



If you knew the day you
were going to die, how
would you choose to live?

THE IMMORTALISTS

CHLOE
BENJAMIN

'Memorable and
heartfelt ... It's
amazing how good
this book is'
KAREN JOY FOWLER

PROLOGUE

The Woman on Hester Street

1969

Varya

Varya is thirteen.

New to her are three more inches of height and the dark patch of fur between her legs. Her breasts are palm sized, her nipples pink dimes. Her hair is waist length and medium brown – not the black of her brother Daniel’s or Simon’s lemon curls, not Klara’s glint of bronze. In the morning, she plaits it in two French braids; she likes the way they whisk her waist, like horses’ tails. Her tiny nose is no one’s, or so she thinks. By twenty, it will have risen to assume its full, hawkish majesty: her mother’s nose. But not yet.

They wind through the neighborhood, all four of them: Varya, the eldest; Daniel, eleven; Klara, nine; and Simon,

seven. Daniel leads the way, taking them down Clinton to Delancey, turning left at Forsyth. They walk the perimeter of Sara D. Roosevelt Park, keeping to the shade beneath the trees. At night, the park turns rowdy, but on this Tuesday morning there are only a few clumps of young people sleeping off the previous weekend's protests, their cheeks pressed to the grass.

At Hester, the siblings become quiet. Here they must pass Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking, which their father owns, and though it is not likely he'll see them – Saul works with total absorption, as if what he is sewing is not the hem of a men's pant leg but the fabric of the universe – he is still a threat to the magic of this muggy July day and its precarious, trembling object, which they have come to Hester Street to find.

Though Simon is the youngest, he's quick. He wears a pair of handed-down jean shorts from Daniel, which fit Daniel at the same age but sag around Simon's narrow waist. In one hand, he carries a drawstring bag made of a chinoiserie fabric. Inside, dollar bills rustle and coins shimmy their tin music.

'Where is this place?' he asks.

'I think it's right here,' Daniel says.

They look up at the old building – at the zigzag of the fire escapes and the dark, rectangular windows of the fifth floor, where the person they have come to see is said to reside.

'How do we get inside?' Varya asks.

It looks remarkably like their apartment building, except that it's cream instead of brown, with five floors instead of seven.

'I guess we ring the buzzer,' Daniel says. 'The buzzer for the fifth floor.'

‘Yeah,’ says Klara, ‘but which number?’

Daniel pulls a crumpled receipt out of his back pocket. When he looks up, his face is pink. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Daniel!’ Varya leans against the wall of the building and flaps a hand in front of her face. It’s nearly ninety degrees, hot enough for her hairline to itch with sweat and her skirt to stick to her thighs.

‘Wait,’ Daniel says. ‘Let me think for a second.’

Simon sits down on the asphalt; the drawstring purse sags, like a jellyfish, between his legs. Klara pulls a piece of taffy from her pocket. Before she can unwrap it, the door to the building opens, and a young man walks out. He wears purple-tinged glasses and an unbuttoned paisley shirt.

He nods at the Golds. ‘You want in?’

‘Yes,’ says Daniel. ‘We do,’ and he is scrambling to his feet as the others follow him, he is walking inside and thanking the man with the purple glasses before the door shuts – Daniel, their fearless, half-inept leader whose idea this was.

He heard two boys talking last week while in line for the kosher Chinese at Shmulke Bernstein’s, where he intended to get one of the warm egg custard tarts he loves to eat even in the heat. The line was long, the fans whirring at top speed, so he had to lean forward to listen to the boys and what they said about the woman who had taken up temporary residence at the top of a building on Hester Street.

As he walked back to 72 Clinton, Daniel’s heart skipped in his chest. In the bedroom, Klara and Simon were playing

Chutes and Ladders on the floor while Varya read a book in her top bunk. Zoya, the black-and-white cat, lay on the radiator in a square frame of sun.

Daniel laid it out for them, his plan.

‘I don’t understand.’ Varya propped a dirty foot up on the ceiling. ‘What exactly does this woman *do*?’

‘I told you.’ Daniel was hyper, impatient. ‘She has powers.’

‘Like what?’ asked Klara, moving her game piece. She’d spent the first part of the summer teaching herself Houdini’s rubber-band card trick, with limited success.

‘What I heard,’ said Daniel, ‘is she can tell fortunes. What’ll happen in your life – whether you’ll have a good one or a bad one. And there’s something else.’ He braced his hands in the door frame and leaned in. ‘She can say when you’ll die.’

Klara looked up.

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Varya. ‘Nobody can say that.’

‘And what if they could?’ asked Daniel.

‘Then I wouldn’t want to know.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because.’ Varya put her book down and sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bunk. ‘What if it’s bad news? What if she says you’ll die before you’re even a grown-up?’

‘Then it’d be better to know,’ said Daniel. ‘So you could get everything done before.’

There was a beat of silence. Then Simon began to laugh, his bird’s body fluttering. Daniel’s face deepened in color.

‘I’m serious,’ he said. ‘I’m going. I can’t take another day in this apartment. I refuse. So who the hell is coming with me?’

Perhaps nothing would have happened were it not the pit of summer, with a month and a half of humid boredom behind them and a month and a half ahead. There is no air-conditioning in the apartment, and this year – the summer of 1969 – it seems something is happening to everyone but them. People are getting wasted at Woodstock and singing ‘Pinball Wizard’ and watching *Midnight Cowboy*, which none of the Gold children are allowed to see. They’re rioting outside Stonewall, ramming the doors with uprooted parking meters, smashing windows and jukeboxes. They’re being murdered in the most gruesome way imaginable, with chemical explosives and guns that can fire five hundred and fifty bullets in succession, their faces transmitted with horrifying immediacy to the television in the Golds’ kitchen. ‘They’re walking on the motherfucking moon,’ said Daniel, who has begun to use this sort of language, but only at a safe remove from their mother. James Earl Ray is sentenced, and so is Sirhan Sirhan, and all the while the Golds play jacks or darts or rescue Zoya from an open pipe behind the oven, which she seems convinced is her rightful home.

But something else created the atmosphere required for this pilgrimage: they are siblings, this summer, in a way they will never be again. Next year, Varya will go to the Catskills with her friend Aviva. Daniel will be immersed in the private rituals of the neighborhood boys, leaving Klara and Simon to their own devices. In 1969, though, they are still a unit, yoked as if it isn’t possible to be anything but.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Klara.

‘Me, too,’ Simon said.

‘So how do we get an appointment with her?’ asked

Varya, who knew, by thirteen, that nothing comes for free.
'What does she charge?'

Daniel frowned. 'I'll find out.'

So this is how it started: as a secret, a challenge, a fire escape they used to dodge the hulking mass of their mother, who demanded that they hang laundry or get the goddamn cat out of the stovepipe whenever she found them lounging in the bunk room. The Gold children asked around. The owner of a magic shop in Chinatown had heard of the woman on Hester Street. She was a nomad, he told Klara, traveling around the country, doing her work. Before Klara left, the owner held up one finger, disappeared into a back aisle, and returned with a large, square tome called *The Book of Divination*. Its cover showed twelve open eyes surrounded by symbols. Klara paid sixty-five cents and hugged it on the walk home.

Some of the other residents at 72 Clinton Street knew of the woman, too. Mrs. Blumenstein had met her in the fifties at a fabulous party, she told Simon. She let her schnauzer out to the front stoop, where Simon sat, and where the dog promptly produced a pellet-sized turd of which Mrs. Blumenstein did not dispose.

'She read my palm. She said I would have a very long life,' Mrs. Blumenstein said, leaning forward for emphasis. Simon held his breath: Mrs. Blumenstein's own breath smelled stale, as if she were exhaling the same ninety-year-old air she had inhaled as a baby. 'And do you know, my dear, she was right.'

The Hindu family on the sixth floor called the woman a

rishika, a seer. Varya wrapped a piece of Gertie's kugel in foil and brought it to Ruby Singh, her classmate at PS 42, in return for a plate of spiced butter chicken. They ate on the fire escape as the sun went down, their bare legs swinging beneath the grates.

Ruby knew all about the woman. 'Two years ago,' she said, 'I was eleven, and my grandmother was sick. The first doctor said it was her heart. He told us she'd die in three months. But the second doctor said she was strong enough to recover. He thought she could live for two years.'

Below them, a taxi squealed across Rivington. Ruby turned her head to squint at the East River, green-brown with muck and sewage.

'A Hindu dies at home,' she said. 'They should be surrounded by family. Even Papa's relatives in India wanted to come, but what could we tell them? Stay for two years? Then Papa heard of the *rishika*. He went to see her, and she gave him a date – the date Dadi was to die. We put Dadi's bed in the front room, with her head facing east. We lit a lamp and kept vigil: praying, singing hymns. Papa's brothers flew from Chandigarh. I sat on the floor with my cousins. There were twenty of us, maybe more. When Dadi died on May sixteenth, just like the *rishika* said, we cried with relief.'

'You weren't mad?'

'Why would we be mad?'

'That the woman didn't save your grandma,' Varya said. 'That she didn't make her better.'

'The *rishika* gave us a chance to say goodbye. We can never repay her for that.' Ruby ate her last bite of kugel, then

folded the foil in half. 'Anyway, she couldn't make Dadi better. She knows things, the rishika, but she can't stop them. She isn't God.'

'Where is she now?' asked Varya. 'Daniel heard she's staying in a building on Hester Street, but he doesn't know which.'

'I wouldn't know, either. She stays in a different place every time. For her safety.'

Inside the Singhs' apartment, there was a high-pitched crash and the sound of someone shouting in Hindi.

Ruby stood, brushing the crumbs off her skirt.

'What do you mean, her safety?' asked Varya, standing, too.

'There are always people going after a woman like that,' Ruby said. 'Who knows what she knows.'

'Rubina!' called Ruby's mother.

'I gotta go.' Ruby hopped through the window and pushed it shut behind her, leaving Varya to take the fire escape down to the fourth floor.

Varya was surprised that word of the woman had spread so far, but not everyone had heard of her. When she mentioned the seer to the men who worked the counter at Katz's, their arms tattooed with numbers, they stared at her with fear.

'Kids,' said one of them. 'Why would you wanna get mixed up with something like that?'

His voice was sharp, as though Varya had personally insulted him. She left with her sandwich, flustered, and did not bring the subject up again.

*

In the end, the same boys Daniel originally overheard gave him the woman's address. He saw them that weekend on the walking path of the Williamsburg Bridge, smoking dope while they leaned against the railing. They were older than he – fourteen, maybe – and Daniel forced himself to confess his eavesdropping before he asked if they knew anything else.

The boys didn't seem to be bothered. They readily offered the number of the apartment building where the woman was said to be staying, though they didn't know how to make an appointment. The rumor, they told Daniel, was that you had to bring an offering. Some claimed it was cash, but others said the woman already had all the money she needed and that you had to get creative. One boy brought a bloody squirrel he found on the side of the road, picked up with tongs and delivered in a tied-off plastic bag. But Varya argued that nobody would want that, even a fortune teller, so in the end they collected their allowances in the drawstring bag and hoped that would be enough.

When Klara wasn't home, Varya retrieved *The Book of Divination* from beneath Klara's bed and climbed into her own. She lay on her stomach to sound out the words: *haruspicy* (by the livers of sacrificed animals), *ceromancy* (by patterns in wax), *rhodomancy* (by rods). On cool days, breeze from the window ruffled the family trees and old photos she keeps taped to the wall beside her bed. Through these documents, she tracks the mysterious, underground brokering of traits: genes flicking on and off and on again, her grandfather Lev's rangy legs skipping Saul for Daniel.

Lev came to New York on a steamship with his father, a

cloth merchant, after his mother was killed in the pogroms of 1905. At Ellis Island, they were tested for disease and interrogated in English while they stared at the fist of the iron woman who watched, impassive, from the sea they had just crossed. Lev's father repaired sewing machines; Lev worked in a garment factory run by a German Jew who allowed him to observe the Sabbath. Lev became an assistant manager, then a manager. In 1930, he opened his own business — Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking — in a basement apartment on Hester Street.

Varya was named for her father's mother, who worked as Lev's bookkeeper until their retirement. She knows less about her maternal grandparents — only that her grandmother was named Klara, like Varya's younger sister, and that she arrived from Hungary in 1913. But she died when Varya's mother, Gertie, was only six, and Gertie rarely speaks of her. Once, Klara and Varya snuck into Gertie's bedroom and scoured it for traces of their grandparents. Like dogs, they smelled the mystery that surrounded this pair, the whiff of intrigue and shame, and they nosed their way to the chest of drawers where Gertie keeps her underclothes. In the top drawer, they found a small wooden box, lacquered and gold hinged. Inside was a yellowed stack of photographs that showed a small, puckish woman with short black hair and heavy-lidded eyes. In the first photo, she stood in a skirted leotard with one hip cocked to the side, holding a cane above her head. In another, she rode a horse, bent over backward with her midriff showing. In the photo Varya and Klara liked best, the woman was suspended in midair, hanging from a rope that she held in her teeth.

Two things told them this woman was their grandmother. The first was a wrinkled old photo, greased with fingerprints, in which the same woman stood with a tall man and a small child. Varya and Klara knew the child was their mother, even at this reduced size: she held her parents' hands in her small, fat fists, and her face was squeezed into an expression of consternation that Gertie still frequently wore.

Klara claimed the box and its contents.

'It belongs to me,' she said. 'I got her name. Ma never looks at it, anyway.'

But they soon found that was not true. The morning after Klara secreted the lacquered box back to the bedroom and tucked it beneath her bottom bunk, a caw came from their parents' room, followed by Gertie's heated interrogations and Saul's muffled denial. Moments later, Gertie burst into the bunk room.

'Who took it?' she cried. 'Who?'

Her nostrils flared, and her wide hips blocked the light that usually spilled in from the hallway. Klara was hot with fear, nearly crying. When Saul left for work and Gertie stalked into the kitchen, Klara snuck into her parents' room and put the box exactly where she'd found it. But when the apartment was empty, Varya knew that Klara returned to the photos and the tiny woman inside them. She stared at the woman's intensity, her glamour, and vowed she'd live up to her namesake.

Don't look around like that,' Daniel hisses. 'Act like you belong.'

The Golds hurry up the stairs. The walls are covered in chipped beige paint, and the halls are dark. When they reach the fifth floor, Daniel pauses.

‘What do you suggest we do now?’ whispers Varya. She likes it when Daniel is stumped.

‘We wait,’ says Daniel. ‘For someone to come out.’

But Varya doesn’t want to wait. She’s jittery, filled with unexpected dread, and she starts down the hallway alone.

She thought that magic would be detectable, but the doors on this floor look exactly the same, with their scratched brass knobs and numbers. The *four* in number *fifty-four* has fallen sideways. When Varya walks toward the door, she hears the sound of a television or a radio: a baseball game. Assuming that a rishika would not care about baseball, she steps back again.

Her siblings have floated apart. Daniel stands near the stairwell with his hands in his pockets, watching the doors. Simon joins Varya at number fifty-four, rises onto his tiptoes and pushes the *four* back into place with his index finger. Klara has been wandering in the opposite direction, but now she comes to stand with them. She is followed by the scent of Breck Gold Formula, a product Klara bought with weeks of allowance; the rest of the family uses Prell, which comes in a plastic tube like toothpaste and squirts jelly the color of kelp. Though Varya scoffs outwardly – *she* would never spend so much on shampoo – she is envious of Klara, who smells like rosemary and oranges, and who now raises her hand to knock.

‘What are you doing?’ whispers Daniel. ‘That could be anyone. It could be – ’

‘Yeah?’

The voice that comes from behind the door is low in pitch and gruff.

‘We’re here to see the woman,’ Klara tries.

Silence. Varya holds her breath. There is a peephole in the door, smaller than a pencil eraser.

On the other side of the door, a throat is cleared.

‘One at a time,’ the voice says.

Varya catches Daniel’s eye. They have not prepared to separate. But before they can negotiate, a bolt is pushed to one side, and Klara – what is she thinking? – steps through.

Nobody is sure how long Klara is inside. To Varya, it feels like hours. She sits against the wall with her knees to her chest. She is thinking of fairy tales: witches who take children, witches who eat them. A tree of panic sprouts in her stomach and grows until the door cracks open.

Varya scrambles to her feet, but Daniel is faster. It’s impossible to see inside the apartment, though Varya hears music – a mariachi band? – and the clang of a pot on a burner.

Before Daniel enters, he looks at Varya and Simon. ‘Don’t worry,’ he says.

But they do.

‘Where’s Klara?’ asks Simon, once Daniel is gone. ‘Why didn’t she come back out?’

‘She’s still inside,’ says Varya, though the same question has occurred to her. ‘They’ll be there when we go in, Klara and Daniel both. They’re probably just . . . waiting for us.’

‘This was a bad idea,’ Simon says. His blond curls are

matted with sweat. Because Varya is the oldest and Simon the youngest, she feels that she should be able to mother him, but Simon is an enigma to her; only Klara seems to understand him. He talks less than the others. At dinner, he sits with his brow furrowed and his eyes glazed. But he has a rabbit's speed and agility. Sometimes, while walking beside him to synagogue, Varya finds herself alone. She knows that Simon has only run ahead or dropped behind, but each time, it feels as though he's vanished.

When the door opens again, that same fraction of an inch, Varya puts a hand on his shoulder. 'It's all right, Sy. You go ahead, and I'll stand lookout. Okay?'

For what or whom, she isn't sure — the hallway is just as empty as it was when they arrived. Really, Varya is timid: despite being the oldest, she'd rather let the others go first. But Simon seems comforted. He brushes a curl out of his eyes before he leaves her.

Alone, Varya's panic swells. She feels cut off from her siblings, as if she is standing on the shore, watching their ships float away. She should have stopped them from coming. By the time the door opens again, sweat has pooled above her upper lip and in the waistband of her skirt. But it's too late to leave the way she came in, and the others are waiting. Varya pushes the door open.

She finds herself in a tiny efficiency filled with so many belongings that at first she sees no person at all. Books are stacked on the floor like model skyscrapers. The kitchen shelves have been stuffed with newspapers instead of food,

and nonperishables are clumped along the counter: crackers, cereal, canned soups, a dozen bright varieties of tea. There are tarot cards and playing cards, astrological charts and calendars — Varya recognizes one in Chinese, another with Roman numerals, and a third that shows the phases of the moon. There is a yellowed poster of the I Ching, whose hexagrams she remembers from Klara's *Book of Divination*; a vase filled with sand; gongs and copper bowls; a laurel wreath; a pile of twiglike wooden sticks, carved with horizontal lines; and a bowl of stones, some of which have been tied to long pieces of string.

Only a nook by the door has been cleared. There, a folding table sits between two folding chairs. Beside it, a smaller table has been set with red cloth roses and an open bible. Two white plaster elephants are arranged around the bible, along with a prayer candle, a wooden cross, and three statues: one of the Buddha, one of the Virgin Mary, and one of Nefertiti, which Varya knows because of a small, handwritten sign that reads *NEFERTITI*.

Varya feels a pang of guilt. In Hebrew school, she heard the case against idols, listening solemnly as Rabbi Chaim read from the tractate Avodah Zarah. Her parents wouldn't want her to be here. But didn't God make the fortune teller, just as He made Varya's parents? In synagogue, Varya tries to pray, but God never seems to respond. The rishika, at least, will talk back.

The woman stands at the sink, shaking loose tea into a delicate metal ball. She wears a wide cotton dress, a pair of leather sandals, and a navy blue headscarf; her long, brown

hair hangs in two slender braids. Though she is large, her movements are elegant and precise.

‘Where are my siblings?’ Varya’s voice is throaty, and she is embarrassed by the desperation she hears in it.

The blinds are drawn. The woman pulls a mug from the top shelf and places the metal ball inside it.

‘I want to know,’ Varya says, more loudly, ‘where my siblings are.’

A kettle whistles on the stove top. The woman turns off the burner and lifts the kettle above the mug. Water pours out in a thick, clear cord, and the room fills with the smell of grass.

‘Outside,’ she says.

‘No, they’re not. I waited in the hall, and they never came out.’

The woman steps toward Varya. Her cheeks are doughy and her nose bulbous, her lips puckered. Her skin is golden brown, like Ruby Singh’s.

‘I can’t do nothing if you don’t trust me,’ she says. ‘Take off your shoes. Then you can sit down.’

Varya slips off her saddle shoes and places them next to the door, chastised. Perhaps the woman is right. If Varya refuses to trust her, this trip will be for nothing, along with all they’ve risked for it: their father’s gaze, their mother’s displeasure, four sets of saved-up allowance. She sits at the folding table. The woman sets the mug of tea before her. Varya thinks of tinctures and poisons, of Rip Van Winkle and his twenty-year sleep. Then she thinks of Ruby. *She knows things, the rishika,*

Ruby said. *We can never repay her for that.* Varya lifts the mug and sips.

The rishika sits in the opposite folding chair. She scans Varya's rigid shoulders, her damp hands, her face.

'You haven't been feeling so good, have you, honey?'

Varya swallows in surprise. She shakes her head.

'You been waitin' to feel better?'

Varya is still, though her pulse runs.

'You worry,' says the woman, nodding. 'You got troubles. You smile on your face, you laugh, but in your heart, you're not happy; you're alone. Am I right?'

Varya's mouth trembles its assent. Her heart is so full she feels it might crack.

'That's a shame,' says the woman. 'We got work to do.' She snaps her fingers and gestures to Varya's left hand. 'Your palm.'

Varya scoots to the edge of her chair and offers her hand to the rishika, whose own hands are nimble and cool. Varya's breath is shallow. She can't remember the last time she touched a stranger; she prefers to keep a membrane, like a raincoat, between herself and other people. When she returns from school, where the desks are oily with fingerprints and the playground contaminated by kindergartners, she washes her hands until they're nearly raw.

'Can you really do it?' she asks. 'Do you know when I'll die?'

She is frightened by the capriciousness of luck: the plain-colored tablets that can expand your mind or turn it upside down; the men randomly chosen and shipped to Cam Ranh Bay and the

mountain Dong Ap Bia, in whose bamboo thickets and twelve-foot elephant grass a thousand men were found dead. She has a classmate at PS 42, Eugene Bogopolski, whose three brothers were sent to Vietnam when Varya and Eugene were only nine. All three of them returned, and the Bogopolskis threw a party in their Broome Street apartment. The next year, Eugene dived into a swimming pool, hit his head on the concrete, and died. Varya's date of death would be one thing – perhaps the most important thing – she could know for sure.

The woman looks at Varya. Her eyes are bright, black marbles.

'I can help you,' she says. 'I can do you good.'

She turns to Varya's palm, looking first at its general shape, then at the blunt, square fingers. Gently, she tugs Varya's thumb backward; it doesn't bend far before resisting. She examines the space between Varya's fourth and fifth fingers. She squeezes the tip of Varya's pinky.

'What are you looking for?' Varya asks.

'Your character. Ever heard of Heraclitus?' Varya shakes her head. 'Greek philosopher. *Character is fate* – that's what he said. They're bound up, those two, like brothers and sisters. You wanna know the future?' She points at Varya with her free hand. 'Look in the mirror.'

'And what if I change?' It seems impossible that Varya's future is already inside her like an actress just offstage, waiting decades to leave the wings.

'Then you'd be special. 'Cause most people don't.'

The rishika turns Varya's hand over and sets it down on the table.

‘January 21st, 2044.’ Her voice is matter-of-fact, as if she is stating the temperature, or the winner of the ballgame. ‘You got plenty of time.’

For a moment, Varya’s heart unlatches and lifts. Two thousand forty-four would make her eighty-eight, an altogether decent age to die. Then she pauses.

‘How do you know?’

‘What did I say about you trusting me?’ The rishika raises a furry eyebrow and frowns. ‘Now, I want you to go home and think about what I said. If you do that, you’re gonna feel better. But don’t tell anybody, all right? What it shows in your hand, what I told you – that’s between you and me.’

The woman stares at Varya, and Varya stares back. Now that Varya is the appraiser and not the person appraised, something curious happens. The woman’s eyes lose their luster, her movements their elegance. It is too good, the fortune Varya has been given, and her good fortune becomes proof of the seer’s fraudulence: probably, she gives the same prediction to everyone. Varya thinks of the wizard of Oz. Like him, this woman is no mage and no seer. She is a swindler, a con artist. Varya stands.

‘My brother should have paid you,’ she says, putting her shoes back on.

The woman rises, too. She walks toward what Varya thought was the door to a closet – a bra hangs from the handle, its mesh cups long as the nets Varya uses to catch monarchs in summer – but no: it’s an exit. The woman cracks the door, and Varya sees a strip of red brick, a thatch of fire escape. When she hears the voices of her siblings drift up from below, her heart balloons.

But the rishika stands before her like a barrier. She pinches Varya's arm.

'Everything is gonna come out okay for you, honey.' There is something threatening in her tone, as if it is urgent that Varya hear this, urgent that she believe it. 'Everything is gonna work out okay.'

Between the woman's fingers, Varya's skin turns white.

'Let me go,' she says.

She is surprised by the coldness in her voice. In the woman's face, a curtain yanks shut. She releases Varya and steps aside.

Varya clangs down the stairs of the fire escape in her saddle shoes. A breeze strokes her arms and ruffles the downy, light brown hair that has begun to appear on her legs. When she reaches the alley, she sees that Klara's cheeks are streaked with salt water, her nose bright pink.

'What's wrong?'

Klara whirls. 'What do you think?'

'Oh, but you can't actually believe . . .' Varya looks to Daniel for help, but he is stony. 'Whatever she said to you – it doesn't mean anything. She made it up. Right, Daniel?'

'Right.' Daniel turns and begins to walk toward the street. 'Let's go.'

Klara pulls Simon up by one arm. He still holds the draw-string bag, which is as full as it was when they came.

'You were supposed to pay her,' Varya says.

'I forgot,' says Simon.

‘She doesn’t deserve our money.’ Daniel stands on the sidewalk with his hands on his hips. ‘Come on!’

They are quiet on the walk home. Varya has never felt further from the others. At dinner, she picks at her brisket, but Simon doesn’t eat at all.

‘What is it, my sweet?’ asks Gertie.

‘Not hungry.’

‘Why not?’

Simon shrugs. His blond curls are white beneath the overhead light.

‘Eat the food your mother has prepared,’ says Saul.

But Simon refuses. He sits on his hands.

‘What is it, hm?’ clucks Gertie, one eyebrow raised. ‘Not good enough for you?’

‘Leave him alone.’ Klara reaches over to ruffle Simon’s hair, but he jerks away and pushes his chair back with a screech.

‘I hate you!’ he cries, standing. ‘I! Hate! *All of you!*’

‘Simon,’ says Saul, standing, too. He still wears the suit he wore to work. His hair is thinning and lighter than Gertie’s, an unusual coppery blond. ‘You do not speak to your family that way.’

He is wooden in this role. Gertie has always been the disciplinarian. Now, she only gapes.

‘But I do,’ says Simon. There is wonder in his face.