

## Chapter 1

New and improved—that’s how I was feeling that Friday afternoon in September three years ago. Like a big box of detergent with better whiteners and softer fabric softener and double-strength static control. Presenting Ellen Gray, now with Patience, Tolerance, and Understanding, and a full money-back guarantee.

My mother was a half hour late getting home from work, and ordinarily I got all edgy about this kind of thing. Now, at the kitchen table, drinking milk and taking apart Big Stuf Oreo cookies, I was practicing patient, tolerant, and understanding greetings. To take the place of my usual “Why are you so late!” would be “I’m so sorry you were delayed,” or “Poor Mom. You must be exhausted.” And “Would you like a nap? *I’ll* make dinner.” This was surprisingly easy. My plan was that I would be packed with improvements by the time my father went away again in January.

But I didn’t want to think about that yet.

Anyway there were too many good things to think about. Two weeks before, I’d made my junior high school softball team, even though I was only a brand-new seventh-grader. Just that afternoon, even though we lost a game we should have won, I’d hit a single and a double and, playing third base, had made the long throw and nailed three runners at first. Afterward the girl playing first, an eighth-grader named Roz Spinak, who was shy and awkward and barely ever spoke to anybody, told me, “You’ve got a great arm.” Best of all, Ms. Moore, our coach, who supposedly never complimented anybody unless maybe she hit a grand slam in the bottom of the ninth, muttered in my direction, “Ellen Gray, you’re about to start improving.” I’d felt my whole self fill up, as if I’d been named Most Valuable Player at Peter Minuit Junior High.

Cool, pale yellow light washed over the yellow walls of our kitchen. I peeled apart six cookies without breaking any. Was there anything I couldn’t do? Bells jingled down the stairs in the hall, bells attached to the collars of two Labrador retrievers who lived up on the fifth floor. Their toenails clicked on the tiles; their breathing was heavy and slightly wheezy. The black one was named George, and the yellow one, Gracie. I live two floors down from George and Gracie, in a loft in Soho, way downtown in Manhattan in New York City.

“Hello, dogs!” I heard my mother’s voice out in the hall. I sat there happily, anticipating her shock at encountering so much patience. But she never even noticed it. Her first words to me, pouring out all in a rush, were, “Do you have any idea how I feel?”

I shook my head, disappointed. So then I practiced understanding, telling myself that my mother often plunged into conversations, the same way she plunged into cold swimming pools. She wasn’t the type to dangle her feet on the edge and say, “It’s freezing. I’ll get used to it this way first.” That type was my Aunt Beryl, my mother’s sister.

“So, how do you feel?” I asked her. One thing I had to notice—she looked terrific. Her gray-blue eyes were all bright and alive, her cheeks rosy and flushed. She had a way of blushing that people found charming. I usually blushed a sickly scarlet that led people to ask if I was “feverish.”

“I have a strange metallic taste in the back of my throat,” my mother said, sitting down beside me on one of our high wooden chairs. “And there’s a hollow, heavy feeling in my chest—the way air feels when it’s about to rain.”

“What’d you have for lunch?”

“Chicken salad on rye, and it had nothing to do with this.” She smiled, exposing perfect teeth. If there was anything about my mother I envied, it was her teeth. I’d worn braces when I was younger, nine and ten, and had barely recovered from the moment a tiny rubber band popped out of my mouth and landed right on Faye Needleman’s looseleaf.

My mother said, “Aren’t you going to ask why I feel this way inside?”

Sunlight played on her shoulder-length, light blond hair. I finally caught on. My mother had news, and this was her way of introducing it. A year and a half earlier, when my father, an officer on a submarine, was going to live at home nonstop for two whole years, something he’d never done before in my entire life, she’d asked me, “Aren’t you wondering why I bought a new cushion for the rocking chair?”

So if a new rocking chair cushion meant my father was going to be home for two years, what news was she telling me now?

“Is Aunt Beryl getting remarried?” I said.

My mother tightened her lips, trying not to laugh. “The first marriage was disastrous enough,” she said. “Poor Beryl. Guess again.”

I thought of my grandparents. The reason we’d moved to New York six and a half years ago was to keep a closer eye on them. “Are Grandmother Anne and Grandfather Mitchell leaving the residential home and coming here to live with us?”

“God forbid! One more try, Ellen.”

I shut my eyes a moment, praying hard I was right this time. “Is Daddy staying home for good?”

My mother’s shoulders sagged a bit. “No, honey, Dad’s got to go back to sea in only a few months.”

“I give up!” A cramp pinched my neck. Maybe there was something else about my mother I envied. She always handled it so well, when my father went away. Besides, why were we playing Twenty Questions? Didn’t she care that her only child was newly improved?

“I’m pregnant,” my mother said. I stared at her. “Three months already, El. I didn’t want to tell you sooner, because the first three months are kind of tricky... there might be danger of a miscarriage. And I didn’t want you to be disappointed after getting all excited.”

Excited? But I felt the exact opposite of excitement. In six months—March, almost springtime—a new Gray baby. That didn’t sound right. My mother picked up an Oreo I’d skillfully taken apart, put it back together, and ate it. She was giving that new Gray baby *my* cookies!

“How does it feel, Big Sister?” she asked me.

I moaned to myself. “It feels like... I’m a pain in the neck—I mean, I have a pain in my neck.”

That made her laugh. I had to laugh too so it would look as though I didn’t care that I’d said something so silly. So why wasn’t I excited about this new baby? Lots of kids at school adored their younger brothers and sisters, and idolized their older ones. Last year, in sixth grade, Susie Brockleman bragged for weeks that her mother was going to have a baby boy.

George and Gracie came back upstairs, wheezing more heavily than ever. But now the bells and the clicking of their toenails sounded far away, too far to reach. Of course, if I ran out to the hall, I’d get two slurpy tongues and hot musty breath in my face, and two tails playfully thrashing my legs. But I didn’t move from my chair.

“Why’d you get home so late!” I burst out suddenly. So much for patience and those other things.

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At dinner that night, my mother said, “I’ve told Ellen.” I had to admit, my mother looked lovely. She has a face designed for laughter, full of laugh lines and dimples. “Now Ellen knows.”

“Wonderful,” my father said. “Isn’t it funny—now the baby seems more real.”

I sat there, rubbing my neck. I must have pulled something during those heroic throws to first. I observed them both with cranky suspicion, as they ate two plates of spaghetti apiece while I could barely eat one. “So when are you leaving, exactly?” I asked my father.

“January third,” my father answered crisply. He’d been a Navy career man for thirteen years, and I couldn’t remember a moment when he didn’t seem alert and eager.

“When’s the new Gray baby due?” I said. “March, right? You’ll be away, won’t you?” My voice cracked a little on the word *away*.

“I plan to be back in March,” my father said, his light, light blue eyes fixed on me. When I was little I called his eyes “blue ice.”

“Briefly,” I said with emphasis. “You’ll be back only briefly. Aunt Beryl says you’ll be away for the next three years.” I began to get a funny feeling in my stomach, as if some weird machine was plugged in and starting to hum. Something told me this machine had better get turned off, and fast.

“Aunt Beryl, as usual, doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” my mother said. “Dad will be on patrol at sea for two months, and then home with us for almost a whole month, and then nearby up in Connecticut for about a month, getting ready to go back to sea. Then the four-month schedule will begin again, and will keep on repeating itself, for three years. After that he’ll be on shore duty in Connecticut for another two years. The Navy knows their people would go nuts without those long spells ashore. Besides, anytime Dad’s in Connecticut, he can call, and visit on weekends. We’ll be seeing lots and lots of Dad.”

I knew that wasn’t exactly true. My strongest memories of my childhood, which started in Connecticut, and then moved to New York when I was five, had to do with Daddy being “away.” The word has always sounded endless to me, like the space beyond the sky. “Maybe Daddy started something he can’t finish,” I said. “Like he planted a seed in the ground and then left the gardening for somebody else.”

That got my mother angry. She said my father was one of the most responsible men she’d ever met; she said he was a wonderful, kind man; she said he’d done a fine job of raising me up even though he was away a lot. What she didn’t say was that in a way I was right.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m not in the greatest mood. We lost today in softball, playing a school that’s practically in last place.”

“Too bad,” my father said, smiling, placing a warm, slightly damp hand on my arm. If he was mad at me too, he wasn’t showing it. I liked his hand on my arm, and his blue-ice eyes, and his smell of strong black coffee, which he drank all day, and the tiny, tiny chip off his front tooth that he said only I had ever noticed, not even my mother. The kitchen was dark now, and I could hear cars and trucks rumbling by on the cobblestone street below. This was the perfect moment to brag about my own performance at softball, but Ms. Moore’s words—“about to start improving”—suddenly seemed so meaningless.

My father leaned over and felt my forehead. “I think Ellen’s got a touch of sibling rivalry fever,” he said.

“She’s eleven,” my mother said.

“Eleven *and a half*,” I corrected her.

“Then it’s worse than I thought. Eleven and a half, and a year ahead in school. You’re much too old and too smart for that. But you’ve got your liver in a quiver about something, that’s for sure.”

Sibling rivalry fever. I wondered how long that would last. Twenty-four hours, or forty-eight hours, like a bug?

My mother was still a little mad at me when I went to bed, but then she woke me up later to watch a comedienne making her first appearance on the “Tonight Show.” My mother did that sometimes. We sat on the soft living room couch, laughing at jokes about the comedienne’s weird relatives. My mother’s cool, slender arm was wrapped around me, and I could smell her slightly rosy, soapy smell. Behind the TV, through the large windows of our loft, I saw the flat gray top of the supermarket across the street and, next to that, a tall apartment building with a cast-iron front. On the other side of the apartment building was a small vacant lot. A year before, it had been a coffee shop. Soho was full of crowded streets, but then there were these empty spaces, like the vacant lot and the back alley just outside my bedroom window, where I could hear real alley cats yowling and scuffling. Looking up, I saw a bright purple-blue sky. New York City never gets completely dark. It’s one of the things I’ve always liked—just like the smell of soap or roses. Was I going to have to share all this with an outsider, who was already sitting right next to me?