In Brownsville tenements, the kitchen is frequently the largest room and the center of the household. As a child, I felt that we lived in a kitchen to which four other rooms were annexed. My other, a "home" dressmaker, had her workshop in the kitchen. She told me once that she had begun dressmaking in Poland when she was thirteen; as far back as I can remember, she was making dresses for the local women. She had an innate sense of design, a quick eye for all the subtleties in the latest fashions—even when she despised them—and great boldness. For three or four dollars, she would study the fashion magazines with a customer, go with the customer to the remnant store in Belmont Avenue to pick out the material, argue the owner down—all remnant stores, for some reason, were supposed to be shady, as if the owners dealt in stolen goods—and then for days patiently fit and haste and sew and fit again.

Our flat was always full of women in their house dresses, sitting around the kitchen table waiting for a fitting. My little bedroom, next to the kitchen, was the fitting room. The sewing machine, an old, nut-brown Singer with golden scrolls painted along the back arm and engraved along the two tiers of little drawers, massed with needles and thread, on each side of the treadle, stood next to the window and the great coal-black stove that was our main source of heat. In December, two outside bedrooms were closed off, and were used to chill bottles of milk and cream, cold borsch, and jellied calves' feet.

The kitchen held our lives together. My mother worked in it all day long, we ate in it almost all meals except the Passover Seder, I did my homework and first writing at the kitchen table, and in winter I often had a bed made up for me on three kitchen chairs near the stove. On the wall just over the table hung a long horizontal mirror that sloped to a ship's prow at each end and was lined in cherry wood. It took up the
whole wall, and drew every object in the kitchen to itself. The walls were a fiercely stippled whitewash, so often rewhitened by my father in slack seasons that the paint looked as if it had been squeezed and cracked into the walls. A large electric bulb hung down the center of the kitchen at the end of a chain that had been hooked into the ceiling; the old gas ring and key still jutted out of the wall like antlers. In the corner next to the toilet was the sink at which we washed, and the square tub in which my mother did our clothes. Above it, tacked to the shelf on which were pleasantly ranged square, blue-bordered white sugar and spice jars, hung calendars from the Public National Bank on Pitkin Avenue and the Minsker Progressive Branch of the Workmen's Circle; receipts for the payment of insurance premiums, and household bills on a spindle; two little boxes engraved with Hebrew letters. One of these was for the poor, the other to buy back the Land of Israel. Each spring a bearded little man would suddenly appear in our kitchen, salute us with a hurried Hebrew blessing, empty the boxes (sometimes with a sidelong look of disdain if they were not full), hurriedly bless us again for remembering our less fortunate Jewish brothers and sisters, and so take his departure until the next spring, after vainly trying to persuade my mother to take still another box. We did occasionally remember to drop coins in the boxes, but this was usually only on the dreaded morning of "midterms" and final examinations, because my mother thought it would bring me luck.

The kitchen gave a special character to our lives—my mother's character. My memories of that kitchen are dominated by the nearness of my mother sitting all day long at her sewing machine, by the clacking of treadle against the linoleum floor, by the patient twist of her right shoulder as she pushed at the wheel with one hand or lifted the foot to free the needle when it had got stuck in a thick piece of material. The kitchen was her life. Year by year, as I began to take in her fantastic capacity for labor and her anxious zeal, I realized it was ourselves she kept stitched together. I cannot remember a time when she was not
working. She worked because the law of her life was work; she worked because she would have found life meaningless without work. She read no English; she could read the Yiddish paper but never felt she had time to. We were always talking of a day when I would teacher her how to read English, but somehow there was never time. When I awoke in the morning, she was already at her machine, or in the great crowd of housewives at the grocery, getting fresh rolls for breakfast. When I returned from school, she was at her machine, or conferring over McCall's with some neighborhood woman who had come in pointing hopefully to an illustration. ("Mrs. Kazin! Mrs. Kazin! Make me a dress like it shows here in the picture!") By the time my father came home from work, she had somehow or other interrupted herself to make supper for us. After the dishes were cleared and washed, she was back at her machine. When I went to bed, often she was still there, wearing her pince-nez, pounding away at the treadle, hunched over the wheel, her hands steering a piece of gauze under the needle with a finesse that contrasted sharply with her swollen hands and broken nails. Her left hand had been pierced when, as a girl, she worked in the famous Triangle shirtwaist factory, on the East Side. A needle had one through the palm, severing a large vein. They had sewn it up for her so clumsily that a tuft of flesh lay folder over the palm.

The kitchen was the great machine that set our lives running; it slowed down a little only on Saturdays and holy days. From my mother's kitchen, I gained my first picture of life, as a white, overheated, starklit workshop redolent with Jewish cooking, crowded with women in house dresses, strewn with fashion magazines, patterns, dress material, spools of thread—at whose center, so lashed to her machine that bolts of energy seemed to dance out of her hands and feet as she worked, my mother stamped the treadle hard against the floor, hard, hard, silently, grimly at war, beating out the first rhythm of the world for me.