

## PROLOGUE

The residents of the Susquehanna River Valley of Northeastern Pennsylvania were accustomed to flood advisories. The last significant flood took place in 1936. After the waters receded and the damage was repaired, a new levee system was built to protect the valley. The new levee was five feet above the level of the river when it crested in 1936, and everyone continued on with their lives, feeling free from the danger of any future flooding.

In the northeastern corner of Pennsylvania, situated in the Susquehanna River Valley, sits a small town called Wilkes-Barre—a community that was especially hard hit by the great flood. As the years passed, the town's survivors of the 1936 flood died, taking their stories of devastation and disaster with them to the graves of the local cemeteries. The flood became historic lore, and the next generation of residents paid little mind to the flood advisories that periodically punctuated local weather reports.

Then in mid-June of 1972, a tropical storm began building in the Caribbean region of the Yucatan Peninsula. Reports of the storm barely made the news, even after it strengthened to a category one hurricane before making landfall in the Florida Panhandle on June 19. They named her Agnes.

Agnes quickly downgraded to a tropical depression, with two thousand miles of storm clouds extending from the storm's epicenter and dumping significant rainfall on the states of Georgia, South

Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. It spawned several twisters and significant flooding, impacting thousands of residents before heading east over the Atlantic Ocean.

While Agnes was hovering over the Atlantic, the residents of Wilkes-Barre breathed a sigh of relief, not knowing the storm was gaining strength. Without warning, Agnes whirled sharply west and made a second landfall as an extratropical cyclone. She hovered over the Wyoming Valley, as if to take care of some unfinished business, and unleashed a deluge of torrential rain that lasted twenty-four hours and overwhelmed the region with nineteen inches of rain.

The people's relaxed attitude around any flood advisories shifted. Vigilance kept their eyes locked on the TV and their ears tuned to radio weather reports as they stared in disbelief at the unstoppable torrential downpour. They heard the reports of the river level quickly rising, yet assured themselves that the levees were high enough at thirty-eight feet. The river would hold. But as each hour passed, this assurance became a question. Would the levees hold?

Fourteen hundred National Guardsmen along with ten thousand volunteers arrived to pile sandbags along the dikes of the river as the rain continued to pound down upon them. Evacuation seemed imminent. Residents began piling valuables and memorabilia onto second floors or higher surfaces, a precautionary measure against the unlikely event that a couple of feet would fill their basements or ground floors.

In the early-morning hours of June 23, 1972, over two hundred thousand residents of the river valley were evacuated from their homes, including seventy-two thousand residents of Wilkes-Barre. They left their belongings and took a few days' worth of clothing, feeling irritated and inconvenienced.

The river crested at almost forty-one feet, eight feet above the crest level of the flood of 1936. The river water made its way over or through the resistance of the thousands upon thousands of sandbags. In some areas, the river slowly seeped over the dikes and steadily filled the streets and homes, transforming the June landscape filled with the green of new spring growth into a dead-land swamp of stench-filled brown liquid.

In other areas, the river burst through the dikes with a force unequalled before or since. Fourteen trillion gallons of water rushed

through the valley, taking down homes as if they were made of cardboard and sweeping away cars like dust bunnies. The water uprooted trees that had been standing strong for a hundred years. Cars, homes, concrete, and steel debris rushed down the now one-mile-wide Susquehanna River, crashing into bridges and testing their engineering. The massive pile of debris crushed and swallowed the steel-and-cement-constructed Pierce Street Bridge, taking the whole thing downriver with it.

The devastation was unlike anything anyone could have imagined. The region was submerged under sixteen feet of river water for days. Houses, torn from their foundations, were found deposited blocks away, some impaled on telephone poles. The water burrowed its way under the earth of a local cemetery and built up enough force to rifle coffins ten feet into the air, spilling out the remains of twenty-seven hundred town ancestors, including those who had lived through the great flood of 1936. Their remains floated down the muddy waters with the fish and the trees and the crumbled houses and the cars and the concrete and the steel and anything else that the angry, brown, swirling, stench-filled water wanted to take. Eventually, the remains that had spilled from their coffins were deposited on front porches, in backyards, and on roofs. Residents came home to find a skull here, a femur there, or a tibia over there.

Local college and town libraries lost every book in their collections, gone with them historical records of the once-thriving coal-mining region. The colossal steel bleachers that surrounded the college football field were swept away and found seventy yards downriver in a twisted, crumpled heap. Every commercial building of the historic town square was devastated after the river rushed in. It smashed every counter, cash register, and fixture through the walls and ceilings of the stores, leaving every inch of the place covered in the gray-brown silt and slime of the flood mud. Fires raged days after the river crested, unreachable by local fire departments and left to burn until the flames met the river water to which they were no match.

The damage was unthinkable and measurable only later in a dollar value of \$2 billion—\$13 billion by 2022 standards.

When the water receded, home and business owners got to work collecting tools to help them salvage what they could or demolish what

they couldn't. Those who were lucky enough to procure a working hose or a squeegee tried their hardest to clean the mess, but nothing touched by the river water was salvageable. Every inch, crack, and crevice was covered, smeared, or filled with flood mud. The slimy, oily mud was nearly impossible to wash off furniture or out of clothing, cushions, and cupboards.

As clean as something might get, nothing could ever get rid of the caustic smell of the flood mud. It was a fetid smell of rotting fish, raw sewage, toxic chemicals, and sulfur that assaulted nostrils like the nauseating smell of carrion. It made the returning residents recoil with dread as they arrived, despondent, to assess the damage to their town and their homes.

The smell would never be forgotten; it remained in the sensory memory of anyone who was unlucky enough to experience it. Decades later, when the smell was detected on books, clothes, furniture, and even inside the ducts of homes that had survived Agnes, it could instantly be proclaimed *from the flood*.

In the years after Agnes devastated the towns of the Susquehanna River Valley, personal memories and historical events came to be marked in history as *before the flood* or *after the flood*. *From the flood* became part of the local vernacular, with houses, people, and belongings regularly identified as *from the flood*. This proclamation was a way for those who survived the flood to keep it in their memories, lest they forget and lower their guard the way they had prior to June of 1972.

The flood changed the town in ways that held fast. Banks, churches, libraries, courthouses, and other government buildings still all display permanent lines painted on their walls to mark and remember the level of the river water that filled their buildings. A mass grave was dug for the remains of the twenty-seven hundred unidentifiable ancestors, and marked with one large monument. The historic buildings of the town square were demolished and replaced by modest office buildings. Modern red lampposts were erected around the perimeter of the central grassy park in the middle of the square, replacing the historic charm with a space-age look akin to Tomorrowland in Florida's Disney World. Those who remembered the bustling town center grieved the loss.

The unprecedented meteorological event that was Agnes caused

such destruction that this was the first of only three hurricane names ever retired from use.

Hurricane Agnes and the flood of 1972 changed communities, people, and families in ways that they could never have imagined.

This is the story of one such family.



PART I

*Agnes*





## August 1970

I was five years old and in kindergarten when our family moved to our new house on Birch Street in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Dad said our old neighborhood wasn't a place to raise kids, but I liked it well enough, especially at Halloween when my friend Dolores dressed up as a bride and got to wear makeup. I thought Dolores was the most beautiful girl in the world that Halloween, and I begged my mom to put makeup on me, which she did but *just this once*, but she wouldn't let me wear red lipstick like Dolores the bride wore.

My sister Pam was one year and five days older than me and in the first grade, and she didn't need to beg Mom to let her wear makeup to look beautiful because all of the grown-ups around talked all the time about how Pam was a *gorgeous child*, which made me feel ugly.

Pam and I did everything together.

We had our tonsils out together, spent the night in the hospital together, and when we came home, we ate potato chips together even though we weren't supposed to. The potato chips ripped Pam's stitches open, and she had to go back to the hospital, which meant that she got extra toys and made me mad and jealous—until now, I had forgotten that feeling.

Pam was my favorite person. We slept in the same room, and when I woke up crying from nightmares about the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, Pam lay in my bed with me until I fell back to sleep.

We ate alike, dressed alike, and thought alike. When I was three years old and Pam was four, Mom and Dad told us we were going to have a baby sister or brother. Pam and I insisted we pick the name, convinced we would come up with something fabulous!

When Mom and Dad brought our new baby brother home from the hospital, he had a round, bald head and eyebrows that scrunched down, the way mine did when I felt like something was unfair.

Pam and I triumphantly proclaimed that our new baby brother's name was Jonny Quest. But Mom and Dad told us *no*, and that his name was Paul, which—when you said it out loud—sounded like the sound you make at the back of your throat just before you throw up all over the floor.

We liked the new Birch Street house because it was in a neighborhood with lots of other kids we could play with. Sometimes we played *bank* because we had a set of little windows on our back screened-in porch that opened with a crank handle and looked like the drive-up bank window that our mom passed things through. We thought up exciting adventures like digging a hole to China, and all the kids pitched in to dig deep enough that we felt sure we would make it all the way to China—until we got spankings for digging up our backyard and had to fill the hole back in and find another exciting adventure to embark on.

Our new school was called Lafayette Elementary School. I was in kindergarten and only went for the morning, coming home to eat lunch and watch *Sesame Street* and wait for Pam to get home. But after a few weeks, Pam started coming home with her new friend, Amy, and for the first time there was something about Birch Street that I really didn't like.

One day I was in the backyard on our swing set.

"We wanna swing," Pam said, walking through the side path to the backyard with Amy in tow.

"Wait your turn," I said. But what I really wanted to say was *If you didn't bring your stupid friend Amy home, you could swing right here next to me.*

“Fine,” said Pam, in a huff. “C’mon, Amy,” Pam instructed. Amy dutifully followed Pam to the opposite corner of the yard.

I felt momentarily triumphant, but Pam and Amy huddled together, whispering some secret to one another, then started singing at the top of their lungs.

My coun-try ’tiiiis of thee,  
Sweet land of liiiiiber-ty,  
Of. Thee. I. Siiiing.

They kept on singing this mysterious song louder and louder. It was like they had a secret that only *they* knew, just because they were in the first grade together and I was still in kindergarten. My chest got hot.

“Hey!” I shouted to them.

Land where my faaaaa-ther died,  
Land of the pil-grims’ pride,  
From e-ev-ree-hee mooun-tain side . . .

They kept loudly singing.

“Hey!” I shouted again.

“What?” Pam shouted back, irritated.

I paused. I wanted to tell them how I really felt. That I felt left out and mad and sad, and I wanted stupid Amy to go home and give my sister back to me.

“You can have the swing now,” I said instead.

I slid off the swing, spun myself toward the back door, and huffed back into the house. Mom saw that I was sad and made me my favorite snack of saltines and grape jelly, which always made me feel better. But the kind of sad that I felt on the day I realized that even though Pam was my best friend, I might not be her best friend, was not the kind of sad my favorite snack could make feel better.

## September 1971

I didn't feel better until the next fall, when I started first grade at Lafayette Elementary School and met my best friend in the whole world, Lowri Jones.

Lowri lived one block away from me. I knew the way to Lowri's house because Lowri's house was also my piano teacher's house, and my piano teacher was Lowri's mother.

Every morning I walked to Lowri's house; then together we walked another two blocks to Lafayette Elementary School, where we met the crossing guard lady, who wore a bright orange sash and carried a stop sign in one hand and looked like a nice old grandma. When she saw us coming, she'd smile and say, *Here come the early birds!* This confused me because when we went back to Lowri's house at the end of the day to eat the bologna and mayonnaise sandwiches and tuna salad sandwiches, Lowri's mom told us that she found out we had been late to school again and could we please stop looking at every leaf and every tree and splashing in every puddle and just get to school on time.

But every day, Lowri and I found things to discover and explore on the walk to school, and we just couldn't understand why we needed to ignore an amazing flower or a struggling worm on the middle of the

sidewalk or hurry up past an irresistible puddle that we knew might not be there the next day just to get to dumb old school, which I hated ever since I pooped my pants by accident in kindergarten and cried all the way home, sure that every kid in the class knew what I had done.

Lowri was my first best friend besides Pam, and she felt almost like my twin sister because she had the same last name as me and she loved to suck her thumb as much as I did, so sometimes we sat in front of the TV with a blankie (for her) or a pillow (for me) and silently sucked our thumbs, feeling safe and content without having to talk to each other.

Sometimes Pam and Lowri's little sister, Meghan, played with us, but mostly Lowri and I would really rather be alone, laughing and eating our sandwiches together or watching TV and sucking our thumbs. It helped to have a new best friend, and I started not caring about Pam and Amy singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and making me feel left out.

## April 1972

Paul, who was three by the time the spring of my first-grade year came around, had a best friend named Patrick Koons. Patrick was the same age as Paul and had a mom who was named Peggy, just like my mom, but his dad was named Pat, and not Bob like my dad. Patrick came to play at our house every day until he stepped in front of the teeter-totter that Paul was riding and got himself clocked smack in the forehead and had to be rushed to the hospital to get the cut all sewn up. Patrick's mother screamed like a *banshee* when it happened, which Dad called *a little dramatic*. After that, Patrick Koons didn't come over without his mother.

Sometimes when Peggy Koons came over with Patrick, she'd sit around the kitchen table with Mom, talking about the things moms talk about like what to make for dinner and new stores that opened up and how to get a stain off a new couch that was there because someone ate chocolate pudding on the couch when they were *specifically told not to*. That someone was me, but I never told anyone because I didn't want to get a spanking.

I spent every day with Lowri, my best friend, and sometimes Pam, but Pam also played with Michelle Bedwick, the oldest in a Lebanese

family that lived down the street, next to a house that Mom called a *modern monstrosity*. Pam and Michelle ran through the middle of Birch Street, playing *The Partridge Family*, a game that mainly consisted of Pam and Michelle waving their hands and running from the screaming throngs of fans while yelling, “No autographs, no autographs!” Pam, of course, was Laurie Partridge, and Michelle Bedwick was Keith Partridge, and I had to be Danny Partridge because Pam was the oldest and always got what she wanted and Michelle was the oldest and probably also got what she wanted. As usual, I didn’t get what I wanted, unless you count playing with Pam, which was what I *always* wanted, especially when I wasn’t playing with Lowri, so I pretended to be whatever Pam told me to be, even though Danny Partridge was weird and ugly and didn’t really have any fans wanting autographs.

Dad worked at his printing business, which was called Bedwick and Jones because our last name was Jones and our uncle Ray was his business partner and his last name was Bedwick. Even though Uncle Ray wasn’t our real uncle, he felt like our real uncle. He was actually Michelle Bedwick’s real uncle. On Sunday afternoons, we’d pile into our sedan and go to the house of Uncle Ray’s sister, Aunt Sadie—because that was where all the big Bedwick dinners and family action took place. Sometimes the Bedwick kids, who lived next to the *modern monstrosity* house, were there too, and we felt like cousins even though they had dark skin and we had light skin.

When we asked Dad what his job was, he told us it was “making the money that pays for this beautiful house and all of the things in it, in this lovely neighborhood that is safe and clean so you kids can have a better life than Mom and I had.”

But that was *before*. Before June 23, 1972, the Birch Street neighborhood *was* quiet, and the streets and sidewalks were wide and clean, and there were hardly any cars because it ended right about where our ranch-style house sat. If you drove down our street past the *modern monstrosity*, past our house, and then past Patrick Koons’s house, then tried to keep driving without looking where you were going, you would drive right up that dike and over the hump and land your car right in the Susquehanna River, and unless you had a car like in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, you would be in big, big trouble.

We weren’t allowed to climb on the dike because there was a train

track there, and Mom told us we could get hit by a train and have our leg cut off or an arm cut off, and that was if we were lucky. A big iron bridge that crossed the river was also only for trains, and we weren't allowed to climb on that either, which was fine by me because I hated bridges and felt sure that if I thought about them collapsing when I was on one and me falling in the water and drowning, I could make that happen just with my thoughts. And sometimes I couldn't stop myself from thinking of scary things that could happen, even if I never ever wanted them to happen.



## *Wednesday, June 21, 1972*

It started raining in the third week of June, which meant that we couldn't play on our swing set or in our yard or even play bank. Dad said we were getting a *real dumping*, and he seemed very interested in that because when the weatherman came on the television set, Dad told us to be quiet because he wanted to listen *for Christ's sake!*

We hated the news because it was boring and the man on the television, who looked like a grandpa, never smiled and looked like he wasn't any fun at all. But we all liked piling on top of Dad because he was gone every day and when he came home, he let us climb all over him, pretending he was a ferocious T-Rex and we were little dinosaurs attacking him.

But when the rain started, Dad and Mom watched the news, and we had to wait to play our game with Dad, which made us feel grumpy.

Dad said, "Enough of that pouting." Dad sometimes said that, and other times he just said, "Don't give me that look," which meant that I was in trouble unless I changed my face, but I was never sure what to do with it, so I looked up, down, left, right, and all around, hoping that if I just didn't settle on *a look*, it would be OK.

The weatherman came on the screen of our giant wooden console

television, and Pam tucked herself under Dad's arm.

"Is everything OK?" Pam asked after the weatherman said *flood advisory* more than once.

"Don't worry, Pamela. The levees are very high, and the river would never get high enough to go over them."

"What's a levee?" I asked, thinking it was a very strange word.

"You know that train track right out there?" Dad said.

"The one that will cut off our leg?" I asked.

Dad chuckled.

"It's not the track that could cut off your leg, Suzanne; it's the train that travels down the track," said Mom.

I still didn't understand how just getting near that track could cut off my leg.

"Well," Dad said, "that's a dike, and it's sometimes called a levee. It is built to keep the river water on the other side, even if it rains a lot and gets really high."

"How do they know how high to build it?" I pressed.

"Well, a long time ago, the river got high and flooded this town, so after that, they built them up as high as they possibly could, and there's never been a flood since!"

The weatherman was saying, "Up to three inches of rain before morning . . ."

We were silent as Dad glued his eyes to the television and Mom watched us carefully.

"Every year they give a flood advisory; it's really nothing to be worried about," Mom assured us.

"I'm bored," I said. Staying inside all day wasn't any fun as far as I was concerned.

"It'll stop by tomorrow," Dad said. Then he said, "Who wants pancakes for dinner?"

"*Yeeeeaaaahhh!*" Pam and I yelled in unison. Paul looked at us and joined in the jubilation even though he probably didn't know what we were cheering about.

Mom made all of the dinners and lunches and most of the breakfasts too, but Dad was the best pancake cook in the world. When Dad made pancakes, it felt like an extra-special morning, but when we had pancakes for dinner, we didn't even know *what* to do with ourselves

because it felt so special and wonderful.

Dad got out the Aunt Jemima pancake mix and the Log Cabin syrup. Mom put the syrup on the table along with a tub of Parkay margarine. We sat at the table expectantly.

“Will you make our initials?” I asked Dad.

“You bet!” said Dad.

Dad made pancakes in the shape of our initials, SJ for me, PJ for Pam, and a Z for Paul because of his nickname, which was Za Za Zu. I hated my initials because they sounded stupid. I wanted initials like PJ or even DJ because they sounded happy and made a great nickname. No one would ever use SJ as a nickname because it sounded sad and clumsy, so everyone just called me Suzie, except for sometimes Mom called me Suzanne, especially when I was in trouble.

We ate our pancakes, had our baths, and climbed into bed.

“Pam,” I whispered.

“What?” She sounded irritated.

“Are you awake?” I asked, just to be sure.

“Yeah,” she said.

I paused.

“What do you want?” Pam asked.

“Are you scared?”

“No.” She paused. “Are you?” she asked.

“Kinda,” I admitted.

There was a long silence, but my eyes were wide open. I stared through the dark to the ceiling of our bedroom, watching shapes of light move around slowly like a lava lamp.

“Pam?”

“What?” she shot back.

“Can I sleep with you?” I asked.

I was glad that I had a big sister in my bedroom with me, even if she was only one year and five days older than me. Paul was the only boy and slept in a room by himself, and I definitely would not want that. I wondered if he was scared.

“OK,” she said.

I climbed into bed with Pam, sleeping with my feet by her head and her feet by my head, like the way sardines fit into their tin.

“Go to sleep, Suzie,” Pam instructed. “We can play in the morning.”

I slipped my thumb into my mouth, pressed the thumb pad to the roof of my mouth, and made my tongue vibrate. I ran my fingers over the cool wrinkles of my pillowcase and immediately felt like I was wrapped in a warm hug. I fell asleep, thinking of all the games we would play outside once the rain stopped.

## *Thursday, June 22, 1972*

Pam and I sprang from our beds and ran to the kitchen. I thought we had the greatest house in the world because it had a pink kitchen. Even though I didn't like pink for toys or pink for dresses, I liked having a pink kitchen because we were the only kids with a kitchen like that, and it made me feel special.

Mom and Dad were sitting at the pink linoleum table. Paul was in a high chair making a mess of his cinnamon-sugar toast.

"How come you're not at work?" Pam asked Dad. It was unusual for him to be at home when we woke up in the morning unless it was a weekend.

"Well, girls," he said after taking a deep breath, "it looks like more rain is on the way, and I'm going to go help pile up some sandbags just in case."

Mom looked at him, then back at us.

"It's nothing to be worried about," she said, wiping Paul's face with a wet cloth.

"Nooooo!" Paul shouted as he shook his head back and forth. "I don't wike it!"

Paul couldn't say all his words right yet, so he called a log a *wog*

and said *kepitch* instead of ketchup and called my sister *Pam-Pam*.

Mom lifted him out of the high chair, and he ran to the living room, picked up the cylindrical cardboard container of Lincoln Logs, and spilled them all over the floor.

“It’s just a precaution,” Mom continued.

“That means just in case,” Pam said looking at me, as if I were a dummy. I was glad she told me anyway.

“Can we go out and play before breakfast?” we asked with our hands folded the way Pam learned in Sunday school so she could have First Holy Communion. I couldn’t wait until I had First Holy Communion and could wear a beautiful white dress like the one Mom bought for Pam and get treated extra special for one day in my life even though Pam would be the first to do it. Pam was the first to do everything, so nothing was as special for me because I was always second.

“Pleeeeeaaassee!” we begged.

Mom looked at Dad, then looked back at us. “OK,” she said, then added, “Don’t leave the yard, and come in if it starts raining.”

Pam and I ran out the side door to the backyard before Paul could see us and tag along.

The rain did not start gradually. We had just begun playing on the swing set, singing “Miss Mary Mack,” when the rain suddenly started, like a faucet turned all the way on high, soaking Pam, me, the swing set, and the whole yard with water. The metal sliding board on our swing set became a downhill stream. The yard was all at once covered in puddles so deep that we couldn’t walk from the swings to the house without avoiding them. Our feet sunk into several inches of water, soaking our shoes. It didn’t matter because the rest of us was so thoroughly soaked that by the time we walked through the side door, we were dripping from our shirts and our pant cuffs. The water made squishing sounds in our shoes. We had to wring out our long hair.

“Take your clothes off,” Mom instructed as we stood there, drip, drip, dripping.

I looked at Pam. Water dripped off the tip of her nose, her earlobes, and her eyelashes.

We peeled off our clothes like they were banana skins, leaving them inside out in a wet, heavy heap on the floor.

I was so irritated that it was raining again that I wanted to stomp my feet in protest. Instead, I said, "Mom?"

"Yes?" Mom said as she began wrapping us each in a bath towel before scooping up our sopping wet clothes.

"How long is it gonna rain this time?" I asked.

She let out a big sigh, as if she were tired of us asking the question.

"I don't know, Suzanne." Then she added, "Soon."

"Will it stop today?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said as she stared out the window at the torrent of rain. It didn't let up. The puddles in our yard turned to streams, running down our driveway and overwhelming the storm drains on the street. The pounding rain on the metal roof of our screened-in back porch sounded like the freight trains that ran over the forbidden tracks. I was glad we had a house to keep us warm and dry.

"Can we play in the basement?" Pam asked.

"Yes," Mom said, still staring out the window. "Let's get you dry and dressed first," she added. Then, "And take your brother with you."

"*But Mooom!*" I moaned in protest.

"No buts," she said. "I need to clean."

After Pam and I dried off and got dressed, we found Paul in the living room still. He was lying on his belly with one of the Lincoln Logs in his hand. He moved it forward and back on the floor, pretending that it was a truck. *Vroom! Vroom!* he said as he moved it forward. *Eeep! Eeep! Eeep!* he chirped as he moved it backward, the way trucks beep when they are backing up.

"Come on, Paul. We're going to play in the basement," we instructed.

The basement was where all of our toys were kept. There was also a bar down there that we only used to store things. It came in handy when we played hide-and-seek.

"I don't wanna!" Paul protested. He wore a look that said, *Come near me and I'll rip your face off.*

"Mom said," Pam told him.

He began to scream, "No!" and wrapped his arms around his Lincoln Logs.

"You know what? You know what?" I said excitedly. I didn't really

know what to say, but Paul was like our old dog Sophie that Dad gave away to a farm. You just had to pretend that something was really exciting, and he would forget all about being mad and follow you.

Paul's face brightened. "What?" he said.

I had to think quick. "I think Mom got you a new truck, and it's in the basement!"

It was a lie, but Paul loved trucks. He especially liked garbage trucks. He loved them so much that when we lived in our old, bad neighborhood, he ran outside and down the street after the garbage truck he had missed because Mom was changing his diaper when the truck stopped at our house. Mom ran after Paul, who was naked as anything, waving his clean diaper in one hand and scooping him up under her other arm, carrying him like a football back to the house while he was kicking and flailing and screaming and crying.

Pam looked at me. She knew I told a lie, and lying was bad. But the situation called for it, so I looked back at her sternly, trying to wordlessly communicate, *Don't you dare tell on me*, which was something that she sometimes did.

Paul jumped up and followed us to the basement with a bounce in his step. I grabbed one of his trucks and gave it to him.

"Here," I said.

"I don't want that!" he grumbled, swatting the truck away.

"This is a new one! It just looks like the old one." It was worth a shot.

Paul examined the truck.

"Come on. Let's play," I said as I started to move the truck back and forth, imitating the *vrooming* and *eeeping* noises Paul had been making. He joined in and seemed to forget about being mad. Paul was really dumb sometimes.

We could hear the rain, even though we were all the way in the basement. Mom was vacuuming above us. We could hear the furniture being moved aside and the vacuum banging into the baseboards.

Pam and I sorted through our toy box and pulled out a Sunset Malibu Barbie and a Skipper doll. We played in the basement with our Barbies. Pam had the Malibu Barbie and pretended she was the mom. I had Skipper, and I had to be the kid.



"You've been a bad kid," Malibu Barbie said to Skipper.

"Hey!" I protested.

"It's just pretend," Pam reminded me.

"Why do I always have to be in trouble?" I meant it, and I wasn't just talking about Skipper.

"Because you do dumb stuff," Pam said. Then she added, "And now your father is going to give you a spanking when he gets home."

This made me furious. A red-hot wave filled my face, moved down into my chest, then down through the arm holding Skipper, and it made me whip the Skipper doll at Pam, hitting her in the head.

*"I'm telling!"* Pam screamed, and she ran upstairs.

I sat in the basement, listening to Paul blather on with his trucks, waiting for what was always coming.

"Suzaaaaneee!" Mom yelled.

"I didn't mean it!" I yelled back. I mostly loved Pam more than anyone, but I hated her right now. I waited for what was next, but nothing came.

Just then, I heard Dad come through the door.

"Look at you!" Mom exclaimed. "Don't come in—I just cleaned! Let me get towels."

Paul's ears perked up, and he yelled, "Daddy!" then ran up the stairs.

I wasn't going to go upstairs unless I had to, afraid that if I did, I would get a spanking for throwing Skipper at Pam's head. I crept up the stairs to listen. Paul left the door to the basement open, and the low voices of Mom and Dad carried the smell of lemon pledge down to me.

"How is it?" Mom asked as she switched on the television.

"Not good," Dad said. He told her he'd never seen anything like it. He described standing in an assembly line. The guys at the end filled pillowcases, garbage bags, or any sack they could find with dirt and sand. They passed them down the line to the end, where they were piled a dozen high, stretching for miles along the dikes.

"I've never seen rain like this," he told her.

"Are we gonna be OK?" Pam asked with a lilt of worry in her voice. Retired General Sergeant Frank Townsend, who Dad told us was a very important man who was the chief of something called the Civil

Defense Department, soberly updated us over the television on the status of the river.

“May begin evacuating hospitals and nursing homes as a precautionary measure . . . ,” he was saying.

Dad peeled off his soaked clothes and dried his head and face with a towel. “It’s a lot of rain, that’s for sure,” he said. “But those dikes are higher than this river has ever gotten. Five feet higher than the worst flood ever. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Everyone was so interested in the rain and the old man on the television and hearing Dad talk about what it was like outside that they didn’t talk at all about Skipper hitting Pam on the head. I quietly moved up the stairs and peeked my head through the doorway.

“It must be coming down over an inch an hour out there,” Dad told Mom. “One fella had a can of spray paint. He was marking the water level on the river side of the dike, but as soon as he sprayed a line, it was covered up again! He just kept spraying and spraying.”

“What do you think?” Mom asked, looking at Dad with an expression that looked less like worry and more like she was trying to make some sort of decision.

If she had asked me that question, I would have told her I thought Pam was a snot and a tattletale and that *she* should be the one to get in trouble for making me be naughty Skipper and making her Malibu Barbie act like a mean grown-up.

Dad pulled on a clean dry, shirt, took in a deep breath, and said, “I think we should put some things up. We might get some water in the basement.”

Then he scooped Paul up off the floor, pretend threw him on the couch, and growled, “Roowwwweeer! T-Rex is *huuuuunnnnggrrrryy!*”

Paul giggled, and Pam and I jumped on Dad and laughed and laughed. Pam and I forgot all about our fight, and I felt like this was a very special day because Dad was playing and laughing with us instead of being at work. If a whole lot of rain was what it took for that to happen, then it was fine by me.

When the five-o’clock news came on the television, Dad told us all to *shhhhhh* so he could hear about the weather.

A man stood under an umbrella in the torrential rain. He had a

yellow rain slicker on with the hood pulled up. He held a large umbrella over his head, and we could barely hear him above the noise of the rain.

“Tropical cyclone Agnes isn’t letting up, with river levels topping out at thirty-five feet so far . . .,” he was saying. It was raining so hard, the rain looked like it was coming through his umbrella. Water dripped off the front edge of his hood. He didn’t bother to wipe any of it off.

“Expect it to continue for several hours . . . expect some flooding in basements of low-lying homes and businesses.”

“What a pain in the ass,” Dad said when he heard *expect some flooding*.

“What about the shop?” Mom asked.

We called Dad’s printing business *the shop*. The shop was in a town called Kingston, which was across the river from Wilkes-Barre, where our house on Birch Street was. The shop wasn’t as close to the river as our house was, and Dad didn’t seem too worried.

“I’m not worried,” he assured, then added, “Let’s put some things up on the bar just in case we get a little water.”

“Can I help?” I asked.

“Me too!” Pam echoed.

“C’mon, girls,” Dad answered as he waved for us to follow him down to the basement. Paul toddled after us, holding on to the banister and carefully making his way down by stepping his left foot, then his right foot, on each stair.

“I’m going to start dinner,” Mom said as she disappeared into the pink kitchen.

Dad began piling a few things on top of the bar in the basement. His golf clubs, some photo albums, and some tools balanced atop one another precariously. Pam and I had immediately gotten distracted with a game of jacks.

“If you don’t want your toys to get wet, you better bring them over here,” Dad warned.

We rifled through our toy box and grabbed as much as we could. Paul brought Dad a toy truck. Dad found a place for everything on top of the bar and proudly proclaimed, “That should do it!”

He paused and looked at all the stuff on the bar, seeming lost in thought.

“C’mon, girls!” he yelled excitedly. “Let’s go for a ride!”

“Me too!” Paul chimed in.

“OK, buster, you too,” Dad agreed.

“But it’s raining,” Pam reminded Dad. She was always very practical.

“Don’t worry. I have a gigantic umbrella that will keep us all dry,” Dad assured. He fetched the umbrella from the corner of the basement where his golf clubs were usually kept. Gripping the umbrella in his hand, he thrust his arm straight forward to show us the umbrella, which he used when he played golf on rainy days.

“The rain never stops a game of golf!” he always told us, but Mom usually rolled her eyes when he said it, so we weren’t sure if it was really true.

We ran excitedly up the stairs from the basement, using both our hands and our feet, which made it feel like we were going twice as fast up those stairs. We waited in the kitchen for Dad to catch up to us, but when he did, Mom put her hand on his shoulder to stop him from walking to the door that led outside.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked Dad in an almost whisper.

“What are we gonna do, hang around here all day, sitting on our hands?”

Mom just looked at him, silently.

“It’ll be fine. They’ll be fine,” he assured.

Mom still didn’t speak. We all held our breath.

Finally, Dad said, “I’ll have them back within the hour.”

Mom took her hand off Dad’s shoulder and let him pass.

Dad led us out to the driveway under the pounding rain, which made the driveway look like a stream and the streets look like rivers.

We climbed into the Chevy, and Dad drove us through the streets of town. They were empty until we arrived at the Market Street Bridge, a formidable beige stone bridge with four stone arches. Two arches framed the road on one side of the river, the other two on the other side of the river. Each stone arch had a gigantic eagle on the very top, with its wings outstretched, as if about to take flight. The Market Street Bridge was the only bridge that I wasn’t too afraid to drive over, on account of the fact that it was so solid looking and it didn’t have

metal grates with holes that you could look down through to see the distance you would fall into the water if the bridge collapsed, which I was almost always sure would happen if I thought about it too much.

Dad pulled the car over to the side of the road and tucked it into a space that had been recently vacated in the middle of a line of parked cars. He opened his door, stuck the umbrella out into the hard rain, opened it, and held it in one hand while he scooped Paul under his other arm, exited the car, and hooked Paul onto one hip. He held the umbrella over our heads as we got out of the car. That umbrella was so big, all four of us could stand under it and stay mostly dry, even though we could see some water seeping through the umbrella because it was raining so hard. It sounded like popcorn that never stopped popping.

The air felt cool like a damp washcloth on your face, and it smelled tinny. The entire sky was like one big blanket of low and dark clouds, casting gray over everything. *What's the big deal?* I thought. *I hate this stupid rain.*

Dad led us to the chunky cement railing of the bridge. The thick, curvy cement spindles were completely obscured by hundreds and hundreds of sandbags piled one on top of the other, spanning the entire length of the bridge. We could see hundreds of men piling more sandbags on top of the dikes that ran on either side of the river. They didn't have raincoats or umbrellas or anything to keep them dry. They were soaked through, their shirts and pants sticking to their bodies and dripping with so much water, it looked like they might have had a hose under there somewhere. *Why do they get to be outside in the rain when I can't?* I felt irritated. I wondered if this was the place where Dad was piling sandbags earlier in the morning.

"Did you put these here, Daddy?" Pam asked before I could.

"Not these," he said. Then he pointed to the dikes along the river that bordered Kirby Park, which was where Dad took us to sled and ice-skate in the winter. "I helped pile those over there," he added.

I was glad that Dad made sure to keep Kirby Park safe from the brown river water that, when he lifted me up to see over the sandbags, I could see was so high that if the bridge did collapse, which I tried my hardest not to think about, you wouldn't fall at all before splashing into the water.

I could tell that Pam was nervous. "Are we gonna be OK?" she

asked Dad. She was right on the verge of busting out crying because she was giving Dad *those cow eyes* as he called them.

But this time he didn't say, *Don't give me those cow eyes* to Pam, and instead he said, "Don't worry; we're gonna be fine."

Paul was stretching his arm, trying to reach out from under the umbrella to feel the rain. The umbrella was too big, which made Paul lean his little body away from Dad, making it hard for Dad to hold him.

"Come on back, buddy," Dad said to Paul as he tried to pull him back in with the same arm he was holding him with.

Pam was not so quick to accept Dad's assurances. "Why is the man on the television saying the river will flood?"

She had a point, I thought.

Dad squatted down to face Pam, bringing the umbrella and a wriggling Paul with him.

"You know the story of the boy who cried wolf?" he asked Pam.

"Yes," she said.

Of course we knew it. The adults were always reminding us of that story when we *exaggerated* things.

"Well, every year, the weatherman says the same thing. It rains a lot, and they warn us of a flood advisory. And every year, we're perfectly fine because the levees are so high, the river would never reach the top," he explained.

"Then what are all those sandbags for?" Pam was a lot smarter than me.

"It's just a precaution," he explained.

There was that word again. *Precaution*. If that meant doing things like piling sandbags or not doing things like playing outside in the rain, then why didn't we use *precaution* other times, like when we had to cross bridges and be scared that they would collapse? Why didn't we just not go over the bridge? I made a note to suggest that to Mom and Dad.

Pam seemed to accept Dad's explanation. Paul was getting very *antsy*, as Mom would say, so it was time to get back in the car and return home and sit around inside feeling irritated again because we couldn't play outside.

After we ate the lasagna that Mom made for dinner and Paul was put

to bed, Pam and I sat out on our screened-in back porch with Dad, who was teaching us how to play gin rummy. Dad was a great teacher because he explained everything really well and never lost his patience when we didn't understand something. It was usually me that didn't understand, because Pam was seven years old and almost in the second grade, and she already knew a little about playing gin rummy.

It was past our bedtime, and Dad was tired from standing in the pouring rain and piling all those sandbags earlier in the morning, but earlier, when Mom was doing the dinner dishes and Dad was drying them, I heard them talking with bowed heads in hushed tones, catching only pieces of their conversation. *Occupy the girls . . . pack some clothes . . . in case we have to evacuate.*

I didn't know what *evacuate* meant, and I didn't care because when Dad was with us, time felt special, like when he gave us baths and sang the "Do-Re-Mi" song from *The Sound of Music* as he soaped up a washrag and helped us scrub ourselves from top to bottom. Or when he made going to bed a fun game by giving us *a sack of potatoes*, which was really just a way for him to throw us over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carry us to bed. And when we came home from a long car ride, I pretended to stay asleep so I could feel the specialness of being lifted out of the car and carried to my bedroom and tucked into my bed, which was great for me because Pam was usually the special one because she was older. I wanted to stay small forever so I would never be too big for my dad to give me *a sack of potatoes*.

But this day, I already felt special even before our sack of potatoes because Dad didn't go to work and was home most of the day, and that made me feel like everything was going to be all right.

Pam was winning because she could do most things better than I could, except when we played *go fish*, which is a game that our great-grandmother Nana taught me before she taught Pam, so I could usually beat her. But this was gin rummy, and I was getting jealous and angry as usual, but I stopped myself from throwing stuff at Pam, remembering that I avoided a spanking for hitting her with Skipper earlier in the day.

"No fair!" I yelled after she won a hand and flashed a glib smirk in my direction. I really wanted to throw my cards in her face.

Dad pulled me onto his lap and said we would be teammates,

except he kept turning his head to look into the kitchen to see what Mom was doing, so I felt like I only had half of a teammate. We had to almost shout over the noise of the hard rain pounding on the metal roof of the porch as my mom shuffled around the house organizing this and that, washing and folding laundry, and wrapping up the tray of leftover lasagna. She then carried the tray down to the basement.

After Dad gave us a sack of potatoes, and Pam and I were in our bedroom, I couldn't get myself to go to sleep. The rain was beating hard on the roof above our bedroom. It had been raining this way all day long, and I just wanted it to stop and be quiet.

"Pam?" I asked.

"What?" she said.

"Do you hear the rain?"

"What do you think?" Pam shot back.

I felt dumb. But I really just wanted Pam to tell me that everything was going to be all right. "If the river comes over the dike, are we gonna drown?"

I imagined the river rushing over the dike next to our house and filling it up so fast, we didn't stand a chance. Pam and I were already learning how to swim, but Mom and Paul couldn't swim, so on top of worrying about me and Pam and Dad drowning, I worried even more about Mom and Paul. Sometimes I didn't know why bad and scary thoughts kept coming into my head.

"Suzie, you heard Daddy. The river won't hurt us. This happens all the time," she assured me.

I trusted Pam because she was right about a lot of stuff. I tried not to think about the river or the Wicked Witch of the West and eventually fell asleep.



## *Friday, June 23, 1972*

It was still dark out when I awoke to the sounds of my brother, Paul, crying, Mom and Dad shuffling about, and a truck with a bullhorn passing in front of our house. There was that word *evacuate* again. I still didn't know what it meant, but it must have been serious because there was a lot of commotion. The lights in my house and in all the neighbors' homes turned on. Like strings of lights that rimmed porches and wrapped around front-lawn shrubs at Christmastime, the homes on our street lit up one after the other after the other.

"Pam! Are you awake?" I asked her. I was confused and frightened.

"Yes," she said.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"I don't know," Pam said. If Pam didn't know something, it made me really worried.

Just then, Dad opened the door to our room. We saw Mom down the hall past our doorway, carrying Paul, who was flailing his arms and legs about, crying as loud as I had ever heard him cry.

"Come on, girls. We're going for a ride," Dad said.

"Where?" we wanted to know. We had never gone for a ride in the morning before the sun came out.

"It's a surprise," Dad said. Then, "You can keep your nightgowns on. And grab a toy if you want."

He swiftly left the room. Pam and I looked at each other, confused.

Pam and I rubbed the sleep from our eyes and walked into the living room. Dad was now holding Paul, telling him the same thing he had just told us. We were *going for a ride*. I didn't understand why Paul was crying when we were *just going for a ride*. I figured it was because he got woken up in the middle of his sleep, because that's what babies do. Paul really wasn't a baby anymore, but he wasn't a kid like Pam and I were kids, so he sometimes acted more like a baby than we did.

Mom was on the phone, which was also strange. Why was everyone so awake this early? The only day we woke up before it was light out was Christmas morning, and Mom and Dad always told us it was *too early for God's sake* and to go back to bed. But it wasn't Christmas. It wasn't anything special that I knew about, yet the man shouting over the bullhorn was waking up the whole neighborhood.

"Who's Mom talking to?" I asked.

Dad said, "Uncle Ray."

*Why is Uncle Ray awake?* I wondered.

"OK, we're coming," Mom said before she hung up the phone.

"We're going for a sleepover at Aunt Sadie's!" Mom said, sounding kind of excited.

"Now?" Pam asked.

"Yes, it's a surprise one-night sleepover. Isn't that fun?"

I don't think Mom really wanted us to answer because as soon as she asked the question, she walked away and went back to her bedroom.

We loved Aunt Sadie. Aunt Sadie's face looked like Uncle Ray's face. It was brown and round with a large nose in the center and large lips with white teeth below that. Whenever Aunt Sadie saw us, her face instantly illuminated, and she smiled with her cheeks as round as apples, cooing *Helloooooo, honey! It's so good to seeeee you!* It always felt great to walk through Aunt Sadie's door and see her happy face, but we usually just went there for spaghetti dinners with all of Aunt Sadie's and Uncle Ray's other brothers and sisters and kids and nieces and nephews, but we never ever had a sleep-over at Aunt Sadie's, which sounded *great*, so I didn't really care what time it was.

Mom walked out of her bedroom with a small bag. “Girls, grab a change of clothes for tomorrow. And bring a toy if you want,” Mom instructed. Then she added, “We won’t be staying long.”

Pam and I rifled through our dresser and found identical brown slacks and long-sleeve T-shirts. Blue for her, and pink for me.

“Can we trade?” I asked Pam. I wanted the blue shirt.

“No way,” Pam quickly quipped.

“*Whyyy?*” I begged.

“Because the pink shirt is yours,” Pam stated.

“I hate pink!” I groused.

Pam turned to walk out of the room, taking the stuffed floppy-eared dog she got as a gift when we had our tonsils out. I left the fluffy pink-and-white kitty that I got because I really would have rather gotten that dog and was mad because, once again, Pam got the thing that I wanted, and she never wanted to trade. Instead, I brought the Sunset Malibu Barbie.

We gave our clothes to Mom, who put them in her bag. She grabbed Paul’s favorite pillow that smelled like maple syrup and had a dent in it because Nana taught Paul to rock his head back and forth to help put himself to sleep.

Outside it was still raining as hard as I’d ever seen. The storm drains on the street were overwhelmed and backed up so much that the street looked like a big stream. We saw the Koonses, the Bedwicks, and all of our other neighbors sloshing through the ankle-deep water and trying to stay dry under umbrellas as they dashed from their homes to their cars.

Were they having sleepovers too?

“Dad?” I asked as he was opening the trunk of the car.

“Hmm?” he answered, preoccupied.

“What’s *evacuate* mean?” I could still hear the man on the bull-horn shouting *evacuate immediately*.

“It means everyone has to leave their homes for the night,” Dad said.

“Why?” I asked.

“It’s just a precaution.”

That word again.

Paul sat on Mom's lap in the front. Pam and I climbed up onto the back dash of the car, where there was enough room for us to lie sardine style, like we did in the twin bed. I looked up through the back windshield and watched the wires on the electric pole move up and down and up and down. I stared at the smooth motion of the wires, wondering if they would hypnotize me.

Pam wriggled and shoved me deeper into the back dash until I was smooshed between the dash and the windshield. My nose fogged the glass when I breathed in and out as I watched the rain hit the glass. The water smoothed the edges and colors of the outside world. I thought about the sandbags on the Market Street Bridge. I wondered if the brown river water was reaching them. Were they piled high enough to keep it in place?

"Daddy, are we gonna be OK?" I asked this time.

"We're gonna be fine," he said.

"Why did we have to leave our house?" Pam asked.

"Just to be on the safe side," Mom quickly piped in. She did this sometimes when she didn't want Dad to say something to us that he shouldn't.

There was a pause. Paul was asleep in the front seat with his head on Mom's lap. She tucked a small blanket that Nana had crocheted for him when he was a baby a little tighter around his toddler body. She turned her head to look at Dad. They shared a silent glance, then both looked forward through the windshield as the wipers moved back and forth, in competition with the driving rain.

"It's just for a day or two," Dad said.

I stuck my thumb in my mouth. It always made me feel safe.

*Just for a day or two, I thought.*

We arrived at Aunt Sadie's house as the obscured sun was just fighting to bring light into the sky. The heavy rain, rain, rain was still pounding down on top of our car, filling the sidewalks, the streets, and the yards with more water than they could handle. They called Aunt Sadie's neighborhood *the hill*, which meant that the rainwater washed away down the hill, which meant that the yards and streets in the valley had water coming from the rain and water coming from Aunt Sadie's hill too.

Uncle Ray, who lived right next door to Aunt Sadie, ran under the cover of a big umbrella to our car and tried to keep us kids dry as he led us through the back door that opened directly into the kitchen. We breathed in the intoxicating fragrances of cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and honey. These were the smells of Aunt Sadie's house, and in this moment, I didn't care what was happening down in the valley or on Birch Street or with the river because the smell of Aunt Sadie's kitchen felt like pure love.

Aunt Sadie turned from the stove and flashed a wide, happy smile.

"*Ya Habibi!* My loves! Come in! Sit down!" she chimed as she turned to face us, but instead of wiping her hands on her apron to clean off pasta dough or ground lamb that she prepared when we visited her for dinner, she wiped off eggs and bacon grease and pastry flour before embracing us with her strong arms. Aunt Sadie's hugs felt like sinking into a giant beanbag chair made of the best stuff in the world, and we felt content and warm and forgot about anything that was happening below *the hill*.

The hill was the neighborhood where all the Lebanese people lived, except Michelle Bedwick and her mom and dad and sisters and brothers. They lived on Birch Street near us. Because the houses on the hill were not down in the valley where the Market Street Bridge was, Uncle Ray invited us for a sleepover; getting water in your basement wasn't fun, but getting to sleep over at Aunt Sadie's felt like a special occasion.

Aunt Sadie and Uncle Ray's family was very big. They had lots of brothers and sisters who all lived on the hill because Uncle Ray and Aunt Sadie's mother had been sent from Lebanon to America on a boat when she was fourteen years old to meet her preselected husband-to-be. Her husband had come over to America some months prior in order to start a wholesale fruit and vegetable business. When Uncle Ray and Aunt Sadie's mom arrived, she started having babies right away when she was fifteen and didn't stop until there were eleven babies, so who had time to be moving around? Everyone just stayed up on the hill, and everyone went to Aunt Sadie's house for dinner and sat around her giant rectangular kitchen table.

Dad met Uncle Ray when Dad got out of the army and Daniel, Dad's grandfather and his Nana's husband, who had raised Dad from age three, called Dad a bum and told him to *get a job* and tossed a

newspaper opened to the classifieds right on Dad's stomach before he could even get out of bed. That is precisely what Dad did that very day, and that job is where he met Uncle Ray.

Dad's job was in the printing department of Planters Peanuts. Every label had a smiling peanut man who wore a top hat, monocle, shoes, white gloves, and carried a cane. Uncle Ray worked at Planters Peanuts too but not in the printing department. Uncle Ray worked in the accounting department and met Dad one day in the lunchroom, where they decided they wanted to *be their own bosses* and made plans to start their own printing business in the basement of Uncle Ray's house, which was right next door to Aunt Sadie's.

After Mom and Dad got married, we referred to the rest of Uncle Ray and Aunt Sadie's gigantic family as aunts and uncles, and every time we went to Aunt Sadie's for dinner, I felt I was a part of the family. I didn't look like anyone else in the family. I was white. They were dark. My nose was small and looked like a ski jump. They had the same big nose, even the kids like Michelle, who had a kid-sized version. I wished I looked Lebanese, but instead, I felt boring and unexciting. And even though I didn't look like anyone else, the members of this giant Lebanese family told me over and over and over they loved me, and it made me feel safe and special and loved and a part of something so big that it would never go away completely.

We were all tired from being woken up by the bullhorn, and we wiped the sleep from our eyes. Aunt Sadie said, "Sit! Sit! Come eat!" after kissing us all on the forehead. We sat down at that giant table in the center of the kitchen while Aunt Sadie began to lay out platters and dishes and bowls of food that I recognized, like scrambled eggs and bacon, and foods that I didn't that had weird round-shaped beige beans that Mom said were called chickpeas. I imagined little baby chicks laying those beans like chickens lay eggs.

There were pastries dripping with honey and layered with walnuts and pistachios and yogurt so thick you could almost cut it with a knife. There was cheese fried in a pan, which you could definitely eat with a fork and a knife, except Aunt Sadie showed us how to pick up all the food with pieces of soft, flat bread that had some funny green stuff on it that Mom called *herbs* and was warm right out of the oven.

I liked the bread OK after I scraped off the green stuff, but Paul took one look at the bread and blurted out, "Yuck!"

"This is Syrian bread," Aunt Sadie proudly stated as she smiled a wide gap-toothed smile. "It's fresh from the oven!"

"I want pancakes!" Paul shouted. Sometimes three-year-olds were so rude.

"I'll make you pancakes tomorrow, deal?" Dad assured him before turning his head back to the television in the kitchen, where a newsman was standing in the rain next to a bridge. The river looked gigantic and angry, and it carried cars, pieces of houses, and large debris down current and smashed them into that bridge.

"Is that near our house?" Pam asked, alarmed.

"No. It's nowhere near us," Dad lied before quickly shutting off the television.

Paul began crying and kept demanding pancakes. Mom picked up Paul and whisked him out of the kitchen. She turned her head on her way out the door and blurted out, "Keep the TV off!"

I picked up and placed on my plate a sweet and gooey pastry that made my mouth water and my fingertips sticky. I popped some bacon in my mouth, biting down with a crunch.

Dad didn't eat a thing. He kept walking out of the kitchen to talk with Uncle Ray and Mom in the other room before returning to the table, where he silently sat and stared blankly into space.

Pam and I kept real quiet and tried to listen in on the grown-ups' hushed tones as they periodically whispered to one another in the corners of the kitchen or over the sink as they washed and dried the dishes. When they talked to us kids directly, they had smiles on their faces and tried to sound happy. But when they looked away or talked to each other, we saw those expressions immediately change from smiling and happy to frowning and worried, which was unusual, especially for Aunt Sadie, who was almost always smiling. I knew that something really serious was going on, and when kids know that something really serious is going on, they also know enough to *keep quiet* and *stay out of it* and let the *adults take care of things*, so after we ate, Pam and I went into the living room. Mom was sitting on a rocking chair, singing "Bingo" to Paul. We sat on the couch, listened to "There was a farmer

had a dog and Bingo was his name-o!" and waited to be told what to do.

Not long after we arrived, Momo walked through Aunt Sadie's back door, which was very, very strange because she wasn't usually invited to Aunt Sadie's house. Momo lived in an apartment down in the valley close to the river and had also been woken up by the man with the bullhorn who was telling everyone to evacuate. Because the same man had made us leave our house on Birch Street, Momo didn't have a place to go, so Aunt Sadie told Mom to *bring her on up!* which made Pam very happy because ever since she was a baby, she spent every single Saturday night having a sleepover with Momo. I stuck my thumb in my mouth and vibrated my tongue to make me feel better because having Momo around was just going to remind me of how special Pam was and how *unspecial* I was.

Momo was Mom's mother. Mom said Momo was a strong and independent woman because when Mom was twelve years old, Momo grabbed her and her brother, Uncle Bob, and walked out on our grandfather who we called *Pop-Pop-with-the-Screwdriver* because he was really handy with tools.

Mom said it wasn't like they were leaving much because they were poor and took baths once a week in a tin tub, taking turns using the same water. But after Momo took Mom and Uncle Bob to go live on their own, Uncle Bob joined the marines and Momo got a job at Planters Peanuts, and I wondered if my first job would be at Planters Peanuts too because that seemed to be where everyone had their first job.

Mom said Momo taught her that women needed to be able to take care of themselves and have minds of their own, so when Momo told Mom she should breastfeed her babies that is what Mom did, even though when Pam and I were born, it was considered old-fashioned and an embarrassment.

Mom said Aunt Sadie was very generous because, between the Bedwick family and our family and now Momo, there weren't enough beds, and we had to sleep on the couches and the floor. Mom and Dad slept at Uncle Ray's house.

Pam and I were still in the living room, waiting for something. We didn't really know what. Paul fell asleep, and Mom laid him on the couch and covered him with a blanket before going back into the



kitchen to greet Momo, who had joined in with the secret conversations that were happening in there.

Through the doorway, we could see Aunt Sadie leaning her back against the kitchen counter, with her hands deep in the pocket of her apron. She was fiddling around with something in there. Her knuckles poked the fabric of her pocket out and in, out and in. When things got quiet in there, we heard whatever was in her pocket clicking around.

I was just about to go in there and ask Aunt Sadie what she was fiddling with deep in her apron pocket, when I heard a sound I had never heard before. It was a siren, but not like a fire engine or a police car or ambulance siren. This siren was so big, it needed time to wind up in order to get real loud. Once it was as loud as it could be, it stayed there for what seemed like a long time, then wound down. All the adults in the kitchen were silent as the siren repeated its wind-up, wind-down screaming.

“Oh my God,” Mom whispered loudly, slicing through the silence. We heard her start crying. It sounded like Dad was crying too, which made us very worried because Mom almost never cried and our dad never cried because dads aren’t supposed to.

“Turn on the TV,” Momo said. We heard it switch on.

Aunt Sadie pulled a string of pretty beads with a cross dangling from the end out of her pocket. She was gripping the beads between her fingers one by one and whispering something to herself. I wondered why she wasn’t wearing them around her neck.

Pam looked at me with worry. “Suzie, I’m scared,” she said.

“Maybe it’s a *precaution*,” I said with my thumb still in my mouth, so it sounded like *precaution*. It seemed like the right thing to say.

Pam and I left Paul sleeping on the couch. Paul hated loud noises. He always cried when we went to see fireworks, and he even made Mom miss a ferry ride on the *Mini Ha-Ha* because he had a fit when the loud ferry horn blew. But he wasn’t waking up from the noise of the siren, and I was relieved because I didn’t think I could take Mom *and* Dad crying and Paul screaming his head off at the same time.

We stopped in the doorway. Mom and Dad were hugging each other. Aunt Sadie put her necklace with the cross back into her pocket and rubbed Mom’s back. When the commercial ended on the TV, everyone watched and listened in silence.

An old man with hair parted in the middle and greased down to his head was talking. He had a mustache that started out fat in the middle but got really skinny and pointy at the ends. He was talking about helicopters and boats and rescues.

The TV then showed people climbing out of the windows of their homes into boats and being rescued from rooftops in helicopters. No one said anything. The man came back on and said something about the Pocono Downs Racetrack being converted into an evacuation center.

“Who is that man?” Pam asked from the doorway.

“That’s Dan Flood. He’s a congressman,” Momo told us.

“He works with President Nixon and is going to help get everyone to safety,” Aunt Sadie added.

Mom turned to look at us. “Girls, go play upstairs.”

What was *that* supposed to mean? There was nothing upstairs to play *with*.

“I’m scared,” Pam said to the grown-ups this time.

I was too busy wondering why this Dan guy put all that grease in his hair, because it made it look dirty and like he needed a shampoo.

“Nothing to worry about, Pamela. We’re safe up here, and everything is going to be fine,” Dad said.

When Dad said everything was going to be fine, it usually was.

Later that day, it was still raining hard outside. When Paul woke up from his nap, Mom told us to *play with your brother*, so Pam and I took him upstairs and tried to play with the only two toys we had. Mom and Dad took Momo over to Uncle Ray’s house across the driveway after telling Aunt Sadie that she didn’t want the news on the television in the kitchen or *anywhere else for that matter*, unless it was over at Uncle Ray’s house. Aunt Sadie came upstairs and started folding laundry in the room next to where we were playing.

Pam and I couldn’t convince Paul to play upstairs with the toys we brought, and he started screaming again. We asked Mom if we could play hide-and-seek because the suggestion made Paul shut up and it was a good indoor game. Mom said *yes we could* and to *not be too loud*, so we made Paul be *it* because we could boss him

around like that. He only knew how to count up to twenty, so we told him to do that three times and then yell *Ready or not, here I come* so we would know when he was starting to look for us. I always liked when Paul was *it* because he wasn't very good at the game, and I got to hide for a lot longer than when Pam was *it*. I was *great* at hiding because I was small and skinny and I could squeeze myself into tight spaces like inside the front-loading dryer and under cabinets.

I ran into the kitchen, which was empty at the moment. This was unusual because there were almost always a few people like Aunt Sadie, her sister Mary, and her brother Johnny in there wearing aprons and preparing food for the big dinner or sitting at the big kitchen table playing a game of cards.

The table was covered in a cloth that wasn't fabric but didn't feel exactly like plastic. It had a floral pattern on it and was a little textured but smooth and shiny enough that you could wipe it with a wet cloth. The underside of the tablecloth was like felt. When I sat at Aunt Sadie's table and ran my fingers across the felt, I determined that I could suck my thumb and use the underside of the tablecloth to run my fingers across in a pinch.

I climbed under the table but quickly determined that it wasn't a good hiding place because the tablecloth didn't go all the way down to the floor. I crawled out from under the table and located a cabinet that had enough room for me to crawl into and close the door. I felt a giddy thrill as I congratulated myself on finding such a fantastic hiding space, thinking, *He'll never find me here!*

I heard Paul's dull footsteps as he ran around upstairs and worked his way from room to room, looking for us. A minute or two later, I heard Mom and Dad and Uncle Ray come into the kitchen and sit down at the table. I breathed a sigh of relief that I hadn't used it as my hiding space!

"I'm going down," Dad said.

"Bobby," Mom replied, as if to warn him that his idea was definitely a bad one.

"Peggy, it's OK. I just want to take a look at the house if I can. I'll walk along the dike."

“What if you can’t get through?” Then she added, “I don’t like it. Stay here until we know more.”

“I can’t just sit over there, watching the place get buried under water on the news. I’ll go crazy.”

It was quiet for a while. I thought maybe they had left the kitchen, but then I heard Mom softly crying. I had never seen or heard her cry, and now she was crying a lot in just this one day.

“Please don’t do anything stupid,” Mom pleaded.

“I won’t. I’m just going to take a look,” Dad said. He paused for a moment, then said, “I just have to see for myself what I’m up against.”

Mom cried a little harder. Then I figured that Dad gave her a hug, which I almost never saw with my own eyes either. But when she said, “I’m so scared,” through her sobs, her voice was muffled as if she were tucking her face into Dad’s neck. I couldn’t really picture Mom hugging anyone, because she wasn’t like Aunt Sadie, who hugged and kissed everyone and called everyone *Ya Habibi*. I wasn’t sure what *Ya Habibi* meant exactly, but I knew it meant something good because Aunt Sadie always kissed us on the face after she said it. I thought maybe Mom just had her face in her own hands. I put my thumb in my mouth and regretted my decision to move from under the table. I vibrated my tongue, wondering why Mom was crying about some water in our basement.

After Dad left, Mom went back to join Momo at Uncle Ray’s house. Pam, Paul, and I finished our game of hide-and-seek and tried to think of another game to play. Aunt Sadie and lots of other Lebanese grown-ups, who we also called aunt and uncle, all put aprons on and started working in the kitchen. They didn’t seem all that worried about the river water. They had turned on the TV in the kitchen, but the volume was turned all the way down. Dan Flood was still talking away on the screen. They also showed more people in boats and streets filled with water and whole neighborhoods that, from above, looked like big lakes with lots of houses that looked more like thousands of little islands.

I thought about how close our Birch Street house was to the dike and the river. I wondered if our house looked like a little island in a big lake too. I wondered the same about Lowri’s house and Patrick Koons’s house and the Bedwicks’ house and the *modern monstrosity* next door.

When we sat down for dinner, there was hardly any room in the kitchen because the big table with the plastic tablecloth was full of so many people from Aunt Sadie and Uncle Ray's family and now Mom and Momo and us kids. For dinner, we had a giant platter of spaghetti and meatballs, and for dessert, Aunt Sadie had made a big sticky sweet tray of baklava that Pam never ate because she didn't like walnuts, so there was more for me. Usually, I ate as many pieces of the sticky sweet baklava as I could until the taste of sweet had coated my mouth and hurt my throat and I felt a little bit sick. I always wished I could restrain myself like Pam did with things like candy and ice cream, but I never could, which made me feel like a greedy little pig.

Dinner at Aunt Sadie's was always so wonderful. I felt happy in my heart, like I was a part of this family, because even though they weren't *real* family, they treated us like they were. We didn't have a lot of *real* aunts and uncles and cousins who lived nearby and came over for dinner every night. We did get to visit Nana and Momo, but they lived alone, and their houses were so quiet, you could hear the clock ticking.

There were never *so many people* that you could barely follow conversations like at Aunt Sadie's house. There weren't lots of grown-ups wearing aprons and always cooking or playing cards or chiming *Ya Habibi* and kissing and hugging us all the time like at Aunt Sadie's.

And we never saw our other grandmother, who was named Gertrude and was Dad's mom, because we never went to visit her at her house. Mom said Grandma Gertrude and Dad had gotten into a *disagreement* and hadn't talked to each other in a couple of years.

But now that we were living at Aunt Sadie's, I felt like a part of this gigantic Lebanese family and community up *on the hill*. I had never felt so safe and loved, and sometimes I forgot about what was happening down the hill until I saw Dan Flood, a.k.a. *Dapper Dan*, as I heard the adults call him, on the TV.

Dad hadn't returned when we sat down for dinner, which seemed to worry Mom because even though she was talking with Aunt Sadie and the rest of the Bedwicks, she wasn't smiling and kept looking toward the door as if expecting Dad to walk in any moment, which he didn't.

Finally, when dessert was served and I started to sink my teeth through a piece of baklava, made thick with dozens and dozens of

layers of phyllo dough, honey, and walnuts, Dad walked through the back door. His face looked like it was too heavy for his skull. It sagged down as if it would fall right off if it weren't attached to the rest of his head. The kitchen instantly went quiet. Mom stared at Dad. It was as if no one knew what to say or do.

Finally, Aunt Sadie, still wearing her apron with the necklace in the pocket, quickly got up and fixed Dad a plate. "Sit down, Bobby. Eat. You must be hungry," she encouraged.

Dad sat down and let out a giant sigh. He picked up a fork and began to push some pasta around on his plate. He poked at a meatball.

We always got scolded for playing with our food, but no one seemed to mind when Dad did it.

"Did you see the house?" Mom finally asked.

Dad was quiet as he looked over at me and Pam.

"Did you?" Pam asked.

Dad seemed to think about what to say and how to say it. "I drove down as far as I could, then walked about two miles down the railroad tracks on the dike right to our house, so I got a good look."

I wanted to tell Dad he shouldn't walk on the railroad tracks because he could get his leg or arm cut off. I made a mental note to bring this up later.

"Did we get water in the basement?" I asked.

"A bit," he said. He looked at my mother with a grave expression and held her gaze, which wasn't something we saw him do very often.

"Did you see the shop?" Mom asked.

"I couldn't get there," Dad said.

It was quiet again for what seemed like a long time. Finally, Paul broke the silence by demanding another meatball.

"Say *please*," Pam told him.

"Please!" Paul demanded. His eyebrows furrowed, and his mouth made a grimace.

Mom looked to be lost in thought. She had a blank expression on her face and said, "I put a lasagna in the basement fridge."

For a moment, the room felt like it shrank, and I felt like I was in that kitchen cabinet again. I stared right at Mom, who kept staring off into space. Her trance was broken by a gleeful announcement from Aunt Sadie. "Oh! We make the *best* lasagna!"

She stood up, wiped her hands on her apron, and began clearing plates as she smiled and said, "We'll make it for dinner tomorrow!"

The room opened up again. Mom forced a smile; then everyone started talking about how *much influence* Congressman Dan Flood had in Washington and how President Nixon was going to visit the valley any day now.

*Thank God for Dapper Dan*, they all said.

That night, Mom and Dad went next door to Uncle Ray's to watch the news. Mom and Dad didn't want us to see the news because they didn't want to upset us, so the TV in Aunt Sadie's kitchen was kept mostly off, except when *Marcus Welby* came on because it was Aunt Sadie's favorite show and one of the only times we saw her take her apron off and sit down.

When it was bedtime, the three of us were told we would sleep in Aunt Sadie's son's room, which meant that he had to go stay at a friend's house. Me and Pam slept in the single bed, sardine style as usual, and Paul slept in a foldout cot that creaked with an *eek eek eek* as he rocked his head back and forth on his pillow to get himself to sleep.

Because of that rocking, all the hair on the back of Paul's head was tangled up like a *rat's nest*, which was what Mom called it. But there were more important things on Mom's and Dad's minds, which I knew on account of overhearing them from my hiding place earlier that day, and getting the tangles out of the back of Paul's head was not one of them.

As much as we loved Aunt Sadie, that first night we were nervous without our parents in the house with us.

"I can't sleep," Pam whispered, so as not to wake Paul, who had already rocked his head and put himself to sleep.

"Me neither," I whispered back.

"Let's play bicycle," she suggested.

Pam and I had come up with a strategy that we called *bicycle* for whenever we couldn't sleep. We put the soles of our feet together, the sole of her right foot on the sole of my left foot and vice versa. When our soles were connected, we started pushing and pulling them back and forth in a pumping motion. Her left foot pushed my right as my right knee bent up toward my nose. At the same time, my left foot

pushed her right, sending her right knee toward her nose. Back and forth and back and forth we moved until we felt so tired, we fell asleep, but not before I tucked my thumb into my mouth.