

JEFFREY EUGENIDES

MIDDLE-



SEX

**JEFFREY
EUGENIDES
Middlesex**

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Copyright

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www.jeffreyeugenides.com

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Praise for *Middlesex*

‘The year’s most sumptuously enjoyable book ... Eugenides gives Callie a graceful fluency of style, enriched with witty phrasing and sensuous detail, that is worthy of John Updike’

Sunday Times Books of the Year

‘Expansive and radiantly generous ... a colossal act of curiosity, of imagination and of love’

New York Times Book Review Books of the Year

‘*Middlesex* is a great Greek-American hermaphrodite epic that we didn’t realise we needed until we read it’

Jay McInerney’s Book of the Year, *Observer*

‘Poised and challenging ... compounding stories of immigration and personal reinvention, Eugenides fits the theme of hermaphroditism into the shape of the epic American novel, sprawling through three generations and across a century’

The Times

‘The best American novel since Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*. exuberant, ambitious, deeply compassionate and wildly funny’

GQ

‘A rich comedy ... The narrative tone has possible progenitors in Muriel Spark and John Irving, but bears the individual imprint of Greek America’

Guardian

‘Wide in scope, rich in classical allusion ... Eugenides is superb at evoking character, and his eye for period detail is absolutely convincing’

Independent on Sunday

‘*Middlesex* has epic sweep, but the mode is archly comic in a way that points backwards to Philip Roth and Saul Bellow as well as to contemporaries David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen and our own Zadie Smith ... What really sets *Middlesex* apart is its warmth and generosity, its pervading air of historical optimism and inclusive, allusive cleverness ... novels as good as this aren’t published very often’

Time Out

‘A vibrant chronicle of three generations of a Greek-American immigrant family living through the twentieth century ... wonderful’

Independent

‘The true triumph of this novel lies in Eugenides’s ability to move beyond mere titillation, and into a sort of intensification of universal experience ... superbly readable’

Sunday Telegraph

‘A sweeping, funny, and tender story of a girl’s unlikely journey to manhood ... Eugenides has emerged as the great American writer that many of us suspected him of being’

Los Angeles Times Book Review

‘A marvellously, quirky and moving entertainment, with the narrative energy of Defoe and the gamesomeness of Sterne ... In an age of pinched postmodernism, the expansive premodernism of Jeffrey Eugenides’ new book should be welcomed with great cheers and libations of black wine’

Literary Review

‘Employs all its author’s rich storytelling talents to give us one Greek-American family’s idiosyncratic journey ... A deeply affecting portrait of

one family's tumultuous engagement with the American twentieth century'

New York Times

'Genuinely moving ... That Eugenides manages to move us without sinking into sentiment shows how successfully he has avoided the tentacles of irony which grip so many writers of his generation'

Times Literary Supplement

'A wonderfully rich, ambitious novel'

Salman Rushdie, *New York Magazine*

'Hilarious and touching ... So wildly imaginative that it borders on the bizarre, and yet so warm-hearted that it's hard to resist'

USA Today

'Even as Eugenides gives us a contemporary model for the grand narratives of social realism, he has conscripted scientific arguments into the service of unforgettably beautiful myths and metaphors for human nature'

Evening Standard

'Wildly inventive ... it was worth the wait; this is a truly extraordinary novel based around one brilliantly drawn character'

Red

'The ideal book for those who enjoy intimate tales on an epic scale. *****'

Sunday Express

'A grand narrative of the immigrant experience and a deliciously twisted romance'

Esquire

'Ever so rarely, I read a novel that deserves the accolade of 'tour de force'. Jeffrey Eugenides's new book *Middlesex* is such a novel, managing to be

both immense in its human scope and moving and funny in its human detail. Life-changing is a rather alarming way to describe a book, but I suspect this one is just that'

Joanna Trollope's Book of the Year, *Daily Mail*

'Unprecedented, astounding ... The most reliably American story there is: A son of immigrants finally finds love after growing up feeling like a freak'

San Francisco Chronicle Book Review

'Handled with storytelling genius ... a good, old-fashioned family saga, owing its epic qualities to a fine cast of memorable individuals'

Image

'Not for nothing has Eugenides been acclaimed as some new Homer: he offers similar scope, heroics and Greeks enduring watery misadventures ... the prose is always generous, frequently amusing and never dull'

Financial Times

'A vast great sprawling story, flickering through three generations, brilliantly engaging, stunningly written'

Anna Pavord's Book of the Year, *Evening Standard*

'Dazzling ...a big, fat, funny American book without which no chattering-class home is complete'

GQ

Dedication

FOR MM, WHO COMES FROM A
DIFFERENT GENE POOL ENTIRELY

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Book One



The Silver Spoon



I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974. Specialized readers may have come across me in Dr. Peter Luce's study, "Gender Identity in 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites," published in the *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology* in 1975. Or maybe you've seen my photograph in chapter sixteen of the now sadly outdated *Genetics and Heredity*. That's me on page 578, standing naked beside a height chart with a black box covering my eyes.

My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver's license (from the Federal Republic of Germany) records my first name simply as Cal. I'm a former field hockey goalie, long-standing member of the Save-the-Manatee Foundation, rare attendant at the Greek Orthodox liturgy, and, for most of my adult life, an employee of the U.S. State Department. Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other. I've been ridiculed by classmates, guinea-pigged by doctors, palpated by specialists, and researched by the March of Dimes. A redheaded girl from Grosse Pointe fell in love with me, not knowing what I was. (Her brother liked me, too.) An army tank led me into urban battle once; a swimming pool turned me into myth; I've left my body in order to occupy others—and all this happened before I turned sixteen.

But now, at the age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on. After decades of neglect, I find myself thinking about departed great-aunts and -uncles, long-lost grandfathers, unknown fifth cousins, or, in the case of an inbred family like mine, all those things in one. And so before it's too late I want to get it down for good: this roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time. Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and the olives dropped. Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly

within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. And sing how Providence, in the guise of a massacre, sent the gene flying again; how it blew like a seed across the sea to America, where it drifted through our industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother's own midwestern womb.

Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too.

Three months before I was born, in the aftermath of one of our elaborate Sunday dinners, my grandmother Desdemona Stephanides ordered my brother to get her silkworm box. Chapter Eleven had been heading toward the kitchen for a second helping of rice pudding when she blocked his way. At fifty-seven, with her short, squat figure and intimidating hairnet, my grandmother was perfectly designed for blocking people's paths. Behind her in the kitchen, the day's large female contingent had congregated, laughing and whispering. Intrigued, Chapter Eleven leaned sideways to see what was going on, but Desdemona reached out and firmly pinched his cheek. Having regained his attention, she sketched a rectangle in the air and pointed at the ceiling. Then, through her ill-fitting dentures, she said, "Go for *yia yia*, dolly *mou*."

Chapter Eleven knew what to do. He ran across the hall into the living room. On all fours he scrambled up the formal staircase to the second floor. He raced past the bedrooms along the upstairs corridor. At the far end was a nearly invisible door, wallpapered over like the entrance to a secret passageway. Chapter Eleven located the tiny doorknob level with his head and, using all his strength, pulled it open. Another set of stairs lay behind it. For a long moment my brother stared hesitantly into the darkness above, before climbing, very slowly now, up to the attic where my grandparents lived.

In sneakers he passed beneath the twelve damply newspapered birdcages suspended from the rafters. With a brave face he immersed himself in the sour odor of the parakeets, and in my grandparents' own particular aroma, a mixture of mothballs and hashish. He negotiated his way past my grandfather's book-piled desk and his collection of rebetika records. Finally, bumping into the leather ottoman and the circular coffee table made of brass, he found my grandparents' bed and, under it, the silkworm box.

Carved from olivewood, a little bigger than a shoe box, it had a tin lid perforated by tiny airholes and inset with the icon of an unrecognizable

saint. The saint's face had been rubbed off, but the fingers of his right hand were raised to bless a short, purple, terrifically self-confident-looking mulberry tree. After gazing awhile at this vivid botanical presence, Chapter Eleven pulled the box from under the bed and opened it. Inside were the two wedding crowns made from rope and, coiled like snakes, the two long braids of hair, each tied with a crumbling black ribbon. He poked one of the braids with his index finger. Just then a parakeet squawked, making my brother jump, and he closed the box, tucked it under his arm, and carried it downstairs to Desdemona.

She was still waiting in the doorway. Taking the silkworm box out of his hands, she turned back into the kitchen. At this point Chapter Eleven was granted a view of the room, where all the women now fell silent. They moved aside to let Desdemona pass and there, in the middle of the linoleum, was my mother. Tessie Stephanides was leaning back in a kitchen chair, pinned beneath the immense, drum-tight globe of her pregnant belly. She had a happy, helpless expression on her face, which was flushed and hot. Desdemona set the silkworm box on the kitchen table and opened the lid. She reached under the wedding crowns and the hair braids to come up with something Chapter Eleven hadn't seen: a silver spoon. She tied a piece of string to the spoon's handle. Then, stooping forward, she dangled the spoon over my mother's swollen belly. And, by extension, over me.

Up until now Desdemona had had a perfect record: twenty-three correct guesses. She'd known that Tessie was going to be Tessie. She'd predicted the sex of my brother and of all the babies of her friends at church. The only children whose genders she hadn't divined were her own, because it was bad luck for a mother to plumb the mysteries of her own womb. Fearlessly, however, she plumbed my mother's. After some initial hesitation, the spoon swung north to south, which meant that I was going to be a boy.

Splay-legged in the chair, my mother tried to smile. She didn't want a boy. She had one already. In fact, she was so certain I was going to be a girl that she'd picked out only one name for me: Calliope. But when my grandmother shouted in Greek, "A boy!" the cry went around the room, and out into the hall, and across the hall into the living room where the men were arguing politics. And my mother, hearing it repeated so many times, began to believe it might be true.

As soon as the cry reached my father, however, he marched into the kitchen to tell his mother that, this time at least, her spoon was wrong. "And

how you know so much?” Desdemona asked him. To which he replied what many Americans of his generation would have:

“It’s science, Ma.”

Ever since they had decided to have another child—the diner was doing well and Chapter Eleven was long out of diapers—Milton and Tessie had been in agreement that they wanted a daughter. Chapter Eleven had just turned five years old. He’d recently found a dead bird in the yard, bringing it into the house to show his mother. He liked shooting things, hammering things, smashing things, and wrestling with his father. In such a masculine household, Tessie had begun to feel like the odd woman out and saw herself in ten years’ time imprisoned in a world of hubcaps and hernias. My mother pictured a daughter as a counterinsurgent: a fellow lover of lapdogs, a seconder of proposals to attend the Ice Capades. In the spring of 1959, when discussions of my fertilization got under way, my mother couldn’t foresee that women would soon be burning their brassieres by the thousand. Hers were padded, stiff, fire-retardant. As much as Tessie loved her son, she knew there were certain things she’d be able to share only with a daughter.

On his morning drive to work, my father had been seeing visions of an irresistibly sweet, dark-eyed little girl. She sat on the seat beside him—mostly during stoplights—directing questions at his patient, all-knowing ear. “What do you call that thing, Daddy?” “That? That’s the Cadillac seal.” “What’s the Cadillac seal?” “Well, a long time ago, there was a French explorer named Cadillac, and he was the one who discovered Detroit. And that seal was his family seal, from France.” “What’s France?” “France is a country in Europe.” “What’s Europe?” “It’s a continent, which is like a great big piece of land, way, way bigger than a country. But Cadillacs don’t come from Europe anymore, *kukla*. They come from right here in the good old U.S.A.” The light turned green and he drove on. But my prototype lingered. She was there at the next light and the next. So pleasant was her company that my father, a man loaded with initiative, decided to see what he could do to turn his vision into reality.

Thus: for some time now, in the living room where the men discussed politics, they had also been discussing the velocity of sperm. Peter Tatakis, “Uncle Pete,” as we called him, was a leading member of the debating society that formed every week on our black love seats. A lifelong bachelor, he had no family in America and so had become attached to ours. Every

Sunday he arrived in his wine-dark Buick, a tall, prune-faced, sad-seeming man with an incongruously vital head of wavy hair. He was not interested in children. A proponent of the Great Books series—which he had read twice—Uncle Pete was engaged with serious thought and Italian opera. He had a passion, in history, for Edward Gibbon, and, in literature, for the journals of Madame de Staël. He liked to quote that witty lady’s opinion on the German language, which held that German wasn’t good for conversation because you had to wait to the end of the sentence for the verb, and so couldn’t interrupt. Uncle Pete had wanted to become a doctor, but the “catastrophe” had ended that dream. In the United States, he’d put himself through two years of chiropractic school, and now ran a small office in Birmingham with a human skeleton he was still paying for in installments. In those days, chiropractors had a somewhat dubious reputation. People didn’t come to Uncle Pete to free up their kundalini. He cracked necks, straightened spines, and made custom arch supports out of foam rubber. Still, he was the closest thing to a doctor we had in the house on those Sunday afternoons. As a young man he’d had half his stomach surgically removed, and now after dinner always drank a Pepsi-Cola to help digest his meal. The soft drink had been named for the digestive enzyme pepsin, he sagely told us, and so was suited to the task.

It was this kind of knowledge that led my father to trust what Uncle Pete said when it came to the reproductive timetable. His head on a throw pillow, his shoes off, *Madama Butterfly* softly playing on my parents’ stereo, Uncle Pete explained that, under the microscope, sperm carrying male chromosomes had been observed to swim faster than those carrying female chromosomes. This assertion generated immediate merriment among the restaurant owners and fur finishers assembled in our living room. My father, however, adopted the pose of his favorite piece of sculpture, *The Thinker*, a miniature of which sat across the room on the telephone table. Though the topic had been brought up in the open-forum atmosphere of those postprandial Sundays, it was clear that, notwithstanding the impersonal tone of the discussion, the sperm they were talking about was my father’s. Uncle Pete made it clear: to have a girl baby, a couple should “have sexual congress twenty-four hours prior to ovulation.” That way, the swift male sperm would rush in and die off. The female sperm, sluggish but more reliable, would arrive just as the egg dropped.

My father had trouble persuading my mother to go along with the scheme. Tessie Zizmo had been a virgin when she married Milton Stephanides at the age of twenty-two. Their engagement, which coincided with the Second World War, had been a chaste affair. My mother was proud of the way she'd managed to simultaneously kindle and snuff my father's flame, keeping him at a low burn for the duration of a global cataclysm. This hadn't been all that difficult, however, since she was in Detroit and Milton was in Annapolis at the U.S. Naval Academy. For more than a year Tessie lit candles at the Greek church for her fiancé, while Milton gazed at her photographs pinned over his bunk. He liked to pose Tessie in the manner of the movie magazines, standing sideways, one high heel raised on a step, an expanse of black stocking visible. My mother looks surprisingly pliable in those old snapshots, as though she liked nothing better than to have her man in uniform arrange her against the porches and lampposts of their humble neighborhood.

She didn't surrender until after Japan had. Then, from their wedding night onward (according to what my brother told my covered ears), my parents made love regularly and enjoyably. When it came to having children, however, my mother had her own ideas. It was her belief that an embryo could sense the amount of love with which it had been created. For this reason, my father's suggestion didn't sit well with her.

"What do you think this is, Milt, the Olympics?"

"We were just speaking theoretically," said my father.

"What does Uncle Pete know about having babies?"

"He read this particular article in *Scientific American*," Milton said. And to bolster his case: "He's a subscriber."

"Listen, if my back went out, I'd go to Uncle Pete. If I had flat feet like you do, I'd go. But that's it."

"This has all been verified. Under the microscope. The male sperms are faster."

"I bet they're stupider, too."

"Go on. Malign the male sperms all you want. Feel free. We don't want a male sperm. What we want is a good old, slow, reliable female sperm."

"Even if it's true, it's still ridiculous. I can't just do it like clockwork, Milt."

"It'll be harder on me than you."

"I don't want to hear it."

“I thought you wanted a daughter.”

“I do.”

“Well,” said my father, “this is how we can get one.”

Tessie laughed the suggestion off. But behind her sarcasm was a serious moral reservation. To tamper with something as mysterious and miraculous as the birth of a child was an act of hubris. In the first place, Tessie didn’t believe you could do it. Even if you could, she didn’t believe you should try.

Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can’t be entirely sure about any of this. I can only explain the scientific mania that overtook my father during that spring of ’59 as a symptom of the belief in progress that was infecting everyone back then. Remember, *Sputnik* had been launched only two years earlier. Polio, which had kept my parents quarantined indoors during the summers of their childhood, had been conquered by the Salk vaccine. People had no idea that viruses were cleverer than human beings, and thought they’d soon be a thing of the past. In that optimistic, postwar America, which I caught the tail end of, everybody was the master of his own destiny, so it only followed that my father would try to be the master of his.

A few days after he had broached his plan to Tessie, Milton came home one evening with a present. It was a jewelry box tied with a ribbon.

“What’s this for?” Tessie asked suspiciously.

“What do you mean, what is it for?”

“It’s not my birthday. It’s not our anniversary. So why are you giving me a present?”

“Do I have to have a reason to give you a present? Go on. Open it.”

Tessie crumpled up one corner of her mouth, unconvinced. But it was difficult to hold a jewelry box in your hand without opening it. So finally she slipped off the ribbon and snapped the box open.

Inside, on black velvet, was a thermometer.

“A thermometer,” said my mother.

“That’s not just any thermometer,” said Milton. “I had to go to three different pharmacies to find one of these.”

“A luxury model, huh?”

“That’s right,” said Milton. “That’s what you call a basal thermometer. It reads the temperature down to *a tenth of a degree*.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Normal thermometers only read every two tenths. This one does it every tenth. Try it out. Put it in your mouth.”

“I don’t have a fever,” said Tessie.

“This isn’t about a fever. You use it to find out what your base temperature is. It’s more accurate and precise than a regular fever-type thermometer.”

“Next time bring me a necklace.”

But Milton persisted: “Your body temperature’s changing all the time, Tess. You may not notice, but it is. You’re in constant flux, temperature-wise. Say, for instance”—a little cough—“you happen to be ovulating. Then your temperature goes up. Six tenths of a degree, in most case scenarios. Now,” my father went on, gaining steam, not noticing that his wife was frowning, “if we were to implement the system we talked about the other day—just for instance, say—what you’d do is, *first*, establish your *base temperature*. It might not be ninety-eight point six. Everybody’s a little different. That’s another thing I learned from Uncle Pete. Anyway, once you established your *base temperature*, then you’d look for that six-tenths-degree rise. And that’s when, if we were to go through with this, that’s when we’d know to, you know, mix the cocktail.”

My mother said nothing. She only put the thermometer into the box, closed it, and handed it back to her husband.

“Okay,” he said. “Fine. Suit yourself. We may get another boy. Number two. If that’s the way you want it, that’s the way it’ll be.”

“I’m not so sure we’re going to have anything at the moment,” replied my mother.

Meanwhile, in the greenroom to the world, I waited. Not even a gleam in my father’s eye yet (he was staring gloomily at the thermometer case in his lap). Now my mother gets up from the so-called love seat. She heads for the stairway, holding a hand to her forehead, and the likelihood of my ever coming to be seems more and more remote. Now my father gets up to make his rounds, turning out lights, locking doors. As he climbs the stairway, there’s hope for me again. The timing of the thing had to be just so in order for me to become the person I am. Delay the act by an hour and you change the gene selection. My conception was still weeks away, but already my parents had begun their slow collision into each other. In our upstairs hallway, the Acropolis night-light is burning, a gift from Jackie Halas, who

owns a souvenir shop. My mother is at her vanity when my father enters the bedroom. With two fingers she rubs Noxzema into her face, wiping it off with a tissue. My father had only to say an affectionate word and she would have forgiven him. Not me but somebody like me might have been made that night. An infinite number of possible selves crowded the threshold, me among them but with no guaranteed ticket, the hours moving slowly, the planets in the heavens circling at their usual pace, weather coming into it, too, because my mother was afraid of thunderstorms and would have cuddled against my father had it rained that night. But, no, clear skies held out, as did my parents' stubbornness. The bedroom light went out. They stayed on their own sides of the bed. At last, from my mother, "Night." And from my father, "See you in the morning." The moments that led up to me fell into place as though decreed. Which, I guess, is why I think about them so much.

The following Sunday, my mother took Desdemona and my brother to church. My father never went along, having become an apostate at the age of eight over the exorbitant price of votive candles. Likewise, my grandfather preferred to spend his mornings working on a modern Greek translation of the "restored" poems of Sappho. For the next seven years, despite repeated strokes, my grandfather worked at a small desk, piecing together the legendary fragments into a larger mosaic, adding a stanza here, a coda there, soldering an anapest or an iamb. In the evenings he played his bordello music and smoked a hookah pipe.

In 1959, Assumption Greek Orthodox Church was located on Charlevoix. It was there that I would be baptized less than a year later and would be brought up in the Orthodox faith. Assumption, with its revolving chief priests, each sent to us via the Patriarchate in Constantinople, each arriving in the full beard of his authority, the embroidered vestments of his sanctity, but each wearying after a time—six months was the rule—because of the squabbling of the congregation, the personal attacks on the way he sang, the constant need to shush the parishioners who treated the church like the bleachers at Tiger Stadium, and, finally, the effort of delivering a sermon each week twice, first in Greek and then again in English. Assumption, with its spirited coffee hours, its bad foundation and roof leaks, its strenuous ethnic festivals, its catechism classes where our heritage was briefly kept alive in us before being allowed to die in the great diaspora. Tessie and

company advanced down the central aisle, past the sand-filled trays of votive candles. Above, as big as a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, was the Christ Pantocrator. He curved across the dome like space itself. Unlike the suffering, earthbound Christs depicted at eye level on the church walls, our Christ Pantocrator was clearly transcendent, all-powerful, heaven-bestrident. He was reaching down to the apostles above the altar to present the four rolled-up sheepskins of the Gospels. And my mother, who tried all her life to believe in God without ever quite succeeding, looked up at him for guidance.

The Christ Pantocrator's eyes flickered in the dim light. They seemed to suck Tessie upward. Through the swirling incense, the Savior's eyes glowed like televisions flashing scenes of recent events ...

First there was Desdemona the week before, giving advice to her daughter-in-law. "Why you want more children, Tessie?" she had asked with studied nonchalance. Bending to look in the oven, hiding the alarm on her face (an alarm that would go unexplained for another sixteen years), Desdemona waved the idea away. "More children, more trouble ..."

Next there was Dr. Philobosian, our elderly family physician. With ancient diplomas behind him, the old doctor gave his verdict. "Nonsense. Male sperm swim faster? Listen. The first person who saw sperm under a microscope was Leeuwenhoek. Do you know what they looked like to him? Like worms ..."

And then Desdemona was back, taking a different angle: "God decides what baby is. Not you ..."

These scenes ran through my mother's mind during the interminable Sunday service. The congregation stood and sat. In the front pew, my cousins, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cleopatra, fidgeted. Father Mike emerged from behind the icon screen and swung his censer. My mother tried to pray, but it was no use. She barely survived until coffee hour.

From the tender age of twelve, my mother had been unable to start her day without the aid of at least two cups of immoderately strong, tar-black, unsweetened coffee, a taste for which she had picked up from the tugboat captains and zooty bachelors who filled the boardinghouse where she had grown up. As a high school girl, standing five foot one inch tall, she had sat next to auto workers at the corner diner, having coffee before her first class. While they scanned the racing forms, Tessie finished her civics homework.

Now, in the church basement, she told Chapter Eleven to run off and play with the other children while she got a cup of coffee to restore herself.

She was on her second cup when a soft, womanly voice sighed in her ear. “Good morning, Tessie.” It was her brother-in-law, Father Michael Antoniou.

“Hi, Father Mike. Beautiful service today,” Tessie said, and immediately regretted it. Father Mike was the assistant priest at Assumption. When the last priest had left, harangued back to Athens after a mere three months, the family had hoped that Father Mike might be promoted. But in the end another new, foreign-born priest, Father Gregorios, had been given the post. Aunt Zo, who never missed a chance to lament her marriage, had said at dinner in her comedienne’s voice, “My husband. Always the bridesmaid and never the bride.”

By complimenting the service, Tessie hadn’t intended to compliment Father Greg. The situation was made still more delicate by the fact that, years ago, Tessie and Michael Antoniou had been engaged to be married. Now she was married to Milton and Father Mike was married to Milton’s sister. Tessie had come down to clear her head and have her coffee and already the day was getting out of hand.

Father Mike didn’t appear to notice the slight, however. He stood smiling, his eyes gentle above the roaring waterfall of his beard. A sweet-natured man, Father Mike was popular with church widows. They liked to crowd around him, offering him cookies and bathing in his beatific essence. Part of this essence came from Father Mike’s perfect contentment at being only five foot four. His shortness had a charitable aspect to it, as though he had given away his height. He seemed to have forgiven Tessie for breaking off their engagement years ago, but it was always there in the air between them, like the talcum powder that sometimes puffed out of his clerical collar.

Smiling, carefully holding his coffee cup and saucer, Father Mike asked, “So, Tessie, how are things at home?”

My mother knew, of course, that as a weekly Sunday guest at our house, Father Mike was fully informed about the thermometer scheme. Looking in his eyes, she thought she detected a glint of amusement.

“You’re coming over to the house today,” she said carelessly. “You can see for yourself.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” said Father Mike. “We always have such interesting discussions at your house.”

Tessie examined Father Mike’s eyes again but now they seemed full of genuine warmth. And then something happened to take her attention away from Father Mike completely.

Across the room, Chapter Eleven had stood on a chair to reach the tap of the coffee urn. He was trying to fill a coffee cup, but once he got the tap open he couldn’t get it closed. Scalding coffee poured out across the table. The hot liquid splattered a girl who was standing nearby. The girl jumped back. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. With great speed my mother ran across the room and whisked the girl into the ladies’ room.

No one remembers the girl’s name. She didn’t belong to any of the regular parishioners. She wasn’t even Greek. She appeared at church that one day and never again, and seems to have existed for the sole purpose of changing my mother’s mind. In the bathroom the girl held her steaming shirt away from her body while Tessie brought damp towels. “Are you okay, honey? Did you get burned?”

“He’s very clumsy, that boy,” the girl said.

“He can be. He gets into everything.”

“Boys can be very obstreperous.”

Tessie smiled. “You have quite a vocabulary.”

At this compliment the girl broke into a big smile. “ ‘Obstreperous’ is my favorite word. My brother is very obstreperous. Last month my favorite word was ‘turgid.’ But you can’t use ‘turgid’ that much. Not that many things are turgid, when you think about it.”

“You’re right about that,” said Tessie, laughing. “But obstreperous is all over the place.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” said the girl.

Two weeks later. Easter Sunday, 1959. Our religion’s adherence to the Julian calendar has once again left us out of sync with the neighborhood. Two Sundays ago, my brother watched as the other kids on the block hunted multicolored eggs in nearby bushes. He saw his friends eating the heads off chocolate bunnies and tossing handfuls of jelly beans into cavity-rich mouths. (Standing at the window, my brother wanted more than anything to believe in an American God who got resurrected on the right day.) Only yesterday was Chapter Eleven finally allowed to dye his own eggs, and then

only in one color: red. All over the house red eggs gleam in lengthening, solstice rays. Red eggs fill bowls on the dining room table. They hang from string pouches over doorways. They crowd the mantel and are baked into loaves of cruciform *tsoureki*.

But now it is late afternoon; dinner is over. And my brother is smiling. Because now comes the one part of Greek Easter he prefers to egg hunts and jelly beans: the egg-cracking game. Everyone gathers around the dining table. Biting his lip, Chapter Eleven selects an egg from the bowl, studies it, returns it. He selects another. "This looks like a good one," Milton says, choosing his own egg. "Built like a Brinks truck." Milton holds his egg up. Chapter Eleven prepares to attack. When suddenly my mother taps my father on the back.

"Just a minute, Tessie. We're cracking eggs here."

She taps him harder.

"What?"

"My temperature." She pauses. "It's up six tenths."

She has been using the thermometer. This is the first my father has heard of it.

"Now?" my father whispers. "Jesus, Tessie, are you sure?"

"No, I'm not sure. You told me to watch for any rise in my temperature and I'm telling you I'm up six tenths of a degree." And, lowering her voice, "Plus it's been thirteen days since my last you know what."

"Come on, Dad," Chapter Eleven pleads.

"Time out," Milton says. He puts his egg in the ashtray. "That's my egg. Nobody touch it until I come back."

Upstairs, in the master bedroom, my parents accomplish the act. A child's natural decorum makes me refrain from imagining the scene in much detail. Only this: when they're done, as if topping off the tank, my father says, "That should do it." It turns out he's right. In May, Tessie learns she's pregnant, and the waiting begins.

By six weeks, I have eyes and ears. By seven, nostrils, even lips. My genitals begin to form. Fetal hormones, taking chromosomal cues, inhibit Müllerian structures, promote Wolffian ducts. My twenty-three paired chromosomes have linked up and crossed over, spinning their roulette wheel, as my *papou* puts his hand on my mother's belly and says, "Lucky two!" Arrayed in their regiments, my genes carry out their orders. All

except two, a pair of miscreants—or revolutionaries, depending on your view—hiding out on chromosome number 5. Together, they siphon off an enzyme, which stops the production of a certain hormone, which complicates my life.

In the living room, the men have stopped talking about politics and instead lay bets on whether Milt's new kid will be a boy or a girl. My father is confident. Twenty-four hours after the deed, my mother's body temperature rose another two tenths, confirming ovulation. By then the male sperm had given up, exhausted. The female sperm, like tortoises, won the race. (At which point Tessie handed Milton the thermometer and told him she never wanted to see it again.)

All this led up to the day Desdemona dangled a utensil over my mother's belly. The sonogram didn't exist at the time; the spoon was the next best thing. Desdemona crouched. The kitchen grew silent. The other women bit their lower lips, watching, waiting. For the first minute, the spoon didn't move at all. Desdemona's hand shook and, after long seconds had passed, Aunt Lina steadied it. The spoon twirled; I kicked; my mother cried out. And then, slowly, moved by a wind no one felt, in that unearthly Ouija-board way, the silver spoon began to move, to swing, at first in a small circle but each orbit growing gradually more elliptical until the path flattened into a straight line pointing from oven to banquette. North to south, in other words. Desdemona cried, "*Koros!*" And the room erupted with shouts of "*Koros, koros.*"

That night, my father said, "Twenty-three in a row means she's bound for a fall. This time, she's wrong. Trust me."

"I don't mind if it's a boy," my mother said. "I really don't. As long as it's healthy, ten fingers, ten toes."

"What's this 'it.' That's my daughter you're talking about."

I was born a week after New Year's, on January 8, 1960. In the waiting room, supplied only with pink-ribboned cigars, my father cried out, "Bingo!" I was a girl. Nineteen inches long. Seven pounds four ounces.

That same January 8, my grandfather suffered the first of his thirteen strokes. Awakened by my parents rushing off to the hospital, he'd gotten out of bed and gone downstairs to make himself a cup of coffee. An hour later, Desdemona found him lying on the kitchen floor. Though his mental faculties remained intact, that morning, as I let out my first cry at Women's

Hospital, my *papou* lost the ability to speak. According to Desdemona, my grandfather collapsed right after overturning his coffee cup to read his fortune in the grounds.

When he heard the news of my sex, Uncle Pete refused to accept any congratulations. There was no magic involved. “Besides,” he joked, “Milt did all the work.” Desdemona became grim. Her American-born son had been proven right and, with this fresh defeat, the old country, in which she still tried to live despite its being four thousand miles and thirty-eight years away, receded one more notch. My arrival marked the end of her baby-guessing and the start of her husband’s long decline. Though the silkworm box reappeared now and then, the spoon was no longer among its treasures.

I was extracted, spanked, and hosed off, in that order. They wrapped me in a blanket and put me on display among six other infants, four boys, two girls, all of them, unlike me, correctly tagged. This can’t be true but I remember it: sparks slowly filling a dark screen.

Someone had switched on my eyes.