ideas, find causes, project effects, and identify relationships like an Olympic mental gymnast. She felt her brain cells multiplying as she studied. She loved herself when she studied because learning was what she did best. She wished she could go to college forever.

Some of the girls in the dorm kidded her about being a study machine and obsessed with grades. And indeed she was a study machine and obsessed with grades. Doing well in school had been the exit ramp from the life she despised. Doing well in school was her way of validating herself as a smart person who could achieve whatever she wanted. Being smart differentiated her from her family. She was the mutant in a family of retarded people.

Abra started out as an English major which was a natural for her because of the love of literature instilled in her by Miss Benjamin and her natural talent for writing. But through conversations with Beth about her classes, she became interested in psychology. So she added psych as a second major with the goal of becoming a child psychologist. She thought this would be a good career match for her because she could empathize with children going through painful childhoods. She knew this would entail many years of schooling but it would result in a job which Abra would always need, having no one to lean on for financial support. She figured that there would always be kids with problems so there would always be a need for child psychologists.

During the summer after her junior year, Abra won a grant to study in England for two weeks. She was to study the London locations featured in books by major English writers. Abra didn't know that the money for the grant was donated by Miss Benjamin who established the grant with the understanding that Abra be the first recipient. She never suspected that the grant was funded by a specific donor, let alone Miss Benjamin. Thanks to her parents' generosity, Beth accompanied Abra. After their two weeks in London, they spent another two weeks traveling through England. The life-changing experience that Beth had described that first day they met three years ago became a reality for Abra. In her four weeks in England, Abra had more memorable experiences than she had in her previous 21 years.

Getting her passport was a milestone in Abra's life. Now she had an international identity. She could travel to the ends of the earth...ride a jeep on a safari in Africa, scale the endless steps of the Great Wall of China, or stand at the foot of Ayres Rock in Australia at sunset. Her passport picture showed her joyous anticipation of the places she could go. Her smile was so full, it monopolized most of her face. Who would have thought that she would go from 17<sup>th</sup> Street in Queens to the world? She would see places that the Ginzbergs never heard of, and



even if they had, they wouldn't want to travel to because there would be no bagels and TV soaps.

She had another first with this trip - her first airplane flight. She and Beth flew out of Dulles Airport in Washington on a British Air 747. Beth's parents drove them to the airport and as they approached, Abra gasped at the beauty of Dulles. Its sloping roofs and its beautifully contoured control tower were works of art. Beth told Abra, "Shut your mouth before you catch a fly. What are you going to do when you see Trafalgar Square – swallow a pigeon?"

Abra sat next to the window with her nose glued to the glass. She delighted at the smallest things: the suitcases being loaded, the plane being fueled. As the plane started, her heart pounded, not with fear, but with anticipation. She loved the feel of taking off. The noise of the engines and the gathering speed filled her with elation. She sensed the battle between her body being pulled up by the plane while being pulled down by gravity. Flying was a way of really escaping, not just metaphorically, but actually.

Beth despised flying. She easily got motion sickness so she had taken medication to help her with the ups and downs and shaking, rattling, and rolling. Beth slept much of the way and refused food. Abra kept waking her up to quote from the guidebook on England which she had already read three times. "Beth, wake up. Let's make sure that we rent a boat on the Avon when we go to Stratford. Let's also go to the Swan's Nest. It's over 300 years old. Hey, let's go to Marlowe's Restaurant. It's even older." Beth moaned and uncharacteristically told Abra to fuck off as she burrowed into her pillow and blanket.

The flight was smooth as was the landing, although not to Beth. Abra looked out the window and got her first glimpse of London. Everything was grey, the sky was grey, the buildings were grey, even the streets were grey. How could something so drab be beautiful? The first thing that struck her as she disembarked at Heathrow was the accents. These people really knew how to speak English. They didn't devour the language like New Yorkers. She felt so important when the immigration agent asked what she was going to do in England. She crowed, "I'm going to tour your beautiful country and enjoy every second of it." Conveying complete boredom through his body language, he stamped her passport without looking up. She didn't let his disinterest dampen her enthusiasm. Nothing and no one was going to stop her from having the best time of her life.

The girls got their luggage and took the tube from Heathrow to central London. Abra knew the New York subways well, but the tube was different. It wasn't the cars or the people, it was just the feel of being foreign. During their stay in London, they took the subway often and always chanted "Mind the gap" along with the recorded message as they jumped over the space between the platform and the train. Over the years, "mind the gap" became a signal between them to rekindle memories of their trip.

They got directions for walking to their hotel on Bloomsbury Square. The Virginia Woolf Hotel. They were staying at a hotel in the neighborhood where Virginia Woolf had lived. How

perfect for an English major! Perhaps they would see real writers sitting in the square. How would they know who was a writer? They probably would look intellectual and wear berets and scarves jauntily wrapped around their necks. But, in their two weeks in London, they didn't see anyone like that in the park or for that matter anywhere in the city. The park was filled with old people feeding the birds, students reading textbooks, homeless people in fetal positions sleeping on benches, and nannies wheeling babies in prams. No overt intellectuals.

Beth and Abra shared a tiny room on the top floor with a window overlooking the square. Abra spent every free minute looking out the window when she wasn't sleeping or writing in her journal. They shared a bathroom with the other hotel guests on the top floor. They were used to sharing a bathroom with women at Jackson, but now they were sharing with men. How continental! Because of the secure lock on the door, they never saw men in any compromising positions. They were disappointed that they didn't see any nude or semi-nude men walking back and forth to the bathroom.

Every morning they were served an English breakfast of eggs, tomatoes, and kippers. On the first day, Abra tried everything, but she couldn't do it again. Abra hated fish, and kippers were the ultimate fish. Kippurs were worse than gefilte fish. Warm tomatoes also didn't do anything for her taste buds. And slippery eggs fried in an unknown substance were too hard for Abra to swallow, literally. She missed her Cheerios and cold milk.

Abra hadn't planned on sleeping for the two weeks they were in London, but as soon as she became horizontal she fell asleep. When she awoke six hours later, she was freezing. Although it was July, it was 50 degrees in London. Not only was it cold, it was damp. The type of dampness that makes your bones and internal organs shiver. They had brought rain jackets anticipating London's usual rainy weather, but not sweaters because it had been 90 degrees at home. So their first purchases were heavy sweaters to keep warm. It was so cold for a few nights that they slept with their sweaters over their pajamas. Beth's sweater became especially ratty as it had remnants of pigeon poop from Trafalgar Square that refused to be washed out. After four weeks in England wearing their sweaters, they deposited them in a garbage bin at Heathrow before boarding their plane for home. They had a ceremony as they buried their filthy sweaters with Beth officiating: "We officially put to rest our bulwark against the brutal cold of the British Isles. It kept these two colonists from developing icicles on their titties."

Abra had an extensive list of places she needed to visit for her grant, but she also wanted to see the "big" tourist spots so they went to Buckingham Palace, Parliament, Tower of London, and the British Museum. Abra imagined herself as a character everywhere they visited. At Buckingham she was Princess Di. Obviously, she couldn't imagine herself as stiff Queen Elizabeth, especially since she didn't have a purse; only a backpack and that was hard to hold over her wrist. At the Tower of London, she was Anne Boleyn getting her head lopped off. At the British Museum, she was a shapely model for an Elgin marble Greek goddess with body parts shed over thousands of years.

They went to plays almost every night seeing *Le Mis*, *Miss Saigon*, and the *Merchant of Venice*. They treated themselves to high tea at the Waldorf, the ultimate in British classiness. At home, Abra only drank tea when she had a cold, but in England she daintily sipped tea. At home, it was Lipton's tea bags. In London, it was Fortnum and Mason's Earl Grey. And of course, scones with clotted cream. Years later when she started frequenting Starbucks where scones were sold, she never bought any. She found that she really didn't like the taste of scones, or maybe the taste of American scones. And she certainly wouldn't clot her arteries with appropriately named clotted cream.

Beth had been in contact with the English family with whom she had lived three years earlier. Hugh and Judith Fox and their two children, Frederick now 10 and Vanessa 8, lived in Hampstead Garden Suburb, a neighborhood of old townhouses in North London that Old Forest Hills in Queens was modeled after. What an irony for Abra, she was visiting a neighborhood in London that looked like a neighborhood near where she had lived for 18 years. The Fox's home looked like something out of a 1950 British black-and-white movie. They had a gas fireplace that they used for heat, not decoration, lamps with fringe on the shades, and a kitchen sink with a separate tap for hot and cold water. Abra thought the place was quaint, but not someplace she could live long-term. She was too American; she loved her conveniences.

They spent a Sunday with the Foxes walking through a park, reminiscing about Beth's earlier stay. The weather had at last warmed up and the sun made an uncharacteristic appearance so they had tea at an outdoor café. Abra treasured the experience of actually getting to know Brits and being more than a tourist who just viewed Brits as specimens. They ended the day with a fish and chips meal at a local restaurant. Abra insisted that she loved the fried cod and French fries despite the grease that coated her hands and face.

Before leaving the states, the girls had bought a British Rail pass which enabled them to freely travel through England and Scotland. First, they went to Stratford on Avon and saw *Macbeth* at the Shakespeare Theatre. They respectfully visited Shakespeare's church and Ann Hathaway's house and, of course, the Swan's Nest and the Marlowe's. In the house where Shakespeare was born, they touched the walls in the hope that Shakespeare had also touched them. Despite the hundreds of years of paint and washing, they were sure that their skin could feel Shakespeare's skin. Abra remembered her vow to rent a boat so they got a rowboat and rowed on the Avon as they sang "Row, row your boat." Not exactly a British ditty, but the only boating song they knew.

They traveled through the Lake District visiting villages on scenic lakes. On a warm, cloudless day in Keswick, they hiked 10 miles around Lake Derwentwater. But one of their most memorable experiences of the trip was telling ghost stories in a church cemetery at midnight. They were staying in a student hostel where they met four college kids from New Zealand. One night, one of the boys suggested going to the church graveyard on the path from

their hostel to the lake. It was a clear, crisp night with a full moon, perfect for ghost searches. The kids read the information on the gravestones before picking the ones that they would grace with their backsides. Abra picked the eternal resting place for Abigail Bennett, a two year old child who died in 1826 while Beth picked her mother Sarah who lived for 86 years, a very long time in the 1800's. Sarah had outlived her daughter by 84 years, how sad each of those years must have been for Sarah.

Each of the cemetery haunters took turns telling ghost stories. Abra told the story of the headless horseman. Beth chastised her for not thinking of something original, but she told the Stephen King story of Carrie causing Abra to punch her arm and return an insult about her lack of creativity. Abra could have stayed in the cemetery until daybreak, but the group was suffering from frostbitten toes so they went back to the hostel at about 2:00. As Abra lay in bed that night, she realized that she could never have imagined this night's experience when she was back on 17<sup>th</sup> Street. Unimaginable – the word fit the experience and the word fit her life since she left Queens on August 22, 1990.

After Keswick, they went to Edinburgh where they visited castles and walked the hills. They strolled along Princess Street, first shopping on one side and then sitting on the benches below the castle on the other. On their first day on Princess Street, Abra saw a group of mentally retarded adults with their caregivers. They were looking in the store windows at Jenners Department Store and describing what they saw. "I would like that blue sweater," said a woman with Down's Syndrome speaking with a thick Scotch brogue, while an elderly man with a small, misshapen head, said, "I would like that yellow tie for Christmas." They all smiled as they held hands with each other and the caregivers. They seemed so happy and "normal" for retarded people. Abra turned away because she didn't want thoughts of her family intruding on her happiness. She didn't want to compare Scottish and American retardation.

Just as Abra worked on developing her mind, she worked on developing her social skills. She developed a knack for making people feel comfortable and important. This combined with her warm and bubbly manner made her popular and well liked. Although she had many friends, she and Beth were inseparable. Beth was her true love, not a homosexual love because both girls had no desire for each other physically. They loved each other like sisters, but differently. You don't get to pick your sister. They had picked each other. They were sharing experiences that were molding them into the women they would become and because of this they were intertwined like a latticed climbing vine.

Over the four years of college, Beth twice broached the subject of Abra's family and both times Abra shut her out. One night when they were discussing "deep ideas," Beth asked, "Do you think much about your parents?"

"I just can't talk about that. Please, let's not go there. You know how painful this is for me to talk about."

"I'm sorry. I understand." But she didn't understand. She thought that best friends should share everything, but Abra believed that best friends should share everything except a troubled past.

Another time, the two girls were lying under the stars at Beth's family's beach house when Beth said "Do you think your parents are up there?"

"I try not to think about my parents."

Beth was tempted to ask why not, but she knew that Abra had closed herself off. She was sure that someday Abra would share her secrets, but maybe not until they were old ladies in a nursing home.

Occasionally, Abra talked about her grandparents, especially when she received her monthly letter from them with two crisp ten dollar bills enclosed. She would respond with thank you notes containing a few comments about how school was going or the weather. Abra talked a lot about Miss Benjamin. She had been Abra's family throughout her high school years. Abra had eaten at Miss Benjamin's apartment a number of times and they had gone to the theatre and concerts together. During her four years at Jackson, Abra spent some of her school vacations at Miss Benjamin's when she didn't go to Beth's house or stay in Linz.

Although Abra never talked about her family, Beth gradually disclosed more and more about her own family. Abra looked at the King family as clones of the Brady Bunch. But Beth gradually shared family secrets showing Abra that even the most "normal" family had skeletons in their closets. There were the usual family feuds between Beth's mother and her aunt and the alcoholism of a grandfather, but the King's main issue revolved around Beth's brother Jeff's homosexuality. Jeff, a year younger than Beth, was also at Jackson where he was captain of the baseball team and a track star. He was movie-star good looking and had the body of a gymnast. All the girls on campus lusted after Jeff, and Jeff lusted after all the boys. In his freshman year, Jeff told Beth that he was gay. Beth was not surprised; she had always suspected. It wasn't anything he said or did, maybe it was gadar. He hadn't told his parents because they were devout Christians who believed that homosexuality was sinful. His father who had been athletic all his life could not believe that a jock, like Jeff, could be gay. It would be many years before Jeff would finally tell his parents. When he finally did, his father was dying of cancer. He told Jeff that he had always known in his heart, but couldn't openly acknowledge that his son was gay. The day before he died, he told Jeff that he would love him for eternity and so would God.

As part of developing the woman she was becoming, Abra worked on creating a unique look. She was slowly coming to the realization that she was striking, not cute or pretty, but attractive, someone people took a second look at. With her dark complexion, small upturned nose, large black eyes, tall, trim figure, she was almost beautiful. She wore plain, but expensive, clothes, tee shirts usually in preppy colors with a polo player on her chest. In Queens, she had shopped at stores where she could buy clothes for less than \$10. There never

was money for clothes or jewelry. She was always ashamed of the clothes she wore. Although she still didn't have much money, now she shopped at the Gap and Banana Republic where she bought at huge reductions at the end of the season. Miss Benjamin knew her love of good clothes and gave her generous gift certificates for the Gap for Hannukah and her birthday so she could dress in a manner suited to the person she wanted to project to the world. She loved looking at herself in the mirror, not only for how she looked, but for who she was becoming. Her new outer look complemented her new inner self.

During the school years, Abra was a work study student in the English department and worked for Dr. Weaver. During the summer, she helped the Jackson groundskeepers tend the flower beds. The money that she made combined with her scholarships and loans made it possible for her to get by. As in high school, she worked on the newspaper eventually becoming news editor. Now the events she wrote about in the paper were events that she witnessed firsthand. Dances, lectures, sports. The stuff of college life. In high school, she wrote about these events, but experienced them vicariously. Now she reported them and lived them.

Everyone at Jackson was into some sport so Abra chose running. She had been a great walker on the streets of Queens so now she just went faster. A lot of kids ran to relax, but Abra was never tense. She had no anxiety about her classes or the future. She liked running because of the feeling of freedom. She ran all over campus and then expanded to the streets of the small town and then to the country roads. She was still amazed at seeing cows and chickens on the farms she passed. These were the real animals that she had read about with Rachel. When she saw them, she would make the sounds – moo, quack, oink. She would think of Rachel when she did this and how she would respond to seeing actual animals, not pictures. She would probably cry and cringe with fear. Rachel was afraid of everything new and different, unlike her sister who treasured everything new and different.

Another of Abra's achievements in college was learning to drive. Lots of people in Queens did not drive. They took subways or buses and for special occasions, cabs or private cars. Beth had her own car in their junior year and taught Abra to drive in one easy lesson. Abra pored over the drivers' manual, took the written test and, of course, passed with 100%. When she passed the behind-the-wheel test, she was deliriously happy. She hugged the bored tester who reacted as if he had been sexually attacked. Abra's picture on her driver's license was like her passport picture showing a widely smiling girl ready to see the world in a vehicle driven by her.

Over their four years together, Abra and Beth planned how they would have all the experiences necessary to become worldly women. Now they were seniors and still virgins. They couldn't call themselves worldly women without having experienced sex. They both had dated but hadn't found anyone that they really liked or that they wanted to remember as their first. They were determined to lose their virginity before graduating. Like everything else in their lives, they made careful plans. They investigated going on the pill or getting a diaphragm

or using a condom or using all three. They were careful about their lives and wanted to be sure that they were protected from pregnancy and disease. They were eager for sex, but cautious sex.

Fate looked kindly on Beth's quest for her first sexual experience. She met Tom Newland who would become the love of her life as well as her first and only sex partner. Tom had graduated from a college in Pennsylvania the year before and was now a graduate student at UVA where he was getting a master's degree and state licensure to teach history. He was teaching a freshman history class at Jackson and working as a waiter in a newly opened pizza parlor. Beth and Abra went to try out the pizza and they found Tom. He was built like the wrestler he had been in high school and college. He looked a bit like Beth because he, too, had thick dark blond hair and lots of freckles. They could have passed for siblings, maybe that's why they were immediately attracted to each other. As he served them their pizza and drinks, he flirted with Beth and before they left, Beth agreed to see Tom the following night. After a movie, he took Beth back to his apartment and she had her first sexual experience. In the past she had worried about whether to kiss a guy on the first date, and now she had sex on her first date. Within a week, Beth was madly in love with Tom. She unreservedly extolled the virtues of sex, vividly describing every aspect from Tom removing her clothes to her climaxes. Abra was surprised at her reaction. She was envious. She wanted a fairy tale experience like Beth's. For the first time in her college life she wanted something she couldn't get by planning.

Abra looked at each guy with a different motive. Would he be right as her first? A guy in her psych of personality class was interesting, but she liked his mind, not his body. He was a scarecrow and even though his penis might be the right size, the rest of him was too skeletal. Another guy she ran with had a great body, but was as dumb as a post. He didn't have to make intelligent conversation, but she still she wanted her first to be someone with an IQ over 100. She was worried that she was being too choosy and with the end of the school year fast approaching, she would miss this one major life experience. She didn't want to graduate as a 22 year old virgin.

Tom told the girls about a guy in his grad program who Abra might like. He also knew of Beth and Abra's plan to lose their virginity before graduation. Although Abra didn't like blind dates, she was eager to meet this guy because he might be someone as good as Tom. Rick Carbona from New Jersey turned out to be quite unlike Tom. He was working on a doctorate in history at UVA and was teaching two history classes at Jackson. Abra thought he was okay looking – dark haired, dark skinned, nice features, and muscular build. Two problems – he was short, probably two or three inches shorter than she and from what she could see of his arms and chest where his shirt collar opened, he was covered with thick black body hair. Even his fingers were hairy. She found all that hairiness ape-like.

The four of them went to a beer joint to hear a rock band. Abra didn't pay attention to the band. They could have been playing Beethoven for all she knew. Abra was totally focused on



Rick even when she wasn't talking to him or looking at him. At the end of the evening, Rick asked Abra out for the following Saturday night. All week, she and Beth talked about whether he would be the one.

Abra was obsessed with what she would wear Saturday night and how she would react to what he might do. Should she cooperate if he took off her clothes? Should she initiate sex if he didn't? At Victoria's Secret, she bought a sexy red lace bra and matching bikini pants, very different from her usual white cotton underwear. As she looked at her textbooks, she fantasized scenarios of passionate love making on a sumptuous bed covered with satin sheets with Rick gently removing her beautiful new underwear and commenting, "This bra and panties are gorgeous, just like you." In her fantasies, Rick was hairless.

At last, Saturday night arrived. Abra met Rick in the lobby of her dorm. Her hands were dripping with sweat. She was glad he didn't touch her. He had a VW Beetle that looked like it was new in 1960. He was polite and opened the car door for her. What a great start. They went to Charlottesville where he lived because there was a new restaurant he wanted to try. He said he was a maven on Italian cooking and he wanted to evaluate it. She knew that the real reason they were going to Charlottesville was to be near his apartment. Their dinner at the restaurant was enjoyable. The food was good and Rick was an excellent conversationalist with a biting sense of humor. As they left the restaurant, he said, "Now to my place for dessert." He leered at her and she knew what dessert he was planning. She felt as if she were about to bungee jump off a bridge. There was no turning back.

His apartment was squalid, like that of most grad students. He lived in two rooms in a divided house with multiple apartments. No sumptuous bed with satin sheets – just an unmade single bed pushed against a wall and dirty clothes piled on the floor. As soon as they entered the apartment, he pulled Abra to the sofa and said, "Let's get down to business. Your first time and I'll make it great for you. You'll always remember it."

"How did you know it's my first time?"

"You announced it to Tom and he told me."

He kissed her deeply with his tongue touching her tonsils. Then he pulled her purple polo up and massaged her breasts. Before she could stop him, he had her bra pulled up above her breasts. He hadn't even looked at her lacy new purchase. He was moving so fast. It was as if he had six hands. She was sexually aroused and didn't want him to stop, but she didn't want this to go too fast. She wanted it to be leisurely and romantic and memorable. Before she knew it, he had pulled down her khakis and her lacy bikinis. He spread her legs wide and forced himself into her. With a few deep lunges into her unexplored vagina, he came. Abra looked down and saw that she had bled on his couch. "Geez, I'm sorry. Look what I did to your couch."

Laughing, he said "This old piece of shit. It's been screwed on hundreds of times and has the proof permanently embedded in the material."

She put her clothes back in order and went to the bathroom to wash herself using tissues since there was no washcloth that she could see. It took half a box before the blood was gone. There was only one dirty towel to dry herself. She cringed at the thought of what else had been dried with this rag. She used more tissues to dry herself.

When she got back out, she saw that Rick was asleep in bed. She sat on the couch, far from the bloody remains of her virginity. She was sweaty and disoriented. This was not what she expected. This was a horrible experience. She didn't know what to make of the feelings in her vagina. She felt throbbing pain, but also a tingling that wouldn't stop. She cried silently and dozed off. Sometime later, Rick was pulling her off the couch. "Come on to bed. It's more comfortable." He guided her to the bed and said, "Take off your clothes." She obeyed hoping that this time would be better. He got in bed and immediately got on top of her. With minimal foreplay, he entered her and pumped up and down for what seemed like hours while he grunted. He never looked at her or talked to her. As he was doing this, she looked at him and thought she was coupling with an ape. Finally he came. Then he asked, "Wanna sleep over or go back to Linz?"

Without hesitation, Abra answered, "Let's go back." She needed to get away from him. On the way back he chatted about school and movies while Abra stared out into the darkness wondering what she had done. She didn't feel shame. She felt raging anger at herself for essentially advertising that she was ready for sex with anyone willing and able. Her first sexual encounter was nothing like she dreamed of. It was impersonal, grungy, and mechanical.

When they got to the dorm, he said, "Can I see you next Saturday? I think we could really be good together. It gets better with practice. You'll learn to like it."

Abra told him to call her later in the week, knowing that she never wanted to see him again. When she got to her room, Beth was asleep, but got up as soon as she heard Abra enter. "Tell me all about it. I can't wait to hear what happened."

"I need to take a long bath first. Just let me say that I did not have an evening with satin sheets."

After a long soak in the tub with repeated washings of her vagina, followed by a shower where she washed her hair twice, she put on clean white, cotton underpants and pajamas. She climbed into bed and said, "He acted like an ape and I felt like an animal just screwing and being screwed. Beth, I'm hoping that someday sex will be great, but it has to be with someone I like and not just for the sake of sex. That's not me. Maybe, I shouldn't have been so eager to have every experience before graduating. But now I am a well educated woman who has traveled abroad and who has had sex, albeit not good sex, but sex. I'll tell you the sordid details tomorrow." With that, Abra fell into a deep sleep with no romantic dreams.

Her senior year brought plans for grad school. She was ranked third in the senior class and had high GRE scores so she had no difficulty getting money for grad school. Originally, Beth and Abra were going to go to grad school together. Now Beth was tied to Tom who got a job

teaching high school history outside of Richmond. Beth decided to go to VCU in Richmond so she and Tom could live together until they saved enough money to marry.

Abra decided to go to grad school at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. She had been offered a graduate assistantship that would pay her tuition plus living expenses. She also liked the idea of USC because it was farther from Queens than Virginia. When she went down to meet the faculty and her advisor, she also met Judy Hurley, another new grad student, who asked to room with her. She knew that she would never find another Beth, but Judy seemed friendly and easy going. The fact that she was black was going to give Abra some experiences in cultural diversity which she sorely needed. Her experience with various cultures was limited to New York Jews and Christian Virginians.

During her senior year, Abra legally changed her last name from Ginzberg to Berg. This was her way of officially becoming another person. She changed her school records to Berg and all of her paperwork for grad school was in the name of Berg. She got a new passport with the name Berg even though she wasn't planning on traveling abroad. When she got to South Carolina, she got a driver's license with the name Abra Berg. Now she was completely Abra Berg.

Graduation was a bittersweet day for Abra. She didn't want her life at Jackson with Beth to end, but at the same time she was ready to move on to the next phase of her life. Miss Benjamin came for the weekend festivities. She attended the honors banquet and the graduation ceremony as Abra's family.

After the graduation ceremony, Beth, Tom, Beth's family, Abra, Dr. Weaver, and Miss Benjamin went for lunch at the same steak house where they had eaten on August 22<sup>nd</sup> four years earlier. Miss Benjamin took endless pictures of Abra in her cap and gown and Abra with her arms around everyone else. Years later, Abra would look at these pictures and compare them to the pictures of herself on her first day at Jackson. To her, they were before- and after-pictures. The before-pictures showed her hopeful anticipation at what awaited her at Jackson, and the after-pictures showed her happiness at the person she had created. Others would look at the pictures and only see that Abra wore more makeup and more stylish clothes, but they wouldn't see the real changes inside. The before-pictures showed a girl with four people hovering over her shoulder trying to grab her. The after-pictures showed nothing behind the girl. She was free. She wanted to always remember this day that capped the happiest four years of her life. She wanted to remember the look of complete fulfillment on her face. She had achieved everything she had dreamed of and even things she couldn't have imagined. Unimaginable to Abra Ginzberg of Queens.

Arm in arm, Abra and Beth walked along the quad for the last time. They talked about how their lives would be forever intertwined. Abra told Beth that she would love her for the rest of her life and would even die for her. Beth laughed and knew that she would because she, too, would die for Abra. Beth said "We were soooo lucky to have such happiness. Nothing went

wrong in our lives these last four years, well except for your first sexual experience which was a fiasco. Now we have to expect things to change. As you know better than anybody, life isn't only good things. It's also ugly and sad things. We'll have sickness or death or things go wrong. But I hope we'll always be there for each other whatever happens." And they were.

## CHAPTER 4

Abra and Beth were in training all day at the conference on Friday. They attended sessions during the day and in the evening had supper with Abra's old friends from her USC doctoral program. On Saturday, they continued with training sessions but turned down offers to have dinner. They had made a reservation at Azalea's, one of Abra's favorite Charleston restaurants. Over their first glass of wine, they chatted about the conference, and then Abra moved the conversation to the real reason for their dinner.

"It's time, Beth. At last. It's time for me to tell you about my past. You knew the day would come when I would tell you my secrets. Well, this is the day. I am so sorry that I hid my life from you. I just couldn't tell you all the awful things in my life. Something terrible happened this week. It's why I was late getting here." Once she started her confession, Abra found that words gushed out on their own. She felt like a Catholic sinner at confession.

"My parents aren't dead like I've always told you. I have a brother and a sister or just a brother now. My sister died this week. I saw an article about her in the New York Post when I was at National waiting for my plane to come here so I changed my plans and went to New York to see her funeral, but I didn't actually go to the funeral. I went to get a glimpse at what happened since I left in '90 when I went away to Jackson. I saw my parents and my brother. They didn't see me." She snickered as she said, "I felt like a stalker."

They stopped to eat and chat with the waiter about how good the grouper was, but all that was just a diversion before they could get back to Abra's revelations.

"My parents are alive. My dad's physically disabled. There's something wrong with his back and he's completely bent over. He's been on disability for that forever. He's also what we experts would consider a slow learner, or maybe mildly mental retarded. He can handle everyday mental activities, but not much more. He didn't graduate from high school. He worked as a loader putting newspapers on trucks until his back went out. He was relatively normal when he married my mom." She drew out every syllable in the word "relatively."

As she spoke, she recalled a picture of Jacob lying on the couch. Her memories were often based on photographs she hadn't seen since she left home, but were permanently etched in her mind. She didn't know why her grandmother wanted to record the squalor of the Ginzberg hellhole and its unsmiling occupants. The few photos she took outside the house were of Abra being honored at school ceremonies. There were no pictures of vacations because there were no vacations. There were no pictures of trips to the zoo because there were no trips to the zoo. The family stayed inside and watched TV, except for Abra who stayed inside and studied.

Jacob really was a couch potato. As she recalled pictures of him over the years, she saw how he had grown heavier and more bowed. She always thought of him on that same green tweed sofa. It got so filthy over the years. No one ever thought of getting a new one or re-upholstering it. When it became too badly worn, they covered it with an itchy wool afghan her grandmother had knitted.

Abra remembered that her father often had this blank expression on his face like he was bored. But Abra didn't think he was bored, she thought he didn't have any mental activity going on. When he wasn't watching TV, which was rare, he just stared into space. As she thought of her father, she realized that she had no idea who Jacob Ginzberg was. With all her psychological training, she didn't understand him, probably because she had never wanted to. She didn't want to recognize that her father, the source of half her genes, was mildly mentally retarded.

"Jacob's passion was my mother Miriam. He doted on her like she was a child. He certainly never doted on any of his kids. He ignored us most of the time. I think he was happy that Miriam married him and had sex with him, well at least three times. Although he had trouble walking, he was always serving her meals and helping her with the little cleaning they did. I did most of the cleaning and believe me that wasn't much. The place was a pigsty. Maybe that's why I'm so compulsively clean now. You always made fun of me for cleaning our room all the time. You said college students aren't supposed to clean their rooms. That was true if they came from clean homes. That dorm room was my first clean environment.

Jacob always talked to Miriam about their TV programs. Did she like the new characters on the soaps they watched all day? Did she like what happened on the different sit-coms they watched all night? Did she like the guests on *Geraldo* or *Oprah*? The TV was always on, not as background, but as mental sustenance. They watched everything, even quiz shows where they didn't know the answers or even understand the questions. They followed all the soaps, and knew everyone's life problems on *General Hospital* and *All My Children*. They watched *Oprah* even when she had politicians or authors on discussing concepts they couldn't begin to comprehend. Other than me, no one read a book or a newspaper. No one discussed world events. No one asked me what I studied in school. For them, the world only existed on TV.

Now my mother didn't spend her days and nights sitting on the couch. She sat on a chair at the kitchen table adjoining the living room. That was so she could use the ashtray on the table

as she chain-smoked one cigarette after another while keeping her eyes on the TV. Thanks to her that house was like a smoke-filled bar, enveloping everyone and everything in lung-clogging smoke. I get short of breath just thinking about the air pollution in that small apartment. Even the EPA would declare apartment 2A a toxic environment.

Miriam was definitely retarded. I'd say her IQ was 60 to 70. Her oral language was hard to understand even when you were around her for a long time. She had lots of articulation substitutions and developmentally her language was like a 7 or 8 year old. She also had the tip-toe, forward leaning gait that we see with some forms of neurological impairment. Her brother had the same characteristics so I know that her disability was genetic. He died young. I don't really remember much about him, just the walk. I can't remember his name. Isn't that terrible? He was my uncle and I don't remember his name and I don't care.

I would go for days without talking to Miriam or even looking at her. When we talked, it was about what I had to get at the store or what I had to do for the kids. We never talked about me and my life. Well, I didn't have much of a life. I just had school which I devoured."

She had difficulty picturing her mother even with the photos her grandmother had taken. She tried to stay away from her mother because of the cigarette smoke and because of the disdain she felt toward her. No, she felt blinding hatred toward her. She wasn't sure how her parents felt about her. She thought that maybe her father liked her, but she knew that her mother hated her, probably because she was intimidated by Abra's intelligence. Abra was an alien who was so different from everyone in the family. She knew that they all needed her. They needed Abra like drowning people need a life raft. You don't love a life raft.

What a reverse situation. Most families are made up of normal people with one disabled person. Not Abra's. Her family was made up of disabled people with one normal person. She was the oddity.

"Everyday life in the Ginzberg house was filled with eating and watching TV. When my parents interacted with Rachel and Noah, they screamed. They never talked in a normal tone of voice. They never said kind words to them. They never smiled at them. When they spoke to me they used a normal tone of voice, but I never got kind words or smiles, not even when I brought home perfect report cards.

I know you're thinking how'd they get married. I'm sure their parents arranged it. They wanted them to have companionship in life like everybody else. They knew that they wouldn't be meeting anyone at school or at a bar or at work. They both had menial jobs when they married. My mother's parents were fairly well off and they made a big wedding. I used to look at their wedding album all the time. I couldn't believe these happy people were my parents. My mother looked almost pretty in her frilly, puffy wedding dress and her lacy veil. It was a gaudy wedding dress that you'd see at a Polish or Mexican wedding. My dad looked sorta handsome in his white tux, with tails no less. I suppose everyone looks good in wedding pictures."

She visualized the photos from the album. Were those really her parents? They were dancing and cutting the multi-tiered cake. There was a great photo of Jacob with his foot raised high about to smash the wine glass, the culmination of a Jewish wedding ceremony. Then there was the picture that she looked at most often - the romantic kiss at the end of the ceremony. Tall Jacob held short Miriam in his arms, dipping her back and giving her a juicy kiss. It was like a kiss from an old time movie. She couldn't recall seeing them kiss other than in that picture. The only time she recalled seeing them touch was when they posed for pictures and Jacob put his arm around Miriam.

"They had me first. I developed early in all areas. My grandmother Joyce, my dad's mother, kept a baby album with all my milestones. She was so proud that Jacob and Miriam produced a normal baby. Not only a normal baby, but a smart baby. She talked about how I started to say full sentences when I was just over a year old, how I could count to 20 at age 2. I started to read the very first day of school. I probably would have read before school but there were no books at home for me to read. I always got A's and was on the honor roll. I marvel at how well I did at school without any stimulation at home. We always talk about how kids need to have an educationally supportive home to do well in school. I certainly didn't have an educationally supportive home. No books, no trips to museums, no stimulating conversation, no encouragement to do my best academically. Just people watching TV all the time. How the hell did I do so well in school? How did I become one of the smartest kids in my class? I really can't explain it.

No one from my home ever went to teacher conferences so none of my teachers ever saw my parents. When Rachel and Noah started into the special ed classes, social workers and special ed teachers made home visits. They saw the hellhole where we lived. I'm sure they shared what they saw at the Ginzbergs with the other teachers at school, and I'm sure I was the topic of many discussions in teacher lounges over the years.

I'm a living argument for the nature side in the ever-popular nature-nurture issue. Somehow I got smart genes that made it possible for me to thrive despite my impoverished environment. I must have been a mutation because four of the five Ginzbergs got dirty genes. That's how I think of my family. I got the starched, sparkling clean jeans and they got the dirty wash. Go figure."

She visualized a photo of herself when she was a senior in high school that prompted a vivid recollection. She was standing next to Mr. Boyers, the principal, who was presenting her with a plaque for being editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. She wore a pink sweater set and a long gray skirt, her uniform for all the senior events where she was honored. Her outward expression was always the same, a wide smile. But if you peered into her eyes you would see a confusion of emotions, mostly discomfort and a feeling of not belonging and a need to escape.

She twirled her wine glass and said, "When I was a senior, I was at the awards program and Mr. Boyers, the principal, was making a speech about me. How I was in the top 5% of the



class, had 2 scholarships, and was one of the best editor-in-chiefs that the school newspaper ever had. Of course, my parents weren't there. I wouldn't let them come even if they wanted to. I knew that they would never come to anything at school. That was the place where they failed. That was the place that was totally alien to them. I didn't want them there. I didn't want anybody to see them. God, it would have been so humiliating and shameful if anyone saw them. My grandmother, Joyce, and my grandfather, Hal, were sitting in the front row. They were beaming with pride. My grandfather was fumbling with the camera while my grandmother noisily sobbed away.

Although my face was plastered with a smile, I felt shame. Shame for where I came from and who I was. You're probably thinking that I should have felt pride in overcoming my home life and achieving such success, but I didn't feel pride. I felt shame that I was produced by two defectives. Mr. Boyers was going on and on about how I should feel great pride in my accomplishments. The unspoken message was that I had overcome huge obstacles. Everyone at school knew something about my home situation, but no one ever discussed it with me. Here he was now strongly intimating that I should feel pride in what I had attained considering my terrible home life. I wished he would shut up and just let me be like everyone else. After the presentation, he spoke with me and my grandparents and said that I was an angel for what I did for my family. He just about called me a martyr. I didn't have a choice. I couldn't run away from home then. I had to take care of them, but that didn't make me an angel or a martyr, it made me a slave."

Beth interceded, "No, you're wrong. You could have run away or you could have rebelled. Many kids would have. You could have put your needs first, but you didn't. You were being the good girl, which you've always been Abra. I can't emphasize that enough. You've always done the right thing. You've always been concerned about moral issues. For 18 years you were faced with Sophie's choice, which child to save. For 18 years, you picked Rachel and Noah and after that you picked yourself. There was no good choice. But that was the right choice based on your survival.

You are basically an emotionally strong person, and that was what got you through those 18 years. Other kids with less stability and inner strength would have turned outward by acting out with drugs or sex, or turned inward by becoming depressed or self-destructive. What is so unusual about you is that you were born with high intelligence AND a strong inner core. Your mental health is unbelievable. You don't smoke or drink, well other than an occasional Pinot Grigio. I'm sure you never took pot or drugs, at least not in your four years at Jackson."

Abra commented, "I must be the only 34 year old Ph.D. who never smoked pot. I did get some second-hand pot smoke though. Remember Drew that guy from grad school who showed me good sex? Well, he always smoked pot after we had sex. I suppose I ingested enough from him. Does that count?"

“No, it has to be first-hand. And you’ve never taken psychotropic drugs. No anti-depressant, no anti-anxiety. Even with all your worries about people finding out about your past and you still didn’t need drugs. Have you ever taken anything other than aspirin?”

“Tylenol.”

“ I think you present two aspects of the nature-nurture issue, intelligence and mental health. Genetically, you’re gifted in both. Someone needs to write an article about you, but obviously keeping you anonymous.”

Abra asked the waiter for coffee. Her confession was draining her and she needed some stimulation. “I need to think about what you’re saying. You always see different aspects of things I never considered before.

Let me finish my confession. I need to keep talking or I’ll clam up again. Let me tell you about Rachel and Noah, my secret siblings. I don’t think there were any baby albums for them. I don’t remember seeing any. It must have been apparent early on that they were developmentally delayed. I think everyone realized that Rachel and Noah were clones of Miriam, only cognitively more severe. I really don’t know why they had Noah when it was obvious that Rachel was retarded like my mother. Someone should have had the good sense to tie her tubes after Rachel was born. Since they didn’t have any more kids after Noah, I assume she did have her tubes tied or maybe they didn’t have sex anymore. Who knows? Everyone always says that they can’t imagine their parents having sex. Well no one in their right mind could imagine Jacob and Miriam having sex. I know that people of all cognitive levels have sex drives, but I really never saw any evidence of that in my parents. There was no physical affection between my parents and the kids. But my grandparents were affectionate, but mostly with me. After they retired, they came over every day, except when they went to the race track, and when they came in the front door, they would say, ‘Where’s our kisses Abra?’ And then they would cover me with juicy kisses. When they weren’t looking, I’d wipe the saliva off my face.

They didn’t do this with Rachel and Noah. Maybe because Rachel and Noah didn’t ask for human contact from them, only from me. They were always climbing on my lap and putting their arms around me. Sorta like octopus arms around my neck. I let them do it. Strange, they kissed me most of the time, and once in a while they kissed my grandparents. They didn’t kiss my mother or father.”

In the few pictures of Rachel and Noah as babies that Abra could recall, they were cute. With what she knew about child development now, she could recall the pictures of them with poor head control well past the time when it was normal. She could recall pictures of them sitting and not walking when they had full heads of hair and must have been two or three. She most vividly recalled their school pictures. They always had these goofy smiles showing off their crooked teeth. No braces for these kids even if the family could have afforded it. They were retarded and no one much cared about how they looked.

“My grandparents – my dad’s parents - helped take care of everyone. They lived in the apartment building next door and after they retired, they were always at the house. As I got older, I took on more responsibility. Or really they made me take on more responsibility. You can’t imagine what I had to do as a young child. I must have been 6 or 7 when I was changing Rachel and Noah’s diapers and feeding them. They always had behavior problems so I was always trying to make them sit down and eat or stop throwing things or stop screaming or stop biting. I developed good behavior management skills at an early age. Maybe that’s why I’m so good at working with E.D. kids. As they grew older, their behavior problems got worse, especially at school. There were always social workers and psychologists and teachers coming to the house and telling us the type of behavioral program we had to set up at home so it would be consistent with what was being done at school. I tried to do what they told us, but of course, the rest of the family had no idea what they were to do. They didn’t understand contingencies and reinforcement.

As I grew older, I became more and more responsible for everyone. How I hated coming home from school. I knew I would have to be everyone’s nursemaid. I had friends at school, but I never saw anyone outside of school. I certainly never had a friend over to the house. The few times I went to visit other kids at their homes were painful. I hated seeing how normal people lived. I hated seeing parents running a home instead of a kid. I hated seeing neat, clean apartments. I hated seeing mothers coming home with their arms filled with bags after they shopped.

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade there was a girl named Isadora who tried to get close to me. She had a single mother who was the ultimate hippie as you could probably tell from Isadora’s name. She was named after the dancer Isadora Duncan. Her mother was a wannabe dancer who made her living as a waitress at a popular neighborhood diner so everyone knew her. I went over to their apartment maybe five or six times. It was almost as dirty as ours, but in a beatnik cluttered way. Her mother would show videotapes of Isadora Duncan dancing and we would all dance along. That’s the extent of my dance lessons. I really was a klutz. I still can’t dance.

They knew about my family. I suppose from the neighborhood gossip that her mother picked up at the diner. Her mother tried to get me to talk about my family and was always asking if she could help out in any way. I knew she was trying to be nice, but I couldn’t accept it. There was also another problem. Isadora was boy crazy and was ready for sex at 14. I wasn’t even ready for sex at 22. All she wanted to talk about was boys and sex and all I wanted to talk about was books I read. I had absolutely no interest in boys and sex. I enjoyed reading about sex in books like *East of Eden*, but my interest was vicarious. I really was abnormal for a 14 year old girl. I just couldn’t accept whatever these nice people had to offer. I stopped seeing Isadora and stopped going to her apartment. My only contact with her after that was writing about her when she performed in the high school musicals. I suppose she was good. I don’t know. I never went to any of the musicals.

One of the reasons I did so well at school was that was where I was happiest. I loved school. I loved my teachers. I loved learning. I loved using my brain. I loved the success I achieved there. School was the only place where I got positive reinforcement for who I was and who I was at school was not the same as who I was at home. I think back to how I was always smiling in school. Everyone thought that I was the happiest, sweetest girl, but I was a Jekyll and Hyde girl. At home, I never smiled. No one smiled. I was a robot doing what I had to do.

I never did extra-curricular stuff until high school. I was a good athlete, but couldn't join any teams. I would have loved to have joined Scouts, but that was out of the question. I couldn't go to meetings. My parents also said that we didn't have money for a uniform. My parents and grandparents always said that I was needed at home.

As a freshman, I stood up to my parents for the first time. I insisted that I be allowed to stay after school with the other kids. That was my first step toward leaving home. I worked on the school paper. That became my refuge. I loved the kids on the staff. They talked about intellectual things that I had no idea existed in the real world, like nuclear disarmament, global warming, gay rights. They read *Time* magazine. I thought that was the most intellectual magazine in the world. Every week I would get the most recent issue from the school library and read it from cover to cover. To me, *Time* represented a thinking person's bible. It represented what I wanted to be intellectually. When I was a senior, I became the editor-in-chief of the paper. Those were my happiest memories of high school, bringing out the newspaper every week."

Abra pictured the issues of the newspaper, the *Tribune*. She would read each article over and over. She knew about every event that took place at school. She knew about the football games, track meets, science fairs, and dances, but she never attended any of them. She loved the editorial staff meetings when the kids talked about world affairs or what was happening locally. They introduced her to the world outside of 17<sup>th</sup> Street and York High School.

"As I got older, my grandparents started talking about plans for the future when they were gone. Neither of them had graduated from high school. They had been too poor and had to go to work early on. They wanted me to go to Queens College and become a teacher. To them, that was like going to Harvard and becoming a doctor. Then I could get a good job with lots of time off so I could take care of the family for the rest of our lives. I remember them saying that I had to be responsible for everyone for the rest of my life. They'd say, Abra, you have to be the head of this family when we're dead. I was 14 and they were laying out my life for me all the way to my grave. I knew that I had to escape. I couldn't be shackled to these people and waste my life. I had dreams and they weren't to take care of my family. My dreams were to be an independent professional woman who would wear lovely clothes and travel and have sophisticated friends and live in a lovely apartment. Anything but living at home with the Ginzbergs.

We lived in a big apartment building. Our apartment was in the back of the building. It was U shaped and you had to walk through a long courtyard to get to our front entrance. There was a big hallway with mailboxes and doorbells. You had to be buzzed up, but the door was usually propped open. We lived in 2 F on the second floor. Up 2 flights of unlit stairs on thread-bare carpeting. We had a three bedroom apartment with one bathroom. My parents had one bedroom, Rachel and Noah shared one, and I had a tiny bedroom that was my refuge. The apartment never got any sun. It was always dark. That's how I remember it, dark and crowded with people and furniture. I don't know why we lived on the second floor when my parents couldn't negotiate the stairs. Why didn't they move down to a first floor apartment? Maybe that was one of the reasons they rarely left the apartment.

We lived on my parents' disability checks and money that both sets of grandparents gave us. My mother's parents were rarely around, but they gave us money regularly. They lived in Florida and came up to New York once a year. My dad's parents kept the family going. They worked for the city of New York doing menial jobs. They didn't make much money, but they had job security which to them was the most important thing about a job. My father was an only child and my mother's brother had died so there were no uncles or aunts to help out. It was just our happy little nuclear family with two sets of grandparents.

The kids were in special ed classes and were constantly going to doctors. They had lots of health problems. Rachel was allergic to everything and was covered with rashes and was always sneezing and wheezing. Noah had petit mals and it was hard to find the right meds for him, but eventually they were pretty well controlled. There were always social workers and nurses coming to the house. As I got older, I took on more household responsibilities. I filled out forms, talked to the social workers and psychologists and teachers, and all the people who got us through life. I remember early on reading the psychological and medical reports on Rachel and Noah. My SAT vocabulary improved tremendously from those reports. I learned words like idiopathic, noncompliant, dysfunctional. Words that weren't part of a high school kids' vocabulary.

Ya know, now we have so many kids in the schools who do the same for their parents who don't speak English. We have these little kids going with their parents to the doctor and translating their parents' ailments. I functioned pretty much the same way, only it wasn't because my parents and siblings couldn't speak English. It was because they were too cognitively limited to deal with the outside world. I was the great communicator."

She recalled the looks of condescension, abhorrence, and mostly pity that the outside world gave her when they realized how cognitively impaired her family was. She unsuccessfully tried to forget a particularly humiliating experience she had when she took Miriam to the doctor. Cynical, bitter Dr. Weisberg was the family physician. He was fat and had these bushy gray eyebrows that partially covered his eyes. He reeked of cigarette smoke and had cigarette ashes

scattered across his chest. Even in those days doctors knew that smoking was lethal, but Dr. Weisberg could not heed the advice, “doctor, heal thyself.”

On one of the many trips she made with her mother to Dr. Weisberg, he asked with exasperation, “What’s wrong with her now?” He did not look at Miriam. He never looked at Miriam. He addressed Abra as if she were the parent and Miriam the child.

Abra answered, “She says that it hurts when she pees and sometimes there’s blood in her pee.”

Dr. Weisberg asked, “How frequently does she urinate?”

She translated for her mother, “How often do you pee?”

“A lot.”

Abra said, “But how much?”

Abra couldn’t make Miriam understand that Dr. Weisberg wanted a specific number of times in a time frame. He examined Miriam vaginally while 12 year old Abra cowered in a corner trying to look anywhere but at her mother’s exposed vagina. She recalled the tears trickling down her cheeks and her resolving to stop them so no one would see her shame for Miriam and herself. After poking around, Dr. Weisberg concluded, “It’s probably another bladder infection. Take this cup and have her urinate in it. Then give it to the nurse. I think she gets these bladder infections because she wipes from back to front instead of front to back. She gets shit in her vagina. I’m not sure she even wipes. Teach her how to wipe when she pees. She needs to keep herself cleaner. Tell her to take a bath more often. She’s schmutzik. Like an animal. Fey.” He shook his head as he looked away in disgust. This was a doctor saying that her mother was dirty like an animal. How she despised him. She wanted to scream in his face. “You’re the animal. You’re a doctor. You’re supposed to treat people nicely.” But of course she was silent.

Abra took Miriam to the bathroom and told her to pee in the cup. She couldn’t manage it so Abra held the cup and watched with horror as Miriam’s urine soaked her hands. Abra carefully washed her hands and then used three disinfectant packets to meticulously cleanse every inch of the skin on her hands. She washed the outside of the cup and brought it to the nurse. Teaching her mother how to wipe, that was the depth of humiliation. She couldn’t share this experience with Beth; it was too painful to verbalize this horrific event to anyone.

“My grandparents were training me to run the family when they became infirmed or died. They wanted me to care for my family for the rest of my life. They were always saying, ‘When we die, you have to be responsible for the family. You’re the only one who can do this. When you’re at work, you’ll hire someone to stay in the house to take care of everybody.’ This curse hung over me. I thought of it constantly. I thought of how I would escape. I wanted a life for myself. I didn’t want to be unselfish and devote my life to my family. There’s the word – unselfish. I’m the first to admit that I’m selfish. I put myself before my family. If I hadn’t, I think I would have committed suicide or become a robot, just living day to day without

thinking or feeling anything. My life would have been a waste, a total and complete waste of an existence.”

After the third cup of coffee, Abra said, “I’m all talked out. I can’t talk anymore. Well, what do you think? Do you think I’m a cruel, selfish person for running away from my family, for leaving them to fend for themselves? I knew that as long as my grandparents were alive, they would help, but since they died I have no idea who helped them. Obviously they made it. The kids were in group homes so they weren’t with Jacob and Miriam. Thank God. I noticed that their home address was different. Somehow they moved from Queens to someplace in Brooklyn. I think from the address that they’re near the beach. They made it without me. That at least makes me feel better. It confirms that I made the right decision. Beth, did you suspect any of this? Did you know?”

“Yes. I knew your parents weren’t dead because a number times you referred to them in the present tense. Once at the beach you said my father IS a smoker, not WAS a smoker. Another time you said my mother loves Oprah. She’s God to her. I knew you didn’t want to talk about them so I didn’t challenge you. I so wanted to have you share your past with me. It really hurt that you didn’t.

I had no idea you had a brother and sister. That’s quite a surprise. Abra, your story has changed how I see you and I’m not sure what the picture is. I always looked at you as a woman of mystery. You exuded this sense of the exotic because I knew there were secrets that you had. But let me ask you the obvious question, did you become a psychologist because of all this?”

Abra nodded her head. “I’ve thought about this question for years. Yeah, I’m sure part of the reason I went into psych was because of my family, but there’s more. I suppose I naively thought that I would be able to understand myself if I became a psychologist and more importantly get validation for the decision I made to leave.”

“Did you?”

“Well, I think my training helped me understand myself better, but it hasn’t helped me with the moral issue. That’s a different ballpark. Did I do the right thing then? Should I have done something for them for these past 16 years? I still don’t have convincing answers.”

Beth said, “How about the retardation? Is it genetic? Have you isolated the possible syndrome?”

Abra answered, “It must be genetic. When I learned about genetics in high school, I came to the conclusion that the Ginzberg family had dirty genes. Over the years, I’ve checked into different possible syndromes. I’ve never found one that fits their characteristics. Up to the time I left, there hadn’t been any genetic studies of the family. There may have been some since I left but I seriously doubt it. They wouldn’t understand genetics and would never cooperate with any testing. You know we Jews have lots of genetic glitches like Tay Sachs. But it’s not any of these. Maybe it’s all that inbreeding over the centuries of living in ghettos.”

Beth leaned forward and asked, "The obvious question is have you ever been tested genetically?"

"Never and won't. I will never have kids so it's not an issue."

"Let me psychologize. I think your family history explains why you've never had a lasting relationship with a guy. God only knows, you've had so many chances, but you've always ended a relationship when it got serious. Remember David? He was perfect for you and crazy about you, but you abruptly stopped seeing him. You never really came up with a reason for doing that. Now I know why."

Abra nervously asked, "Do you think less of me now that you know?"

Beth grabbed Abra's hands and held them tightly. "No, I think more of you. I can't imagine living the life you did. I grew up in a happy, loving home so I can't begin to understand what you went through. I have no idea what I would have done, but I think I would have done what you did."

They paid the bill and left the restaurant. It was a warm, starry night so they walked arm in arm along the water at Battery Park. The full moon created trails of rippled water. They looked out at Fort Sumter marveling at the tranquility of this night as compared to a night over a hundred years ago when the Civil War shooting began. They made idle chatter about the weather, the city, Clay's progress in kindergarten, and Beth and Tom's attempts to adopt a child. Suddenly they realized how tired they were and headed back to the hotel. When they returned to their room, Beth said, "Tell me about Miss B. It's funny. I've never been able to call her Edith either."

Abra loved talking about Edith Benjamin because she got her out of F Street. She aided and abetted her escape to the real world. Without her, Abra probably would have remained with the Ginzberg family, at least for a while until she was able to escape on her own.

"Ah - Edith Benjamin - my savior! She was my freshman English teacher. Some of the kids made fun of her because she was unattractive, but the smart kids admired her because she was a charismatic teacher who instilled a love of literature in us. I adored her class and would hang around her whenever I had a chance. She shared special books with me. She introduced me to *Catcher in the Rye* and *East of Eden*. When the first parent-teacher night was approaching, she told me that she was eager to meet my parents and tell them what a fine mind I had. I had never told anyone about my parents although many people knew. I told her they weren't coming. She asked why and I broke down and told her all about my family. She was the only person I opened up to in my first 18 years of life. Come to think of it she's the only person till now that I ever completely opened up to. She became my conspirator in hiding the gory details of my home life. There's lots to tell about wonderful Edith Benjamin, but I'll save it for another time. I 'm worried about her. She has very high blood pressure and medication isn't bringing it down. I talk to her almost every day. She says she's doing fine, but I have to visit her and see for myself.



She still lives in that gorgeous old apartment in Manhattan. Beth, do you remember that wonderful Christmas vacation when we went up to New York City and stayed with her? There was a blizzard and we were snowed in her apartment. New York City was totally paralyzed. We had so much fun with her. Remember that day we stayed in our pajamas all day and tried to read all the titles of the books in her library. The next day we went out in the snow and made angels in the snow in Riverside Park.

We need to find time to talk and talk and talk some time soon. We're both so tired and you have to take off early and I'm having brunch with the Nelsons."

Beth got into her nightgown and jumped into bed. "I have only one other question to ask you. How do you feel about Rachel's death?"

Abra was putting on her sweats and said, "I don't know. It's going to take me a while to process how I feel. I did love her, but I loved myself more than her. I don't know if I feel any grief. I do know I feel relief that one of my wards is no longer haunting me. I should feel guilty about feeling relief, but I don't. More than anything, I feel fear that people will find out about me. That overwhelming fear haunts me more than ever. As you very well know, I'm a secretive person and I don't want my secrets to be made public. I don't want to be outed.

Hopefully, when I come to your place at Thanksgiving we'll find some time to talk about that. I'll use that as my homework assignment. I'll bring Godiva candies and an answer to your question. And maybe by then you'll get a baby. I hope so Beth. You should have lots of babies. You and Tom have so much love to give. I feel terrible that we haven't talked about your adoption plans."

At her last visit with Beth and Tom during the summer, they had disclosed that they couldn't have any more children. They weren't sure why despite all the testing they had subjected themselves to. There was a low sperm count for Tom and lots of fibroid tumors for Beth. But whatever the reasons, they were determined to have more kids. Since none of the modern miracles of medicine were miraculous for them, they were going to adopt. They had registered with different agencies and had been vetted. Now they were waiting for the child who would complete their family.

"There's nothing to talk about right now. We've definitely decided not to do a foreign adoption. We have so many kids who need a home here in America I don't think we have to travel the world to find a kid. We may adopt a biracial or handicapped kid or a biracial and handicapped kid. There are lots available. Nobody wants them. I know you probably don't understand how we could seek out a handicapped kid when you ran away from such kids, but we want to share our love with a kid who others find hard to love."

"Knowing you, I understand. You and Tom are unbelievable people. I could never in a million years do what you're doing but if anyone can, it's you two. Maybe when I see you at Thanksgiving, there will be another Newland in your home. I hope so. Whatever makes it possible for you to love such a kid made it possible for you to love me. I wasn't too different

from a handicapped kid when we met. I was desperately in need of someone to love and teach me about the world. That someone was you. For some lucky kid, that will be you again.”

They kissed goodnight and fell asleep immediately.

## CHAPTER 5

Beth and Abra popped out of bed at 6 AM, much as they had done during their four years at Jackson. With a quick shower and a cursory comb through her matted hair, Beth was out the door and in her car by 6:30 eager to drive home to Richmond to her beloved Tim and Clay. Beth checked out by 7:30 and waited in front of the hotel for Pete Nelson to pick her up. She breathed in the sweet humid morning air as she eyed the still sleeping streets of Charleston littered with Saturday night’s debris.

During her years in South Carolina Abra mastered her profession. In her three years of grad school in Columbia, she learned the content of psychology and during her year internship in Charleston, she applied what she had learned to the real world. She enjoyed her time in Columbia doing what she did best, school. She had a limited social life, except for four months in her second year of grad school when she took a course in sex education from a neighbor. One afternoon as she was studying in her apartment, she responded to a knock at the door to find the guy who lived next door.

“Hi, I’m Drew Ellis. I live next door. I forgot my keys and my roommates are out. Can I use your balcony to get to my place?”

Although Drew looked like 90% of the guys on campus, Abra had noticed him because he always wore a baseball cap backwards. In fact, she silently referred to him as Backwards. He was one of the many college students who wore the college uniform of a tee shirt on a warm day or a sweat shirt on a cold day, jeans, and sloppy sneakers or flip flops.

“Sure, just don’t fall. I can’t afford to be sued.”

Like a trapeze artist, he agilely leaped from her balcony to his and disappeared into his apartment. A few minutes later, he came to her door with two beers as a thank you gift. In the next few hours he told her his whole life story. All he really wanted to do was explore the world, but he promised his mother he would graduate from college so he was biding his time until he graduated in May. After high school, he spent a year backpacking through South America and after his sophomore year, he took a year off to travel through Eastern Europe. He

was a journalism major with aspirations of being a foreign correspondent or a travel writer. Over the following three weeks, he shared his writings of his travels with Abra, who vicariously visited Machu Pichu and canoed up the Amazon. When Drew talked of his adventures, Abra listened to him as if he were Marco Polo sharing his travels in China. One day several weeks after his balcony stunt, he said, “Abra, I really like you. Let’s have sex.”

She laughed. “Just like that? Drew, I like you too, but I’m not sure that we should do it just because we like each other. There are a lot of people I like but I don’t sleep with them. Anyhow, would you believe that this 23 year old only had sex once and it was a fiasco so I’m a bit leery of a second try.”

“Abra, I’m no great lover. I just enjoy sex. Give me a chance and maybe I can get you to enjoy it too.” And he did. For four months before he graduated, they had enjoyable sex. Drew was not planning on attending graduation so when he finished his last final, he came to say good-bye to Abra. He was off to China for another adventure and she was back to her usual life of studying. She would miss his sweetness and the comfort of no-ties sex. He was a true free spirit. She had never known anyone like him before or since. Everyone she met in school and after school was focused on a career and eventual marriage and kids. He had an open-ended future. Over the years, she googled his name to see if he had become a travel writer or a journalist, but she never found any reference to him. He disappeared into the world.

Her year in Charleston was different from her time in Columbia. It was less cerebral and more action filled as she began work as a psychologist, and it was fulfilling as she came to the realization that she had selected the right career. And the year brought deep friendships, with Martha, Pete, and her roommate, Judy.

As Director of Psychological Services for the Wando Schools, Martha Nelson supervised Abra’s school psych internship. She expertly molded Abra’s skills in designing and applying treatment plans for troubled kids and administering and interpreting tests to arrive at diagnoses linked to appropriate services. Pete was an art teacher at Wando High School where Abra was based. Although she would have loved Pete for being Martha’s husband, she learned to love him for being an all-giving husband, father, and friend. It was her first experience having a man, and a married man at that, as a friend.

Martha and Peter looked like they stepped off a page of an ad for living the good life in Sweden, with their thin blond hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and lanky builds. At school, Martha dressed conservatively, but at home she reverted to the hippie garb of her youth. She wore gauzy off-the-shoulder blouses, without a bra, and long multicolored skirts and, of course, Birkenstocks. She held her hair up with amber sticks which stuck out at steep angles and were hazardous to anyone getting too close. Ironically, she was always hugging people who had to avoid being impaled by the sticks. Initially, Abra was intimidated by their Nordic looks and her expectation that they would personify the stereotypical aloof personalities of Scandinavians. But she quickly revised her expectations as she found them to be outgoing and warm.

Martha and Pete were transplants from Iowa. They met in college during their hippie phase. Upon graduating, they married and then spent six months driving through the states, thanks to a small inheritance from Martha's grandmother. When they visited Charleston, they instantly knew they found the place they wanted to call home. So they moved to Columbia where Martha enrolled in the psych program at the University of South Carolina and Pete entered the master of fine arts program. After they finished grad school, they moved to the Charleston area where Martha became a psychologist for the Wando Schools and Pete an art teacher at Wando High School.

While they were in grad school, they often visited Charleston and discovered nearby Sullivan Island, a tiny island that bravely faced the powerful Atlantic Ocean on the east, while being backed up by the calm intracoastal waterway on the west. Coming from the land-locked Midwest, they were enchanted by the expanse of the ocean, the never ending horizon, the fine whiteness of the sand, and the swooping pelicans. All of their spare time was spent exploring the beach that was deserted when the tourists weren't around, and semi-deserted even when the tourists were.

Their love of Sullivan Island was fed not only by its beauty, but its morbid history. The palm-lined streets of Sullivan Island belied its sinister past. This was the drop-off point for slaves on their voyages from Africa to the markets in Charleston. Strewn on the beaches were memories of America's ugly past as despoilers of black lives. To add even more spice to the island's history was the fact that Edgar Allen Poe had been based at an army post there when he was young. He may have even used the island as the prototype for the island in his book, *The Gold Bug*. Edgar Allen Poe, the master of the macabre, cast diabolical shadows on sunny Sullivan Island. And then there was the haunting of the island by the eight crew members of the Hunley, the only submarine used in the Civil War, which sank off the island on its maiden voyage.

Abra was glad to be spending the day with the Nelsons. She wanted to purge herself from last night's painful disclosure to Beth. She knew that eventually she would tell the Nelsons, but today she wanted to forget herself and think only about them and their wonderful shared past. She was disappointed that she wouldn't see their twins who were away at college. Eric was at the University of South Carolina majoring in fraternity and business, while Lisa was at the Savannah School of Art following in her father's footsteps majoring in art.

As Abra waited at the hotel for Pete to pick her up, she thought back to how her life intersected with the Nelson's. Abra and Judy had both obtained internships in the Charleston area, Abra with the Wando Schools and Judy with the Charleston City Schools. They decided that since they had lived together amiably for three years of grad school, they would continue for another year. After her interview with Martha about her responsibilities as an intern, Abra asked if she knew of an apartment that she and Judy might rent. She mentioned that Judy was black and asked if that would be a problem since Abra was well aware of housing

discrimination against blacks in the South, as well as in the North. Martha said, “I own an old house on Sullivan Island not far from my house. It’s not in the best condition, but it’s near the beach and you both could get to work easily. Come see it. And if you don’t like it, it won’t hurt my feelings. And best of all, it’s cheap! And I don’t care if Judy is black or purple as long as she pays the rent. She’s a psychologist so she must be a good person.”

Abra replied, “We’re grad students who’ve lived in a slum the past three years. Anything will be an improvement. And you did say the magic word – cheap.”

The next day Abra and Judy met Martha at the house and they saw that it was a fixer-upper and not much of an improvement over where they had been living for the past three years, but it had one asset – it was one block from the beach. Martha and Peter bought the house for Martha’s father after her mother died. They wanted him near them, but he didn’t like being away from Iowa and his friends. He spent most of his time traveling back to Iowa and never got around to making any of the desperately needed repairs on the house. After a few years, he moved back to Iowa permanently so they had this house which because of its cheap price, they easily rented to tourists in the summers, but was vacant the rest of the year and was perfect for Abra and Judy’s needs.

Abra and Judy spent several weekends cleaning the house, but it really needed a year for the job to be completed. Still they loved the house: its dank smell which resisted all attempts at being neutralized by incense, scented candles, and room deodorizers; its screened porch dotted with holes for free admission of mosquitoes eager to feast on human blood; and its endless parade of cockroaches, or more euphemistically, palmetto bugs, marching through the kitchen, the bathroom, and every spot in the house where they ruled supreme despite constant barrages of bug spray. But most of all they loved the beach which they walked or jogged whenever their tight schedules allowed.

The strong bond between Abra and Martha started with Ella, a student Martha assigned to Abra for counseling. Ella, a Wando High School sophomore, proved to be the most difficult student Abra would work with during her internship. Ella, known as the school slut willing and eager to sleep with anyone, defied authority figures, refused to do school work, was truant, and engaged in self-abusive behavior. Most troubling, she was a cutter.

Abra was surprised when she met Ella. She had read her file and expected a large, loud teen-ager. Instead, she found a tiny, rail-thin girl who looked as if she were in elementary school except for her breast buds which she proudly showed off by not wearing a bra under her tight short tee shirts. She had a pretty face with perfect features, but it appeared clown-like because of the heavy make-up Ella haphazardly applied. Her long, stringy hair covered the multitude of earrings lining both ears. She used her twig-like arms as dart boards for all types of sharp objects. She seemed proud of this self-mutilation and never attempted to cover her arms. When she spoke, her voice was sweet and childlike, but the words she spoke were those of a jaded woman who had seen the worst of life.

Ella came from a poor, dysfunctional home so there was no money for psychiatric help, although there was money for alcohol and drugs. Ella's father was a small time drug dealer and her mother an occasional hooker, but because of her meth addiction she had lost her teeth and was skeletal, making her appealing to only the most sexually desperate. Surprisingly Ella didn't drink or do drugs, perhaps because she knew first-hand the damage these insidious killers wreaked on her parents. Over the last 10 years, Ella had periodically been removed from the home when a parent was arrested or came to the attention of the authorities. She was placed in foster homes that were as dysfunctional as her home and returned to her parents because there was no place else for her.

Abra's newly emerging counseling skills were all that Ella was going to get in the way of psychological help. They met twice a week for talk therapy. No one had ever been interested in Ella before, especially a pretty young woman so Ella lapped up the attention from Abra and opened up about her drug addicted parents and their long history of dependence on welfare and criminal activities. She freely talked about her need for sex and her belief that it would provide a way out of her life with her parents. She said that she was a great fuck and that was why all the guys in school loved her. She bragged that she would do as many as three guys at one time. It was hard to believe that she really thought that these boys loved her, but she had to believe this or she would have to recognize that she was a throw-away sex object. Abra was taken aback by the vivid description of sex that Ella proudly offered, but she was careful to mask her shock and abhorrence. This was her first experience with a kid who was acting out sexually and it was enlightening for Abra who up to this point had "conventional" sex with only Rick and Drew. In their follow-up meeting after Abra's first session with Ella, Martha advised Abra to set limits on the topics and language she allowed Ella to use in their sessions because they were in the school setting. Ella enjoyed describing the one thing she thought she was good at – sex, but reluctantly agreed not to talk about it. She also agreed that she would not use the words, fuck or shit, the most frequently used words in her limited vocabulary.

At their second session, Ella methodically described each of the self inflicted wounds on her arms. "Sticking things in my arms hurts only a little. It's enough to make me not want to hurt myself a lot. Actually, it keeps me from killing myself. Sometimes I think of stabbing a knife into my chest, but instead stick it into my arm It's like I'm a balloon full of air and when I cut myself I let a little of the air out. I don't feel so wound up and tight anymore." She pointed to sores that she made with pins, knives, and needles indicating the different patterns they made. Because she was right handed, her left arm was a patchwork of sores at various stages of scabbing. Abra and Martha had decided that this would be the first area that Abra should focus on. Ella agreed to stop the cutting and signed a contract formalizing her decision. They developed a list of behaviors that Ella would use whenever she felt like hurting herself. The behavior that Ella liked best was screaming all the dirty words she could think of, but only if she was in a private place. If she was in a public place, like school, she was to write these

words down using big letters. Abra told Ella's teachers about this so they would not punish Ella if they found the written profanity. Even if they saw many of the words Ella wrote, they probably wouldn't have been able to read them because of Ella's poor spelling and handwriting, although fuck and shit were always spelled correctly. Abra marveled as the sores on Ella's arm began to fade. Abra and Martha were encouraged at this change in Ella's behavior. They decided to next focus on improving her attendance. Since Abra and Ella had started meeting on Tuesdays and Thursday, Ella had not missed these days of school. Now they targeted the other three days of the week.

Abra was desperate to find something, besides sex, that made Ella feel good. She found that Ella liked only one class - her art class with Pete. Abra talked to Pete and Martha about how they might use art to help Ella. Pete guided Ella as she created watercolor beach scenes. Ella was transformed when she drew. She expressed the passion and pain in her soul with strong bold brush strokes. As she painted, she talked and ranted against her parents and the unfairness of her life. "Why is there such ugliness in my life when there's such beauty in the world? Why can't my life be like the beach – beautiful and quiet? Instead of filthy and disgusting and screwed up. Just like me." Her paintings were fairly good artistically, but what made them special was the emotion she expressed with harsh, vibrant colors.

After eight weeks of counseling, Martha invited Ella and Abra to her home for a Sunday lunch followed by a painting session at the beach with Pete. The house, a block from the beach, was gray shingled and had a wrap-around porch with rockers, Abra's favorite kind of chair. At Jackson, she had rocked on her dorm porch so often she was sure that she had etched permanent ruts on the porch floorboards. In the living room, a ceiling fan constantly circulated overhead blowing the sheer curtains out the windows onto the porch rockers. The living room walls were covered with Pete's oil paintings of the beach and the twins at various stages of their childhood. The private collection of nude drawings of Martha was kept in Martha and Pete's bedroom, away from the eyes of casual visitors.

The breeze from the fan carried the smell of shrimp and pasta that Martha had cooked along with strawberry cobbler made from berries the kids had picked. That mingled with the smell of ground coffee beans made Abra salivate like Pavlov's dog every time she recalled that first meal at the Nelson's.

Abra and Ella were both won over by these warm people and their mushy animals. Here was an example of a loving marriage and happy kids, something Abra hadn't seen in her first 18 years of life or in the families she worked with in her professional training. For the first time, Ella witnessed a happy family. Seeing a happy family in the movies or TV didn't count. That was make-believe. This was real.

After lunch, Pete and Ella took their painting supplies to the beach. Abra and Martha took a long walk while the kids and dogs romped in the ocean. The wet dogs rolled in the sand and covered everyone within five feet with sticky sand that refused to wash off even in the salty

ocean. Ella stopped painting and wildly chased the dogs as they ran in circles. Then she rolled in the sand as she laughed from the depths of her soul, something Abra had never seen her do and maybe she had never done before. After an hour, the artists packed up their supplies and went back to the house so that they could show the others what they had produced. Ella painted a serene ocean with two distant figures walking along the beach, Abra and Martha. She presented it to Abra as a gift for helping her. “Miss Berg, I want you to have this picture because you’ve helped me so much. Thanks for making me feel better.” Abra was overcome with emotion and happiness that she had made a difference in Ella’s life. Here was proof that she had picked the right profession. She was meant to be a helper, a supporter, a nurturer.

Later when Abra drove Ella home, Ella mournfully cried. “That’s the life I want. Miss Berg. I wanna house like Dr. Nelson’s. I want nice furniture. I wanna be with nice people. Help me get away from my family. I need to escape and live a normal life or I’ll die. Can I come and live with you? I could be your kid. You could adopt me. Or I could be your little sister. Please. Please. I’m going to die if I have to stay with those shits. I hate my life. I want a life like those people have.”

Abra was so overcome by this outburst, she couldn’t drive. She pulled over to the side of the road frantically groping for the right words that a good psychologist would use. Here was Ella asking Abra to be her Miss Benjamin. But she couldn’t. She didn’t have the money or the legal support to take Ella. And Ella didn’t have anything that would make her successful even if she did get away. She hadn’t benefited from school so she was poorly educated. She could barely read and write. She probably would have difficulty making it at a community college even if she eventually finished high school. And she didn’t have any job skills. It wouldn’t work even if Abra wanted to do it. But Abra knew where the uncrossable line between being a professional and being a friend began and ended. She also knew the reality of Ella – she couldn’t climb out of her quagmire no matter what Abra might do.

In a quavering voice, Abra said, “Ella, you know I want to help you, but I can’t take you in. I’ll have social services take you away from your parents. They’ll find a good foster home for you. I promise.”

Ella’s voice reeked of bitterness, “Oh yeah, that would really help. Who would want me as a foster child? I’ve been in foster homes a million times since I was a kid. I’ve been screwed and beaten by weirdos and perverts. Forget it. They’d send me to an institution where I’d learn to whore and deal. No, thanks. That’s not what I had in mind. I wish I’d never met you or Nelson. I don’t want to know what’s out there that I can’t have. I don’t want to see you anymore. Let’s go. Take me back to my shithole to see my parents shooting up and fucking. Maybe my father will want to do me. I might be ready for that now.”

Abra was desperate. She couldn’t think of what to do. Frantically, she said, “Wait. Wait. Wait. Let’s talk to Dr. Nelson about this. Let’s see what she can do to help. Ella, I’m just starting out as a psychologist. I don’t know all the options for you. Please let me help you.”



Ella fiercely yelled, “How will you help me? Put me back in the system? Put me on the streets? Take me home or I’ll walk.”

Abra drove the rest of the way to Ella’s trailer silently crying while Ella jiggled up and down as if she were going to explode. Her right hand began gouging her left arm marking the cancellation of the self-mutilation contract. As soon as she stopped at Ella’s trailer, Ella grabbed the painting she had given Abra and tore it up. She glared at Abra as she threw the pieces at her. Then she ran out of Abra’s life forever.

Abra slowly drove back to the Nelsons afraid she would crash because of her blinding tears. When she got to their house, she sat in the car and cried uncontrollably. Cried because she couldn’t help Ella. Cried because of the life Ella was doomed to. Cried because she doubted if she was really going to be a good psychologist after all.

Eric was shooting baskets in the driveway when he noticed Abra. He approached the car and cautiously asked, “Abra, what’s the matter? Come in the house.” Abra couldn’t stop crying so Eric ran into the house for Martha.

Martha came out to the car and got in. “Cry all you want. When you’re finished tell me what happened.”

Abra babbled incoherently, but gradually Martha was able to piece together what had happened in the 30 minutes since she had left. Thirty minutes that changed Abra in so many ways. Martha took Abra’s hand and said, “You’re learning a lesson that I have to keep learning myself. We can’t save the world by ourselves. We can’t give kids like Ella a taste of what life should be like and expect them to change on their own. We need to get a kid like her earlier and get social services involved. She should have been taken from that hellhole permanently a long time ago. She needed special education, therapy, and most of all a supportive home with affection. We gave her a glimpse of what life could be like and she wanted it. Were we foolish to involve her in our lives? Were we right to let her hope? I don’t know. I thought it would help her, especially after you stopped her self-abusive behavior. We’re both do-gooders at heart. We think we can save the world. But we can’t do it alone. We can only do a little bit and if there are enough people who do their little bits together maybe we can save more kids. But Abra, don’t question your ability to be a good psychologist. I’ve worked with so many interns and you’re one of the best. One day you’ll be an outstanding psychologist, but you’ll still lose kids like Ella. It’ll break your heart, but you have to keep going for the kids you can help.”

They talked for two hours. Martha switched from mentor to friend and back again. By the time Abra left, she was calmer, but she still couldn’t accept that there was nothing they could do for Ella. Abra went back to the cottage and told Judy about what had happened and they talked until bedtime. After that, Abra lay in bed and talked to herself. She compared her home to Ella’s. She knew her home was bad, but not compared to Ella’s. There were no drugs or booze or sex in her house. She knew she was so lucky that she had the means to escape, her brains and Miss Benjamin. She felt an overwhelming sadness knowing that Ella would never

escape. She kept whispering into her pillow. “Forgive me Ella. I wanted to help you. I couldn’t take you. Please, please forgive me”

Ella never returned to school. She ran away from home with a boy, also a high school drop-out, who had been in trouble with the law. They moved to Myrtle Beach to live in a cramped trailer with his family. The boy worked construction off and on, not a job that would move Ella out of the poverty she knew so well. Later in the year she had a baby girl. She named her Abra. To the question of why that unusual name, Ella would respond, “It was my friend’s name. My only friend.” Ella was doomed to continue the life of hopelessness that her family had known for generations, but maybe she had dreams for her daughter. Maybe her Abra would make a successful escape.

Abra couldn’t believe the sight before her eyes. Pete drove up in the same Jeep he had for at least 20 years. She threw her suitcase in the back and hugged him tightly. It was so good to see this Viking who was still handsome despite his thinning hair and sprouting potbelly.

Abra opened up with “You still have this death trap”

“I wouldn’t give my beloved Jeep up even if I was offered a million bucks. Well, maybe a million, but not a half million. I thought you’d enjoy being in this since it brings back so many happy memories.”

They drove over the clunky, ancient bridge to Mount Pleasant and then the older, clunkier draw bridge to Sullivan Island. Abra always feared the teetering, creaking bridges from Charleston, but whatever was on the other side made the white knuckle drive worth it.

Before they drove to the house, Pete drove past the cottage where Abra and Judy had lived. The Nelsons had fixed it up and sold it for a sizeable profit. It didn’t look like the same house, it was transformed with new shingles, bright paint, and landscaping. But the memories of that house remained and most of the memories were of Judy. Although Abra and Judy had lived together for three years in grad school, they had not been close. They shared classes and went out together with their school friends. Most of their lives were concentrated on mastering their profession. But that changed in that house on Sullivan Island. They became friends across racial lines, something neither had ever experienced before.

Growing up in a Jewish ghetto in Queens and going to a white school in Virginia, Abra had little contact with blacks. Judy had grown up having little contact with whites, living in the South side black ghetto of Chicago and going to all black elementary and secondary schools. Her mother was a single parent working two jobs to support Judy who attended the University of Illinois at Chicago, her first experience in an integrated school setting. She graduated with a 3.8 GPA and got an assistantship to USC for the graduate psych program. In Columbia, Judy straddled two lives. She was part of the primarily white world of graduate school and life with white Abra. But she found a new black world of well educated people who also went back and forth from white to black. For the first time, she dated white guys. She had never been interested in white guys, but found that many were interested in her honey skin, uncontrollable

bush of kinky hair reluctantly pulled tight in a pony tail, and thin figure accentuated by a protruding butt.

In their year in Charleston, Abra and Judy bonded, in part because they didn't have time for anyone or anything other than work. Walks on the beach were the settings for many conversations on race and identity and dreams. Abra didn't feel any identity problems because of being Jewish, probably because she wasn't religious. Her feelings of being different were based on being from a loveless, dysfunctional home. However, she learned of the tribulations of being black from Judy's descriptions of her students' lives. Abra worked in a predominantly white, middle class school while Judy worked in a totally black, poor, inner city school. Although the schools were only a few miles apart physically, they were continents apart educationally and socially. They contrasted the lives of their students, each learning from the other. They witnessed how race and social class played out in the schools. Although Ella was white, she shared many of the overwhelming problems of blacks, especially generational poverty, the root of much of the evil they saw in their students' lives.

Abra also learned from Judy about a relationship that was totally alien to her, passionate mother-daughter love. Adoring, selfless mother love was something Abra had only read about, but now she witnessed it first-hand. Over their year together, Judy described how her mother, Gale, dedicated her life to making it possible for Judy to realize her dreams. There was no sacrifice Gale wouldn't make for her Judy.

Gale married Marlin, an immigrant from Jamaica who worked two jobs to support his wife and newborn daughter. One night coming home from his second job as a dishwasher in an upscale downtown Chicago restaurant, he was mugged. He was shot dead for the \$10 in his wallet. Judy was 18 months old. She had no memories of her father. She had only her mother's memories of a warm, loving family man and a few pictures of a smiling light skinned man with a head of kinky hair just like Judy's. During the day, Gale worked as a nurse's aide at the University of Chicago hospital and at night she baby sat with children whose mothers worked night jobs. There were always two kids sleeping in Gale's bed and another on a cot, while Gale slept on the couch. She didn't want to work nights because she didn't want to be away from Judy and she was afraid to be out at night. The memory of Marlin being shot as he walked home from the bus haunted her whenever she was out after dark.

Gale was Judy's Miss Benjamin, but more. Gale always said, "You can do anything in this world. You have the brains and the will. I'll do whatever I can to make you the star I know you can be. You are the best!" Over and over Judy heard these words and she absorbed them, knowing her dreams were attainable. As Judy grew, she dreamed of becoming a lawyer and having her mother live with her for the rest of her life so she wouldn't have to work. Judy didn't become a lawyer, but she did become a psychologist and her mother did live with her for the rest of her life.

Abra had never known someone who had lost a loved one to murder. This type of violence was what she saw on TV, but to know someone who was a victim was frightening. Judy talked about the inner city kids she worked with who knew murder on a daily basis. Murder was in the streets and in the houses where bullets were randomly fired into houses killing innocent children watching TV or mothers nursing their babies. This was a world that Abra could only see through Judy's eyes. The kids in Abra's school were involved in some violence at home or with gangs, but never this random mayhem victimizing the black community. They did not live in a state of perpetual fear of being killed for no reason.

Abra and Judy's relationship was capped by the graduation ceremony when they got their doctorates. Neither Abra nor Judy cared much about going to the graduation, but they knew that Miss Benjamin and Gale needed to see the culmination of their years of support and love. On a sweltering day in Columbia, Abra became Dr. Berg and Judy became Dr. Hurley. Miss Benjamin and Gale cheered loudly as their girls received their hoods. They spent an entire afternoon in a coldly air conditioned restaurant reminiscing about the past five years and wondering about their futures, Abra working as a school psychologist and Judy teaching in the psychology department at a state university in Illinois. Both Miss Benjamin and Mrs. Hurley glowed with pride at the finished products they helped mold. Abra and Judy overflowed with gratitude for having such loving people who made their dreams reality. The two older women used Dr. Berg and Dr. Hurley throughout the afternoon. "Pass the salt, Dr. Berg...Dr. Hurley, do you want to order some dessert now?"

Abra ordered wine for everyone so that she could communicate her feelings through toasts. Abra raised her glass and as she looked from Miss Benjamin to Mrs. Hurley, she said, "To two of the greatest ladies who ever lived. To two of the most unselfish women in the world. To the true heroines of life – Edith Benjamin and Gale Hurley."

Abra and Judy had only seen each other three times since graduation, twice at psych conventions and once at Judy's wedding two years after they graduated. Judy had fallen in love with Harold, a geology professor at the university where she was teaching. The fact that Harold was Jamaican like her father was a plus. Judy asked Abra to be her maid of honor and Abra proudly accepted. This was her second time as maid of honor, the first at Beth and Tom's big church wedding in Richmond. This wedding was small with only Mrs. Hurley, Harold's parents from Jamaica, and a few friends they had made at the university. They were married at the university chapel and had a champagne brunch at a nearby outdoor restaurant. It was a glorious day for Judy. All her dreams had been realized – a doctorate, a university teaching job, and a wonderful husband. Two years later they moved to a university in California and the year after that Judy had a baby boy, named Marlin. Her mother moved to California to care for the baby while Judy continued working. Abra kept promising to visit them, but had not gotten around to it yet. Maybe one day. She did want to see another happy family, especially for someone who so deserved happiness. Judy had realized the American dream that was

inconceivable to her black ancestors who were dragged onto Sullivan Island soil hundreds of years ago. Her escape was made possible by a selfless, loving mother.

Abra looked at the Nelson house – it had a fresh coat of paint and a new roof, but it still was the welcoming haven from seven years ago. As Abra entered the front door, Martha ran into her arms. They hugged for a long time, just savoring each other's presence.

Martha said: "Before we start talking and talking, let's eat. Everything is ready to be devoured." Martha had always been a great cook. She believed that cooking was a creative art just like painting and acting. Abra had never been able to develop an interest in cooking, it was just something you did so that you didn't eat TV dinners all the time.

Martha made an egg/cheese casserole, blueberry muffins, home-made strawberry preserves, and delicious strong coffee. The first time Abra had eaten muffins and preserves that Martha made from scratch, she was dumbfounded. How did people get the time to do this? Where did they get the ingredients? Martha didn't even follow recipes. How did she know what to use and how much? Was this some sort of inborn talent, like perfect pitch?

They ate breakfast, cleaned up, and then headed to the beach with the dogs. Abra took off her shoes and walked in the wet sand savoring the feel of the firm and yet soft, shifting sand. Pete walked off with the dogs as he threw sticks for them to fetch. Martha and Abra sat on straw mats holding hands and watching Pete, the dogs, and the ocean.

Abra's plan not to tell Martha about her family dissolved as soon as Abra opened her mouth. She needed to confess to Martha especially, after thinking back to Ella. She used the same words that she had used with Beth the day before. This was going to be her canned speech recited the same way as she made her confession to more and more people.

"Martha, I want to tell you about my secrets. You've always known that I harbored lots of secrets and you've never asked." She started with seeing the newspaper article at National Airport and ended with coming to Charleston a day late.

When she finished, Martha said, "I'm so glad you told me. It puts a lot of things into perspective." She tightly squeezed Abra's hand.

"Are you surprised about my family?"

"No. I knew they weren't dead but I had no idea you had siblings. When you came to my house after the incident with Ella, you said things that made me suspect that they were alive. You're probably not even aware of what you said. You were in such a distraught state. You talked about all the things that Ella would have to do if she ran away. It was obvious you had been through this yourself. You provided too much detail for this to have been a spur of the moment analysis. I was tempted to challenge you, but it wasn't the right time and it never was after that. I knew that someday you'd tell me the truth. But honestly, I'm absolutely shocked by your family. You have such a sharp mind. It's hard to picture you coming from a family of limited intelligence. Pete and I thought that you probably came from a well educated, intellectual family and that you had been abused or there was some trauma in the family that

pushed you away. Other than the incident with Ella, you always were in control and seemed to have so much strength, but maybe not. Maybe there's still a child inside you needing to be nurtured. You never did have a childhood. You were an adult when you should have been taking piano lessons and going to Girls Scouts and sitting on your dad's lap hearing stories about his dreams for you. You missed a lot of life. Maybe that's why you always had a certain expression on your face when I'd see you staring intently at my kids. I suppose it was envy. You wanted a childhood like they were having and you knew that would never happen. Or maybe you were sending them a silent message that they were so lucky to have a loving family, something that was denied you."

As Abra sobbed, she said, "I thought I was so good at covering my past, but obviously not since you and Beth both knew. But you were both so good not to make me tell you until you knew I was ready. And now I'm ready although I have to admit not willingly, only because I have to. I hate for people to know my past. I want to only be Abra Berg, not Abra Ginzberg."

"But you'll always be Abra Ginzberg. You can't make her go away. She'll always be there inside you. You have to learn to build on her, not cover her up."

Pete came back with the dogs and knew that he had missed something significant, but he also knew that Martha would share all with him later. "We'd better move fast or you're going to miss your plane. Let's de-beach and get moving."

They went back to house for a wash-up and then drove to the airport. She hugged each of them closely and said to Martha, "I wish we had more time to talk. I always feel cleansed after I've talked with you. Please email me or call me as you think about what I've told you. I need your thoughts. I need your wisdom."

"I'll be in contact. I'm your friend and always will be. Come back again at Christmas when the kids are here."

"I'll be back."

## CHAPTER 6

The next Monday was the start of another workweek in the carefully-programmed life that Abra had orchestrated. Usually she was up by 5:30 without the aid of NPR, but this morning she was exhausted from the previous week's events and didn't awake until her clock radio went off with the news at 6:00. She showered, ate her orange and cereal, and packed her yogurt,

fruit, veggies, and crackers for lunch. She would go at a non-stop pace until she got home from work and shopping 14 hours later.

During the school year, her life followed the same routine. She went to work at 7:30, ate lunch at her desk, and left at 4:00. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, she saw clients at her friend, Anne's counseling practice. This brought \$300 a week of extra, always needed income. But it also gave her the challenge of helping kids cope with emotional and psychological problems that were tearing at their young lives. This was the reason she went into psych - to help kids meet the challenges of living life, hopefully more effectively than she had done with Ella. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she ran errands and went to the gym where she swam laps or jogged the track so she could lose herself in suspended mental animation, her way of emptying the tension bin.

She headed to Black's Run Elementary School, a school from kindergarten to fifth grade crammed with kids representing the America that was emerging from the recent influx of immigrants from all points of the globe. There were white, middle class, high achieving "American" kids as well as kids from Kurdistan, Honduras, Pakistan, and Vietnam. She was the psychologist assigned to do all testing, counseling, and teacher consultation in the school. She had a heavy work load, on which she thrived.

This morning she had psychological testing scheduled with a socially isolated second grader who was not reading despite intense remedial efforts. After listening to her phone messages, she set up the testing materials and went to get Bailey. She didn't dare look at her e-mail because she knew she had loads of messages that needed immediate responses. She had responded to some of the most critical ones the week before during breaks at the conference, but she had saved the ones that needed consideration and access to her master schedule for her return to work.

She went to the second grade class, asked the teacher for Bailey, and then gave her a warm smile and cheerfully said, "Hello Bailey. I'm Ms. Berg and this morning we're going to do all kinds of interesting, fun things together."

She never used the title Dr. Berg because the children might think she was a medical doctor, possibly even one who would give them dreaded shots. Bailey reacted like most children Abra saw for the first time, she was unresponsive and petrified. Her face was frozen in terror at what this strange lady was going to do to her. When they got to Abra's office, Abra showed her a pop-up book she used as an ice-breaker. She leafed through the Wizard of Oz book and had Bailey put on the green glasses accompanying the book to look at an emerald world. The glasses transformed Bailey. She relaxed and even smiled. Then Abra whacked her with an intelligence test. After a break drinking water and looking through the Alice in Wonderland pop-up book, she did some personality testing. She ended the session with Bailey selecting a sticker and a pencil as reinforcement for being cooperative. Abra walked a very

different child back to her classroom. Bailey squeezed Abra's hand, and said, "I like doing testees with you. Can I come back and do them again tomorrow?"

Abra stifled a smile at Bailey's use of the diminutive for the word test. "Well, not tomorrow, but maybe we'll get together another time. I really liked meeting you Bailey. Thanks for working so hard."

Abra returned to her office to immediately score the tests and record her notes in the child's file. She found that if she waited even a short time to record her impressions and observations, she forgot important behaviors and reactions. She e-mailed the social worker about materials she wanted Bailey's parents to complete when the social worker made a home visit. Then she e-mailed the special education coordinator about the times she could attend a meeting to determine if Bailey was eligible for special education services.

Abra ate her lunch as she tackled the endless e-mails waiting for her attention. At 1:00 she collected the three boys who were in her anger management group. As usual, there were no girls in the anger management group. Girls expressed their anger in ways other than acting out at school, usually with food or sex, as Ella had so clearly demonstrated. The group was on its third session so the three boys knew the procedures. They were forthcoming about the anger problems they had had over the previous week and how they had tried to cope with them. She greeted Barak, a boy growing up as one of six sons in an Arab home, where his anger at females was not considered negative. "Hello Barak. It's good to see you again." Barak expressed anger at his female teachers, talking back to them and challenging their authority. So far he had been cooperative with Abra, not demonstrating the antagonist behaviors he was showing in the classroom to the teacher and especially the paraprofessional.

She greeted Josh, an overweight bully, who physically and verbally harassed smaller kids. "Hi Josh. I see you got a haircut while I was away. You look cool." Abra had met Josh's father, who was also an overweight bully, but he owned a car dealership where his bullying was socially acceptable and profitable.

And finally she acknowledged B.J., who took his anger out by destroying objects, hitting the wall, tearing up school papers, and carving on his desk to vent the anger that built up in him for no apparent reason. He came from a "good" home and no one could find a cause for this anger that would erupt with little or no provocation. "How's my buddy B.J? Did you have a good week?"

The kids shared their experiences, wrote about their feelings, did some role playing, and analyzed their behaviors. After the session, Abra recorded her progress notes for the group and for each of the boys. She felt that the only one who was making progress was B.J. He seemed to be more aware of triggers that set off his anger and to use self-talk to prevent the eruptions. She felt that Barak needed more experience with the culture before he could make any changes, if he ever did. Josh had a perfect role model of bullying behavior, his father, so it would be



unlikely that he would change completely. But for now, Abra hoped to have him substitute words for actions whenever he bullied other kids.

At 3:00, she met with a first grade teacher who was concerned about a child who masturbated in class. They discussed the child's background, factors that might cause the behavior, and a time for Abra to observe the child. At 3:30 she met with Charlie Washington, the principal of Black's Run. How Abra adored Charlie! Although he was in his mid 40's and black, she looked up to him as a father figure and he looked at her in a fatherly way knowing that she was an "orphan." He was a wise, kind man who felt responsible for the kids, teachers, and support staff of his school. If a teacher or parent did not put a child's welfare first, he would let them know in blunt terms. He ran Black's Run as a tight ship and he was the commander. For the past two years his personal life had been under siege because of his wife's battle with cancer. Joan, too, was a principal, but had taken disability leave this year. They had no children and were totally devoted to each other so her cancer was hitting Charlie hard, making his Santa Claus sounding laughter which frequently echoed through the school corridors, sound forced. Abra had offered to become involved in their lives and they had accepted her kindnesses. She helped out when Joan was weak after chemotherapy by cooking meals or driving her to appointments, and keeping her company during the evenings or weekends when Charlie had to be away. They were both members of the Black's Run's teachers' book club. She made sure that Joan read the monthly book, or got it on tape, so she would be prepared for their meetings.

Charlie wanted to see Abra about setting up a support meeting with some of the teachers who had three former students who had committed suicide the first week of school. These three students who were in high school together, had all been problemless, high achieving students while at Black's Run. Abra was sure that Charlie wanted the meeting for himself as well as the teachers.

Then Abra was back at her office to finish off the most important paperwork. She didn't get out at 4:00 as she had hoped, but she did make it out by 5:00, the absolute cut-off for the latest she would stay at work. She had to pace herself and not completely engulf herself in her work. She knew that she could work until 10:00 every night and still not finish everything that needed attention.

She stopped at the supermarket to replenish her empty cabinets and refrigerator. Then she headed to the cleaners to pick up much needed clean work clothes and back home to do laundry and catch up on last week's mail and newspapers. There was no time for the gym today. That would have to wait until Wednesday. As usual, she had a hectic day. That was what she loved, being engaged every possible minute so she didn't think about anything other than her work and her most immediate needs. And being engaged in worthwhile work, doing something that helped kids, that was her anchor. She knew she could never hold a job in business or government like many of her friends. She had to see change in others and know that she was

responsible for the change, even if only in small part. She heard Martha's words echoing in her ears – we can make the world a bit better one child at a time. She was content with her life and didn't want anything or anyone new to complicate it.

Then she was back at her two-bedroom apartment in a large apartment complex near the Beltway and Rte 66 making it relatively easy for her to get around traffic-clogged Fairfax County. Her apartment was on the second floor and had a view of the parking lot and other buildings that differed from hers only in their pastel shade of paint. There was a pool and workout room in the complex, but she never used them, preferring the gym with an indoor pool and more advanced equipment. She knew her neighbors to say hello, but had never established a relationship with any. She was just another anonymous apartment dweller filling the impersonal Monopoly apartment houses of the county.

She had furnished her living room and bedroom with modern furniture from IKEA. The second tiny bedroom was set up as a home office with her all-important laptop. She kept her apartment immaculately clean, dusting and vacuuming every few nights even if there was no need for dusting and vacuuming. She scrubbed her tub, toilet, and sink after every use. She did her laundry every few days. To someone who didn't know Abra, she might seem compulsively clean. To someone who knew Abra Ginzberg and Abra Berg, she might seem to be marking the difference between the dirty life she lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> Street apartment and the immaculate life she now lived in the Sunset Hills apartment complex.

When she went to bed at 11:00, she immediately fell asleep. No thoughts about her trip to New York, her family, her friends. Just sleep with dreams that were irretrievably buried by the time she awoke at 5:30 the next morning.

Her life at school was the same on Tuesday and Thursday, filled with testing, counseling, consulting, meetings, and paperwork. But promptly at 4:00 she left to head over to Developmental Counseling Associates, the counseling practice owned by her friend, Anne Simmons. Anne had been a psychologist with Fairfax County when Abra first started working with the county. She was a single mom with an adopted daughter from China. She wanted more flexibility in her work schedule so she started her own counseling practice which had become successful in affluent Fairfax County. She only hired therapists she knew were competent and caring, and catered to the upper middle class who could afford expensive counseling. Anne charged \$300 per hour and took half toward overhead and commission. She accepted no insurance. She refused to be hampered by the regulations of insurance companies that paid little, limited the amount of counseling, and had no regard for the well-being of the clients. At the end of every school year, Anne asked Abra to work for her full time, but Abra always refused preferring the school setting.

Abra had two clients, on Tuesday she saw Wendy Taylor and on Thursday Sasha Weiss-Parker. Twelve-year-old Wendy attended a private day school for students with learning disabilities where she was doing marginal academic work. Her parents ran a successful

accounting business, and her younger brother, Seth, was intellectually gifted and socially adept. Her parents were eager to have Abra “make” Wendy more like Seth and themselves. That didn’t seem to be a viable option considering Wendy’s low average IQ and diagnosis of Asperger’s, a high level of autism reflected in social interaction problems. Her parents were at work from early morning until after supper so Wendy saw them infrequently. Seth was busy with school and extra-curricular activities so she rarely saw him. The person she saw most was the maid, Consuela, who spoke broken English. But even the time with her was limited since Consuela talked on the phone in Spanish to her friends whenever the Taylors were out of the house, which was most of the time. Most of Wendy’s time was spent alone in her room watching TV, knitting, and doing cross-stitching. She was an isolated child with limited social skills for reaching out to others, and no one to reach out to.

Abra started working with Wendy the previous February. Abra felt that it was important that Wendy develop some interests to fill the time that she spent alone so she taught her to knit and do cross-stitching. Wendy became adept at these and knitted Abra several very long brightly colored scarves and stitched pillow shams and table runners with flowers and puppy dogs. Wendy was so proud of herself. She found something she could do well and everything she knitted or sewed was evidence of her new-found competence. Wendy talked more freely whenever her hands were engaged with needles so Abra encouraged her to knit or cross-stitch during their counseling sessions. She would acknowledge her tenuous position in her home making statements such as “See, I can do something. I’m not a dummy like Seth says,” or “I’m so glad my mother can’t sew. I can do something she can’t. She tried it and got a needle in her finger. It wouldn’t stop bleeding. I laughed and laughed.”

Abra knew that Wendy needed social skill training more than anything, but she couldn’t do that on an individual basis. Wendy needed to learn social skills through practice with other kids. Abra was working with the psychologist at Wendy’s school on setting up a social skills group to help Wendy develop skills to interact with others. So far, this had been unsuccessful because the psychologist did not follow through on arranging group sessions. Abra and Anne had identified a number of clients of Wendy’s age who needed social skills training so that they could offer a group on Saturday mornings. Abra had even agreed to give up her Saturday mornings to lead the group. So far they had been unsuccessful because all the children, except Wendy, were programmed with lessons and activities from early morning to late afternoon.

At their last session together, Abra and Wendy explored the possibility of Wendy taking a baby sitting course at the Y so she could be a companion to a young child after school, while being monitored by the child’s parent who would be at home. Hopefully, this would give Wendy more responsibility and increase her interaction with others. Abra was pleasantly surprised to find that over the two week hiatus, Wendy had enrolled in a baby sitting class at the Y and would start the class the following Saturday. They discussed expectations for the class, especially those involving reading, and how Wendy could meet these considering her low

reading level. Abra asked Wendy to bring the book to the next session so they could work on it together.

Abra and Anne had talked about the need for Wendy's parents to have counseling to arrive at more realistic expectations for Wendy's future. They were becoming increasingly unhappy with Wendy's lack of progress and were blaming her, as if she chose not to do well in school and she chose not to have good social skills. They resisted family counseling, saying the problems were Wendy's, not theirs. But one of their major reasons for not wanting counseling was time. They wouldn't fit counseling into their tight schedules.

After the session, Abra completed a progress report to share with Anne as well as the forms for the all-important billing. As she left the office, she met Anne who was coming to meet with her evening clients. Abra briefly updated her on Wendy. Anne asked Abra if she could take on another case, perhaps on Saturdays. She tried to entice Abra by describing a seven year old Asian child from a high achieving family who lost the spelling bee and stood on his desk holding a scissors threatening to kill himself. Although the child sounded like a challenge, Abra knew her limit. She screamed NO at the top of her lungs, drawing attention from others in the parking lot. Then she smiled widely and hugged Anne. They made a date for lunch on Saturday so they could review Abra's cases and chat about life. Abra hugged Anne again and got in her Honda for a quick ride home, supper, and deep sleep with irretrievable dreams.

Before seeing Sasha on Thursday, Abra reviewed Sasha's file to be ready for this most challenging child. Abra had started with Sasha four weeks earlier. She was 8 years old and an adopted child from Romania. Her files indicated a great deal of previous psychiatric and psychological testing and therapy. Of the many diagnostic labels that had been hung on her, the most intimidating was reactive attachment disorder. Sasha had lived in an orphanage for the first year of life where she was fed with a propped bottle and had limited contact with people. She was adopted by two gay women who were determined to build a loving family, which was difficult with a child like Sasha. She was hard to manage from the first day they brought her to the US. She had eating, sleeping, and behavior problems. Sasha received preschool disability services from the county which improved her behavior somewhat, but she still posed difficult problems. The parents were not able to take her out to eat in a restaurant until she was 7. Now at 8, she was emotionally flat with occasional explosive, violent outbursts. She rejected physical affection. Her mothers so wanted to hold and caress her, but when they tried to hug her, she would stiffen her body transforming herself into a wooden board. She had been placed on a number of different medications, most of which worsened her behavior.

Abra was using play therapy in an attempt to help her establish positive emotional relationships and be responsive to physical contact. Sasha enjoyed playing with Barbie dolls, endlessly dressing and undressing them. But it was difficult for Abra to elicit any language from her. She just wanted to engage in silent play with the dolls. She did not simulate social situations among the dolls nor did she talk to them. Each doll was in a world of her own, just

like Sasha. Abra also used books and story completion tasks to spark discussions with Sasha. Abra read a book about a princess who got lost in the woods and stopped before the ending. Sasha finished the story by saying a policeman found her and brought her back to the castle. It wasn't the most creative response, but it was language and she was being responsive.

Abra had made some progress in the area of physical contact with Sasha. Now when Sasha entered the counseling room, Abra lightly touched each of the doll's shoulders as she greeted them and then she touched Sasha's shoulder as she greeted her. Today, Abra also touched Sasha's and the doll's shoulders as they parted. Sasha did not withdraw.

After the session, Abra spoke with Sasha's moms who said that they, too, were now able to touch Sasha's shoulder without her cringing. Abra suggested moving on to trying to hold her hand in certain situations. These wonderful women were happy with any improvement, no matter how small.

Abra treasured her periodic Saturday lunches with Anne. Here was a 45 year old woman, twice divorced with no biological children, who had found fulfillment in adopting a Chinese girl five years earlier. Anne was an outstanding psychologist full of empathy and knowledge. She seemed to intuitively know what approach to take with the different kinds of problems her clients displayed. She understood herself and knew that she was not a woman for marriage. Her two marriages had failed because she didn't like being married, but she did want a child. She had maternal instincts that demanded satisfaction. She had traveled half way around the world to spend three grueling weeks in China to pick up Mai. The trip was worth it. The last five years had been the happiest of Anne's life. Mai gave meaning and direction to her life. She made her complete.

Anne always brought Mai along to their lunches. Abra marveled at how well behaved the child was. She ate what was given her, even vegetables, played with the toys and books Anne brought, and verbally interacted with them like a little adult. What Abra most loved about watching Anne and Mai together was the affection they showered on each other. When Anne held Mai, the tiny child wrapped her arms and legs around her as if she were climbing a tree. Anne kissed Mai's forehead, cheeks, nose, lips, and chin. Then Mai planted kisses on Anne's forehead, cheeks, nose, lips, and chin. Mai always kissed Abra hello and goodbye, not because she was told to, but because she wanted to. Abra adored Mai and thought that Anne was so lucky to have found such a precious child. But Abra did not envy Anne. She did not want a child, not even one so precious. Usually after these lunches, Abra searched inside herself for any maternal instincts, but couldn't find any. If there had ever been any inside her, they had been destroyed by Miriam.

Abra's weekend life usually involved getting a haircut or a manicure, shopping, going to the gym, and reading. She often went out with others for lunch or dinner, a movie, a concert, or a show. During the summers she traveled with other women or men, one summer to Vancouver, another to Russia, and one Christmas to Hawaii. She tried to combine her travels

with attendance at international professional conferences so she could deduct her expenses from her taxes. She was always discovering ways to save money, something she would always need to do.

Abra had lots of acquaintances who were both male and female, straight and gay, white and non-white, Jewish and non-Jewish, some psychologists, and some other professions. She was an equal opportunity acquaintance. But she didn't have any real friends other than Beth. All her acquaintances were like her, content to be engulfed in their professional lives.

Abra dated occasionally, but usually broke off the relationship before it got to the stage of sex. Over her six years in Fairfax, she had two sexual relationships. One was with Mark, her dentist. She enjoyed his company until he started spouting his right wing rants. He was extremely conservative politically and believed every word Rush Limbaugh uttered. She hated to end the relationship because she had to find a new dentist, and Mark was very good. Her second involvement was with David, her accountant. They enjoyed each other's company and especially enjoyed sex with each other. After four months of dating, David started talking about getting married and having kids. Soon afterwards, Abra ended the relationship. In this case, she hated ending the relationship more because she would miss David than the need to find another accountant.

Abra felt that she was destined to be like Miss Benjamin, an old maid, a spinster, not because she was unattractive like Miss Benjamin, but out of choice. She could never have a relationship like Pete and Martha or Beth and Tim. She didn't feel badly about this. She felt that she had so many good things in her life and that no one was entitled to have everything. She felt like a deaf person who had a fulfilling life even though she would never hear Brubeck or geese honking or a 2 year old giggle. She felt that you can't have everything, but what you could have, could be good. Life could be satisfying without a significant other. She knew that she was independent and didn't need anyone to lean on and she certainly didn't want anyone to lean on her, not after 18 years of having four people lean on her until she was almost crushed into the ground. She was happy being Abra Berg and satisfied with her life as it was. She was especially happy when she thought about what her life would have been like had she stayed Abra Ginzberg.

## CHAPTER 7

Abra desperately needed to talk to Miss Benjamin after the funeral, but she didn't want to call her from Charleston because she needed the privacy of her apartment where she could talk freely. It was too late to call her Sunday night when she got back so as soon as she got home from shopping on Monday, she dialed her number. When she heard Miss Benjamin's voice, she knew she was in her safe zone. "Miss B., did you hear about Rachel?"

"Yes. I saw it in the paper and Adam called to tell me in case I didn't know about it. I called you, but I didn't leave a message because I remembered that you were in Charleston. I was waiting for your call tonight to tell you."

"Do you know any specifics?"

"No. Just what I read in the paper. But Adam is trying to see if he can get details."

"I can't believe the way I found out. On Wednesday, when I was at National waiting for my flight to Charleston, I went to get a paper and my eye was attracted to the picture of her in the Post. I knew right away it was Rachel, even before I read the article. I don't know how I knew. Just think, if I hadn't gone to get a paper I wouldn't have found out until I talked to you tonight."

When I saw the picture, I changed my plans and flew to New York. I spied on the funeral. I sat in a Starbucks across from the funeral home and got a glimpse of all of them. Jacob is grayer and heavier and even more bent over. Miriam was in a wheelchair and covered with a black veil, like something out of an Italian wake. Noah changed, he's not so skinny. I didn't get a real feel for any of them. I saw them for less than a minute before and after the funeral. What a media circus! This story will be around for awhile. They're going to have more than their 15 minutes of fame"

"Oh, it'll be around for a long time. We'll see Jacob and Miriam on TV and anybody else who is remotely involved with them. I'm sure they'll be on Larry King. Did you stay overnight when you came?"

"Yeah. I stayed at the Marriott. I didn't call you. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I think I'm ready to talk now. I really need you right now."

When Abra uttered these words, "I need you," Miss Benjamin's heart fluttered. This was the only person in the world who needed her and she would do anything to help her.

"I'll come up and see you probably week after next. I have so much to catch up on at work."

It turned out that the middle of October was the first opportunity Abra had to go to New York. She was busier than usual with a major crises at school, a second grader lost both his parents in an automobile crash. He was taken out of school by his grandparents and was going to live with them in Florida. The boy's teacher informed his classmates that the boy's parents had died. Abra and two psychologists from other schools held grief counseling sessions with

groups of children. Practically all the kids verbalized their fears that their parents would die in a car crash. Abra sent letters home to the parents telling them how to discuss their fears with their children and offering to meet with individuals or groups. Abra and the other psychologists provided individual counseling to kids who needed it. Some kids didn't want to drive in cars or even on the school bus. With all that was going on in school, Abra had no time to think of Rachel. Her attention was devoted to the pain and fears of the kids at Black's Run Elementary.

Abra arranged to leave school early to make the 3:30 Amtrak train from Union Station in Washington to Penn Station in New York. She loved traveling by train. It was so much more civilized than flying. No waiting in long lines in her bare feet. No watching 80 year old ladies being searched for explosives when all they hid were titanium knee replacements. Not being squashed into narrow seats with her long legs cramped up to avoid skinning her knees on the seat in front of her. She recalled the excitement of her first plane trip, but the excitement lessened with each subsequent trip until 9/11. Then flying stopped being flying and became mass movement of humans, more like movement of cattle in freight cars.

After boarding the train, she found a seat by a window so she could watch the East Coast corridor rush by. She morbidly enjoyed seeing the crumbling cities that could only be viewed from trains. You couldn't walk or drive in these neighbors, not if you were a white woman, a woman, a white, or a black that was not part of the inner city world.

She ate a sandwich and sipped a glass of wine while she let every muscle in her body go lax. She was going home to her only family, her Miss B, and to her only home, the spacious 11<sup>th</sup> floor apartment on Riverside Drive overlooking Riverside Park. She had visited Miss B monthly when she was in high school and then during vacations in college. She rarely got to see her when she was in grad school, but once she moved to Fairfax, she tried to visit her every other month. She had grown to love Miss B's New York, and of course, with time she had grown to love Miss B more realizing how much she had done for her.

Abra sank into reverie and recalled how Miss B. became her family. The first time she saw Miss Benjamin was the first day of high school. Miss Benjamin was her advanced freshman English teacher. This short, plump, unattractive lady eagerly welcomed the class and told them that they were going to have an adventure of the mind. As she reviewed the syllabus, she glowed with the excitement about their joint learning venture. They were going to read about the world and they were going to learn to write about the creative ideas in their heads. "Can you think of anything more exciting?" Some of the kids groaned, but Abra was thrilled. This was the birth of her love of learning.

As Miss B reviewed the course assignments, some the students complained that there was too much work. Abra didn't complain. The more opportunities for her to use her outstanding language skills, the better. The more her mind could be challenged, the happier she felt. After that first class, Abra didn't notice Miss Benjamin's appearance. She looked at her as if she were a demi-god. She never really looked at any of her teachers as people with lives, loves,



fears, and wants. They were just dispensers of knowledge and positive reinforcement. Occasionally, she would notice a teacher's clothes, especially the polyesters they seemed to favor before they became retro.

After Abra wrote her first paper, Miss Benjamin asked to meet with her. "Abra, this is one of the best papers I have ever received from a freshman." This one sentence sent Abra soaring into a dream world where anything was possible. This spurred Abra to produce many papers and stories which she gave to Miss Benjamin for critiquing. They met every Tuesday after school to go over her work. Abra couldn't get enough of Miss Benjamin's praise. No one had ever talked about her talents before. In earlier grades, her teachers gave her the highest grades, smiley faces, and kind words, but no one was as effusive as Miss Benjamin. This confirmed Abra's belief that she could use her mind as the means of escaping from the Ginzberg jail and make a new life for herself. Miss Benjamin made it possible for her to dream. She fed the fires of Abra's fantasies of living in a modern penthouse apartment by herself, wearing beautiful suits to work and evening dresses to fancy dinners, and working in a Manhattan office. She wasn't sure what she would do, but that didn't matter. For the first time, she allowed herself to dream of a future with no Ginzbergs.

At one of their after school meetings, Miss Benjamin asked Abra about her family. As usual, Abra was evasive. She was just starting to lay the foundation for the privacy wall around her family. Miss Benjamin sensed that this was a taboo subject for discussion and didn't broach it again. They developed an unspoken understanding about Abra's family. Abra knew that Miss Benjamin had learned the basic facts about the family from her records and teacher gossip, but they spoke little about the specifics of her daily hell. Occasionally, Abra would allude to having to stay home to care for Rachel who was sick or having to go home early for a social worker's visit or to go food shopping. She shared enough information for Miss Benjamin to know the never-ending demands made on Abra to run the Ginzberg household. Once, without Abra's knowledge, Miss Benjamin drove by Abra's house to see where she lived. She saw the crowded squalor of the building blocking out whatever sunlight might be trying to reach the ground. She got access to Abra's school files which described her parents' status and her siblings' educational needs. By the end of Abra's senior year, Miss Benjamin knew all about Abra's life, even the sordid everyday details. The more she knew about Abra, the more she loved her and the more she wanted to help her escape. Abra needed support and guidance, but more importantly she needed love. Miss B was there to give her all three.

Abra got all A's her freshman year. Miss Benjamin told her that she would have given her an A+ if possible. During the next year, Abra dropped into Miss Benjamin's classroom every Tuesday after school for their conversations about her writing, her readings, and life in general. Then Miss Benjamin invited Abra to her home for a Sunday brunch. That was the start of their life-long love affair.

Miss Benjamin lived in an eleventh floor apartment on Riverside Avenue on Manhattan's upper west side. It was a "classy" building with a doorman, a spacious tiled entryway, and an elevator operator. It was filled with rich, old, well-educated Jews. Miss Benjamin had grown up in the apartment and lived there with her parents until their deaths. Afterwards, she continued to live in the apartment without changing a thing.

The apartment looked like something out of a 1950's movie. There was heavily-upholstered furniture, velour drapery, oriental rugs, and lots of antiques and fragile pieces. Abra moved gingerly whenever she walked near any of these for fear that she would trip and break something of personal or financial value. She never touched any of these fragile pieces lest her mere touch shatter them. Miss Benjamin's father had been a successful lawyer and the apartment reflected the wealth he had accumulated. The apartment even had a library with over a thousand books. Abra would stand in awe at the doorway of the library. She never imagined that people had libraries in their homes. Libraries were in schools or buildings where you had to present your library card to gain access to the paper treasures. Abra loved randomly plucking a book from a shelf and immersing herself in it. She would nestle in a leather wing chair while burying herself in the words. Miss Benjamin encouraged her to borrow books, but Abra feared for what would happen to them in the Ginzberg household. They might be torn or puked on or stepped on, but certainly they would be damaged. There was no respect for books in the Ginzberg house.

The apartment was immaculately clean thanks to a maid who came to clean four hours every morning. The maid, a black lady named Minerva, had worked for the Benjamin family for 20 years. Abra loved the neatness and cleanliness of Miss Benjamin's place. It made her feel clean. It made her feel as if she had just stepped out of a luxurious bubble bath in an oversized tub and was toweling off with a plush white towel followed by a massage with magnolia scented body cream.

During the last three years of high school, Abra brunched at Miss Benjamin's apartment once a month. Often Miss Benjamin's family would join them. Her brother, Seymour, was a lawyer who was carrying on his father's law practice. His wife, Arlene, was the stereotypical Jewish lawyer's wife with carefully coiffed, highly teased hair dyed a shade of orange that did not exist in nature and lots of diamonds weighing down her ears, neck, and fingers. She was a professional volunteer serving on the boards of several hospitals and Jewish charities. She was the proverbial Jewish mother always encouraging everyone to eat their vegetables and to bundle up when they went out in the cold. She was always friendly and warm to Abra.

Their only child, Adam, was three years younger than Abra. He was quiet so it was hard to tell that he was intellectually gifted. Abra knew that he had a crush on her because she would find him peeking at her when he thought she wasn't looking. His expression was much like that of a child receiving a puppy as a gift, pure joy at seeing a thing of beauty.

Miss Benjamin, Seymour, and Adam looked alike. They were short and stocky. They were fireplugs. Miss Benjamin and her brother had fat faces with jowls and brown spots. Someday Adam, too, might sprout jowls and spots, but right now he was a chubby kid with pale white skin and a thick head of straight black, greasy hair. Abra was sure he washed it regularly but it still exuded a sheen of oil.

Miss Benjamin had never married. She knew that she was the proverbial old maid. She hadn't married, not because she was gay, but because she was the type of woman men did not find attractive. Furthermore, she was afraid of men. She would have loved to have married and have kids, but she long ago resigned herself to the realization that that would never happen. If she had lived in more contemporary times when a single woman could adopt a child, she would have done so. She had so much maternal love in her heart and the only one who was around to get it was lucky Abra.

Miss Benjamin was content with herself. She had a remarkable self concept, she understood who she was and she liked who she was. Abra was sure that was a result of her parents who had loved and admired her. They had laid the foundation for her healthy emotional development. The way she saw herself was reflective of how her parents saw her and not how the outside world viewed her. To her parents, she had been loving, smart, and good-hearted, everything they wanted in a daughter. To the outside world, she was smart and unattractive.

She had a group of women friends with whom she went to the theatre, museums, and concerts. The group had season tickets to the Met and always lunched at an exclusive restaurant before going to a Saturday matinee of Tosca or Madame Butterfly. Miss Benjamin liked her life, especially once Abra entered it.

Miss Benjamin's parents had died and left her a hefty inheritance so she had the wealth to appreciate living in New York City. Not having to rely on just a teacher's salary, she was able to travel to Europe or Asia every summer. She did not use her wealth on clothes or material possessions for herself. She just wasn't interested in things. Her students never suspected she lived a life of affluence when she wasn't with them. They often judged wealth on the basis of clothes and a car. Miss B's wore non-descript clothes and she drove a Volvo which she traded in every seven years. They could never have imagined Miss Benjamin living as she did. Although Miss Benjamin got along with her colleagues, she didn't socialize with them outside of school. Her lady friends came from her synagogue and her classmates at the Ethical Culture School and Barnard.

During the family meals that Abra shared with the Benjamin family, she had her first glimpse of a happy family. This was certainly not a "typical" happy family. This was a brilliant, rich, unattractive family. It was obvious that everyone loved and respected each other. They spoke to each other with a gentleness that Abra had never experienced or imagined. They carefully listened to each other's statements and mulled over their responses. But mostly, they laughed. They laughed at the corny jokes Seymour told, TV programs or movies they had seen,

and funny life experiences. There were always jowls bobbing up and down at Miss Benjamin's dining room table. When they looked at each other, they smiled and visibly took joy in each other. They also were physically affectionate. When they came into the apartment, everyone got a tight hug, including Abra. When they left, the hugs were repeated. There were coming-in hugs and going-out hugs. Adam would kiss Miss Benjamin, but only give Abra a muted hi with averted eyes. The adults smiled knowingly at his visible crush.

Miss Benjamin introduced Abra to culture. Other than school and TV, Abra lived in a vacuum. Miss Benjamin took her to shows, concerts, and museums. They always went during the day because Abra couldn't be away at night. They would go on Saturdays or Sundays when Abra's grandparents could stay with the family. Someone "normal" always had to be on call in the house to see to Jacob, Miriam, Rachel, and Noah. They couldn't be left unsupervised. They were all children who could get into unforeseen trouble. They might find matches and set a fire, they might open the door and leave, or they might start hitting each other and not stop.

She knew that her family didn't like her being away, but she ignored their objections. She made sure there was enough food for everyone before she walked out the door. She left detailed directions for her grandparents on any specials, like the times for giving Noah salve for his unknown rash. They never asked her about what she did when she was away from them. Nor did they ask her who she was with. She could have been with a child molester or a serial killer, and they wouldn't have known. When she got back from her outings, they would talk about their needs and what she had to do because she had been away. She suspected that they knew she was seeing the outside world that they would never know. They were afraid that this was the beginning of her leaving them and they were overwhelmed with dread.

At the end of her junior year Abra started talking about college. She shared her desire to leave New York with Miss Benjamin. When Miss Benjamin showed support for this idea, she told her that her family wanted her to stay in New York so that she could continue to help out at home. Miss Benjamin told her that she would find a way to help Abra go to a college out of New York. Abra was dumbfounded. How could she do this? Miss Benjamin explained how she would find potential colleges that would fit her needs. The two spent hours poring over Peterson's Guide to Colleges and college websites. When Miss Benjamin hit upon Jackson College, she knew it would be a perfect match for Abra, and she was right.

Some of the Abra's classmates at York wondered about her relationship with Miss Benjamin. When they asked Abra about it, she told them that she was her mentor and was helping her with her writing and finding a college. She didn't tell them that she found someone she could trust, someone who was helping her become a competent person who would be able to function in the outside world, someone who was becoming her conspirator in escaping from Queens and the Ginzberg family, and someone she was growing to love. They could never suspect that Abra and Miss Benjamin were molding the foundation for their unique mother-child relationship.

Seymour also wondered about his sister's relationship with Abra. One day while they were at his summer place at Montauk, he asked "Edith, do you think it's healthy for you to be so close with Abra?"

"Oh Seymour, it's not only healthy, it's life sustaining for me. She's the daughter I'll never have. She's smart and talented and beautiful and kind. She's everything I would want if I could custom design a daughter. Seymour, I have so much love pent up in me and I'm giving it to Abra. I have to be careful. I can't overwhelm her with it or let her know the depths of my feelings. She's strong to be able to survive in that miserable home, but at the same time she's fragile. She doesn't really know what family love is. She certainly doesn't know what motherly love is. I don't think she realizes that I know all about her family. The social worker and the principal at the school know all the ugly details of how she lives. They shared them with me because they know I'm fond of her."

Abra was jolted out of her reverie by the darkness in the tunnel approaching Penn Station. She was in New York City which was thousands of miles from Queens. She hurried through Penn Station so she wouldn't have to look at the homeless people holding up the walls. She took a cab to Miss Benjamin's apartment and soaked in the sights of the suicidal pedestrians daring the cars to hit them and the street vendors selling authentic copies of designer goods.

When she arrived at Miss Benjamin's stately building, she was helped out of the cab by the doorman, Murray. He had been opening doors since she first visited Miss Benjamin 20 years ago. He greeted her with his wide smile, "Abra, it's so good to see you again. You're as gorgeous as ever. I'm sure Miss Benjamin will be so happy to see you."

"I can't wait to see her and I'm so happy to see you again, Murray. You never change. Handsome as ever."

She walked over the sparkling black and white tiled floor to the elevator. She always felt as if she were skating on ice when she walked on these tiles. Wilson was still taking people up and down in the elevator even though the elevator could be operated automatically. He, too, gave Abra a wide grin and a warm greeting. Without her telling him the floor, he whizzed her up to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor.

Murray had rung Miss Benjamin's intercom to let her know that Abra was coming so she was standing in the open doorway with her arms out. Abra dropped her purse and bag and grabbed little Miss B around the neck. She squeezed her tightly as she sobbed. Miss B gently patted her back as she silently cried and said, "You'll be alright now. We'll talk."

After a minute, Abra let go and said, "I have to go to the john. I'm bursting. I didn't want to use the john at Penn Station. The resident clientele there is shadier than ever."

She went to the guest room she always used. It was her room. She was the only overnight guest that Miss B ever had. After a heavy pee, she sat on the closed commode and placed a cool wet washcloth on her face and released the tension through the washcloth. She had lived in several apartments since college, but this was the only place that felt like home.

She found Miss B in the kitchen. “Did you eat?”

“Yeah. I had a sandwich on the train. It hit the spot. But I could use some tea and cake.” Although she preferred coffee, she knew that Miss B was an avid tea drinker and so she always had tea at her home.

“How did you know that I had some of your favorite Fortnum and Mason Earl Gray and apple coffee cake?”

Abra unwound by telling Miss B about the child whose parents had died and what the school was doing in response to the crisis. When she was talked out, she said, “Miss B, do you mind if we talk about Rachel tomorrow? I just want to relax and unwind first. OK?”

They sat in the living room and watched Jay Leno until they both fell asleep on the couch. Miss Benjamin nudged Abra and said, “We’d better go to bed now.”

The next morning she slept until 8 AM. She couldn’t believe that she had slept so late. This was like sleeping till noon for anyone else. Still wearing her sleep sweats, she went out to greet Miss Benjamin who had been up for two hours. She had coffee and fresh bagels waiting. She probably had one of the building staff run over to the bagel bakery on Broadway to get bagels fresh from the oven. New York bagels were a unique delicacy to Abra. No other city could duplicate the perfection of the bagels created in New York bakery ovens.

After breakfast, Abra showered and then spent a while browsing in the library. Now she could take books home without worrying that they would be destroyed. She brought Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift* out to Miss Benjamin. “Miss Librarian, I’ve never read this. Can I check it out?”

Miss Benjamin smiled and responded, “Only if you bring it back in two weeks. Let me stamp your card.”

The weather was beautiful so they decided to walk in Central Park and took a cab to 59<sup>th</sup> Street. Miss Benjamin said, “Abra, have you ever taken a horse and buggy ride through the park?”

“No. I don’t want to do that,” she said insincerely. “Everybody will think we’re tourists.”

“Well I want to be a tourist today.” Miss Benjamin led Abra to the line of horses and said, “Pick one.”

Abra looked at the horses and buggies lined up for inspection. They all looked alike except for the flowers draped around the necks of the horses. The horses and the drivers looked bored, but a white horse looked at her as if beckoning her to pick him, and she knew he was the one. “How about the white one with the red flowers around his neck?”

Miss Benjamin paid the driver and they started off through the park as they were enveloped by the lush trees that were just starting to turn brown and red. The leisurely amble of the horse allowed them to look at the joggers, tourists, families, and everyone else luxuriating in the warmth and beauty of the day.

Abra looked up at the cloudless sky and said, “Do you think there’s a heaven? If so, I think Rachel is probably there. God must have different criteria for letting special people in. At least, I hope so. He must take their travails into consideration. He creates them with all these problems and makes up for his cruelty by giving them a free pass to heaven.

I hope He looks at Rachel with pity. She had to live with her disability, but she also had to survive without the one person she loved most. Me. What must it have been like for her that day in August when I left? Remember you asked me about it when I got in the car and I said I didn’t want to talk about it. Well, let me tell you about it now. I’m only 16 years late in answering your question.

It was like a scene out of Dante’s *Inferno*. Over the few days before I left, I had shopped to store as much food and supplies as possible. I sorta prepared them for a nuclear attack. They were going to be in their underground bunker with enough food and soap and shampoo for a century. I talked with my grandparents and told them what they would have to do, but they didn’t want to talk. They said, ‘We’ll get by. Don’t worry.’ They also kept asking why I was going so far away. ‘Abra, it’s not too late to change your mind and stay here and go to Queens College. You could go anyplace with your grades. You could go to NYU. Why do you have to go so far away? Why do you have to go with all the goyim in the South?’ I didn’t answer any of their questions. At night, after everyone was asleep I packed and hid the suitcases under my bed and in the back of my closet so the kids wouldn’t ask me what these were.

Remember you asked me if I wanted you to talk to my parents and explain to them why I wanted to go away to college. What a scene that would have been. They probably would have blamed you for taking me away, which is true. You did take me away. They would have been so angry at you. I don’t know what they would have done. There would have been lots of screaming, and maybe some violence. The only time I’ve witnessed violence in person was in that house. They never hit me, but they did hit Rachel and Noah when they wouldn’t behave and, of course, the hitting led to more misbehavior and screaming. Rachel cried and Miriam hit her on the back or the leg, never the face. She didn’t want to leave any visible evidence. She wasn’t that retarded. She’d holler at Rachel, ‘Shut up. I don’t want to hear your crying.’ Then Rachel would cry more because Miriam hit her. It was this endless cycle. I stopped it by dragging Rachel into her bedroom.

As Rachel and Noah got older, they hit back and there were these brawls between Miriam and the kids. Everyone screamed and cried and struck out, except me. I was the peacemaker. I dragged the kids into their room and calmed them which wasn’t easy. Sometimes it would take me hours to settle them down. It’s a miracle the neighbors never called the police with all that noise.

I was a nervous wreck the weeks before I left. I kept thinking that something would happen to stop me from leaving. You were away in Italy right before I left so I had no one to talk to. Every time one of the kids sneezed, I was sure they were coming down with the plague and I

wouldn't be able to leave. I tried to avoid talking to my parents and grandparents. When they initiated any conversation about college, I would clam up. This would make my parents mad and they would yell at me. Miriam became especially vicious. She would scream 'I hate you, you ungrateful bitch. Look what we've done for you and now you're leaving. What kind of person are you?' Here was Miriam who rarely spoke to me over the last 18 years now screaming at me and telling me that they had done things for me. She had done absolutely nothing for me. I was the one who had done everything for her and the family. She used the vilest profanities with me, words that I would never speak to another human being. It took everything I could muster to keep my mouth shut. I'd mentally tell myself over and over to control myself. I never exploded maybe because I was afraid of the hurtful things I might say or because Miriam might turn her violence on me. When they started these screaming rampages, I'd ignore them or leave the room. But mostly I'd get out of the apartment. I'd walk around the neighborhood for hours. How I learned to hate them those last few weeks. The way they acted just confirmed that I was doing the right thing.

Miss Benjamin asked, "I've always wondered about your grandparents. Where were they in all of this?"

"They were scared and didn't know what to do. They were these little people who make up the world, who just want to hide safely in their corner. They want to eat the same food, go to the same places, watch the same TV programs. They want the world to stay the same. My going away was changing things drastically and they would have to do things they didn't want to. They were just simple people who were overwhelmed with the situation. I also think they hated Miriam. They rarely spoke to her. They loved their Jacob and kept saying what a shame he had a bad back and couldn't work. He was such a wonderful worker. For God's sake, he loaded newspapers on trucks. Not the greatest job in the world. Not a rocket scientist. At first they were helpful with the kids, but as they got older and more difficult to manage, they didn't know what to do. I think they were afraid of them. Remember Rachel and Noah weren't the sweet, simple type of retarded individuals. Much of the time they were angry, violent, and hard to manage. The population of the retarded is like the population of normals. Some of them are sweet and angelic and some are a little sweet and a little sour and some, like my sibs, were angry, mean, and hard to love or even like. But they loved me and I loved them. But more than love, I pitied them. I asked God. Why? Why did He give these innocents such a cruel mother and such a hard life?"

When Abra stopped for a breath, Miss Benjamin said, "Remember you told me that you didn't want to know anything about what was happened after you left for school – good or bad – you didn't want to know. I found out from your grandparents and sources I had in the schools. Soon after you left, the kids were placed in a foster home that specialized in kids with disabilities. The social worker found that your parents couldn't care for their basic needs. They couldn't cook or wash them or walk them downstairs to the bus. So the system came to their



rescue. They couldn't have left them with your parents who could hardly care for themselves, let alone the kids. Fortunately, the system saw that your grandparents couldn't handle them either so they took over which in the last analysis was the best thing for their welfare. They were in a good home that did a better job of meeting their basic needs than you did. But of course, they couldn't give them what you could – love. After the kids left school at 21, they were put in group homes. I don't know why they were separated and put in different homes. I would think they would have wanted to keep them together, but I don't know.”

Abra said, “Thanks for not telling me. I had to make a complete break and knowing anything that went on would have been horrible. It might have pulled me back. It certainly would have filled me with more guilt and I had enough guilt to last a lifetime.”

“Although your grandparents helped out, social services provided help to your parents after the kids were taken away. A nurse came in weekly to help with Miriam and Jacob's health needs and then there was a home aide who came in a few hours a day to help with cooking and cleaning them and even cleaning the apartment. It was probably in better shape than when you did the cleaning”

“How do you know all this?”

“I tried to keep in contact with your grandparents so I got this from them. Your grandparents hated me and didn't really want to talk to me. They blamed me for stealing you from them. They were angry that you wouldn't be there to take care of the family after they died, but I also think they were concerned about your welfare. They once asked me if it was possible that you could be sold into white slavery. I tried not to laugh, but it showed me their lack of understanding of the world and their fear of the world. I also got some information about what happened to Rachel and Noah from the special ed teachers at school.”

Abra turned sideways to look into Miss Benjamin's eyes and said, “Let me tell you about that awful day when I left for school. You were picking me up at 7 so at 6:45 I took out my suitcases and put them outside the front door. I spoke to Jacob and Miriam and told them that I would call them and let them know how things were going. Miriam glared at me with hatred and screamed, ‘I don't want to ever hear from you, you fucking bitch. Get out of here and don't let me see your shitface again. Everything is for Abra. Nothing for this family. Selfish bitch. Selfish bitch.’ This was why I never spoke to Miriam. I knew any words I spoke would provoke hateful attacks. The screaming brought Rachel and Noah out of their beds. They cried hysterically, knowing something terrible was happening. I hugged Rachel and said, ‘Good bye. Take care of yourself and be a good girl.’ Rachel wouldn't let go of me. She clung to me as if her life depended on me, and it did. I told my zayde to take Rachel. He tried to take her, but she struck out at him. She swatted his glasses off. He pinned her arms to her sides and yelled, “Jacob, help me with her.”

It looked like a mini-riot. I ran out the door without saying good-bye to Noah or my grandparents. I had to escape the screaming and hitting. That's why I was in the state I was in when you picked me up. That was why I couldn't talk.

I've wondered what happened that day after I left. Rachel must have howled uncontrollably for hours. How did they calm her? Maybe, they never really calmed her. I think she probably missed me for the rest of her life. Maybe that's why she yelled A-B when she was running through the park. I've tried not to think of how she and Noah felt, but I have to now. Saying that I was going away to college had no meaning for them. You were either there or not there. And I wasn't there ever again. I wonder who calmed them and held them. Do you think maybe Jacob? Certainly not Miriam. During the day when they were there Bubby and Zayde probably tried, but physical nurturing wasn't part of them. A quick juicy kiss was all they ever gave."

After the buggy ride, they walked to a deli on 57<sup>th</sup> Street. Miss Benjamin ordered a pastrami on rye with a side of cole slaw and Abra ordered a salad even though she was at the mecca of delicious deli food. Her one concession to being in a Jewish deli was ordering a can of diet Dr. Brown cream soda.

After they settled into eating their food, Miss B turned the conversation back to Abra's family. "Abra, you were in a situation where you had to save yourself. Rationally, you know that you had to leave or you would have not lived the life you wanted. You weren't Mother Theresa. You were a bright girl who wanted to live life and not just exist. I have always thought you did the bravest thing in the world. Most people would do what was expected of them. They would take the easy way out and stay. You took the hard way and made a life for yourself, with no one to help."

"What do you mean no one to help? Do you think I could have done anything without you?"

"I hope you're right. I so wanted to be a mother to you."

"You were and are."

Miss Benjamin looked down as she silently cried tears of joy.

Suddenly Abra noticed that Miss Benjamin didn't look well. Her skin was ashen and although her face was still jowly, it was drawn. "Miss B, I have been so focused on myself, I didn't ask how you're feeling."

Miss Benjamin had retired from teaching the year before and immediately began having health problems. She developed diabetes and high blood pressure. She was 61 and felt 101.

"I'm ok although I'm still having trouble stabilizing my blood pressure despite taking 10 horse tablets a day."

They took a cab back to the apartment so Miss Benjamin could rest. Then they went to a late afternoon foreign film at a nearby art theatre. They were a bit embarrassed at their joint viewing of explicit sex scenes with nude males. Alone, neither of them would have been

bothered, but watching it with someone who was like your mother or daughter mad them cringe, but also laugh at their embarrassment.

Before Abra left, they decided that she would try to come up for several days during Abra's Christmas vacation and Miss Benjamin would get tickets for a Broadway show. Before she left the apartment, Abra took Miss Benjamin's hands in hers and looked deeply in her eyes, "How many different times and ways can I say thank you for giving me a life. I love you so please take care of yourself. I need you to live to be 100."

## CHAPTER 8

Abra and Beth's time together in Charleston had been focused solely on Abra's disclosure of her hidden past. Their time together at Thanksgiving was focused on Beth's newly adopted son Zack. At the beginning of November, Beth e-mailed Abra telling her that she and Tom were adopting a 20 month old biracial child with Down's Syndrome. Beth was taking a six-week leave from work so she could bond with him and learn how to meet his needs. Zack had been born to a white 45 year old woman who had been raped by an unknown black assailant. The woman chose not to have an amniocentesis because she did not want to abort the fetus no matter what its condition. She was planning to give the baby up for adoption if it was normal or not. Zack had been born with a heart defect and needed immediate heart surgery. He was placed in a foster home and at 3 weeks was operated on to repair his heart defect. Since then, he was in a caring foster home and had fully recovered from the surgery and was in good health.

When the adoption agency asked Beth and Tom if they wanted a biracial child with Down's Syndrome, they didn't hesitate to say yes. They felt that his special needs would have no impact on their ability to love him. Their only concern was for Clay and his adjusting to another child in the house where he had ruled as king for the past five years.

In the three weeks prior to Abra's visit, Beth sent nightly emails describing the constant challenges of parenting a baby. There were the diapers, baby food, crying in the middle of the night, and illnesses. She had forgotten how hard it was to physically mother a child. But these challenges helped cement the bond of love among the four Newland family members. Beth described how during the first few days Clay had some difficulty adjusting to the stranger who was suddenly his brother, but now he was telling everyone "We're adopting Zack because he doesn't have a mother and father and he needs a family to love him and we have lots of love to share with him." Obviously, he was mimicking what Beth and Tom had told him. Hopefully, with time he would come to believe it.

Abra made her annual visit to the Newland's for Thanksgiving. She left early Thursday morning to get to Richmond before ten. She had scoured the aisles of Babys R Us and bought Zack a cute denim outfit, Thomas Train toys, and baby books. For Clay she patrolled the aisles

of Toys R Us to find the latest crazes for 5 year old boys. She found transformers and the eternally popular Legos updated with robots and monsters.

Up until Beth's father Phil's death three years earlier, Thanksgiving had always been at Beth's parents' house. Now it was at Beth's home with Linda, Beth's mother, acting as head chef. There was a sadness about the day because of Phil's absence, but it was growing less painful every year. Linda orchestrated the meal, shopped for the food, set the table with Beth's good dishes, and did most of the cooking of a huge stuffed deeply browned turkey, pumpkin pie, and sweet potato casserole. Everything that means Thanksgiving.

This was the first year that Jeff brought his significant other, Roy, to the Thanksgiving celebration. Jeff was an interior designer to the rich and famous of New York and he had become quite wealthy. Roy, who was 15 years older than Jeff was a fabulously rich Wall Street broker. They had recently moved into an apartment in a mid-town Manhattan glass tower. With Roy's limitless funds, Jeff decorated it to his impeccable taste. An article and photos of the apartment were going to be featured in the January issue of *Architectural Digest*. He promised to send them all copies when the issue hit the newsstands.

Roy and Jeff were planning on getting married at Roy's summer home in Provincetown the following summer. Although Phil had accepted Jeff's homosexuality at the end of his life, Linda wasn't sure how he would have reacted to his son marrying a man. The culminating kiss might have been too much for him. Linda, Beth, and Tom were happy for Jeff. He had found love, companionship, and a profession that he loved.

Abra pulled up at the Newland's house and parked behind a Porsche, which she was sure was Jeff's or Roy's. Abra entered Beth's house and was immediately set upon by Clay who hugged her tightly around the waist. "What did you bring me Aunt Abra? You always bring me the best toys!"

"Hey, how about the toys we brought you?" said Jeff. "Don't you like Uncle Jeff's presents?"

"I like everyone's presents. I like Thanksgiving because it's like a first Christmas and I like Christmas because it's the real Christmas."

As she gazed at the floor littered with gift wrap and toys – trucks, trains, star war figures, Abra asked, "Did you bring all these Jeff?"

"Of course, I loved these macho toys when I was young. What do you think – I played with dolls?"

Clay, ever vigilant to everyone's conversation, said, "I like dolls. Boy dolls like Batman and Superman. I don't like Barbies and girl kinds of dolls. Yuk."

Jeff said, "Well, I think we've resolved the doll issue."

"Clay, let me hug everyone and then you can help me get the presents out of my car. They're so heavy for your tired old Aunt Abra."

"You're not old. My grandma is old. You're not old."

“Thanks” said Linda to Clay as she walked into the living room from the kitchen. “I may be old but I’m the best tickler in the world so you better get ready for a tickle attack.” She chased Chase and threw him on the couch for a round of belly tickling which made him squeal with delight.

“Come on. Let’s get your presents.” Abra and Clay brought in presents for him and Zack.

As they came back in, Beth was coming down the stairs holding Zack. Abra looked at him with wonder. Here was this honey skinned Asian looking rotund baby with a huge smile. He looked from Abra, to Linda, to Jeff, to Roy, to Tom, to Clay, and just laughed as if he knew a joke that no one else knew. The smile on Beth’s glowing face was almost as wide as Zack’s.

Abra walked to Beth and kissed her as she enclosed her and Zack in her arms. Then she reached her arms out and Zack eagerly put his arms out to her. Abra held him tight. She bored her eyes into his face with its chubby cheeks, slitted eyes, and white pearls of teeth rooted between his lips. What a beautiful little boy. She felt something she had never felt before, a tugging at her heart as she pressed Zack to her body. Her whole body tingled as she pressed her cheek against his. She didn’t want to think about what this meant, she only wanted to enjoy the feeling.

The rest of the day was spent playing with toys, reading books, watching the Macy’s Thanksgiving parade, eating and more eating. Abra spent most of the time playing with Clay and staring at Zack. As a psychologist, she measured what he couldn’t do yet – walk or say words. Then she measured what he could do – sit up, stand holding on, imitate clapping his hands, point at people and objects for labeling by adults, and respond to people positively. He smiled and laughed whenever people paid attention to him. Despite the medical problems and foster home, he was doing remarkably well. He had a bright future with the Newland family.

At 10:00 Linda left taking Jeff and Roy who would sleep in her guest room since space was tight at Beth’s with the guest room converted to a bedroom for Zack. Abra would sleep on the futon in the office. They said good-bye to Jeff and Roy who were going to Williamsburg to visit friends the next day. Jeff told Abra to mark August 11th on her calendar for his wedding in Provincetown. He definitely wanted his sorta-sister to be there for the biggest day of his life. Abra said that she wouldn’t miss it for the world, and she didn’t.

Abra and Beth washed and dried pots and platters that were too big for the dishwasher and did their annual review of the dinner. “As usual, the food was great. The sweet potato casserole was the best ever, but maybe that’s because I only eat it once a year. Don’t tell Linda, but the stuffing was dry. Everyone’s happy. I see your mom is healing. She’s not radiating the pain of the last few years. And it is heartwarming to see Jeff and Roy so happy with each other. And most of all, everyone is adjusting to Zack and Zack is certainly thriving.”

“Abra, I can’t tell you how marvelous the last three weeks have been. Not having to go through the pain of an actual birth is actually good. I’m tired but I don’t have the complications of recovering from childbirth. In three weeks we’ve bonded with that special human being. I’ve

been so pleased with Clay's reaction. I think he's really learning to love Zack. At first, I thought he would be jealous of the attention we shower on him, but I haven't seen any green eyed envy. He's turning into such a giving, loving human being at 5. He tries to help me with the diapers and bathing Zack. When I leave them alone, Clay talks to him. He says, 'Now you're in the Newland house. We're going to love you and I'm going to be your big brother and protect you.' Can you believe it? He's five.

With the kitchen cleaned up, they went into the family room and sat on a cushiony, deep sofa and looked at the embers in the fireplace. "Abra, how are you doing?"

"As usual, I'm totally immersed in work and rarely think about Rachel or my family. I shouldn't call them my family. You have a family. The Ginzbergs were just a collection of people I lived with for 18 years."

"Abra, how do you feel about me adopting a retarded child?"

"Beth, I don't view Zack the way I viewed Rachel and Noah. You and Tom want Zack. You know what you're getting into. You're not putting any responsibility on Clay except to love him. I was expected to take responsibility for them, but not love them."

"Abra, have you thought of adopting? I know that your friend Anne has had a great experience with the Chinese baby she adopted."

"Beth dear, I'm just not made for having a kid, naturally or by adoption. I love kids, but I couldn't love one as my own. I love Clay, and someday I'll love Zack. If I adopted, which I won't, I could even adopt a kid with a disability. It's not what the kid would be like. It's what's inside me to give and there's no mother love to give."

She articulated these words, but she wondered about the unfamiliar feelings she had whenever she held Zack. She had never responded physically to a child before. Maybe there was a kernel of motherly love hidden inside her, but she had no plans to ever let it grow. She was happy with her life. She wanted to be alone. She didn't need a husband or children. She needed her independence.

Suddenly the shrill crying of a baby shot out of the monitor. By the time, they got to Zack's room, Tom was there holding Zack and comforting him. He said, "I think he had a poop. I'll change him." Beth and Abra looked at Tom. He was cuddling Zack with his face inches from Zack's saying, "Zack. I think I love you. I think I'll love you when we're both old men. Then you'll have to change my diaper. So when I'm 90 I'll remind you that I changed your stinky diaper in the middle of the night and you'll have to do the same for me."

Zack stopped crying and reached for Tom's face. He pulled his nose. Tom said, "Hey man, let me breathe. On the other hand, maybe I shouldn't breathe that stinky poop."

Beth and Abra looked at each other, their eyes welling up with tears. Abra said, "Tom, you're still the best catch in the world. The best husband and the best daddy. Can we clone you?"

The next day Abra and Linda took Clay to the Children's Museum. They saw the science exhibits and watched a puppet show. Clay loved playing at the water table. They coaxed him away with the promise that he could eat whatever he wanted for lunch. They let him get a hot dog, chips, coke, cookies, and ice cream with the conspiratorial warning, "Don't tell your mom what we let you eat. She'll never let us take you out again. Tell her we got you carrots, oatmeal, and milk."

While Beth made the traditional Friday supper with turkey salad leftovers, Abra took Zack for a walk in his stroller and Clay accompanied them to make sure that they didn't get lost. When they got back, Abra took Zack out of the stroller and sat on the backyard swing gently moving back and forth as she sang Old Macdonald along with Clay who was on the next swing. Zack leaned his body into hers with the ebb and flow of the swing. She felt like she was part of the Newland family – the old maid aunt.

On Saturday, Beth and Abra went out for lunch while Tom and Linda baby sat with the kids. Beth said, "I have a preschool disability teacher coming on Monday and also a physical therapist. We'll start with all the preschool services that hopefully will help Zack master the skills at this critical time. I'm not going back to work until after January 1<sup>st</sup>. Zack will be entering a preschool handicapped class, but I have to find day care. I'm not sure if I'll continue working full time. Maybe I can arrange to work while he's in school. We need the money so I have to do something. My mom has offered to baby sit with Zack, but I don't want to tie her down. She needs freedom to enjoy her own life and not repeat motherhood again. My loving brother Jeff has generously offered to give us money so I can stay home, but I don't know if I want to take it. He says that he wants to make sure that Zack gets the best treatment in the world – me. He's such angel. We'll see what we'll do. I might take him up on his offer. You know how much I've always loved my work, but now it's definitely secondary to my family. Would you believe that Tom and I are already discussing adopting another child? I can't tell you the emotions Zack has kindled in us. We feel like we're making a difference in the world and it's so hard to feel that way today. But most importantly, we're making a difference in Zack's life and in our own."

"I can see you and Tom becoming like these families you see on TV where they adopt 10 handicapped kids and make it seem so easy."

"I don't think we'll make 10, but if things go well, we'll get another one. We'll see next year. Thanksgiving 2007 may really be crowded and busy."

Remember about six months ago, I told you that Tom and I joined a church and were getting quite involved with the people in the congregation. You know, we hadn't really been religious, but over the last six months we've had a spiritual awakening. We've found a welcoming home in this wonderful church. We love the minister and the congregation. It's like we've known these people our whole lives. The older people are like grandparents doting on our kids. The people our age want us to socialize with them. Some of the teenage girls have

offered to baby sit. We have this extended family of very good people. I just never conceived that something like that would be possible. And everyone has been so supportive of our adoption and they've been so helpful. The week we brought Zack home we got 14 casseroles, 14. I still have some in the freezer. Though I think 13 were tuna noodle which I may never eat again. We had so many visits from people in the congregation we thought we'd have to give out numbers at the door.

And getting Zack brought us closer to God and to each other. We're having a spiritual birth that I didn't think we would ever have. Religion was never a big thing in our lives, but suddenly God is central to everything. Both Tom and I are going through this awakening together and this has made our relationship even stronger. I love Tom with a spiritual passion that I never imagined before. I really think we were created for each other. God meant us to be together for eternity. God works in strange ways, even bringing a waiter and coed together in a pizza joint.

And I think God sent us Zack. First he gave us the gift of Clay. Maybe we weren't meant to have another kid so we could get Zack. We're going to have him baptized next month. I feel like we're going to officially present him to God for His blessing and protection."

"Beth, I'm overwhelmed. I just never imagined you going through a religious experience like this. You were always so secular, so areligious. We talked about God, but as sort of an abstract, omnipotent power that we couldn't understand. It's so awesome that you two have found such fulfillment and new meaning in your lives. You'll need it if you're going to raise kids in this crazy world of war and terrorism. You never cease to amaze me. You're always changing. You're always getting better."

Abra found it difficult to understand Beth and Tom's religious passion. She believed in God from a distance. She didn't think God was interested in her daily affairs. He had bigger things to do. But there were times when she talked to God, asking Him why He created her family, her vicious mother, wars, famines, child abuse, and all the evil things in the world. She was still waiting for answers. She suspected the answers were wrapped in the goodness of Edith Benjamin, the laughter of baby Zack, the kindness of Beth and Tom, and the big brother protectiveness of Clay.

Abra never felt a need or desire for involvement in organized religion. Growing up in the Ginzberg family she had never gone to synagogue. She had gone to Miss Benjamin's synagogue a few times when she visited over the years, but found no inspiration. She was glad that Beth and Tom had found comfort in their religious re-birth, but knew she couldn't believe in an all-controlling God who managed the daily lives of His subjects or destined two people for eternal love.

Beth said, "Before we go back home, tell me about your visit with Miss B? Did she know about Rachel?"



“Yes, she knew all about what happened. She told me so much about the family that I didn’t know. Rachel and Noah were placed in foster care after I left because my parents couldn’t take care of them. My parents also got services which helped them. She convinced me that they were okay without me. That is, until Rachel drowned. Not that I could have prevented that.

We had a wonderful visit together. We even took a buggy ride through Central Park. Can you imagine all the times I visited, I never went on a buggy ride?

Ya know, I’ve been thinking about the differences between Zack and Rachel and Noah. Zach is so happy – I think partly it’s his basic temperament. I think of your house full of smiles and happiness. Then I think of my house. No one smiled. Rachel and Noah were always angry and unhappy and I think that was partly their basic temperament. But I know the environment also made the difference. When we see Zack, we automatically smile and he smiles back. Or he smiles first which makes us smile. There’s this communication between our faces. When I looked at Rachel or Noah, I never smiled so they had nothing positive to respond to. My parents certainly didn’t smile at them or me. I can’t recall them ever initiating smiling. So much of their behavior was a result of this cold, harsh life we lived. I wonder what they would have been like if they had been raised in a house with smiles like yours. But I’ll never know, will I?”

“Abra, did you love Rachel and Noah?”

“I’ve thought about that so much over the years. At first, I didn’t think I did. I thought I was pretending to love them. I do think I loved them, but I was afraid to admit it because it might tie me to them. If I admitted I loved them, then how could I leave them in that house of horrors? I think of the times I held them and sang to them or read to them or watched them sleep and I recall what I felt and it was love. I can remember so many times laying in bed holding Rachel in one arm and Noah in the other and rocking them back and forth as I sang *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* over and over, and they looked up at me with pure love and total trust. The three of us cuddled together. And I felt a serenity I’ve never felt again. No one else ever rocked them. No one else loved them. Only their big sister who betrayed their trust and left them forever.

When I was in high school I couldn’t reconcile loving them with abandoning them. I still can’t. Maybe I should have gone back to see them once I got out of school and could do something for them. Why didn’t I ever go see Rachel and Noah? I feel guilty about that, especially knowing that I will never see Rachel again and only having that last memory of her striking out to fight off the people who were keeping me from her. I think I couldn’t see them again because of the awful memories they would stir up. I need to bury my past as Abra Ginzberg and I suppose that means shutting them out, or shutting Noah out. I think I feel guiltiest about never seeing them these last 16 years. Leaving them when I went to college was bad enough, but never having any contact with them again was much worse. I just could never

bring myself to go back. I felt I had to make a complete break. Cut the ties permanently. I hate myself for that. But it was them or me and me has always won.”

“Did you love your parents?”

“I didn’t love my father, but I also didn’t hate him. I felt neutral about him, if that’s possible. I always felt sorry for him because he was totally controlled by Miriam and she treated him like crap. I despised my mother and I still do. Isn’t that awful? A child hating her mother. I can’t remember calling her mom or ma or mother. I must have when I was a little kid. I didn’t call her anything to her face and when I talked about her I would say she or her, not Miriam or mother. I don’t feel guilty about hating her. She was a terrible person with no love in her heart for anyone. If she could have, she would have left us. But she couldn’t live on her own and she had nowhere to go. It would have been so much better for everyone if she had left us. If she was pushed more, I really think she might have become one of these mothers who kills her kids. I think it was a possibility. I could see her picking up a knife in one of her rages when she was hitting one of the kids and stabbing them. Sorta like a Psycho scene. Scarey, but true. But I don’t think she would have ever tried to kill me. She would only go after Rachel and Noah, maybe because they were just like her. Maybe it would be a way of killing herself. I think she hated herself and didn’t know how to change herself. I wonder if there ever was any hope for her, maybe when she was young, she might have benefited from therapy or special ed. or a different family. Or maybe, that’s the way she was made and nothing could change her. When I knew her, she was too far gone for help. Beth, when I would look at her, I’d say to myself ‘How did I come from this monster? How did this devil create me?’ My mother was the most despicable person I have ever met.”

“Abra, I don’t know how you became who you are with her as your mother. I especially don’t know how you developed your ethics, your empathy, and stable mental health. You are a puzzler. I don’t think we can explain you. Maybe one day you’ll become a mass murderer.”

“Thanks. I’ll call you for a consult at my trial.”

“Abra, do you mind if I share your life story with my church. Obviously, I wouldn’t give your name or any identifying information. We don’t have a psychological explanation for how you got to be you. Maybe there’s a spiritual one.”

“If you and your gang find something, let me know.”

“Do you think you’ll ever see your parents?”

“Not if I can help it. I have nothing to say to them. No, they’re dead to me and I’m dead to them. Hey, we’d better get back and shop for a Christmas tree.”

## CHAPTER 9

Abra had carefully plotted out every day of her Christmas vacation. First, she would drive to Sullivan's Island to join the Nelson's for their delicious made-from-scratch Christmas dinner and see the twins. On the way back, she would stop in Richmond at Beth's to see how the Newland's were molding their lives around Zack. Next, she would return home in time for a New Year's Eve party at the Ritz Carlton with Ken, someone interesting that Abra had gone out with twice. Finally she would go to New York to see a play and a concert with Miss B.

Ken was a lawyer in a prestigious DC law firm. To make him even more interesting, he was Japanese. Abra had never dated an Asian before. Ken Ishibashi. She had met him through a friend, Amy, who was also Japanese. Amy and Abra were running partners, hoping that one day they would have enough stamina to enter a marathon or even a half-marathon. At the present, they were up to seven miles without getting totally drained. Amy and Ken were lawyers in the same firm. Although there were hundreds of lawyers in the firm, Amy and Ken became friendly because they were the only Japanese.

The weekend after Thanksgiving, Amy invited a few friends, including Abra and Ken, for dinner. They immediately clicked over their mutual interests in the TV series "24" and running. Ken had run the Boston Marathon, which, to Abra was equal to being a movie idol. They had gone out twice in December and then he asked her to his firm's New Year's Eve black tie party at the Ritz Carlton. Abra eagerly accepted. She had never been to such a swank party. She had not peeked into the world of the rich and powerful of Washington's alphabetical and state-named streets. At a boutique specializing in evening dresses, she bought the skimpiest, black silk evening dress she could find, on sale of course. Abra never bought anything at full price. She was frugal, almost stingy, and carefully budgeted for any special purchases that might come along. The dress weighing only a few ounces was reduced from the original price of \$800 to a bargain \$400 and was such a special purchase. She figured the dress cost \$100 per ounce. She asked Amy over to see if she thought it would be good for the party.

As Abra modeled the dress, Amy said, "The slit in the back almost meets the vee in the back. You have just enough material to cover your tush. If that doesn't get Ken into bed, nothing will."

"That's not why I'm wearing this. It's to look glamorous. Not a way I've ever looked before."

"Oh, you'll look glamorous and very sexy."

Abra felt like a high school kid going to her first prom, something she had never done. She had never felt so excited about a silly party before.

But Abra didn't go to Charleston, Richmond, or the swank party. Three days before the start of her Christmas break, Abra got a call from Miss Benjamin's nephew, Adam. Miss Benjamin had suffered a massive stroke and wasn't expected to survive long. He wanted to

know if Abra could come to New York to say goodbye. Abra told him that she would be up the following day. She would call him back with the specifics so he could take her to the hospital.

Abra called Martha and Beth to cancel her visits. Then she called Ken to tell him that she didn't know if she'd be back in time for the party and to invite someone else if he wanted to. He said that if she couldn't make it back, he'd take Amy who was planning to go stag. She was relieved that he didn't have to cancel out on the party, although she knew he didn't care about it as much as she did. It was just another event of many like it that he'd go to, but to her, it was a first and probably last.

When Abra called Beth she came through with the emotional support that she always got from her beloved friend. "Oh Beth, Miss B. had a stroke and isn't expected to live long."

"I was just taking Zack to the doctor. He has another ear infection. Let me call you when we get back. We'll talk. I know you need me and I'll be here for you."

"Oh my Beth, thank you. Talk you then."

Abra sat at her kitchen table looking at her coffee cup and the Washington Post she had been reading when Adam called. The letters looked like hieroglyphics. She couldn't decipher words because her mind was being tossed around by a tornado. She was frozen. She just sat and stared. She knew that she had to make plans to go to New York. Should she fly, take the train, or drive? Usually, she went into her action mode, but all she could do was think about her beloved Miss B. There were only two people in the world she loved – Beth and Edith Benjamin, and now one was dying. She felt a sense of aloneness that she had never experienced before. Although there was no change in the room temperature, she trembled. For 16 years she knew that Miss B. would be there to help her with whatever problem might arise. Who would help her now?

At five, Beth called Abra. She reported that Zack was going on a new antibiotic in the hope that this would be more effective in combating his recurring ear infections.

Finally, Beth said: "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know the particulars yet. Oh Beth, how I love that woman. Aside from you, she's the only person I've loved. I wish I could have spent more time with her over the last few years. Since she retired she had lots of time, but my life got busier and busier. I owe everything to that sainted woman. The Jewish Saint Edith. Did you know that the last time I saw her I called her Edith for the first time. She loved it and wanted me to say it over and over. Edith, Edith, Edith. I wish she had told me that calling her by her first name meant so much to her. I know she loved me like a daughter and I came as close as I could to loving her like a mother. She knew me better than anyone. She knew Abra Ginzberg better than anyone. She knew both halves of me. You only know the Abra Berg half. Not only did she give me love, she showed me a beautiful world. She gave me my first taste of theatre and concerts and museums and literature. Hers was a world of the mind and spirit.

I hadn't seen her since October. I kept putting off visiting her because of my job and now I won't ever see her the way I want to see her. I feel so guilty for putting myself before her. I know how much she adored me spending time with her and now I won't be spending any more time with her."

"Abra, go to New York and cry your eyes out. It'll be a different experience from your last trip to New York. You didn't mourn for Rachel and I know you feel guilty about it even though you deny it. Don't hold back with Edith. She was the pillar of your life and the person responsible for the Abra you are.

Come visit when you get a long weekend. We need to talk and hold each other. Clay has a new batman cape that he wants to show you. He may even let you wear it like he did with his other cape. He loves his Aunt Abra so much. You have a way of playing with him like no one else. I want you to see Zack and the progress he's making. He started walking. Goodbye love. Hope everything goes well in New York. Call me anytime you need me – day or night. I'm usually up at night listening to Zack cry and churning his hand into his ear."

Abra called Adam and told him that she was taking the train and would arrive at about 11:00. She planned on staying at the Marriot Marquis. Adam wanted her to stay at Miss Benjamin's apartment, but Abra said that she couldn't, the memories would be too painful. Adam told her that he would pick her up at the hotel at noon.

The next day Abra took the train to New York City and cabbled to the Marriott. Promptly at noon she was in front of the hotel. She didn't know what type of car Adam drove so she peeked into each car that pulled up. Then she saw Adam in a black Mercedes convertible. She didn't know much about cars, only the five year old Honda Accord she drove. But she knew this car was way out of her price range. It surprised Abra because she expected Adam to drive a big boat Cadillac like a 60 year old Jewish man from Long Island. She assumed he would be conventional like the rest of his family.

Abra had seen Adam twice since she left Queens 16 years ago. The first time was nine years ago when she visited New York soon after Adam graduated from Yale. Abra planned to go to her first professional convention in New York in June so she called Miss Benjamin to ask if she could stay with her, and of course she could. Miss Benjamin said she was hosting a party at the Plaza to celebrate Adam's graduation from Yale and she wanted her to come. Abra accepted the invitation, eager to see how Adam had grown into a man and eager to see the Plaza. Abra packed her only black cocktail dress along with her two going-to-meeting suits.

Abra attended meetings at the convention eagerly absorbing new information, and then she headed back to the apartment to change. Miss Benjamin left earlier in the day to see that arrangements for the party were on-track. As soon as Abra entered the ornate room filled with relatives, family friends, and young friends and classmates of Adam, Miss Benjamin spotted her and rushed to give her a tight hug. She escorted her through the crowd to greet Seymour and Arlene. After chatting with them, Abra leisurely inspected the table of hors d'oeuvres

overflowing with pate, crab dip, fruits, veggies, and cheeses. Abra took a glass of wine from a waiter and walked around and chatted with people.

Then she spotted Adam. He had grown into a Benjamin. He was medium height and had lost his teenage chubbiness. He had a full face with beginning jowls which gave the impression that he was fat. Although he was only 22, his hairline was rapidly receding. When he saw Abra, he rushed over to her and awkwardly hugged her, sure not to touch her breasts with his chest. She wished him luck with his next project – Columbia Law School. As they talked, she saw that he still nursed a crush on her. He shyly looked at her for a few seconds, but when he let his eyes linger on her for longer she could see the affection he harbored. It warmed her heart to know that this brilliant, sweet boy liked her. She was surprised that when the guests took their seats, she was seated with Miss Benjamin and her family. This further confirmed what she knew, Miss Benjamin felt as if she were her daughter.

The second time Abra saw Adam was the year before at Miss Benjamin's retirement party. After 35 years of teaching, Miss Benjamin retired. Although she still loved teaching, she found that she no longer had the energy and the passion which made her a star teacher. Seymour and Arlene made a party for her at Tavern on the Green in Central Park. They invited family, friends, Miss Benjamin's colleagues, and her former students with whom she was still in contact. Everyone gave testimonials embarrassing, but delighting Miss Benjamin. Abra spoke last. She had prepared written comments because she knew she would be emotional and might choke up. She looked at the comments and realized they were too stilted and formal. She looked at Miss Benjamin and took her hand.

"You would have been proud of me because I wrote a speech like you taught me to do. I researched my topic, what is a great teacher, and got lots of memorable quotes. I was going to cite examples of how they apply to you. But it doesn't seem right. I have to speak from my heart, not from someone else's. That first day of my English class with you in my freshman year was the best day of my life educationally and that includes all of my undergrad and graduate years in school. You made me so excited about learning I thought I was going to jump out of my skin. You were so enthusiastic telling us the adventures of the mind we would have. At first I wanted to do well for you. I wanted to make you proud of the papers I wrote and the ideas I produced. But then the magic of your teaching took over and I wanted to do well for myself, not you. That is the gift of a great teacher that you gave me – to learn for the sake of learning, to cultivate your mind like a garden, feeding it constantly to produce ideas and thoughts to....." Abra broke down and blubbered. Miss Benjamin cried too and they hugged. Many people in the audience wiped tears from their eyes.

After her speech, Adam found Abra and thanked her for all she had done for his aunt. Abra was surprised, "She's the one who did everything for me." Then others crowded around them and they never finished their conversation.

As they drove to the Hospital, Abra looked at Adam. He had changed. He was thinner and more muscular, obviously from working out. He was also more sophisticated looking and well dressed. He was wearing a blue button down collar shirt, khakis, loafers, and a very soft black leather jacket. He had a self-assured air, like he was in control. Being a successful tax lawyer and a graduate of two ivy league schools obviously did a lot for his self esteem. He was not the shy Adam Abra recalled from her meals at Miss Benjamin's apartment.

Miss Benjamin was at Cornell Hospital so they got there quickly from the Marriott. Adam found a nearby parking lot and as they walked to the hospital, Abra was filled with dread over what awaited her.

As they approached her hospital room, Adam said, "She looks terrible. She's twisted from the stroke. She's unconscious. The doctors don't think she'll ever regain consciousness. So be prepared." As he said this, he fought back tears and tightly squeezed her hand. He was preparing himself as well as Abra.

In the bed was a person who looked like she might have been Edith Benjamin at one time, but now was someone else. Without her glasses and her sparkling eyes looking intently at you, she was a corpse. Carefully pushing aside tubes and wires, Abra hugged her as she violently gulped sobs. "Oh Edith, I love you so much. You have been my life. What am I going to do without you? Please, please, please don't die. I need you."

She continued to sob as tears gushed from her eyes and snot from her nose. When her spasmodic crying subsided, she sat down and held Edith's hand. She shut her eyes and let herself visualize the many happy times they shared. Their after school meetings, brunches, discussions of books they had read, shared laughter at shows, and shared tears at concerts. With each memory she stroked her hand. She even let some remembrances escape her lips

"Edith, do you remember *Cats*? Do you remember how I pestered you to get a cat after we saw it, but you said you weren't an animal person. I even bought you a stuffed calico cat. Do you remember the Itzak Perlman concert at Carnegie? His music lingered in my brain for days. And I would hear you humming one of his violin concertos as you read my writing at our Tuesday meetings."

She had forgotten that Adam was in the room. He stood by the door silently, not wanting to break the bond between Abra and Edith. When she glanced over at him, she saw that tears soaked his face and even the collar of his shirt. After an hour, there was a knock at the door. A nurse came in to check her vitals. Abra stood at the window looking out at a beautiful Sunday afternoon. She and Edith would have enjoyed a walk in Riverside Park on a day like this. After the nurse left, she shared her precious memories of Edith with Adam.

"Adam, you can't imagine the difference between my life at home and my life with Edith. My life at home was squalid and loveless. My life with Edith was intellectual and affectionate. You can't possibly realize what she did for me. If she hadn't rescued me, I would be living in Queens with my parents and two retarded siblings and I would be teaching in the New York

City schools. I would be a zombie – I would be one of the walking dead. I would have been existing, not living. She saved my life.

She lied for me. She helped me construct a fictitious history. I told everyone that my parents were dead and I had no siblings. I know she hated to lie, but she had no choice. I had created this fantasy past and she had to go along with it.

Now two people know about my past and that's because of what happened with Rachel. I went to the funeral so I missed a day of this conference I was going to in Charleston. I could have made up another lie about why I was late, but I suppose I was just tired of lying so I told my best friend, Beth, and Martha, my supervisor during my doctoral internship. They both suspected my parents weren't dead. I wasn't a very convincing liar."

Adam replied, "I knew all about your life and how you had built a new life with a fictitious past. After the party she gave for me when I graduated, I asked her to tell me all about you. I know what she meant to you and what you meant to her. I hope you realize how much she loved you. Your love fulfilled her need to be a mother. She was always talking about you and your accomplishments. I knew all about your trip to England, your graduation from USC, your job, and your travels. She talked about you more than she talked about me. That was okay with me because you were her daughter and I was her nephew."

Abra said, "I've been so focused on myself, I haven't asked about you. How are you holding up?"

"I don't know. Aunt Edith was really more than an aunt to me. Our family is small and close. We share everything. Losing her will be more than losing an aunt, it will be losing a person who worshiped me. I think she adored me almost as much as she adored you... almost."

Abra went to Adam and hugged him. "How will I go on without her? I just don't know. I've been so self-centered, I never thought about a day when Edith wouldn't be there for me."

"You'll make it. Don't worry. I'll always be there for you."

Abra looked at him with confusion. Was he offering to take Edith's place in her life? She had never considered that someone could do that. Why would Adam even think of such a thing?

Just then there was a muted rap at the door. This time it was Seymour and Arlene. They kissed Abra and thanked her for coming. They said that a consultant was going to examine Edith to see if she had any brain activity at all. Abra said that she couldn't stay around any longer. She felt weak, like she was going to collapse. She went to Edith and kissed her on her eyes as she gently stroked her arm. "Goodbye, my beloved Edith. I will love you forever. I will never forget you and what you did for me."

Adam walked Abra down to the street to catch a cab. He asked her if she would join him for dinner that evening. He didn't want her to be alone. She said, "Of course, Adam. I feel like we're family. We need to share our memories and think of all the happy times we had. There



will be no more happy times for Edith even if she lives. And I don't want her to live, not like this."

Adam picked Abra up at 7:00. They drove to a small Italian restaurant near Adam's apartment on West 73<sup>rd</sup> Street. Everyone in the restaurant knew Adam. They even knew his favorite dishes. First they talked about Edith. Abra said, "She's not Edith anymore. I can't imagine her ever becoming the woman she was. It's selfish of me to say this, but if she can't be Edith I don't really want her to live. I think she would feel the same way. Did she ever talk about death to your parents?"

"Yes, she had a living will. She explicitly said she didn't want to be kept alive under these conditions."

"Adam, tell me about the Edith you know."

"Since I was a kid, she was there for me. She baby sat with me when my parents went out of town to a convention or on vacation. I'd love it because I'd have the run of the library and she let me stay up reading until I fell asleep in a chair. And she let me eat as much as I wanted. My parents were always trying to make me diet and control my eating. I love to eat and so did she. We would have ice cream with chocolate syrup every night before bedtime. But what I recall most of all is that she loved me completely. She helped me find what's special in myself. She told me that everyone would always laud me for my intelligence and high achievement, but that I had something more important. I was a kind, giving person and when I got to be 100 and arrived at the pearly gate, that would get me in, not my high IQ, my off-the-chart grades, and my six figure income. She always reminded me to let that goodness show itself. I've tried to follow her advice. I hope she was right about me.

She helped me through some hard times in high school when I got a lot of rejection from girls and the popular guys. Even though I had lots of friends who were like me, nerdy, I still wanted to be accepted, especially by the gorgeous girls. She knew what high school kids were like from her years of watching the pain of many of her students. I don't mean to imply that I was unhappy. In fact, I was a happy kid satisfied with my fat body and big brain, but I wanted more, especially more girls, more gorgeous girls. But girls, especially gorgeous girls, weren't interested in me.

I have a cousin Matt. He's two year older than me. Do you remember him from my graduation party or Aunt Edith's retirement party? Probably not. He's my mom's brother's son. His dad is a partner in the firm. Matt and I went to the same high school. He was handsome, athletic, popular, and a mean son-of-bitch. He was always making fun of me, especially when no one in the family could hear. I had my friends and I was at the top of my class so you'd think I wouldn't give a damn about what he said about me or how he acted toward me, but I did care. When I was 14, we were at our place in Montauk when he was being particularly sadistic. These girls in very brief bikinis would come over to the house to hang around him. They would look at him adoringly. I would foolishly hang around so I could

examine their bodies from close range. The schmuck would say things like ‘Do you know my fat cousin Adam? Or this is Adam, the blimp. He’s a brain, but ugly as sin. This is Adam, my cousin the sex fiend. Watch out that he doesn’t cop a feel when you’re not looking or stick his dick up your butt.’ You’d think I would have enough self-confidence that it wouldn’t hurt me, but it did. I was 14 years old, chubby, and shy and I wanted to be Brad Pitt.

No one noticed my reaction except Aunt Edith. One night, she asked me to go for a walk on the beach and she brought up his behavior. I didn’t want to talk about it, especially to an aunt, but she went ahead. She told me that it didn’t matter how he acted toward me. I had to go on with being me and that was all that mattered. I said that I couldn’t ignore him. She told me not to ignore him, but to ask myself why he delighted in tormenting me. I said that it made him feel good, maybe because he wasn’t as smart as me or maybe he felt insecure inside or more likely, he was just plain mean. She made me feel so much better, but it took me many years to put Matt’s behavior in perspective. Maybe it became understandable when he became a Scientologist.”

They both laughed, her laughter growing as loud as his.

Abra said, “You know I was oblivious to all that high school stuff. I only had friends from 8 to 3, and they weren’t really friends, only kids I talked to in school. I never really had a friend until college. I never socialized outside school so I never got into any situations like you had with Matt. I’m sure if I did socialize with kids, somebody would have made fun of my family. I don’t think I could have handled that.”

Adam continued, “You know she came to our beach house at Montauk whenever she could get away. She loved swimming there.”

“What? She swam in the ocean?”

“Yes, I can’t believe you didn’t know that. She was a great swimmer. She did laps at the Y pool and when we went to the beach, she swam in the ocean for hours. She said that if she were younger, she would have loved to swim the English Channel. I think she was being a bit unrealistic about her abilities, but it was good that she had a dream. She turned me onto swimming too. I was on the high school swim team, but I wasn’t good enough for the team at Yale. I swim three or four times a week. It’s my favorite exercise, although I reluctantly run and lift to keep the food I love to eat from turning to flab.”

“I knew she swam at the Y sometimes, but I had no idea about her ocean swimming. The English Channel, huh? I was so self-centered. I didn’t really pay attention to her. I wonder what else I didn’t know about her.”

“You knew about her love of literature, travel, theatre, and art. She was a deep believer in Judaism. She went to services almost every Friday night.”

“I knew she practiced, but not about her going to shul religiously – ha, joke.” Adam gave a deep rumble of a laugh in response to her lame pun. “I suppose I only knew the Edith who was

a marvelous teacher and the Edith who guided me to a new life.” Abra cried silently. Adam held her hand. They were quiet for a while.

“Adam, tell me about your life.”

“There’s not too much to tell. I’m a partner in my father’s law firm. We do tax and corporate law, not something exciting to someone outside the field. I’m a sports fanatic. I go to all the Knicks, Yankees, and Giants games I can. Working and watching sports – that’s pretty much my life. I’m a desk potato and a box seat potato. What about you?”

“I work all the time at school and with private clients. With my little free time, I run and exercise.”

Abra didn’t know why she asked, but she did. “Adam, do you have a girlfriend?”

“No. Do you want the job? Just kidding. My mother is working hard to fix me up with every Jewish professional woman from 21 to 31. She has direct access to the Jewish American princess hotline. Abra, are you seeing anyone?”

“Nope. I’m married to my work. Adam, let me change the subject. I know you know about my sister Rachel’s death. I’m struggling with that right now because I felt no grief for Rachel and I feel guilty about that. When I compare my reaction to Rachel’s death with the possibility of Edith’s death I feel even more guilt because I’m overwhelmed with grief over my Edith. I say my Edith because she’s different from your Edith. My Edith was a woman who was there to protect me. She tried to make sure that I wouldn’t be hurt, that life would be kind to me. She was there to open doors to show me what life could be like. What life should be like.”

“Abra, you did what you had to do to survive. I don’t blame you for not feeling guilty about Rachel. If it were me, I would hope that I would have had the courage to do what you did. You’re a very strong individual and not many people could have done what you did.

Abra, I want to warn you about something. There’s a possibility that people will find out about you.”

Abra froze. She felt like a stake had been put through her heart. “What are you talking about? What do you mean? How?”

“I don’t know how, but your parents are suing the nursing home and the city. Whenever there’s money involved, there are investigations so it’s possible that someone will track you down.”

Abra started to shake and cry. She was embarrassed to show such emotional behavior in a restaurant, but couldn’t stop.

“Adam, don’t tell me that. I can’t handle that now with what’s happening with Edith.”

“Abra, it’s unlikely, but possible. I don’t want you to be surprised if somehow you’re tracked down.”

Abra couldn’t eat any more. She couldn’t think. Her brain was flooded with fear and thoughts that she had never entertained.

“Abra, if anything like that happens, call me immediately and I’ll take care of it. I’ll be there for you if you ever need me.”

“Adam, I know how you feel about me and I can’t talk about anything like that now. Between Edith’s impending death and what you’ve just told me, I’m coming undone. I have to be in control and now I feel like I’m unraveling. We’ll talk later. I really need to go home now.”

Adam drove her back to the hotel. Abra jumped out of the car without saying goodbye. Adam called after her, ‘Abra, I’ll call you later. Let’s talk. Please.’

She got to her room and focused her mind on two topics, Edith’s death and the possible exposure of her secret. She never considered the possibility that she would be found out, especially publically. It was ironic that the person who protected her secret was no longer there to protect her now and maybe that was why she might be exposed. She knew that was silly and superstitious, but she couldn’t put the thought out of her mind. She was so angry at Adam for even suggesting that exposure was a possibility. Up to a few hours ago, she was certain that her secret was securely buried. Now Adam had raised doubts. Damn Adam. She cursed the messenger for bringing the worst possible message she could imagine.

She went back home, but she didn’t go to Charleston, Richmond, or to the New Year’s party. Three days later, she got a call from Adam. Edith died. Abra was glad her existence was ended. She didn’t want Edith to survive as a vegetable and she knew that Edith would not have wanted to live like that. Adam wanted to know if she could come to the funeral. Abra said no. She told Adam that she said goodbye on Sunday and there was nothing more to say. She hoped he and his parents understood this and would not hold it against her. She didn’t think she could emotionally handle the funeral and she certainly couldn’t see her Edith lowered into the ground forever.

When she hung up, she emptied her tear ducts for hours. There seemed to be no end to the flow of her tears. Finally when they stopped, she felt an emptiness in her body, as if she had no internal organs. She wished Miss Benjamin could have lived longer in good health, but she knew her many fond memories of their lives together would keep her going forever. In one of her rare conversations with God, she thanked Him for giving her Edith Benjamin.

She spent the rest of her Christmas break mourning Edith. She looked at pictures of them taken at graduations and visits. She read the many letters Edith had sent her, especially when she traveled. She re-read books that they both liked. Friends called to invite her out, but she refused. Ken called and asked her out, but she told him she wasn’t ready to start a relationship with anyone. Her life was in flux and she needed time to think and she would call him in the future. When school started, she was ready to face her professional world, but she had closed off her personal world.

Two weeks later, Adam called to say that Edith left some possessions and money to Abra in her will. Abra was flabbergasted. She never even thought about Edith having a will or

herself as being an heir. Abra arranged to take a Friday off at the end of January and took a late train to New York on Thursday night. Abra was planning to stay in Edith's apartment. She was looking forward to this, but at the same time she was apprehensive. She knew each memory she would recall as she walked through the apartment would warm her heart, but also crack it a bit. She felt that Edith's apartment was her only home. She didn't think of her apartment as home. The only other place she thought of as home was the dilapidated cottage she and Judy shared on Sullivan Island.

One of her fondest memories of the apartment was staying there with Beth over one of their Christmas breaks from school. She and Beth had flown to New York and stayed at Miss Benjamin's apartment. They were planning to squeeze in as many plays, sights, and museums as possible in their three days there. On the first morning, they got up early so that they could stand in the front row in the crowd on the Today Show holding a sign saying "Hello Jackson College." They followed that up with a tour of the UN, a 2:00 Broadway show, and then dinner at the Hard Rock Café.

On the second day there was an unpredicted blizzard that closed New York. After sleeping late, they went outside to marvel at the empty streets. They had a snowball fight in the middle of usually busy Riverside Drive and then laid down in the street and made angels in the snow. When they got back to the apartment, Miss Benjamin had hot chocolate ready to warm their frigid bones. Then they got into their pajamas and told Miss Benjamin that they were going to read every book in her library. They had two glorious days alone with Miss Benjamin. When the airports finally opened, they had to wait another day to get a flight. Abra knew that Miss Benjamin treasured the extended visit even more than they did. Miss Benjamin would always recall Abra and Beth's giggles and noisy conversation filling the quiet rooms.

On Abra's many visits to Miss Benjamin, they enjoyed walking in Riverside Park, eating at the neighborhood Jewish delis, and gossiping with the old ladies who lived in the building about whose dog had pooped in the lobby. Abra loved sharing Miss Benjamin's life during these quick visits. It was a life of wealth, comfort, culture, and learning. And she gradually realized, without her, Miss Benjamin's life would not have been as full. Abra realized that she gave meaning and direction to Miss Benjamin. They both needed each other.

Adam told Abra that all the family members had taken what they wanted from the apartment and Abra could take whatever she liked. Miss Benjamin had left him the apartment, but before moving in, he was having it completely renovated. Whatever Abra didn't want would be sold at auction or given away.

He went to a file cabinet in the library and pulled out drawers with everything Edith had kept documenting Abra's life since they first met. Miss Benjamin kept copies of every paper that Abra wrote, her high school transcript, her letters of recommendation to college, high school programs for graduation and honors day, every newspaper edition that Abra served as editor for in both high school and college, and picture upon picture of their shared lives. There

were wrinkled programs from the shows and concerts they had shared. There was an 8 x 10 photo of them on the first day of school at Jackson and others of her graduation from Jackson and USC. She knew this would fill four or five large boxes, but she wanted to take it all, not only for a record of herself, but a record of Miss Benjamin's love of her. She spent four hours leafing through every paper and picture. She would examine them more closely when she had them at home.

She took Miss B's three gold charm bracelets, filled with mementos of her world travels. A gondola from Venice, Big Ben from London, the Eiffel Tower from Paris, and the Little Mermaid from Copenhagen. She took her two chains with Jewish stars, one in gold and one in silver. She put the gold one around her neck. She had never worn anything that signified her Jewishness and she felt uncomfortable, but she wore it for the rest of the day.

She took Edith's glasses. She put the glasses over her eyes and laughed. She didn't look a bit like Miss Benjamin, but she felt like she was seeing the world through her eyes. She would have liked to have taken more, but she didn't have any room in her small apartment. As it was, she would have to rent a storage unit for the stuff she was taking.

That night Adam and Abra met for dinner. This time he took her to a Chinese restaurant near Miss Benjamin's apartment. Again, everyone seemed to know him.

"Do you go out to eat every night?"

"Yes. My cooking is limited to pouring cereal and milk into a bowl."

Adam talked about his passion – sports. He described different sports figures she had never heard of as she nodded her head feigning understanding. Abra looked at him as he talked. He was like Miss Benjamin, comfortable with the world and himself. She thought he was so lucky to have inherited the Benjamin genes for happiness and kindness. And there was his infectious laughter punctuating his stories and her attempts at humor. They chatted and laughed about lots of things, but carefully stayed away from Abra's most feared topic – exposure.

The next day Abra went to the office of George Rosen, Edith's family lawyer, to learn the contents of Edith's will. His office was in a building on Broadway near Edith's apartment. She walked to his office so she could appreciate this glorious New York City neighborhood even though it was frigid as only New York canyons can get cold. After formalities, he informed her that Miss Benjamin had left her \$500,000 in cash, stocks, and bonds. She knew Edith was wealthy, but she didn't think she could leave her that much money. She kept repeating, "I can't believe this. I can't believe this. You're kidding me. Right?"

"No, I'm not kidding you. Edith wanted to make sure that you never had to worry about money again. She knew that you had limited resources and she wanted you to have a cushion to fall back on if you ever had a problem. She didn't want you to know before she died because she knew you wouldn't want to accept the money. She also was reluctant to have people know the extent of her wealth.

Abra, you should consult someone about investing it wisely so you don't have to pay excessive taxes. You probably should ask Adam to help find such a person."

After signing the paperwork, she walked back to the apartment. She couldn't conceive of herself as having all that money. She would be rich. Although she lived frugally, she never thought of herself as needing a lot of money or even wanting a lot of money. She earned enough money for the car payments on her five year old Honda which was almost paid off, rent on her two-bedroom apartment, payments toward her school loans, purchases of nice clothes, on sale, and savings for occasional travel. She had a good retirement plan so she felt comfortable knowing that her old age would not be spent in poverty. When compared to her life in the Ginzberg house, she was doing very well financially. But \$500,000. She thought she might give some of it to charity since she wasn't going to need it all. She had never dreamed of having money and would have to think long and hard about how she would use it productively.

That evening at dinner at his parents' apartment, Adam discussed Edith's will with Abra. In addition to leaving Abra a half million dollars, she left five of her former students \$100,000 each. Periodically, Edith created a special bond with a promising student who was in need of mentoring. Abra recalled some of these students from Miss Benjamin's retirement party. They, too, gave speeches thanking her for making their dreams reality. One student was Natalia Rosaria, a Hispanic student with a gift for writing whose parents were illegal immigrants. Natalia was born in New York so she couldn't be deported, but she lived in constant fear that her parents would be. Edith mentored her and after law school, she became an immigration attorney. Then there was Dennis O'Donnell whose mother was mentally ill and had no father. He lived with his aunt and took care of his mother whenever she made temporary visits home. He eventually earned a Ph.D. in genetics and became a researcher in the field of the genetic aspects of mental illness. She also left millions to Barnard, her alma mater, and Jackson College to be used for scholarships for needy students.

"Adam, will you help me with this money? I don't want to squander it or lose it to taxes."

"I'll put you in touch with a money manager I know in your area."

"I can't believe I'll be able to pay off my college loans. After all this time, I still owe \$12,000. I figured it would be another four years before I paid it off. And now maybe I could buy a condo or a town house. I might even get a new car. My Honda has 120,000 miles on it. Do you think I should give money to my parents to help them out?"

"Absolutely not! I've checked on your parents and they seem to be doing all right."

"What do you mean you checked on my parents?"

"I thought you might want to give them money so I checked and found that they're both receiving disability checks and that your grandparents left them money so they're not in need of your money."

"Maybe I want to give them money out of guilt. I shouldn't enjoy money with them living in poverty."

“Abra, they’re not living in poverty. This is money that was given to you, not them. I don’t think Aunt Edith would have liked you giving them any of her money.”

At the end of the evening, Adam asked if he could see her again. She looked at him, he was a male version of Miss Benjamin. He was basically unattractive and he was almost totally bald. But at the same time, he was so likeable. He exuded self confidence. But that wasn’t it. It was that he seemed happy, even joyous. When they weren’t talking about serious matters, he was always smiling or laughing his deep guffaw infecting Abra who loudly laughed along with him. She couldn’t recall laughing so much in one evening.

She didn’t know what to say. She liked him as a cousin, but certainly not romantically. “Adam, we can see each other, but only as friends. You’re my little cousin. You’re just a kid”

“Abra, my dream is to be more than your friend, but I’ll settle for being your good friend. I just want to be there for you like Aunt Edith was.”

“Adam, I hate to say this, but I’m just not attracted to you. Anyhow, I’ve been avoiding relationships lately. I just can’t seem to get emotionally involved with anyone right now. I’ve been like a nun not wanting to get involved with any guys. I want to keep seeing you because you remind me of my beloved Edith and the happiness she brought me. I know we can be close friends. I’ll call you about coming down for a weekend next month. OK?”

“Sounds good.” He looked at her with gratitude that she wanted to continue their relationship, albeit platonically.

Adam dropped Abra off at Edith’s apartment. “Next time you come to New York, you’ll have to come to see how I’ve redone the apartment. I’m sure you won’t recognize it.”

“Can’t wait to see it, but don’t change the library too much. That’s my favorite room. It’s like a museum. It’s a shrine to Edith and her parents.”

On the train ride back to Washington, Abra’s mind kept alternating between her new-found wealth and Adam. She had never dreamed of having money, and now that this treasure had fallen into her lap, she wasn’t sure of what she would do with it other than buy a new car and a condo. She kept saying to herself, “I’m rich. I’m rich.” As she laughed to herself, she heard Adam’s hearty laughter. She loved hearing him laugh. She wasn’t quite sure what to think about Adam. He wanted to be her protector, and more, a lot more. She prided herself on her independence, but at the same time she felt comfortable knowing that she could lean on Adam if she needed help. Maybe she needed the assurance that there was someone in the world who would rescue her if she ever needed rescuing. Maybe she needed a Superman who would swoop down and save her from any evil. She had to change her ideas about Adam. He was no longer the little nerdy cousin. She wasn’t sure how to describe him. He certainly seemed interested in women and sex, but maybe not as much as sports.



## CHAPTER 10

The Monday after Abra got back from New York, Adam called to ask if he could come down and visit, ostensibly to introduce her to a money manager and help her buy a new car. They arranged for a visit in mid-February. Adam came down on a Friday morning so that they could see Harold Meyers, an accountant who was adept at helping people manage money, especially if they had lots of it. Adam and Harold had gone to high school together and Harold went to George Washington University and remained in the DC area.

After making a follow-up appointment with Harold, Abra took Adam sightseeing. Although he had visited DC a few times in the past, mostly for business, he didn't really know the city. They spent an afternoon at the Spy Museum marveling at the charming low tech devices of the past and high tech modern devices of the present. They wondered at how so many spies had gone undetected for so long. Abra commented, "I'd be a great spy. I'd be better than Robert Hanson and Aldrich Ames. I'm good at hiding things. Look at how I've hidden my past. Well maybe I wouldn't be too good when you think that Beth and Martha knew. Scratch spying as a future career for me."

At the gift shop, they bought baseball caps that said "Deny everything." They also got a book on the history of spying and a cd of music to spy by. When they left the museum, they felt like teenagers rather than 30 somethings. They had dinner at an upscale restaurant called Mata Hari's near the museum. They wore their caps through dinner delighting in the disdainful looks they got from nearby diners.

During dinner, they fantasized about what they would do if they were spies. Abra painted a picture of herself in a trench coat tightly buckled to show off her voluptuous figure and a shoulder bag swaying back and forth as she swaggered in her 5 inch stiletto heels, while Adam saw himself with a belted trench coat, a hat tilted at a jaunty angle, and a cigarette dangling from his lips as he used his Humphrey Bogart lisp to say, "Of all the gin joints in the world, you had to pick mine." In their shared daydream, they met in the thick fog at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin to exchange secrets, hers how to test children with ADHD and his how to hide money in offshore accounts.

They enjoyed the food and most of all the laughter. Every time Adam laughed, Abra did too. There was something about his enjoyment of jokes, fantasies, and food that made Abra giddy, an emotion she had never felt before.

"Adam, it's like we're back at Miss Benjamin's dining room table for a laughter-filled brunch."

"Abra, I hope Aunt Edith is looking down on us and sharing our laughter." He looked up and winked at her Edith.

Adam dropped Abra off in front of her apartment and went to a nearby Hampton Inn. The next day they went shopping for a new car for Abra. Adam tried to convince her to get a Lexus

or Acura, but she was sticking with a reliable Honda. She did get the LX model so she could have a sun roof, which she was sure she would never use. Abra let Adam do the bargaining at which he was quite adept. She noticed that the car salesman never looked at her even though she was buying the car and she was paying with cash. He either thought that Adam was really the one who was buying the car, or he was a sexist pig, or both.

That night they had a traditional date starting at the movies where they saw "*The Bourne Identity*." They were totally wrapped up in the fast-paced action and unaware of the passage of time although they never lost peripheral sight of each other's movements. Then they went to a popular restaurant/brewery where they waited an hour to be seated. The hour passed quickly as they chatted about their mutual love of jazz, especially pianists like Oscar Peterson and Dave Brubeck, and their lack of mutual love of sports. Adam told Abra that he would convert her to a sports fan if she would accompany him to just one game, especially a Knicks game. She said, "We'll see." The only games she had seen in the past were Jackson College baseball and football games and three University of South Carolina football games, which were enough for her.

They shared their views on the present crop of politicians and how they were ruining America and the world. Both detested the country's leaders, but for different reasons. Adam, for what they were doing to the economy and Abra for the war. As they exited the restaurant, Adam grabbed her hand said, "I've had such a wonderful time Abra. I think about you all the time."

"Please Adam. Not now. Let's just enjoy each other and our time together." But she did let him continue holding her hand.

Adam asked Abra to come to New York in two weeks to see the progress on his apartment and to celebrate her birthday. Abra was shocked that he knew when her birthday was. "How do you know my birthday?"

Adam smiled sinisterly, "I have ways of knowing. I know all about you. February 28<sup>th</sup>. It's a shame you weren't born on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Then you'd only get older every four years. And then you wouldn't be calling yourself an old lady and me a baby all the time. I'm so glad you're going to be 35. I love older women. For two months you'll be four years older than me. Let's go out and celebrate and you can wear your sexy New Year's Eve dress. I hate to see \$400 go to waste. And I want to celebrate life since we've both had such sorrow with Aunt Edith's death. I think she'd like us to do that."

Two weeks later, at 5:00 AM on a Saturday, Abra left her apartment and drove to New York in her new Honda. She loved driving it. Her body molded to the leather seat and the controls seemed to be made for her hands. She even pulled back the cover on the sun roof to bathe the car in sunlight. Adam was paying for a room for her at the Carlyle. She had objected to his paying, but he said that if she were paying she'd only spring for a flophouse in the Bowery. She didn't ask him how much it cost. She knew it was probably close to her food

budget for three months. She drove up to the entrance and had the valet park the car. This was the first time she had trusted someone to drive her new car. She wanted to tell him to drive it carefully, but she knew he thought it was a clunker compared to the Porsches and Mercedes he usually parked.

Abra called Adam as soon as she got to the room. "I'm here."

"I'll be there in 15 minutes."

"Sure, superman, watch the tops of buildings as you fly here."

She explored the room which was tasteful, but small. It was smaller than her bedroom at home. In 15 minutes there was a knock at her door. She opened it to see Adam beaming. "How did you get here so fast? It's impossible to drive from your apartment to the hotel so fast."

Adam laughed as he said, "I took a cab and told the driver he'd get an extra ten bucks if he got me here in 10 minutes. And he did it in 8 minutes. It is Saturday morning so there's not much traffic. Are you ready to see my beautiful place?"

Abra grabbed her coat and they went downstairs. The doorman hailed a cab and they got to Riverside Drive in 12 minutes, another record. Murray opened the cab door and warmly greeted them. It seemed strange going into the building with Adam. She had always gone in alone or with Edith. Adam was bursting with anticipation as they rode the elevator to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. He eagerly unlocked the door and said "Voila. Here it is. My palace, mademoiselle."

It was a mess. Sawdust coated everything. The newly-laid white marble entryway floor was covered with grout that had not yet been scraped off. The living room still smelling of fresh paint, had soft taupe walls complementing the honey tinted wood floor.

Although the kitchen was partly finished, the newly-installed black granite tops and stainless steel appliances shone brightly. Abra could see the apartment shaping up into something she would see in *Home and Garden*. Adam saved the library for last. He opened the door. It was unchanged. It looked just as it had when Abra first came here 21 years ago. "You asked me not to change it and I didn't. I want you to use it whenever you're here."

After showing her every item in the apartment, he announced that he was going to make lunch. "You can't cook. Anyhow the kitchen's not finished."

"That's true, I can't cook and for what I'm making, I only need a refrigerator. But I spent a fortune on this kitchen and I'm going to use it. I got lunch meat and bread and salads from Zabar's. And of course, I got your Dr. Brown's diet soda. Here are my designer paper plates and here's our gourmet lunch."

"Adam, that's not cooking. That's assembling food and opening plastic containers."

"Abra, for me that's cooking." They laughed as they enjoyed corned beef sandwiches on rye.

When they finished their sandwiches, Adam went to the refrigerator and with fanfare removed a chocolate cake with "Happy Birthday Abra" scripted on top in pink frosting. Nestled in pink frosted roses was a Cinderella princess doll. A perfect cake for a six year old girl,

which was what Abra felt like at that moment. Adam took some birthday candles from a drawer and lit them. He put 7 candles on the cake, one for each decade and then the five more.

He said, "If I put 35 candles on this, my gorgeous new apartment would burn down. Then he sang "Happy Birthday Abra" in a loud laughing voice.

"This probably won't surprise you, but I didn't have a birthday cake for the first 18 years of my life. I never had a party. Rachel and Noah didn't have birthdays either. No one celebrated in that unhappy place. I usually got a card from my grandparents. My first birthday cake was for my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. Wonderful Beth never forgot my birthday our four years at Jackson. She made funny theme parties and invited everyone on the floor. You can't imagine what this cake means to me." She stared at the cake as if mesmerized by the flickering light, and when she blew the candles out, there were tears mingled with her breath.

"Did you make a wish?"

"Of course, but I can't tell you." She couldn't tell him that she wished that she would always be as happy as she was at that moment.

They lightly kissed on the lips and Adam cut two huge pieces of cake which they washed down with Dr. Brown soda.

In a tour director voice, Adam said, "Ok. This is the schedule for the rest of the day. There's an Edward Hopper exhibit at MOMA that we can catch. Then I'll take you back to the hotel so you can slither into your slinky black dress. I can't wait to see it, all four ounces of it. Then dinner at Gramercy Tavern followed by Barbara Cook at the Carlyle. How does that sound?"

"Perfect. You have thought of everything I like."

They took a cab to MOMA and toured the exhibit. Ironically, these two happy people loved the moroseness of Edward Hopper. They commented that his deserted city scenes looked like New York after being destroyed by a bomb that only killed people.

Adam dropped Abra back at the Carlyle to change. She showered and put on THE dress. She stared at herself in the full length mirror. She looked sexy and glamorous. She had never looked like this before. When Adam knocked at the door, she was embarrassed. She wanted him to tell her that she looked gorgeous. When he looked at her, his eyes told her what she wanted to hear. "I can't believe you're the Abra who always wears pant suits or jeans. You look stunning. Everyone is going to look at us and ask how did that zhlob get such a looker. He must be one of the baby billionaires. But before we go, I have a little birthday present for you."

He presented Abra with a gift box in Tiffany wrapping. She said, "Adam, this is ridiculous. You should never have gotten me a present. The cake was more than enough."

She opened the box and with disbelief took out a necklace with a single diamond which must have been two carats. "I can't take this. It's worth a fortune."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it. I've never had anything like it."

“Then accept it graciously and wear it. Just say thank you.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you forever.”

He stood behind Abra and locked the clasp around her neck. The low cut neckline of the dress perfectly framed the necklace. She looked at herself in the mirror. This wasn't the Abra she knew. She felt like Cinderella going to the ball. She looked at Adam standing next to her. With her three inch heels, they were exactly the same height. Adam exuded wealth. He was smartly dressed. She didn't know much about men's clothes, but he was wearing an impeccably tailored suit made of soft wool. His starched shirt was a blinding white. He looked like a successful lawyer which was what he was. They both smiled with satisfaction at their reflections in the mirror. Then she laced her arm through his and said, “American Gothic. Or for us, Jewish American Gothic.”

“I look like a fatter version of the bald guy with the pitchfork.”

They dined at the Gramercy Tavern, and agreed that the rave reviews by food critics were merited. Then they took a cab back to the Carlyle for the late show. Barbara Cook, as usual, was the ultimate cabaret singer. Her music was like foreplay as couples in the audience held hands or nestled closer to each other. Abra had two glasses of wine and was a bit tipsy following the two glasses she had with dinner. Adam was sitting slightly behind her and she knew he was staring at her throughout the show. Once when she took a sip of wine, she looked at him. He looked so intense and serious, unlike his usual jovial self. His eyes were boring through her. She quickly looked away.

She knew decision time was approaching. Adam would take her up to her room and want to stay. She didn't really know how she felt about it. She knew that she didn't want to ruin her friendship with him by adding a sexual component. She didn't understand herself at that moment because she was sexually aroused, maybe from the music, the wine, the cake, the necklace, and the sophisticated couple she had seen in the mirror. On the elevator ride up to her room they didn't look at each other, acting like teenagers on their first date. When Abra tried to unlock the door, she found that her hands were shaking. She kept getting a red light. Finally, Adam took the card and turned it around and got the green light. “I suppose we have a green light to go in. That is if you want me to come in?” His eyes were searching hers eagerly imploring her to say yes.

“Yes, Adam. I do.” She knew she wanted this as much as Adam. She wanted sex to end her evening of glamour. She wasn't sure she wanted sex with Adam because she knew it was opening the door to a relationship she didn't think she wanted. She wanted him to be her friend, not her lover, but it was too late.

They silently kissed. Adam was hard immediately. He was like a 12 year old boy ready and eager for his first lay. Abra joked, “I hate to take off this gorgeous dress. I feel so sexy in it.”

“I think you'll be sexier without it.”

“I’m not going to take my necklace off. I want to wear it with my birthday suit. Do you have a condom? I’m not on the pill.” Even in a moment of heated passion, Abra reverted to her practical self. Adam removed three condoms from his wallet. Obviously, he had big plans for the evening.

She took off her dress and stood before him in her black lace underwear purchased to accompany the dress. They sat on the edge of the bed as Adam tore his clothes off. He kissed every part of her body in an attempt to catch her up to him. She closed her eyes and took off with him. He stopped to put on a condom and as soon as he entered her, he came. “Abra, I’m sorry. I’ve waited so long for this.”

He tenderly explored her body. She was ready and then they came together.

“Abra, thank you. Thank you.”

“Adam, I wasn’t doing you a favor. I wanted this as much as you. To tell you the truth, it’s been a long time since I’ve had sex so I suppose I’m horny.”

“Abra, I don’t know where we’re going from here. I don’t want to talk about our future until you’re ready.”

“I don’t know what to make of this. I don’t know if I’m dazzled by the glamour of your life and this glorious evening. Let’s just keep enjoying the rest of the weekend.”

Adam fell asleep immediately. Abra stared at him. Although he was bald, he had a little boy look about him. He had a slight smile on his face as if he were a child dreaming of his new toys. Even in his sleep he was happy. She smiled too as she thought about the wonderful evening and the passionately sweet sex, something she had never experienced before. She gently kissed his lips and fell asleep. In the morning, she awoke with Adam staring at her.

“Thanks for letting me stay.”

“I didn’t even know you’d stayed. I fell asleep as if I was drugged. I’m sure all that wine had something to do with it. I have such a low tolerance for alcohol. I’m a cheap drunk. Maybe all that physical exercise made me conk out.”

He rose and dressed. “I’m going home to shower and change. I’ll be back as soon as possible and we’ll have brunch and then I suppose you’ll be ready to go back.” He said this with the sadness of a child when the circus is over.

He returned at 11:00 and they had brunch in the hotel restaurant. They talked about everything except their lovemaking. They were a bit standoffish, not knowing how to proceed.

The weather had turned cold and rainy so they said goodbye in the lobby. He kissed her tenderly and said, “Call me tonight when you get home so I know that you made it safely.”

Abra replied, “You know I have driven four hours before without having anyone check on me.” They both laughed at his protectiveness. But maybe that’s what Abra wanted. Someone to worry about her.

She drove home in what seemed like a flash. She relived every minute of the weekend. She knew she had one of the best nights of her life, but was surprised at herself for liking Adam’s

life style. She thought she wasn't the type of person to be impressed by money and luxury. Maybe, it wasn't the life style, maybe it was the protection that Adam was offering. She thought of herself as independent, not needing protection. Maybe she was wrong. Or maybe it was Adam. He had the happiness and goodness genes of the Benjamin family. He exuded warmth and love. She felt happy just to be with him. She never thought of herself as a happy person. She thought she was contented with her life, but now she felt a joyousness that she had never before experienced.

When she got home, she called Adam to let him know that she had arrived safely. They agreed that he would come to visit Abra the next weekend. He was going to help her shop for a condo. This would be her first home purchase. Before she got off the phone, Abra said, "I've decided that I'm going to make an appointment with my gynecologist tomorrow so I can get a prescription for the pill. That is unless you want to continue using those yucky rubber things."

Adam said, "I'll donate my supply to a teen sex clinic"

After she got off the phone, she emailed Beth to tell her what had happened and told her to call when she got a chance. At 9:00 Beth called. "We just got the kids down. I couldn't wait to talk to you. I can't tell you how surprised I am about what happened. You never mentioned Adam in any way other than he's a smart nerdy guy who was part of Miss B's family. I'm absolutely shocked."

"So am I. Do you think I'm getting involved with him because he's rich and he's showering me with things I've never had before?"

"Maybe, but I do think you're getting involved with him because you want a substitute for Miss B. I think you want someone to be there for you like Miss B. was, and there's nothing wrong with that."

"I always pictured going through life as an attractive Edith Benjamin, never marrying. Now I don't know. I have to make sure that Adam knows I don't want children. I can't risk having children."

"Do you think he loves you?"

"Yes, I think he adores me. I've never had anyone look at me the way he does. I think he's loved me since we first met when he was 11."

"Do you think you could love him?"

"I don't know. If you had asked me that before this weekend, I would have said definitely no. He is so good-hearted. He makes me feel deliriously happy. I never felt that before. And the sex was good. Perhaps I could love him in the future. Or, I'm just rationalizing. I don't know."

"Abra, give him a chance. I think he would be so good for you. He would give you a wonderful life."

"I really hate the idea of leading him on if I don't love him. I would hate to hurt him. He's such a good person. I hadn't thought that I could marry someone I don't love or for that matter

marry at all. But maybe I need protection more than I need love. Maybe I'm not Miss Steel Independence. We'll see. We'll see."

Adam planned to visit her the next weekend. When he called her on Thursday, he told her he wouldn't be making a hotel reservation. She told him that he would have to sleep on her sofa. But he didn't, he shared her bed every minute they were in the apartment. As soon as Adam entered the apartment, he kissed Abra and said, "Where's the bedroom?" She pulled him into the bedroom and they partially undressed so that they could make love. When they were finished, they both laughed in appreciation of their passion. Adam said, "That was fast and furious."

Abra took Adam on a tour of her apartment imitating him as he had led her on a tour of his newly renovated apartment. "Here we have the kitchen. Please note the white electric oven with the microwave above. And here is the formica topped counter that leads to the eating area. The kitchen set is the latest model from IKEA. The window looks out on the parking lot so you can see the hundreds of cars parked there. Oh look at that black Mercedes convertible. How did it get there with the Hondas and the Toyotas and Ford pick-up trucks?"

They laughed and Adam said, "Let's get something to eat and come back and resume our real business."

"You're only interested in my body. You don't care about my mind."

"You're right. Let's go to the supermarket and stock up on food for the weekend so I can get to know your mind better."

When they got back to Abra's apartment, Adam said, "I forgot something. I brought you a little gift." He gave her a beautifully wrapped package that was obviously a cd. She asked why? It wasn't her birthday again. Like a child, he answered, "Just because." She tore off the wrapping to find a Barbara Cook cd.

She said, "You want me to remember the Carlyle. How can I forget it? Cook's great for getting in the mood for making love. Let me play it." They never heard the music. They were too immersed in each other. By the time they got around to unpacking the groceries, the cold foods were warm.

After supper they got into bed and talked until 2 AM sharing their lives and their secrets. Adam said, "O.K. First secret. Abra, you were responsible for me masturbating as a kid."

She screamed, "What? How?"

"I fell in love with you when I was 11. All I had to do was think of you and I'd get an erection. I'd close my eyes and picture you, especially your breasts. I watched those breasts grow every time I would see you and all I could think of was touching them. Most teenagers fantasize about movie stars or pop stars when they jerk off. For me, it was Abra Ginberg.

My parents knew that I had a crush on you because I was always asking when we could go to Aunt Edith's for a Sunday brunch. Then I would casually ask if you were going to be there. If they said no, I'd think of an excuse not to go. I also think my mom knew about my bedtime



activities although I tried to clean them up, but I'm sure she didn't know you were the object of my affection."

"What a normal boy you were. I always thought you only cared about studying and getting straight A's. Now I learn that you had other things on your mind. Well, only one other thing. You weren't this little genius. Well, you were a sexed-crazed little genius. I knew you had a crush on me, but I thought it was a harmless boyhood crush, not fantasies of ravaging me."

The next day it rained so they decided not to look at condos. They only got out of bed to go to the bathroom and to eat breakfast at 10 and lunch at 3. Abra had never spent a full day in bed with a man before. In fact, she had never spent a full day in bed alone even when she had the flu. She and Adam got to know each other physically in an intimate way that she had never experienced before. She had had sex with a total of four men in her life, but had never really explored a man's body. She openly shared every inch of her body with him. But she also openly shared her past. "Adam, I've never told anyone all the horrors of growing up in the Ginzberg house, not even your aunt. I want you to know all about me." She told him the story of taking her mother to Dr. Weisberg and her urine soaked hands. She never thought she would share this with anyone, especially a man, but here she was detailing the traumatic event to Adam as if he were her priest at confession.

Other memories that she had suppressed came bubbling up. She had forgotten how she had to take care of Rachel when she menstruated. She changed her pads because Rachel couldn't get it right. Both she and Rachel bled heavily, but Abra was able to contain her bleeding with tampons and pads. She couldn't use tampons with Rachel so she had to constantly change her pads. After two years of changing Rachel's pads, Rachel finally learned how to care for herself. Two years of blood soaked hands and constant washing until her skin chaffed. Suddenly it occurred to her that Miriam never menstruated. She must have had her tubes tied when she had Noah. It had taken Abra all this time to realize this. No wonder there were no more retarded Ginzberg kids.

She tried to think of where she learned about menstruation and sex. Miriam never said a word about these taboo subjects. Abra must have gathered most of her knowledge from her fifth grade sex education class. She picked up the seamier side from TV and books. Not from movies, she never went to the movies.

Her memories of Noah were not as vivid as those of Rachel although she did as much caring for him. She had to wipe his bottom when he had bowel movements. He couldn't seem to get himself clean. His underwear was always clotted with poop unless Abra wiped him. It's one thing to wipe a two year old's bottom, it's another to wipe a ten year old's bottom. But, he, too, finally learned to clean himself.

Abra shared these horrendous experiences with Adam. She held nothing back. As she described them she pictured Rachel and Noah. She learned back against the backboard of the bed and stared straight ahead and pictured herself doing these things. So many memories were

located in that tiny bathroom with Rachel or Noah on the toilet seat and Abra sitting on the edge of the tub doing what she had to do. How she hated that bathtub. There were always pubic hairs around the drain. She would sop each one up with toilet paper before she had a shower. The only place she hated more was the laundry room in the basement of the building. Jacob did the laundry but as his back deteriorated, she was forced to carry the laundry basket filled to the brim up and down the steps. They would load two or three machines and come back after the washes were finished to transfer them to dryers. As she got older, Jacob made her do this alone. She was petrified of the dark, damp, dirty basement. As soon as she set the laundry basket down, she would peek behind the boxes and anything tall enough to conceal a murderer/rapist. She held the sharp knife she always took to the basement in front of her ready to lunge at any lurker. She knew she would not hesitate to stab anyone who tried to attack her on her dreaded travels to the bowels of the building.

“Believe it or not, there were also some tender times, but only with the kids, never with my parents. I read books about animal sounds that Rachel loved. We were always quacking and mooing at each other. They also helped me study, not that they were aware of it. I’d memorize my Spanish vocabulary and I’d say a word in English and then in Spanish, and then I’d have them repeat the words. It was funny what they produced. I’d say ‘pencil, el lapiz,’ and they would say ‘pencil lapi,’ or I’d say ‘desk, el escritorio,’ and they’d say ‘deskrio.’ Ya’know I dwell on the horrible memories, but there’s one I don’t like to think of because it was beautiful and when I think of it my heart aches. We had an evening ritual that we never missed. We’d get into their bed. They slept together. I would put one arm around Rachel and the other around Noah and the three of us would rock back and forth as I sang “Twinkle, twinkle little star. How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high. Like a diamond in the sky.” They wouldn’t go to sleep without me singing this to them at least ten times. I sang it the night before I left. They never heard it again and I’m sure they never slept soundly again.”

She was outside her body viewing these memories like a TV show. Adam stared at her as if he were watching a war movie – disbelief at the horror of it all. He wanted to hold her and comfort her, but he saw that she was in another time and place and didn’t want to come back.

And then their talk moved on to the good things in their lives. Adam told her about his years at Yale and Columbia and how he was happiest when he was learning. Abra described her late night communion with her books and how she was happiest when she studied. She told him that she even studied on Saturday nights and had to be forced to go out with Beth and their friends. Doing well in school was important to both of them, but especially to Abra because it proved that she wasn’t a Ginzberg.

Then it was time for Adam to confess. “Abra, I’ve had everything I’ve ever wanted up to now, a great job, tickets to my sports events, and lots of good friends. But now I want something I don’t know if I can have. You know it’s you.

When I first met you 20 years ago, I fell in love with you, but it was your looks. I thought you were the most beautiful girl in the world. You were tall and well-built, unlike my short, pudgy family. You had this long face, unlike our fat Benjamin face. I fell in love with your unJewish turned-up nose and black eyes and black hair and smooth skin. To 11 year old Adam you were perfection. You still are. As I got to know you, I fell in love with your outgoing personality. But most of all I was captivated by your aura of mystery. No one talked to me about your family. I knew it was a taboo subject, but gradually I learned the facts about your life. And I loved you for overcoming what you were born into.

Abra, I fell in love with you when I was 11, but I loved you as a kid. Now, I've fallen in love with you again, but as an adult. I know you don't want to hear any of this, but I can't keep it in. I've never loved anyone else. I always knew I would marry in the future, but I never dared to dream that I might marry you. Now I'm allowing myself to dream."

Abra was overwhelmed by his feelings for her. This was a man who knew everything about her and loved her for who she was. She never dreamed that someone would love her so completely.

"Adam, I thought I knew what I wanted out of life. I thought I wanted to have a life like Aunt Edith's. I didn't need anyone. Now I don't know what I want. You've overwhelmed me. I can't believe I've told you all about my life growing up. I never did that before. So much has changed in the last few weeks. All my dreams are morphing into dreams of you. Adam, is it because I need to be protected that I want you?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's not really me or who I think I am. Who am I? I'm the Ginzberg who lucked out and got two recessive genes for intelligence and niceness. But I have a gene pool filled with dirty genes, genes for retardation and meanness. Adam I could never have children. I couldn't perpetuate those genes. You're so lucky to have clean genes for intelligence and niceness. I could never pollute the Benjamin gene pool."

"Abra, let's not talk about that now. Let's talk about us and our future as two people and not creators of embryos."

"I don't want you to think that everything is genes. It's also the world you create. I see the world that Beth and Tom have created for Clay and Zack. It's a world of smiles. You were brought up in a world of smiles. I think I could create a world of smiles, but I don't know. I would be so petrified of being like Miriam and creating a real Ginzberg."

"Abra, you can't be a real Ginzberg.. You've created Abra Berg and that is who you are." He really wanted to say, "And someday you'll be Abra Benjamin," but he didn't. Not yet.

They ordered Chinese for Saturday supper and had cheerios and oranges for Sunday breakfast. At about 1:00, Abra said, "I suppose we need to shower and dress. Adam, I have never spent a whole weekend in bed with a man. Have you?"

“Never with a man. No seriously, I haven’t either. I think I can get used to this. It saves on clothes and cleaning bills.”

“I’m going to shower.”

“Can I join you?”

“That’s another first for me. A coed shower. I’m becoming a wild woman.”

They both dreaded Adam’s 5:00 Sunday departure. “Adam, it’s still raining. Be sure you call me when you get back.” They both laughed at her turning the tables on him. Four hours later, the phone rang. “I’m safe.” They laughed and agreed to talk the next day. Abra heard the words, “I’m safe,” and thought they applied to her when she was with Adam. She was safe with Adam.

Monday morning started with the usual intense work schedule so Abra had little time to think about Adam. But whenever she had a free moment, Adam’s face would appear before her. And he would be smiling with his happiness and goodness shining through. She wore her diamond necklace under her sweater. She didn’t want anyone to see it. Whenever she thought of him, she touched it. When she got home Monday night, her message light was blinking. It was Adam saying that she should call him as soon as she got in. She called him and he said, “I missed you all day. It was hard for me to concentrate. I kept thinking of you naked and open to me. I was afraid I would get hard just sitting at my desk. My secretary Cindy would love to tell everyone in the office about her boss, the pervert.”

“Adam, I missed you too. I was so busy, but when I wasn’t actually engaged with kids, I pictured your face.”

“Oh great. My ugly face. Just what I want to hear.”

“No, your good face.”

On Tuesday, she went to Anne’s office to see Wendy. She was surprised to see Mrs. Taylor there since Consuela usually drove Wendy to her appointments. Mrs. Taylor told Abra that she wanted to talk to her privately before Wendy’s session. So Wendy watched a video in the outer office. As soon as Abra closed the door, Mrs. Taylor said, “We’re placing Wendy in a residential school for kids with special needs in Pennsylvania. We can’t handle her at home anymore. She’s driving us crazy. She’s ruining Scot’s life. He can’t bring any friends over because they think he has a loony sister. The last time he had friends over Wendy was in the family room playing with paper dolls. I let her do that in her room, but only there. The boys made fun of her. Scott was so embarrassed.

And we can’t do all the things we want to do as a family. We have a week planned at an all-inclusive resort in Jamaica and I really don’t know what we’re going to do with Wendy. She doesn’t like going to the beach or sitting by the pool. If we take her, she’ll sit in the room by herself and watch TV.

We're really not meeting her needs. She's getting worse, not better. She never talks and when she does, she doesn't make sense. She's failing in school even though it's a special school. We even tried Prozac and that didn't work."

"Wait a second. You gave Wendy Prozac? You never told me that."

"Well, we knew you'd say she's not depressed so she didn't need it. Our doctor wanted to give it a try. He says he thinks drugs may be the only answer. She needs better schooling and more intense therapy and different meds. I think if she's in a controlled setting like a residential school, they could try new meds and monitor to see what works. I don't think the soft stuff like counseling and education are really going to help her in the last analysis. I think she needs the right meds to make a difference.

We just can't have her at home anymore. We haven't told Wendy because we know she won't want to go. She'll think that we're trying to get rid of her because she doesn't fit into our family. And let's face it, it's true. We need to focus on Scott. We've neglected him because of Wendy. He says he hates her and wants her out of the house. Abra, I want you to tell her about this. She really likes you. In fact, I think you're the only person in the world she likes. If you tell her this, she'll listen to you. She'll go without a fight. Maybe you can even drive up there with us."

Abra was dumbfounded. Mrs. Taylor had never mentioned residential schooling for Wendy before. She certainly didn't want to be the one to tell Wendy. That would be inappropriate. She knew that only Mr. and Mrs. Taylor could tell Wendy such devastating news. She also hadn't realized how much they wanted to get rid of Wendy.

"Mrs. Taylor, I'm not going to tell Wendy that you're sending her away. It is not my job to do this. Furthermore, I don't think you're doing the right thing. You're getting rid of Wendy because she doesn't fit into your life style. It may be unprofessional for me to say this, but I think that's cruel. I can't be party to this. Please let's talk this over. Why don't you and your husband see me Saturday morning and we can brainstorm alternatives. I know Wendy needs more intense treatment, but sending her to this school is not the solution. Not now. Not like this. Not just throwing her out. Please let's meet on Saturday."

Mrs. Taylor reluctantly agreed that she and her husband would meet with Abra at 10:00. Abra mused to herself, "Here's an interesting situation. The parents are trying to throw their kid out instead of the kid trying to run away. Quite the opposite of my life."

The session with Wendy was unusually quiet. Abra suspected that Wendy knew there were significant changes coming in her life, but she didn't know what they might be. She was too frightened to ask Abra what she had discussed with her mother. They talked about a boy on a sitcom on the Disney Channel that she liked and hoped to marry someday and move to California with him. Abra looked at this 13 year old and saw the 7 year old child within. She did seem to be regressing.

When their session was over, she left a note for Anne who was seeing a client telling her to call her at home. Before she left the building, Anne came out of her office. She said that her client was sick and she had been doing paperwork. Abra told her about the Taylors' decision to send Wendy away and their use of Prozac without telling her. Anne told Abra that she thought she did the right thing. It would be unethical to support them unless they tried less drastic alternatives and Abra certainly should not be the one to tell Wendy she was being sent away. They had to realize that Wendy was as important as Scott and their social lives, but they both knew this was a realization that they would never accept. Abra ended their conversation by saying, "I think she bought me for Wendy. I was Wendy's baby sitter and friend. That hurts."

It was 9:00 o'clock when she got home emotionally drained from a full work day followed by the confrontation with Mrs. Taylor. She went to the kitchen to put a TV dinner in the microwave. Then she called Adam. He was at a basketball game at the Garden. "Oh Adam, I'm sorry I'll talk to you later."

"Don't be silly. I can talk and watch."

"Adam, I can't come up to New York this weekend because I have a very important meeting about a client Saturday morning. I think I'll also have my period. I expect it on Thursday and I'm always very regular. Maybe we can skip this weekend. You know I don't want to, but I just can't get away."

"I understand. We'll postpone it until the following weekend. But I'll probably go crazy without seeing you for that long."

Abra did get her period on Thursday. On Saturday at 10:00 she prepared to meet with the Taylors. At 11:00 it was obvious that they wouldn't be coming. They had not called because the matter was closed. They were sending Wendy away and they would not be dissuaded by Abra

After 11:00, Abra went to the supermarket, the cleaners, and Target for essentials. She got back to her apartment at about 2:00. Occupying the parking spot closest to her front entrance was a black Mercedes convertible with a New York license tag. Abra was so happy that Adam hadn't listened to her. She needed to talk to him and have him hold her. She rapped on the driver's window and said, "Just in time to help me carry the groceries up. By the way, remind me to get you a key."

As soon as they got in the apartment, they kissed tenderly. "Abra, I couldn't be away from you even if we can't have sex and you're busy. I just need to be with you even to just sleep next to you and look at you."

"So you do like my mind as much as my body."

Abra led Adam into the bedroom and unzipped his pants. She pushed him on the bed and tenderly kissed his penis until it was at attention. She had never done this before. She had always thought that it was perverse, but now she thought it was an act of love.

Every time Adam saw Abra, he gave her a gift. One weekend it was a book by Geraldine Brooks, one of her favorite authors. Another weekend it was two dozen yellow roses. She asked “Why do you bring me presents all the time?”

He responded, “Because you give me the best present every time I see you. You give me yourself. That way we’re even.”

This weekend, he brought her a can of Dr. Brown diet cream soda covered with heart decals. Along with the Dr. Brown, he brought her a handwritten poem. “Ok, believe it or not I was browsing in the sports section at Barnes and Noble and I found this book of love poem mistakenly put in the wrong section. So I decided to look through it and I found this poem that fit us. I’m getting really stingy like you. I didn’t buy the book, I just copied the poem onto my blackberry. This shows that I’m really a nerdy doofus.

Anyhow Dante said these words to Beatrice and they fit what’s in my heart. I hope you don’t mind me getting so mushy.”

Abra read the words aloud.

In that book which is

My memory...

On the first page

That is the chapter when

I first met you

Appear the words...

Here begins a new life.

Abra folded the paper and put it in her bra next to her pulsating heart.

“Mr. Doofus, I’ll save this forever.”

## CHAPTER 11

For the next eight weeks, Abra and Adam took turns visiting each other and every visit strengthened their relationship. When they were in New York, they had a whirlwind of social activities, going to shows, or out with Adam’s friends. When they were in Fairfax, they spent most of the weekends in bed.

To prove to Abra that she could like sports, Adam took her to a Knicks game. Because she thought she might get bored, she brought a book in her purse, but she found the fast-paced

game exciting and people watching entertaining, especially the celebrities. Adam told her that if she read a book at the game, he would burn it right at their seats, even though he didn't have matches or a lighter. He'd find two sticks and rub them together. Adam was a yeller like most of the people in the audience. He screamed things to the refs that he would never say to anyone face-to-face. Toward the end of the tied game, Abra joined the yelling. On the way back to his apartment, Abra said, "Ok. I liked the game. I suppose I like basketball. Now we'll have to check out baseball and football. How about crossword puzzles? There's a competition in that area here in New York. No, I suppose that would be really boring. You'd end up bringing a book."

Another weekend they had dinner with Jeff and Roy at their glamorous apartment in a glass tower on the East Side. Beth had emailed Jeff that Abra was in New York frequently because of a new boyfriend so Jeff emailed Abra and they made plans to get together. Abra was overwhelmed by the splendor of the building and the apartment. Jeff, being a much sought after interior designer by the rich and famous, had created a work of art out of six rooms towering over Manhattan. Jeff, being a fabulously successful stock broker, provided the funds for Jeff's creation. They even had a butler who served dinner which had been cooked by their personal chef. Abra laughed to Jeff, "I can't believe that the big man on campus of Jackson College is now the big man of Manhattan glitzerati. You've come a long way little brother. And the butler and chef are really off the top. I know that Beth hasn't visited, but has Linda been here?"

"Yes, and she was in a daze. She kept saying over and over, 'What would your father have thought of all this?' I really don't know, but he would have been happy for me because I'm so happy. I'd be happy with Roy even if we were poor. Oh shit, that's a lie. I would still love him, but living like this makes it a hell of a lot easier."

Even Adam, who knew many of the rich and famous, was impressed. Roy and Adam found that they knew a number of people in common, and that some of Roy's associates and friends had used Adam's law firm. After a warm evening of Jeff's stories about clients and their outrageous demands, including where to place a stuffed menagerie of former pets for a famous fading actress, they parted with hugs and kisses and promises to attend their August wedding in Provincetown. As they were leaving Jeff whispered in Abra's ear, "I've never seen you so happy. You're glowing. He's a great guy. Treasure him."

Abra knew that they couldn't maintain their weekend relationship. She had to make a decision about the future and she had to make it soon because she needed to inform the Fairfax schools that she wouldn't be back for the next school year so they could get a replacement for her. She hated feeling pressured, but she couldn't resign after the start of the school year. She felt that would be unethical, and Abra always prided herself on doing the right thing.

In her usual methodical way, Abra made a list of the reasons she should move to New York and the reasons she shouldn't move. The "shouldn't move" list included:



1. I don't like New York City. It's a nice place to visit, but I don't like the idea of living there. It's congested, dirty, noisy, expensive, and impersonal.
2. I hate to leave my job. I love it and the people I work with.
3. I'll never find a job as good as the one I have now.
4. I'll have to get an apartment in New York and rents are astronomical.
5. There's no cheap shopping and everything is grossly overpriced.

There was only one item on the "should move" list:

1. I love Adam and can't live without him.

The next weekend was Abra's turn to go to New York. On Thursday, she called Adam and said, "There's something we need to discuss tomorrow."

Adam said, "Tell me now."

Abra somberly said, "I can't. We need to talk face-to-face. There's a lot of stuff we have to talk about."

When Abra got to Adam's apartment the next day, she unlocked the door and found Adam sitting on the sofa with his face in his hands. When he looked up, she saw that something terrible had happened. She ran to him, "Adam, what happened? Is something wrong with your mom or dad? Are you sick?"

"Abra, are you breaking up with me?"

"What? Are you crazy?" She started laughing hysterically and threw her arms around him. "What made you think that?"

"When you said you had to talk to me about something important, I thought the worst. My high school fat boy insecurity is always just below the surface. I don't know what I'd do if you broke up with me. It scares me to think of life without you."

"You idiot. I want to make plans for moving here."

"Oh my God. That's the best news in the world." Every trace of anxiety on his face disappeared instantly.

"I need to decide soon about moving here. I can't put it off any longer. If I'm going to quit my job, I have to do it now so they can get a replacement. I made a list of reasons why I should move to New York and reasons why I shouldn't." She read the shouldn't move list first, and then she said, "There's only one item on the should move list. I love Adam and I can't live without him."

"Oh Abra, you don't know how happy you've made me. I've been crazy all day not knowing what you had to tell me. Did you do this to torture me on purpose?"

"No. I'm not the most rational person right now, just thinking of all the things I have to do. It's not easy changing everything in your life."

"Abra, there's nothing I could do about you living in New York. It's where I have to live to make my living. I grew up here and it's home. My family and friends are here. I can't imagine

living anyplace else. I think with time you'll come to like it, maybe not love it, but like it. We can go other places whenever we have time off. You love the ocean so we can go to my folks' place in Montauk on weekends. I know you love Sullivan's Island and we can go there every summer. And you can certainly drive to New Jersey to shop at your beloved cheap stores.

I can't guarantee you'll get a job that you'll love as much as Fairfax, but my father and I have a lot of contacts in the city and I think we can help you find something. And the high rents can be taken care of by having you move in with me. If we're going to start our new life, we need to share everything from the beginning."

Adam cradled Abra's face in his hands and said, "I was thinking that Aunt Edith's death led to something very good. Us. We wouldn't have met again if she hadn't died at this time in our lives. We would have gone on living our separate existences. She brought us together."

"You're right. If she died years from now, you'd be married to one of the Jewish American professional princesses your mom would have found for you and I would be further entrenched in my solitary life. God took someone precious from both of us, but He gave us something else precious, each other."

She hugged him tightly, and said mournfully, "Adam, this is really a hard time for me. Please be patient with me. I've always been so organized and sure of what I wanted and how to get it. Now things are changing at supersonic speed. I'm not just moving here. I'm changing who I am and what I want out of life. I've prided myself on being an independent woman who didn't need anyone now or ever. Last year if you'd asked me who I was, I would have said I was a psychologist. That was the core of my identity. With this move, I will no longer be independent. I will be part of you and you will be part of me. Does that make sense? I'll still be a psychologist, but it will be my job, not my identity. My identity will be Abra slash Adam and yours will be Adam slash Abra. We will be one and I will be part of that one. I just can't believe what has happened to me and how I've changed because of you. In just a few months my world turned upside down. My heart is fluttering as I say these words. I think I'm having a heart attack"

Adam laughed his jovial laugh, "Abra, you're not having a heart attack. I know you're changing yourself for me. I don't have to change for you. I've always held a place open in my heart for someone to love and share my life. You've come along and filled it. You didn't set aside a place for someone in your heart so I'm barging in and staking out a claim."

They hugged and then Adam said, "We need to get going to my folks." They were having Friday night dinner at Adam's parents' apartment. As they rode in a cab to their place, Adam asked, "Abra, can we tell my parents that you'll be moving here?"

"Of course. They'll find out anyhow when they see me hanging around your apartment all the time."

"Our apartment. I'm moving into Aunt Edith's apartment next month and I want you to live with me. Miss Cheapskate, it's a waste of money for you to rent an apartment, but if you

really want to live separately at first, you can rent a place. In fact, you could probably get my place since I have to sublet it.”

“No, I want to live in our apartment. Let’s have Murray open the door for us”

When they got to Seymour and Arlene’s, they saw that Arlene had set the table with her best china and had the Friday night candles waiting to be lit. Arlene said the Friday night blessing and then served an elaborate meal centered around roasted chicken. Arlene appeared nervous. She was chattering nonstop and forgot where she put the special dessert spoons for the rice pudding she had made. Abra realized that Arlene’s mother’s intuition was showing.

When Seymour filled the wine glasses, Adam raised his and said, “I’d like to present a toast. To Abra, who will be moving to New York.”

They all said, “L’Chaim,” and clinked glasses.

Arlene piped in, “I knew it. I just knew it. A mother knows. Abra, we’re so happy. We know that Adam loves you very much and we hope you love him as much.”

Abra stared tenderly at Adam and said, “I do.”

“Can we make an engagement party?”

“Who said we’re engaged? We’re not ready for that step. First Abra will move to New York and then decide,” said Adam jovially.

Abra said, “Arlene, when the time is right, we’ll want lots of parties, but I don’t think it’s time yet. We’ve only been seeing each other for a few months. Please don’t hurry us. Seymour and Arlene, I want you to know all about my family. I know you might think I’m not good enough for Adam once you know all about them, and I would understand.”

Seymour replied, “Abra, we’ve known about your family since we met you and never, never have we ever thought that you’re not good enough for Adam.”

“Knowing my family of retarded people, you still want Adam to marry me?”

“He’d be marrying you, not your family.”

“It’s not the same for me. I would be marrying Adam and also the both of you.”

Arlene said, “I’ve always wanted a daughter and hopefully I’ll have one.” Abra looked at red helmeted Arlene and knew she could never love her like a mother, but she knew she could be very fond of this kind woman. Arlene went to Abra and hugged her tightly. “He’s the center of our life. We want only the best for him. If he loves you Abra, we love you.” Abra thought to herself, “What would my life have been like if I had parents who loved me like they loved Adam?”

As soon as Abra got back to Virginia, she called Beth and told her that she had decided to move to New York.

“I am so happy for you Abra. I feel that you’re doing the right thing. Remember when you left home to make a new start. Well Act 1 of your life was the Abra Ginzberg years and Act 2 is the Abra Berg years. I think Act 3 is about to open and will be the Abra Benjamin years.”

“Abra Benjamin. You know I’m going to marry Adam so I can keep my initials. A-B.”

During the week Abra met with Charlie and Anne to tell them about her move to New York. They were happy that she had found love, but they would miss her. She was a good psychologist and a good friend, and it would be hard to fill her shoes.

The next weekend was Adam's turn to visit Abra in Virginia. It was also the week of Adam's 32nd birthday. Now it was time for her to plan Adam's birthday. She wanted it to be as special as her party had been. She went on line to find books on sports. She had checked the books in his apartment the weekend before to make sure that he didn't have any of the books she found of interest. She bought books on each of the teams he fanatically followed and a book on sports statistics. Hopefully, he didn't know all the facts in the book already. For his love of jazz, she got him Oscar Peterson and Herbie Hancock cds. She had also checked his cabinet of cds and knew he didn't have them. Then she bought him a book of love sonnets by Shakespeare. She wanted them to take turns reading them aloud to each other. She hoped he wouldn't think this was too sentimental, but who better than Shakespeare could express love. Finally, she got the mushiest card she could find in the Hallmark store. She decorated her apartment with Happy Birthday signs and balloons. The Safeway cake she ordered had "Happy birthday Adam" surrounded by tiny figures of basketball players and a hoop.

When Adam arrived on Friday night, he unlocked the door and found Abra holding the cake with the candles ablaze. She had watched for his car to pull up and when she heard him on the steps, she lit the candles. Adam's face exploded with joy. Abra sang Happy Birthday and then he blew out the candles. She asked if they could eat the cake later and instead open his presents. She had elaborately gift wrapped each gift so it took him some minutes to disengage the bows, ribbons, and paper. He kvelled over each present saying it was exactly what he wanted. "Abra, I've never had such wonderful presents. I know how you labored over deciding about each of these. I started the schmaltzy poems with my Dante poem and now you're getting back at me with a whole book. Let me reserve judgment on these Shakespeare sonnets. I didn't particularly like my Shakespeare course at Yale, but maybe you and he can convince me that he can say how I feel better than I can. You've made me so happy to be 32. Now there's only a three year difference between us. I'm catching up to you."

The rest of the weekend was spent laying out tentative plans for her move and her search for a new job. They decided that mid-June would be a good time for her to move. Hopefully, that would give her time to get a job for the next school year. As Abra was making a list, she said to Adam, "I've added some new to-dos for my list. I'm selling all my furniture. I don't think I'll need any of it if I'm going to move into Aunt Edith's apartment."

"It's not Aunt Edith's apartment. It's our apartment. I wish you could have been involved in the remodeling plans so you would feel like it's really your apartment. Although I have to admit my mom did make a lot of the decisions. I'm not interested in bedspreads and curtains and towels. She spent days picking just the right towels and pots at Bloomingdale's. She spent so much time there, they were going to charge her rent."

“The walls and floors and furniture aren’t going to make me feel like I belong there. It’s what happens between us. Anyhow, I’ve never had an interest in house things either, but maybe that’ll change when I know the apartment is our home.”

Abra placed ads to sell her furniture and household goods on Craig’s List. She spent most of her evenings meeting with buyers who were glad to pay her price for her unblemished, clean furniture, and she was glad to have them cart away her belongings.

She was resigning on June 15<sup>th</sup> after six wonderful years at Fairfax. She hated to leave the school system, her school, the kids, and her colleagues. These six years were a period when she felt a sense of personal fulfillment in her job and a sense of self sufficiency that she could manage her life.

There were good-bye parties planned for her by the teachers at Black’s Run and her fellow psychologists. Anne threw a garden party for Abra’s friends to say farewell to her and hello to Adam. Abra was especially eager for Adam to meet Anne and Charlie, two people who meant so much to her over the last six years. Anne lived in a spacious home in rural Loudon County. The weather was perfect, so most of the evening was spent in her backyard watching fireflies dart out of the woods behind her house and shooing the flies away from the food. Anne had a co-hostess, Mai, who socialized with everyone and even stayed up until everyone left at 10:00. Adam and his sweet personality and booming laughter charmed Abra’s friends. Abra felt like she was showing off a new acquisition. She beamed with pride each time she looked at Adam.

Beth and Tom came up from Richmond for the party. Fortunately, Linda and her new boyfriend were able to baby sit with Clay and Zack. The next morning, the four met for brunch. Abra was eager for the two people she loved most in the world to like one another. Everyone knew the agenda for the brunch...have Adam and Beth get to know each other. Adam said, “Beth, we’re being tested. Abra wants us to like each other so let’s start out by putting her at ease and say we like each other and get on with getting to know each other.” Everyone laughed and followed his orders. At 3:00, they reluctantly parted. Beth and Abra went off to a corner and hugged. Beth said, “He’s a gem. You both are so right for each other. Let me know the date as soon as you set it. I need to get motivated to start a diet so I can squeeze into a size 12 matron of honor dress.”

Early June was a hectic time with Abra packing her belongings and finishing up all the paperwork for her school cases. She had no contact with the Taylor’s since the time when Mrs. Taylor announced that they were sending Wendy to a residential school. She often wondered about Wendy, but had no way of knowing how she was doing. She probably would never get closure on Wendy. She would be another open-ended story of a kid whose life she touched for a short period of time. Part of the problem with her job was that she didn’t get to see if the kids she worked with had happy endings to their lives.

On Wednesday night after she got home from the gym, her message light was blinking. She pressed the play button and heard a message that changed her life forever.

“Hello, this is Amy Forbes. I’m a reporter for the New York Post. I’m looking for an Abra Ginzberg and I’ve been told that her name is now Abra Berg. I’m writing an article about her parents’ law suit against the city. Please call me back at ....”

Abra played the message again to make sure she had heard it correctly. She had been outed. “Now it’s happened. Everyone will find out that I’ve lived a lie. Adam, my Adam, please don’t let it affect us. I can’t lose you.”

Strangely, she was calm. Now she was glad that months ago Adam had warned her that this might happen. Unconsciously, she had mentally prepared herself. She immediately dialed Adam’s number.

Adam saw Abra’s number on his caller ID, and said, “Do you want to give me a goodnight kiss?”

“Oh Adam, the worst thing in the world has happened. I’ve been exposed. I got a message on my phone from a reporter for the Post saying she was going to write an article about my family. Of course, she’ll portray me as the evil daughter who deserted her family.”

“Abra, this is NOT the worst thing in the world. Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it. Give me her phone number. I’ll tell her I’m your attorney and that you will not cooperate with her in any way.”

“That won’t stop her from writing the article.”

“No, it won’t. But it will keep you out of it as much as possible. She can get factual information like your job and where you live. But she can’t get the personal stuff from you. She wants the juicy stuff about why you left and you’re not going to give it to her.”

“Adam will this affect our relationship? Do you still want me to live with you? If this reporter finds out about you, she’ll print your name in the article. That would be horrendous.”

“Why? Why would the world knowing that I’m your lover matter? Do you think people would think less of me? Do you think it would affect my business? You’re not being rational.”

“No. This is one thing I can never be rational about. The Ginzbergs are my Achilles heel.”

Abra was up late into the evening thinking of the people that she needed to tell about her past. First there was Charlie. The next morning she stopped by his office as soon as she got to work. “Hey Charlie, I need to see you about something important. It’s personal. Can we meet for lunch one day this week?”

“I’m free today. I’d love to go out for lunch. What a treat for me. I’m getting out of this building. Yeah!! Meet me at noon in the parking lot.”

They lunched outdoors at a local eatery. First they talked about the progress that Joan was making in her cancer treatment. She was in remission and gaining her strength. They were planning an Alaskan cruise in August to celebrate her improved health. Finally, Charlie said, “OK. What’s up? I can’t wait anymore. Are you pregnant?”

“No, I’m not pregnant. Charlie, it’s my past. I lied to you about my family. My parents aren’t dead. They’re alive and live in New York City. There will be an article about me and my

family in the New York Post.” She proceeded to tell him about her family and her first life as Abra Ginzberg and her second as Abra Berg. Then she told him about Rachel’s death.

After her lengthy confession, Charlie leaned back and said, “You know you never struck me as having dead parents. I always knew there was something else in your past. You were this mystery woman. I suppose you didn’t show enough grief for dead parents. I thought maybe you had been severely abused as a child and indeed you were. You were emotionally abused. You were prevented from having a childhood. You became an adult at a tender age.

You spent a lot of time with Joan talking about life and death and never talked about the death of your parents. We both wondered about that. We never asked because you sent a strong message not to go there. With all the stuff we had going on in our lives, we didn’t have it in us to find out about your past. We were too worried about Joan’s future.

I think you’ll feel a lot better with everyone knowing so you don’t have to be so vigilant about hiding your past. You can live in the present and start thinking more about your wonderful future with Adam.

Abra, did you ever think of what you would do as a psychologist if there was a girl in our school with problems like you had? How would you help her?”

“No, I never did. That’s an interesting question. I certainly don’t think a psychologist could have helped me. I was coping psychologically. I really was never depressed. I was unhappy at home, but that was to be expected. I was happy at school so my life was not all bad. There were islands of brightness. I can’t even say that I had an unhappy childhood. I had an unhappy childhood at home. When I was at home, I was on automatic pilot, doing what had to be done, but not thinking about what else I could be doing, like going to the movies with friends or being on the soccer team. I really tried not to think about all that I was missing in life.

I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t done so well in school. I wouldn’t have had a way out unless I had another talent, like sex. I also don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t been such a docile child. No, docile isn’t the right word, maybe responsible is better. I took the initiative in running the house, but I did so without every complaining. I just knew what I had to do and I did it. I didn’t expect anyone else to help. I accepted that the Ginzberg world was on my shoulders.

I don’t think a social worker could have helped either. I can’t see a situation where I would have been removed from the house. There was no physical or sexual abuse. There was emotional abuse, but that wouldn’t be grounds for removing me, especially when you compare the Ginzberg household with the trillions of families in New York where kids are violently abused. There was no real neglect. I did the food shopping and we managed to eat okay, maybe not nutritionally healthy but we certainly had enough calories. I did the laundry so we didn’t have dirty clothes although I never used bleach and there were permanent stains on everybody’s clothes. I bathed the kids every other day so they weren’t dirty. I took a shower everyday so I was clean. I don’t know about my parents. I don’t think they washed very often,

especially my mother. Frankly, she was schmutzik. I didn't clean the house, but a dirty house is not grounds for neglect or half the kids in America would have to be removed from their homes. I suppose if there had been somebody to come in to clean the house and take care of the kids that might have helped, but I still would have been in charge. I was the only one who could be head of the Ginzberg household. As long as I can remember, I've made lists. I still do. I'm a compulsive Type A list maker. I had my shopping lists for the grocery and the drug store. I had to-do lists for me and for my grandparents. I would give them a list telling them that they had to take Rachel and Noah to get new shoes or they needed to take them to the doctor for their shots. I always knew what had to be done, but I couldn't always do things so I delegated responsibility to my grandparents. I was in charge of the five people in my house as well as my grandparents starting at about age 10, maybe even younger. Jeez. How did I do it?

It certainly wouldn't have helped to break the family up and put us in foster care. That was not a solution. I can't imagine what my life would have been like if I had been in foster care. Although after I left, putting Rachel and Noah in foster care turned out to be the best option but that was because there was no one in charge anymore.

I could have used some friends, but there's no social service for providing friendship. I was so lonely. I had kids that I hung around with at school, but they weren't friends I could talk to. I couldn't talk about my life to anyone. I suppose even if I had a friend, they couldn't possibly understand what I was going through. I remember walking the streets wishing I had someone to talk to. I was a streetwalker searching for a friend, not sex. The only outsider who could have helped was someone to get me out of that house, and fortunately I found such a person. My beloved Edith Benjamin. I suppose there really was no way out. My only alternative was to wait 18 years.

Charlie, are you sure you're not a psychologist instead of a lowly principal? Would you consider it reverse sexual harassment if I hugged you?" They warmly hugged and when she pulled away she saw tears in Charlie's eyes.

"Joan and I will miss you Abra. We've felt so close to you, especially since you gave so much of yourself to help with Joan over the last two years. You gave such comfort to both of us when we scared. Like a daughter would. I've felt a little like your father even though I'm too dark for the part."

"Charlie, you have been like a father to me and I can't thank you enough for your friendship. I will miss you and Joan dearly."

At 4:00 Abra met with Anne at her office. First they discussed Abra's recommendations for Sasha's future therapy. Anne volunteered that she had heard that Wendy was not doing well at the residential school and had become mute. "Anne, do you think we could have done anything to prevent this?"

"No. The Taylors wanted to get rid of her and they did, and now Wendy is paying the price of their rejection. They're the cause of many, if not all, of the problems that Wendy will have in



life, but they'll blame Wendy's Asperger and her low intelligence and the system and everyone else but themselves. You just can't throw away a kid like trash, but the Taylors don't know that."

Then Abra changed the subject to herself. "Anne, I'm going to tell you about my past because there's going to be an article about me and my family in the New York Post. My parents aren't dead as I told you. They're alive in New York." Then she proceeded to tell Anne the same story that she told Charlie a few hours earlier.

Anne, too, wasn't surprised. "I always knew you had a family, but I thought they were criminals or had done something you were trying to hide or they had abused you. There were so many times I wanted to ask you about them, but I felt it might affect our friendship. You had this Berlin Wall around you, and now it's down. You'll be so much better now that your secret is out."

Anne and Charlie had reacted in the same way. They knew her parents weren't dead and that Abra harbored a secret past. Obviously Abra wasn't as good at hiding secrets as she had thought she was. She, too, thought that Abra might have been abused as a child. Her childhood pain must have surfaced enough for sensitive observers to pick it up.

Anne said, "Abra, I took control of my life when I adopted Mai. I knew what I wanted and I went after it. I've achieved a level of happiness and fulfillment that is beyond my wildest dreams. She's my reason for living. You know I'm not an advocate for marriage based on my two disasters, but I think more than anything you need to marry Adam. He'll be your reason for living. He can help you put your past in perspective and give you a glorious future."

"Thanks for the therapy Anne. What a great perk – free therapy." They looked at each other sadly knowing that their friendship would wane with time and distance.

When Abra got home, she called Adam. He said that he called the reporter and told her he was her attorney and that Abra wouldn't be granting any interviews. He asked the reporter how she had gotten Abra's name. She said that when she interviewed Jacob and Miriam they told her that they had a daughter who had deserted them 17 years earlier and that they expected her to turn up as soon as they got the money from the law suits. They figured you would want to get your share of the dough. The reporter asked your name and they gave it to her. Your grandparents knew your changed name and they told your parents years ago. They could have tracked you down if they wanted to, but they didn't want to."

"I can't believe they knew my name all this time. I thought I was hiding from them when they could have found me. They didn't want to find me because there was nothing I could do for them. I lost my usefulness. Rachel and Noah were gone and they didn't need me to take care of them. I can't believe I spent my life hiding from them in plain sight."

The next weekend was the last that they would have together in Virginia. Abra had packed all the things that she was taking to her new life, her clothes, files, mementos, pictures, and electronics, enough to fill a small U-Haul. She had sold or given away most of her dishes, pots

and pans, and furniture. A custodian from school, Jose, was going to move her possessions in the U-Haul she had rented. Jose's wife was going to drive Abra's Honda to New York while Abra drove back with Adam, and then Jose and his wife would drive the empty U-Haul back to Virginia.

After helping Jose load the truck, Adam and Abra went out for a leisurely dinner at a local Chinese restaurant.

"Everything's done. I'm amazed at how little I'm bringing to our merger."

"You have all I want. How do you feel about moving to the apartment?"

"For the age of 14 to 18, it was the place in the world where I was the happiest except for school, so I'm looking forward to it. The only other place I think of with such fondness is that run-down cottage I lived in on Sullivan Island. What opposites! Comfort and beauty vs. discomfort and dilapidation, but both harbored love and friendship. It goes to show it's not what's on the outside that makes a home, it's what people make on the inside."

"Abra, I want to talk about your family. You've got to resolve the issues about them especially now that you're moving to New York. I know you don't want to do this, but I think you must see them if you're going to close the chapter on your past life."

"I don't ever want to see them. I can't bear the thought of it. Why would I want to see them? What would be accomplished?"

"You would tell them that you don't want their money and you don't want anything to do with them. You can't tell them how they made your life hell. They wouldn't understand. They have to think of you as a cruel bitch. They have to blame all their problems on you. It's the only way they can rationalize their abysmal lives. You need to get closure. You didn't see them at the funeral although you wanted to. Well, now's your chance. Abra, I'll go with you. We'll see them for a short period of time so you can tell them that you don't want their money and you don't want any involvement with them. Please think about it. If you want to do it, I'll arrange it."

"Maybe it isn't a big deal. Maybe I have blown this out of proportion."

"Abra, the world doesn't care about your secret. Only you do. You've covered your past up so you wouldn't have to think about it. The secret was more for your benefit than keeping others from knowing about it. Just think about the reaction you've gotten from Charlie and Anne. They knew, but they still respected your wishes to keep your past hidden. Think of the reaction from Beth and the Nelsons. They all knew but loved you too much to force you to admit you were covering up your past. You weren't fooling anyone, but yourself."

She stared into his eyes. He was right. All these years of furtive hiding were to protect herself.

"How did you get so wise? Did they teach a Wisdom 101 course at Yale?" She gently stroked his cheek.

“The article will probably be in the paper in the next week or two. You’ll think that the whole city will be looking at you, but no one will care. Remember, this is New York City we’re talking about.”

“What about you? What happens if they find out about us?”

“Don’t be silly. No one will find out about us and if they do, so what? Have we done anything wrong? Don’t spend your time anticipating terrible things that won’t happen.”

Adam had helped Abra make contacts about two potential jobs, one as a psychologist on the staff of a child study clinic at NYU Medical School and the other as a psychologist at a private school for students with learning and emotional difficulties, kids like Wendy. In both cases, his family knew the directors. Abra was learning the importance of personal contacts in negotiating New York City.

“What about the job interviews? What happens if they find out about me?”

“Nothing will happen. With your training and experience and recommendations, you won’t have any trouble getting a job. Why would anybody care about your past unless you’re a pervert or murderer? They care if you’re a good psychologist who’s competent and responsible. Period.”

“Also, the fact that the head of the clinic and the head of the school know your family doesn’t hurt.”

Abra took a deep breath, and said, “Ok, so let’s plan it for next Saturday. Will you go with me?”

“Of course. I’ll call them and arrange a meeting for next Saturday.”

“That’s too quick with the job interviews and the move. That’s too much”

“If you don’t do it now, it’ll lay in your stomach like a cancer. Settle this and move on. I’ll be there for you every step of the way.”

“I’ll say ok now and if I tell you to cancel, don’t listen to me.”

They returned to the apartment to say good-bye to the walls that had witnessed their falling in love. They were going to a hotel because all the furniture was gone. They slowly walked through the rooms. Abra said, “I’m really scared Adam. I’ve never had so many changes happen in such a short period. A new job. My first and I hope only serious relationship. I have always planned changes in my life and spaced them out. This will be a test to see if I’m as sane and rational as I think I am.”

Adam said, “If you could survive living in the Ginzberg house, you can survive all the good things that are going to happen. The best is yet to come.”

## CHAPTER 12

When they arrived at the apartment on Sunday, Murray greeted them. “Welcome to your new home folks. Let me get your car parked.”

“The U-Haul and Abra’s car should be here at about 11:00. Let us know when they get here. Thanks for being so great to us Murray. You’ve been a gem with helping us move in.” He slipped a bill of unknown denomination in Murray’s hand. Abra had never thought of tipping him. She’d have to ask Adam about this. She had a lot to learn about sharing Adam’s life.

When they got on the elevator Adam handed Abra a key. “Here’s the key to your new home. Should I carry you over the threshold?”

“Do you want a hernia? Anyway, wait until I have a ring on.”

“Does that mean you’re going to marry me?”

“Duh. No, I’m going to adopt you.”

This time Abra had no difficulty using the key to open the door to her new life. Although she had seen the apartment as it was being renovated, it was now complete and it was lovely. The marble floor glistened. She went into the living room and went to the windows and looked out at the park and the river in the distance. She gently touched all the furniture as she strolled through the rooms. Everything was in shades of beige creating a muted brightness and a sense of relaxation. Beige leather couches and chairs, beige marble tables, and taupe curtains. The area rugs were in geometric patterns of browns.

They went into the kitchen where Adam informed her that his mother bought pots and pans and dishes and put them away in the cupboards. He had no idea what they had and where things were. He also told her that Arlene was upset that she bought towels and sheets in masculine colors, but it was before she knew that Abra would be sharing them. She told Adam that she was sure that the new linens they would get for their bridal showers would be less masculine. Abra laughed and said, “I can dry myself with brown towels as well as white towels.”

“Abra, I have a welcome gift for you.”

“Oh Adam. What’s this with all the gifts?”

“You know I wish this were a ring, but I know you’re not ready. I’ll find a good time to surprise you with one, when you’re ready. Like Candid Camera. Here’s something to remember your first day in our home.”

It was obviously a jewelry box. She unwrapped the silver paper, carefully folding it up for possible reuse. On the box was the word Rolex. She opened it up to find a silver watch with diamonds encircling the watch face.

“Do you like it? I got the plainest one I could find so you could wear it to work. I’ll get you another for dress later on.”

She looked at him with disbelief. "A Rolex watch. My God. I always skipped over the Rolex ads in magazines since I couldn't afford one. I couldn't even afford to dream of one. Oh Adam, it's perfect. It's so classy. No more Timexes and Fossils for me. Adam, what do I say when you give me such gifts? I'm speechless."

"I thought a watch would be a good way of marking the beginning of our time together."

She removed her clunky Fossil watch, replacing it with the sleek Rolex. She kept turning her arm to examine it from different perspectives.

"Adam, I've never coveted luxurious things, but I may be changing thanks to you. Can you afford all these expensive presents?"

Adam laughed, "Yes Abra, I can afford them. Remember I'm a tax lawyer. I make lots of money by saving rich people lots of money."

Adam put her overnight bag in the bedroom. "Okay, let's see who gets what dresser space. I've used most of the drawers. I think we're going to need another dresser. And we may have to use the guest room closet for out-of-season clothes. There's a lot of empty space in the bathroom cabinets so I think we'll be alright there. Here's the most important piece of furniture in the place - the bed. Do you want the right or the left side? Once you pick a side, it's yours forever."

Abra plopped down on the right side of the bed. "This is the most comfortable bed I have ever been in. I may spend all my time here."

"Me too."

A buzzer sounded alerting them that Jose had arrived with the U-Haul. They spent the rest of the day unpacking and getting settled. They ordered Chinese for supper since it had started to rain and they didn't feel like going out. Abra looked around. "How long do you think it will take for me to feel at home?"

"I could ask the same question. I've only lived here for a little more than a week. Somehow it doesn't seem like Aunt Edith's apartment until you go into the library. I think that's good, having memories of her but also having a new start."

"I feel a little funny making love here knowing that it was Aunt Edith's bedroom. Is that weird?"

"Yes, it's weird. But it's our apartment now and we can make love wherever and whenever we want. Maybe not the library. Let's try the bed now."

Sunday night Adam fussed about Abra and what she would do alone on Monday morning. He told her that Minerva, Edith's cleaning lady, would be cleaning for them every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning. If they needed her more, she would arrange for her to stay a full day. Abra asked, "What will she do?"

"What did you do when you cleaned your place? She'll dust and vacuum and do the laundry and handle the dry cleaning. I know you think you can clean the place, but once you start working, you won't have any time. And don't be one of these women who cleans before

the cleaning woman comes. Believe me, it won't be hard getting used to having someone clean. Especially Minerva. She's an angel."

He told her he would call her whenever he had a chance to see if everything was alright. Abra laughed. "Now you're acting like a parent who's leaving his kid alone without a babysitter for the first time. I'm really excited about tomorrow. It's the first day of the rest of my life, as the old saying goes and I'm eager to start. I think I might be able to handle being alone. Adam, you need to go back to your professional life and live it as you always have, except for the evenings and the weekends. That's my time."

Monday morning Adam went back to his usual routine of leaving for work at 6:30 and working until 4:30 when he would go to his gym for a half-hour swim. Then he would be home between 6 and 6:30. He kissed Abra as she luxuriated in bed and told her he'd try to call her as soon as he had a break. Abra laid in bed and wondered what she should do. For the first time in her life, she didn't have a routine. She was sure this wouldn't last once she got a job so she nestled in the thick, puffy comforter and pillows.

At 8:00 Minerva rang the doorbell rang even though she had a key. Abra asked Minerva to share a cup of coffee before starting work so they could get to know each other and Minerva could tell her what she would be doing. After two cups of coffee, Abra and Minerva bonded over their affection and fond memories of Edith, and Abra began to feel more comfortable about having her help with the cleaning.

Abra spent the morning unpacking and settling into the apartment. There were so many things she didn't know where to put. For now, she put undecided things in the guest bedroom, that had been her room on her many visits to Miss B. She unpacked the boxes of mementos of her life that Edith had saved. She had put the boxes in a storage locker in Fairfax and had never even had a chance to look at them. Now she put everything back in the file cabinets where she had taken them from a few months earlier.

In the afternoon she explored the neighborhood. It was so different from the suburbs where she had lived for the last six years. There were no big box stores anywhere. No Walmart. No Target. She wasn't sure where she would buy her shampoos, greeting cards, and aspirins. Maybe she could drive out to a Target in New Jersey over the weekend and stock up on what she needed. There were lots of foreign restaurants, all of them small. Abra and Adam could travel the world by eating at the Spanish, French, Russian, Thai, Korean, Ethiopian, and Brazilian restaurants in a two block stretch. There was a Barnes and Noble so she would have a place to buy her books and Starbucks coffee. She went to the grocery that she and Edith had shopped at in the past. She had checked the cupboards in the kitchen before she left and they were bare, except for the jar of instant coffee that she and Minerva had used for their get-to-know each other chat. She had lots to buy, but she knew she couldn't carry everything back. She asked a clerk how she could get everything to her apartment and was told that there was a delivery boy who would gladly deliver her order. She would have to get used to shopping in a

small grocery instead of the Giant or Safeway supermarkets where she had bought her food cheaply. She knew the Virginia price of each item she bought and was astounded that the New York prices were 50 to 100% higher. Now she was certain she would drive out to Jersey to do her food shopping. She couldn't break her frugal shopping habits.

She knew that she didn't want to go out for dinner every night because she wanted to control what she and Adam ate and because it was too expensive. She made a mental note to talk to Adam about money. He never seemed to pay attention to money while she thought about the cost of everything. They needed to decide how they were going to share expenses. Who would pay for what? Even though she was unemployed now, she had the cushion of money from her inheritance from Miss Benjamin. She knew she would have to learn to cook so after she finished grocery shopping, she went to Barnes and Noble and bought three cookbooks on easy cooking for two.

When Adam came home at 6:15, she had wine and cheese waiting for him in the living room, and a dinner of broiled salmon, spinach salad, and hot bread waiting on the dining room table.

"I can't believe this. You've made it like a home already. How did you learn to cook in twelve hours?"

"Here are my new bibles – cooking for two, quick meals for two, and gourmet cooking for two on a budget. I probably won't be able to do this that often once I start working so don't get used to it. But I could cook things in advance and freeze dinners."

"I can't believe Abra, queen of the TV dinner, is now Julia Child."

After dinner, they sat over coffee and Adam said. "I contacted your parents today. We'll see them at 1:00 on Saturday. They've moved. They live in Brooklyn near Coney Island. They live with all the Russians. I don't know why they picked that area. Maybe Jacob has joined the Russian Mafia."

"Who did you talk to?"

"Your father."

"What did he say when you told them I wanted to see them?"

"He said that they didn't want to see you. I heard your mother in the background prompting him what to say. I said that you wanted to see if you could resolve some issues. I'm not sure he knew what I was talking about but he said to come. He asked if they should have their lawyer there and I said I wasn't coming as a lawyer but as your friend."

"It's so funny to hear you say 'their lawyer.' They never would have had a lawyer when I lived with them, but I'm sure as soon as this hit the papers, the ambulance chasers were chasing them down and they had their choice. They probably picked the sleaziest one who convinced them he could get them the most money. I picture this guy with slicked back greasy hair wearing a plaid suit. Now tell me isn't that some stereotype about sharks in your profession."

Adam laughed and said, "The guy also has rings on his pinky fingers."

Adam took Abra's hand and intensely looked into her eyes.

"Abra, I want to ask you a question about something I can't stop thinking about. Why didn't you ever try to contact Rachel or Noah all these years? You left your parents, but why did you leave them? It would have been so easy to find them and see them again."

She gulped back sobs and then controlled herself. "You know that's a real sore spot. I try not to think about it. I could have found out if they were still living with my parents or if they were living in a group home and I could have visited them without seeing my parents. But I didn't. Last September when Rachel died, I could have contacted Noah. I knew where he lived, but I didn't even consider it. I wanted to completely cut off all ties to my past.

What kind of person am I to not to try to see these two people who I loved and who loved me more than anything in the world? I hate myself when I think of how I deserted them. I don't feel guilty about never seeing Jacob and Miriam, but I feel guilty for not trying to see Rachel and Noah, but not guilty enough to do anything about it. I've pushed this out of my mind for almost 17 years and now it's front and center. Why didn't I ever see Rachel? I'll never see her now. Never. My friends, everybody, always said I was such a good moral person. They didn't know the real me. A moral person wouldn't reject her siblings just because it wasn't comfortable to bring up the past. I just wanted total and complete freedom from the past. It was all or nothing. I was afraid that if I saw them I would be sucked back into their lives and I would be Abra Ginzberg again. I was happy with the life I created. I had no ties. I could concentrate just on me. Does that make you think less of me?"

"You're not perfect Abra, but nothing could make me think less of you. You're going to have to face up to this situation after you see your parents."

"I can't think about that now. Adam, please be there for me. I can't go back alone." She looked at him desperately as her eyes overflowed with tears.

"Abra, for God's sake, you should know I'll be there for you for everything good and bad in our lives." Adam looked at her with new eyes. He was seeing a vulnerability in Abra he had only glimpsed before. There was still a frightened child inside Abra, one who had been camouflaged by the responsible child who made adult decisions.

On Tuesday, Abra interviewed at the Child Development Center at NYU Medical School. The job involved doing psychological testing as part of a multidisciplinary diagnostic team. Before she was introduced to the staff, she met with Dr. Gottlieb, the director, who after greeting her said that she was lucky to be marrying into the Benjamin family. He talked about how generous the family was to so many charities. She didn't know how to respond so she just nodded her head and asked questions about the job. She knew that the job was hers just because of the recommendation from the Benjamin family. But first she had to find out if she wanted the job. She met the staff, who were friendly and interested in her. The job would require her to test a child for a number of hours, present her results at a multidisciplinary team meeting, write a report, and be involved at the conference where the results were presented to the family.



The biggest drawback was there was no extended involvement with children. She would be a testing machine. This was not the job for her.

On Thursday, she interviewed with the Sarah Sawyer, Director of the Grove Park School. It was a private school for elementary and high school students with severe learning and behavior disabilities, a school that would have been perfect for Wendy. The school was well-known in New York as being the school where the rich and famous sent their problem children. Parent-teacher night at Grove Park looked like a get-together for UN delegates, CEOs of major corporations, and Broadway producers.

Abra was interviewing for a job involving testing and counseling with the children at the kindergarten through third grade levels. She was more optimistic about this job because it would involve intensive interaction with children.

The school was in an elegant restored mansion on the West Side. The outside was a study in contrasts, with the early 1900 design representing the building's origins and modern sculptures of dragons and dinosaurs gracing the lawn representing the building's current use. As soon as she entered the front door, she liked the ambience of the school. There was an emphasis on the arts with sculpture and paintings created by the children throughout the building. Walking through the halls was like walking through an art museum.

She was greeted by Sarah, an intense, dynamic woman who had started the school 25 years earlier because she hadn't been able to find an appropriate school for her son who had special learning needs. The school had grown from 20 to 200 kids. Over the years, Sarah had become a celebrity in her own right because of the influence she wielded over the family life of many of the rich and famous.

As soon as they sat down in Sarah's office, Sarah grilled Abra on her philosophy of education and her views on assessment and treatment approaches. But mostly, she wanted to know how she felt about kids and how she thought she would fit into the school. Abra could have talked for hours. These were favorite topics; children, education, assessment, and treatment. Finally, Sarah stopped her and said, "Let's take a look around the school. I think if I let you talk until you're finished, it will be supper time."

There were no regular classes because of the summer break, but there were special summer programs. As Sarah led Abra on a tour of the school, they looked through the glass in the classroom doors to see the different activities taking place. They observed kids working on their reading, writing, and math skills. Some kids were doing word drills, reading words such as *cat*, *hat*, and *sat*, while others were decoding compound words such as *somewhere*, *somehow*, and *sometime*. In another room, kids were acting out stories they had read, and still others were writing a group play. Wherever you looked, teachers were teaching and students were learning. Abra could feel the electricity in the air; she could feel the excitement of education taking place.

Abra spent some time in a classroom observing an enrichment class where kids were studying American Indians and building a five foot teepee, another where the kids were studying Antarctica and creating penguin colonies, and an art class where kids were painting graffiti on large rolls of paper on the walls. In each setting the teachers and children seemed excited about what they were doing. However, as she approached a classroom she heard a child screaming profanities. She peeked through the glass in the door to see a boy hiding behind a bookcase as a teacher and an aide tried to entice him to come out. This was a reminder that this was a school for kids with special needs.

When she and Sarah met for her exit interview, Abra knew she wanted the job. This was a place where she could make a difference and be happy. Sarah told Abra that she had called all of her references and they were unanimous in saying that she was an outstanding professional in all respects. When Sarah offered her the job, she accepted before she knew the salary, the benefits, or her specific responsibilities. Sarah stated that she wasn't hiring her because of her personal relationship with the Benjamins, but because she was sure she would fit in at Grove Park. Sarah asked her to start on July 16<sup>th</sup>, but Abra asked if she could start on the 30th instead because she was going on vacation. She and Adam were going on their first vacation together, to Santorini in the Greek Isles. Abra would get to use her passport again.

Abra thought the interview was over, when Sarah said, "Abra, I suppose I should tell you about my contacts with the Benjamin family and Adam. You'll find out eventually anyhow. Arlene and I have been friends since college. We were even in each other's bridal parties. My son, Harry, and Adam are the same age. Our families used to get together a lot and it was painful for me to compare the two boys. Adam was well behaved, sweet, and brilliant. Harry was a mess, totally out of control. Medication didn't help. Psychotherapy didn't help. He had academic problems because he never settled down long enough to learn anything. His daily temper tantrums took forever to control.

We were all at the Montauk house the summer the boys were 6. It was a rainy day and Harry was running around the house not responding to restraint and driving everyone crazy. I thought we might have to leave early and go back to the city. Adam was doing a puzzle on the floor when Harry ran through it and messed it up. Adam caught him by the leg and yanked him down. He laid across Harry's body and quietly said, 'Harry, I know you want to be friends and play, but you can't act like this and have friends. You ruin games and you're not nice to people. I really want to be your friend, but you have to control yourself. Come into my room and we'll play with my Batman stuff. You can drive the batmobile. And when it stops raining we'll dig for crabs'. Would you believe Harry went with him and they played for the rest of the afternoon. We didn't even see them again until supper.

That was when I decided to start a school. I figured if a six-year old boy could calm Harry down and get him to play, adults should be able to figure out how to do it. The next year I started Grove Park School. Harry has had a hard time, but now he's found himself and doing

quite well. He manages a restaurant in Key West. He's great at that because it takes a lot of movement from one thing to another and that's his talent, lots of movement.

Your Adam is a unique person. I have never seen a six-year old with such understanding and empathy. He's still the same Adam as a grown-up, understanding and good to others. Abra, I'm hiring you because I know you're competent, but I'm also hiring you because of Adam. I would do anything for him."

"Sarah, I'm glad you told me this. But I want you to know I won't take advantage of how you feel about Adam. I will do the best I can so that you'll never have any regrets about hiring me."

When she got home, she tried to be calm and not explode with happiness when Adam came in the door. But at 6:30 when Adam unlocked the door, Abra ran at him and jumped into his arms. "I've got a job that I think I'm going to love. I'll be psychologist for the lower grades at Grove Park School. Adam, she told me how you impacted her life and how you were Harry's friend. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I think she exaggerates my influence. I just got him calmed down for the day. Remember I was this roly polly kid laying on top of this scrawny kid and telling him to be quiet. He probably thought I was going to crush him to death. He went back to his old self the next day. Maybe I should have started off each day by laying on top of him."

"Adam, maybe you should have been a psychologist. You do have so much empathy and understanding of social situations."

"One psychologist is more than enough for this family."

"Adam, Sarah is such a dynamic woman. I love her philosophy of learning and how to reach out to kids. I think this will work out. I was so worried I wouldn't find a job that was personally fulfilling."

"Abra, I'm so happy for you. See you can be a psychologist in New York as well as in Virginia. You could be a psychologist in China and even on the moon."

Her life was coming together if she could survive Saturday. Dreaded Saturday.

## CHAPTER 13

The next seven days were the most tumultuous of Abra's life. The week started off with a visit to Jacob and Miriam and ended with visits to Noah and Rachel. On Saturday, Abra couldn't eat breakfast, the meal she deemed essential for mental and physical energy. Every muscle in her body seemed contracted and cramped. She was preparing her body for backward time travel to 1990.

Adam drove to Coney Island, a place Abra had never visited in her previous life in New York. They got there early and as they drove around, she felt like she was touring another country. Abra commented, "Sometimes New York doesn't feel like a city with a collection of neighborhoods. It feels like Yugoslavia, with different republics or enclaves, or whatever you call them. Is this Serbia or Croatia?"

It was Saturday so the streets were packed with scurrying shoppers. Many of the store signs were in Russian making it difficult to tell what the people were actually shopping for. And the people looked different from the people in Adam and Abra's New York. They were built differently, thicker and shorter. Their faces were Slavic, full with pronounced cheekbones and smaller eyes. Some of the women wore scarves around their heads, but not fashioned like the scarves of Moslem or Orthodox Jewish women. And there were women pushing baby buggies, not strollers, but buggies from the 1960's. There was definitely an aura of a past time and a foreign country.

"We'd better look for a parking place now since it'll take a while to find something."

"Adam, I don't want you to go in with me. I have to do this alone."

"Why? Are you ashamed of them?"

"No, that's not the reason, and yes I am ashamed of them. I have to feel that I can say what's on my mind without thinking of what you're thinking and whether you think I'm handling the situation the right way. I have to do this alone. Maybe I need the freedom to be Abra Ginzberg again. I'll be the Abra Ginzberg of August, 1990 and I'll say what I wanted to say then."

Adam parked illegally in front of the building where he told her he would wait. It was a high rise, not like the squalid three story building on 17<sup>th</sup> Street. It was one of five buildings that were clones of each other. Abra was reminded of her visit to Moscow three years earlier where she had seen the endless blocks of grim, Soviet-built apartment complexes, devoid of vegetation or ornamentation reflecting the austerity of Communism. She thought that a Russian must have built these buildings in an attempt to create a little Moscow in Coney Island.

She entered the lobby and looked at the roster of tenants. There it was - Ginzberg. 4-D. She rang the bell and was buzzed up immediately. She took the elevator to 4 and walked down the cinder block hallway to 4-D. She felt like she was walking down a bleak corridor to the electric chair. She knocked at the door and before her hand dropped, Jacob opened it. He had aged

more than 17 years in the last 17 years. His hair was completely gray, his face heavily etched with worry lines, and he was even more bent over. And now he was wearing glasses that slid down to the middle of his nose giving him a professorial appearance.

“So it’s you.” He opened the door wide ushering her in. He pointed to the dining room where Miriam was seated at the table. She was perched on a chair, just as she had sat on a kitchen chair during Abra’s 18 years in Queens. She was smoking a cigarette and flicking ashes into an ashtray overflowing with ashes and butts. The room was thick with wispy stratus clouds of smoke and the stench of long-ago smoked cigarettes.

Miriam changed too from 17 years, but her change was an attempt to stop time. Seventeen years ago she had undyed mousey brown hair and wore little make-up. Now her hair was dyed tar-black and teased into a stiff beehive. She had rings on each of her fingers, and on her ring fingers, she had large diamonds, or maybe fake diamonds. Abra didn’t know enough about jewelry to tell if they were real. Now Miriam was heavily made up with a greasy golden pancake base, blush applied to her cheeks like two perfectly round apples, blue eye shadow with sparkles, and flaming red lipstick. She was even wearing false eyelashes which she couldn’t possibly have put on with her uncoordinated fingers weighed down by the rings. Abra could only recall her wearing lipstick because that was all Abra wore until she went off to college. Miriam looked like an old woman desperately trying to look young and attractive, but without the benefits of plastic surgery, a stylish haircut, and expertly-applied make-up, she looked like a pathetic clown.

Miriam glared at Abra, and spewed forth a diatribe, “You look like a fancy lady, but you’re still a shithead to me. I hear you’re a doctor and take care of morons like Rachel and Noah. You don’t look like you did when you lived here. You look fancy smancy, If you’re so rich, how come no nice jewelry like I got?”

Also seated at the table was a middle-aged woman who contemptuously stared at Abra. As Abra turned to her, she introduced herself. “I’m Tatiana. I live next door and I help take care of my close friends here. I do what you should be doing. I’m their best friend. I would do anything for them. I love them like family. I’m here to protect them from you.” Tatiana’s English was heavily accented showing her Russian origins. She was decorated much like Miriam with rings covering her fingers and the same make-up coating her face.

Abra looked around the room and saw a plastic world. Everything was covered with the marvel of modern chemistry, the upholstery of the dining room chairs, the sofa, and the living room chairs. A bowl of faded plastic fruit sat on a plastic tablecloth on the dining room table. There was even a plastic runner from the front door to the balcony door. On 17<sup>th</sup> Street everything was allowed to age and get dirty. Here the aging process was arrested by modern miracle of plastic. Miriam was using plastic the way she used make-up.

What was most different though about this apartment and the 17<sup>th</sup> Street apartment was adornment. There was nothing decorative back in Queens. It was barren, perhaps because of the

fear that Noah and Rachel would damage whatever might brighten up the apartment or perhaps it just reflected the desolate way of life in the Ginzberg house. Here everything was covered with glass and china chatchkas. There was a set of six glass shelves against a wall covered with miniature china animals. There were more chatchkas on the coffee table and end tables. They had created a zoo of porcelain, but they probably had no idea what a real panda or a real dolphin was. There were pictures on the walls of calm rural scenes, but no pictures of family members.

Jacob said, "So what do you want? Did you come to get money? You know we're going to get a lot of dough from the home and the city." He raised his voice, "And if you think you're getting one penny, you're nuts. You don't deserve nothing."

Abra said, "I didn't come for money. I don't need your money. I don't want your money. I came to see you after 17 years to find out how you're doing. I suppose you know there's going to be an article in the paper about you and I wanted to see you before I saw the article. I'll probably be in the article too since the reporter who wrote it tried to contact me."

Miriam erupted with rage. Under the make-up, her face turned maroon and her voice dripped with venom. "Don't you know how much we hate you? I never wanted to see you again but Jacob made me let you come. Where were you when we needed money? You only come around now when we're gonna be rich. Not a penny for you, not a penny. You always thought of only yourself. Everything was always for Abra. Nothing for Rachel or Noah or us. I've hated you from the second you were born. I wish I could have killed you when you came out of me. I can still remember the pain and the blood. I was in labor for 24 hours with you. You almost killed me and what kind of kid did I get for all that. The lousiest person in the world. Get out of my house you fucking bitch."

Abra caught her breath trying to relax her breathing, but she couldn't. Here was her biological mother telling her that she wished that she had killed her. How could any mother even think thoughts like this? How could any mother harbor so much vitriol?

Jacob put his hand on Miriam's arm to calm her, perhaps fearing she would strike Abra. "Wait a sec Miriam. Let's tell her what happened after she left us. They took Rachel and Noah away because you left. They said we couldn't take care of them. If you was here, they wouldn't take them away. You should have stayed to take care of them. Rachel would have lived with us. She wouldn't have died. It's your fault that she's dead. If she was home, she wouldn't be walking around alone in no park with a deep lake. Our maidela Rachel died. Oy, my Rachel. I loved her so."

Abra wondered if he was rehearsing the speech his lawyer had written for him for the trial to get blood money for Rachel. Silently Abra said to herself, "You liar. You never loved Rachel. You never even kissed her. Now you've made yourself this angelic father. All so you can collect money."

First her mother tells her she wishes her dead and now her father blames her for the death of her sister. She felt like she was in one of Dante's circles of hell. Why was she subjecting herself to this torture? Was she flagellating herself for leaving them? She didn't speak up as she told Adam she would. She didn't say what she was thinking. She was Abra Ginzberg again and she was obedient, quiet, and docile.

Jacob continued. "We don't have any kids anymore. We don't have you. You died for us 17 years ago. If I went to shul, I'd say yizkor for you. We don't have Noah no more. We never see him. He don't want to come here. He says we hit him. We don't. We just make sure he behaves himself. They keep him with the other nuts in that nut house. If they take him for a walk and he drowns, we'll sue everybody again.

Bubbe and Zadde used to stick up for you and say you needed a life. What about our life? You needed to take care of us. You shoulda stayed here and lived with us."

Miriam chimed in. "You owe us. We're gonna get money from the home and the city, but you should pay us too. I know you're rich. You're a doctor. You owe us because you didn't take care of us. You owe us for killing Rachel"

Abra looked from one to the other in their plastic world. She saw herself living here today and knew that if she had stayed, she would have killed herself. She would have broken one of the china chatchkas and slit her wrists until all the blood drained from her body. The bitterness and hatred polluted the air more than Miriam's cigarettes. She knew she didn't kill Rachel, but to hear them blame her for it was heart wrenching. She wasn't even going to bother arguing with them about that. It was no use.

"Don't you want to know about my life? Don't you want to know what I've done for the past 17 years?"

Miriam's eyes were brimming with hatred and anger, but also fear. There it was. Fear like a trapped animal. She was afraid of Abra because she knew the real Miriam, the one under all the rings and make-up. She knew all the things Miriam couldn't do. She was afraid that Abra would tell the world about her and she would be institutionalized or put in a group home like Rachel and Noah. That's why she was glad Abra was out of her life. She was petrified Abra would expose her to the world and tell everyone that she couldn't even wipe herself when she peed. She would tell the world that all she could do was eat and watch TV and hate.

"Why should we give a shit about you? You were always the snob. Even when you was little. You was the smart one and we was all the dummies. You knew everything. You always got the A's. Every time you looked at us, I knew how you felt. You hated us for being stupid. That's how God made us. What could we do? Do you think we wanted to be dumb? We wanted to be like everybody else and go in the world and not be locked in that shitty apartment all day. I wanted to go shopping and buy things."

Abra didn't want to respond, but words poured out. "Being dumb was no excuse for not loving us. You never loved Rachel or Noah or me. Every time you looked at us, you looked at us with hate. You never smiled. You never hugged or kissed us."

"What the hell was there to smile about? Living in that pigsty with crazy kids. Being poor. Having a cripple of a husband who couldn't support us and was dumb like his kids. Never having nice things. No jewelry, no car, no fur coat." Her voice dripping with sarcasm, she said, "Sure, I should have laughed, not smiled. Ha-ha-ha."

Abra changed the subject. She couldn't stand the painful words. "What are you going to do with the money you get?"

Miriam's face lightened up as she joyfully said, "It depends on how much we get. The lawyer says we can get 3 million. Then we'll move to Florida. Tatiana's coming with us. She'll help us get a fancy condo on the beach. We'll buy her a condo next door so she can help us with the shopping and stuff. We'll get a svartza to do the cleaning. We'll get a white Cadillac convertible so Tatiana can drive us around to the beach and the fancy stores. We'll shop for fancy clothes and jewelry. We'll drive to Atlantic City and stay at one of those big casino hotels and win lots of money." Miriam sounded like Wendy when she said she wanted to marry one of the stars of a Disney program and move to California. Miriam was a child who was being given a pot of gold to squander.

"How do you like my jewelry? I bought this stuff even though we ain't got the money yet. Manny the guy with the jewelry store on the corner sold 'em to me. He told me I could pay him later when I get the money. He's not even going to charge me interest. This diamond is two carats. Ain't it gorgeous? I bet you don't got anything like this you fancy schmansy scprinca." There was the answer to Abra's question. The jewels were real.

"What about Noah?"

"What about him?"

"Are you taking him with you to Florida when you move?"

"Nooooo. We can't take care of him. He'll stay up here with the other retards. I don't want people to see him."

Abra winced at Miriam's language. Nut house. Retards. How ironic for Miriam to use these words, especially retard, which was what she was.

"When did you last see him?"

"At the funeral."

"Don't you visit him?"

"No. We can't travel."

"Have you been to the cemetery to see Rachel's grave since she died?"

"What's to see? She's dead. That's the end."



Abra looked at them for the last time. She knew she did the right thing by leaving 17 years ago and she knew she would do the right thing now and leave forever. Silently she got up and went to the door.

“Where ya going? We got cake and coffee. Don’t you want some? We spent money to buy a nice coffee cake and you’re not even going to eat it? Are you walking out like you did before?”

Abra thought to herself, no it’s not like it was 17 years ago. Then she was running away to find a new life. Now she wasn’t running away. Now she had a new life waiting downstairs in a black Mercedes.

She took the elevator downstairs and got in the car. She was quiet for a while and then said, “Adam, I did the right thing by coming here, but I can’t talk about it now. Let’s talk about it later.” They drove back to Manhattan in silence. She felt like she did when Miss Benjamin picked her up and drove her to Jackson in 1990. She needed complete silence so she could etch every word and every scene into her memory.

When they got back to their apartment, Abra went in the library. “Let’s talk in here. It’s the right place to talk about the past. Adam, in a way, I wish you could have seen them. My father is old, older than his years. He only has Miriam and she blames him for their situation. Poor Jacob. What a life he has. But most of all she blames me. I don’t know who’s to blame for their situation. Maybe God. I don’t know why He created her.

My mother is so cruel and unloving. She’s vile. She wished that she could have killed me when I was born. Can you imagine a mother saying that to her daughter? I never thought it was possible to hate someone so much. Maybe I hate her so much because she is my mother and she’s supposed to love me. She has no maternal feelings. Her retardation extends to mothering. Zero maternal quotient. Zero MQ. I don’t hate anyone else in the world other than my mother. When I look at her I don’t see any physical resemblance and I think maybe I got switched at birth. Then I look at my father and I see myself reflected in his face. I can’t deny that her dirty genes are comfortably ensconced in each and every cell in my body. I can never really get away from her. I just have to make sure no one gets those genes in the future.

They’re so excited about the money they’re going to get from the lawsuit. They’re planning to move to Florida and get a Cadillac. They can’t even drive. They think the money will make them happy. They’ll never be happy. They have this Russian svengali who’s taking care of them. I’m sure she’ll take care of their money too.

When I look around this apartment and at you, I know I did the right thing. Look at the life I have. It’s pure joy. If I hadn’t left, I would have lived in their world of hate and I would have caught it, just like the flu. I would have been consumed with hatred for everyone and for myself. I really think I would have killed myself. I would never in a million years think of killing myself for any reason other than being trapped in that jail of hatred.”

They sat quietly on the couch for the next hour with Adam's arm loosely draped around her shoulder. At 4:00 Abra spritely said, "O.K, time to get on with our lives. Let's take a walk in the park. Then let's go to a movie and get pasta at Luigi's. And then let's come home and make passionate love. Hey, let's do that backwards. Let's start with the passionate love"

On Monday of that week, Abra went to Grove Park School to sign a contract for her position as psychologist of the lower school. She met with Sarah and the two began building a bond that would last a lifetime. Sarah loved Adam and now she was learning to like Abra for herself and not because Adam loved her. Abra read everything on the history and philosophy of the school and then started in on the records of the 30 children who she would be serving. It seemed to be a small caseload, but not when she considered the severity of the learning, behavior, or emotional problems of each of the kids. Also, she knew that the parents were paying hundreds of thousands of dollars of tuition for services individualized for their child's needs.

She explored the room that would be her home away from home. There was a small table for testing and an area with toys, puppets, dress-up clothes, and books for therapy. Her clean desk was facing a blank wall. She needed to personalize this room with pictures for the walls and lots of plants. She had to get a picture of Adam for her desk. Neither of them had pictures of each other. They were going to his parents' house on Montauk for July 4<sup>th</sup> and she hoped they could take some pictures of themselves to start building a digital record of their lives together.

On Tuesday, she planned to start a schedule of exercising. She was going to a local gym to see if they had the facilities she liked. As she was about to leave, the phone rang. It was Adam. "Get the Post. The article is in there."

"Is it bad?"

"You'll see."

"From your answer and your tone of voice it must not be that bad. I'll call you back after I read it."

She walked to Starbucks and picked up the Post. She was curious about what she would see, but she wasn't afraid. She was prepared. Adam had prepared her last December on the night she had visited Miss B. in the hospital. On page 3 there was the article showing pictures of Rachel, her parents, and Tatiana Lermontov. Why Tatiana? She read the article and started to laugh. There was a big expose, not of Abra, but of Tatiana who was the sister of one of the crime bosses of the Jewish Russian Mafia in Brooklyn. The article posed the question, "Who is really going to get the Ginzberg money – the Lermontovs or the Ginzbergs?" Amy Forbes had found a juicier story than Abra, she had the Mafia. Abra laughed hysterically. People turned to look at her making her laugh even louder.

As soon as Abra finished the article, she called Adam who was with a client. Cindy, his secretary, told Abra he would call her back in an hour. Cindy and Abra were becoming close phone friends. Cindy said, "Abra, you sound happy?"

"Cindy, I'm ecstatic."

Abra toured the gym and as she was walking home, her cell rang. "Can you believe there was nothing about me? Our hotshot investigative reporter found a better story than little old Abra. Adam, I'm so relieved. I know my secret may come out one day, but so what? So what?"

That night when Abra and Adam were dining on chicken kiev that Abra made using a recipe from one of her cookbooks, Abra said, "I'm ready to see my siblings. First Noah. He really has no one in the world. Our parents deserted him. Worse, I deserted him. They say that they can't travel to see him, but I know it's because they don't care about him. Maybe I can be his big sister and maybe it's time for me to see if I can salvage something from my screwed-up family. I saved the name of the group home where he lives from the article that was in the paper last September. Will you go with me to visit him? I want you to see what the Ginzberg genes for retardation look like."

"Of course I'll go. Let's go there this weekend."

"There's something even harder I have to do. I need to say goodbye to Rachel. I need to visit her grave."

"Wow, when you decide to do something, you go all out. We'll go this weekend too, if you want."

On Tuesday, Abra went to Adam's office. She knew Adam had a busy professional life that she knew little about. Even though he spent time talking to clients on the phone when he was with her, most of his time on the weekends and evenings was free, although his telephone time was not. She didn't know much about what he actually did. She never asked. She was always talking about her kids and their problems. Now she wanted to focus on him and his profession. She wanted to know all about him when he wasn't with her. She knew Adam's inner life, but she didn't know his work life.

Adam was eager for Abra to see where he worked and he wanted her to meet everyone at the office. At 11:30 she entered the glass doors of Benjamin, Stein, and Benjamin. The Stein was for Milt, Arlene's brother. Their son, Matt, the Scientologist, couldn't join the firm since he hadn't completed college.

Abra was greeted by an attractive, blonde receptionist. "You must be Abra. We've all been so excited about your visit. I'm Elaine." They shook hands and Elaine led Abra past a maze of offices until they reached the end of the hall where there were two offices. To the right was Seymour's and to the left Adam's. Both were large and attractively furnished, probably by a decorator specializing in law offices as shown on TV programs. Adam's degrees, licenses,

certifications, and photos with public officials covered every inch of the wall behind his desk. Adam came to meet Abra and hugged her.

“This is where I spend my days finding ways for rich people to get richer.”

Seymour heard them and came in to hug Abra and welcome her. Adam led Abra to the office next to his to meet his right hand, Cindy. Abra was taken aback by Cindy’s appearance. She was extremely obese. Abra spoke to Cindy everyday and had a preconceived picture of her based on her cute name and her high pitched voice. She pictured a tiny cute 20 something instead of a 300 pound 40 year old woman. Adam had never mentioned her appearance. He had only talked about how competent and devoted she was. She hadn’t gone to college because she came from a poor family, but he felt that she was bright enough to have gone to law school. That was her Adam – always focusing on people’s assets.

For the next hour Adam showed her around and introduced her to the lawyers, paralegals, and administrative staff members of Benjamin, Stein, and Benjamin. Adam knew all about each one...their families, their interests. And everyone seemed to know about Abra, even her new job. After a whirlwind tour, there was lunch for everyone in one of the conference rooms. It was catered by a local deli and there was even Dr. Brown diet cream soda.

That evening, Abra said, “Adam, I was so impressed with everything about your office today. In fact, I was rather overwhelmed. You’re so good to everyone who works for you and everyone seems to respect you and really like you. There’s something I can’t understand about you. You’re always happy. In the six months I’ve spent with you, I’ve never seen you angry. Do you ever feel anger? Come to think of it, I’ve never seen you in a bad mood. Are you human?”

“No, I’m superjew! I do get angry usually at work when I have to deal with idiots, especially other lawyers. I get angry at unreasonable clients who refuse sound advice. I get angry at the system. But I never show my anger. I always keep it under control. I talk to myself. I ask myself what can be gained from showing anger. In 99% of the situations nothing can be gained so I cover it up, but it’s still there. Fortunately, it doesn’t eat at me. Any anger I bury seems to disappear when I get out of the situation even if I don’t resolve it the way I want to. I don’t get angry at everyday things or people in my life. It’s just not worth it.”

“God, that’s a formula for good mental health if I ever heard one.”

“I’m rarely in a bad mood. I do get very anxious. I’m sure you’ll see it sometime. Like before a big event, like maybe a wedding. I was a basket case the months before I got my acceptance letters from college, and then law school, and then the results of the bar exam. Ask my parents what I’m like when I’m anxious. I drove them crazy imagining that I wouldn’t get into any school and I’d end up at a community college or I’d have to go to a low ranked law school or I’d have to retake the bar over and over again. Or I’d never pass it and all my years of school would be wasted. Of course, none of this happened, but my wild imagination conjured up all these scenarios and I couldn’t keep them out of my mind.

But the most anxious time of my life was the two months from the day you came to see Aunt Edith in the hospital to the weekend in bed at your apartment. I thought I might lose my mind. When I saw you at the hospital, I fell in love with you as an adult, not as a lovesick kid. I didn't know if I would ever get you to love me. How do you make someone love you? I kept imagining that you would find me ugly or not good in bed and you'd find someone better. I imagined myself pining for you for the rest of my life. I saw myself as a male version of Aunt Edith. But when you said you loved me, my bad mood miraculously vanished and hasn't been back yet and hopefully never will be. Ask my father and Cindy about the mood I was in for those two months. First, they thought it was because of Aunt Edith's death, but then they both realized there was more, especially my father. After I came back from our marathon weekend, my father said, 'Now I know what's been bothering you. You're in love.'"

The next day, Abra made two phone calls, the first to Wakefield Home for Adults where Noah lived, and the second to Beth Zion Cemetery where Rachel was buried. She found the cemetery by going back to Rachel's obituary and then she googled it to find its location.

When Abra called Wakefield Home for Adults, she spoke to the resident manager explaining that she was Noah's sister and wanted to visit him on Saturday. She asked what Noah might like as a present. The manager said that he liked coloring books and markers so she bought three coloring books and a huge packet of washable markers at the nearby drug store. Abra was edgier about seeing Noah than she had been about seeing her parents. She had no idea what he would be like or what his reaction to her would be. Maybe he wouldn't know who she was. Maybe he would be angry at her for deserting him. Maybe he wouldn't want to see her. She felt no guilt about not seeing her parents, but she did feel guilt about not seeing Noah all these years. She had abandoned him.

They readily found the group home in a racially mixed residential neighborhood down the street from a mosque. A resident came to the door after they rang the bell, and asked who they wanted to see. Before they could answer, Noah came running to Abra. He threw his arms around her neck and said, "Abra. My sister. Abra. I love you. I love you."

She didn't know if he had recognized her or if the resident manager told him that she was coming. Here was Noah, now well over 6 feet tall like his dad, heavier than 17 years ago but still thin, and with no acne. Noah had a huge grin on his face. He looked so happy. At last he had a sister. At last he had a family.

"Noah, how are you?" Abra said as she tightly hugged Noah.

"Fine. I miss you. I didn't see you for a long time."

"Noah, this is my friend Adam."

Noah extended his hand and said, "Glad ta metya." Someone had taught Noah social skills since Abra had last seen him.

Adam warmly shook his hand and said, "I'm so glad to meet you buddy."

Noah said, "Buddy, buddy, buddy." He savored the word as he repeated it.

They went into the living room and gave Noah the coloring books and markers. He immediately started working on the Spiderman coloring book. As he tried to color within the lines, he said, "I'm good at coloring in the lines. What color is this? Red?"

Adam and Abra stayed for lunch, grilled cheese and overcooked carrots, prepared by some of the higher functioning residents. Noah folded napkins and then correctly placed them and silverware on the table. After lunch, they took a walk in the neighborhood. When they got back, they sat on the porch swing. Noah looked at Abra and said, "Sing Twinkle." Abra was astounded. He remembered their nightly ritual. She was sitting in the middle of the swing and she put her arm round Noah on one side and Adam on the other and sang "Twinkle, twinkle little star. How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high. Like a diamond in the sky."

Noah said, "Again." She sang it five more times and then said, "Noah, it's time for us to go, but I promise we'll be back to see you again. I promise. Would you like to go to the zoo next time?" Maybe it wasn't too late for Abra and Noah to have a childhood.

"Can we see elephants? I never seen elephants."

"Yes Noah, we can see elephants."

"Bye bye, Abra. I love you. Bye buddy. I love you too." He couldn't recall Adam's name. He was Buddy. Adam would always be Buddy to Noah.

They were both silent on the ride back to Manhattan, but not silent for the same reason following Abra's visit to her parents. They were content because they realized that Noah was happy. He was living in a place where people were good to him and tried to meet his needs. They knew his life would have been horrible had he lived with his parents.

Adam said, "We will go back. You do have a family. You have a brother."

"Do you see why I don't want to have children? I don't want to pass on those faulty genes."

"Abra, it's not the time to talk about that now, but I want to say there are lots of tests to determine your genetic makeup. We could research them and go to the best doctors. But that doesn't matter because we know what happens if you smile first and we would smile first if our kids were normal or retarded."

That one statement was all Abra needed to love Adam forever.

The next day Abra and Adam drove to Beth Zion Cemetery, one of the urban cemeteries cramped with graves reflecting the cramped lives of the people when they were alive. They stopped at the gate house where they consulted a ledger listing the names and locations of everyone buried in Beth Zion. They found Rachel's grave in the outer reaches of the cemetery next to a fence with a view of the auto repair shop next door.

There was no gravestone for Rachel only a marker with her name, birth date, and death date. Rachel had brought flowers which she put at the marker. Following Jewish custom for visiting a grave, Adam found a rock and placed it next to the marker. Then in fluent Hebrew, he

recited kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. Abra didn't know it so she bowed her head and murmured, "God protect innocent Rachel." She promised herself that she would learn the prayer so that she could say it in the future when she returned to visit Rachel. She also knew that she was ready to visit Edith's grave, and she wanted to be able to greet her in Hebrew, the language of God.

"Hello Rachel. It's A-B. Sorry I didn't visit you sooner, but I'm here now. I'll always be here. This is my friend Adam. I wanted him to meet you. Can you forgive me? I wasn't a sister to you after I left, and now I will never see you again. Forgive me. Oh my Rachel, forgive me." She sobbed. Adam enveloped her in his arms.

As they drove back, Abra said, "I'm going to get a headstone for her. What do you think I should have written on it?"

"How about twinkle?"

"Isn't that too long?"

"They could use small font. You're the only one who has to read it. Or you could just use the first line. You could decorate it with stars."

"Maybe the tombstone maker can draw several designs and we could decide. Adam, do you think we should get a double plot at a cemetery?"

"Does that mean you want to be with me for eternity?"

"Yes."

"Is that a proposal?"

"Yes."

###

**About the author:** I, Esther Minskoff, am a retired professor of special education. At James Madison University, I trained teachers to teach students with learning disabilities, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance. I authored two major textbooks in the field of special education: *Teaching Reading to Struggling Learners* and *Academic Success Strategies for Adolescents with Learning Disabilities and ADHD*, both published by Brookes Publishing. This is my first endeavor at writing fiction. I'd love to hear from you. Contact me at [eminskoff@gmail.com](mailto:eminskoff@gmail.com)



This is a legally distributed free edition from  
[www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form.