Smoke plumed out of the skyscraper and little figures fell from the building. Millie rubbed her eyes and looked again, deciding it was pieces of the building dropping off, but when she squinted, it looked a lot like people.

She reclined in her Lazy-boy and the tips of her slippered feet touched the dusty screen. It reminded her of *The Towering Inferno*, a film that had given her more than one nightmare over the years. Since Millie had the power to mute the noise and stop the images, she did so. The world, from inside her bedroom, was still in her hands.

On her night table were four plastic cups of prune puree, the colour of muddy water. She was late taking her medications and found it more difficult to keep up with the nurses’ demands. Millie swallowed the six pills with some orange juice, but couldn’t make herself eat the puree.

The smoke that came out of that tall building on the TV must have been a cataract clouding her vision. She would ask the nurse to make an appointment with the eye doctor, the handsome one. What was the point in having good eyesight unless there was something pleasant to look at? All morning the image stayed in her mind: little slivers falling off the building and onto the pavement. Would the people below have time to escape? It must have been a remake of that horrible film and she wondered why the Hollywood studios didn’t come up with new ideas. That Jewish director – what was his name? – had rejected her life story for one of his films. Imagine, it had cost her five dollars to send the manuscript and all she got back was a form letter. The worst part was that he went ahead and made her story without her and the film won an Academy Award. He stole her ideas without paying for them, or giving her credit. She could have given him advice on how to dramatize the scene in the work camp and the escape through underground tunnels, if he had only answered her phone calls. Since receiving his letter, she refused to watch any films on TV and warned her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren to do the same.

Millie opened her faux wood dresser drawer and pulled out a cookie tin, camouflaged under her underwear. Inside, was a handkerchief tied up with ribbon from which she removed an amber necklace – the stone cool and as large as her palm. When she held the jewel up to the window, she saw the cloudy, green amber with bits of fossilized nature sealed inside. She slipped the necklace into her pocket, put the tin back and slammed the drawer shut. Her hands shook as she smoothed the bedspread on either side of her and pursed her mouth at thoughts that flashed like electric currents through her brain.

Millie’s stomach growled. The clock read 11:35, which was nearly time for lunch so she decided to stroll down to the foyer and say hello to her friends, the parakeets. In the hall, she met up with Yvette, who had refused to wash her hair for a week and the nurses
who tried to get her out of her wheelchair and into the bath would get a bite or kick. When Millie sneezed, it nearly knocked her to the floor. “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!” Millie sang, pulling bits of fluff out of her friend’s hair. Yvette held a necklace Millie had given her the day before.

“I’ve never had anything so shiny,” she said, looking up at Millie with radiant eyes and an appreciation that Millie hadn’t seen since her husband abandoned the world. Millie pushed Yvette’s wheelchair to the elevator.

“Speed up,” Yvette commanded.

“I am.”

“Not fast enough.” They just missed running over the new nurse’s toes. “Better luck next time,” Yvette said.

“Good morning ladies,” said the nurse.

“Good afternoon,” said Millie.

“Why are you in such a rush?” The nurse leaned down to Yvette. “Lunch isn’t on yet.”

“You must be the new one,” Yvette said.

“I started on Monday. I’m Jemmy.”

“Jenny,” Millie repeated.

“Jemmy, with two ‘m’s. It’s Filipino.”

“Let me ask you this Jemmy: what day is it today?” The nurse hesitated. “Thursday.”

“That’s right, and Thursday is a special day at Riverbanks.”

“What’s special about it?” Jemmy smiled. Millie and Yvette looked at each other and Jemmy crossed her arms over her starched uniform. “Well?”

“Thursday is Jell-O day,” Yvette announced. “And Jell-O day is sacred around here.” The dining room, decorated in shades of brown and orange, seemed unchanged since the ‘70’s. Back then, some of those now at Riverbanks were out in the world, protesting the Vietnam War or converting to vegetarianism. Others were housewives and competed in baking competitions, and cooked hams and turkeys for family dinners, passing down favourite recipes from grandmother to mother, daughter, nieces, aunts and cousins.

Now where were they?

Eating unrecognizable slop out of plastic bowls. The food at Riverbanks came in shades of grey, white, or brown. Mystery meat swam in grey gravy. White potato salad was bathed in mayonnaise. Vegetables were cooked until they fell apart. They were served a variety of soft foods that slid easily down the throat.

Millie sat at a table with Yvette, Herman and Dorothy and when Jemmy strode over, she covered her sandwich with the palm of her hand.

“You’d better finish your lunch or you won’t get you-know-what, Mrs. Borkowski.”

“That’s a threat,” Yvette murmured, pushing chunks of banana and canned mandarins around her plate. A fruit plate was the alternative meal choice. Millie’s hands shook as she picked up her sandwich. Blanched iceberg lettuce wilted out the side and the egg filling was the same colour as the bread.

“They only make Jell-O once a week,” Yvette said.

“I know. You don’t need to tell me.”

The sandwich disintegrated in Millie’s fingers. “Here, use your knife and fork if it’s not cooperating,” Jemmy said. Herman laughed which made him choke. The nurse fed him water and kept watch over Millie, who’d encircled her plate of mushy egg sandwich with her arms, like
a fortification.

Dorothy and Herman ate their sandwiches with knives and forks. “When you finish yours, will you help me out?” she asked Herman. Herman chomped down on his fork, dentures hitting metal. “Anything for you, lovely,” he said, pushing his teeth back into his mouth. Dorothy poked Herman with a bony finger and glared at Millie.

The moment everyone was waiting for came, and bowls of Jell-O were set down so hard they jiggled like cellulite. Dorothy stuck her finger into the centre of her bowl to break up the plastic surface. Millie stabbed hers three times with a spoon and brought the bowl up to her lips to drink. Some of the gelatin bounced down her blouse and into her lap.

For a few moments, the world was in its rightful place. Men and women flirted, pursing stained lips. Jell-O, ah, and red at that, the colour of cherries and passion, blood and sex. It reminded Millie of sucking back oysters with her late husband at a beachside restaurant.

Yvette tried to collect their bowls in order to catch the bus boy’s attention. At that moment, Dorothy cried, “The ring. The ring on her finger. Look.” She lunged for Yvette’s hand. “That’s mine. That was for me. She stole it. She took it right off my hand, while I was sleeping. It was a gift.” Yvette tucked her hands up under her armpits and looked out the window. The residents watched Dorothy’s face turn pink, red, and then deep mauve. The nurses gathered around to fan sooth her, but Dorothy was on a rampage. “My diamond, that’s my diamond. Tell her to give it back. She, she’s a thief, she went into my, she broke into my room.”

The accused Yvette kept her eyes lowered because although she hadn’t stolen it, it was given to her with a promise not to tell. A nurse called the front desk for medication and everyone turned to watch the drama as Dorothy hyperventilated, slipped out of the nurse’s grasp and passed out on the floor. Millie watched the handsome male nurse, who looked like a movie star from California, bend over her. His silky blonde hair covered his face but she could imagine his full mouth planted on her own to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

“Ungrateful wretch. Look at her, getting kisses from the nurse,” she told Yvette. “When she acts like a child, she should be scolded, not rewarded.” Her stomach soured, the effects of Jell-O curdling with coffee, and she escaped the dining room frenzy.

The walls of the lounge were floral: pansies and roses intertwined on a gable, and yellow lamps dangled from the ceiling. Three people huddled together on an orangey-brown sofa: Marty, a former mathematics professor, then Ivan, and his girlfriend Nancy. They sat side-by-side, staring ahead like birds on a wire. Marty mumbled and Ivan shifted closer to Nancy.

“What do you get in your pockets, Marty? Are you stealing cookies from the kitchen again?” Ivan squeezed Nancy’s hand and she squeezed back.

“Two times two is forty three.” Marty looked to Ivan for a response.

“No. No, that doesn’t seem right.” Ivan held his hands out and lifted two fingers on each Hand. “Count these.”

The mathematician looked at Ivan’s fingers, grunted and peeled himself off the plastic couch.

“Marty, wait, come back and I’ll show you,” Ivan shouted, but Marty was gone. “What can you do but help the man?” he told his girlfriend. “He’s lacking in basic arithmetic.” Ivan wiped spittle from Nancy’s mouth with his handkerchief.
Marty lumbered over to the pool table. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and pulled out necklaces, earrings, pendants and broaches and set them down. The only nurse on duty was in the back room behind reception.

The glimmer of the jewels on the table against the green felt looked like tiny flowers dotting an alpine field. He spread them out and categorized them into groups by colour, size and worth. When he touched each piece, it was as if he offered a blessing.

“Three times three is twelve. Four times six is eighteen. Nine times nine is ten.”

His hands worked with speed, making light tracks between the piles of ambers and sapphires, diamonds and emeralds. In the green pile were little earrings, he could hardly pick up with his lumpy fingers. In the orange section were two amber necklaces and a broach and in the reds, four sets of ruby earrings. In the centre of his jewelry pie was a diamond solitaire in a white gold setting so breathtaking that he set it apart.

He marked down the categories in a notebook so he could work out the formulas later, but then two residents wandered up to the pool table.

“Woohoo, looky here,” one man said, tapping his cane on a leg of the pool table.

“Did you just return from the Klondike, Mister?” asked the other.

Marty turned his back on them. “You opening up a jewellery shop?” the man with the cane asked, reaching for the crown jewel. Marty slapped his hand away, and spun to face them, keeping his back to the table and his arms extended out to the sides. Because of his height and slightly crossed eyes, the two men backed away.

“Okay buddy, no problem, you got some special girlfriend to be giving her all that loot.”

“Maybe it was his wife’s?” They drifted away. “Oh yeah, or his mothers.”

Marty took a swatch of toilet paper from his pocket and tore off squares to wrap each jewel in. Between his nerves and thick fingers, he didn’t notice a ruby earring fall to the floor. When he was done, he moved briskly away from the pool table and tapped the fish tank on the way back to his room.

At seven that evening, Millie was force-fed a plastic cup full of pureed prunes.

“There’s nothing as close to heaven as being regular. You eat these up like a good girl and by tomorrow morning you’ll feel like a million dollars,” the nurse said. Millie winced as prune sauce squirted out of the side of her mouth. The nurse wiped her lips and showed Millie her lottery ticket for the three million jackpot.

“I could be back in the Philippines this time next week.”

“Take me with you?” Millie grabbed the nurse’s hand.

“If you pray for me to win and I win, I’ll take you.”

“It’s a deal.”

The first image on the evening news was the painting of Adele Bloch-Bauer I, by Gustav Klimt, which Pierre had named the golden woman. When Pierre took Millie on holiday to Vienna, they
strolled along arm in arm and he called her *my golden woman*.

The colours didn’t show up on TV like the original she’d seen in Vienna’s Belvedere Palace, but maybe that was her cataract. She remembered how overcome she was by Klimt’s woman in her swirling gold robe, with jewels glimmering at her neck, bracelets on her arm and such sorrow in her eyes.

“The painting will be returned to its rightful owner, the Altmann family,” the newscaster stated. Millie popped a cookie in her mouth and turned up the volume.

“The niece of the Bloch-Bauer family will reclaim this and three other paintings which were illegally seized by the Nazis in 1938.”

Millie nodded when the niece came on to speak about the history of the paintings. The Jewish Heritage Fund in New York worked to restore confiscated Jewish property to its rightful owners. Her own family had lost artwork belonging to her great-grandparents. Before the war, they owned a dry-goods store in Warsaw, and when forced to evacuate, they left almost everything behind, including the family’s silverware and two paintings of her great-grandmother. Millie’s mother put her family at risk just to seize her own jewelry and the Menorah.

Millie pulled open her drawer to remove the cloth packages of jewels wrapped in handkerchiefs. The amber was dull in the evening light, the silver earrings with four emerald stones tarnished. A ruby set in a gold heart attached to a thin gold chain with a broken clasp.

That night she dreamt of towers of teeth. A soldier ordered her to look for gold fillings and put them into burlap bags to be melted down. Every time she got to the last tooth, the soldier came in with a wheelbarrow and dumped more on the concrete floor in front of her.

Then a new vision: a pile of jewels glimmered under an interrogation lamp. The lamp swung over the gems and each time she started to count them, an SS officer danced her in a tango. She left him and escaped into a tunnel, wearing a miner’s lamp on her head. The sides of the earthen tunnel were inlaid with diamonds and she picked them out of the earth, cleaned them on her apron, and put them in her mouth.

Millie awoke, sucking at the air because she had been holding her breath. The blankets were on the floor and the window had blown open. Frigid air rushed in and chilled the soft powdered folds of her body. She lay awake for hours, tracking the shadows on the ceiling, and straining to recall the dream about jewels and work, about sorting and accounting. Her hands moved like sparrows over her breasts.

* 

In the morning, she awoke to someone knocking at her door. It was Jemmy, who hadn’t won the lottery. “Millie, how are you this morning?”

“Good, very good, I feel more energetic today.”

Jemmy looked at the now eight plastic cups of prune puree. “I’ll have to start force-feeding you.”

“Give me French fries.”

Jemmy helped her out of bed. “If you ate fries every day how would you keep your fine figure?”
“Listen,” Millie said. “Let’s make this work for both of us. You bring me a burger and fries and I’ll eat that muck.” The nurse pulled Millie’s nightgown off over her head and sponged her body with a steaming washcloth.

“Let’s get you dressed. What’s your colour today?”
Millie pulled a yellow skirt off a hanger and opened the drawer to take out some underwear. The jewels in the drawer fell to the side, and she looked up to see if Jemmy had seen, but the nurse was counting out her pills. Millie decided to take the jewels from the closet instead. She reached for a little box and handed it to the nurse.

“What’s this?” Jemmy asked.

“Jewellery. To go with my outfit. And a little something for you.”
Jemmy opened the box to find five amber necklaces. “Very pretty.”

“They were my mother’s and this is only part of it,” Millie told her. “There’s more.” She pointed to the TV but the nurse’s walkie-talkie went off.

“Oh, I have to get to Hazel’s room for a little emergency. Here, let’s pull up your stockings, zip up your skirt, and slip this over your head. There, you’re as good as gold.”
Jemmy left Millie with the open box of jewels in her hand.

“You forgot your necklace,” she called out, but Jemmy was already halfway down the hall. Millie closed the box and with trembling hands, slipped it between her sweaters on a shelf in the closet.

After lunch and before her nap, Millie went up to her room with the nurse.

“Just one more,” the nurse said, holding out the ninth daily pill Millie had to take for Parkinson’s, nausea, dizziness and an upset stomach. One pill seemed to combat the next so that a war waged in her fragile stomach. Every time the nurse held out her palm with a new pill, Millie hunched her shoulders higher and ground her bony bum into the chair.

“They’ll do your nails this afternoon,” the nurse offered. “Coral, like a seashell.”
Millie held out her fingers, “No more pink. It doesn’t suit me.” The nurse touched Millie’s hair, as if it were the downy feathers on a baby bird. “How about a new colour here?” she asked, looking at the russet shade, turning copper at the temples.

“To look like Lana Turner? That would suit me fine.”

The nurse took her time brushing Millie’s hair, and made Millie promise to go downstairs for bingo. After the nurse left, Millie took her winter coat from her closet and laid it on her bed. The woolen coat was still in good shape and had kept its caramel colour. From the dresser, she took out ten handkerchief packages, each one stuffed with the jewellery Millie had saved. They looked like birthday presents, all tied up with yellow ribbons. With a nail file, she opened a small hole along an existing tear in the lining of the coat and squeezed the jewel packages through it until each one dropped like an anchor to the bottom. She pushed more and more through, until she could see a bulge in the lining. When she tried to prise a second hole on the other side, her hands weren’t strong enough to poke through the material and she dropped the nail file, unwittingly kicking it under the bed.

She hadn’t thought to fill both sides evenly and now the coat was lopsided and difficult to lift. Millie sat down and tears ran from her eyes. The only empty handkerchief in the room fluttered in her hands. Holding it to her nose, she inhaled its cotton scent, and gradually her breath became regular. She couldn’t possibly take all the packages out again because her fingers wouldn’t fit
through the small hole. When she arrived, she’d have to cut open the lining to get to them out and then buy another coat. New York in the fall would require a warm coat.

Millie knew that if she didn’t leave soon, she’d miss her train, so she filled a bag with clothes: two undershirts, a flowered skirt for when she’d get that award, and her only white blouse. There was a stain on the chest but she could cover it with a broach and no one would be the wiser. But the bag was too heavy and she worried that the nurses would see her carrying it out. She unpacked and stuffed underwear in her pockets and socks in her purse. She would wear the skirt, and layer all of her clothes like Heidi of the hills, and that way she would be warmer on the train.

There was a knock at her door and she ignored it, but when the knocking continued, she opened it to the blonde male nurse. He pushed his long, silky hair away from his face. Millie stared into his light blue eyes, fringed with white eyelashes. “Won’t you come in, dear?” she said.

“How are you feeling, Millie?” His voice was all efficiency and politeness. “What a smart lad to remember my name.” He eyed the cups of prune puree on her bedside table. “I can’t keep up with you people,” she told him, shrugging.

The nurse smoothed out the covers on her bed, and held up the empty travel bag. “Are you going somewhere?” he asked, fluffing her pillow. Millie shook her head.

“If you would kindly help me get my coat on, I’m going to sit outside in the garden before bingo.” “But it’s starting now,” the nurse said. “You’ll miss it if we don’t go down.” He hung her coat back in the closet and patted her shoulders, so she followed the silky-haired man as he steered her out of her room.

“Lock the door,” she said in an exaggerated whisper and heard the lock click into place. She imagined winning the $10 jackpot in bingo, which she would save for the trip. Maybe then, she could sit in the dining car and have a hamburger.

After bingo, there was a tea break and they served chocolate chip cookies. Jemmy came over as she was pocketing a handful of them. “Millie, you look lovely. How are you feeling, dear?” Millie attempted a smile, which came out lopsided. The Filipino woman leaned over, “How are you feeling today?” she yelled in her ear.

“I’m not deaf. I’m just fine, thank you very much,” Millie said, pushing away with her walker, her pockets bulging with cookies.

The fish were swimming Olympic laps in their tank and the little black one was winning. Beside the tank, in their cage the two parakeets were having a domestic squabble, the blue one losing feathers. “It’s not worth fighting about, whatever it is,” she told them. She’d learned that in life. “You’ll forget about it tomorrow.”

While watching the frenetic activity in the cage, her eyes drooped. Millie had tried to convince her son that the nurses drugged the tea and coffee to keep them quiet, but he just assumed old people were always tired. She lowered herself onto the floral sofa beside Marty. Within seconds, gravity pulled on her eyelids and her head lolled over onto the mathematician’s shoulder. He looked down at her, expanded his chest and patted her head with his active fingers. He counted aloud the number of jewels he had categorized that day and was grateful to Millie for sharing them. She obviously trusted him. After awhile, he had to go to the bathroom, so he got another
His Golden Woman. Elena Kaufman

residents to take over the shouldering, but Millie awoke.

“Where are we? Have we arrived?” She looked around, bleary-eyed at the floral walls. She’d dreamt about the spinning lights and sounds of Manhattan. The Jewish Organization would have booked her a hotel room by now and someone would be waiting for her at the train station. Had they received her letter already? She’d found one in the drawer of her bedside table, unstamped and unsent.

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A full week passed before she remembered her plans. The weather had turned from dreary rain into crisp fall days – the leaves on the trees in the garden were yellow, orange and red. She joined the gardening club to dig up the annuals and plant hardy marigolds. The nurse who supervised them recommended they wear a coat and scarf.

When Millie rooted in the closet for her coat and couldn’t find it, her breath became uneven and raggedy. She remembered the last time she had seen it was when she filled it like a piggy bank with jewels. Her bony fingers flittered and grasped each item until she found it, at the back with her summer clothes, hanging like a dead weight. She pulled it out and struggled to get her arms through the holes.

It was heavy indeed, but worth more than its material. She felt in the lining for the bulge of jeweled packages, which had fallen to the bottom, hardly noticeable from the outside, but the weight reassured her.

Millie looked at herself in the mirror, her hair a new shade of Rita Hayworth auburn, and burnt sienna lipstick staining her bow lips: Sunset Boulevard style. She arranged a gauzy scarf over her hairdo and felt as if she had wafted out of a women’s magazine. In her purse, she had tucked the address written down from the TV, her acceptance speech for when they awarded her what she was owed, and the unmailed letter. If she posted it today, it would get there in time to make arrangements. They would be thrilled to see her. The office for Jewish restitution rights was on Fifth Avenue. The taxi driver would know how to find it.

She took a last look around her cramped room: at the replica posters of Klimt’s Adele Bloch-Bauer, at the miniature violet plant on her dresser, at the twelve cups of prune puree on her bedside table, and at the telephone, which reminded her to call her son.

“Hello mother, how are you?”

“I’m still alive, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Phillip was a banker and did something with other people’s money by putting it somewhere else to make them more money. It was a big change from the family business in Warsaw when the customer paid for the items in his hand – flour, sugar, nuts, and chocolate –with real money so the exchange was visible.

“Ma, I told you I can’t speak at work.”

“How are little Sophie and Sean? Are they happy being back at school?”

“Everyone is fine. Listen, mom.”

“Philip, will you bring me a hamburger?”

“Sure, sure. I’ll call you later, okay?”
“I might not be here.”
“What do you mean?” Her son broke away to speak sharply to someone. “Hold on
minute.” He had never spoken to her like that. Millie thought about putting the phone down but
he came back on the line. “What did you just say?” he asked.
“I just wanted to, wanted to say good-. I mean: hello.”
“Mother?”
“Oh, you know, I could be in the, in the toilet, or, or in the lounge.”
“What’s going on?” Her son’s voice had turned tight and impatient.
“Nothing, everything is just fine, say hello to the family. I haven’t seen them for so
long.”
“We’ll visit you soon,” he told her but Millie had already hung up.
She was sweating with the heavy coat on. When she turned around, she bumped into the side of
the bed. The phone rang so she turned the TV on with the volume up, and hurried out of the
room.

There were no nurses in sight when she hobbled to the front door. The only people in the lobby
were half-dozing in front of the TV. She thought about finding Yvette and Marty to say goodbye,
but the front doors of the residence automatically swung open and when a rush of chilly air
swept over her, she forgot. Millie stepped back into the warm lobby, looked at the unmanned
desk, and after a moment, plunged forward again. It was drizzling out and she stood, in her
heavy winter coat with her overflowing purse, and looked up and down the street. When a taxi
came along, the driver noticed her light hand waving from side to side.
“Where to, ma’am?”
“The station, please. The VIA Rail train station.”
“Nice day to travel, better inside than out.”
“Yes, it’s a good day for ducks.”
“Are you off to visit relatives?”
Millie held onto the door as he swerved around a corner. “Yes, that’s right,” she said with
delight. “Relatives. My daughter. She lives in Poland.”
“And you’re taking a train to get there?” The driver burst out laughing. “That’s a good
one.”
“I meant to say New York,” she told him.
He looked at her in the rearview mirror and abruptly stopped laughing. Millie looked away and
out the window. “Oh, I didn’t hear you properly, I’m sorry about that, ma’am.” He looked up
again, his eyes sober.
“And if you wouldn’t mind,” she said. “I would like you to look at the schedule when we
get there. My eyesight isn’t very good anymore, and I’m sure you can tell me which train I
should get on?”
“Absolutely. No problem at all, ma’am.” The driver nodded.
“I have a long trip ahead of me,” she said, pulling her coat closed around her.
Millie sat back and looked out the window, watching as the city sped by her at an alarming rate.