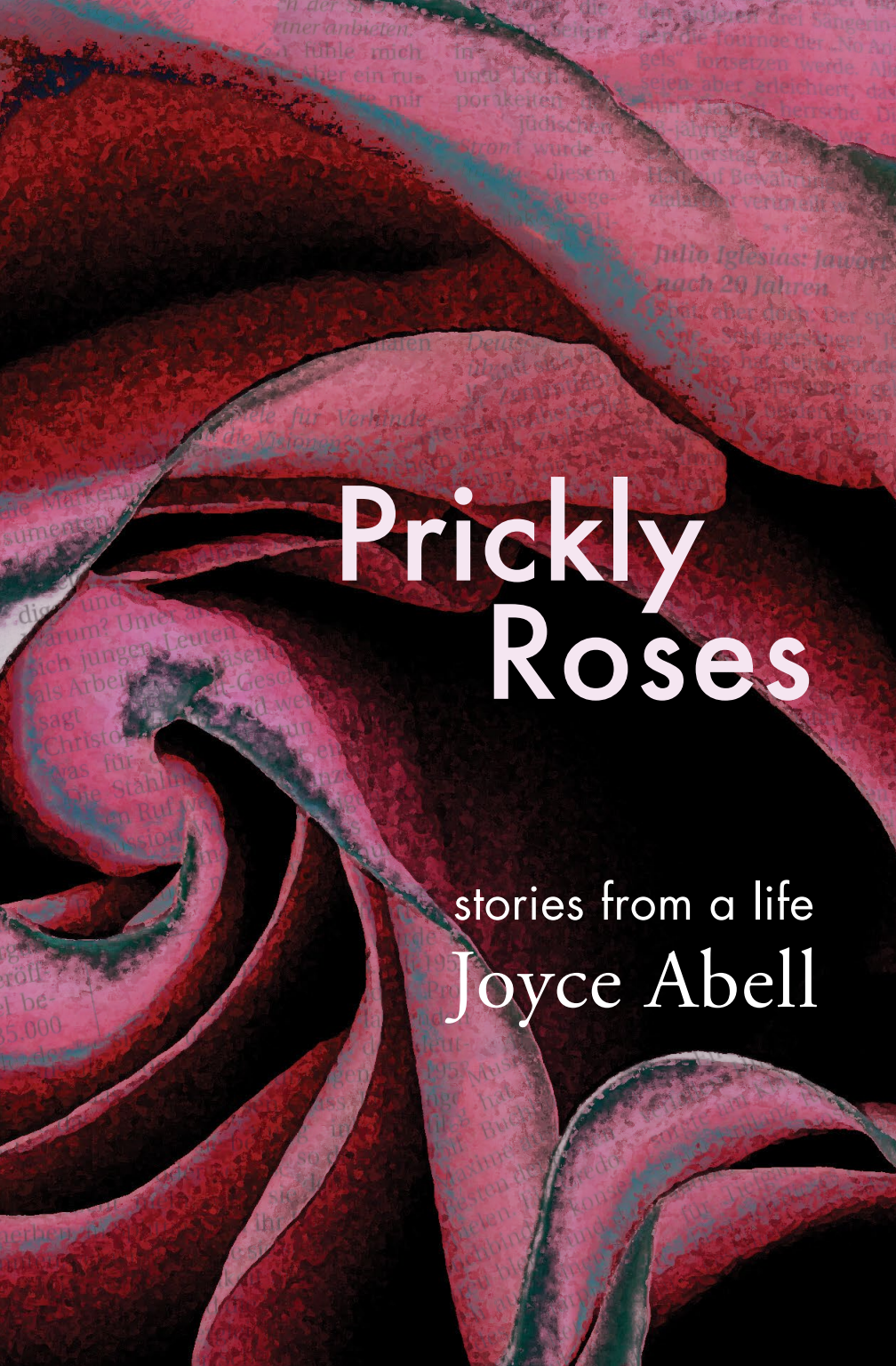
Prickly
Roses
stories from a life
Joyce Abell

Journey to Albania

They fought a lot. Usually it was because my father wouldn't get a job and my mother had to support him.

"But I already have a job," said my father. "Writing a novel is my job."

"Yeah? Well, you could sit in that armchair from now 'til doomsday," replied my mother, "writing, writing, writing that boring novel of yours, and you still couldn't make it

good enough."

"Oh, I know just what you're really saying," spat my father. "You mean I'll never achieve the perfect writing of Mr. Perfection, your perfect daddy."

I sat very still in my chair and pretended to be reading, reading, reading my book. Other fights were about me, and I didn't understand why.

"All you do with Joyce is pretend she's not here," said my mother.

"Well, I don't see you giving her much of your time," said my father.

"This was a big mistake," she said.

As their fight escalated, I scurried to the dark, safer place between the back of the couch and the radiator. I knew what they were saying.

I was now five years old. After my time at Bubbe and Zayde's farm, my parents and I had stayed at my other grandparents' summer home in Sheffield, Massachusetts in the Berkshires. One of our neighbors, Mrs. Carey, was the sweet teacher of the one-room schoolhouse just a half-mile up our road and she told my parents she would like to teach me because she thought I was "a smart little pumpkin" and could do at least first-grade work. So I went for a couple of months where I was the youngest child in the place. I loved it. Mrs. Carey showed me where I would sit. She introduced me to my fellow students, ages 7 to 15. But she forgot to tell me one important thing – where the outhouse was. And for some reason I was shy about asking. It was about six weeks after I'd started school; I was up at the blackboard working on arithmetic sums; I peed so much so that it puddled on the floor. I filled with shame and ran outside.

Mrs. Carey came outside and tried to tell me not to be embarrassed and to come back in. But I would not. I waited outside for my daddy to come for me and I told him I was never going back to Mrs. Carey's school.

"Well, maybe you could take a day or two off," my father said.

"No," I said. "I won't go." And I never did.

Mrs. Carey brought me schoolbooks to read and papers with sums for me to work out and I did some schoolwork at home. "She's too bright not to be in school," Mrs. Carey said. But no one could persuade me.

Two months later, we moved to a tiny fourth-floor walkup in Brooklyn. On and off, my parents would discuss what to do with me. My father was absolutely opposed to my returning to Bubbe and Zayde, or living with any of the family on his side, Aunt Ida, Uncle Max, Aunt Mary, Uncle Bernie or Aunt Beatie. According to him, they were all "dumb animals."

With my father's side out, the remaining option was to shuffle me off to someone on my mother's side. Until recently, my mother's parents had been living in an elegant apartment overlooking Central Park. Perhaps I could have gone there, though my mother and grandmother hated each other. I had heard my mother say she wasn't going to have her mother "lord it over her" – apparently, dropping me off to stay with them would confirm the big mistake she'd made in marrying my father. On the other hand, my mother admired my grandpa more than anyone in the world. He was a famous foreign correspondent and a newspaper publisher; he knew kings and presidents. His name was Herman Bernstein.

Six months earlier, President Hoover had appointed Herman Bernstein to be the American ambassador to Albania, a position officially known as the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. My grandparents, Herman and Sophie, and my mother's younger sisters, Dorothy and Violet, had all gone to live in Tirana, Albania's capital.

One day my father received a letter from my ambassador grandfather containing an ultimatum: Get a job or I'll see to it that my daughter divorces you. My father was so angry, he didn't speak to my mother or me for a whole week. Then he gave in. He took the "goddamn job" my grandpa had found for him as Assistant Director of a big community center on Chicago's West Side – the Jewish People's Institute. In three weeks' time, he and my mother would move to Chicago.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I would not go with them. Instead, I would be sent me to live with my grandparents in Albania. I liked my grandparents, my grandfather especially, so I looked forward to seeing them.

A few weeks later, my mother took me down to the docks. As we threaded through hundreds of people milling around a giant ocean liner, my mother took my hand; we climbed the gangplank and made our way to the captain of the ship.

"Grandpa has arranged for Captain Morris to be in charge of you on your trip across the ocean," my mother explained.

Captain Morris, resplendent in his white cap with gold braid and his crisp uniform, leaned down to smile at me. "So, you're the brave little miss who is crossing the Atlantic alone!"

Alone? Didn't my mother say Captain Morris would be taking care of me? Dozens of people swirled around

us, talking, laughing, crying, kissing, waving goodbye to the people on shore. My mother tapped my shoulder and said, "Stop looking so scared, for heaven's sakes. It's a big adventure, silly. Just be a good girl and do what the captain tells you to do and you'll be just fine. OK? Well, goodbye, Joyce. I have to go now." Then she turned away and walked down the gangplank. She didn't turn back to wave; she just disappeared.

Indeed, the captain did not become my onboard buddy. He quickly turned me over to the care of a steward and a maid, who took me to a stateroom and unpacked my clothes. The rest of that day, I clung to them, but very quickly I stopped being scared because there were so many exciting things I kept encountering.

The first morning I went down to the gigantic, formal dining room for breakfast. Two waiters bowed to me and then asked me what I would like to eat.

"Chicken and ice cream," I told them.

"Are you sure?" one of them asked. "Maybe that'd be better for lunch. Or dinner."

"I want some now," I replied.

And, oh, what nice men they were! They brought me orange juice, toast, a nicely roasted chicken breast and, yes, my favorite vanilla ice cream.

By the second day, I had begun to feel like a character from one of my favorite books, *The Elephant's Child,* filled with "satiable curiosity" about everything and everybody around me: The rolling ship. The giant waves. The funny little round windows. The wide decks with grownups, half-sitting, half-lying, like peas in a pod, in their long deck chairs. The huge lifeboats hanging off the railings. The vast

dining room with its snow-white tablecloths and sparkling crystal glassware. The huge boat stacks that sometimes honked loudly. I ran from one interesting object and person to the next, the steward faithfully following close behind to protect me.

Soon, a number of my shipmates were curious about me as well, this tiny motherless girl, who every morning skipped along the decks, always trailed by the steward. A little old lady who looked like a witch stopped me and taught me to play Slapjack with her, declaring me "a cute little smartypants" when I beat her almost every time. A teasing young man lifted me up on his shoulders and jiggedy danced with me, then played hide-and-seek with me among the lifeboats. Every day, a kewpie doll of an old lady with great round rouge spots on her cheeks brought me pretty bracelets, necklaces and pins from her jewelry box, and bonbons from her hoard of chocolates. A tall, skinny colonel saluted me and taught me to salute back; then we marched up and down the deck, me swinging my arms importantly, he playing an imaginary bugle. A lady in men's trousers wrapped me round and round in her deckchair's blanket and bet me a penny I couldn't squirm out before she finished reciting Mr. Shakespeare's poem, "Hark, Hark, the Lark!" Of course, I won the penny.

At dinner at the captain's table, I was placed beside a large lady opera singer with funny feathers in her headband who told me she had two little girls of her own and she missed them very much. When I asked for her help in cutting up my roast beef, she leaned way over me as she cut my meat, enveloping me in her ample flesh, then asked in her booming, laughing voice, "Hah, is my great big boozalom

about to smother you, leettle one?"

Another night I was taken to a huge room with a dance band and put up on a table to dance. Before I knew it, a handsome man lifted me into his arms and began to twirl me round and round. Another and another laughing man whirled me until I began to feel dizzy. Beautiful women in short shiny dresses – this was the height of the Jazz Age and they were decked out in the sexiest flapper styles – gave me sips of their champagne. And at last, when midnight arrived and I was almost asleep, several of them carried me off to my stateroom. The giggling young women would choose one of the young men to undress me and put me in my pajamas and, after their derisive laughter at his awkwardness, clap and kiss his cheek for his "good" work, then tuck me into bed, leaning over to kiss me goodnight, smelling of mysterious scents: pomade, perfume and cigarettes. "Night, night!" they would call to me, as they all laughingly ran out to dance, drink and flirt their night away.

The next morning my friend, the waiter in the big dining room, noticed that I wasn't eating much of my breakfast and asked me if I had a hangover. "I think maybe I do," I told him. Even my chicken and ice cream did not taste all that good.

But finally the big ship docked at Cherbourg, all the people who had been on board disappeared and now I was riding in a train headed for Paris. Seated with me in my compartment was Mr. Krasnicki, my grandpa's aide. Short, slender and dark-haired, he had come to accompany me on the next leg of my journey. But Mr. Krasnicki had much work to do, so he paid little attention to me, busy instead writing and shuffling papers. I sat and sat, read my

Photograph by Christine Drawl

Joyce Abell was born in 1925 in New York City and spent her childhood shuttled between parents and grandparents, living many places, from a farm in Connecticut to a palace in Albania. After teaching anthropology and psychology in the public high schools, she and her husband, retired and moved to Rappahannock County, VA where they became organic farmers. Joyce was a founding member of Rappahannock County Community Theatre. In the early '90s she created and co-directed "No Ordinary Person," a dramatic reading series highlighting autobiographical stories by local citizens, still running as of 2017. Her recent acting roles were the leads in "*Driving Miss Daisy*" and "*The Gin Game*." This is her first book.

Prickly Roses: Stories from a Life may just as well have been called The Unimaginable, Fascinating, and Unspeakably Magical Life of Joyce Abell. Her childhood adventures rival those of Harry Potter, except her stories are better because they're true. The world she recounts is all but lost to us now, and so I am doubly grateful to Joyce Abell for writing her history down.

Ann Patchett, author of *Commonwealth and Bel Canto*

Joyce Abell is a wonder! To write such a potently frank, luscious, character-rich memoir is no small thing, at any age. But to be able to describe childhood mysteries of abuse and neglect without an ounce of blame, but with a brilliantly clear, calm, long-ranging eye is astonishing. Abell has known a life in which odd things continued to happen, people like Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes managed to show up, and her gusto for new surprises and new days remained unshaken. I adore this book and this author and you will too.

Naomi Shihab Nye, author of *Habibi* and *The Turtle of Oman*

Abell has an engaging, straightforward style . . . Charming snapshots from a lost age.

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