

The Smallest Objective



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VANCOUVER
NEW STAR BOOKS
2020

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Author's Note: The names of some minor characters have been altered for the purposes of this book.



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The publisher acknowledges the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund, the British Columbia Arts Council, and the Province of British Columbia through the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

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ARTS COUNCIL
An agency of the Province of British Columbia

Cataloguing information for this book is available from
Library and Archives Canada, collectionscanada.gc.ca

Printed & bound in Canada by Imprimerie Gauvin, Gatineau, QC

Cover design by Robin Mitchell Cranfield

Typeset by New Star Books

First printing, April 2020

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CHAPTER ONE



Treasure



MY MOTHER'S HOUSE WAS A PLACE OF PROHIBITIONS. ADMONISHMENTS on scraps of paper, some in narrow ballpoint but more in coarse crayon, obscured the walls and tabletops: *No boots on rug. Don't mess with timer. Bolt basement door. Hands off sheers. Don't leave black bedspread in the light.* Still, my mother had failed on one count: She'd neglected to prohibit boring into hardwood floor, not because she approved of the venture, but simply because it had never occurred to her. Nor would her blacklist have extended to a Highland Scots carpenter in her bedroom or archaeologists in her wardrobe. Such improbables, later realized, eluded even her frayed imagination.

My mother no longer inhabits that house. The brand-new split-level to which she came as a lucid bride, she left without warning and in confusion, appeased only by the belief that her beloved daughter, her sole and cherished child, would never lie. But that I did. The move to assisted living, I told her, was merely a trial, a respite endorsed by her doctors. And in the months that ensued I flouted my mother's strictures time and again, at first with grief, and eventually with indifference.

Unbeknownst to my mother, the first assaults on her perfect order began while she still occupied the 1950s semi-detached with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, a spacious kitchen, a formal living and dining room, a den, and an unfinished

basement supporting the whole — her house or, most often in her parlance, “the house.” And yet, “the house” is misleading. In truth, my mother had withdrawn from most of her range, lumbering only between the master bedroom and bathroom or kitchen. Like a raccoon in winter torpor, she stirred grudgingly and merely to satisfy vital functions. Her adherence to the half-light made possible incursions that previously would have been unthinkable.

A martini shaker imprinted with *Skol* and *A Votre Santé!* The black ceramic bowl studded with gold bees. A never-sent letter my mother had composed for a friend about the ice storm of '98, the words on the envelope, *I wrote about the ice storm*. Not one was an obvious tool of transgression, but each was among the first objects I stole away.

Once I'd removed my mother from her house in Montreal, I could dispense with subtlety, but until then, stealth prevailed. Serge, the moving coordinator, agreed to survey the contents during one of my mother's several daily naps. With her hearing aid switched off and the requisite pillow over her head, my mother would detect little and suspect even less. Serge was ample, perhaps three hundred pounds, and that he itemized both the den and kitchen without rousing my mother was a measure of his grace. But as he hovered before the bedroom door, unwittingly he placed his full weight on a rogue floorboard.

“Who's there?” My mother came swiftly to the door.

The doctor's bride — in her now-standard uniform. Rene Elissa Kirsch, née Rutenberg, who wore for her wedding “a Simonetta of Rome original of white brocaded satin, with a high neckline, fitted bodice and a full flared skirt falling into a court train,” stood before us in a ragged white shirt that barely grazed her upper thighs. Beneath the hemline, her legs were crisscrossed with varicose veins.

My mother squinted at Serge, then at me, her grown-up child and heir. "There's a man in my house," she declared, for once sure of herself. "Who is this man in my house?"

"A colleague." My voice faltered only slightly. "Go back to bed. You have nothing to worry about." She turned, stumbling along the well-trodden path to her bed.

The bride's "veil of tulle illusion was held by a cluster of apple blossoms. She carried a spray of apple blossoms."



Of late, I've been composing a memo for myself when I am old:

- Wear shoes with Velcro.
- Eat something other than cheese and crackers.
- Take charge of your own life before someone else does.

The morning of the move, a brisk October morning, I drove my mother to an apartment hotel with a newspaper, a nurse's aide, and a box of party sandwiches: cream cheese, gherkin pickle and smoked salmon pinwheels, double-decker egg and tuna. She'd once composed these herself, covering them in the fridge overnight with a damp washcloth to subdue moisture loss. Even now her appetite for party sandwiches remained unsated.

"I'm confused," she said. A familiar litany.

"Don't worry, everything's all right," I told her. I could scarcely believe I was following through on my own intentions, necessary as they were. Privately I reminded myself to keep breathing.

After I'd deposited my mother and her aide at the hotel, I hurried back to the house to dismantle her endeavour of more than fifty years.

By sundown, the kitchen, den, and master bedroom had been shorn of all that made them hers. The dozens of objects on my mother's dresser, arranged at precise angles and according