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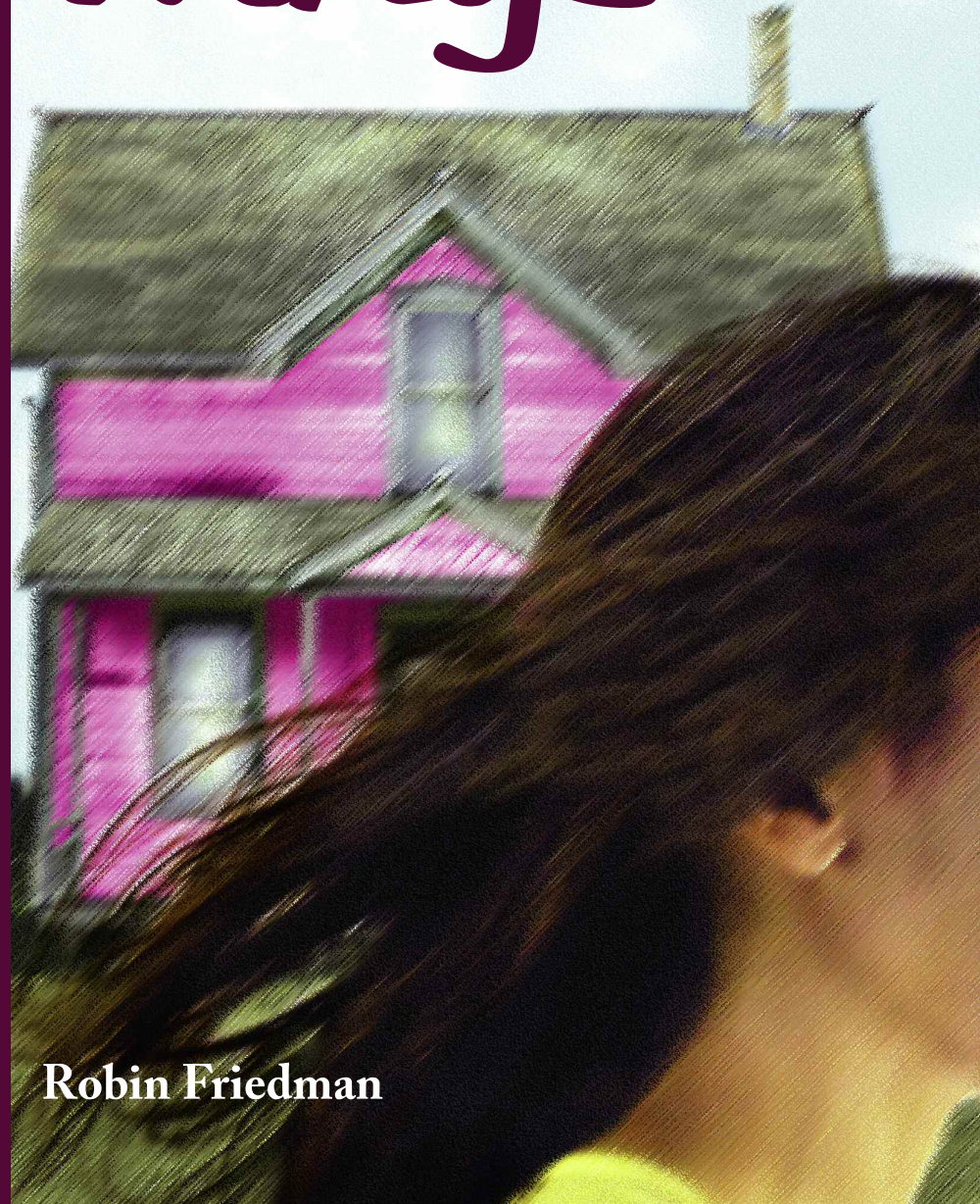


the  
importance  
of  
MISSES

Friedman

Charlesbridge

# the importance of wings



Robin Friedman

the importance of  
**wings**

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 Charlesbridge

*For my Israeli-American family:  
my generous mother, Sarah;  
my wise father, Daniel;  
my beautiful sister, Galit;  
and my sweet brother, Jonathan.*

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Israeli-born Roxanne, who idolizes Wonder Woman, begins to see things differently  
when the supremely confident Liat, also from Israel, moves into the “cursed house”  
next door and they become friends.

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## chapter one

*it's called the cursed house* because something terrible always happens to anyone who lives there.

It's not a scary or ugly house, like those haunted houses you see in the movies, but it is different. It's the biggest house on the block, and the only one painted bright pink. And the backyard leads to the woods, which are scary. Nobody else's house leads to the woods.

My sister, Gayle, and I are walking home from school when we see the sign:

***House for Sale***

Contact Appleseed Agency

Neither of us says anything. Finally Gayle asks, “What kind of weird name is Appleseed?”

“I dunno,” I reply. “Maybe it’s . . .” But I trail off, because I can’t think of an explanation. We stare at it for a few more seconds in silence, then finally start for our house.

Gayle walks straight into the kitchen, turns on the TV, and gets out the cereal. “Do you think anyone will buy it, Roxanne?” she asks as she dumps a rushing stream of Cocoa Pebbles into her bowl.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I say. I make sure the TV is tuned to Channel 5, which shows the best reruns after school.

We sit at the kitchen table watching TV and eating cereal, but my mind drifts from *The Brady Bunch* to the Cursed House. I think about all the awful stories we’ve heard about the people who lived there—like the one about Stood-Up Serena. Stood-Up Serena was a high school senior who was stood up by her date on the night of the senior prom. She walked into the woods in her lavender prom gown and never came back.

Then there was the time the FBI swarmed over the house in the middle of the night with flashlights and

guns. The family who lived there got busted for something major, but no one ever found out what.

Four months later, the Brinns moved in. They were there only a week when their youngest daughter fell down the stairs and broke her neck. On the way to her funeral, the whole family died when a milk truck plowed into their car on the Staten Island Expressway.

The *Staten Island Advance* splashed the story on its front page, describing the accident scene as “a haunting shade of bright pink”—spilled milk mixing with spilled blood. It also mentioned that the house the family had lived in was bright pink, but it didn’t say it was called the Cursed House. The house has been empty ever since.

“Do you really think it’s Cursed?” Gayle asks.

“Yeah, it seems like it,” I reply.

Gayle stops her spoon in midair. “Do you think it’s pink because of blood?”

“Yeah,” I say again.

“How come the Curse doesn’t come to our house?” she asks, and although she says this nonchalantly, I can tell the idea makes her anxious.

I pause, because I really don't know. Finally I say, "I guess Curses don't work that way. I guess Curses just stay where they are."

Gayle nods, satisfied with my response.

Truth is, even though the Cursed House has always been right next door, it isn't a big part of my life and I don't worry about it.

This is a list of the things I *do* worry about:

- a. *eddie*
- b. *gym*
- c. *my hair*
- d. *being israeli*

I make a lot of lists. They help me think. I sometimes write them down, but mostly I just make them in my head.

After eating a second bowl of cereal, I go upstairs to put away my school things. The first thing to greet me when I walk into my room is my poster of Prince Charles and Lady Diana on their wedding day. Gayle bought it for me on my thirteenth birthday. Gayle's

birthday—she turned nine—is the day before mine.

"Roxanne!" Gayle suddenly screeches. "Come quick!"

"What? What?" I yell as I run down the stairs.

Gayle is standing in front of the window in our living room, pointing outside, her mouth frozen into a giant O.

A blue station wagon is parked in the driveway of the Cursed House. A woman with a fluffy mound of carrot-orange hair, wearing a brown skirt and yellow jacket, is pulling a sign out of the trunk.

Before I can make out what the sign says, I know what it is. I have seen this exact situation in countless commercials. The woman is a real estate agent, and the sign she slides slowly into place reads:

**Sold.**

## chapter two

*it doesn't take long* for the news to get around Brookfield Avenue. After being empty for almost a year, the Cursed House was sold again—in just one day!

After the real estate agent with the carrot-orange pompadour drives away, a knot of neighborhood kids gathers around the sign on the lawn of the Cursed House.

Eddie runs his hands over the sign, as if by feeling it he will be able to magically tell us who has been crazy enough to buy the Cursed House. It's not an ugly house, really. Even the bright pink isn't so bad. Except

the lawn is kind of gross right now—scattered with old cigarette butts and beer cans.

I stare at Eddie from where Gayle and I stand with our neighbor Kathleen, admiring his white-blond hair and how good his butt looks in his tight jeans. When he turns to look at me, my heart catches in my throat. That always happens when Eddie looks at me. I don't remember exactly when I started liking him. I think I always did. He's so All-American. His gaze rests on me for only a second, though, before searching out Kathleen's face.

“What do you think, Kathleen?” he asks, his blue eyes flashing like a car's high beams.

Kathleen smiles. “You tell me, Eddie,” she answers coolly.

I wonder for the hundredth time what he sees in her. Kathleen is the definition of ordinary. There's nothing special about her average face, her average brown hair, her average brown eyes. But Eddie has the biggest crush in the world on her. And the funny thing is, Kathleen likes letting Eddie think he has a chance,

but she doesn't give in to him. And this has been going on for five months!

Part of me likes Kathleen and considers her my friend—maybe my only friend, besides Gayle, who doesn't really count. Another part of me wishes she'd disappear. A third part of me has a feeling I hang out with her only because wherever she goes, Eddie goes.

Eddie glances at me. "What do you think?" he asks.

I'm so startled, I feel momentarily numb. I finally manage to mutter, "Uh . . ."

"Uh . . . ," Joe mimics, making a funny face at his friends.

The boys around Joe laugh. I feel my cheeks burn. I have to remind myself that Joe is only eight, even if he is nasty.

"Shut up, Joe," Kathleen snaps.

Joe's gap-toothed grin vanishes immediately, and his friends stop laughing all at once, as if a switch has been turned off. I'm sorry I wished Kathleen would disappear a moment ago.

"Say you're sorry," Kathleen demands.

"Yeah," Eddie joins in. "Say you're sorry." He trudges to where Joe and his little friends stand on the lawn. The boys disperse like cookie crumbs as Eddie towers over them. He grabs Joe by his shirt collar and drags him over to me.

Joe laughs and whimpers at the same time. Eddie shoves Joe toward me—so hard that Joe tumbles to his knees at my feet.

"That's right, on your knees," Eddie says heartily, giving me a wink.

My heart nearly pops out of my chest. This is the most attention Eddie has given me—ever. I smile uncomfortably.

"Say you're sorry," Eddie growls as he stands over Joe.

Joe is crying. I can make out a tiny "Sorry" as it comes out of his mouth. Without any warning, Eddie suddenly brings his fist down, sprawling Joe across the ground. I gaze at Eddie in disbelief.

"Say it louder," he snarls.

"Eddie, stop," Kathleen says, reaching down to help Joe get up. "Are you okay?" she asks him.



Joe sobs and sniffles.

Eddie looks morosely at Kathleen, not sure what to do.

I study the ground, wishing I was the one who had saved Joe, even if it meant yelling at Eddie.

“I’m gonna take Joe home,” Kathleen says. She glowers at Eddie, who looks at the ground. Then she walks away, leading Joe by the hand.

I shuffle my feet, not sure what to do now that I’m alone with Eddie. But I don’t have to worry about it for long, because a red convertible pulls up in front of the house. It’s Margo Defino, who lives in the house on the other side of the Cursed House.

“Wow!” she cries. She hops out of her convertible, whips off her sunglasses, and hurries to the sign. “I don’t believe it! It’s sold! When did this happen?” she asks, turning in a circle to look at us.

No one answers. Finally Eddie says, “It happened in one day. Today.”

“Wow!” she exclaims again, grinning. Then her smile fades. She looks at us curiously. “What are you

all doing?” she asks suspiciously. She checks her watch. “It’s almost dinnertime. Why don’t you all go home?”

Grown-ups don’t seem to like seeing a big group of us together. Normally, we’d balk—well, not me, but Eddie or Kathleen would. But this time, in less than a minute, the knot of kids around the Cursed House vanishes into thin air.

## chapter three

*margo defino told us to go home* because of dinnertime, but that's a joke. At our house, anyway.

On *The Brady Bunch*, dinnertime means all six Brady kids, plus Carol and Mike Brady, wolfing down pork chops and applesauce around the dining room table while Alice the housekeeper pours lemonade made from real lemons.

At our house, dinnertime means Gayle and me, alone, with *I Dream of Jeannie* reruns and more Cocoa Pebbles around the kitchen table. Dinnertime is a

beautiful concept, but it doesn't work at our house. Not since *Em*a—our mother—left, anyway.

There is one great thing about not having dinner-time. If we were a normal American family, I doubt we'd be allowed to watch TV during dinner. And after *I Dream of Jeannie* ends, my favorite show in the whole world starts.

When the show comes on, Gayle and I sing the theme song at the top of our lungs:

*Wonder Woman, Wonder Woman.  
All the world's waiting for you,  
and the power you possess!*

*In your satin tights,  
Fighting for your rights  
And the old Red, White, and Blue!*

I nearly burst into tears. The song clogs up all the cavities of my chest, making it hard to breathe.

I can't remember much about our naturalization ceremony in Brooklyn the day we became American

citizens. I do remember *Emma* crying quietly during the swearing of the oath. I suspect *Emma* felt then what I feel now—positively constipated with red, white, and blue happiness.

I try not to dwell on *Emma's* absence, because it makes my stomach hurt. I'm glad I have *Wonder Woman* to take my mind off it.

There's something about Wonder Woman—her strength, her beauty, her fabulous hair, her sheer All-Americanness—that makes me yearn to be her. When I was little, all the girls in my class wanted to be Wonder Woman, but I guess I never outgrew it. I mean, wouldn't it be absolutely awesome to fend off bullets with golden bracelets and have a golden lasso that forced people to tell the truth?

When I was nine, I'd twirl around at recess, determined to change into Wonder Woman. That's how Wonder Woman changed from Diana Prince, her real identity, into a superhero. I thought that if I just concentrated on it—*really* concentrated on it—it would work. It didn't, of course, and I gave up. But I still think about it sometimes.

An hour later, *Wonder Woman* is over and we run out of Cocoa Pebbles. Yuck and double yuck. We usually remember we have homework to do around this time, so we take out our schoolbooks and, with the TV still on, work at the kitchen table.

An hour after that, the sky darkens, *Little House on the Prairie* comes on, and we start worrying about *Aba*—our father.

Gayle adores *Little House on the Prairie*, which is about a girl named Laura Ingalls, who has the most wonderful family in the world. Ma and Pa are always there for her—listening, helping, hugging. Ma is the kind of mother who sews lace ruffles onto bonnets, and Pa is the kind of father who teaches Laura Important Life Lessons. They always have dinnertime. They even have breakfast time. They're totally All-American.

At 9:38, Gayle announces she's taking a shower. She says it cheerfully, to hide the fact that she's upset.

By 10:53, we're at the kitchen table, drumming our fingers and not paying attention to *Dynasty*.

I make a decision. "I'm not staying up again," I say to Gayle, my voice shaking. "I'm going to bed."

Gayle yawns. She doesn't reply.

I know most kids love staying up late, but that's because their parents are home. They aren't alone like Gayle and me, worrying, waiting for their father to get home from work.

I trudge up the stairs to my room, getting angrier with each step. By the time I enter my room, I'm seething. I pull off my clothes and throw them in exasperation across the room. I reach behind my pillow for my pajamas with the hole in the seat of the pants and barge into the bathroom.

Why did *Emá* have to leave us? It's been almost three months since she flew to Israel to take care of her sister. We get her letters, but the mail is so slow, and calling is too expensive. My sister and I always fight when we spot that wonderful, flimsy, blue aeromail envelope in our mailbox. We both want to be the first to read it. It's kind of silly to fight over *Emá's* letters, though, because we both have trouble reading Hebrew—especially when there aren't any vowels.

The Hebrew alphabet is like the English alphabet—there are letters and sounds and all that stuff. But

the vowels, instead of being letters like *a, e, i, o, u*, are dots and dashes instead. These dots and dashes go *under* the letters; the letter *gimel*, for instance, which makes a *g* sound, gets its vowel sound from whichever dot or dash is under it. That's how you know to say *goo* or *go* or *guh* or *gah* or *gee*. It's kind of cool and really pretty easy—but when the vowels are missing, it can be very hard. Advanced writing, like in books and newspapers in Israel, usually doesn't have vowels.

*Emá* used vowels in her letters at first. I guess she was imagining Gayle and me reading them—knowing we'd have trouble if they weren't there. But after a few weeks, the vowels would be in the first few paragraphs of her letter but not the rest of it. And lately, her letters didn't have any vowels at all.

It's like she's forgetting us. Forgetting that Gayle and I are here, waiting and reading. This thought hurts.

I finish in the bathroom. The TV is on in my parents' bedroom, which means Gayle has moved there from the kitchen. I walk down the hall. Gayle is lying in our parents' bed in her pajamas, waiting for *The Tonight Show* so she can pretend to watch it.

"I'm going to sleep," I announce.

"Aren't you worried?" she asks, keeping her eyes on the TV.

"No," I lie.

"Liar," she says, still not looking at me.

I slip back to my room. Falling asleep in my parents' bed in front of the TV is the way Gayle deals. It's the way we both did once. I used to lie there next to her, listening to Johnny Carson's jokes without getting them, panicking, certain that *Aba* was murdered, lying in a pool of his own hot blood in a dark alley. Gayle always fell asleep while I lay awake, waiting, worrying, imagining that murder scene over and over in my mind until it felt so real to me, I swear I could taste *Aba's* blood on my tongue.

For three months it's been like that.

Well, no more.

I'm not going to lie awake anymore.

I'm not going to panic anymore.

I'm not going to wait up for *Aba* anymore.

I'm not going to imagine that hot pool of blood in my mind anymore.

I slide into bed. The sheets are cold, and I curl up into a ball, shivering. The blue-green digits on my clock blink relentlessly at me: "11:39." I turn over onto my stomach and force myself to shut my eyes. But I'm not sleepy.

At 11:53, I can still hear the soft sounds of the TV. I turn over onto my side and face the wall.

At 12:28, I start counting sheep. It doesn't work. Who was the idiot who came up with that stupid idea? And why is it sheep anyway? Why isn't it apple pies or baseballs or cheeseburgers?

At 12:49, a key jingles in the front door.

"*Aba!*" I hear Gayle shout; then comes the sound of her bounding down the stairs.

"*Motek!*" I hear *Aba* cry. *Motek* means "sweetheart" in Hebrew.

I pull the covers over my head.

Now the conversation in the kitchen is growing animated. I pick up words—"Cursed House," "sold in one day," "new neighbors." I turn over twice, but it's useless. Sighing, I pull myself out of bed and head downstairs.

The light in the kitchen is brighter than I expect. I stand in the doorway, squinting and feeling self-conscious in my flimsy pajamas. *Aba* looks up and says, “*Motek*, you were sleeping?”

“No,” Gayle answers with a smile. “Roxanne was pretending.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I protest.

*Aba* motions for me to join him and Gayle at the kitchen table. As usual, he’s made peppermint tea. Steam curls out of the three mugs on the table. Three mugs—one for me, too.

I sigh again. “*Aba*, I’m sick of this,” I say. My throat tightens, but I ignore it and go on. “Why did she have to leave? When is she coming back?”

Gayle stares alertly at our father. We’ve asked him this question a hundred times, but he’s never really given us an answer.

“Soon,” he says. “Very soon.”

You’d think we’d press him further on this, but we’ve done that, and it’s never gotten us anywhere.

“Family is important,” he says quietly.

That gets me. “But we’re her family, too,” I say. “What about *us*?”

*Aba* looks down into his mug. He doesn’t answer my question. “She will come home soon,” he says.

We’re quiet for a few seconds. I take a sip of my tea. I want to cry, but at the same time, I want to be strong. Being strong stinks.

“Can you . . . read her letter again?” Gayle asks.

Every night, Gayle asks *Aba* to read *Emma*’s last letter. This latest one we got seven days ago, without vowels. *Aba* reaches into his back pocket. It occurs to me he probably keeps the letter with him all the time. Does he read it when he’s taking a break? Does he study it when he’s lined up with all the other taxis in front of Penn Station?

“I miss you all so much,” *Aba* reads out loud in Hebrew. “I think about you every minute of every day. I’m sorry you’re not happy about the food. I promise that when I come back, we’ll have a feast. I promise. I’ll be back soon. Very soon.”

Even *Emma* won’t answer the question.

## chapter four

*gym is the worst idea ever invented.*

Congress should ban it.

I wish someone would blow up the gym and get it over with.

It's the only class where my hands sweat. If gym didn't exist, I wouldn't know hands *could* sweat. It's like those sweat glands are marked *For Gym Use Only*.

I haven't slept well, and the next morning, the last thing I want to think about is the twice-a-week torture known as gym. I've had strange dreams all night

involving my mother, murderous Hebrew vowels, and mugs of scalding peppermint tea.

But I do have to think about gym. I have to make sure I wear hole-free panties and my nicest bra. As I wriggle into a satiny white bra, I'm reminded once again of how much I

- a. pray for a crazed wacko to set off explosives in the gym*
- b. wish i could turn into wonder woman*
- c. long to have my hair work*

If I were my sister's age, the hair issue would be nonexistent. I would wear it straight with bangs like Gayle does and be done with it, and nobody would think anything.

But I'm in eighth grade, and in eighth grade you need wings. The hair on each side of your face has to be meticulously rolled into feathery snake-curls, and these curls have to last perfectly all day long. Since I can't make my hair do that, I pull it back with brown

barrettes and pretend I have a reason for being the most uncool person in school.

After homeroom, my hands begin their steady spiral toward cold clamminess as I head to gym. I file into the girls' locker room for the ritual Undressing. My hands are slippery as I claw my way out of my clothes. I can't tell you how barbarian it is to throw a bunch of girls together into a room and force them to take off their clothes in front of each other. It has taught me, though, to be the fastest changer on earth. In five seconds flat, I'm in my sweat suit.

Most girls change into shorts, but I need the physical and emotional protection of baggy sweatpants. Once we're all changed, our Too-Chirpy Gym Teacher informs us we're playing indoor Wiffle ball. My stomach plunges eighteen stories. Indoor Wiffle ball is as ferocious and bewildering as any civilized sport can be. The Wiffle ball constantly ricochets off everything in the gym, hurtling unpredictably in all directions, so you never know when it's going to smash into your nose.

Being outside for softball instead of inside for Wiffle ball is semi-decent, because you can hide in the

outfield. If you're lucky, you might spend the entire period milling around without having to play at all. Sometimes a ball will come at you, causing a momentary crisis, but nobody is that good in eighth grade. You can miss it without suffering horrible consequences. Besides, I always make sure to stand really far back in the outfield.

See, all balls seem as hard as rocks to me. I always duck when they come toward me instead of trying to catch them. It's a reflex I can't change. I know being good at sports is one of the requirements of being American. But I can't transcend my spazzness, and this is a constant source of humiliation for me.

Our Too-Chirpy Gym Teacher picks two captains and tells them to choose players for their teams. I can't imagine a worse way to do this. My classmates are picked off until it's only me, Gheeta, and Suri. Gheeta and Suri can barely speak English and look strange and smell funny. Why am I in their category?

*a. because i'm a spazz?*

*b. because i'm a fake american, too?*



I hear my name called and feel a rush of euphoria. I'm picked before Gheeta and Suri! With a grin, I join my team.

"What are you so happy about?" Donna growls at me.

The grin quickly disappears from my face.

Donna is the scariest person I know. She lives around the corner from us. She smokes, dates boys who are older than her, has perfect wings and makeup, and is fantastic at sports. Her gym clothes—tight blue shorts and tight white top—provide a fascinating show for the boys on the other side of the gym. Whenever she moves, part of her butt peeks out of her shorts.

I wish I had one iota of the Americanness Donna possesses. I take a step away from her, and she turns back to her friends.

As predicted, indoor Wiffle ball is a nightmare. The deafening echo of the ball combined with the loud screech of sneakers on the wooden floor makes me totally paranoid. But the ball never comes near me, so I don't have to catch it, and the class ends before it's my turn to hit. I'm safe again till next time.

The rest of the day is okay. When I get home, I choose a can of sliced mushrooms from the kitchen cupboard. I'm opening it when Gayle gets home.

"Hello," she says cheerily, taking off her backpack. She studies my can of mushrooms. "We're out of cereal?"

"Yup," I say.

Gayle opens the fridge.

"There's no yogurt either," I say, as I fork mushrooms into my mouth. "I'll split this with you."

Gayle frowns. Then her face lights up. "Let's get hot dogs from Kathleen," she says excitedly.

Since *Em*a left, food has become a never-ending source of

**a. distress**

**b. aggravation**

**c. starvation**

**d. extinction**

*Aba's* idea of eating is a kitchen cupboard filled with nasty cans of "ethnic food" from a grocery store on

the Lower East Side, though there are occasional treasures such as mushrooms. And he can't cook anything except *hijeh*, a kind of Israeli omelet with vegetables.

Gayle and I have resorted to buying food from Kathleen. It's pathetic, I know, but it beats scavenging in garbage cans like a couple of homeless people.

Gayle opens her backpack and pulls out a little gold purse. "I've got two dollars," she says brightly. "That should be enough for four hot dogs."

We walk to Kathleen's house, which is next door to Margo's. We pass the Cursed House on the way. It looks the same. I can't believe some very unlucky human beings are going to move into it.

"I wonder how long before the new people move in," Gayle says, echoing my thoughts.

"Soon, I guess," I say.

"I wonder . . ." Gayle begins but stops.

I know what she's thinking: *I wonder what terrible things will happen to them.*

When we reach Kathleen's house, we see her brothers and sisters throwing a red Frisbee on their front lawn. Kathleen's front lawn isn't really a lawn.

The grass is trampled away because her family is always using it to play sports.

Kathleen's family is super-athletic, super-Irish, and super-American—like the Kennedys, really. My family doesn't even own a Frisbee. Kathleen has so many brothers and sisters, I can hardly keep track of everybody. Her house bustles with constant comings and goings. It's lively and full and fun—it reminds me of *The Brady Bunch*. It never feels lonely or empty or food-extinct.

Kathleen and Eddie are sitting on her front stoop next to her oldest brother, Glenn—who is usually mean and is always red-bumped-pimply-faced—all watching the Frisbee game. My heart begins to thump loudly. I don't want this stupid hot dog exchange to take place in front of Eddie.

But when Kathleen sees Gayle and me, she gets up and walks over, leaving Eddie on the stoop. Eddie seems unhappy about it. I guess he can't stand being away from the love of his life for even one minute. Glenn must notice this, because he suddenly punches Eddie in the arm.

“Eddie has a girlfriend,” he says in a singsong voice.

“Shut up,” Eddie says, getting up.

We leave them and follow Kathleen into the house, right to the kitchen, where Kathleen’s mother is feeding Mikey. Mikey’s gurgling in his high chair, his little face smeared with mushy green peas.

“Hi there, girls,” Kathleen’s mother says pleasantly.

“Do we have hot dogs, Mom?” Kathleen asks.

“Behind the American cheese,” Kathleen’s mother answers.

Kathleen opens the fridge and moves food around. “I don’t see them,” she calls over her shoulder.

Kathleen’s mother shuts her eyes as if in deep thought. “Check behind the cupcakes. No, the chocolate milk.”

Mikey knocks a bag of potato chips to the kitchen floor. Ruffled yellow chips scatter everywhere.

“Oh, Mikey!” Kathleen groans.

“It’s all right,” Kathleen’s mother soothes. “There’s a bag of Doritos in the cupboard.”

I can hardly contain myself. I exchange a quick glance with Gayle, lick my lips, and ravenously eye the

crumbly trail of potato chips on Kathleen’s kitchen floor. Hot dogs, American cheese, cupcakes, chocolate milk, potato chips, Doritos. These are the kinds of foods that are missing from our house—delicious American junk foods. *Emma* and *Aba* can’t even pronounce Doritos, much less know what they are or understand their importance.

Kathleen finally finds the hot dogs. She wraps four of them in foil.

When we get back outside, Margo Defino is stepping out of her house in a tight red dress and red high heels. Her boyfriend, a crater-faced guy whose name I can never remember, slips an arm around her waist as they walk to his car. When Margo sees us, she waves.

“Where are you going?” Kathleen shouts.

Margo stops and yells back, “The city for dinner and dancing.” She shakes her hips.

We all watch as Crater Face opens the car door for her, helps her inside, and goes around to his side of the car. Margo waves one more time before they drive away.

Eddie comes over to stand next to Kathleen. Kathleen eyes him with newfound interest.

I feel suddenly and totally morose. Margo has a boyfriend who takes her to the city for dinner and dancing. Kathleen has Eddie, a mom at home, Doritos, cupcakes, an older-brother bodyguard, and plenty of other siblings to fill her house with activity.

I look down sadly at the package of hot dogs in my hand. If you'd asked me right then and there whether I'd ever

- a. feel okay about my hair
- b. accept gym
- c. watch less tv
- d. stop missing my mother

I would have said no.

## chapter five

*on saturday mornings*, Gayle and I get up early to watch cartoons. Yeah, I know—this is little kids' turf. I should be sleeping late on Saturday mornings. I should be in bed till noon. But I get bored just lying around. Besides, one of my favorite shows is on Saturday mornings.

*Super Friends* is about all the great American superheroes—Superman, Batman and Robin, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, and the Wonder Twins—living together in a place called the Hall of Justice and fighting crime together.

The Wonder Twins are purplish and have weird, pointy faces. They morph into things. Usually, they touch their fists together and say, “Wonder Twin Powers, activate!” Then Jayna, the girl twin, says, “Shape of a gorilla!”—she always seems to choose apes—and Zan, the boy twin, says, “Form of water!” He always seems to end up being carried around in a bucket, but sometimes he turns into something useful, like an ice rocket.

*Aba* always gets up after *Super Friends* ends. Since Saturday is the busiest night in the city, when almost everyone needs a taxi, he starts working in the afternoon. He usually doesn’t get home till the next morning. He shuffles into the kitchen as Gayle and I are watching *The Smurfs*.

He blinks at the TV. “What’s that?” he asks with distaste.

“*Smurfs*,” Gayle answers merrily. “La-LA-lala-la-LA,” she sings.

“Hah?” *Aba* asks.

“That’s the theme song,” Gayle explains. “La-LA-lala-la-LA.”

“Team song?”

“Theme,” Gayle repeats. “Th-eme.”

“Team,” *Aba* says.

“No, not *t. Th.*”

My father tries to pronounce the word again but can’t. All Israelis seem to have trouble with *th*.

“I guess I no say it,” *Aba* says.

“I guess I can’t say it,” I correct. It’s always been my job to correct my parents’ English.

“I guess I can’t say it,” he repeats, then asks, “Ready soon?”

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“The mall,” *Aba* answers definitively, as if there is no other destination on Earth worth considering.

“I want my own *moussaka* this time,” Gayle says.

“Okay, okay,” *Aba* says with amusement. He turns to me. “You want your own *moussaka* too?”

“I guess,” I reply.

Sometimes I wonder what American families do on Saturdays. I’m sure they do more interesting things than what we do. I’m sure they do American things like bowling, or roller-skating, or swimming, or going to the movies, or going on a picnic.

We go to the Staten Island Mall.

Shopping at a mall is a very American thing, but not like we do it. If we were doing it the right way, *Emma* would take us, and actually buy us things, and treat us to lunch at the restaurant inside Macy's, where I would order a strawberry sundae with whipped cream. You can't get more American than that. I bet Donna and her mom do it all the time.

But *Aba* has a whole different routine. First, we go to Sears to browse in the hardware department—fun for him, torture for us. Then we go to the food court for Greek food—the closest we can get to Israeli food. After we eat, *Aba* looks at tires or something equally boring, while Gayle and I pine for designer jeans like the kind Donna wears from Merry-Go-Round or The Limited. Sometimes we play in the arcade.

Nothing special happens with *Aba's* mall routine today, except that Gayle beats me twice at *Donkey Kong*. When we get back home, a white truck is sitting in the driveway of the Cursed House. It looks like a moving truck. Two red-faced men are closing the back with a loud rumble.

"The new neighbors!" Gayle exclaims.

I'm not the kind of person who can just go up to total strangers, but Gayle jumps out of the car and races up to the men.

"Are you them?" she asks brightly.

The men eye each other in confusion. "What, hon'?" one asks.

"Are you the new neighbors?" she asks, jumping up and down.

The man chuckles. "No, hon'. We're the movers."

"Oh," Gayle says, sounding disappointed. "Then where are they?"

The man checks his watch. "They should be here soon. We just finished moving everything."

Gayle watches as the two men climb into their truck and drive away. The truck belches black smoke as it rounds the corner.

My father gets out of the car. "I get ready for work," he says.

"The new neighbors are going to be here soon," Gayle says excitedly, pointing to the spot where the truck was parked a few seconds ago.

*Aba* looks over to where Gayle's pointing. "Looks like I miss it," he replies.

I'm about to correct my father's English, but I don't.

It occurs to me that *Ema* and *Aba* miss a lot of important things.

## chapter six

*after my father leaves for the city*, Gayle and I flip through channels, but Saturday afternoons are pretty bad TV-wise. There's just too many sports. This is yet another American thing I'm not good at. Not only am I terrible at playing sports, but I get bored watching them, too.

I think about ringing Kathleen's doorbell, but her family is always busy with something on Saturdays. I have a ton of homework to do, but the thought of doing it is unbearable to me. Still, it looks like there