

## IT'S THE SUMMER OF 1986,

and Molly just wants to spend the summer with her friends at camp. Instead, she heads to Israel to visit family she barely knows for an entire month! With a few words of Hebrew she picked up in Hebrew school, Molly wonders how she



will be able to communicate and have fun in a country that is new and totally strange to her. Little does she expect the **Big SURPRISES WAITING FOR HER.**

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# PICKLED WATERMELON

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# 1

“That’s not a word, Bubbe.”

“It is a word. Look it up,” my grandmother said, scowling the way she always does when I catch her trying to get away with something.

“That’s Yiddish, Bubbe. You know the rules: no names, no places, no Yiddish.”

Bubbe couldn’t stop herself from smiling. “Who says you always have to follow the rules?” she teased. “Anyway, enough already. You win. And your mother will be here soon.”

“We’re tied.” I rolled the wooden letters off the board and into the Scrabble box and then pushed the pieces around with my finger. “I guess we’ll play our next match when I get back.”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t we?”

I knew my grandmother was looking at me,

waiting for me to answer, but I stared at the tiles instead.

“For such a big trip, Molly, you don’t seem so excited.” Bubbe put the cover on the box and stood up. She walked into the kitchen and brought back a plate of cookies, the *rogelach* we’d baked the day before. The apartment still smelled of cinnamon and melted butter. She handed one to me.

“Tell me, what’s the big problem? You’ll visit Israel for one month, spend time with the family, go to the wedding, and then you’ll be back so soon.”

It sounded simple when Bubbe said it, but to me, it was impossible to imagine. A whole month in a foreign country with people I didn’t know, people who spoke a different language. This wasn’t how I’d expected to spend the summer of 1986. Not at all.

I bit small pieces of cookie, making the dough chip off in layers in my mouth. “It’s not a *problem*, really,” I answered, wishing I could tell Bubbe how I felt. But I wasn’t saying anything to anyone, especially not my parents. I knew they’d just think I was being melodramatic. But I was used to spending summer at camp with my friends, especially my best friend Jenny.

“Well, I know that if *I* was going to fly far away and meet people I had never seen before, I might be a little nervous,” Bubbe said as she swept up cookie crumbs with her palm. “But you’ll enjoy yourself once you get there. Your grandparents have waited a long time to meet you and your brother. All the other relatives too. I can’t imagine what it would be like not to know you. It will be exciting for all of you.”

“But Bubbe, they don’t speak any English.”

At Hebrew school I’d only learned to recite a few words of Hebrew. I remembered a few basics like mother and father—*ima* and *abba*; food—*ochel*; and bathroom—*beit shimush*. My class had certainly heard *sheket bevakasha*—quiet, please!—often enough. But that vocabulary wasn’t going to get me far if I wanted to talk to my relatives.

Back when we were really little, my mother taught Ben and me to call our grandparents *Savta* and *Saba*, Hebrew for “grandmother” and “grandfather.” I spoke on the phone to my grandparents a couple of times a year, reciting lines my mother taught me: “*Yom Huledet Sameach, Savta*,” on Savta’s birthday, “*Shana Tova, Saba*,” on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. They would respond somehow, and then

Mom would take back the phone. I couldn't imagine spending a whole month like that.

"I didn't always speak English, you know," Bubbe told me now. "It will be okay. You will get to know them and then you will come back here and describe everyone in such detail that I will feel like I have been there myself." Bubbe smiled, and I tried to smile back. It's hard not to smile back at Bubbe.

"Mom's told us a little about them, and I've seen pictures . . ." But in my mind, all those relatives were just that, photographs, flat and unfamiliar.

"I met your grandparents once, years ago, when I went to Israel for your parents' wedding. Your grandmother knew how to make me laugh. Your grandfather was shy, like you."

"Are they anything like you?" I asked.

"In some ways, maybe. We come from the same beginning, all the way back to Romania, but with different countries and so many years we are probably very, very different. Anyway, what do you need with more than one of me?" Bubbe laughed and put her hand on my cheek, and I leaned my head into her palm.

The doorbell rang. Bubbe put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. "I know you love writing

in your journal and making up stories. Think of this as a chance to find new stories for yourself. Try to enjoy it."

The doorbell rang again, more insistently this time. I suddenly wished I could press a magic button that would let me stay with this grandmother, in my own town, with my own friends, for as long as I wanted.

No such luck. "Okay, okay, we're coming!" Bubbe shouted. She went to the door and let my mother in.

My mother walked into the apartment out of breath, holding a suitcase I didn't recognize. "What a crazy day! We couldn't find Ben's suitcase, so I had to go out and get another one. Then Dad looked at the plane tickets and realized we weren't all sitting together. It took an hour to get that changed . . ."

Mom had been wrapped up in planning this trip for ages. It had been three years since she last visited her family. She and Dad had carefully planned and saved so that all four of us could go to Israel for my uncle's wedding. It had taken weeks to pack. Mom chose small gifts for each relative, worrying about who would like what the most. Ben and I listened to long lists of funny-sounding names belonging

to people who were apparently my cousins, aunts, and uncles. I knew I wouldn't be able to remember them—the names all sounded so different from our own. And through it all, I couldn't shake one major question:

*Who are these people?*

Is it possible to think of people you have never, ever met as your family? And how in the world was I supposed to get to know them when we couldn't speak each other's languages?

Mom sighed and grabbed a cookie. "I can't wait until we're there already."

I really wished I felt the same way.