



## Middlesex



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Reliure: Broché

Extrait

### **The Silver Spoon**

I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974. Specialized readers may have come across me in Dr. Peter Luce's study, "Gender Identity in 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites," published in the *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology* in 1975. Or maybe you've seen my photograph in chapter sixteen of the now sadly outdated *Genetics and Heredity*. That's me on page 578, standing naked beside a height chart with a black box covering my eyes.

My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver's license (from the Federal Republic of Germany) records my first name simply as Cal. I'm a former field hockey goalie, longstanding member of the Save-the-Manatee Foundation, rare attendant at the Greek Orthodox liturgy, and, for most of my adult life, an employee of the U.S. State Department. Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other. I've been ridiculed by classmates, guinea-pigged by doctors, palpated by specialists, and researched by the March of Dimes. A redheaded girl from Grosse Pointe fell in love with me, not knowing what I was. (Her brother liked me, too.) An army tank led me into urban battle once; a swimming pool turned me into myth; I've left my body in order to occupy others -- and all this happened before I turned sixteen.

But now, at the age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on. After, decades of neglect, I find myself thinking about departed great-aunts and -uncles, long-lost grandfathers, unknown fifth cousins, or, in the case of an inbred family like mine, all those things in one. And so before it's too late I want to get it down for good: this roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time. Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and the olives dropped. Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. And sing how Providence, in the guise of a massacre, sent the gene flying again; how it blew like a seed across the sea to America, where it drifted through our industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother's own mid-western womb.

Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three months before I was born, in the aftermath of one of our elaborate Sunday dinners, my grandmother Desdemona Stephanides ordered my brother to get her silkworm box. Chapter Eleven had been heading toward the kitchen for a second helping of rice pudding when she blocked his way. At fifty-seven, with her short, squat figure and intimidating hairnet, my grandmother was perfectly designed for blocking people's paths. Behind her in the kitchen, the day's large female contingent had congregated, laughing and whispering. Intrigued, Chapter Eleven leaned sideways to see what was going on, but Desdemona reached out and firmly pinched his cheek. Having regained his attention, she sketched a rectangle in the air and pointed at the ceiling. Then, through her ill-fitting dentures, she said, "Go for *yia yia*, dolly *mou*."

Chapter Eleven knew what to do. He ran across the hall into the living room. On all fours he scrambled up the formal staircase to the second floor. He raced past the bedrooms along the upstairs corridor. At the far end was a nearly invisible door, wallpapered over like the entrance to a secret passageway. Chapter Eleven located the tiny doorknob level with his head and, using all his strength, pulled it open. Another set of stairs

lay behind it. For a long moment my brother stared hesitantly into the darkness above, before climbing, very slowly now, up to the attic where my grandparents lived.

In sneakers he passed beneath the twelve damply newspapered birdcages suspended from the rafters. With a brave face he immersed himself in the sour odor of the parakeets, and in my grandparents' own particular aroma, a mixture of mothballs and hashish. He negotiated his way past my grandfather's book-piled desk and his collection of rebetika records. Finally, bumping into the leather ottoman and the circular coffee table made of brass, he found my grandparents' bed and, under it, the silkworm box.

Carved from olivewood, a little bigger than a shoe box, it had a tin lid perforated by tiny airholes and inset with the icon of an unrecognizable saint. The saint's face had been rubbed off, but the fingers of his right hand were raised to bless a short, purple, terrifically self-confident-looking mulberry tree. After gazing awhile at this vivid botanical presence, Chapter Eleven pulled the box from under the bed and opened it. Inside were the two wedding crowns made from rope and, coiled like snakes, the two long braids of hair, each tied with a crumbling black ribbon. He poked one of the braids with his index finger. Just then a parakeet squawked, making my brother jump, and he closed the box, tucked it under his arm, and carried it downstairs to Desdemona.

She was still waiting in the doorway. Taking the silkworm box out of his hands, she turned back into the kitchen. At this point Chapter Eleven was granted a view of the room, where all the women now fell silent. They moved aside to let Desdemona pass and there, in the middle of the linoleum, was my mother. Tessie Stephanides was leaning back in a kitchen chair, pinned beneath the immense, drum-tight globe of her pregnant belly. She had a happy, helpless expression on her face, which was flushed and hot. Desdemona set the silkworm box on the kitchen table and, opened the lid. She reached under the wedding crowns and the hair braids to come up with something Chapter Eleven hadn't seen: a silver spoon. She tied a piece of string to the spoon's handle. Then, stooping forward, she dangled the spoon over my mother's swollen belly. And, by extension, over me.

Up until now Desdemona had had a perfect record: twenty-three correct guesses. She'd known that Tessie was going to be Tessie. She'd predicted the sex of my brother and of all the babies of her friends at church. The only children whose genders she hadn't divined were her own, because it was bad luck for a mother to plumb the mysteries of her own womb. Fearlessly, however, she plumbed my mother's. After some initial hesitation, the spoon swung north to south, which meant that I was going to be a boy.

Splay-legged in the chair, my mother tried to smile. She didn't want a boy. She had one already. In fact, she was so certain I was going to be a girl that she'd picked out only one name for me: Calliope. But when my grandmother shouted in Greek, "A boy!" the cry went around the room, and out into the hall, and across the hall into the living room where the men were arguing politics. And my mother, hearing it repeated so many times, began to believe it might be true.

As soon as the cry reached my father, however, he marched into the kitchen to tell his mother that, this time at least, her spoon was wrong. "And how you know so much?" Desdemona asked him. To which he replied what many Americans of his generation would have:

"It's science, Ma."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ever since they had decided to have another child -- the diner was doing well and Chapter Eleven was long

out of diapers -- Milton and Tessie had been in agreement that they wanted a daughter. Chapter Eleven had just turned five years old. He'd recently found a dead bird in the yard, bringing it into the house to show his mother. He liked shooting things, hammering things, smashing things, and wrestling with his father. In such a masculine household, Tessie had begun to feel like the odd woman out and saw herself in ten years' time imprisoned in a world of hubcaps and hernias. My mother pictured a daughter as a counterinsurgent: a fellow lover of lapdogs, a seconder of proposals to attend the Ice Capades. In the spring of 1959, when discussions of my fertilization got under way, my mother couldn't foresee that women would soon be burning their brassieres by the thousand. Hers were padded, stiff, fire-retardant. As much as Tessie loved her son, she knew there were certain things she'd be able to share only with a daughter.

On his morning drive to work, my father had been seeing visions of an irresistibly sweet, dark-eyed little girl. She sat on the seat beside him -- mostly during stoplights -- directing questions at his patient, all-knowing ear. "What do you call that thing, Daddy?" "That? That's the Cadillac seal." "What's the Cadillac seal?" "Well, a long time ago, there was a French explorer named Cadillac, and he was the one who discovered Detroit. And that seal was his family seal, from France." "What's France?" "France is a country in Europe." "What's Europe?" "It's a continent, which is like a great big piece of land, way, way bigger than a country. But Cadillacs don't come from Europe anymore, *kukla*. They come from right here in the good old U.S.A." The light turned green and he drove on. But my prototype lingered. She was there at the next light and the next. So pleasant was her company that my father, a man loaded with initiative, decided to see what he could do to turn his vision into reality.

Thus: for some time now, in the living room where the men discussed politics, they had also been discussing the velocity of sperm. Peter Tatakis, "Uncle Pete" as we called him, was a leading member of the debating society that formed every week on our black love seats. A lifelong bachelor, he had no family in America and so had become attached to ours. Every Sunday he arrived in his wine-dark Buick, a tall, prune-faced, sad-seeming man with an incongruously vital head of wavy hair. He was not interested in children. A proponent of the Great Books series -- which he... *Revue de presse* "Funny, sad, tragic, and beautifully rendered."

—*The Ottawa Citizen*

"A tenderly rendered and often hilariously bizarre saga."

—*The Edmonton Journal*

"This novel is longer, more populated, sadder, funnier, bigger in every way than its predecessor. What hasn't changed is what set its author apart in the first place: an empathy and curiosity that ranges across generations and gender, and a willingness to enter heavily mined areas -- especially with regard to sex -- where lesser writers fear to tread.... Eugenides has taken all the trials and joys of the traditional coming-of-age novel and in one fell swoop made them twice (three times?) as rich."

—*The Gazette* (Montreal)

"Delightful.... infectious... bold... The story is more about genetics than gender confusion, more family saga than freak show.... It's about the transatlantic journey of a single gene and how the vagaries of love and hate generations removed come to bear on an individual life."

—*The Globe and Mail*

"[Since **The Virgin Suicides**] we've been wanting a big fat novel that would consume us.... We have it now. I just finished reading it. Middlesex is in every way that big novel."

—*The Vancouver Sun*

"He has emerged as the great American writer that many of us suspected him of being."

—Jeff Turrentine, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Sweeps the reader along with easy grace and charm, concealing . . . the ache of earned wisdom beneath bushels of inventive storytelling"

—Adam Begley, *The New York Observer*

"A wonderfully rich, ambitious novel -- it deserves to be a huge success."

—Salman Rushdie, *New York Magazine*

"Here's your heads-up . . . Yes, it's that good . . . A novel of chance, family, sex, surgery, and America, it contains multitudes."

—Jonathan Miles, *Men's Journal*

"...an uproarious epic, at once funny and sad, about misplaced identities and family secrets.... Mr. Eugenides has a keen sociological eye for 20th-century American life.... But it's his emotional wisdom, his nuanced insight into his characters' inner lives, that lends this book its cumulative power."

—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"Jeffrey Eugenides's rollicking, gleefully inventive second novel, **Middlesex**, serves as a tribute to Nabokovian themes. It provides not only incest à la *Ada* and a **Lolita**-style road trip, but enough dense detail to keep fans of close reading manically busy."

—*The Washington Post*

"delightful... a big-hearted engine of a novel [with] epic-proportioned emotions and an intelligent, exuberant voice."

—Zsuzsi Gartner, *The Globe and Mail*

"The pay-off for the reader is huge. Eugenides has taken all the trials and joys of the traditional coming-of-age novel and made them twice (three times?) as rich."

—*The Montreal Gazette*

"Jeffrey Eugenides' expansive and radiantly generous second novel ... feels rich with treats, including some handsome writing.... One of the delights of **Middlesex** is how soundly it's constructed, with motifs and characters weaving through the novel's various episodes, pulling it tight. The book's length feels like its author's arms are stretching farther and farther to encompass more people, more life.... It is a colossal act of curiosity, of imagination and of love."

—*The New York Times Review of Books*

"Perhaps the most wonderful thing about the book is Eugenides' ability to feel his way into the girl, Callie, and the man, Cal. It's difficult to imagine any serious male writer of earlier eras so effortlessly transcending the stereotypes of gender. This is one determinedly literary novel that should also appeal to a large, general audience."

—*Publisher's Weekly*

"Jeffrey Eugenides is a big and big-hearted talent, and **Middlesex** is a weird, wonderful novel that will sweep you off your feet."

—Jonathan Franzen

"**Middlesex** vibrates with wit. . . . A virtuosic combination of elegy, sociohistorical study, and picaresque adventure: altogether irresistible."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Wildly imaginative and engrossing . . . [**Middlesex**] skillfully bends our notions of gender . . . with its affecting characterization of a brave and lonely soul and its vivid depiction of exactly what it means to be both male and female."

—*Booklist* Présentation de l'éditeur

Olsiewający sukces bestsellerowego autora "Przekleństw niewinności" - zdumiewająca opowieść o genie, który przechodzi przez trzy generacje grecko-amerykańskiej rodziny i rozkwita w ciele nastoletniej dziewczyny.

Obejmująca osiem dekad - i jedno niezwykle dojrzewanie - długo oczekiwana druga powieść Jeffreya Eugenidesa jest świetna, całkowicie wyjątkowa baśń o skrzyżowanych rodowodach, subtelnościach płci oraz głębokich, nieczystych ponagleniach pożądania. Barwne dzieje niezwyklej rodziny, a w tle m.in. Upadające imperium tureckie, Detroit za czasów prohibicji, okres świetności Samochodowego Miasta oraz bunt na tle rasowym w roku 1967.

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