

Echo from Mount Royal

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Merrimack Media
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Author's Note:

This is a work of fiction. The action of the novel was inspired by a real person, but events and characters quickly took on lives of their own, transforming themselves in ways that have nothing in common with anyone's family members or history.

Published by Merrimack Media, Cambridge, Massachusetts
January, 2015

*I dedicate this book with a profound debt of gratitude
to Riva Weiss who told me a story over a cup of coffee
one morning.*

Without her, this book would not exist.

*Newspaper article in Le Monde de
Sainte-Agathe, March 23, 1984*

SAINTE-AGATHE-DES-MONTS - Fifty-three passengers and four crew members died when Air Canada Flight 593 crashed on February 7 during a snow storm in the mountains north-west of Montreal. There were no survivors. The cause of the crash is still unknown. Members of Laurentian Mountain Rescue and Recovery (LMRR) temporarily buried the bodies found at the site until major recovery efforts are mounted in late spring. The 'black box' was turned over to the Canadian Transportation Safety Board last night. Identifiable personal effects found in the wreckage will be delivered to family members of the victims.

The leader of the team, Pierre Raquin of Sainte-Agathe, said the recovery effort was delayed by avalanches in the region. When this reporter asked him about the physical hardships of mountain recovery, Raquin said, "Not surprisingly, the greatest difficulty for team members is the emotional toll." Burying bodies and recovering personal belongings, he explained, are stark reminders of the fragility of life. As an example, he spoke about a damaged photograph dated

1952 found at the edge of the debris field. The image is of a young woman standing by a wall on what appears to be Mount Royal in Montreal. "No other identification is available," Raquin said, "so we are unable to return this keepsake to the next of kin."



Do you recognize this woman?

Prologue: Boston, 2014

Before I've finished my morning coffee, I hear the squeal of brakes in the driveway. My 12-year-old grandson. Then a light tap when he leans his bicycle against the house. He knocks on the screen door.

"Morning, Joshua. Come in."

He carries the heat of summer into the house, the edge of his hair damp with perspiration. "Pour yourself some juice," I tell him. Sunlight coming through the kitchen window sets his blond hair on fire.

"Ready for your first computer lesson, Bubbe?" he asks, taking the orange juice from the refrigerator.

My daughter has haunted me to buy a computer for almost a year. When I accompanied her to the mall on Saturday, she steered me into an electronics store and signaled to a salesman. "I want to look at a computer for my mother."

Not again, I thought. How many times must I tell her I can't afford one? That's my excuse when 'encouraged' to buy something I don't want. I'm too busy reading a stack of novels to spend time learning about computers.

She smiled at the salesman. "It's for her birthday."

Now what could I say to that?

Joshua gulps down his juice while I rinse my coffee cup in

the sink. "What's on the docket today?" I ask, leading the way into the den. He turns on the computer and adjusts the monitor, all business now. Teaching his 81-year-old grandmother is a serious matter. He shows me how to create an email for his sister. He sends it with a picture of me sitting beside him at the computer. How does he take a picture without a camera? Before I can ask about this mystery, he demonstrates how to 'bring up the Net.' "Hold your horses, Joshua. You're going too fast."

I hear a musical ding coming from the computer.

"Look. Shirley's already replied to us." My granddaughter includes a short message: 'hi C U 2morrow lol.' The grinning red face at the end of the text reminds me of a devil. Maybe this computer stuff isn't so difficult after all.

"Where did you live when you were a teenager?" he asks me.

"I've told you enough stories, Joshua. Montreal."

"Oh, I forgot." He types 'montreal' in a box and clicks on a line. Then, on the monitor I see photos of Montreal - government buildings, stores, and synagogues I'd forgotten about long ago. I haven't been back in over fifty years. "Oh, there's Reitmans!"

Joshua looks up. "Who's Reitman?"

"A women's clothing store. Very expensive. My father once sent me there to buy the most luxurious slip I could find. I thought he wanted it for my mother." Little did I know at the time he'd end up in court.

"Why did he want it?"

"Never mind. I'll tell you later when—look, Eaton's. That's where I shopped." The store reminds me of the day when my friend, Jackie, and I bought satin nightgowns to wear to

a wedding. We were so excited to find them. What were we thinking? I sigh. I lost touch with Jackie years ago.

"Joshua, can I send an email to a friend?"

"What's her email address?" "I don't know if she has one."

"Everyone has email, Bubbe," he says. "What's her name?" I give him Jacqueline's maiden name. "I don't know if she's married. I hope she still lives in Montreal. Her cousin was a famous Canadian writer. Does that help?"

Joshua types for ten minutes. Google, Facebook, a genealogy website and Canadian census data narrow the choices to three women. I look closely at the small pictures beside their names. This can't be right, I think, they're much too old. Then I remember I'm no longer an 18-year-old girl myself. One of the women has the same birthday as Jackie. "That must be her," I tell Joshua. I dictate while he types.

My dear Jackie

I don't know if you are the Jacqueline who was my friend so long ago in Montreal. Hopefully, you are and will remember me, Rebecca Wiseman, from Hutchinson Street.

Isn't it amazing we're both still alive? First let me apologize for not staying in touch. It's unforgivable. I always thought of you as my soul mate. As you'll remember, my last year in Montreal was difficult. I tried to forget everything that happened before moving to Boston.

My grandson is teaching me about computers. I have 2 children and now 3 grandchildren. Tell me about yourself. So much to tell each other.

Love, Becky

When Joshua clicks 'Send,' I shiver with excitement, but also fear. What if she doesn't reply? Maybe she's never forgiven me.

I sense Joshua is bored. "Are there pictures of Montreal from the nineteen fifties?" I ask.

He types 'photos montreal 1950s.'

"I'll be damned." The word slips out before I can stop it. A series of old photos appear in a slideshow - *avant et après*. I recognize parks and streets I knew as a child. Each photo of 1950 Montreal fades to a photo of the same location today. I stare at my grandson with amazement. "Where did you learn all this?"

"It's simple, Bubbe. Everything you want to know is on the web."

I'm transfixed. Some photographs don't spark any memory, but then others startle me with recognition. I'd forgotten how people dressed in those days. The computer is a time machine. Why didn't I know about this? Oh right, my stubbornness.

Joshua wiggles out of his seat. "I'm gonna get a Coke."

I nod, barely listening to him. I could look at these pictures for hours. And then—

The photograph is just another city block, but the sign 'Carpets, Linoleum, Wood Floors' catches my eye. Something familiar about the style of writing, scrolling beneath the name of the store: Gottesman & Sons. I can't breathe, my heart filling my chest until I think it will explode. The present day photo appears. The store is still there. I stumble, trying to stand. My chair snags on the carpet and falls over.

"Bubbe, what's wrong?" Joshua is beside me holding my arm.

My voice is only a hoarse whisper. "I'm tired..." I pull myself together enough to pat his shoulder. "I'm fine. Really. I never realized how the past..."

He helps me into my recliner and brings me a glass of water. I drink it slowly and force myself to smile.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Of course. We old folks don't have the get-up-and-go we had as kids." Keep smiling, I warn myself, or your daughter will be over to find out what's going on. "Come back tomorrow and teach me more." He's reassured and kisses me. Through the window, I watch him ride his bike home to his friends and the rest of a beautiful summer day.

I close my eyes. Memories stampede through my brain. No sooner does one appear than it's gone, and another takes its place, making me dizzy. I feel the recliner lifting off the floor and revolving in space. I grip the armrests—

I hear a musical sound from the den. What's that? Then I remember the computer. I struggle to my feet, but sit back down, disoriented. Is my daughter already worried and emailing me? So that's why she wants me to have a computer.

In the den, I find an email on the computer screen. I click on it the way Joshua showed me. It's from Jackie. I breathe deeply, hardly daring to open it. I can't help thinking it's like speaking with the dead.

Dearest Becky

Oui, c'est moi. It's a miracle to get your email. Just last week I was thinking about the day you helped me with the birthday party for my sister. Where did we find the energy? I'm out the door in a minute, but I PROMISE to write more tonight. We have to plan a visit. Vous me connaissez, I want to hear all the details.

Love Jackie

PS: Did you read about the plane crash in the mountains up north about thirty years ago? The bastard is dead.

How many of my memories of 1951 are real and how many are only the imaginings of an old woman? How many false memories has my mind created to protect me during all the years of repression? Nothing can protect me from the past now.

*October -
December 1951*

One

Of all the events that happened in the months after I met Sol, the first I remember is the day he sent me twenty-five roses. The bouquet was the first gift I received from him - in fact, the first flowers from any man. When Sol didn't call me after the incident in the library, I worried that my angry outburst had given him second thoughts. For three days, I waited in agony for his call. I blamed myself and once again regretted how I often acted without thinking.

Later in our courtship, Sol gave me a brooch once belonging to his maternal grandmother. I loved the ivory brooch, but it was never the thrill of finding roses when I arrived home from my class at the university, when I thought all hope was lost. Roses, unlike jewelry, are living things and, like all living things, are here for a short time and then are gone. I doubt he ever told his mother he'd sent me roses, but she eventually learned he'd given me the brooch. I've never forgotten her words when she saw it.

My mother was at home that afternoon working on a dress for a wealthy client in Westmount. Thinking back, I imagine her kneeling on the floor cutting out a pattern with her large shears, her tongue poking out to the side from between her lips. The doorbell rings. She stands and smoothes her house

dress, wondering if it is Mrs. LeClerc, our next door neighbor. Opening the door, she sees a truck with a sign 'Robichard *Fleuristes de Montréal*.'

"*Fleurs pour Rebecca*...ah,' the delivery man examines the invoice, "Wiseman. *Signer ici*."

Of course, I don't know if the man hesitated, but in my imagination he does. My mind always enhances my memories until sometimes I can't remember what is real and what I make up. I blame this exaggeration on my life-long habit of reading one or two books a week.

My mother tried to act as if nothing unusual had happened. I could see she was excited, but guessed she had a new commission for a dress. "Come," she said and taking my hand, led me into the dining room. I smelled the roses before I saw them. The bouquet filled a deep blue vase in the middle of the table. The late afternoon sunlight, coming through the windows, seemed to illuminate only the roses. The red color of the delicate petals was hypnotic.

"From Dad?" Had I forgotten my parents' anniversary?

She looked at me as if I'd asked a stupid question. 'No, they're for you. From Sol.'

"Sol Gottesman?"

My mother laughed, clasping her hands under her chin in delight. "Of course. How many Sols do you know who'd send you flowers?"

My hands trembled as I took the card from its place between two roses. I was annoyed I couldn't be calm and sophisticated as if this gift were only to be expected.

Rebecca

A rose for each day of our budding friendship.

Sol

In my confusion, I dropped the card. My doubts about our last date vanished. I couldn't wait to call Jackie. In fact, I wanted to shout the news from our front porch so all Montreal would hear.

"I'm sorry I didn't leave them in the box," I heard my mother say. "I wanted to put them in water as soon as possible."

We stood side-by-side staring at the flowers without speaking. I heard a radio through the open window from the house next door. A CBC news reporter was describing the crowds lining the streets to welcome Princess Elizabeth to Canada. I pretended the people were cheering for me.

"I've never seen roses so perfect," my mother said, shaking her head as if unable to comprehend such extravagance. "The flowers at my wedding weren't as beautiful." Then she turned to practical matters. "Remember to save the petals in a linen bag for your bureau."

I hugged my mother, unable to resist teasing her. "Only you would think of that." She saved everything and still had remnants of material from dresses she'd made years before.

"Why not? You'll remember this day for the rest of your life."

"I'm so happy," I whispered, burying my face against her neck.

"He must like you very much," she said softly. Then pushing me to arm's length, she saw my tears. "Now, none of that. Enjoy them." I nodded, pressing my lips together to stop the trembling. "You're young only once," she said, lifting her apron to pat my cheeks dry. "I hear your father."

"I don't want him to see me like this. Don't show him the flowers until I come down."

Upstairs I washed my face in cold water. I remembered

what she had said about the flowers at her wedding. She'd struggled since coming to Canada as a 10-year-old from Safed, a small city in Palestine. With her sister and parents, she travelled in steerage on ships to Marseilles, Lisbon and Cobh, Ireland. Learning that Cobh was the last port of the Titanic that had sunk the year before, she was terrified crossing the Atlantic, waiting for the grinding crunch of an iceberg despite travelling in the August heat. Disembarking in Halifax, Nova Scotia, she swore she'd never board a ship again.

I dried my face and brushed my hair. After taking a deep breath on the landing, I smoothed my skirt and returned downstairs. I kissed my father as he washed his hands at the kitchen sink.

"We're eating in the dining room tonight," my mother said, steering my father, thin and over six feet tall, back toward the living room.

"Go relax in the living room," I said.

"I'd rather stay out here and talk with my girls."

"No, you're tired." Mom was insistent. "Put your feet up and read the paper."

He looked at me with a quizzical expression. "Okay, okay. Don't push me out the front door."

Mom and I took out the good china and cloth napkins and giggled, little girls playing house.

"You're not fooling me," he called from the living room.

"You're up to something out there."

Finally, we allowed him into the dining room. He looked suspiciously at his place at the table, checking his chair before sitting down. My mother said a prayer and started serving the soup. My father frowned and looked from one of us to the other. "I give up."

"Michael, you wouldn't see a bear till it bit you. I'm surprised customers aren't shoplifting right and left under your nose." My father was the assistant manager of Woolworth's on Park Avenue.

Passing him a bowl, she caught his eye and tilted her head toward the center of the table.

"What?" he said.

When that didn't work, she pointed to the roses. "Sol sent these roses to Becca. Can't you smell them?"

I half expected my father to ask "Who's this Sol?" He could be absent-minded, especially when Mom wanted him to fix something around the house. "Your new beau, eh?" He whistled.

"He's only a friend," I said.

"Pretty fancy gift for 'a friend.'"

My mother nodded in agreement. "That's what I told her."

"Nothing's too good for my girl."

I pulled a rose from the vase and snapped off the end. I walked around the table and slipped the stem through the button hole of my mother's sweater. I kissed the top of her head. She looked away from us, her voice thick and tight. "Eat your soup now before it gets cold."

My mother wasn't against sentimentality. She just didn't like it in herself, especially when it crept up behind her unexpectedly. A childhood in Palestine and the scarcity of the Depression had honed a sharp edge on her view of life.

I never thought of our family as being poor when growing up. Only later, I realized money was a constant worry. My mother supplemented my father's income with her talent for sewing. She could take a generic dress pattern and transform

it into something beautiful and unique. Even becoming overweight in her mid-fifties never stopped her from getting down on her knees to hem a dress or cut out a pattern on the living room floor.

She always looked youthful. Her hair, once reaching halfway down her back, remained a silky black, well into her sixties. One day, without warning, she had it cut short. "I'm tired of combing it out every day." My father was quick to hide his shock and said he liked the new style. Throughout her life, she wore a scarf over her hair, a habit begun in childhood. I was so accustomed to her wearing one that, when I saw her bareheaded, I needed an extra second to recognize her.

Her skin was darker than that of most people, with a clear and smooth complexion. Her eyes were small and piercing; her teeth slightly crooked which discouraged her from smiling. This and her thin lips often gave the impression of disapproval, which was rarely the case.

When she became frustrated by her failure to lose weight, my father reassured her by saying he liked her 'pleasantly plump.' "A man's got to have something to hold on to when he twirls his woman across the dance floor," he'd say, grabbing my mother and swinging her in a circle. She'd tell him to put her down before he hurt his back, but her smile and repressed laughter proved her delight.

My parents rarely argued. When they did, the subject was, usually, one of my father's business ventures. He'd have an idea, like opening the first store to sell television sets. He'd be full of confidence, talking about his plans, but when he hit an obstacle, like failing to raise the necessary capital, he'd soon lose interest. We'd never hear about it again. My father was a dreamer, but my mother, practical and down-to-earth, always

fought for everything to make life better for my brother and me.

Before I went to bed that night, I crept back downstairs to look at the roses. The house was dark except for the light from the streetlamp through the living room windows. The pale light revealed no color, no delicacy, only form and structure; only a fragrance hinted at the fallacy of sight.

Returning upstairs, I met my mother coming from the bathroom. "I'm too excited to sleep," I said. "I had to see the roses again."

"Sol is a wonderful young man who cares about you very much."

"I like him more than anyone I've ever met."

Kissing her goodnight, I returned to bed, relieved she hadn't asked me if I loved him. I knew she wouldn't have done so, but it was a question I had begun to ask myself.

Two

I met Sol at a Young Men's Hebrew Association dance on a Saturday night in early October, 1951. My older brother insisted that he'd introduced us, but I'd had my eye on Sol long before Robert showed up at the dance on his way into Montreal. Later, who-said-what-when didn't matter.

Whoever scheduled the dance for that evening hadn't checked the sports pages. The Montreal Canadiens were playing the Boston Bruins at the Forum - the sold-out second game of the season. One thing you must know about Montreal: we're crazy for hockey. 'Rocket' Richard and 'Boom-Boom' Geoffrion were our heroes.

At the dance, those of us who couldn't get a ticket to the game grouped together to commiserate. Jackie, my best friend, had a fate worse than death: trapped at home babysitting her sister Eva. She'd been desperate to attend the dance. "Where else am I going to meet boys?" she wailed. "My parents never consider my social life." I planned to tell her a white lie when I called her the next day to assure her she hadn't missed a thing. Since grade school, we'd always shared our grievances and secrets. When one of us was sad, the other did the cheering up. We balanced each other, although it seemed like our lives, at times, were lived on a seesaw.

The DJ compensated for the low turnout. Who could stand still when he played *Tennessee Waltz* by the great Patti Page or *Glory of Love* by the Five Keys? I couldn't have stopped tapping my feet if my life depended on it. I loved dancing and practiced in my bedroom with my bureau mirror tilted forward so I could watch my feet. I was wearing my felt skirt with poodle appliqués along the hem. I was one of the first girls in high school to have one, my mother making it for me after she saw one in a sewing magazine. I also wore black and white saddle shoes with pink socks, a pink cotton chiffon blouse and a pink ribbon in my curly hair with its poodle cut.

I didn't know many people at the dance and the pickings looked slim. I wasn't keen on dancing with a girlfriend. Some girls who danced together pretended not to care if boys ever asked them. No surprise when the boys didn't ask. I was relieved when Michel LeClerc waved to me on his way to request a song from the DJ. An excellent dancer, Michel, at six feet, was three inches taller than me and as thin as a stick, but playing hockey made him strong enough to lift and swing me around. The LeClercs lived on the other side of the semi-detached house, and we were more like brother and sister. I guess that was the reason he never asked me to dance when the music was slow. A priest probably told him slow dancing with a sister was sinful. Those days, in Quebec, Catholics still believed everything the priests told them.

Michel asked the DJ to play some boogie-woogie. The minute I heard the Andrew Sisters, I began snapping my fingers and swaying in time to the beat. Michel escorted me to the center of the dance floor. Once we found our rhythm, Michel lifted my arm so I could twirl in a circle and let my poodle skirt flare out. He signaled when he was ready for me to jump so he could lift me above his shoulder. At the end

of the song, I skipped toward him, letting him slide me along the floor between his legs. He stepped over me, and turning around, lifted me back up. We earned a round of applause when the music stopped.

The next song was a slow one. "Let's get something to drink," he said, leading me to the refreshment table at the side of the hall. But after a few sips of punch, he said he'd see me later and went over to talk with his friends.

Alone again, I watched the boys standing around, hoping to catch the eye of someone who wanted to dance. Not easy to do when their eyes didn't want to be caught. I knew some of them from our four years at Strathcona Academy, others I recognized from college, but when I smiled, they merely nodded and looked away. Maybe they were self-conscious after watching Michel. I couldn't blame them. I tried to be tolerant of sloppy dancing, but wasn't always successful hiding my impatience.

I swayed my hips in time to the music, emulating Rita Hayworth, my favorite movie star. Whenever I saw her at the cinema, I studied the way she walked and then practiced at home. When I showed Jackie, she advised me to tone down my hips because 'You look like a slut-in-training.' I was becoming impatient and at the point where I'd dance with anyone who could walk straight and not step on my toes. Of course, I hoped a handsome guy would ask me. A good-looker could have two left feet and limp for all I cared.

That's when I saw him standing in a group on the other side of the dance floor. He looked older, more mature, like he'd already graduated from college. Even from a distance, his good looks stunned me. I don't remember a thing about the other men.

I couldn't keep my eyes off him, tall with blond hair that

appeared almost white in the semi-darkness. Listening to the man next to him, he suddenly laughed, a lock of hair falling over his forehead. His smile was boyishly lopsided and his face gleamed in the revolving lights from the ceiling.

A desire to touch his face was so strong, my fingers tingled and a lethargic numbness crept up my arms. Even if I had the courage to walk over to him, I doubt I could have unstuck my tongue to speak.

At that moment, an eager couple rushing to dance to Mario Lanza singing *Be My Love* bumped me 'sideways to Sunday,' as my mother would say. Regaining my balance, I turned back to find him looking directly at me. I looked away. Has he been watching me all this time? I felt the exciting queasiness I'd experienced reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* last summer. Jackie had found a copy of the banned book hidden under her brother's bed. He had conveniently broken the binding at the sexiest parts.

When I dared to look up, Sol was still staring at me. I smiled, but his expression didn't change. Instead, he craned his neck, turning his head from side to side as if searching for someone over my shoulder. Don't look over there, I thought. Recognizing someone, he raised his hand. "Oh, no. *Mon dieu!*" With my luck, I'd find a beautiful girl waving back. But there was no one, beautiful or otherwise, with her hand in the air.

He spoke to his friends and left them. I had no time to waste if I wanted to reach him. Polite but insistent, I pushed through the crowd. He veered to the left, moving toward the doors of the auditorium. I changed direction so abruptly a man behind me stepped on my shoe. With no time to shuffle my heel back into my shoe, I slid it along with my toes, limping like someone with one leg shorter than the other.

Hopeless! I wouldn't reach him in time. He held his hand out - toward another man? They shook hands like long-time friends, clapping each other on the back. When the newcomer turned around, I saw my brother Robert.

What is he doing here? I wondered. Years before, when entering high school, my brother had made it clear I was not to bother him when he was with friends, "Don't butt in where you're not wanted." I complained to my mother but received no sympathy. "It's not appropriate for an eight-year-old girl to hang around high school boys." Dad was no help either.

"Robert? What are you doing here?"

Now it was my brother's turn to be surprised. Before he could speak, I introduced myself. "I'm Rebecca, his sister." The man stepped forward. His hand was thin and delicate but strong and warm. "I'm Sol Gottesman. Pleased to meet you."

He looked into my eyes when he spoke. I noticed his soft brown eyes first, then his long eyelashes. God, he was handsome. I blushed like I had when a boy picked me up for a high school dance and, with my parents in the hall watching us, fumbled with the corsage. Sol released my hand and stepped back.

"Do you work with my brother in Ottawa?"

Robert frowned as if asking what I was up to. "Sol works for his father here in Montreal."

I was about to ask what business that was when Sol said, "Your brother and I shared the same residence at McGill." His voice was clear and strong. His blond hair fell across his forehead, and I almost reached up to brush it back with my fingers.

"I'm a freshman at Sir George Williams." I couldn't think of anything else to say. Did he even care?

A darkness under each eye made his pale face look long and narrow. I didn't want him to stop looking at me.

"What curriculum are you taking?" he asked.

"I haven't decided yet."

"She's a great one for reading," my brother interrupted. "Carries a book wherever she goes." I shot him a look: Mind your own business. "Always with her nose in a book," he scoffed.

Sol grinned. Was he going to tease me? "She doesn't have a book now..."

I noticed his teeth, perfectly straight except for a chipped tooth. Ah, Sol isn't perfect after all, I thought, relieved. What other imperfection is he hiding?

"...you're an excellent dancer," he said.

So he'd been watching me after all. I would have asked him to dance if my brother hadn't nudged him with his elbow.

"Sol, we'd better be going or we'll be late."

"Will you give me a ride home?" I asked, hoping my brother would say yes. A short ride home was better than nothing. I imagined maneuvering Sol away from the front seat and into the back with me. No! Change that. In my fantasy, he chooses to sit beside me. Would I have the courage to touch his hand?

"Sorry, Rebecca, no can do. We're meeting some other friends and heading downtown."

"Where are you going?"

My brother laughed. "Aren't you the curious cat."

"You're going to the striptease at the Gayety."

Robert pretended shock. "From the mouths of babes," he said and turned toward Sol. "Ready? We need to head out."

Then back to me: "You have a ticket for the streetcar, don't you?" When I said nothing and glared at him, he added, "See you tomorrow."

"It was nice to meet you, Rebecca." Sol shook my hand again before turning toward the door.

I heard my brother's voice in my ear: "What are you up to, little sister?"

"Let me come with you—"

"You're too innocent for that kind of show. Besides, Mom would kill me if she found out."

How would she find out? I thought, angry at his dismissal. I followed them outside. Standing at the front door, I watched them leaving the parking lot in my father's car.

I returned inside, but all the excitement - and possibilities - of the dance had drained away in Sol's absence. I no longer wanted to dance. I no longer wanted to talk to anyone unless they could tell me more about Sol. But everyone looked dull and plain. How would they ever know someone as exciting as Sol? I imagined I was the unhappiest girl at the dance. I found my coat in the cloakroom. Taking the Van Horne streetcar home and looking out at the couples walking arm-in-arm on the sidewalk, I decided, No, I was the unhappiest girl in Montreal.

Three

My brother Robert, six years older, was home on vacation from his job in Ottawa, his first visit since Christmas. I was annoyed at the way my parents fussed over him. I wanted to say, "He only works for the prime minister. He's not Louis St. Laurent." Our mother made all his favorite meals. He slept late. No one complained when he clomped up the stairs at odd hours in the early morning. Two nights after he'd arrived, we argued over our father's car. My parents decided it was only fair, with Robert home so seldom, that he should have the car to visit friends. My brother turned to me with a grin. "I guess it's the streetcar for you, little sister." He and my father laughed. "I'm almost as tall as you are," I said, storming up to my room.

My mother yelled from the kitchen. "Who's making that racket?"

"I am," I shouted, slamming my bedroom door. I wasn't angry about the car. Instead, my childhood belief that our parents loved him more than me always surfaced when he came home.

When I returned from the dance, my parents were already in

bed. I brushed my teeth and sat at my desk, trying to finish a chapter in my biology textbook. After reading the same page three times, I finally gave up. I decided a novel would be more successful in distracting me from my disappointing evening. I climbed into bed and finished reading *Washington Square* by Henry James. The revenge Catherine Sloper took on Morris, her would-be-lover, was satisfying. 'You treated me badly,' she tells him. 'You made a great change in my life. Please don't come again.' Good for her, I thought and turned out the light.

I woke when Robert came home. My bedroom door always rattled from the suction when the front door opened. I heard our mother come from her bedroom and quietly speak to him as he climbed the stairs. "You shouldn't wait up," he said, forgetting to whisper. "You need your rest." The sound of a kiss on each cheek. I pictured her hugging him until he pulled away. "I don't need anything to eat. Go back to bed."

My parents' bedroom door closed. A moment later the toilet flushed. Then a hesitant tap on my door, and he slowly pushed it open. The hinges creaked. He blocked the hall light, his shadow thrown against the wall.

"Are you awake?"

"What do you think?" I said. "You'd wake the dead climbing those stairs." I struggled into a sitting position. "Close the door and keep your voice down. You'll have Mom in here." Was he drunk? In the darkness, I couldn't see his face. "What time is it?"

"Only 1:30. When we heard the Canadiens beat the Bruins, we had to celebrate." He closed the door, gripping the door-knob so it wouldn't shut with a loud click. "The Canadiens will win the Stanley Cup this season. You can bet on it. Bouchard will keep them in line."

"Robert, lower your volume or go to bed."

"What do you mean?" After a burlesque show, a hockey celebration and a couple of beers, he didn't realize he was practically shouting. "You made quite an impression, little sister," he said, trying to whisper. "Sol couldn't stop talking about you."

The excitement and desire I'd felt earlier that evening swept over me, but I kept my voice nonchalant. "What did he say?"

"What a great dancer you are."

No, I thought, correcting him. Sol said I was an *excellent* dancer.

"He can't dance for beans, but he enjoyed watching you. You're not like the other girls he usually meets. All your practicing hasn't gone to waste."

"What else did he say?" "How pretty you are—"

"I'm not that pretty." My nonchalance was shameless.

"Don't sell yourself short. He said you reminded him a little of Maureen O'Hara. Except with black hair. I don't think so. Do you?"

"Uncle Max once told me I looked like—"

"Uncle Max? I wouldn't go by what he says."

"Don't say anything more, if you're going to be insulting."

"And he thinks you're smart—"

I laughed. "How would he know how smart I am?"

"No, he did. I told him you're a big reader. People who don't read think people who do must be smart. But don't worry," he teased, "I didn't let on you're as dumb as mud."

Was Sol putting on an act for my brother? That didn't make sense. Sol wasn't a high school boy who wanted to show off. "What else did he say?"

"I didn't keep notes, you know. It's embarrassing when someone blabs on and on about your own sister. I didn't think guys could be so mushy. And he wasn't even drunk."

My brother said Sol had always been the quiet one at college and shy around women. Robert had the impression his mother had been strict about whom he played with as a child.

"After meeting his mother I'm not surprised. He's the baby in the family. His brother Ezra is eight years older. They both work for their father. You know Gottesman and Sons."

His words took me by surprise. "The big store downtown? He's one of those Gottesmans?"

"Big bucks, little sister. But you'd never know it. He doesn't act rich."

"He's cheap like you?"

"No. In fact I tell him to stop paying for everything when we're together. People might think we're on a date!" My brother stopped talking.

"And?" I prompted.

He sat on the edge of my bed. "At the bar, he became the Sol I recognized from college. Shy and quiet. Something was on his mind."

I could hardly breathe. My brother had become so serious.

"When I dropped him off, he didn't get out of the car right away. I turned off the engine and waited for him to say something."

I forced myself to remain calm.

"You know what he said?" my brother asked.

I thought I did, but I couldn't trust my voice. I shook my head, pretending I had no idea.

"Do you think Rebecca would go on a date if I asked her?" That's what he said."

When I remained silent, he spoke quickly, unsure of himself. "You would, right?"

"Yes." My voice croaked. I barely heard my own answer.

My brother heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God. I was afraid you'd be angry. What would I tell him if you said no?"

"The truth?"

"The truth would crush him. Anyway he asked me to feel you out—" Then realizing what he'd said, we both started laughing.

We were no longer whispering. "Quiet," I said pushing down with my hands as if that could lower the volume. With the tension broken, I saw how upside down all this was. Was I threatening to men? Nonsense. How silly was that? Then I had an awful thought: what if I was.

"He said if you agreed, he'd call tomorrow." My brother stood up. The bedsprings squeaked and I felt myself falling back. "I'll never play matchmaker again. It's in your court now, little sister."

As he opened the door, I had one more question. "Who did you see at the Gayety?"

Startled by my question, he said, "Lili St. Cyr. Why? Applying for a job?"

"Promise you'll take me next time?"

"No chance." He nodded toward the wall we shared with our neighbors. "Ask Michel to take you."

After he left my room I fell back on the mattress, my arms stretched out to either side. My brother could call me 'little sister' all he wanted. I didn't care. I closed my eyes trying to picture Sol at the dance. I was surprised when I couldn't remember exactly what he looked like. What did it matter? I'd see him again soon enough. I tried to imagine falling in love with Sol. Instead feelings of desire overwhelmed me.

Burrowing under the covers, I shivered with excitement. I don't remember how long it took me to fall asleep.

Robert returned to Quebec the next afternoon. Sol telephoned that evening.

