

"Smart and tender and true. I know these women because I'm one of them.
We all are. We're brave. We're afraid. We're loving. We're destructive.
We're finding our way in a difficult world."

—REBECCA RASMUSSEN, author of *The Bird Sisters*



*The
Appetites
of Girls*

A NOVEL

PAMELA MOSES

Part
ONE



FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE

• 2003 •

This, above all else, binds the four of us together: standing side by side, each struggled to believe the best in herself, hearing amid the dark doubts in her mind the whisper of triumph.

Long before we grew in strength, we began life in separate corners. In my first moments, I made only small whimpers, my family tells me. Then my face turned red as beet soup, my fists tight as knots, and I cried with a roar that seemed beyond my tiny lungs. Opal was born into the arms of midwives in a country house outside of Paris. Her mother reclined on feather pillows and sipped lemon water until it was time. Francesca claims she bellowed her first day morning through night until the nurses relented, freeing her from her swaddling blanket. And Setsu's life opened just as her mother's closed, her cries lasting longest of all.

Far we have come since those beginnings, and long the journeys to victory over doubt. But always, in us, were stirrings of possibilities, and we would find the will to hold fast to these hopes.

In the eleven years since graduation, Francesca and I have phoned each other regularly, as we have with Setsu and with Opal, a pledge we made long ago and kept. But in the spinning hum of our grown-up lives, our visits became sporadic, and not since our final college year have all four of us been together in one place. This past spring, though, just days after Francesca had come into Manhattan, meeting me for lunch and a stroll through the American wing of the Met, she called, insisting the baby I was carrying deserved a celebration. Besides, what better excuse could the four of us have to reunite? For old time's sake, she said. Wouldn't it be fun?

"Oh, no, Fran, you don't need to. Thank you, really . . ." I had fumbled for the appropriate words to decline her unexpected offer. In part because it is not in the Jewish tradition, a baby shower had never crossed my mind.

"*B'sha'ah Tova*—in good time," my aunts and sisters and mother said when they learned that I was expecting. *One's hopes should not rise too high before the hour comes. Congratulations may bring bad luck*, they worried. My grandmothers and great-grandmothers would not have so much as knitted a bootee before a baby's arrival. "Why tempt bad spirits?" Nana Leah had cautioned with an old wives' superstition.

But shouldn't I have known Fran would persist? "Ruth, you are bringing a daughter into the world. How can you refuse her some festivity?"

There was a time she could talk me into many things because I lacked the courage to trust my own mind. Now, though, with the sudden possibility of reuniting with my suitemates, I realized I missed not just each of them separately, but all of us together as a group. Our weaknesses differed, but our journeys to overcome them were shared. We learned from one another's struggles, and learned, too, we were not alone in struggling. In our day-to-day living together and the friendships formed in those years, we gained strength to fight for our deepest yearnings. And

now as I take this new step toward motherhood, it seems fitting that we four come together again.

So here we sit at this table beneath the tulip tree: Francesca, Setsu, Opal, and I. Our spoons dip into shallow dishes of chilled soup as the tree's high branches cast soft, swaying shadows across our faces and arms and the plates of luncheon food before us. Years ago we could not have dreamed we would ever be this picture of contentment. But no storms rage forever, not even those that whirl within us. Yes, each of us was stronger than she knew. Even I.

Fran has thought through every detail. Her garden table is set with linen place mats and napkins, at its center a crystal vase thick with daffodils. At the table ends stand two pitchers of iced mint tea, their handles wound with ivy and tiny white flower buds as intricate as snowflakes. And beside each plate, someone has placed a pair of cellophane-wrapped baby shoes made entirely of pink sugar.

This is the first time any of us has seen Francesca's new Connecticut home, and when I arrived, ringing the bell to the left of her paneled front door, I heard her calling to someone—"Got it! *Got it!*"—and then the familiar pounding of her running feet.

"God, it's great to have you here," she said, kissing me, walking me through the house, hanging my spring jacket in her hall closet. As we pass the kitchen, I glimpse the food to be served—dishes I had seen in magazines—crustless sandwiches rolled like pinwheels, bowls of pastel soup with scrolling loops of cream at their edges, salads of nearly transparent green leaves no larger than rose petals. A trim woman in a starched white blouse stands to the left of the double sink, slicing raw vegetables—Lucienne, Francesca introduces her.

"This is really so beautiful, Fran—everything. And so generous—"

"Oh, goodness. You're welcome." She shrugs off my words, never

comfortable with sentiment. “Let’s talk about you. You look *wonderful*. How are you feeling? Are you getting any sleep?” It was the one trial of her own pregnancies, she remembers. How for hours in her bed, with eyes wide open, her mind would whirl.

“Sleeping, yes, but I’ve never had such vivid dreams,” I tell her.

As we speak, a dream of the four of us from the night before returns to me: we are racing along the shore, kicking up the foaming water. And how young we are. Only girls, but then in a twinkling we are women, with our shadows stretching far, out into the ocean.

Then we are interrupted by the arrival of Opal, followed soon by Setsu. “I can’t believe you’re here,” Fran says. “You both look terrific. And doesn’t *Ruth* look terrific?”

But Setsu and Opal are already embracing me, asking me exactly how many more weeks, exclaiming that I’m radiant.

In the kitchen, Fran mixes mimosas, pouring them into tall flutes. “Occasional drinks in the third trimester are permissible, aren’t they?” She winks at me.

“Just not the way you make them.”

She laughs, surprised by my retort but approving of it, and fills a separate flute without champagne.

Lucienne arranges the bowls of soup on a tray, and we follow her, carrying our glasses across the lawn, settling around the table. And now as our spoons clink against Francesca’s china bowls, we begin to chat, at first taking turns, speaking of work, of families, of things we’ve heard of other college friends. But before long, we are talking together and at once, the way we used to do. A rhythm suddenly familiar as chords from well-loved but, for a time, forgotten music.

Setsu surprises us. While sorting through some files at home, she has unearthed some photos from our college days.

“Oh, look at us. Is that freshman year?” Opal asks.

“Yes, it must be finals week. We look *exhausted*. Remember how we

studied until morning and Fran kept us all awake with chocolate-covered coffee beans?” Setsu smiles at Fran.

“That’s right! And, Ruth, you collapsed on your books right on the floor!” Fran recalls.

We laugh and agree it feels both a lifetime ago and just like yesterday.

As we put aside the photographs, and as I look from Setsu to Opal to Fran, I see their clothes are more tailored than they once were, their hair more stylishly cut, the angles of their faces more defined. But in other ways, how little they have changed. Setsu’s long fingers still fold beneath her chin as she speaks, pressing to her mouth now and then when she has finished. Francesca’s voice pierces with the same old boldness. And as the soup begins to disappear, how well I recall Setsu’s tiny meals—mouse portions, I thought them—that gave her rope-thin arms. Opal’s insistence on measuring, analyzing every morsel before it passed her lips, scrutinizing each bite before she swallowed. Francesca with her penchant for frosted cakes, her French baguettes and Brie from the gourmet store in town. Much of those years has faded and blurred, but these and other things I still see clearly. And I cringe at what they surely, maybe especially, remember of me.

As the soup slides along my tongue, I gaze at each of the women and think of the hindering roots that had found soil in our earliest experiences of life. Entangled with a thousand secrets and unshared stories, and thickening as we grew, becoming, after a time, almost as hard to cut away as our own limbs.

But these struggles are part of what it means to be human—struggles with our own natures, often undeclared, as if unnoticed by those who know us, even by ourselves. Yet such battles must be waged and won if we are to grow, if we mean to claim what is truest within.