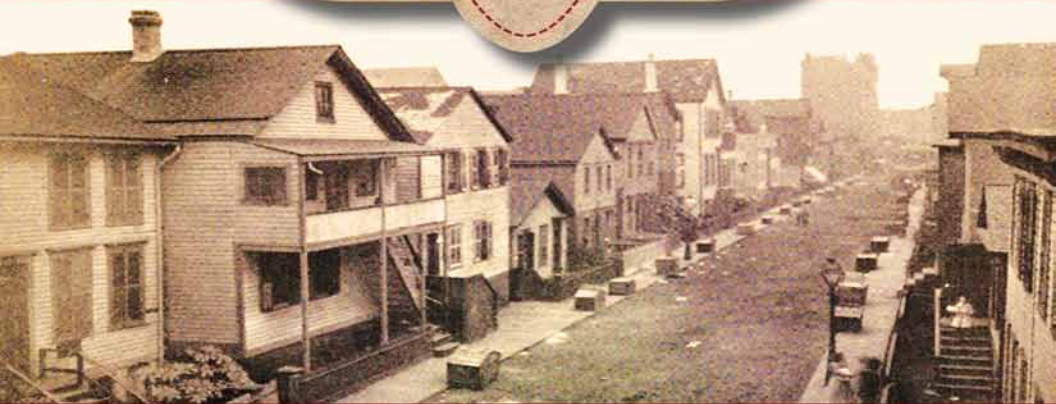




HER
MOTHER'S
SECRET



BARBARA GARLAND POLIKOFF

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PROLOGUE

When Sarah Goldman was first put into her mother's arms she weighed four pounds, was red and wrinkled, and had a thatch of black hair. Her young cousin Bluma, tiptoeing into the bedroom to see the newborn, rushed out screaming, "A devil baby! A devil baby!"

Sarah's mother, Rifke, never breathed a word to Sarah about Bluma's terror at seeing her infant cousin. Nor did her father, Jacob. It was Fanny, Sarah's older sister by two years, who let the secret out. Sarah was eight years old when she knocked over a bottle of ink, splattering black splotches all over Fanny's new blue dress. Fanny chased her out into the street screaming, "A devil baby, that's what you are! Just like Bluma said!"

Fanny, fair-haired and blue-eyed, was her mother's princess. And hazel-eyed Sammy with the blond curls, born when Sarah was ten years old, was her little prince. Sarah, thin and dusky, with straight black hair and dark brooding eyes, felt left out of her mother's circle of love. Fanny's scream, "devil baby," never ceased echoing in the secret chambers of her memory.

ONE

Winter 1892

Sarah Goldman blew a disgusted “Pee-yew!” as the stench from the city garbage box slapped her in the face. Chained to the sidewalk outside the Goldmans’ butcher shop, the overflowing box was a daily insult.

Fanny pinched her nose and they both bolted past the box and ran until they had out-distanced the stink.

Fanny’s eyes blazed. “Old Mendel dumped his horse’s plops in the box again. Papa should report him to the police!”

“Papa’s too softhearted.”

“Then Mama should do it.”

Sarah giggled.

“What’s so funny?” Fanny demanded.

“Mama? Complaining to the police about horse plops!” Sarah lifted her chin and looked down her nose. “Officer, I have come about the stink from the horse residue deposited illegally in our. . .” She erupted into giggles again.

Fanny frowned. “I don’t like you making fun of Mama.”

“As if you never do!”

The sunless January morning was cold. Not that the sun cheered up the neighborhood much, Sarah thought ruefully. All it did was show how dilapidated the dreary parade of houses really was and melt the snow, turning the dirt street to mud.

Her mind skipped to the buggy ride they had taken last spring to celebrate her mother’s thirty-ninth birthday. It was if they had entered a different world as they rolled down Astor Street. Stone

houses looking like small castles were bordered by grass as green and smooth as the velvet lining in her father's cello case. Wide stairways were flanked by urns of red and yellow tulips. Lilacs billowed behind iron grill gates.

Color! That was it. The rich had color.

And the poor have gray. Not even a pale weed pushed through the cracks in the plank sidewalks she walked every day. In my paintings, Sarah vowed, I will *never* use gray. Color. Only color.

Two blocks from school Fanny made her customary dash to catch up with her friends. The first time Fanny had sprinted ahead and left her behind, Sarah had been startled and hurt. It didn't take long to figure out that Fanny was ashamed of her dark, ugly sister and didn't want to be seen with her. Even after a year and a half, the abandonment still stung.

"Hi, Black-eyed Sarah," a voice called.

Charley Weinstein. He had been calling her that since Miss W. had them paint the vase of black-eyed Susans on her desk. She didn't quite admit to herself that she was pleased that Charley had noticed the color of her eyes. His were striking—light green with a ring of yellow circling the pupil, fringed with long, dark lashes. In the school bathroom she had overheard two girls giggle over Charley Weinstein's "bedroom eyes."

He caught up to her, matching her quick stride. Charley was the only one in class taller than she. Big boned and stocky, he had an easy smile and thick brown hair falling over his forehead.

"We're going to have a sub today. Miss W. broke her ankle."

"Bad," Sarah said. "If Miss W. can learn to walk with crutches, she'll be back next week."

Sarah imagined plump, pink-faced Miss W. trying to swing her round body between crutches. "We're going to be stuck with a sub for a while," she said ominously.

Once they reached the classroom, Sarah's dismal opinion of substitute teachers was confirmed. Mrs. Plusker was gaunt, with tightly waved gray hair and a balloon of pink rouge flying high

on each cheek. She watched coolly as the class took their seats, then wordlessly turned and wrote her name on the blackboard in large, square letters, MRS. PLUSKER. As she moved her hand up and down, the white handkerchief tucked beneath her watchband fluttered like a dying bird.

Expect the worst from this one, Sarah thought.

When Mrs. Plusker spoke, her voice was unexpectedly throaty. “I will be your teacher this week. I expect you to listen well. I do not repeat myself.” She paused. “We will start by writing an essay on the Chicago Fire of 1871, which I understand you have been studying, and its effects on the city’s inhabitants.” She glanced at her watch. “You have thirty minutes to write. Are there any questions?”

A hand shot up. Dominic Scala. “Can I write about someone who burned up in the fire?”

Mrs. Plusker’s frown failed to dampen Dominic’s enthusiasm.

“The Chicago fire really affected this person,” he added earnestly.

“Yeah,” Charley Weinstein blurted, “he’s never been the same since.”

Laughter exploded. Sarah knew without looking that Charley had an innocent expression on his face.

Mrs. Plusker rapped the desk with a ruler. “You are wasting precious minutes.”

Sifting through her mind for a subject to write about, Sarah recalled a photograph she had seen in a newspaper that had fallen out of her father’s hand as he dozed in his chair. An old, sad-faced woman, black babushka tied under her chin, was pulling a charred picture frame from a pile of rubble. Sarah had felt a dull ache in her chest. The woman reminded her of her grandmother, Dora, who had refused to join them on their flight from the shtetl to America. Who would keep the weeds from choking the marker on her husband’s grave? No amount of pleading could change her mind. Six months after they left, her house was burned to

the ground by the czar's drunken soldiers, and she went to live with her sister. Three weeks later, the sister wrote that Dora had collapsed carrying a bucket of water from the well and never regained consciousness. It was the first time Sarah had seen her father cry. He paced the living room like someone caged, raking his hand through his hair, reading the letter over and over.

Sarah began to write, imagining that the old woman pulling the charred frame from the rubble was her grandmother. The frame had held her wedding photograph.

Mrs. Plusker's voice startled her as she was writing the last sentence of her essay.

"Time is up. I'm asking for volunteers to read aloud."

Sarah shrank in her seat. Whenever she had to read aloud her heart raced, her brain clogged, and her voice stuck in her throat.

When Dominic the Undaunted raised his hand, her heart slowed to a trot. Isabelle Santi volunteered next. No surprise. Isabelle took elocution lessons and liked showing off her perfect enunciation. Mrs. Plusker complimented her on her delivery, then scanned the room. "There's time to read one more paper before we turn to art."

Unexpectedly, Stanley Arvey raised his hand. Safe! But along with relief came anger at herself for being such a stupid ninny. Next time I'll surprise everyone and volunteer, she vowed. But she knew she wouldn't.

Stanley finished to a spatter of applause. He grinned, bowed slightly, and sat down.

Next, art—which had been Sarah's favorite class until Mr. Bellmeyer left and Miss W. took over. Charley, already in an art class at Hull House, confirmed Sarah's feeling that Miss W. was a poor art teacher.

"She has no more imagination than a cow," he said.

Sarah had no lack of imagination. She imagined a cow on crutches and repressed a smile as Mrs. Plusker gave them their assignment.

“As a complement to your study of mammals in biology class you are to choose an animal and paint it in its native habitat. I will select the two best to send to Miss Warkowski.”

Animals. Native habitat. As if they'd all been to Africa. The only live animals she saw were horses, dogs, and cats. Forget the mice skittering around rubbish heaps. She loved to give Tillie, the pot-and-pan peddler's horse, a handful of hay. A tingle would run up her spine as its black, rubbery lips engulfed her hand. Tillie would stare at her and she would stare back, Tillie's dark, liquid eyes taking her to a nameless, far-off place.

Halsted Street was far from a horse's natural habitat, but she remembered the horses at her cousin's farm from their visit there last summer. The horses had stopped grazing and suddenly galloped across the field, their hooves pounding, manes flying. She could almost feel the wind as they passed by.

Time to take the leap. She sketched a galloping horse, concentrating so intently that her muscles stiffened and she had to sit back and relax before continuing. Getting the legs right was the hardest. She drew them and redrew them. The head looked fine. She liked the way the mane flew like a banner in the wind.

What color? She wanted to give that exciting feeling of wildness that she had felt as the horses pounded by. Brown? Gray?

No. Red! Racing against a clear blue sky.

She had painted the horse and was about to color the sky when she caught the scent of face powder as Mrs. Plusker bent over her, swept the painting off her desk, and held it up as if it were a soiled rag. Her thick voice was cold with contempt. “If any of you are as irresponsible as the painter of this absurd red horse, you'd better destroy your work and begin again.”

The sound of paper ripping. The two halves landed on her desk. Sarah sat motionless, hands heavy as lead in her lap. She felt the hot pinprick of everyone's eyes. Never, she vowed, will I paint in school again.

HER MOTHER'S SECRET

“Get a fresh sheet of paper,” Mrs. Plusker commanded. “I expect a suitable painting from you.”

Sarah didn't move as Mrs. Plusker returned to the front of the room. Charley turned and put a blank sheet on her desk.

When the recess bell rang Sarah put the still empty sheet back on the supply table and walked out of the room.