

"Told in two voices which Weissman weaves together like a double helix, this is a story of family ties, some of which are broken by war, some broken by choice, some broken by unanswered questions. But by the end, readers will see that love and faith—from strangers, from friends, and from long-gone ancestors—have the power to knit us together with strings that are so much stronger than genetics. **I loved this sweet refuge of a book.**"

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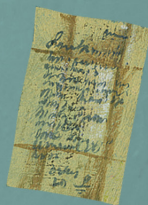
—Patricia Reilly Giff,

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"*The Length of a String* is a resounding continuum of connection and search for self. As universal as it is personal. **A must read.**"

—Rita Williams-Garcia,

Newbery Honor-winning author of *One Crazy Summer*



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CHAPTER 1

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You're invited!" Parker Applebaum dangled two postcards over the low shelves in the synagogue library. Even though I couldn't see her from my spot on the floor with Madeline, I knew it was Parker because there was a giant photo of her face taking up half the postcard. Madeline and I looked at each other and suppressed giggles. The picture looked like it was meant for a department store ad. Parker's long red hair was blowing in the wind, and her mouth was open in a hearty grin, like the photographer—no doubt a professional one—had caught her mid-laugh.

Madeline squinted at the postcard. "Where are her braces?"

Parker's actual face appeared over the bookshelf.

“Photoshopped out,” she explained. “This photographer’s amazing. He doesn’t usually do bat mitzvahs, but he’s willing to do mine because we used him for my modeling portfolio. Let me know if you want his number. I can probably get you guys in too. *And,*” Parker sang, her lips curling up, “guess who else is invited.” She cocked her head in the direction of the tables in the center of the library.

“The whole class?” Madeline deadpanned.

The corners of Parker’s lips dropped. “I was talking to Imani,” she said. She smiled at me and did a double-raise of her eyebrows. “I’m inviting Ethan Bloom.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to sound casual. Ethan and I are both on our school tennis team, and ever since Parker heard him compliment my backhand a couple weeks ago, she’s been convinced that he likes me. I’m not as convinced. It’s not like he complimented my serve (which stinks). Everyone compliments my backhand, because it’s killer.

“I’m going to sit you and Ethan at the same table,” Parker said with some more eyebrow wiggling.

Mrs. Coleman’s face appeared above Parker’s. “Girls,” she said. “Back to your projects, please.”

Parker smiled and handed Mrs. Coleman a postcard. “You’re invited, Mrs. Coleman.”

“December sixth,” our teacher said without need-

ing to look. “Will you have your haftorah ready by then? How about the research project you’re supposed to be working on as we speak?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Parker rolled her eyes and reminded us, “December sixth,” before walking away.

Madeline and I went back to our Holocaust books. As if we didn’t have to do enough to prepare for our bat mitzvahs (write a speech, know all the prayers, read nine lines of Torah, *sing* a long haftorah portion . . .), we each had to research some aspect of the Holocaust. Like we hadn’t heard enough about the Holocaust every year of our lives. I’m usually pretty good about doing classwork, even for Hebrew school, but this assignment was seriously uninspiring. We couldn’t even use the internet to look stuff up the easy way; Mrs. Coleman was making us use actual books, which was why our Hebrew school class had permanently relocated from a classroom to the synagogue library.

Not wanting to think about Ethan or my Holocaust project, I waited till Mrs. Coleman was out of earshot and then poked Madeline with Parker’s postcard. “Are you going to have your photo on your invitations?” I whispered.

Madeline blew air through her lips, like a bike tire deflating. “I don’t think so. We’re not even going to do paper invites; wastes too many trees.”

Figures. Madeline's parents are green to the extreme.

"When are you going to tell your parents what you want for your present?" she asked.

I sighed and leaned back into the bookshelf. Instead of having a blowout party for my bat mitzvah (like Parker) or a tasteful luncheon (like Madeline), I'm going to get a big present. My parents said they'd get me whatever gift I want, within reason. I know exactly what I want, but so far I've only worked up the nerve to tell Madeline. I also told Madeline to make sure I don't chicken out of asking, and boy, was she keeping that promise.

"Imani." She poked my arm with her pointer finger. "Just tell them. They said you can have anything."

"Within reason," I reminded her.

"What could be more reasonable than wanting to know who you are?" Madeline flipped through the pages of the book she was holding. It was full of old pictures of white people, emaciated, with sunken cheeks and resigned eyes. "Remember when we used to look at that *Children of the World* book? The one with the people from all different countries?"

"Oh yeah," I said, as though just now remembering. "You used to hold it up next to me and try to see which country my ancestors might be from." This was always a one-way game, since there's nothing

mysterious about where Madeline gets her appearance. She looks exactly like her mom, only shorter.

“We thought that girl from Ghana could be your twin!” Madeline laughed, which made Mrs. Coleman appear again.

“Mayim. Emunah.” She said our Hebrew names like she was too tired to be stern, which made me feel worse than if she’d just yelled at us.

“Sorry,” I said.

We looked back at our books, but now my mind was with the *Children of the World*. That book was about how everyone’s the same on the inside, but I always liked it more for how different everyone looks on the outside. In my town, everyone looks pretty much the same, and it’s not like me. Nobody in my own family even looks like me. My mom is tall and sturdy, like she’s built to survive a Nordic winter. My dad is also tall, but angular and spindly, like he’d have to spend that Nordic winter huddled close to the fireplace (probably stocked with wood my mom had chopped). They both have fair skin, thick brown hair, and icy blue eyes.

My brother Jaime’s skin is a shade darker. His eyes are brown, and his hair is a shiny black. Not surprising, given that he’s adopted from Guatemala.

Then there’s me. I’m short and skinny. My arms and legs look like toothpicks no matter how much

tennis I play or how many bowls of tortellini I eat. (My records, by the way, are fifteen hours of tennis in one week and five bowls of tortellini in one sitting. I like tennis, but I'm obsessed with tortellini.) My complexion's a little darker than Jaime's, but my light brown eyes are flecked with green. My hair is soft and springy, with tight coils that extend up and out, challenging gravity. Parker says I look "exotic"—she's actually used that word, straight out of an ad for some honeymoon resort—and she's always lamenting that she doesn't. She says I'd get a ton of modeling jobs if I wanted them. Apparently, talent agents want people whose ethnicity "keeps you guessing."

I'm no stranger to guessing. I know I was born in Philadelphia, and I know my birth mother was black. The rest has been left to my imagination, and boy, has my imagination embraced the challenge. Long after Madeline outgrew *Children of the World*, I kept playing on my own, holding up pages next to my reflection in the mirror. Picture by picture, I'd compare the tone of my skin, the shape of my nose, lips, eyes. Is my father Irish or Italian? Am I a quarter Filipino? Part Indian or Latina or Arab? I never have an answer when people ask, "What are you?" I usually tell them I'm human, but sometimes I also add that I'm Jewish, just to make them more confused.

When Madeline and I were in third grade, and she said that Ghanaian girl looked like my twin, I started to wonder if I really might have a twin somewhere in the world. I imagined that my mother gave birth to twins, but she could only afford to keep one child, so she placed me for adoption. Unlikely, I know, and not the happiest story. But even if it were true—that I was a twin and my birth mother kept my sister but not me—I told myself I could handle it. I just wanted to know.

I still want to know.

That’s why, for my bat mitzvah gift, I want to find my family. My *first* family. My blood-and-guts, double-helix, you’re-as-stubborn-as-your-father family.

Does that sound reasonable?

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I nearly jumped. I glanced around to make sure Mrs. Coleman was out of sight, then I took it out. A text from Madeline, who was still, like, twenty inches away. I rolled my eyes at her, but she was pretending to be very interested in *Kristallnacht*. (Like, too interested. She was pointing at something in the book and nodding and saying “hmm.”)

I opened her text. *Tell your parents tonight.*

I sighed again. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked Madeline to make sure I do this. She wants to be an investigative reporter when she grows up—like one

of the people on NPR, this boring radio station her parents always have on in the car—and I was starting to wonder if she was in this for me, or if she was just hoping for her first big story: *From NPR News in Baltimore, I'm Madeline Winter with the latest on Imani's adoption story.*

I guess I could tell her to back off, but I *do* want to investigate this too. More than anything. I just wish I could do it in a way that won't hurt my parents beyond repair.

Another vibration. Another text from the reporter-in-training. *Play the bat mitzvah card. Adult in Judaism, etc. etc.*

This was a convincing point. When we turn thirteen and have our bat mitzvahs, we'll be considered adults in the Jewish religion. It doesn't get us much in the real world—I won't be able to see R-rated movies or buy a scratch-off lotto ticket or anything—but Mrs. Coleman and Rabbi Seider like to remind us that it does mean something symbolically. The symbolism seems extra applicable to me, since the odds that I'm genetically Jewish are probably, like, zero. Madeline thinks I should milk that symbolism for all it's worth. I'm the only black girl in Hebrew school, gamely researching a heritage that has no biological connection to me. The least my parents can do is let me research my real history too, right? If I'm considered

an adult in Judaism, I should be old enough to deal with whatever I discover.

Ok, I texted back. *I will.* I was feeling strong and sure. I was really going to do it. That night.

I watched Madeline's eyes move down to the phone hidden in her book. Then she looked up at me and nodded, her freckled face lit up with satisfaction. "Just don't run away and live with your biological family, wherever they are, okay?" she whispered.

"No way," I said. I held up Parker's invitation. "Then I'd miss the event of the century."

Madeline shook her head. I thought she might bring up Ethan, who I could see cleaning his glasses with the bottom of his T-shirt, but instead she said, "I can't believe her braces are Photoshopped out."

"Parker always looks good in pictures," I said, "even without Photoshop. How come I always look like I'm about to sneeze?"

"You look great in pictures," Madeline insisted. "I'm the one who always has, like, one eye half blinking and the other looking at the wrong camera."

She made a face, trying to demonstrate, and I let out a laugh so loud, the entire class—including Ethan—looked our way. Mrs. Coleman did not look happy. Luckily, the bell rang at that exact moment, and Madeline and I bolted before we could get in trouble. We ran, laughing and puffing, out the side

door of the temple and to the corner, where we had to wait for our younger brothers so we could all walk home together.

“Let me know what your parents say,” Madeline said, catching her breath.

“I will,” I promised. “Tonight.”