

The Girl Who Knew Everything

By Nina Vida

One

1947
In Love with Ted

Oh, Ted, brown-eyed, sweet-lipped Ted, knight of my dreams, blood of my veins, pulse of my heart, was there ever a more love-struck girl than me? I'd do anything for you. Anything. Why else would I, a Jew in name only, be learning Hebrew if not to maybe, possibly, miraculously catch a glimpse of you in the house where you live and where Rabbi Goren's Hebrew class is about to begin?

I'm the first one here today. So far, no sign of Ted. He sometimes saunters in from the kitchen or comes down the stairs from his room to use the telephone, and, joy and glory, there he'll be in all his lanky beautifulness swift across the floor like Fred Astaire.

Rabbi Goren is glancing over his lesson plan. His wife and three children were killed by Hitler and he spent three years in a concentration camp. He's wearing a short-sleeved shirt today and you can see the numbers the Nazis wrote on his arm. They look slapdash and slant every which way. Mrs. Blitstein, who plays mahjong with Mama on Saturday afternoons, has neatly drawn numbers on her arm except for one blurry figure where the person doing the printing was probably in a hurry and sank the number too deeply into a pucker of skin. I can't imagine what it must be like to live with numbers tattooed on your arm, numbers that will be with you forever and ever and every time that arm reaches for something the inky squiggles shout at you to look at them and so you do and that's when a sort of insanity of grief over a dead wife and dead children clutches your heart and throws you to the floor. I really don't know how Rabbi Goren lives with that arm.

So where's Ted?

Maybe he went on an errand for his mother and won't be back in time for me to catch a glimpse of him before Mama comes to pick me up.

Of course, I see him in the halls at school all the time. He's a hall monitor and is supposed to take down names if someone roughhouses or forgets to use the trash can. Sometimes I'll catch him looking in my direction, but he doesn't really know who I am, so he could be looking over my shoulder at someone else. Sometimes when he's not on duty he'll be sitting on the railing in front of the photography lab looking outrageously handsome in his green letterman sweater and I'll be tempted to walk over to him and tell him I love him, but something always happens to stop me; someone will ask me what the Spanish assignment is or the minute-to-class bell clangs and Ted's girlfriend shows up and the two of them walk away arm in arm before I get a chance.

Love, love, love. I'm overflowing with it. Bursting with it. I'll do handstands across Mrs. Beckman's living room if I'm lucky enough to even catch a tiny, fleeting, quick-as-a-moth glance of the incredibly handsome Ted before Hebrew class starts.

Half-open drapes make the living room look as dark and mysterious as the inside of a closet and all I can see of the upstairs is a closed door and next to the door a fist-sized hole in the wall. I think Ted's room is the second door at the top of the stairs, but I haven't seen him come out of it. I shift my gaze to the dining room. He's not in there. A short hall between the dining room and kitchen has a desk with a telephone. He's not on the telephone.

Waiting is excruciating. Grandma says I have no *sitzfleisch*, that when something exciting is about to happen I can't sit still. Right now, just thinking about catching sight of Ted pulls all the blood out of my heart and routes it straight through every vein in my body. I can feel the pumping heat in my cheeks and probably look like I'm about to break out in the measles.

I like this house. Not only because Ted lives here, either. I like it because it's warm and messy – since I've been coming to Hebrew class, I've seen the same pair of galoshes in front of the fireplace next to the dead leaves that once must have been a living plant – and it always smells like something delicious is cooking in the kitchen. Our house is neat and clean and mostly smells like dish soap. Daddy hates when

Mama cooks. He says the stink of roast brisket and fried fish gets into the upholstery and never leaves. And he likes the house to look like no one lives in it. Galoshes and dead plants hanging around wouldn't stand a chance in our house when Daddy's around. He once threw away a half-knitted sweater, a ball of yarn and a pair of knitting needles of Grandma's.

So I'm in love with a Jewish boy. Which I don't suppose is a very good idea. When I started reading about the murder of the Jews in Europe, I realized that merely moving around in a Jewish body and blowing air out of Jewish lungs and occupying space that gentiles might want could be dangerous. I thought about turning Christian. I would be Ellie Sherman, Methodist. Methodists never get put in concentration camps or have numbers inked on their arms or are gassed. That I know of. I wouldn't even have to change my name. No one can tell I'm Jewish by an innocent-sounding name like Sherman. I told Grandma what I was thinking. *Sweetheart*, she said in that reasonable, warm-hearted way she has, *it's always best to be who you are*. Anyway, I didn't become a Methodist. I did become alert to what anyone around me said about Hitler or Jews or concentration camps. When a girl in geometry class asked me if I was Jewish I wanted to say no, I'm a Methodist, but the words wouldn't come out of my mouth. And the sassy way she said Jew settled it. I said *Yes, and proud of it* and never spoke to her again.

Grandma says I'm obsessed with the idea of Jewishness. Not the fact of it. The idea. Why is the word Jew so full of emotion, so hair-singeing with derision, so maddened by envy, so singularly mysterious is what I want to know. The first thing I do when I read about a famous person is try to find out if they have Jewish blood. It doesn't have to be complete Jewish blood. It could be one parent or a grandparent. Preliminarily I want to know where everyone on my team is, and when that's settled I can figure out how Jewish they are. Observant, casual, self-hating, ashamed or proud. I'm a real detective. I sweep up little details. I concoct doomsday scenarios in case I'm interrogated by the Gestapo. Lately I've been trying to figure out whether being a Jew in name only gives you a pass.

We used to live in Los Angeles. There were plenty of Jewish boys to fall in love with there – which would have made Grandma happy, because although she's not religious she's suspicious of gentiles and believes that they always end up, at a minimum, calling you a dirty Jew -- but I was in grammar school and the war was on and what was happening around me was more fascinating than boys could ever be. There were blackout curtains in every house and block wardens knocking on doors to make sure no light seeped through curtains and drapes, and Grandma was giving me piano lessons, which meant an hour of practice every day, and I was growing a Victory Garden of radishes and carrots and lettuce and saving bacon fat in coffee tins and stacking old newspapers in every corner of the house for the paper drives and walking up to the Melrose Market on Saturdays to buy salami and cheese and butter with the family ration book, and I couldn't see into the future so I had no idea I could possibly ever fall in love with anyone, especially a Jewish boy who doesn't even know I'm alive.

Grandma was born in Chicago and went to the Academy of Music to become a piano teacher. She has her certificate on the wall of the bedroom we share next to a photograph of me when I was three years old. I'm sitting on a table in the picture, my chubby knees peeking out beneath my pearl-buttoned dress. Mama said someone once stopped her in the street and said I looked like the Gerber baby and gave her a card in case she wanted to hire me out to the movies. I'm glad she didn't. Being in the movies ruins people. There's no privacy. Everyone picks you over, makes up stories about you, discusses your chubby knees.

As far as I can tell, Vanita and I are the only Jews in my class at Langford High School. I used to eat lunch with her on the quad because I thought I should out of solidarity and comradeship and mutual outsideness, but she was so quiet and rolled out what little she had to say so slowly a person could go to sleep before she got to the point. She didn't seem to mind when I started eating lunch with a bunch of Mormon kids on the lawn next to the ice cream truck. But they were always talking about the "ward" and whether or not they were going to go to the dance at the "stake," which made me even sleepier than Vanita did. I eat by myself now.

“Everyone is late,” the rabbi says. “There’s no excuse. I waste my time.”

“There might be traffic,” I say. “One extra car on the street, and by the time that car gets to Lennox Boulevard there’s traffic. You can plug in time of day, weather conditions and gas prices and predict how many cars will be merging at any given moment.”

The rabbi rubs his hand with the numbered arm across his lips, as though what I had said made some sense, although I was just trying to amuse him until Ted came out of his room or out of the kitchen or out of wherever he was.

If you count grades, I’m very smart. All A’s. Mama says that’s what she expects from me. I’d like her to tell me she’s proud of me, but she never does. Daddy isn’t interested in anything I do and doesn’t even look at my report cards. Grandma keeps them in a candy box, and says I’m the smartest, prettiest granddaughter in the world and not to pay attention to anything Daddy says bad about me, that she’s sure he loves me. She says he used to take me to the park and push me on the swings. Maybe he did, but that was a long time ago.

I don’t know if Ted’s smart or not and I don’t care. I don’t even care that he has a girlfriend. She is very pale and blonde and is from some glacially cold place like Norway or Sweden and is so thin I think she must live on lettuce leaves. I’m not fat, but Grandma says that if I skipped the black-and-white cookies I have every day after school I’ll be sure to fit into Merlie’s wedding gown when I get married. Aunt Merlie died of bone cancer and Mama says it would be bad luck to wear a dead person’s wedding gown, that Grandma should have thrown it away when Merlie died. Cancer isn’t catching, I told her, but I don’t think she heard me.

Back to Ted and his girlfriend. I see him walking across campus with her between classes and at lunchtime. Nadine. She wears a cross on a gold chain around her neck and tosses her long blonde hair over her shoulder when she laughs. When she does that Ted does a sort of spin with his upper body, hooks her waist with his right arm and pulls her head close to his chest. Sometimes I get a tremendous urge to walk up to

him and say *I'll love you forever, Ted. No Norwegian shiksa will love you till death do us part the way I will.*

I hated the South Bay at first and it gives me the shivers when I think that I didn't want to leave Los Angeles. If we hadn't, I would never have fallen in love with Ted. It's sort of like the way I felt waking up worried sick on the morning of Grandma's cancer operation and in the afternoon the happiness I felt when the doctor told us it wasn't cancer after all.

The couch I'm sitting on has so many rips and tears that the dark-brown stuffing is oozing out. I try not to move around too much on the falling-apart cushions or shuffle my feet back and forth on the carpet because when I sneezed a few minutes ago the rabbi looked up from his book and I thought he was going to start the lesson without anyone else here, which would cut into my looking-for-signs-of-Ted time, but he stared at me for a few seconds over his glasses, then went back to his notebook.

We used to live in one side of a duplex in Los Angeles. I knew everyone in the neighborhood. Then at the end of fifth grade Daddy said we were moving to the South Bay, that he had a job at Long Beach Naval Shipyard and war workers could buy a house in Gardena for almost no money. It made me so mad that he hadn't asked me whether I wanted to move to the South Bay that I told him I hated him. Which might be the reason he doesn't speak to me.

Ta-da! Ted is walking down the stairs. He's got his dog with him. Now he's gone into the kitchen with the dog yapping at the back of his shoes all the way.

Mrs. Beckman has come into the living room. She's chubby in the middle, but as she bends over the basket of twigs beside the fireplace, her house dress lifts up and I can see her skinny legs. Mama says she's had four husbands and divorced each one and everyone in the mahjong group talks about her as if she's going to steal one of their husbands.

Mrs. Beckman once asked me what Daddy did. I suppose she meant where did he work. I said he worked in an office. I didn't tell her he's a genius at math but he's crazy. Or that Mama is afraid of him. Now whenever Mrs. Beckman asks me anything about my family, I sort of

skitter and skate, smile a huge smile, and talk about something else. Grandma calls me a yes-girl because I'm always trying to please.

"How about some heat, Rabbi?" Mrs. Beckman says.

"What?"

"Heat. Fire. A little warmth."

"What do I care? Heat or no heat, it's all the same." He looks at me. "Are you cold, Ellie?"

"Maybe a little."

Mrs. Beckman tosses handfuls of twigs into the fireplace, then lights a match to a squashed page of newspaper, tosses it in and stands with hands on ample hips watching the whole mess catch fire.

"We didn't use our fireplace in Los Angeles," I say. "Whenever we did it would fill the house with smoke. I tried to tell Daddy there was probably something wrong with the flue, but he had stopped speaking to me by then and it wasn't until the day before we moved out that the landlord went up on the roof and fixed it."

"Oh," Mrs. Beckman says and Rabbi Goren shakes his head.

"Then Grandma moved in with us and the only place her piano would fit was right in front of the fireplace. A flaming fire would have ruined the soundboard. Soundboards are very delicate. Heat can shrink them and then the wood needs to be shimmed and the piano won't keep a tune. There's no point playing an out-of-tune piano, not unless you want to get an earache. Anyway, Mama put a cactus plant in the fireplace and when it got cold we turned on the radiator."

"Would you like some water, Ellie?" Mrs. Beckman says. "Or a soda. I have root beer soda." She's only asking me if I want a root beer soda because she's sorry I have a daddy who doesn't speak to me.

"I'm not thirsty, Mrs. Beckman, so no water, thank you. And I read that soda is bad for you. Too much sugar."

Ted comes into the living room. He's standing right where the afternoon sun is coming through the window. It's shining the silky tips of his brown hair a soft gold, and as he turns his face towards me his eyes have a fiery dazzle in their dark centers.

He puts a leash on the dog.

"What's her name?" I ask.

“It’s a he. Butch.”

“Why are you putting a leash on him?”

“I’m taking him for a walk.”

His voice startles me. I’ve never heard it this close up. I hear bits of its silvery tone when he talks on the telephone in the hall, but listening to its swoony depths from only two feet away prickles my skin.

“You can come if you want,” he says.

I hesitate. He’s asking me to walk the dog with him. I want to, but he’s probably just being polite.

“Class will be starting in a minute. We’re waiting for everyone to get here. They’re all late. They don’t think twice about wasting Rabbi Goren’s time when it’s so valuable. I think there’s nothing more precious than time. Einstein says the only reason there’s such a thing as time is so that everything doesn’t happen at once.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Go with him for a walk,” the rabbi says.

Ted takes long steps. Two steps of mine to one of his. I keep my eyes on the toes of my shoes. I can see every crack in the sidewalk, every loose stone, every dandelion pushing up through the cement. Here I am walking with the boy I love and it would be awful if I tripped and broke my leg.

“Do you like Hebrew class?” he says.

“I do. The rabbi is a very good teacher. The last few weeks he’s been talking to us about the Euphrates. Did you know that Euphrates means good and abounding river?”

“I only went long enough for my bar mitzvah.”

“I can give you one of my study books, if you want. Biblical geography is the only part of Hebrew class I like, anyway. I don’t know what use I would ever have for knowing how to read and write Hebrew, since I’m probably never going to be an observant Jew. And even if I did become an observant Jew, Rabbi Goren is always complaining that even in temple everything is in English.”

The Beckman house is the only house on the block. It's as if someone built the house and then forgot it was there and just started putting buildings up around it. There's a barber shop on one side and a used-furniture store on the other, then an empty lot, then a small market and after that nearly to the corner a bunch of little stores with signs on their windows and newspaper stands and candy machines on the sidewalk. Streetcar tracks run down the middle of the street, and there's a stop sign at the corner. The street is so wide I think it would take me five minutes to walk across to the other side. I'm not positive, but I think I'm deliriously happy.

"I don't remember seeing you at Langford," he says. "Do you go to Morningside?"

"Nope. Langford."

"Funny I haven't seen you before. Where do you eat?"

"What do you mean?"

"East or west of the quad. I eat west."

"I move around. Sometimes east, sometimes west. It depends."

"I'm eighteen. I graduate in June. How old are you?"

"Fifteen. In seven months I'll be sixteen. I'll be a junior next year. When I graduate I'm going to France to study at the Sorbonne. From what I read, if you want to study the liberal arts, the Sorbonne is the best place to do it. Of course, a person has to have a lot of money to go to France in the first place, so that might not be possible. In which case I'll probably just get a job."

He doesn't even know I go to Langford. He's never noticed me there. Of course, he's not in any of my classes, and his locker must be on the west side of the building instead of the east, and he must never have bought a plate of mashed potatoes and gravy at the take-out window of the cafeteria or he'd certainly have seen me there. But I forgive him. I'd like to take his hand – the one not holding the leash – and lean into his shoulder the way his girlfriend does, and look up into his sparkly eyes and tell him how much I love him.

"Are you going to college?" I ask him.

"No money for college. Anyway, I'm not the best student in the world."

“You probably don’t try,” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“Good students are good students because they try. They pay attention in class and do their homework. I don’t think I’d be half as smart as everyone thinks I am if I didn’t pay attention and study. Grandma says study has its own reward, that you should do it for the pleasure of it and not expect any reward. Do you read?”

“Of course I read,” he says.

“I don’t mean just read, do you read books?”

“Sure.

“My favorite books are adventure.”

“I thought girls only read romances.”

“I read everything. Right now I’m reading books about the war.”

“Which war?”

“The second world war, of course. Aren’t you interested in what happened to the Jews in the war?”

“I try not to think about it because there’s nothing I can do about it,” he says. My real father’s brother died in it. No one ever found his body, so maybe he isn’t even dead.”

“I think history is important. And since I’m a Jew, I’m particularly interested in what happened to the Jews. People don’t like to talk about it, but truly horrible things happened. Before my grandpa died he used to take me to temple on Yom Kippur. He knew I’d go to school if he didn’t. Have you read *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck?”

“I don’t read books by girls,” he says.

“You should read this one.”

“What’s it about?”

“About a Chinese family. And I would never say I wouldn’t read a book because it’s by a boy. That’s a very petty thing to say. I read books by boys all the time.”

“Petty? Where did you get that word?”

“From the dictionary. You should read it sometime, there are all sorts of interesting words in it. Have you read *Scaramouche*?”

“I read *Scaramouche* and *Black Hawk* and *Captain Blood*.”

“I’ve read all of Rafael Sabatini’s books. You should read *Bardelys the Magnificent*. It’s the best. Where did the hole come from?”

“What hole?”

“At the top of the stairs in your house. Haven’t you even noticed that there’s a hole in the wall at the top of the stairs?”

“I noticed.”

“So how did it get there?”

“My dad pushed me.”

“Really? Did he just stick out his arm and didn’t say watch out but just socked you so hard you flew backwards and made a hole in the wall?” I punch the air with my fist to demonstrate.

“It was an accidental push,” he says. “He didn’t say anything.”

“Not even I’m sorry?”

“Why would he say he was sorry if it was an accident?”

“People say I’m sorry when they push someone, even if it’s accidental. Which one of your fathers was he?”

“I only have one father.”

“Mama says you have four or five, at least.”

“I don’t count them as my father.”

“Then where is he?”

“Somewhere.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Anyway, I wouldn’t have thought anyone being pushed could make a hole that big,” I say emphatically. “It looks like it was made by an auger, that there was a leak in the toilet pipe and the only way to get to it was through the wall, and the only way to do that is with an auger. There’s usually no way to a leaky pipe unless you tear the wall apart. Any plumber will tell you that. Unless it’s lath and plaster. Your house must be plasterboard. Plasterboard is very weak. It doesn’t take much. Our house in Los Angeles had lath and plaster walls and you needed a sledge hammer to hang a picture.”

“How come you know so much?”

“I really don’t know that much. I just remember things I hear or read. My mother says it’s a curse.”

“So did you like Los Angeles? I hear it’s too crowded.”

“Maybe it is, but I liked it. I especially liked the house we lived in. Where we live now is like living on the moon. All the houses look the same except for the color of the paint, and hardly anything grows. There are just weedy lawns and overgrown gardens and little kids on tricycles. Sometimes I ride my bike through the whole tract without seeing a single car. What kind of dog is Butch?”

“He’s a mongrel. I don’t think he’s any kind.”

“He looks like a part spaniel and pug mix to me, although I don’t think breeds are very important, do you?”

“Not really.”

“I mean, everyone is always trying to classify people into breeds and look where that’s gotten us.”

His laugh is as sparkly as his eyes. It makes me want to laugh. So I do. My gosh, I think I love him even more than I did before.

When we’re through laughing, he says, “You’re cute, you know that?”

“I am?”

“No one’s ever said that to you before?”

“Maybe my grandmother.”

Butch is pooping in the dirt at the edge of the sidewalk. It’s embarrassing. We stand in the middle of the sidewalk, the smell of dog poop drifting on the breeze.

“My name’s Ted. What’s yours?”

“Ellie. Actually Ellen, but no one ever calls me that. I’m named after my father’s mother. She died a month before I was born. Mama’s mother lives with us. We share a bedroom. It’s very crowded. If I had designed the house, I would have thought more in terms of how many people were expected to live in it, but residential usage doesn’t figure into governmental housing design. Two bedrooms, one bathroom, and Grandma and I in a queen-sized bed that has to be pushed up against the wall to fit, which means if she’s in bed first I have to climb over her. It’s very inconvenient.”

“You talk like a grownup.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Anyway, a bunch of us kids are going to the beach on Sunday. You know the beach at the end of Rosecrans?”

“I do.”

“You should come. I’ve got my mom’s car on Sunday and I’d give you a ride, but the car’s full. Maybe your dad can take you.”

On Thursday Mama asks Daddy if he’ll drive me to the beach on Sunday. He doesn’t answer. She asks him on Friday and again on Saturday. He doesn’t answer either time. It’s always that way. Mama starts out asking Daddy to do something – take Ellie to Hebrew class, clean out the garage, put gas in the car – and she always ends up doing it herself.

Mama is sort of fat and has acne scars, but she has the prettiest dark brown eyes and longest eyelashes of anyone I know, which is what everyone remarks on when they meet her. Not many people know how smart she is, because she’s never had a job or gone any further than high school, but she can recite every poem she’s ever read, has read Funk and Wagnalls from A to Z, and as hard as I try to stump her on the meaning of a word, she can pull it out of her head quicker than I can say Jack Robinson. Besides which, she’s the best cook and cleaner. Her fried chicken is the best fried chicken in the world, and she cleans places in the house that no one would even know exist. Above all, she’s the one who taught me to read when I was four. By the time I started school I had read every book in the children’s section of the library.

Daddy might have been handsome once upon a time, but he’s nearly bald and is too thin. He’s also very strange, the way if having a cheetah living in the house with us would be strange. He hardly says or does anything to make you notice him, but can strike without warning if you upset him in some way or make him change his way of doing something. He has a routine and no one is allowed to interrupt him when he’s in the middle of it, because if they do that’s when he turns into a cheetah, which is something no one outside of our house knows about, because Daddy is always smiling at everyone he meets and never says

anything disagreeable. I can't even describe the mean things he's said to Mama and Grandma and me when he's a cheetah. Ugly, nasty, horrible things. Mama says if we told anyone what Daddy was really like, they wouldn't believe it.

Exercise is very important to Daddy. Every morning he stands on his head before breakfast, in the evening he walks five miles, then reads until bedtime. He plays the piano by ear and can add and subtract and multiply huge numbers in his head. Now that the war's over he works for a market, and that's what he does, numbers. Mama says Daddy is a human calculator and when the market takes inventory in the warehouse the foreman just has to tell Daddy the unit price of a can of beans and Daddy tells him the case price in a second without even figuring it out on a piece of paper. The Army offered him a special job during the war calculating the path of missiles as they fly through the air, but Daddy said if he took the Army job he wouldn't have been able to do his routine, so he told them no.

"Daddy can't take you to the beach," Mama says on Sunday morning. "He's busy. I'll take you."

"You can park here."

"But it's a long walk to the beach from here," Mama says. "Can you see them?"

"I can't, but I know they're there. It'll be fine, and I don't want you to worry that there'll be a problem or something will go wrong, because it won't."

"I just want to see that you have the right place before I leave. There's a lot of beach, Ellie, and maybe you heard wrong, that it wasn't Rosecrans, but some other street."

"I didn't hear wrong, Mama. My ears are perfectly good."

"You're sure it was today, not yesterday?"

"I'm sure."

"Sometimes things don't turn out the way we think they will, and I don't want you to be disappointed."

“I’ll be perfectly fine until four o’clock, so you don’t have to worry I’ll be disappointed because I won’t be.”

“There’s always a chance you might.”

“There’s no chance. It’s just the beach, and they’re kids I go to school with.”

“You’ve never talked about them before.”

“I didn’t think it was important. They’re friends of mine. We eat lunch together. I don’t ask you who you eat lunch with when you play mahjong.”

“Oh, Ellie.”

“Just don’t baby me. The idea that I have to have my mother drive me to the beach in the first place is embarrassing enough.”

It’s a fairly long walk to the water, and I stop halfway to dump sand out of my sandals. I look back once and Mama is still sitting in the car watching me. I wave at her and mouth *I love you*, and continue walking.

“Hey, you made it,” Ted says and smooths a place for me on one of the blankets. “This is Ellie. Her parents are friends with my mom.”

I’ve seen them all at school, girls and boys, most of them seniors, a few juniors, who sit together near the ice cream truck on the quad and are so famous for their fame that they get to pick the loudspeaker’s lunchtime music. One of the boys always wears a trench coat to school, even on the hottest days, and I’ve heard that he carries a flask of whiskey in one of its pockets. And there’s Eric, the boy who wrote on the blackboard in my geometry class *I finally got a higher grade on a test than Ellie Sherman*. And the girl who’s always applying layer after layer of pancake makeup in Spanish class and passing notes back and forth to her friends. And the boy who came up to me in study hall and asked me to conjugate the subjunctive of *estar* for him and the girl who wanted me to loan her my geometry workbook and help her with an essay for English.

The girls are all wearing sleek strapless bathing suits. I’m wearing the two-piece Mama bought me in the kids department at Bullocks. It has a sailboat print on the material, and the top and bottom are ruffled.

Ted's girlfriend Nadine smiles at me as I take off my sweater and skirt and sit down.

They're all looking at me now. I'm sure they're wondering about my bathing suit and whether Ted's mother made him ask me to the beach.

"You go to Morningside?" Nadine asks me.

"Langford. Maybe you remember I played the piano at the talent contest and won a year's worth of malts at the Jungle Shack. Malaguena by Ernesto Lacuona. Grandma says Malaguena is my warhorse, because when someone asks me to play something, that's what I play. It's just stuck in my fingers forever. I don't suppose I'll ever forget how to play it even when I'm ninety."

"Were you wearing ballet slippers?"

"I don't think so. I don't own any. I thought you have to take ballet lessons to wear ballet slippers."

"Then I don't remember you."

"Well," I say, "I was wearing a plaid skirt and saddle shoes, and my hair kept slipping out of my pony tail while I was playing. It was really annoying. I remember you, though. You sit in the third row on the left side near the window in Spanish class."

"You're not on the prom committee. I know everyone on the committee."

"I'm not a junior yet. I'll be a junior next year. I don't think I'll be on the prom committee, though. Committees take up too much time, and I'm not sure there's an ample reward for the time invested. It's really a matter of how you want to allot your time, and I think that how anyone wants to allot theirs is up to them, which is not to say I think you're wasting your time, because I don't. I think it's neat that you work on the prom committee. Contributing something of yourself so everyone can have a good time is very altruistic."

"Ellie is really smart," Ted says.

"I'll say she is," Eric says.

Ted says, "Tell everyone what Einstein said about time, Ellie."

I look at the way the sun grazes his cheek, the expectant smile as he waits for me to shine. He loves me. Really, truly, deeply. There's no question about it.

"Einstein said the only reason there's such a thing as time is so that everything doesn't happen at once," I say. "But there's disagreement as to whether Einstein actually said it. Quotes sometimes get misattributed and then the misattribution gets repeated and soon too much time has passed and there's no one around to say who said what. But he's one of the great minds of this century, maybe any century, and if he didn't say that time was invented to keep events from bumping into one another, then he probably should have."

"He couldn't do his income tax," Eric says.

"When you're smart and famous and the most important mathematician in the world, people make up stories about you."

"He's dead, so who cares?" Nadine says.

"He's alive," Eric says.

"He is?" Nadine says.

I say, "Anyway, I'm going to take physics next year."

"Take physics?" Nadine says. "Is that like for a stomachache?"

"It's like for astronomy," I say. "I'm interested in the planets. There are all sorts of discoveries being made as a result of the war. You wouldn't think there was anything good can come out of death and destruction, but all the research on weapons and military strategy and improvements in flight have really opened up space exploration. We'll probably go to the moon someday."

"Ellie thinks breeds of dogs are like breeds of people," Ted says.

"That's really funny," Nadine says and the girls all laugh.

"It wasn't a statement, Ted," I say. "It was an analogy."

"I knew that," Ted says.

"Of course, people aren't dogs," I say, "but they're categorized in similar ways, which makes for sweeping stereotypes about groups of human beings."

"I don't see the point of what you're saying," Nadine says.

"She's talking about tribes," Ted says.

"I still don't get it,"

“It’s really not important,” I say and Ted melts me with his smile.

Two

1949 Ted Disappears

I don't see Ted at school on Monday. He isn't walking hand-in-hand with Nadine across campus or sitting with her on the quad at lunch.

I catch Nadine at her locker after fifth period.

"Did you talk to Ted today?" I ask her.

"Who wants to know?"

"So you haven't talked to him today?"

"No," she says, "and if he wanted to be here, he would be here," and she tosses her yellow hair the way she might have if I had told her something funny.

He isn't at school on Tuesday either. I go to the office in the afternoon and ask the secretary if she knows why Ted Beckman isn't at school. She checks the class rosters and says he hasn't been in any of his classes since last Friday and there is no written or oral excuse for his absence.

At Wednesday's Hebrew class there is no sign of Ted upstairs or downstairs or in the kitchen or on the telephone.

"I don't know where Ted is," Mrs. Beckman says.

"You're his mother, you have to know where he is."

"I don't."

"Then call the police, because it's been more than two days, and anything can happen to a person in two days. Aren't you even worried? I'm worried to death and I'm not his mother. I don't understand how you can be so calm about it."

"Ted is very independent," she says. "I'm not worried about him."

"Well, I am," I reply.

It's the day of Ted's graduation. I take the bus and sit in the relatives' section. There's no sign of Ted in a blue-and-white gown

sitting with his classmates on the hockey field. His name isn't on the Langford High School graduation schedule. The B's come and go and no one calls Ted Beckman to come up and get his diploma. His name isn't mentioned by the principal in his class address. The valedictorian talks about believing in herself and doesn't say where Ted Beckman is. It's as if he never was a student at Langford High School, and as I listen to the commencement speeches, I want to write his name in big letters on the graduation schedule and run down to the hockey field and wave it over the sea of blue. Doesn't anyone care what happened to him? How could he have just disappeared without telling his mother or his girlfriend or the principal or the valedictorian where he was going?

I walk down to the bus stop and sit on the curb. I don't understand how this could have happened, how I could have lost him before he even knew how much I loved him. I didn't dream him up. He's real. His face will float above my pain-and-fever-addled body on my death bed; the glimmer in his eye will be as vivid in my dying mind as the words I never got to say to him. I may be fifteen and a half, almost sixteen, but I know what I know, and what I know is that I will never love anyone else the way I love him. You can believe me or not. I don't care. I love him. And I'm going to find him, no matter how far and wide I have to look. So let everyone else forget him; I never will.