

THE HISTORY OF MY BODY
The Fleur Trilogy, Book 1

A novel
by
Sharon Heath



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In memory of Bessie and Chaim Wodlinger, my bubbe and zayda.

*“Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.”*

Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*



Chapter One

THE BIBLE SAYS that in the beginning was the void, and it hasn't escaped me how fast the Lord moved to take care of His own particular vacuum—dividing day from night, spitting out vast oceans, carving out competing continents that could one day have the power to blow each other up. What an inspired series of creations to keep the devil of boredom at bay. No wonder God kept seeing that it *was* good.

Maybe it all would have happened differently if the bird on the front lawn hadn't given me my idea about my grandfather's balls. Or maybe not. You never know in this life; there are too many variables. In ancient times they might have called it Fate, more recently the Butterfly Effect, but I like to think of it as the human race's chronic aversion to boredom. I figure any species lacking fangs and claws had a powerful incentive to evolve an active sort of mind.

I suppose I'm not the only one who likes to hear about her own beginnings. Luckily for me, Nana loves to reminisce about the period in her life that coincides with my first eleven years, when we all lived together on what *Time Magazine* once described as "Senator Robins' conspicuously spacious Tudor estate in the Main Line suburb of Gladwyne." While the rest of us spent virtually all our time on that property, Father often spared us his presence, commuting to an apartment in D.C., where, as he liked to put it, he served as the only senator from Pennsylvania defending the sanctity of human life.

I had my hands full defending my own. Looking back from the perspective of my fifteen years, I have to appreciate my infant ingenuity in keeping me just this side of the lurking pit of nothingness. Nana says I made more of a racket than all the saved babies combined, directing frantic tom-toms at my mother, who'd cry back at me from the foot of my crib, a drowning woman clutching her wine glass like a life raft. The crib still exists. I saw it a few years ago, its slats bearing the imprints I made with my bullet-shaped head.

I saw Mother defend me against Father only three times in my life. The first was on my tenth Easter. I remember because I was wearing the dreamy pale blue dress and matching strappy shoes Nana had bought me for just that occasion. Having talked Cook out of one of her yummy lemon squares after returning from church, I was humming and chewing my way toward the den until I

realized Mother and Father had gotten there first. Father had already begun one of his rants against the devil abortionists. This time he added an extra twist. “Who knows,” he taunted Mother, “how much you wanting to get rid of her made our only child autistic?”

Usually, when Father got mean, Mother ran up to her room, but this time she stood her ground, though her voice quivered noticeably. “That’s not what Dr. Sand said!”

Father made a sound that was more like a bark than a laugh. “Oh, what’s the difference? Doesn’t matter a hell of a lot when everyone can see she’s a freak. Spinning like a maniac her first day of Sunday school just because some kid made a dumb crack about the crucifix. Kids are like animals. They know. No wonder none of them would go near her after that.”

“Don’t!” Mother stepped back as if she’d been hit. “That’s not fair! It was an awful thing for that boy to say. Dr. Sand isn’t convinced she’s even on the spectrum. You can’t shove her into some category just because you don’t know what to do with her.” I watched her face turn a particular shade of pig-pink. “Besides,” she added breathlessly, “if someone’s getting punished, maybe it’s the senator who had to marry the child he took out for a burger and a good screw after a pro-life rally.”

Transfixed, I watched spit fly out of Father’s mouth as he shouted, “Child? Hardly! But you’re right about one thing. You may stink as a wife, but you were a hell of a good screw. As for the kid, maybe you’re right about that, too. Maybe she’s just a born space cadet. Or maybe it all comes down to maternal neglect. Maybe if you hadn’t been at the bottle all these years, she’d be cured by now.”

Just then, Sister Flatulencia had rushed into the room and was steering me out of it and down the stairs toward the kitchen, one hand on my shoulder and the other frantically fingering her rosary beads. I had barely been able to follow my parents’ argument—I had never heard the name *Autistic* before, and the part about screws was more than a little confusing—but I always felt sorry for Mother when Father blamed her for not wanting to have me. Why *would* she have wanted a child like me, who was always driving people away with her words and her whirling and flapping?

When Sister Flatulencia and I entered the kitchen, it was apparent we’d walked in on the beginning of a game of Hearts, the three-handed variety they occasionally had to resort to when they couldn’t scramble up a fourth. Nana and Fayga and Cook each held a clumsy spread of seventeen cards, and a one-card kitty interrupted the pattern of the washable Stars and Stripes tablecloth covering the small kitchen table.

Sister Flatulencia answered their upturned questioning faces with a curt, “They’re at it again,” but that didn’t stop me from loosening myself from her grip and approaching Nana, asking, “What’s *autistic* mean?”

Nana snorted and replied with a dismissive, “Shhh, don’t be silly,” cuffing me on the ear with her handful of cards more forcefully than she probably intended. That was the odd thing about Nana. For a nanny with an addiction to a game called Hearts, she had all the gentleness of a Mack truck. Just like the angel in the Bible who wrestled with Jacob and made his thigh go out of joint before blessing him, one minute she was treating me like a side of beef, the next she’d be showering me with little chicken-peck kisses that sent waves of pleasurable goose bumps over my oddly shaped head.

As Nana’s eyes veered back to her hand, Fayga chipped in with a nasal, “I can’t believe he actually said that in front of the child,” her wriggling worm of an upper lip stretched tight and wide, like it was getting fried to a crisp by the sun. I’d often reflected that it was too bad about her face, which was so nondescript that it looked dangerously like a void punctuated by the teensiest salvation of a wormy lip.

Cook chimed in predictably, “I can’t believe it either,” looking around the table as if she’d actually contributed something. Cook was a weakling when it came to having her own opinions. When Fayga was mean, Cook thought she had to be, too, which made me worry that perhaps Cook wasn’t real at all, just a little trick of the void to personify itself. Sometimes I had to remind myself that Cook was really one of my angels, the only one in our house who could bake angel food cake, which is my favorite food. Luckily for me, she’d baked a nice round loaf the night before, so when she set down her cards and pushed up from the table, her round body sailing past me toward one of the long kitchen counters, I held my breath, and not just because I’d gotten a whiff of her hands and breath, which smelled eternally of garlic and onion.

Suddenly Fayga threw down her cards and flew out of her chair to the corner of the kitchen, stomping her Comfort Flex shoe on the floor several times. “Got you!” she cried. She hated roaches. Short of burning down the house, she did everything she could to kill them. Her mission in life was to keep dirt under control, which was pretty clever of her, because the earth is made of dirt, so her particular method of keeping the void at bay had a pretty good shelf life. But when she was overworked she tended to get mean and complain a lot, particularly about the washing she had to do for Father’s saved babies: dirty diapers, puked crib sheets, soiled terry cloth infant sacks

constructed with arms but no feet as if we were host to mutant Martian babies with only one set of limbs apiece—all of it purchased in lots of a hundred from Leland DuRay, an infant clothing wholesaler who was one of Father’s frequent contributors.

I tried to keep my eyes averted from the squished roach Fayga was scraping up from the floor as Cook motioned me to sit down at the table, setting my second dessert for the day in front of me. I was still licking my lips fifteen minutes later as I took the stairs two at a time up to my room to look up my new word.

I’d been using the dictionary and encyclopedia to battle boredom ever since teaching myself to read, my little bottom planted comfortably on a potty stool painted a pastel yellow that put my amber pee, stinking of vitamin drops and creamed asparagus, to shame. I created something of a household brouhaha back then by graduating so quickly from *Goodnight Moon* and *Green Eggs and Ham* to increasingly hefty dictionaries, Sister Flatulencia’s *World English Bible*, and an assortment of dog-eared *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines Mother kept in the pretty pink basket in the corner of her bedroom. As you might imagine, sounding out words at the age of four was a lot easier than comprehending their meanings, but a couple of phrases have stayed with me to this day, like “an honest answer is like a kiss on the lips” (*Proverbs 24:26*) and “pearlescent pink and robin’s egg blue are all the rage for spring” (*Vogue Magazine*).

Autistic sounded a teensy bit like me, but mostly it didn’t. It wasn’t that I hadn’t been called names before. Sweetie Pie was one. I stopped liking it after dreaming of lying curled into a ball on a giant pie tin at the center of our massive, burlled wood dining table—shined up so often by Fayga that every piece of food I ever ate there smelled like Ye Olde English Furniture Paste. On one side of me sat a slightly burnt apple pie with sickly-green crescent moons decorating the top and on the other a lemon meringue, one of my favorites ever since I discovered I could make Jillily sneeze if I put a dollop of meringue on the tip of her pink triangle of a nose. But here’s the worst part: everyone but Grandfather was salivating and aiming giant forks in my direction.

Fortunately my second name, Angel Face, didn’t disrupt my sleep. Since my potty stool was convertible, with a lid that could be flipped over to stand on, I could slide it across the marble floor to the flower-and-butterfly-painted sink that Nana never failed to remind me was much nicer than the plain white ones in the big, bare bathroom father built for the children he’d saved from the devil abortionists. Standing on tippy-toes, I’d spend hours staring at my angel face in the mirror,

hoping I'd see wings start to sprout from the curved handles of my ears so I could fly out of the house and up to heaven.

I entered Father's new name for me in my diary. I liked to keep lists of words I looked up, taking particular pleasure in words with more than one meaning. But the reference to the major characteristic of the name *Autistic*—poor eye contact—made me nervous. I scrambled off my bed and stood in front of my dresser mirror, staring straight into my watery blue eyes and counting out a full sixty seconds without blinking, until I got distracted by the shape of my head, deciding it really was pretty pointy at the top.

Nana once told me that my bullet-shaped head is living evidence of my mother's distaste for anything too painful. She said that when it came time to push me out of her body, Mother gave one heave that allowed the tip of my head to squeeze through the swollen opening at her bottom, then decided it hurt too much and waited around until Father yelled bad words at her before reluctantly releasing me into the world. The other problem is that my bullet of a head is covered with funny-looking bumps and indentations. I saw them for the first time on the afternoon of my fifth birthday, when Nana said, "Oh, for heaven's sake, I'm not going to watch you scratch yourself like a monkey one minute longer," and drove me off to the doctor.

Only days before, I'd wandered over to the wing of our house Father had converted for the children he'd saved from the devil abortionists. Climbing into one of the new toddler's cots, I'd put my body right up next to hers so I could pretend we were Siamese twins. With her peach-fuzz cheeks and round blue eyes, she looked so much prettier than pale-eyebrowed, crooked-grinned, stringy-blond-haired me. Who knew she was going to infect me with a nasty case of ringworm and make me get my head shaved?

My rash prompted Father to permanently ban me from the saved babies' wing of the house, so I mostly struggled in secret with my insatiable curiosity about those other children. It wasn't as though I had a bunch of friends to distract me. Thanks to my banging and flapping, none of the local private schools were willing to accept me, and Mother wasn't exactly rushing to organize play dates.

I suppose I should give Nana credit for the bumps and indentations on my head. It probably took her flinging me into hundreds of hard landings onto my old rock of an infant changing table for me to realize I could actively give myself pain. Nana still cringes when she describes the first time she caught me squirming around my crib, rhythmically banging my head against its slats as

if I were consciously aiming at slightly varying angles each time. I personally count it my earliest achievement, a terrific means of dispelling the void. Because as sure as my grandfather's balls could qualify for the Guinness record of the world's most gargantuan testicles, conquering the feeling of emptiness was the chief challenge of my young life. After all, Nana couldn't spend all her time slathering my little butt with Johnson and Johnson's. There were all those other butts, that revolving door of children my father kept rescuing.

But it wasn't just pain and reading and making lists that kept me going. Ever since turning four, I've had Jillily. As long as I can remember, Sister Flatulencia liked to call Jillily a tuxedo cat, which set the stage for some awful confusion when Fayga remarked offhandedly sometime after my sixth birthday that tuxedos were how Father dressed when he went off to rake in the dough. On the next Saturday that Father stayed out late, I tried to keep myself awake as best I could, pinching and banging until he got in, so I could sneak into his bedroom when he was showering and try to find his cat suit and where he kept his dough. I didn't find either one, not even a streak of flour on his wide-lapelled jacket, although I detected some unfamiliar perfume mixed in with the sharp jolt of bitterness in the jacket's armpits.

I vowed to try again, so the next time Father didn't come home for dinner, I kept myself awake by busily pinching my belly fat in a room that was pitch dark except for a little circle of light around my nightlight in the shape of a duck with a chip at the edge of its bill. My belly started hurting so badly that I opened my eyes and saw the silhouette of my mother at my doorway. She was craning her head in my direction, as if she couldn't quite see me, and she was holding her arms with her hands, as if she had to hold herself in one piece, and she was crying softly, just like Jillily after Cook shut the kitchen door on her paw. My room started smelling like the rubbing alcohol Nana dabbed on my knee whenever I fell, and I found myself hating Father, though I couldn't have explained why.

Under normal circumstances, when there was something confusing going on that I was trying to figure out, I felt good, because it filled up the you-know-what. But when my mother slipped away and took with her that disturbing smell, I had to pinch my tummy a lot harder to keep myself out of a pitch-black pit.

Nana yelled at me the next morning, "What's your doctor going to say when you go for your tests this afternoon?" I asked her why I had to go to so many doctors, anyway, if I wasn't even

sick, but she turned away and muttered under her breath, “I have to see to the babies,” and left the room without answering.

Needless to say, none of this resolved my confusion about Father’s pits and the mysterious perfume he used to bring home with him instead of dough. The fact was, except on his late nights, Father had no smell to him at all. Which should have been a clue right there. Most people have the common courtesy to give off a little whiff of something to help other folks with their voids.

Nana, for instance, was pretty generous in that department, walking around the house with the perpetual stink of baby puke on her left shoulder and the faint perfume of Johnson’s Baby Oil on her hands, and underneath them both, a hint of strong dirt somewhere under her skirt, like a body that lived mostly in caves, without much air circulating around. Every once in awhile, all of those smells, the puke, the oil, the cave dirt, were overtaken by the sharp punch of chocolate, which was Nana’s favorite food. She liked every kind of it—from bittersweet to creamy white. One time, I heard her whisper to Fayga and Cook that chocolate was better than sex, and they all giggled, but then Fayga slapped my arm for listening, and Cook got all flush-faced and nervous and sent me out of the kitchen, and I had to bang my head against the Laura Ashley floral wallpaper on my bedroom wall a couple of times to make myself feel better.

Of course, the most aromatic member of our household was Sister Flatulencia, who, by the way, was never called that name to her face. Nana made it clear to me early on that she was to be addressed simply as Sister. For all I knew, Sister Flatulencia had never been given a proper name at all, but she was anything but anonymous. She was the tallest person in our household, taller even than Father, and though most of the time she kept her hair wrapped inside a royal blue bandana, she couldn’t seem to fasten the scarf tightly enough to stop little grizzled curls from peeking out of it. She might have looked a little prettier if, besides her bandana, she didn’t dress exactly like a man, with a white shirt tucked so tightly into her tailored black trousers that even her meager little breasts didn’t show. As it is, with no makeup on her face, she looked just like a very tall man playing at being a woman by sticking a bandana on his head.

Speaking of whiffs, when I tried to ask Sister Flatulencia why I had to go for so many tests, she just passed some of her famous fruity wind and batted her eyelashes over her flying saucer eyes and kept muttering her name for me over and over again, “You Poor Child, You Poor Child, You Poor Child.” I didn’t particularly like that name, either; it made my tummy feel like those balloons they tie up at the county fair to look like animals, but they never do. What kind of animal

had no eyes, or nose, or even a mouth? An animal without a mouth would die in a couple of days from starvation. I shuddered to think of it, imagining what it would be like to float in the void with that bored-as-hell God, who wouldn't even let you get born so you could do things like give yourself pain to save yourself.

Not that Sister Flatulencia would have seen it that way. Before she became Mother's companion she was a nun, or at least she had been until she had a nervous breakdown. Nana told me that the nervous breakdown came from taking care of all those babies my father saved and feeling bad that she never had one of her own. I guess that's why Nana could do it, since she had her very own baby, even though he died serving his country. One time I tried asking her, "Was your son a waiter or a cook like Cook, and how do you serve a whole country? It sounds like such a lot of work to do. Did he die of working too hard to make his whole country fat and happy?"

But Nana just said, "Shhh," and got up and acted like she had a lot of things to do, even though she'd seemed quite content the minute before to sink with me into the softest of our chintz sofas to watch re-runs of *I Dream of Jeannie*.

I used to wonder why they don't let nuns have babies. Maybe it was because nuns are married to Jesus. This is how my thinking went:

1. Father says that Jesus is God, so maybe God needs nuns to send every single bit of their love His way because it helps fill His void.
2. God is pretty big, so it figures He has a bigger void than any of us to fill.
3. Come to think of it, a country's pretty big, too, so it makes sense that a son who's trying to serve it could end up dying from over-work.
4. Maybe Sister Flatulencia's nervous breakdown saved *her* from dying of over-work.

Sometimes I passed the time by wondering, what is a nervous breakdown, anyway? Is it a constant state of gas? That is what Sister Flatulencia had, which worked to our advantage when it came to sitting by ourselves in the middle of the Majestic, with lots of space between us and little groups of teenagers making disgusting slurp sounds to force the Coke up their straws from the bottoms of their paper cups. Myself, I didn't really mind Sister Flatulencia's farts. They were much sweeter than a lot of people's smells, definitely sweeter than Father's pits and Nana's pukey

shoulder and Mother's medicine odor whenever she stood in my doorway. I'd take them any day over Jillily's vomit, when she ate grass and it came out the same shape as it went in, but surrounded by stinky brownish goop, murky tide pools all over the carpet. Sweeter, too, than the sickly pee smell of Grandfather when his balls started to swell from congestive heart failure.

And just so you know, I haven't said much about Grandfather so far, but not because he wasn't important. On the contrary, he was my favorite person in the whole world.

I used to find it confusing that the name Grandfather could belong to more than one person in a family. Nana used to call my two grandfathers Grandfather Phillips and Grandfather Robins, which was pretty strange, because it was Grandfather *Phillips* who used to watch the birds with me. Grandfather Robins didn't watch anything but his pennies; at least that's what Cook used to say. Come to think of it, I'm not sure anyone had to tell Cook about that, so maybe she wasn't so opinionless after all.

Nana said that Cook didn't like anyone who pinched pennies because it took a lot of money to buy the freshest meats and vegetables. That comment of hers was extremely helpful in the void-management department. I used to spend hours trying to imagine how you could pinch a penny. Belly fat, yes. The little bit of flesh hanging from the underside of your arm, easy. Really, anything that has a little plumpness to it is pretty pinchable. Not Jillily, though. I learned that the hard way. Before I learned that not everybody likes pain the way I do, I made Jillily cry.

I tried to tell myself that it would never have happened if she hadn't gotten taken to the vet to get fixed. Personally, I had no idea why she had to get fixed. I never noticed anything about Jillily that looked broken. To me, she was perfect in every way. But in the weeks after coming back from the vet, she walked funny, her white furry belly all loose and hangy and swaying from side to side. I figured anything that pouchy-looking was fair game for a pinch, so one day, when I came into my bedroom and she was lying on her back on a little patch of sun on the carpet the way she likes to do, with her legs spread open and her paws flapped up in the air, I felt the itching for a pinch come over me, the way it can. Everybody laughed at Jillily when she struck that particular pose of hers. Fayga would call her Charlotte the Harlot, but then Sister Flatulencia would make a mean squint of her flying saucer eyes and Nana would say, "Hush!"

Anyway, there was Jillily, my favorite person in the whole world besides my grandfather, even though Nana has always insisted that Jillily isn't really a person. Sometimes Nana's mind is just a little limited, if you know what I mean. But Nana wasn't there when I reached down and

gave that empty-looking belly a nice, squeeze pinch. In one quick second, the world went black as the blankest void. Jillily yowled and gave me a look like I'd sold her to the devil abortionists, then she ran away from me and squatted under my four-poster, with her body clenched up all tight and the muscles in her back twitching like she was being bitten by fleas. I flattened myself like a crocodile to slither under the bed and coax her back out, and I had to give her a thousand chicken-peck kisses all over her back and ears and belly before she let her motor whirr again, and when she finally let me kiss her little pink triangle of a nose, I could see the wet gook in the corners of her yellow eyes and I knew that I'd made Jillily cry.

That was my first time realizing there are some things worse than boredom. My whole body felt like something ugly and stinky and I kept wishing that my skin was a pair of pajamas I could just take off and fling into Fayga's dirty clothes bin, along with all those Martian infant sacks. A part of me wanted to bite off my ugly, stinking fingers, but Jillily's whirring told me she needed me to keep patting her, so I kept my fingers out of my mouth and stroked Jillily with them, instead.

That afternoon, I told Grandfather what I'd done. We were sitting together facing the big lead-paned front window of Grandfather's bedroom, Grandfather in his recliner and me in my giant-sized, cushiony rocking chair that I'd inherited from my mother. We were watching our tree like we always did, and I kept opening my mouth to say what was on my mind and then closing it again. It was only after the last mockingbird had flown away and the branches looked as desolate as a motherless baby that I finally turned to Grandfather and told him. For a long time, he looked at me, his eyes brimming over with kindness, and then he stretched out his big, twisty hand and put it over my evil, Jillily-pinching one and he made his sounds.

Nana said that the sounds Grandfather made sounded like "ugga umph ugg," but what if they did? Grandfather's infirmity didn't stop Nana from inviting him up to her bedroom at the end of the day if she needed him to make a foursome. If you're not a cards player you might not know that it takes four people to play a proper game of Hearts. Grandfather wasn't so good at Hearts. He hardly ever won.

But when Grandfather put his Hearts-losing hand on mine and looked so tenderly into my eyes, my hatred at myself for making Jillily cry flowed right out of me. After a while, Grandfather let go of my hand, and we both turned back to watch our tree. A pair of sparrows was hopping from branch to branch in a complicated zigzag pattern. They like to keep busy to fend off the void. I snuck a quick look at Grandfather. The edges of his lips were turned up in a peaceful grin.

I suppose I should explain about Grandfather's inability to make language. Nana said that Grandfather had suffered a stroke. I already knew that stroke is one of those double-meaning words, so I asked her. "Did somebody pat Grandfather the wrong way, like somebody rubbing Jillily's fur from her backside to her head instead of the right way around? Or did he go swimming one day and do the butterfly stroke so fast that his words dissolved like butterfly wings in the swimming pool?"

But she just laughed and said, "No, Angel Face, nothing so fancy. A stroke is just an infirmity—a sickness like a bad cold, only it doesn't go away." She added, "It's a good thing his stroke didn't affect anything but his ability to make words." I knew from personal experience she was right. He could read just fine. If anything, he understood way more than most. But he couldn't write anymore, let alone speak comprehensibly.

Grandfather didn't seem to mind that he couldn't talk like the rest of us. It didn't stop him from taking his bulldog-headed cane for a slow walk around the grounds every day, it didn't stop him from poring over the pile of newspapers beside his place-setting at our Ye Old English Furniture Paste-smelling dining room table each morning, and it didn't stop him from sitting by my side in his room, stroking my hair and sneaking me red jelly candies and listening to me copying all the bird calls as we watched our tree.

Grandfather and I had a lot in common. We both knew what it was like to not be understood. I could say words better than Grandfather, but that didn't guarantee that people wouldn't look at me as if I'd just said "ugga umph ugg" when I talked to them.

Grandfather and I both liked to watch birds. Birds have a couple of very good ways of dealing with the void—they can fly and they can sing. They also provided Jillily with an antidote to boredom. When birds flew past the window, she made deep noises in her throat that sounded friendly, but they weren't, they were about wanting to kill, which made me have second thoughts about Jillily until I remembered how much I liked to tear hunks of chicken off the bone with my teeth and forgave her.

Speaking of eating, another thing that Grandfather and I had in common was a taste for red jelly candies, which were hard and shiny and sweet. The only trouble was, when I went to brush my teeth at night, if I'd sucked a red jelly candy that day my tongue would still be bright red at bedtime. No amount of brushing would make the redness go away. When I get an idea into my head, it's not so easy to get rid of. Plus, there's something about the nighttime that's just an

invitation to the void, so once I got the idea into my head that red was the color of blood, I started to worry I was dying. After that, whenever Grandfather would slip me a piece of red jelly candy, I'd pretend to put it in my mouth, but really I'd stick it in my pocket. But then I worried I might be saving myself, but what about Grandfather? What if those candies had given him his stroke?

That was when I decided to sneak into Grandfather's bedroom while he was taking one of his walks and steal his candies from him. I found the drawer where he kept his crinkly plastic bags of red jelly candies. Right next to them, though, was something even more interesting: a photograph of my mother when she was a teenager and marrying Father, who wasn't a teenager at all. I could tell that Mother was getting married because of what she wore. I thought she looked very pretty, her long white dress bulging at her middle as if she'd eaten a couple of Cook's biggest angel food cakes.

I knew Grandfather still had an hour to go before he'd finish circling the grounds, so I settled into my mother's rocking chair and studied the photo. There was a much younger version of my grandfather peeking into it from the uppermost left corner. The top of Grandfather's head was chopped off by the white border, but he didn't seem to mind; he was smiling a big fat smile at his only daughter. My father was there, too, tall and skinny, with his hair pale yellow and fluffy, like one of Fayga's mops. I almost laughed, but when I noticed the way my father was looking down at my mother in the photo, goose bumps started marching up and down my arms. Father had the same exact look in his eyes as a dog I'd encountered in front of the doctor's office when I was little, all sharp-tooth lunging at me with a volcano growl coming out of his throat and Nana yelling, "Hey, buddy, that dog needs to be put down!" before wrapping her thick arms around my body and chicken-peck-kissing me.

That photo took my bad feeling about my father from the Saturday night I'd heard Mother cry and turned it into a rock in the middle of my chest. I just couldn't understand why my beautiful young girl of a mother in her white dress wasn't running from my father as fast as her feet could take her. And, worse still, why my grandfather was smiling. Shouldn't he have been shielding Mother with his body, yelling, "That man needs to be put down?"

I realize this doesn't begin to explain about the bird on the lawn and my grandfather's balls, but I hope I've given you enough of a preview of coming attractions to help keep your void at bay. As for me, I'm afraid I've worked myself up a little. But don't worry—give me a moment to

recover, maybe a pinch or two, and, as Nana likes to put it, “Bob’s your uncle, I’ll be as right as rain.”