

WHITE WALLS

A MEMOIR ABOUT
MOTHERHOOD, DAUGHTERHOOD,
AND THE MESS IN BETWEEN



JUDY BATALION

· PROLOGUE ·

VOYAGEUR
New York City, 2010

“It’s time,” my father’s voice creaks through the phone. My father has called me exactly three times since I left home, in 1996, and never at eight thirty in the morning.

“Her threats are serious. She’s really planning it,” he says. “The details.”

He doesn’t make any of his usual jokes: *she is plotting her plot for when she plotzes*. Or: *she’s ready for her seventy-two virgins*. That’s how I know it really is time.

I feel my esophagus battering through me like a pendulum. “I’m coming.”

I dial my brother. “Eli, book us in at court for tomorrow morning,” I say, as if I’m referring to a mani-pedi, and not requesting an injunction against the woman who bore me.

I hear my blood pump, quick, staccato; imagine hers gushing through her thick veins. Imagine it stop. *She just likes the attention*, I remind myself, attempt to console myself. Eight hours from New York to Montreal. I can make it. I must.

I look out of my all-window apartment at the new high rises and

old water towers, at the buzzing Mondrian grid of Manhattan streets. I see their arrangement: parallels and perpendiculars, squares, equal angles. They are numbered in order, so no one ever gets lost. Someone is looking out for you. I live on the eighteenth floor, reminding me of *chai*. The Hebrew for one and eight, the symbol for luck. The word for life. I am on top of things here on my mountain—I can see the moat, protect myself.

“What’s going on?” Jon, suited up for work, comes into the living room, which is sparse, airy, barely furnished. The exact opposite of both of our mothers’ homes.

“I’m going to get the court order,” I say. “Finally.”

“Finally,” he repeats, knowing that I’ve been trying to do this, waiting for my dad’s support for years. I smell his Irish Spring. *Like the Irish are so known for cleanliness*, he jokes in his British accent. To me, it’s the scent of savior. “Call me.”

“If you’re lucky.” I grab his hand. He squeezes back. I memorize the pressure of his knuckles on my skin, think how our bodies’ link is entirely different from the bonds that hold together DNA.

I am wired. It’s actually happening. I have only twenty-five minutes to catch the bus. Within ten, I am packed and in a taxi headed to Port Authority station.

I call Mom as we stop and start in the traffic around Times Square. “What’s going on?” My stomach is clenched.

“I can’t go on. They’re coming to get me,” she says. She is terrified of *them*. “There’s no point. Even God is telling me to kill myself.”

“Well, God’s made a lot of mistakes,” I say, but *God*? When has she ever once mentioned God? I try to breathe, feel the pulse in my eyes. Eight hours is a long time. “I’m coming,” I say, as we pass a billboard for yet another *Shrek*. “Don’t kill yourself.” It’s very simple: just don’t kill yourself. The concept of her nonexistence short-circuits my neurons. The area behind my forehead goes numb. “I’ll be there soon,” I add as the cab jerks to a halt. The need to check in with her became worse over the past few years. Sometimes she doesn’t call back for hours. Usually, she’s just on Valium, or engaged in her fan-

tasies, or deeply ensconced in *Masterpiece Theatre*. Thanks, PBS, for your riveting programming that has aged me ten years.

I hop on the bus, clutching a southwestern tuna wrap from Au Bon Pain. The difference in my two lives has never been more apparent. Within a quarter of an hour I go from an aerial condo to Greyhound. Sashimi to sandwich. My chosen family to my birth one, and accordingly, I revert.

I find an empty seat. I know this route well. "Voyageur" is the Canadian branch of Greyhound. Meaning "traveler," its rolling French connotes wild adventure, Jules Verneish explorations, sing-along expeditions across the Yukon's blazing horizon, instead of the reality: the alcoholic luggage schlepper, the characters who travel back and forth with plastic bags instead of suitcases, and the racist customs officials who interrogate them. Seeing my Canadian passport, their main question is: did you buy anything? Well, I always want to answer, considering I've been away for fifteen years, I *have* done a touch of light shopping.

I text my friend Melissa, who I'm supposed to meet for lunch later that day, a mini celebration for my thirty-third birthday. "Heading to Montreal," I explain. "Just a little impromptu vacay." *To prevent my mother from hanging herself with her vast collection of pencil cases.*

I check in with Mom. Still alive.

I e-mail my brother: "you're on call when I lose reception in the Adirondacks." I'm thankful he's on the ground, can pacify her with his soft voice, his slow gestures, until I get there. He soothes her more than I do. She likes him better.

Then, I take out a pen and the forms that have been sitting in my drawer. I need to fill in the blanks, and to do it perfectly. For years, I've tried to find ways to get my mother into treatment, secretly speaking to social workers, doctors, therapists, driven by the image of her cured: smiling, laughing like she used to, maybe even leaving her house, coming to mine. I've done more research for this project than for my PhD. Then again, my mother is much more compli-

cated than Representations of Domestic Space in Contemporary Art. *You won't have a good chance at court unless your father participates*, they all warned. *He's the one who lives with her*. Enables her, they meant.

Only now, staring at the legal questionnaire and the “patient’s history,” I’m not sure where to begin. How to narrate the tale of my mother falling apart? The brain that turned in on itself over decades, in little unremarkable steps, like the ascent of the Nazis, I think, and wonder if I should start with the Holocaust. My grandmother’s escape from Warsaw to Siberian work camps, my mother’s wartime birth in Kirgizia, in transit, her formative years in ravaged Poland, DP camps, born into the fresh smell of a murdered family, a refugee before she knew what home was. Eventually coming to Canada, but never really settling, never committing to a house, a stable structure. The way a few extra piles of books turned into domestic mayhem, mounds of old paper towels, thousands of videocassettes, sale Danishes that formed a barricade across her kitchen, a fortress to protect from the next world war that was always just around the corner, especially in suburban Canada. The slow stewings of a victim complex. The disputes, the real estate battles, tens of thousands spent on lawyers, not to mention the rooms filled with spy devices used to record every meeting, the gradual disjoining from friends, cousins, siblings, her own name. The stacks of “research” to help her track down “the people who are after her,” who—she claims—break into the house, leave her cryptic messages, mess up her papers. The house bolted stiff with locks and alarms, loudly ticking clocks in every room. Cameras. Laptops. Binders. The pill vials. The story of how a person becomes a shadow.

I read the next question on the form. “Is she a danger to herself or to others?” *They mean life danger*, the social worker had explained.

“Yes,” I write.

In “family history,” I write that her mother suffered from the same thing. The exact same thing.

We reach Albany’s bus station, our pit stop, the midpoint. Transitional space. Not here, not there, but a halfway house. The cafeteria hosts middle-aged women in miniskirts, and might just double as a

brothel. Over the years, I've pushed myself into constant motion, moved countries, climates, crossed borders, waded in endless hinterlands. An expert at layovers. In the rancid bathroom, the metal door is shiny but offers no reflection, as if my short body, brown hair, plastic-framed glasses are not really there.

I buy the one remaining bottle of sparkling water—my insides, at least, feel sharp, bubbly. A few months ago, my mother said: you were the normal one born into an abnormal family. I'd felt both vindicated and angry at that truth. Then again, a nerdy, workaholic, insomniac, recovering academic, former stand-up comic—I wondered how many people would call me the normal one. But chez Batalion, I am the metaphor for normal, the simile for the sane.

Please don't kill yourself. Please.

This time, I'm going to get it right. I'm coming home to save you. I'm coming.

Back on the bus, my cell rings. Mom, still alive. "Where are you?" she barks. "Where?" Definitely still alive. And kicking.

"Four hours away," I answer and spill fizzy water on my thighs. I sigh: they will be wet for that whole time.

"What good is that?" she wails. "I need you here. I have so many problems, Judy. No one ever does anything for me. It's like I have no family."

I bite my tongue until the pain feels good, salty. "I'll be there soon," I say. I don't want to lose her. But blotting my damp lap with napkins, I also think: I am so fucking tired of being the mother.

4 WEEKS: INCONCEIVABLE CONCEPTION

New York City, 2011

I was sitting on an examining table at my local clinic when the Israeli doctor threw open the door and pitched a small object right at me. It hit my arm.

"Photograph this!" he yelled.

"Ouch," I muttered. I reached over to the other side of the table

where the white plastic object landed and picked it up. It was small, and square, and had two lines on it. Thin, parallel lines, was the first thought that ran through my mind, their ends never meeting.

The second thought was: Wait. What?

Wait. Fuck.

"What is this?" I asked, my voice shaky.

"Text the photo to your husband!" he commanded. "You're having a baby!" A passing-by nurse squealed. I felt my eyes pop. My cheeks deflate. My cilia stand on guard.

"But I'm here for my *infertility* blood work," I tried to clarify. This made no sense. Based on a history of abdominal surgeries for colitis, an internal palimpsest of scar tissue, and a family history of early-onset menopause, doctors told me it would take at least two years for me to get pregnant—a time period that I secretly thought of as my safety net. While I liked the concept of one day toasting my union with Jon by going forth and multiplying, my mind shut off at the thought of even burping a baby, let alone raising a child. *Let's at least see what's wrong with you*, Jon had urged. He was *ready*. So at thirty-three, with a forty-year-old husband suffering from his "biological cock," and the fear that I was on my last eggs, I had reluctantly stopped the pill just to begin the medical process—which I'd assumed would be very, very long. Especially when I started reading about pregnancy: all those years of birth control, and yet, there was approximately one second per month when you could actually conceive.

"Well, you won't need that progesterone flush today!" the doctor said, patting me—gently, this time—on the back. "Mazel tov! Aren't you thrilled? You are thrilled. YOU ARE THRILLED. Text your husband!"

He left the room, which was now spinning. A whirlwind of scales and swabs taunted me. I felt nauseous, and knew it wasn't the estrogen. I managed to fumble for my iPhone, my fingers trembling as they glazed over numbers. Jon answered right away.

"I'm pregnant," I said, the words like squares in my hole of a

mouth. My insides felt like white noise. Alive and cackling but inaudible at the same time.

“Hold on,” Jon said.

“You’re putting me on hold?!”

“I meant, to my colleague on the other line,” Jon said. “Sheesh, hormones already...”

“Aren’t you shocked?”

“No. You went off the pill three weeks ago.”

My damn reasonable husband.

“It’s early days, we shouldn’t get too excited,” I blurted out.

“I’m not too excited,” Jon replied defensively, but I could hear the shimmer in his voice, his British accent hitting unusual crescendos. “Come home right away,” he almost sang, tenor tin ling.

Doctor Crazy pranced back into the room, his lips stretching across his tanned visage. “We’ll need a whole new set of blood tests now!”

“I’m shocked,” I declared, to him, to myself. A hard bolus, like a freshly blown metallic balloon, appeared at the center of my throat. *What have I done?*

“Life happens,” he said.

Quite literally, I thought.

My sweaty thumb and pointer finger gripped the edges of the white square, trying to squeeze the two lines into one—a no, a negative, a singular s it of nothingness.

They didn’t budge.

Outside, traffic went on as usual. The noon sun still shone. The February wind thumped my cheeks. I stopped to buy a frozen feta cheese bureka. I needed a moment to stall the rest of my life, a calm before the seismic, entropic storm like Wile E. Coyote running in midair before noticing that his feet touched no ground. How could the most incredible news I would ever receive have come to me at the bacteria-infested local clinic that Jon and I referred to as “the petri dish”? I meandered on the wide sidewalks, weaving from building to street, taking swaying steps, feeling my feet slip within my ballet

flats and sensed a new state set in, a mood crystallizing in my cells: not despair, but not thrill. More of a weight, a heavy, unsettling blankness. Fear.

My mind flitted to the legend about the foundation of Chelm, the folkloric town of Jewish fools. An angel had been passing over Ukraine with a slew of half-baked babies destined for mothers across the globe, when it tripped and dropped them all in this random spot. Rootless, homeless, these were the lost baby spirits that set up the Slavic city of the idiots. I gulped hard. This could not be a mistake.

But why couldn't I find the feeling of *wanting* this that I knew must have been somewhere inside me?

I stepped more quickly, zigzagging along the pavement, cutting off workmen on lunch breaks, women carrying matcha lattes. I was having a *baby*. I was having a baby. Nebbishy, infertile me. A baby had taken up tenancy in my uterus. My arid uterus.

Minutes later I walked into our new apartment, my perfect space, my decorative and emotional *pièce-de-résistance*. This abode, our Chelsea loft with enormous windows and open plans, marked the culmination of years of work; it was the manifestation that I had solved my life. I insisted we get all white counters, white sofas, white carpets. Who really needed coffee tables? "Less is too much" was my mantra when it came to space. I would live in a gallery if I could. I'd spent a decade working as a design curator, becoming a Doctor of Domesticity, for just that reason. Finally, I'd met a partner who uncannily understood, who'd helped me to make my own clean rooms. We had moved into our pale palace just four weeks earlier. Now I realized that was the same week that my egg was cooked.

Jon was waiting in the kitchen, smiling with his eyes.

"I'm pregnant," I repeated. "Two years took three days."

"Super sperm." He came over and gave me a firm hug, squeezing my sides.

"Better not cuddle too hard," I joked, breaking free of his grasp. I needed air. "Let me warm up this bureka."

"I'll do it," Jon offered. I sat down at the kitchen table as he flitted around the pallid counters, unwrapping, turning knobs, cutting, his moves graceful like a Romanian gymnast. I was trying to count months in my head, but kept messing up the numbers.

"I guess we're due in October? November?"

Jon didn't reply. He was generally gregarious; I knew his silence meant elation. An extrovert par excellence, it was in moments of true happiness that he turned inward.

"Hello, Jon?"

"Yes."

"Nothing," I said. *How can you feel so secure? I wanted to scream. So sure? It's not like your family's so normal. Who knows what meshugener, messy offspring our shared acids will sprout!* But I kept my cool. I couldn't disturb his euphoria. I smiled.

He cut open the bureka, showing the cheese filling nestled inside.

I forced myself to swallow three enormous bites in a row, their edges smashing against my trachea, blocking me from uttering the high-pitched sound that had been brewing near my tonsils.

That night, I pulled even more blankets over me than my usual three.

"Good night, mum o' my child." Jon gave me a head massage.

For hours, I stared at the white ceiling above me, making sure it stayed far up. Don't collapse, I told my walls, do not.

"Jon," I finally said, nudging him and adjusting my voice to be louder than his snoring, which he did like a wildebeest with bronchitis. "Jon! Where will we put it?"

"Huh?"

"Where will the baby go?"

"I don't know," he mumbled from his pillow. "I guess the office."

Oh God. My office.

I might have a PhD in the history and theory of physical space, but I did not know how to make room for a baby.

I stared at the ceiling, listening to his nasal expulsions. The TV

fuzz feeling set in again, tingling through my eyes, nose, spine. Then it dawned on me: pregnant women weren't supposed to eat unpasteurized feta cheese. I was screwing up already.

I got out of bed and sat in my white tiled shower until morning.

How could I, who came from such a pathologically messy home, with no blueprint for normalcy, make one? How the hell was I supposed to become *a mother*?

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BERMUDA SHORTS TRIANGLE
Montreal, 1986

All I wanted to do was go home.

To be picked up from school by a mom who played doubles at the Hampstead tennis club, stuffed into OshKosh winter couture, and escorted into a luxury-car-pool that would whisk me westward to the airy suburbs with shiny built-ins and lemon-lime scents. To do my homework, watch *Video Hits*, and eat SpaghettiOs and thinly sliced carrots before being bathed in bubbles and tucked into my pink trundle bed that hosted matching throw pillows with embroidered Judys.

Instead, I clutched my red-and-blue coat, procured from the basement of a Lubavitch woman who served as an underground wholesale importer of factory seconds. Thank God I'd found one that looked vaguely Esprit, and that my mother had not been forcing me to wear one of the fifteen fake Howard the Duck T-shirts that she'd sourced at the same time. I made my way to the back of the lobby to wait for Bubbie, my mom's mom, to pick up me and my brother, Eli. Mondays through Wednesdays she took me to Yiddish drama, dance, or judo. (Despite my being barely four feet tall and

the only girl in the class, my father's philosophy: you must learn how to fall!) Thursdays and Fridays we went to her and Zaidy's house. A few years earlier they had moved with us to a duplex in the suburbs, but averse to the local quietness, quickly headed back east, in the direction they'd always run, making my father—who had bought a house just to fit them—vow he'd never talk to them again, despite their babysitting services.

In the recesses of the foyer, I did not make eye contact with a single fourth grade classmate, but put my coat on slowly, sleeve by sleeve, conscious of directing my every movement, negotiating the position of each of my limbs, convincing myself that if I couldn't see anyone, they couldn't see me either. Being short helped me to shrink out of sight. Eli, playing kick the can with an empty cardboard juice box, was stuffed into a puffy snowsuit and wire-rimmed glasses with enormous lenses that made him look sixty instead of six.

Bubbie was usually late, which was fine with me, for when she did arrive she did so palpably. I saw her approach the glass door, flinging plastic bags full of briskets and at least one of her myriad old leather purses stashed with money and mysterious papers. She cackled with glee when she spotted me. Her back was hunched; the handkerchief wrapped around her head, bright green. Even her name—Zelda—was the epitome of conspicuousness.

I'd made my way to Eli before she even touched the knob.

"Judaleh!" she called, her eyes lighting up.

"We're coming, Bubbie," I said, pushing my brother out into the dusk. Even if my classmates had noticed Bubbie, I absolutely did not want them to notice me, leaving school by foot and eastward, toward my grandmother's cramped house with the original gray carpets from 1957.

Outside, icicles hung from traffic lights. It was too cold to talk, even for Bubbie. This was also fine with me and I walked silently, slightly ahead of her and Eli. I buried my face into my scarf, pretending to myself that we were walking to a doctor's appointment, or tennis lessons, or our cream-colored Jaguar that just happened to be parked far away.

But once I'd climbed through enough piles of snow and seas of slosh, once we were far enough in the east, deep in the area of 1960s low-rise apartment buildings, Vietnamese corner stores, and street names like "Côte-des-Neiges" and "Lavoie" instead of the upper crusty "Westmount" and "The Boulevard," I forced myself to look up. There were neither classmates nor their mothers here. Anyone who could see me was also in the east—we were all the same. Breathing easier, I stepped right into pace with my bubbie and simultaneously slipped into a different genre of fantasy, a historical one. Now, I was foraging through a Siberian work camp, or sneaking across bridges over the frozen Vistula, or running through the blustery Polish countryside, or something else that Bubbie might have done during the war.

"You are Hitler!" Bubbie screamed at a grocer, waking me from my inner world and directing me into a fruit store. "And SS," she said, gesturing to the Sri Lankan assistant schlepping wet boxes across the slushy floor. She was not the kind of Holocaust survivor who suppressed her memories or pretended it never happened. On a regular basis, I heard how she escaped Warsaw by swimming across a river. And in a truck filled with oranges. And at a convent. And thanks to a Nazi, who, of all things, turned the other way. Her best friend was a Polish woman who had helped save Jews; her other best friend had recently been accused by a livid man at the local shopping center of being in the Warsaw Judenrat. Forty years later, these were still topics of gossip here, in this Yiddish outpost of a Polish shtetl in the middle of French Quebec in an ex-Anglo colony.

"Nazi," she muttered. "Turned my sister into soap!" I was used to my bubbie's public explosions, especially in this stretch of fruit stores, one of which she was convinced was owned by Hitler's cousin who charged double for his apples.

Eli and I waited at least an hour while she haggled with grocers. "For the best eeklelech, *for you*," she said, flailing a cucumber in my face. I knew she had medication to help her craziness—when she took it. As Dad always said, it was the paranoids who fled and survived, giving rise to paranoid children.

Finally, when she was pleased that she'd selected the best roughage at the best price ever offered in the universe, she stuffed her new wares into her cocoon of bags, amazing me that she could fit more inside. I pulled up my backpack, made sure Eli's was on tight, and we headed back out, again me pretending that it was 1939, and we'd just stocked up to save our lives.

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at Bubbie and Zaidy's house on Campden Place, the bottom flat of a duplex on a pedestrianized street, its center filled with trees instead of cars. A quiet pocket of the city, unnoticed by passersby. I'd lived on the upstairs floor from ages one to six; back then, our home was cluttered but in a free-spirited, hippie sort of way. My parents hosted drinks nights where they served Breton crackers and peach schnapps on their teak tables, Mom's raucous laughter trickling through the walls, reaching me as I dozed off in my bed. My early birthday parties, overstuffed with guests, offered buffets of bagels amid the seventies crochet. On weekends, Mom taught me to illustrate puns in little homemade booklets as we sat on shag rugs, listening to folk music and her spirited Socialist-Zionist records. Now, my bubbie's house hosted faux French regency sofas covered in plastic, golden lamps, and a smattering of photographs and Judaica from Poland, though I was never sure how they'd carried large framed photos and crystal vases when they escaped east to Russian work camps where they ate horse meat, and then after the war when they walked back to Poland via Kirgizia, where my mother was born.

My favorite photos were of Bubbie and Zaidy when they were in their twenties, with their dashing slicked-back Warsaw dos and Bubbie's striking high cheekbones, like a model for *Vogue* (Vodjz?). My other favorite photo was my parents' wedding portrait, which hung in a thick gold frame in the living room, showing my mom as a slender beauty with long dark hair and an innocent smile that graced her cherubic cheeks, my dad as a dashing man in fashionably gigantic 1972 eyewear. No pictures of my parents' wedding hung in my house. Each time I was here, I took a few minutes to stare at this

evidence and imagine what it must have been like when they were young, happy. I wondered what it would take for Mom to look so elegant again.

As Eli and I disrobed, my zaidy, now with only scattered white wisps of hair crowning his barely five-foot-tall body, emerged from his basement hideaway—his makeshift workshop where he busily fixed pipes with masking tape and smoked cigarettes. His twinkling gray eyes peeking out from under swollen eyelids, Zaidy giddily played with us as Bubbie got down to the business of cooking. Everything was done by hand. Orange juice was squeezed by hand. Bees were killed by hand. Floors were scrubbed by hand, though I'd noticed lately they were starting to smell acidic, like stale urine. Zaidy, Eli, and I played a game where we ran from wall to wall trying to catch one another—Bubbie joining for some rounds—and then I cleared us a picnic place on the floor of the dining/TV room, which hosted heaps of leather bags and clothes draped on golden chairs. There, my grandmother spread out newspapers for our five-course dinner—cut up vegetables drenched in oil; chicken soup; meatballs with no sauce and spinach latkes; apple compote and Neapolitan ice cream; a petit four of Kit Kats—which was served over the next few hours, until Dad came to pick us up.

When *Three's Com any* came on, Bubbie sat on a chair, cackling loudly at her major crush, John Ritter. "They should put this on for cancer patients, for victims of war. I don't even think about my mother dying in gas chambers when I watch Jack!" she cooed, munching on toast with cottage cheese and jam. "We used to swim in the Vistula, all my sisters," she whispered, as if letting me in on a secret from her old world—the old world—even though I'd heard these stories a thousand times. "The Zionist groups swam. That's how I saved myself. I swam." I remembered a photo my mom had shown me of Bubbie walking on the banks of the river. She was wearing a long dress, her long legs taking long strides, next to a man in a suit who did not look like my zaidy. At all. "Who's that?" I'd asked.

"Oh, I think her boyfriend," Mom had answered from the couch,

as if my grandmother having a boyfriend—a life before Zaidy, a life before the war—was nothing. Her having had a romantic, carefree existence felt more foreign to me than the daily stories of partisan violence on the Russian front. *There was a drop of normalcy somewhere in my lineage?* I hadn't asked any more questions. I hadn't known how. I just packaged up this bit of knowledge, storing it for later.

After the meatball course, my grandmother slowed down her service, and as usual, came in to show me her victories of the day. "How much you think I pay for this?" she asked, holding out a mint green sweater with gold lamé weave.

"Ten dollars," I played along.

"Less!" my grandmother cried in delight, our reverse bargaining session beginning.

"Five dollars."

"Less!"

"One dollar."

"Twenty-five cents!" She applauded herself. She had taken me with her a couple of times to the bazaars where she trawled through long tables piled high with shiny clothes, and then fought it out penny for penny with the sellers, always emerging triumphant.

I had no idea why she kept shopping, considering that opening her closet resulted in a mudslide of dresses. Purses were piled high on the living room couches. A full room in the basement was unlivable, the pool table buried under a mound of skirts. Yet, it didn't bother me that much. I didn't live here, and the stuff wasn't for me. *These piles wouldn't drown me, pull me under. Please don't let my house become this bad,* I begged inwardly, but I already sensed the slopes were slippery like the wintery ground outside.

Finally, after all the desserts were brought out and scattered across the floor, I started to check the clock. At a commercial break during *A Different World*, I went back to the living room with my parents' almost-fictional wedding photo, and practiced my moves as I sang Tina Turner and danced in front of the full-length mirror,

checking every few minutes to see if Dad was out back and if he'd honked. If we made it to his car quickly, there'd be no time for him to think about how mad he was at Bubbie for moving and there was a better chance he'd put on CKMF radio so I might catch Falco's "Rock Me Amadeus." When I noted his Pontiac station wagon outside, the headlights spotlighting the snow that sprayed in all directions, I ordered, "Eli, let's go!" I made sure he put on all his layers and that we both had our schoolbags before hugging Bubbie and Zaidy so tightly I thought I'd break their osteoporotic bones. "I love you, Judaleh," Bubbie said, nuzzling her smooth chin with its maze of thin wrinkles into my hair for an extra-long second. The warmth diffused across my scalp.

"Gotta go, Bubbie." I pushed off. From the corner of my eye I saw displayed on her kitchen table the crumpled piece of paper that was a photocopy of my picture that had appeared in the *Canadian Jewish News* for winning a Jewish studies award. The paper was worn from her clutching it, from toting it around to her friends in the park, showing off how far she'd come from the world of the Judenrat, showing off *me*.

The car ride home transpired as usual. Dad was quiet, seemingly intent on listening to his talk radio, so I didn't ask for the station change. Though known to his friends as a joker, and popular on the wedding/funeral/Christmas party speaker circuit, he was reserved when he was hungry. His day before coming to get us was always long: after working at the government-run hospital, taking his sauna and attending his weekly medical lecture, he stopped on Carlton Avenue, at his parents' house that was now inhabited by his older brother Moishe, a chain-smoking used-carpet salesman bachelor who slept on the sofa in front of blaring ESPN snooker matches. Dad still had a bedroom there; it was "his room" and he visited every day to "check up on the house," but he never ate food at Carlton. As he drove, he complained about the insane number of stop signs on the way west, the route being the hypotenuse of the triangle of my

family's three houses. Carlton-Campden-Kildare. None of these Anglo streets were remotely posh, but the trifecta sounded like an upper-class family, or a pharmaceutical company, like the names on the polyp-shaped stationery that Dad brought home.

Our house, a 1960s white brick rectangle, was tucked into the bend of a cul-de-sac. As we pulled into our driveway, I felt a wave of discomfort in my lower abdomen. Behind "Mount Kildare," as Dad had named the hill of snow that the snow blower dumped on our front lawn every winter, allowing us to toboggan right outside our door, I could see that the living room lights were on. Did that mean that Mom was up or asleep? I secretly hoped it was the latter. By now, it was bone-chillingly cold out, not just hitting my face but invading the stitches of my clothes, and I braced myself for leaving the car, for the one minute in which I had to open the garage door and wait for Dad to let us in. I also braced myself for the entry.

Fortunately, the house was warm. Then I noticed—*all* the lights were on. As were the radios. And the television.

"Hi, Mom," I called, knowing that whatever awaited me I might as well find out right away. "Hi, Mom," I said louder this time, also knowing that if she was up, she'd be slow to forgive me if I didn't say hello first.

As I removed my layers of damp, cool clothes, which I draped over the rail to the basement stairs since there was no room in the closet, I heard Mom stir. "Hello," she said. Her voice was thin and wavering, as if she'd been roused from a deep slumber.

I inhaled, exhaled, and walked into the den. "Hi, Mom." I found her lying on piles of pillows and under several blankets on the couch. The coffee table was covered in papers; I prayed my latest report card—which still needed signing—was somewhere in there, hiding along with her. Even my success vanished in the domestic chaos. Next to the sofa stood a tower of newspapers and free magazines—"your mother's cocaine," my dad called them. I'd long been used to Mom's stacks of records that overcrowded the wood shelving, but lately the bohemian aesthetic had been deepening. Now books—

many severely overdue at the local library—piled up on the floor between the furniture too. Not to mention the clutter in her bedroom, the files and clothes that were slowly spreading across her bed, making it hard for me to reach her when I had a nightmare.

My father slept in a cleared-out area in the basement.

I thought of Bubbie's sartorial stashes and my heart plunged. It was too late. Mom's mess was metastasizing, taking over our family space.

"Hi, Mom," I said, for a fourth time.

"Hi, Judy," she said groggily. "I'm just taking a nap. Just a second, I'll get up."

She turned the other way, to face the inside of the couch. Her gray formless knit sweater peeked out from the blankets; she did not wear Roots aerobic gear like the other moms.

I carefully stepped over piles of family albums. Mom had taken thousands of photos of me as a baby, and I normally loved looking at them, proof that she had noticed me, that I was a main character in her life. But now, they too seem in the way. I found the remote under last week's *The Suburban*, and flipped channels, looking for *Yes, Prime Minister*, my mom's version of *Three's Company*, with Nigel Hawthorne as her John Ritter. If she would only laugh, I knew, she'd wake up and want to talk, maybe even have a snack with me as Dad ate his dinner.

I couldn't find anything good, except for a repeat of *Video Hits*. "Mom," I said, pointing at the "Land of Confusion" video. She loved the Royal Family, she loved caricature. "Look at the puppets." I did a parody dance of the parody dance, writhing like Nancy Reagan.

"Judy," she said. "Just give me a minute."

I reminded myself that she woke up at five a.m. to go to work at a military school outside Montreal where she developed English curricula for French Canadian soldiers. "Sorry," I said, and went into the kitchen.

My dad was eating dinner from behind a Berlin wall of sauerkraut and tuna cans. He ate only cold foods at home. The rest of the kitchen

was similarly fortified: stacks of Russian whole wheat loaves, half-used tissues tucked into Kleenex boxes, an army of Sweet’N Low packets amassed from coffee shops across town.

At my mom’s place at the table sat the phone and a leaning tower of coupons. I cleared coffee-stained paper towels and gestured at the clippings. Dad rolled his eyes. “Nature abhors a vacuum,” he said. “And a vacuum cleaner.”

I laughed loudly, relieved that he knew something was askew in our house, which was just when my mother came in.

“What’s funny?” she asked, serious. I froze. She was right. We had been laughing at her.

My father didn’t answer.

“Nothing,” I said, and looked away. “We were just talking about the kitchen.”

“Well,” she said, her eyes darkening, darting quickly around the room. As if a switch in her brain had been flicked, her hand movement suddenly became jerky, her breathing, heavy and staccato. “Why don’t you ask your precious father, your best friend, to take care of all the shopping?” she mocked me, and slammed the phone as she moved it to the counter. Then she tore open the fridge, threw juice onto the counter, and poured herself a pink plastic cup full. I tried to remember her better moods, the time she took me and Eli downtown to see *The NeverEnding Story* and we sang the *Pirates of Penzance*’s “My Eyes Are Fully Open” to the rhythm of our steps as we walked from the metro to the theater. “So it really doesn’t matter, matter, matter, matter . . .”

“It wasn’t about shopping,” I mumbled now under my breath. My pulse quickened, and I swiftly left the room. *And my father does take care of it*, I wanted to add. She was forcefully, frantically stacking plastic cups at the opposite end of the kitchen, behind the cluttered counter, as if making herself yet another shield to protect herself from me.

“It’s getting late,” she shouted after me. “Get ready for bed.”

“I have to finish my homework,” I mumbled. Of course it was

late. I was brought home at only nine thirty. *What, now you're a disciplinarian?* I wanted to yell.

I went to my room, closed the door, and sprawled out on the small area of carpet cramped between the four chests of drawers, trying to ignore the little crumbs nestled between the bobbles of wool. I quickly did my reading, my Hebrew, and my math, before putting away my clothes. My closet was so jam-packed—acrylic-blend hoodies with metal zippers, Ocean Pacific-style Bermuda shorts—that I had to get up on a folding chair to slot my shirt in. I checked up on my perfume sample collection that I had placed neatly—each little clear vial getting its own space—on the top of my wooden bureau, pretending it was a makeup table and I was a movie star. Then I put my books in my schoolbag, and put it on top of the secretary desk, which my mother had loved for its rounded closing top, but which seemed to me like just too much furniture.

At least she'd let me trade my double bed for Eli's single one, which I'd pushed lengthwise along one wall so it would take up less room, even if it meant I had nothing against which to rest my head. Pretending it was my pink trundle, I crawled in and tucked myself into the layers of unmade blankets, hugging them, as if they were throw pillows.

Then, like most nights, I had a sneezing fit from the dust that accumulated on the side of the night table.

Excerpted from the book White Walls by Judy Batalion.

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