I wanted a son. Most women I know want a daughter. But I didn’t. I wanted a son. Male body and all. And I had you.

I see myself in you so completely. I know you have your father’s baby fine blond hair and your father’s lanky body, the kind of body stretching toward heaven that El Greco liked to paint. That makes people who don’t know any better think you’re a replica of your father. But you have my eyes, my lips, and my hands. Our thumbs match exactly; they have since you were born. You came out of my body. I tell you that a lot. And your body remembers my body. When you come into our bed in the morning, you reach for me, you put your hand in mine, thumb to thumb.

One day, as if you’ve had a taste of the apple, you gain the knowledge that you can strip the grass skirt and bathing suit off your Hawaiian Barbie, the only female doll you have amid an overpopulation of muscle-heavy male action figures. Look, you say, pointing to the breasts. Look, you say, pointing again, a vagina. And you take that naked Barbie into the bath with you. I watch you pulling her around by her long dark hair. Be gentle, I say. For my sake,
okay? And you look at me with those eyes of yours that are so like mine, as if this is something you will remember. Without a word, you release her and let her float.

It is to you I am telling the family stories about the journeys that brought us here. How your great-grandparents left Russia and Poland and Turkey to find their America in Cuba and then how we left behind that promised land and went to New York and how that led to your Mami going to study in Connecticut and crossing paths with your Daddy, an exile from Texas, whose family remembers they came on the Mayflower by drinking milk with every meal. I want Spanish words to flow from your mouth like sugar from the cane, but you are not to forget that as Jews we have not stopped waiting.

This last Erev Yom Kippur, you sat on my lap, anger charging your heart. Your dignity had been offended and you declared that you wished one of your Ninja Turtle action figures would go poke the mean lady in the back row who had ordered you to stop playing your game. The room was crowded and there was not much for a little boy to do, so you slid down onto the floor and, with my jacket underneath your body like a motorized lily pad, you managed to travel under the seats for several rows, appearing between people’s legs like a frog just leapt from a pond. Most people welcomed your six-year-old boyishness, but not that sullen lady who wanted you to know it was a holy night, the beginning of a long twenty-four hours of fasting and remembering of sins.

As I hold you, stroking your back slowly to calm the fury from your body, which I love more than my own body, you suddenly ask me, What’s more important, the yarmulkas, the prayer shawls, or the books? I immediately say, the books. Because everything is written there. You shake your head, smile, and answer soberly, You know what I think is most important? The prayers. . . . In case the books get lost. . . .