

*A Heart-Wrenching Historical Fiction Novel  
Based on a True Story*



# *The* Secrets She Never Told



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## **THE SECRETS SHE NEVER TOLD**

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# CHAPTER 1

**M**y heart skips a beat when Liza calls.  
When I answer, she quickly tries to reassure me with her soft, smiling voice that “everything’s fine.” It’s just—Mom went crazy again.

They had just come back from a walk. Liza tried to convince her that there was no one in the house except the two of them. Mom wasn’t convinced. Her demented brain produces strange scenarios and she’s absolutely certain that whatever plays in her mind is entirely real.

I hear Liza trying again and again, in her broken English and Hebrew, to persuade Mom that there’s no one else in the house. Eventually, she asks me to speak with her. The language isn’t to blame. I can’t get through to her either, can’t convince her that what she sees is just a product of her imagination.

When I finally suggest she let me talk to one of the people supposedly in the house, she whispers, “It’s a little awkward... They’ll think I want to kick them out.”

“But that’s what you want, isn’t it? For them to leave...?”

“Yes, but I don’t want them to know that.”

“So what do we do, Mom?”

Silence. I can hear her breathing.

Finally, she says, “You need to come here.”

I can’t come right now and, at this point, I have no choice but to pull out my last weapon.

“You know I love you, right?” I tell her.

“Yes.”

“And that I always tell you the truth, right?”

Silence on the line.

“Mom?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“No... maybe.”

“But you know I only want what’s best for you, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have to believe me right now—there’s no one in your house except you and Liza. If there were a stranger walking around the house, Liza would have told me and I’d be there in a heartbeat to kick them out. I don’t want strangers in your house either.”

There’s silence on the other end. She starts to say something but stops, breathing heavily, searching for the right words, the tone of voice that would make me come over. Finally, she rasps out in a hoarse whisper, “You don’t understand. Please come. They want to take my home.”

At least this time she’s not dragging Liza into the plot. Sometimes it’s Liza who brings them into the house. Liza is the one who initiates the takeover of her home.

“I can’t come right now, Mom. I’ll come in the afternoon. I promise you there’s nothing to worry about.”

Silence. And then a sigh, “Okay, it’ll be alright. Don’t worry.”

I breathe a little easier, but then she adds, “I don’t want to trouble you right now.”

And the ball is back in my court. Maybe I should have said—back before the dementia started—that yes, it really *is* a burden to come over now, just to silence these righteous little remarks for good. Too late. I want to get back to what I was doing, but a smudge of guilt settles in my mind like a wet tea bag.

I sit down at my desk. Letters appear on the screen one by one. “Mom reaches out her hand...”

I reach for the phone. I call Liza. When she picks up, I manage to hear Mom’s voice in the background, still anxious.

“Liza, give Mom half a pill. The tranquilizer the doctor prescribed.”

“No, no need,” Liza says. “She be okay one minute.”

Liza doesn’t like pills. A cup of herbal tea and a cloth soaked in something will do the job. That’s how she used to calm her own mother back in the Philippines.

“Your mother ninety-five,” she scolds me gently. “She allowed be crazy. It pass.”

Half an hour passes. “Mom fine,” she says over the phone.

Liza, with ancient Filipino wisdom, knows how to coax wayward brain fibers back into place.

Most of the day Mom lies in bed. Sometimes she’s transferred to a

wheelchair for meals, going to the bathroom, or a shower. Moving her from the bed to the chair is a complex operation requiring both strength and strategy.

“Mom, come on, put your feet on the floor. Let’s move you to the chair,” I tell her.

“You don’t have to move me. I’m about to get up.”

“You can’t get up on your own.”

“Why not?” she asks. “Of course I can. You’ll see in a minute...”

You can’t, I want to say. You haven’t been able to for a while now. You’re ninety-five. Accept it. Your legs can barely carry you. Your mind is slipping.

But, of course, I can’t say those things to her. In her mind, she’s still a young woman who wants to—and believes she can—do everything.

So Liza and I play along. We stand to the side. We wait. She slowly lowers her legs to the floor, leans forward, and places both hands on the wheelchair’s armrests for support. She pushes, but her body refuses.

“I don’t understand what’s happened to me.”

Her hands release the armrests and she looks at me with a blend of confusion and pleading.

“Nothing in particular happened. You just fell, and right now it’s a little hard,” I say, “but it’ll get better.”

Liza is already standing above her, and Mom reaches out in surrender, wrapping her arms around Liza’s neck. Liza lifts her.

“Now we walk little, Mom,” she says. “Physiotherapist say. Move legs.”

We hold her by both arms, one of us on each side, and walk together through the living room and back. One round and Mom is exhausted.

“Come, Mamita, now sit,” Liza says.

Lately, she’s been calling Mom *Mamita*. I have no idea where it came from. Maybe it’s a Filipino term of endearment, something like *Ima’le*—mommy—in Hebrew. Mom laughs when Liza calls her that, stroking her cheek affectionately.

Liza settles her into the wheelchair.

“Okay, now we’ll go home,” Mom says.

“Go where? This your home, Mom,” I tell her.

“No. This is not my home,” she snaps. “Don’t try to convince me every time.”

“Mom,” I stroke her head, “you’ve been living here

for years.”

“Maybe. But I have another home.”

“You don’t, Mom. This is your only home.”

Mom looks at me with doubt. It’s a look that carries a faint smile—You think I’m stupid? says the smile. I know you’re hiding something from me. This isn’t my home, I’m sure of it. I just can’t explain it. I’m too tired. What were we even talking about just now?

The ‘home’ story repeats itself almost daily. Sometimes it’s very much hers, and other times it’s a place she’s trapped in.

“She won’t let me out of here,” Mom complains about Liza. “She keeps me locked up in this place all day.”

I wonder about the source of this occasional sense of alienation from the house she’s lived in for so many years. Sometimes I ask her about that other home she longs to return to. She doesn’t know how to answer. She has no words for that ‘other home.’ Is it the life she had before the dementia? A memory of some inner reality from which she’s been exiled? Does she feel ‘not at home’ in this new version of reality she’s landed in? A kind of exile of the soul? I don’t know. But sometimes she looks at me with a gaze that says: *What am I even doing here? Who am I?*

Mom insists.

“I want to go home. This house is ugly. The kitchen is too small. And this bed. Why is it always closed? I want to go home.”

“Where’s your home?” I ask her.

“38 Narkis Street,” she says right away.

“That’s right. We’re at 38 Narkis Street, Mom.”

She looks at me with suspicion.

“Come, Mom, I’ll show you this is your home,” I tell her. I wheel her around the apartment. We get to the bedroom, which has been left unused since her fall. Now she sleeps in the living room on an adjustable medical bed we couldn’t fit in the bedroom. The bed has railings on

both sides.

I open the closet and pull out a shirt.

“Whose shirt is this, Mom?”

She looks. “Mine.”

“And these pants?”

“Mine.”

“And this pretty scarf?”

“Oh, where were all these clothes?”

“They were right here, in your closet, in your bedroom.”

She looks around.

“Yes,” she says, hesitantly.

Now we move toward the vanity. On top of it sits a jewelry box. Mom opens it with her trembling hands and pulls out a necklace. She feels it, running her fingers along the beads.

“It’s so beautiful,” she says. “Whose is it?”

She lifts the necklace and slips it over her head, then looks up at the mirror.

“What...?” she gasps. “Why don’t I have teeth? Who is that old woman in the mirror?”

I remind Mom that she has a set of dentures. That they hurt her. That she refuses to wear them.

She looks at me with a slightly blank expression, then back at the mirror.

“I can’t go out like this, without teeth. Take me to the dentist.”

“Dentists aren’t working right now. Because of Covid.”

“Ahh,” she puckers her lips and bares her gums.

“Oh no,” she sighs, “that... disease still hasn’t passed?”

I explain that it’s going to take a while.

She wrinkles her face. “And you can’t even give me a kiss.”

“That’s true. But I visit you almost every day, and we blow kisses in the air.”

“But what about the teeth?”

“It’s not such a big deal,” I tell her. “You manage fine without them, right? And besides, you’re at home all the time anyway.”

“I am not at home all the time,” she says with a touch of offense. “Yesterday I was... at... at... where was I, Liza?”

“We at home all the time,” Liza calls from the kitchen.

“Okay, never mind,” Mom sighs and reaches for her lower back. “I understand. Now I want to lie down.

It hurts.”

I wheel her back to the living room and Liza helps her into bed and raises the side rail.

“Don’t close it,” Mom cries out. “Why is it always closed? I need to get

down sometimes.”

“That’s exactly it, Mom. You try to get down and forget you need help. If you get down alone, you’ll fall again and hurt yourself, and we’ll have to take you to the hospital.”

Her expression softens at last. “Okay, close it,” she says.

She looks at me.

“You are an angel,” she says, reaching her arms out to hug me. “What would I do without you? You always explain things to me. When you explain things to me, I understand.”



## CHAPTER 2

When Mom fell, Liza called me. She sounded scared—I could tell she wasn't smiling like she usually does. In stammering words, she told me that Mom had fallen in the shower. It was a bit surprising, since Liza never takes her eyes off her. She had placed Mom inside the shower stall and asked her to hold on to the special bar fixed to the wall while she soaped her up. But Mom forgot for a moment—because, in her mind, she can still stand without any help—let go of the bar, and slipped. She hit the tiled shower floor.

A fall, they say, is the beginning of the end.

Liza was full of guilt, punishing herself for a crime she didn't commit. She told me the story in great detail, in broken speech I had to partly decipher. I tried to calm her down, but she still sounded scared. She guards Mom, keeping a close eye on her. She has to keep her alive. Mom supports Liza's family of ten.

Mom was in pain. She couldn't stand. A red abrasion ran the length of her left forearm. No over-the-counter pain medication helped. I suspected a hip fracture. It took me an entire day to convince her to go to the emergency room.

"This will pass, you'll see. It's just a little pain, nothing bad."

Eventually, she gave in. We called an ambulance and went to the ER. They laid Mom down in a small cubicle surrounded by curtains. A doctor came to examine her. She looked a bit unsure of herself—maybe she was still a student. Every so often an older doctor peeked into the cubicle, probably checking that his trainee was managing.

Mom answered all the questions nicely. Everyone was very kind. And she was very kind in return—still remembered how to put on that special charm she always reserved for service people. They sent us here and there. X-ray. CT scan. Bloodwork. EKG. Then we waited.

Hours.

The temperature in the ER is always near freezing. All year round. We bundled up in wool blankets—who knows who else used them before us. The doctors moved back and forth from patient to patient, looking more and

more exhausted as the hours ticked by. Red-eyed, dragging their feet, yawning until they looked like they might collapse. One shift ended, another began. The night stretched on endlessly.

Eventually I sent Liza home and sat in a chair next to Mom's bed. She slept. I didn't. I couldn't find a place for my head, didn't know where to put my legs. It felt like a flight to New York—eleven hours overnight with cramped knees and constant attempts to sleep, praying to not wake up frozen and sore.

But, at least then, New York awaits.

Here there are only bleary-eyed people. Moaning, if you're lucky. Screaming if you're not.

Morning finally came and, with it, the answers.

"Pelvic fracture," announced a young doctor, still holding his first cup of coffee. "There's nothing to do. Just rest until the bones knit back together."

*That* I could have said myself.

"Knit back together" is a hopeful phrase. For young people. My mother's bones are lazy now—maybe too tired already. The pain lingered a long time and she never returned to walking like she did before. In fact, she could barely walk at all.

The trauma of the fall triggered a mental decline—shockingly fast. My sister and I couldn't believe it. Our mother? Like this? It couldn't be real. We denied the situation, denied it to each other, to ourselves. We told each other stories about how sharp Mom still was. We clung to every shred of normalcy.

But dementia has its own agenda.

After much hesitation and back-and-forth, we called in a geriatrician.

The geriatrician, a young man, sat in front of Mom and began a series of questions.

For the first few minutes I was filled with hope. Mom was really with it. She looked like she'd prepared for an audition. She sat in an armchair, hair brushed, dressed neatly, adorned with a bracelet, rings, and earrings—insisting on wearing them even at home. Her lips were done up with lipstick and she even wore her outdoor shoes for the occasion.

When the doctor asked for her name, she gave him a slightly mocking look and said, "Really, Doctor? You think I don't know my own name or my ID number?"

And she rattled it all off in one breath—even adding her full address.

“And what year is it?” the doctor continued.

“Nineteen... wait,” she looked at me, slightly nervous. I wasn’t allowed to respond. Eventually the doctor said, “2019.”

“Yes-yes, I got mixed up for a second, Doctor. 2019.”

“What day is it today?”

She looked at me again. “Thursday?”

The doctor quickly said “Yes,” even though it was Monday.

“And who’s our prime minister?” he asked.

“Trump,” she answered, beaming with triumph.

“Great. Everything’s fine.”

He rummaged through his bag and said gently, “This isn’t a test, you know. I just want to see if there’s anything I can give you to help you feel better.”

“But I feel good,” she protested.

“You could feel much better. After all, you did fall, it’s hard for you to walk, and you need help all the time. I’m going to give you something to help you get back to yourself.”

Mom smiled with satisfaction.

“You’re very nice,” she said, turning to me.

“Look at this sweet man,” she winked. Always the matchmaker. Especially when it comes to doctors. She always wanted me to marry one.

The sweet man asked a few more questions and jotted something down in his notebook. After the audition, he and I moved to the kitchen.

“Well, it’s clear,” he said. “She’s experiencing dementia.”

The word sank into me like a hundred-kilo weight.

“But, Doctor,” I tried, “how can that be? She was doing okay just a month ago... It can’t happen this fast. Maybe it’s from the fall...”

“Did she hit her head?” he asked.

No. She didn’t.

He looked at me with kind eyes.

“That’s how it happens. Physical trauma often accelerates mental deterioration. But I’m sure there were earlier signs you just didn’t really notice,” he half-asked.

He, of course, knew what he was talking about. I started remembering all kinds of strange comments, complaints about people who were out to get her. Like the building committee treasurer.

“She’s stealing my money. She promised they’d re-coat the roof and

nothing's happening. It's hot as hell in the summer. I paid her. She's buying clothes with my money."

Back then, my sister had gently said, "I think she's become a little paranoid, don't you think?"

"Of course not," I snapped. "Maybe there is something to what she's saying... She's not the kind to make things up."

My sister looked at me in silence. I felt like she wanted to say more, but she didn't. And I didn't encourage her.

After the treasurer came the issue with the dust.

"I can't breathe," Mom told me one day. "There's dust in the air."

I told her I didn't feel any dust.

"Then I'll prove it to you," she said, dragging me out to the balcony and pointing at a certain house.

"See that house? They're renovating it, and all the dust is flying over. Look at my hands," she held her palms out to me, "Look how much dust is on them."

Her hands—beautiful, well-kept—were completely clean.

I looked at the house she was pointing to. I saw no sign of construction.

"The window is closed, that's why you don't see it. But they're renovating and all the dust is flying our way," she said, as if reading my thoughts.

I glanced at Liza. She shook her head.

I tried to convince Mom that there were no renovations, no dust, but I couldn't get through to her. When I suggested we walk over there to see for ourselves if anything was being renovated, she refused. I think that's when a faint suspicion began to surface in me—but the idea that my mother was losing her mind seemed so absurd and terrifying, I pushed it away immediately. She kept talking about the dust every time I visited until I just couldn't listen to it anymore. One time I told her sharply, "Mom, I really don't think there are any renovations. And since you won't come with me to check, please stop talking to me about it."

"Why are you yelling at me?" she scolded. "So you don't believe me. Fine. The important thing is I know what I'm talking about."

She's right, I thought. What does it matter if I believe her or not? And why am I arguing with her in the first place? Liza lets her say what she wants. Sometimes even agrees with her, just to keep the peace. Maybe I can learn to do that too?

"There's a little light at the end of the tunnel," the doctor said. "Sometimes

the decline happens quickly, and then it plateaus for a while. The disease progresses slowly. I believe you'll still be able to enjoy time with your mother. In many cases it takes a long time until..."

He lowered his eyes for a moment, "You know. And she's a healthy woman."

Until she dies.

Yes, I know. No one ever says it out loud. As if it takes some extraordinary kind of courage. "I have wonderful news to tell you," Mom greets me one day.

From experience, I already know this kind of opening signals the start of a fictional tale, usually inspired by something she saw on TV.

"I'm glad to hear it. What's the news?"

"I got engaged."

"Really? To whom?"

She points at the television.

"To him."

The fiancé is a violinist and conductor of a major orchestra. He performs all over the world and invites dancers and singers to his concerts. Each one is a grand spectacle. The performances are on YouTube and my mother watches them for hours.

"He's always looking at me and talking to me. Look what a handsome man he is."

She's dressed in a white sweater decorated with tiny pearls. Her hands are adorned with rings and a bracelet. Every morning there's a ritual—putting on the jewelry. Rings, bracelet, earrings, watch. It's very important to her to know what time it is. I try to convince her not to wear the rings—her skin is so thin and sensitive now—but she insists.

One day we discover that her favorite ring is stuck on her finger. We try every possible way to remove it, but her finger is already swollen and painful. We have no choice but to call in a jeweler to cut the ring off.

"Mom, you look so beautiful today," I tell her.

"I need to dress nicely. He can see me," she says, pointing at the conductor. "But today he's not answering me," she adds, disappointed.

"Don't you see he's busy?" I say.

"Yes, you're right," she replies. "You always know." She smiles at me and reaches out to stroke my cheek.

"Can I touch you now?" she asks.

“Yes, you can,” I say, even though nothing has really changed. Covid’s still here.

And yet, my heart won’t let me play along with her fantasies that return again and again.

“He can’t talk to you,” I tell her. “He’s not really here. It’s just a picture. A video.”

“You’re wrong,” she says, full of certainty.

“Mom...”

“Don’t start again. I’m telling you he hears me,” she says, waving her hand toward the television. “He always waves to me, and he even gave me a violin as a gift,” she adds.

“Mom, that’s a TV. The man lives abroad. The concert was filmed a few years ago. He’s not inside the television. It’s a video. And he can’t give you a violin,” I repeat.

She looks at me with disbelief.

“You always have to... Why do you say that? What do you care?” she half-scolds, half-pleads.

I fall silent. What does she mean by that? Is it a flicker of awareness? Or just a wishful thought she doesn’t even know is wishful? I don’t know. But she said it. And it’s confusing. It’s just a delusion, I decide at last, brushing the doubt away. She’s just mad at me for getting in her way.

“Look, look,” she exclaims, pointing at the television. “He just waved at me with the violin. That’s not the one he gave me. He has several violins.”

“And where’s the one he gave you?”

She looks around, then says, “I gave it to Smadar. I don’t know how to play the violin.”

“Does Smadar know how?”

My sister played piano as a child.

“If she doesn’t, she’ll learn. Trust me.”

She turns back to the television, listens to the music, and starts moving her hands as if she’s conducting the orchestra.

“He proposed to me,” she says, shy as a schoolgirl. That part is hard for me to digest. I feel offended on my father’s behalf.

“Mom, did you forget you were married?”

“Me? Who was I married to?”

“To Dad.”

She pauses, furrows her brow.

“My dad?”

“No, not your dad. Your husband, Natan.”

Confusion spreads across her face.

“And where is Natan now?”

“He’s gone... He passed away.”

“Really? What did he die of?”

“Cancer.”

“When?”

“A long time ago.”

Her eyes widen and she claps a hand to her head.

“How could I forget him? That’s right—my Natan... How could I forget?”

Now her eyes redden.

“I miss him so much,” she says, shaking her head. A single tear slides down her withered cheek. “Oh, Natan, my Natan... Why did you leave at such a young age?” she mourns in Yiddish.

I told Liza to show Mom videos where people don’t look straight into the camera—into the viewer’s eyes. So now Liza plays her clips of kids, cats, dogs, scenic landscapes, and craft tutorials. But Mom still talks to the animals and children.

“Careful,” she says. “Don’t jump,” “Come here, sweetie, I’ll give you something to eat. You’re so hungry...”

I tell my friend Daphna about Mom’s relationships with the figures on the screen.

“So what?” she says. “Don’t try to convince her otherwise. It won’t work. Let her live in that world.”

“But sometimes she really suffers,” I say. “She thinks people are hurting her, trying to take her things. She talks to the TV, carries on entire conversations, and gets upset when no one answers.”

“There’s nothing you can do,” Daphna says. She’s been through it with her dad. “Eventually she calms down. Let her enjoy the illusion. That’s her world now. It gives her a little thrill. It’s her company. Just think—falling in love at that age...”

Coming to terms with Mom’s condition comes in waves—tide in, tide out.

I give her little tests. During the high tides she sounds almost rational. I can sometimes even ask for her advice. I can tell her things. She understands—or seems to. She nods at the right moments, clucks her tongue at the right parts. I heard a lecturer once explain dementia with the word

*disoriented*. I like that word. It has a whiff of impermanence. A softened version of ‘forgotten.’ If Mom’s disoriented, then she’s just lost her way. That’s not so bad, maybe she can still come back. She still knows the words. She still gets the concepts. She can piece together some little shape of reality. Sometimes she perfectly recites poems from school. She spells out difficult words. She reads the subtitles on TV. Slowly—but she reads.

Then the tide turns.

She starts a sentence and can’t finish. In seconds, the thread is gone. I see her effort. She tries again.

But she can’t.

She isn’t stubborn. After two or three tries, she gives up.

“Never mind,” she says.

And I think, if she were fully aware of this failure to speak, of what it really means, she’d probably say she wants to die.

She can’t do the one thing she loved most anymore—read. She can’t read the book I wrote. She has all kinds of explanations, “It’s too dark in here,” “The letters are too small.” She holds the book I wrote against her chest. Hugs it. She can read short sentences, but she can’t link them together into anything that carries meaning.

“I’ll read it,” she reassures me. “It’s just that my eyes hurt today.”

She was so happy when I gave her the book. I fulfilled her dream. She loved books. She had exquisite taste in books. When she was in elementary school, she won first prize in an essay competition.

She once told me: “I was one of the only Jewish girls in school. I loved school so much. I didn’t miss a single day. We were really poor. I didn’t have money to buy books or notebooks. I think I had one notebook. And there was never enough food. I was always hungry. But school felt nicer than our crowded house. One day we found out that one of the girls in class died. She’d been sick for a long time, missed school for months. We’d nearly forgotten her. The teacher took a few of us girls and we went to her funeral in another town. We rode in a closed carriage with a horse and driver. I sat on one bench, the teacher sat across from me, and next to her was a priest—you know, in a black robe, big cross on his chest. I sat there in the carriage feeling really awkward around the priest. We were religious. I was scared. Then I heard the teacher whisper to him, ‘That girl is Jewish. But she’s very gifted. She writes beautifully. She’ll go far.’ The priest smiled at me and started asking me questions. He was very kind. He had



kind eyes. I relaxed a little. It was a funeral ride, but for me—it was a happy day.”

## CHAPTER 3

Two years ago Mom started walking slower. I suddenly noticed it. It was before the dementia. More precisely, before I became aware of all the other signs of slowing down. And even though it's obvious that old people move slower, are more hunched over, sicker—I still had a hard time accepting it. I remember walking down the street with her, our arms linked, and she stopped and said, “Don’t walk so fast. I can’t walk fast anymore.” I slowed down, but I forgot pretty quickly. It took a few of those moments for it to really sink in. I remember the first time I told myself: She’s walking so slowly, she’s talking so slowly—what happened to her?

At some point she started walking with a cane. And now, after the fall, she barely walks at all.

I’ve supposedly gotten used to it. I don’t get upset anymore, don’t get worked up by everything she says. I don’t look for proof anymore. I’ve gotten into the routine of visits and taking care of her medical needs, as well as others. I don’t try to convince her of anything anymore.

But, lately, time feels like a galloping horse. In the evening I find myself thinking how much younger I was just this morning, an hour ago, a minute ago. Tiny signs of illness terrify me. Forgetfulness terrifies me. I’m more awake than ever to the fact that forever has an end. And the end doesn’t feel far away—not like it did a few years ago, if ever. It’s like a horizonless space, endless.

And the thoughts—what did I do with my life? What was I? What do my kids think of me? What will they think when I’m gone? How many years do I even have left? Say, best case, twenty more. But who’s to say I’ll be clear-headed that whole time? That I’ll stay healthy? My genetics are a mix—Dad didn’t make it to eighty. Mom’s sprinting toward ninety-six.

And the thought of helplessness, of depending on others. In my imagination, I see some cruel caregiver who mistreats me, forces me to do things, cleans me with disgust, shoves food I don’t want at me, complains in Filipino or Tibetan or some Indian dialect to her friends about how hard it is to lift me. The transition from awareness, to half-awareness, to a quarter, and finally into the blankness of idiocy.

My mother hasn’t made it all the way down the road yet. She hasn’t

completely descended into mindlessness. She's not easy to control. She still has opinions—not always logical, but formed by her own internal logic. And she still knows how to complain.

Every complaint so far seems made-up, I want to believe. Still, I catch myself wondering what goes on when I'm not around. I hope everything's fine. There are no other signs. But I have no doubt that Liza sometimes gets annoyed, sometimes feels fed up, sometimes just wants to throw in the towel and run.

I wouldn't last even a single day.

Liza has an entire life overseas. Four grown kids—two of them married with kids of their own. An elderly father. Chickens. A piece of farmland that barely produces. She lives separately from her husband. He's always asking the kids for money. Unemployed. A drunk. She recently told me he had a mistress who gave birth to another daughter. But he left her too. And he doesn't take care of that daughter either.

Liza supports them all.

Cleanliness—that's what won my mother over when she hired Liza, back when she was still fully lucid. The laundry folded into fragrant, neat piles in the wardrobe. The kitchen sparkling. The terrazzo tiles never shone like this before.

Liza has this signature pose. She stands at the edge of the room, hands on her hips, eyes scanning the floor's shine. If the furniture doesn't reflect back like a mirror, those tiles are getting scrubbed again. A random wet smudge, a haze of dust—it all gets handled with a heavy hand.

The living room rug? Rolled up and banished to the far end of the house so it wouldn't get any funny ideas about hiding filth underneath.

In that same spirit, Liza also chases my mother. But here there's no cooperation.

My mother, who used to shower twice a day, now refuses.

"But I showered this morning," she argues.

"No, that was yesterday," Liza tells her.

"No."

"Come, quick quick," Liza learned to say.

"I don't want quick quick!" Mom yells back.

"They always want to wash me," she complains when I come visit.

"Who's 'they'?" I ask.

Mom points toward the kitchen, where Liza stands cooking. “Them.”

“Every time I come to this house, they want to wash me,” she says. “Am I that filthy? I’m not coming here anymore. I’ve decided. I want to go home.” She grabs the chair’s armrests and tries to stand. Of course, she can’t.

“Mom, this *is* your home. You’ve lived here for over fifty years.”

“No. This is not my home,” she snaps. “And I’m not coming here again. You always want to wash me.”

The anger keeps building.

I can’t even use the old trick of walking her around the apartment to remind her this place is hers.

“I already know what’s there,” she says, pointing to the bedroom. “And I know this isn’t my house.”

I glance at the shelf lined with all her bridge trophies. Just two years ago, she was queen of the club. Four nights a week. Bridge was her life.

“Mom, look at your trophies. Remember what a bridge champion you were?”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, eyes drifting sadly to the shelf.

“Every time you won a tournament, you put one up there. For years.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Everyone wanted to play with you. Every time we saw one of your friends from bridge on the street, they’d say, ‘Do you know what an amazing player your mom is?’”

She looks at me.

“Remember your friend Ida? She used to come here and you’d play with her and two other women. What were their names?”

Her face lights up.

“Yes... Ida. I remember her. Where is she?”

“I don’t know, Mom,” I say. Of course I know. Ida died. But at least I’ve distracted her.

The slow withdrawal from bridge club meetings was also, I now realize, one of the early signs.

“It’s hard to hold the cards,” “I can’t sit that long,” “They beat me all the time. And they’re not even good players.”

I stroke her hair. She presses her face into my shoulder.

“I’m so tired of it. So, so tired of it,” she murmurs.

I’m afraid of those moments—her *I’m tired* moments. They’re rare, but

they terrify me. I always worry that she'll suddenly, in a moment of clarity, understand where she's ended up.

A smart, meticulous woman now lies in a mechanical bed we got from Yad Sarah, swaddled and toothless. If she knew...

"How are your parents?" she asks politely one day, as I sit beside her bed.

I look at her silently, still hoping she'll slap her forehead and say: "Oh, I'm so confused."

But not today. She waits for an answer.

"Mom, what parents? You're my mother. And Dad passed away a long time ago... We had his memorial just last week," I added—and immediately regretted it.

"What memorial? Where? Why didn't you take me?"

"You couldn't get to the cemetery. There's no wheelchair access."

She looks at me, lips tight.

"I don't need a wheelchair. I've got legs. I want to walk. When did he die?"

"A long time ago."

"Why didn't you take me?"

"This year it was a really small memorial because of Covid."

"I want to go. I feel like I have to."

"Okay," I say, "we'll arrange it."

Her eyes fill with tears.

"What is it, Mom?"

"I miss Dad. He was such a sweetheart. I loved him."

Sweetheart?

These sudden bursts of tenderness toward my father throw me off. They make me think. I can't decide anymore—deep down, did she really love him? And, if she did, what kind of love was it? What was it made of? Was it the warm dinners she always had ready for him at six, served on a pretty plate on a cloth napkin? Was it the crisply ironed shirts stacked neatly in his closet? The hush she enforced so he could nap after work?

And now—after years of widowhood, after the list of expectations she brought into marriage has long been erased from her mind, after most of her awareness has faded too—after all those disappointments and consequences and lack of happiness have vanished, as she pictured it should be, is she

finally saying everything that comes to mind because the internal censor has retired?

When you say *love*, what do you mean?

Love and happiness—two words like white clouds in the sky, with no outlines, sensitive to every little breeze. Melting, fraying, thickening.

They lived happily ever after.

But what is happiness?

Happiness received a lot of stage time in our home.

“Is she happy?”

“Is he happy?”

I never really understood what happiness meant, but I believed it was real.

My mom once looked at me and said, “You have a happy childhood, right?”

I was around ten years old. I didn’t know what to say. I figured... maybe yes? I was a giggly kid. I tried to infect my parents with that giggliness, but they never got infected.

## CHAPTER 4

I was once witness to a conversation.

“You think I’m happy with him?” my mother asked her aunt, Vera.

They sat drinking coffee in the uncle and aunt’s garden on a sunny winter day. The uncle, my grandfather’s brother, and the aunt, his wife, had fled Europe before World War II broke out and settled in a small village near Tel Aviv. For my mother, whose own mother had died before the war (“Because my father gave her too many children,” she would always say with disgust), Aunt Vera served as her wailing wall and counselor for matters of the heart. I caught bits of their conversation because I was playing with Ginger, the orange cat, behind the flaming bougainvillea bushes that climbed around the porch. I didn’t fully understand what was said, but something about her words worried me. It was the world of adults, from which I was constantly excluded.

On the bus ride home I asked Mom who she’d been talking about with Aunt Vera. At first she pretended she didn’t know what I was talking about. Then suddenly, she “remembered.”

“Ohh,” she said with a fake smile, “that was just a part of a story I was telling Aunt Vera, something my friend Edith told me.”

I didn’t believe her. I knew she had been talking about my father.

Yet, I remember Saturday mornings: crawling into their bed, finding them lying there, hugging each other, calm, and laying myself between them. They talk about last night’s outing. Mom laughs. Dad sometimes makes her laugh until tears roll down her cheeks. Love?

I never asked how either of them how they met. Or maybe I did. I don’t remember. Maybe the image I formed in my head was based on something I’d heard, maybe a half-comment I caught by chance. I’ve always had a vivid imagination. Always weaving stories out of scraps I’d picked up here and there.

She met him in a café outside the displaced persons camp in Germany after the war. He was sitting with a group of men—tall, light-haired, with high cheekbones. For a moment, she wondered if he was Jewish. He was sitting among Jews; that much was clear. Yet something about his appearance and manner stood out as different. She had come to the café

with her three-year-old nephew, whom she'd taken out so his mother could rest. She was living at her sister's house, where she justified her existence through her role of caring for the child whenever needed. Her sister's husband was a wealthy widower who'd barely survived the camps. He owned a small shoe factory and a shoemaker's workshop. He knew feet well—flat feet, high-arched feet—he found solutions for them all, even for German soldiers. They wanted him to stay. He was indispensable.

The boy loved the café for its assortment of cakes. She loved the café for the atmosphere. In this café, you could sense the beginnings of normalcy. Groups of women, dressed beautifully, laughed around tables, couples with children, couples in love, and one man. Tall, light-haired.

She noticed he saw her. Occasionally, he glanced her way above his friends' heads. Once, she arrived early, and when he walked in surrounded by his friends, she saw him scanning the café. She thought she saw him nod—an almost imperceptible nod—when he noticed her. But immediately after, he turned away and took his usual seat with his friends.

There could be more to tell about their dance of glances. But there's something more important to say. About her. She had recently broken up with someone. His name was Leo. This Leo would later star in another story, perhaps fictionalized by me. I had to build worlds from fiction because there were many things she never told me, or only said things in fragments with long silences and distant looks, stirring in the heart of the listener (me) the feeling of storms unspoken. In any case, this Leo was expected to propose. He never did. On the contrary, she'd often seen him flirting with others. He was a social activist type, a member of the camp committee, a charismatic guy with a big mouth. She wanted him, but his betrayals put her off. There were tears, broken promises, determined resolutions to leave him, resolutions she never kept. It was obsessive love—fierce yet futile. Deep inside, she knew he'd never change. She would always have to be vigilant, her life a constant struggle for his attention. She wasn't ready for that. She'd already been through enough struggles. She'd spent enough time on guard. Now she needed rest.

Sometimes she wondered how she'd react if he truly proposed. But she never faced that test. Shortly before noticing the tall, light-haired man in the café, she'd finally decided to sever ties with Leo. Something in her had irrevocably broken. Her disgust outweighed everything else. She still cried at night from heartbreak, but this time, somehow, she managed to convince



herself that after everything she'd endured, she could handle this too. After all, this small wound of hers, she thought, was insignificant compared to the vast wounds of the world. And it would heal.

The appearance of the tall, light-haired man played no small part in her ability to withstand the breakup.

She had a weakness for beauty. Always. She found beauty even in the ugliest places. And she looked for beauty; she sought it because beauty was a source of comfort. It expanded her heart during tough moments—a beautiful flower, a lovely house, a pretty dress, daydreams about beautiful things. And when the tall, light-haired man approached her one day and introduced himself, she realized he was even more handsome up close. His eyes were khaki-colored, and she immediately thought about the children they would have—light-haired, healthy, light-eyed. They wouldn't look Jewish, and that was a good thing. She didn't consider the genetics of her own black hair, brown eyes, or distinctively Jewish nose.

She was twenty-four; he was thirty. He told her his brother had gone to the Land of Israel and that he planned to join him. Would she like to come with him? No, she wasn't ready yet. She was still wrestling with the remnants left behind, the traitorous activist, even though she knew deep down that going back to him was out of the question. It hurt—a lot—but the pain was changing, fading, like a stain whose edges blur after countless attempts to remove it.

He went to the Land of Israel. He wrote her letters. His brother helped him find work. He found an apartment. In Tel Aviv. Everything's different here, he wrote—terrible heat in summer, damp cold in winter, dust, sweat, and the sea. But, best of all, everyone is Jewish. You can't imagine how that feels, he told her. You should come; we'll get married. The "we'll get married" clinched it. Three of her sisters were already there and she longed for her own home, her own space. She convinced herself that she missed him, that she needed him, that maybe she could even say she loved him—not painful love, but measured love, good for marriage. She agreed.

The ship left from Bari, Italy, arriving at Haifa port in February 1950. Mount Carmel was covered in snow. The immigrants stood amazed on deck. This wasn't what they'd expected. A land flowing with milk and honey—no snow, they'd been told—a warm and welcoming land. The man in charge of the group explained in his strange Yiddish that snow was an exceptional occurrence. He had never seen snow on the Carmel before.

Sometimes, in winter, it snowed in Jerusalem, but on the Carmel? No. In Tel Aviv, he said, the snow could reach twelve centimeters high. He seemed delighted by the snow. He'd probably never seen snow in his life, she thought. She, too, was pleased. Glad she'd decided at the last moment not to sell her fur coat—black sealskin—that she'd gotten from her sister.

I remember that coat. It hung in the coat closet, pushed against the side, covered with a sheet. My sister and I would secretly take the sheet off, stroke our faces with the fur, and hide inside it. Mom didn't like this game. After finding the coat thrown on the closet floor several times, she forbade us to touch it. One very cold winter day, before an evening out, I saw her take it out, try it on, look at herself from every angle in the mirror, bury her face in the furry collar, step onto her delicate heels, admire herself again, tiptoe around the room, and finally, disappointed, remove the coat and put it back.

"Why, Mom? It's beautiful," I said.

"Too elegant," she replied, fixing her hair. "And ridiculous. It's unsuitable here. I just wanted to remember what it felt like."

So, the seal fur stayed in the closet for years. It was never cold or festive enough. It always seemed too pretentious to Mom. Eventually, she sold it to a fur dealer who supplied fur coats to tourist shops on Ben Yehuda Street.

The handsome man waited for her on the dock. She waved to him from the upper deck. She descended slowly, step by careful step. Her high-heeled shoes flattered her legs. They hugged awkwardly. Physical closeness hadn't yet developed between them. He smelled good. He was dressed well, which counted in his favor. He took her to one of her sisters who lived on the Carmel. This sister was already married. They stayed there that night, sleeping separately, of course. The next day, he left her at her sister's and traveled to Tel Aviv. That was the plan. She would prepare for the wedding, and he'd return in a week to marry her.

The next day the sun shone brightly, slowly melting the snow. This was something she'd quickly grow to love about her new country—the warm sunshine in the middle of winter, warm enough even for short sleeves. And the oranges. Oh, those oranges, so sweet and juicy. She'd seen oranges once in Germany, a fruit unknown to her before. Her sister had bought two; they were expensive, so she hadn't dared touch them. But here? On every street corner, in every garden, trees heavy with orange fruit. In the market,

oranges rolled freely on the ground. She tried peeling one with her fingernails but couldn't manage it. He taught her how. He was skilled at peeling oranges, slicing away the skin with a knife like peeling an apple without ever nicking the fruit. "But what about this white stuff?" she asked. "You can peel that by hand," he said, "but don't throw it away. It's the healthiest part."

Her sister gave her the wedding dress and veil. It required some alterations, mainly around the waist—hers was slimmer. They married in a small hall in Haifa and traveled to Tel Aviv the next day. He'd rented a room with a family in the Montefiore neighborhood.

She learned how to be a wife.

He enjoyed the food she cooked, appreciated the neat way she arranged his shirts.

He loved her body.

He loved her.

And she?

I don't know.

## CHAPTER 5

In the evening, we sit on the porch. Dad sits on a recliner reading the paper, Mom is cross-stitching, and I sit on the floor. From under the table I see their legs. Dad's big toe looks like the bark of an old tree. Mom's legs are swollen and bluish from a pregnancy that never seems to end.

Mom gets up. "Come sleep, it's late already," she tells me. I don't want to. Lately I've been having this scary white dream. Mom waits. From below, I see her giant belly rising from her legs like a mountain. Any minute now she'll yell. She's low on patience, especially since the pregnancy. Eventually, I give in.

That night I wake up again from the dream. I open my eyes wide to see the big brown closet, to prove I didn't drown in the whiteness. Whiteness doesn't have a shape. It's like the sky, but sealed. It wraps around me with a scary, monotonous buzz. I run to Mom and Dad's bed and squeeze between them. In the morning, Mom tells me I'm a big girl already and that I can't sleep in their bed every night. She says that every morning, with anger. But at night, she pities me.

In the afternoon, Mom goes to rest. "Don't make any noise," she reminds me, "I'm very tired." She's always tired. I'm not tired. My body is exploding with energy. I wander around the house, eat something, go to the porch, stare at the sleepy street, eat something again, do handstands with my feet on the wall, and go back to the porch. Everything's closed in the afternoon. Even the library. I already finished my homework, and that little napkin Mom bought me so I could embroider is stuffed deep in the closet. When Mom wakes up she already knows I've spent hours sitting on my hands.

"Sitting on one's hands" is an expression she learned in Hebrew School and is very important in her vocabulary. If Mom really wants to compliment someone, she'll say they don't sit on their hands.

To avoid being in the fridge or upside-down on the wall all day, I go outside. Mom doesn't love that either. "Everyone'll think you're some street kid," she says. But I don't care. There's a lot to do outside—without Mom's eyes on me.

That day I went out and climbed the hill next to our house. I was looking for flowers. Everything looked lousy. Just groundsels and thistles and low flowers that could never compete with the gladiolas Dad brings home on Fridays. Dad's gladiolas are tall and tight and open slowly over the week. Mom's always staring at them, saying, "Look at those gladiolas. They're so regal."

I wandered a bit on the hill and went back home. I tiptoed inside. The house smelled strange. I heard voices coming from the living room, which is also Mom and Dad's bedroom. I opened the door. Mom was sitting on the bed in her nightgown and a man in a black suit with a cigarette sat across from her. He looked familiar. But I couldn't place him. Maybe I'd seen him in the blue photo album Mom and Dad keep, full of pictures from abroad—people in long coats and scarves with funny hairdos, standing in the snow.

There's one photo in that album of a couple Mom says are friends, but I've never seen them around. The woman is blond with curls and a kind of hill of hair over her forehead (Mom has a photo like that too, but she's not blond), and the man has slicked-back hair that looks like it's been greased with margarine. I always pause at that picture because the woman's eyes are so light, they seem transparent. She's really beautiful. The man now sitting next to Mom reminded me a little of the blond woman's man.

Mom straightened up and the strap of her nightgown slipped off her shoulder. "This is Leo, our friend from abroad," she said in her "guest voice" and lifted the strap back up. Mom thought that the word "abroad" would impress me, and that I'd be really nice to the visitor. But I was already sick of abroad. Our "abroad" was just weird languages I sometimes felt ashamed of and sad songs that made me cry.

The only thing I liked from abroad was our cabinet, which looked like Aladdin's cave—when you opened it, a light would go on inside and all the crystal glasses and silverware Mom and Dad brought from abroad would sparkle in the mirror like diamonds. There's even a giant silver cup for Elijah the Prophet, and sometimes, when no one's looking, I rub it, hoping a little genie will come out and grant me a few wishes.

The whole room smelled like cigarettes and I ran to open all the windows.

"What are you doing?" Mom scolded me.

"What'll Dad say?" I asked.

"What do you mean, what'll he say?" she genuinely waited for an answer. Her voice sounded... strange. Not angry. Maybe scared.

“When he smells that smell,” I said.

“Oh,” she brushed it off with a wave of her hand. “He smokes too.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but you don’t let him smoke in here.”

That made her angry again.

“Why are you barging in like that? Don’t you know that this is when I sleep?”

In the hallway by their bedroom, there’s a big dresser Mom and Dad brought from abroad. On top is a lace doily, a silver-embossed hairbrush, and a sparkly glass perfume bottle with a little hose and rubber bulb. No one actually uses the brush or the perfume—they just sit there. I sprayed a little perfume to get rid of the cigarette smell and opened the drawer.

Inside were letter papers, scissors, a bottle of ink and some pens, and a knife in a leather sheath, which I really liked the smell of. When Mom gets letters from America—from her big sister, Sabina, whom she loves like a mother—she opens them carefully with the knife. That way the envelope stays whole, and the stamps—which Dad and I collect (well, mostly Dad, I just help)—stay intact.

But lately Mom’s been too impatient and tears the envelope right through the stamps. So when I bring in the mail, I try to bring the knife too. I don’t like when she’s not patient about those kinds of things.

I stood by the dresser, listening to the voices from the bedroom. Outside, I heard Dad’s footsteps on the stairs. He opened the door, took off his shoes, and walked in socks straight to the bathroom to wash his hands. He scrubbed for a long time, “so your mother doesn’t start in on me,” and then went to the kitchen to warm up

some soup.

Just as he started eating, Mom came out of the bedroom and walked into the kitchen. She stood by the sink and told Dad we had a guest. Dad looked up from his soup and asked who it was but, before Mom could answer, Leo walked in.

I think Dad’s lips went white. He stood up and said, “Welcome, Leo!” too loudly and shook his hand. He even smiled, but I don’t think it was a real smile, because the wrinkle between his eyebrows didn’t smooth out. Then he started asking Leo questions like, “How’s it going?” “How’s the business?” and “How’s Bronka?” who’s been in the hospital for weeks. Then they talked about how hard things are in Israel, how hot it is, and how

Mom and Dad had the papers to leave for abroad, but Mom refused to raise kids in a non-Jewish country because she'd had enough already.

Mom stood to the side, fiddling with the belt on her robe, her eyes moving back and forth between them. Then Dad invited Leo to the living room for a drink. He opened the cabinet and took out two little glasses. Dad poured them both some red wine, and they drank it all in one go.

A single red drop clung to Dad's chin. Mom reached out to wipe it, but halfway there she changed her mind and pulled her hand back. The drop slid down Dad's neck and stained his shirt. I waited for Mom to say something, but this time she held back.

This Leo guy—I didn't like him at all. He sat in the living room with his legs crossed, like someone who doesn't work, his pants perfectly creased, his shoes shiny. He had this gold cigarette case that he opened and closed every few minutes with one hand, making an annoying little click.

Dad, wearing his blue work clothes, kept trying to hide his black fingernails, shifting around in his seat like there were nails poking out of it.

Mom went into the other room and I followed her. She opened the closet and pulled out her pretty yellow dress. Her hands were shaking.

I asked her what was wrong, but she said right away, "Nothing, nothing. Go play outside."

Outside?

I went to my room and sat quietly on the bed. I heard Dad talking. He suddenly became chatty. Telling stories, asking questions, laughing loudly. Stuff he never does with us.

After a while, Leo left, and Mom and Dad stayed in the living room. I peeked in. They were sitting in silence, like always.

Finally Mom stood up, gathered the glasses onto a small tray, and took them to the kitchen. Dad stayed where he was, smoking. The cigarette burned down to his fingers, but he didn't care.

I sat next to him and he stroked my head and asked how school was. I ran to get my notebook to show him the 'Very Good' I got in math. But, this time, the crease between his eyes didn't go away. He just flipped through the notebook and stared out the window.

I saw a big package tied with a red ribbon on the armchair.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's for you. From Leo," he said.

Inside was a doll with a lace dress and pink shoes. I picked it up. It cried

and moved its eyes.

I thought, Leo must not have kids because, if he did, he'd know girls my age don't play with dolls anymore.

I went to the kitchen to show Mom. She was at the sink washing the glasses. When I showed her the doll, I saw her eyes were red. She kept turning her head away and said she had a little cold and I shouldn't come too close.

I wanted to take Leo's stupid doll and throw it in the trash.

But Mom said that maybe soon I'd have a little sister, and I could give the doll to her.

Eventually I didn't know what else to do, so I went outside. The kids called me to play, but I didn't want to. I thought they seemed so silly, laughing and fighting. They probably didn't have someone like Leo who suddenly shows up and messes everything up.

I climbed the hill and lay down among the bushes. A flock of birds landed near me. They started pecking at the ground. Close by, one little bird stood still, staring at me—first with its right eye, then with its left. I moved closer. It didn't fly away, just tilted its head and hopped slightly. There was blood on its wing. I reached out to touch it, but it started hopping toward the other birds and eventually disappeared.

I went back home. Dad had gone to rest and Mom took me straight to the bathroom. She started scrubbing my head, complaining the whole time about how hard it was for her to bend over. Afterward, she sat me on a small stool and sat above me on a chair, brushing my hair. I asked her if she would still love me after the baby was born.

"You silly goose," she said, "tomorrow we're going to the hairdresser's. I can't comb you anymore. Your hair's like a jungle."

"No, no, I don't want to!" I wailed.

"What are you crying about?" she said, "Don't you know how comfortable it'll be for you with short hair? You won't need me every morning. You'll be able to comb your hair yourself."

Mom didn't understand at all—I didn't want to comb my hair myself.

That night I woke up again from the white dream. I heard voices from the other room. Mom said, "What do you want? He came to visit his relatives in Holon and just dropped by to say hello." Dad replied, "I don't want him dropping by. It just hurts everyone." Mom said, "Hurts? What hurts?"



Dad was quiet.

Mom said angrily, “Are you starting with your nonsense again? I’m sick of your fantasies.”

Dad didn’t answer. Mom got up, went to the kitchen for a glass of water, then went back to bed. After that, the house went quiet.

The next day, Mom and I went to the hairdresser’s. Shlomo, the hairdresser, was standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame in his white coat. When he saw Mom, he stood up straight and smoothed down his little Hitler mustache.

“What can I do for you today, Mrs. Weiss?” he asked in that flattering voice of his, flashing all his false teeth. I was always afraid his teeth would fall out because, whenever he talked, they moved up and down as if nothing was holding them in place.

“I’d like you to give the girl a haircut,” Mom said.

“Of course, of course,” said Shlomo, leading me inside. “We’ll give this young lady a hairstyle so lovely, she’ll be as beautiful as her mother, huh?” He looked at Mom, who smiled back at him like a gracious queen.

Shlomo put me on a tall chair and tied a cape around my neck. Then he opened a drawer and started pulling out all sorts of tools. Mom sat on the side, leafing through a magazine. Around us, on the walls, were pictures of movie stars, just like the ones I sometimes saw in Aunt Katya’s magazines. There was Ava Gardner, Lauren Bacall, and Rita Hayworth—whose name we couldn’t pronounce properly.

Shlomo came up to me holding the longest pair of scissors in the whole place. When I saw that, I jumped off the chair, threw the cape onto the floor, and ran out. From behind me, I heard Mom calling, but I kept running. Of course, she couldn’t chase after me. I crossed the street and hurried down the road. I passed Rosenberg’s grocery store, Levkovich’s shoe repair, and Aboudi’s dry goods store, walking further and further until I reached the school, which in the afternoon looked empty and sad. I didn’t want to go home and I didn’t know where else to go, so I wandered around a little longer until, finally, I climbed my hill.

A new sign had been placed there: “Caution! Construction Site.” A large tractor was working, biting into the red sand with its big scoop, toppling bushes and flowers one after another. I realized I had to find a new place. I watched the tractor, maybe for an hour, maybe half an hour—I don’t really

know. The sun was beginning to set when someone touched my shoulder. It was Dad.

“Let’s go home,” he said.

We walked quietly for a few minutes and then Dad said I should never do things like that because Mom wasn’t very strong, and after everything she’d been through in life, we needed to watch out for her nerves. He spoke as if we had a secret alliance of the strong. Even though I couldn’t really understand what Mom had been through, or what those nerves looked like, I agreed with him.

When we got near the house, I saw Mom at the window. But when we walked inside, she wouldn’t look at me, and she didn’t speak to me for the rest of the evening.

That night I didn’t dream at all. And when I woke up in the morning, only Dad was home.

“Mom’s at the hospital, and you have a little sister,” he told me.

Suddenly, I remembered. Right, a little sister.

I felt like a huge fish was swimming around inside my stomach.

Dad looked at me. “Aren’t you happy?” he asked.

He had a big smile on his face, and the crease between his eyebrows had completely disappeared. I knew I was supposed to be happy.

“Yes, I’m happy.”

Dad helped me get dressed. “You can give her the doll,” he said.

I remembered that stupid doll, sitting on a cushion in the living room with her glass eyes that don’t see anything.

“What if she doesn’t want it?”

“Then she doesn’t,” he said and laughed. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that Mom feels good. And soon, she’ll come home. Then you’ll have a real doll.”

## CHAPTER 6

I'm sitting next to Mom. Her bed is now in the living room. We turned her beautiful living room into a bedroom. Liza, the caregiver, sleeps nearby on a youth bed we brought in from another room. Across from Mom's bed, there's an old cabinet lined with delicate porcelain figurines. Dancers in stiff tutus, princesses in poofy, layered dresses, a shepherd playing a flute to a girl, a sheep nibbling grass. On a higher shelf there are colorful glass miniatures: a peacock, a stork, a galloping horse, a fish. Above them all, a wall clock.

"I got this clock from my brother," she tells me, and then tells me again.

"Yes, I know."

"He was here yesterday, my brother."

"Mom, your brother wasn't here yesterday."

She looks at me, offended. "I'm telling you he was. And I'm mad at him."

"Mom, your brother passed away many years ago."

"No, you're wrong," she tells me. "He brought me this clock from his shop yesterday. I asked for a different one, but he's cheap. He brought me one he just wanted to get rid of."

"Mom," I say softly, stroking her hair, "he died a long time ago."

I know. I'm cruel. Every time, I try again. But there are some things I can't accept. Sometimes she gets it, understands the time and place, and it brings her back—the Mom she used to be.

"Where are all my brothers and sisters?" she asks, right after we talk about her brother's death.

It hurts to tell her that they're all gone, except for one who's two years younger than her.

"But how can it be that they all died?"

"They were old, Mom. And sick."

Silence. She looks at her hands and says, "So how am I still here?"

"You're healthy. You're old, yes—but you're okay."

"I'm old? How old am I?"

"Ninety-five."

Mom stares at me in disbelief. She chuckles nervously. "No way. That can't be."

She looks again at her hands, still beautiful, despite her age. “These aren’t the hands of an old woman,” she says.

She’s right.

But, somehow, my words sink in. “So I’m completely alone now?”

“You’re not alone. You’ve got us, your daughters, and our families.” I show her pictures of everyone. Her eyesight’s weak. She looks at the pictures on my phone and pulls it close, but the images disappear quickly because her hands tremble.

“It’s not the same,” she says, her eyes reddening. “I’m alone.” Then she adds, “And don’t tell anyone I’m this old. It’s... it’s... I’m ashamed.”

On the living room walls hang paintings she bought over the years. Directly across from her bed is a reproduction of a Rembrandt portrait called *Portrait of an Old Jew*. The fact that she bought this painting surprised me—the old man in it looked so much like the photo we had of my grandfather hanging in our house. Not long ago, when I came to visit her, she suddenly pointed to the painting and told me, “That’s my father, you know?”

I was so stunned that I answered immediately, “What do you mean, Mom? That’s a Rembrandt painting.”

“But he painted my father...”

“Mom, that’s impossible. Rembrandt lived five hundred years ago...”

“I’m telling you, it’s my father.”

The next day, she points to the painting again and says, “He looks a lot like my father, but it’s not him. It’s just a painting, I know.”

The day after that, she’s back to being sure it’s her father.

I no longer respond. And if I do, I just go along with her—either way. But I wonder about her almost obsessive fixation on this image.

Whether it is her father or not, *that* father—the one she spent years criticizing for being irresponsible, for fathering child after child “without thinking for a second how he’d support them,” for the crushing poverty they lived in, for the hard life he doomed his family to—that father she now imagines looks at her every morning from the wall across from her bed. But the bitter words are gone. She doesn’t speak badly of him anymore. He’s just a figure now, called “father.”

When she’s not staring at the painting, she’s watching TV. The television is her refuge. And ours. I can’t imagine her lying or sitting around for hours, lost in a mental fog, without this colorful world opening up before

her eyes. The TV feeds her videos of dogs and cats and babies, of the world's most beautiful flowers, the world's most stunning landscapes—autumn scenes with soothing music, waterfalls with calming music, gorgeous gardens with relaxing music, embroidery tutorials, knitting, paper cutting, classical dance performances, and ethnic dance shows.

I sit by her bed. We're holding hands. Her delicate, soft hand rests inside mine. If she lets go for a second to scratch or brush her hair out of her eyes, she quickly brings her hand back into mine, like her life depends on it.

We stare at the screen—a video showing hands doing embroidery. A woman's hands stitching flowers onto a cloth. I slowly relax after my daily hustle. It feels nice. Quiet in the house. Quiet outside. The late-afternoon sun casts a gentle glow through the room. A wave of longing washes over me. For Mom's own stitching hands, for her knitting hands, for her cooking, for sitting by the kerosene heater on winter days, for the steady patter of rain in the gutters. For my dad sitting beside me, smelling of soap and tobacco, helping me with math homework.

The hair clip holding her hair has loosened and gray strands fall across her face. I get up to restore order. I brush her hair, now cascading over her shoulders. It's soft and naturally beautiful, gray. Even at her advanced age, it's still thick, almost like in the photos from her younger days. But back then it was shorter, curled and sprayed stiff, carefully maintained all week until her next salon visit. Now she looks more beautiful to me.

Mom loves beauty. I've said that before. Beauty is a pillar in her life. The house was always beautiful. Not trendy or fancy, but beauty rooted in light, cleanliness, the arrangement of furniture and objects. The kind of beauty that radiates hominess. And, of course, the flowers that adorned the table every Friday.

She often told me about the wide fields with wildflowers she used to escape to, running away from the cramped, poor house. In May, she told me, the forests would bloom with lilies of the valley. Her favorite flower of all. A small, fragrant plant that produces tiny clusters of white, bell-shaped flowers. "May bells," she called them longingly. That flower only grows in cold, snowy countries and, of course, my father never found it in any florist shop here in Israel. But he always bought her white flowers. Maybe to honor those flowers she loved so much.

"You embroider so beautifully," Mom says suddenly.

Me? I don't correct her. I'm resting now. Let her say whatever she wants.

If it comforts her to believe I'm the one embroidering on TV, then so be it.

When I walk through the door, her eyes light up and she showers me with words of affection I don't remember from my childhood. Every few minutes she tells me how much she loves me. How beautiful I am. How happy she is to see me. It's easy to love her now. We've both laid down our weapons. All the thorns have fallen away. What's left is just love. And tenderness. And compassion.

It wasn't always like this.

Many times, I felt like she disliked me—especially when she lumped me in with my father. In her eyes, we were made of the same stuff. The same front, formed against her.

"You stab me with your words, just like your father," she used to hurl at me. I don't remember my father ever using harsh words. But I do remember hers.

I was six, a tall little girl. My mother took me to Aviva's ballet class. Her studio sat at the top of a hill and, to get there, we had to climb stairs. A lot of stairs. At least that's how it seemed to me then. My mom was pregnant and, as we climbed, she panted and stopped to rest every few steps. When we reached the studio, she sat down on a chair to watch the class. Aviva's mother was there too. But her chair was a big, plush, velvet armchair with a high back, crowned with carved wooden flourishes like a royal throne.

That mother was said to have been a dancer once, and she constantly tossed comments and instructions at Aviva in a language I didn't understand. She even told Aviva which girl should play the role of Princess Odette in the *Swan Lake* piece we were dancing.

I wasn't that girl. Aviva put me at the end of the line.

When class ended, my mom exchanged a few quiet words with Aviva's mom off to the side. Then she gathered me up and we walked back down the stairs, heading home.

Ballet lessons suddenly stopped. At first, I didn't notice. But then I realized that a week had gone by, and another, and I hadn't had class. And I loved ballet so much. When I asked my mom why there was no ballet anymore, she said, "You're too tall. Dancers have to be light."

Her answer wasn't completely clear to me. I stood in front of the mirror and looked. True, I was tall. But what did "dancers have to be light" mean? Why should that stop me from going to ballet?

A few weeks later, I asked her again. “There’s no money right now,” she muttered.

I never forgot “You’re too tall. Dancers have to be light.” For years, I watched ballerinas. They never looked especially short to me. But yes, they always seemed light. And graceful. Was I really not light? Not graceful? I never asked to go back to ballet. But I never forgot that I wasn’t light. Or graceful.

Years ago she broke her arm. It was a nasty fracture—a full-on crush. I took her to the hospital. We waited for hours in the ER and when she was finally admitted, a young doctor—not someone who looked very experienced—took care of her. The fracture was close to her wrist and, for some reason, he thought that if he pulled her hand a certain way, he could set the bone back in place. He pulled and pulled—and Mom screamed in pain.

I stood at the far end of the room, terrified, and all I could think was, damn it, why can’t she just hold it in? I was angry at her—for letting herself scream like that. For not being able to control it. There wasn’t an ounce of compassion in me. I was frozen. I couldn’t say a single word. And that scared me.

Mom was in her sixties back then and the thought that one day I’d have to care for her in old age—or in sickness—worried me deeply. She’d be helpless and I wouldn’t be able to feel compassion. I knew I wouldn’t neglect her. I’d always take care of her and give her the best treatment possible. But I wouldn’t be able to do it out of affection. I didn’t like her.

Affection. What a beautiful word. A word filled with nothing but innocence, goodness, and calm. Like a ripple on a quiet lake. A whole word. Not like love, a sea of turmoil—swollen with waves, dragged by whirlpools, frothing with foam. A broken word, one that leaves room for pain, for hatred, for lack of affection.

“I miss my sister,” Mom says to me.

“Which sister?”

“My sister Sabina. Maybe we could go visit her?”

“Mom, Sabina’s been gone for a long time,” I say—this time, with reverence and care.

Mom looks at me with an expression that, for a moment, seems clear. “Right,” she says, “I forgot.”

She shakes her head and sighs. “Poor thing. Ten kids. Can you imagine? I

don't even remember my mother. I was four when she died. She died at thirty-eight. Sabina was our mother..."

Her nose turns red. She closes her eyes and tears push through her lashes. I'm surprised by how suddenly she's able to speak with such clarity and flow.

"So much poverty..." she says. "Did I tell you?"

Of course. She told me many times.

"Tell me again, Mom," I say.

She tells the story, but her sentences are broken. Now, she can't find many words, and then she drifts to other places. I have to gently bring her back again and again. But I remember well what she told me before—when her mind was still fully intact.

"We were eleven children," she always said. And here she would stop. "Eleven children. My father kept having kids non-stop. One every year. My mother died from a miscarriage. Not just a miscarriage. She gave herself a miscarriage. Like they used to do back then, with something you... put in... never mind." And here she would always stop again, and I'd shudder. "She died of an infection, that's what our older siblings told us. And my father—he didn't know what to do with us. He was so... nothing. There was never enough food at home. It was always cold. The house was so crowded. There were fights and yelling. And Sabina, the oldest sister, became our mother. Poor thing. She was only sixteen."

And here, her voice breaks. "Sabina was so good. She didn't deserve to die like that."

I was always amazed by how she could recall that story in the exact same order. A strange kind of consistency, like it was a monologue she'd memorized.

But now, all that's left of the story is: "She didn't deserve to die like that."

"How, Mom?"

"Like that," she says, blowing her nose into a tissue she always keeps clutched in her hand.

She tries to explain, but the words don't come. I can see the thought rise in her mind, drift around for a few seconds, and then vanish—like a cloud in the wind.

Of course I know what she means. Hidden in her words is a warning. A silent plea that we must not, ever, do to her what was done to her sister Sabina—"who ended up in one of those awful nursing homes."



## CHAPTER 7

A few months before my mother turned eighty, she started talking to me about a trip to Poland. She wanted to visit her friends. They'd been urging her to come, and she asked if I'd go with her. My mother's friends were a group of women, almost ten years younger than me, who came to Israel in the nineties as foreign workers. One of them had cared for my father when he was sick. My mother connected with her, as well as with all her friends who were also working in Israel. They were an educated group of women who couldn't find work in Poland. They grew attached to my mother and stayed in touch even after they went back to Poland. For my mother, this was a chance to relish once more in the Polish language she loved so much, in the Polish culture she'd been torn from as a young girl. Her homeland. She longed to speak again in Polish that wasn't laced with Yiddish or Hebrew—a clean Polish—and to be complimented on the beautiful way in which she speaks, still rich and precise after all these years away. Every holiday these women still call Mom and send greetings. To this day.

Suddenly, loving Jews had become trendy in Poland. A kind of fashion. Markets filled with Judaica. The Polish were falling in love with Jews—who would've thought? My mother's friends invited her to come visit.

At first, she hesitated. She had already gone to Poland once. She went with my father and hadn't planned to return. That trip was after the fall of communism. I don't remember being particularly interested in hearing about the trip, though I'm sure it deeply affected her. I've always resisted her attempts to share things that stirred her. I didn't like seeing her excited or joyful. When I was a little girl, she used to sing to herself while cooking or cleaning. Sometimes I'd see tears in her eyes as she sang. I remember closing my eyes and plugging my ears, praying she'd stop.

So, she hesitated at first, but one day she asked me—gently—if I'd be willing to go with her. Without thinking too hard, I said, "No." I didn't like her connection with those Polish women. It felt forced and fake. The Polish women seemed desperate to repent for the sins of their fathers, and my mother seemed just as desperate to reclaim the dignity she lost on Polish soil sixty years earlier.

She used to invite them to our Friday night family dinners. Every delicacy you could imagine was laid out on that table. And those poor women, whose lives had flipped upside down, were overwhelmed with gratitude. They wore their best clothes and sat at the table in reverent awe. I wasn't pleasant during those meals. I acted distant and snobbish. Not that I had anything against the guests. But the welcome my mother gave them, the gifts she showered them with, the lavish food she'd spent a week preparing, and all the compliments flying back and forth—they embarrassed me. I'd worked so hard to distance myself from all that: the culture, the language, the Polish past my parents came from. And here it was, slapping me in the face like a boomerang, clinging to me in a way I couldn't stand.

Among the women, there was G., a woman my mother particularly liked. One Friday night after dinner, my mother ceremoniously gave her a gift. It was a necklace I had bought for my mother—for a holiday or some special occasion. I was so stunned I couldn't say a word. I just stared as my mother fastened the necklace around her guest's neck, lifted strands of hair caught underneath it, admired how it looked—and I could feel the heat boiling in my stomach. Of course, my mother didn't notice. She asked me to bring the guest a mirror so she could see herself. I went to the bathroom and stood by the sink, looking at myself in the mirror. My face was flushed. My whole body was flushed. I was so hot I wanted to peel off my skin.

I tried to convince myself that maybe she just forgot that the necklace was from me. But, deep down, I knew—even if she had forgotten—it was yet another sign of how little value she placed on gifts we, her daughters, gave her. Whether it was carelessness or genuine forgetfulness, she never really knew how to receive gifts from us. There was always a comment tucked into her thank you. Something like, "I really don't need another necklace," or "How much did this cost you? You could've gotten it cheaper here," or "It's a nice blouse, but not really my color." And so on and so forth. I always wondered why she didn't feel the need to at least pretend she liked what we gave her, the way she did with gifts from other people.

In recent years, since the dementia started, she accepts gifts with joy. She gushes over the smallest thing. A day later she forgets who gave her what.

"I want to give you everything I never got myself. I want you to have a good life. I say this for your own good."

That was one of her justifications. And there were always justifications. Lots of them. About how I lived, how I dressed, how I kept my home, how

I cooked, how I raised my kids. Sometimes she'd say something offhand, and I'd snap. I'd yell. We'd fight. I always wanted to win, to prove something to her. But she'd drop out of the argument quickly: "I don't know how to talk like you," or "I don't feel well," or "I'm too tired." What can you say to "I don't feel well"? So the resentment piled up and came out in stabs, in unexpected places.

Two days before I gave birth, my mother broke her ankle and couldn't help me, as was "protocol" for a grandmother post-labor. So, to ease her guilt, she hired a nurse to live in our house for ten days and help me get organized. The problem was that my mother didn't trust the nurse completely and, over the phone, she'd give me advice that contradicted the nurse's rules and routines.

No one asked what I thought, of course. Honestly, I was so overwhelmed by the birth that I didn't even think about the annoyances waiting for me back home. So instead of bonding quietly and intimately with this new little wonder, my husband and I ended up hosting a strange, bossy, fleshy woman who had invaded

our home.

"You go to bed," she commanded in a booming voice.

I didn't resist. I was so drained from the birth and all the excitement that bed sounded like a great idea. I went. But the baby's soft cries from the other room got me up. I tried to go to my son, but Nurse Rachel stood between me and the crib, her body blocking the way.

"Sit there," she ordered. "I'll bring him to you to nurse." That was all I was allowed to do—sit in the armchair and nurse. I felt like a milk machine.

Soon it turned out that even that job wasn't really mine. Unfortunately, demand far outpaced supply.

"Well, there's no choice," the nurse declared. "We'll have to give him a bottle." After she fed him, she said, "Now there should be quiet. From now on, he should eat every four hours." But my baby didn't know about the four-hour rule. He wanted to eat every two.

Rachel was furious. "I don't understand this. You can't feed a baby every two hours. I've never seen anything like it." She was like the echo of Dr. Sharashvesky, the Israeli twin of Dr. Spock, the American child-rearing guru. And I believed her. Something must be wrong with my baby, I thought. I have to teach him, I decided. He can't be this hungry. He's only a week old.

The nurse left after ten days. And then my mother's voice entered the picture—louder than ever: "Let him eat when he wants. You're starving him. It'll work itself out. Just once, listen to me. I know what I'm talking about."

Wow. I couldn't take it. Already frayed and exhausted from Nurse Rachel's infuriating rules, I exploded. I argued with her. I yelled. Years of rebellion against her motherly criticism all poured into that one moment—when my child's upbringing was at stake. My child. And in my mind, I thought, I'm not going to learn how to raise my child from you. You're no example. I'll do it better than you did. That was my instinctive response to everything she ever said. She had this way of lighting a fireball in me. Only she could do that. No one else. Over the years—many, many years—I'd learned to train myself not to react to every comment. But that fireball? It was still there, rolling around. It took effort.

I lasted two, maybe three days of the whole "every four hours" routine, during which I mourned the nurse's departure. Eventually, I caved. I fed the baby whenever he wanted. And he stopped crying.

When my mother heard I had refused to travel with her, she almost gave up. Going alone was out of the question.

I'd said no, but inside I didn't feel at peace with that no. My conscience nagged at me. My heart wouldn't let me turn down a request like that. A woman wanting to visit her homeland in the twilight of her life. I wasn't going to be the one to take that away from her.

I told her yes—but with one condition: We would visit her friends for a few days, and then we would take a heritage trip that would cover her entire journey through the Holocaust.

My mother looked at me, frightened, "I don't know if I can..." she said, her voice trembling. "It might be too hard for me... I need to think about it."

But after convincing myself to go with her, I'd already made up my mind.

I felt like it was worth taking this trip. Not just worth it—it was important. That maybe, being close to her in those difficult places, those killing fields, might finally break the wall between us. And that one day, I'd be able to have compassion for her. Maybe even love her. Maybe even like her.

She finally accepted my condition. The pull of seeing her homeland again was just too strong. Or maybe she thought that being in those places wouldn't be harder than remembering them in the stories she'd told for

years. I packed a little executive tape recorder to document all her stories. The tiny cassettes are still buried in the back of my nightstand drawer. I never listened to them. I remember all the stories. At least I hope I do.

## CHAPTER 8

We landed in Warsaw.

The language that surrounded me in childhood—the one I hated because it wasn't Hebrew, the one that set me apart from the native-born children, the language of newspapers and books, the language they used with their friends. Their language.

Now it drowned me. I heard it everywhere. Through the airport speakers, from the cab driver who drove us to the hotel, from the receptionist, from the bellhop. Here it wasn't a language to hide anymore. It was so strange—how legitimate it sounded. How natural it was. My mother stood taller, somehow, and her Polish sounded more refined than ever. I watched the people she spoke to, wondering if they'd hear something odd in her speech—a foreign accent, old-fashioned phrases. But no. Later I understood—her language was flawless. On the contrary—her Polish was exquisite and up-to-date even after fifty-five years away.

And me... I felt almost at home.

Even though my parents had made a point of speaking Hebrew with me, as far back as I can remember, this language—Polish—the one I heard from the day I was born, had settled inside me. It had taken root. Whether I liked it or not. The same goes for Yiddish. Polish and Yiddish were like oil and water in our home. My father loved Yiddish. But to my mother, Yiddish was something a little shameful. Small-town narrow-mindedness of poverty and inferiority that she spent her life trying to shake off. She always preferred Polish. I remember my father sitting in the living room, tuning the radio to Hebrew news, and then turning the dial, lining up the green-glow pointer to a station that broadcasts in Yiddish. When he found it, he'd lean back in his chair with a satisfied smile, close his eyes, and listen.

She never joined him.

He also loved Yiddish theater—especially Dzigan and Shumacher.

She didn't.

I remember her exchanging books at the Polish library, tucked in the basement of a mini-mall on Allenby Street. A thick, green hardcover always sat beside her bed. "It's a great poem by Adam Mickiewicz," she told me when I asked. "Have you heard of him?" No. "He was the national poet of

Poland. Like your Bialik. Well, ours,” she corrected herself. Sometimes I saw her leaf through the book, then close it and sigh, “There’s never been another poet like him.”

We’re standing at the Umschlagplatz, the square on the northern edge of the Warsaw Ghetto from which Jews were deported to the concentration camps. I set up the recorder, and Mom looks around, trying to identify the spot where she escaped. She was fifteen, alone with her father in the ghetto. The family had scattered—some siblings had fled to Russia, her eldest sister had taken the two youngest girls to another ghetto. In the Warsaw Ghetto there was hunger. Disease. People were murdered daily. The streets were filled with corpses. My mother and her father were starving. The hunger pains were unbearable. Her father begged her to run away.

You’re young, he told her. You still have strength. I’ll die here anyway.

Did she struggle with the decision? I don’t know. She never told me. And I never asked. She didn’t love that father. I didn’t want to hear her speak ill of him. Or maybe I was afraid that asking would stir her guilt. I’m not sure.

We look at the plaque on the memorial wall: “From here they were taken...”

“It’s rare that I managed to escape,” she says. “There weren’t many escapes from this ghetto. Some kids could slip through holes in the fences, sell stuff and sneak back in. But to run away like I did—I don’t know if many pulled it off.”

“You were so courageous,” I say, amazed.

My mother gives me a puzzled look.

“Courageous? Not courage. There was no choice. And mostly—luck.”

“Why do you always downplay it? Making that decision, actually getting out—is that just luck?”

She goes quiet for a moment, then says thoughtfully,

“Maybe. Maybe it wasn’t just luck...”

But she’ll return to that idea of luck again and again throughout the trip.

She points to the tracks.

“All day, trains ran through here. Constantly. You know, more and more people were brought in. Soldiers stood all around. I escaped in a moment when one train was leaving and another was just pulling in. I slipped between them. I ran fast. I had nothing to lose. People in the ghetto were dying like flies. Either way, I would die. But a fifteen-year-old girl can’t agree to die. Do you understand? A girl that age can’t comprehend it. She

can't picture herself lying dead in the street like the bodies she sees every day. I had this sort of stupid belief that I wouldn't let it happen to me. I wouldn't be one of the bodies." She looks at me. "Maybe that's what saved me."

She scans the surroundings again.

"Everything's changed so much. I can't say exactly which way I ran. There was a soldier. He saw me running. But the moment I looked at him, he turned his head—pretended to adjust his uniform. I ran like crazy across the tracks until I made it to the Aryan side. A regular street, with people and stores, just a few meters from the ghetto border. I remember my shock. People walking calmly, dressed nicely, with no idea what was happening two blocks away. I stopped, trying not to attract attention, to catch my breath. Calm down. I stood in front of a bakery—or maybe it was a pastry shop, I can't remember. The smells were dizzying. I was so hungry. People were waiting inside in line. I remember a mother and daughter coming out. The girl had braids tied with red ribbons. One hand in her mother's, the other clutching a bread roll she was biting into. They were dressed identically. Plaid dresses with matching green wool capes. So clean and polished. I thought they probably stand in front of the closet in the morning, and the mother picks out clothes that match. Maybe the girl doesn't always want to wear what the mother chooses, so they argue, and the mom tries to convince her. Long story short... troubles.

"That bakery was on the corner of a side street," my mother searches with her eyes, trying to place it. "I think it was there." She points toward a corner shop beneath a large residential building. "I turned into that alley, and suddenly, out of nowhere, a gang of boys attacked me. Polish boys. No one else was around. I didn't even scream. I was too afraid to draw attention. I fought them, but there were four, maybe five. They started tearing at my clothes. They were looking for money, food—I could tell by what they said. You know, the Poles were hungry too. A lot of people lost their homes. Homeless kids ran around in gangs. They threw me to the ground. Another second and they would've killed me. Then I heard someone shout in German, and suddenly everything went quiet. They jumped up and bolted, like the Angel of Death was chasing them. I slowly got up and looked around. The street was empty. But at the corner I saw a figure disappearing. Just the edge of a boot. I'm sure it was that soldier—the one who saw me run. He saved me."



She goes silent for a moment, then says, “Do you understand now why I say luck...?”

I pretend something’s wrong with the tape. It was a good idea to bring it. I turn the knobs, smooth the tape that doesn’t actually need smoothing, and think to myself—what happens to memories after so many years? Did it really happen that way? I don’t know. But I do know how stories are built. How we fill in what’s missing based on what we need. Maybe that German soldier really did save her. But maybe the shout was actually in Polish. Maybe it wasn’t even a soldier who yelled, but just a passerby. Or maybe there was no shout at all, and the boys just ran off because someone was coming, or because they realized she had nothing worth stealing. Or maybe—maybe my mother just needed a sign. Some proof that there was still goodness in the world.

Finally, I look up.

“And what did you do then?” I ask.

“The first thing I did was tear off the yellow badge. I was so used to it, it didn’t even occur to me to hide it. Those boys saw I was Jewish and that gave them permission to attack me. I don’t know if they would’ve dared if they’d thought I was a Polish girl. Then I got up and started walking. I wandered around the city. I slept in stairwells. I don’t remember much from that time but, in the end—I ended up in another ghetto.”

“What??”

“You heard me. I was so lonely. I lived in constant fear. I had no documents. I was always hungry. I worked odd jobs, lived hand to mouth. I had nowhere to go. I was looking for Jews. I was looking for family.”

We rest a bit at a nearby café. It’s a hot summer day. People are strolling leisurely. There’s a small market nearby—piles of fruit and vegetables and baked goods. We buy some grapes and a few apples.

“You know, when I was a child, we barely ate fruit. There weren’t all these kinds and, if there were—who had money to buy them? I remember when I first came to Israel, my sister-in-law took me to Carmel Market. I was stunned. By a few things. First, by the noise and the mess, the shouting vendors—I couldn’t understand how she could walk through that place. But after the initial shock, I opened my eyes and was amazed by the abundance of fruit and vegetables. The size, the colors, the freshness. I’d never seen anything like it. There were vegetables and fruits I didn’t even recognize.

She had already been in Israel for fifteen years, and she cooked dishes I had never tasted.”

“But you didn’t exactly learn from her,” I laughed. I loved visiting that aunt—Aunt Rachel, my father’s only sister, who’d immigrated to Israel in the 1930s. Aunt Rachel was a soldier in the British Army and she even served in Egypt. Maybe that’s where she learned to cook all those dishes that never once appeared on our family’s table.

“True,” my mother said. “That was because of your father. He only liked my cooking.”

Well, Dad was to blame for a lot of things. Probably this too.

We continue to the Jewish cemetery of Warsaw.

I stand, overwhelmed, before a sea of gravestones, moved almost to tears. Giant trees cast their shade over this magnificent garden. I look across hundreds of years of history. Thousands of headstones. Some grand, some simple. Many tilted into the ground, leaning on each other, overburdened with sorrow. The inscriptions aren’t always legible. We walk the paths, stepping on soft layers of leaves like in a secret forest, encountering writers, poets, great rabbis, wealthy men and ordinary folks. Here’s Janusz Korczak’s memorial. There, a mass grave. The grave of Mrs. Yentl Weiss, who died young and was buried with her baby. Next to her—her husband Abraham, who died half a century later.

Inscriptions in Hebrew. Yiddish. Polish. This cemetery tells the story of centuries—of wise, kind, and generous men and women. Of family sorrow, of bad deaths and good ones—a few deaths from old age. Many more from disease, hunger, plague.

My mother pauses by a grave with a familiar last name carved on it—her grandparents’ surname. Her mother’s parents. She stops breathing for a moment and covers her mouth. Of course, this couldn’t be her grandmother’s grave—her grandparents were taken to the death camps. But maybe a distant relative? Maybe. She picks up a small stone and places it gently on the gravestone.

Our next stop is Łódź. We check into a hotel on the main street. The buildings here are beautiful, worn down by time and neglect. No one here has heard of restoration or preservation. Our hotel is one of those buildings—a sort of crumbling palace with enormous rooms, ornate cornices, velvet

curtains dulled by dust, and worn carpets stretched across creaky wooden floors.

The wide staircase leading down to the lobby reminds me of the one on which Cinderella lost her glass slipper.

A young man with Slavic features dressed in a ceremonial uniform stands like a sentry at the bottom of the stairs. He bows slightly as we pass. I think about my mother—how a Polish man is bowing to her. A Pole bowing to a Jew. She gives him a small nod in return, slightly haughty, as befits the lady she now is.

In the lobby we order coffee. We hear Hebrew.

A group of Israelis are headed to a nearby town to visit family graves. “Graves of holy and pure souls who perished during the war,” one of them says. Turns out, my grandfather—my mother’s father—was born in that same town, and surely some relatives are buried there.

I remember a photograph of my grandfather that used to hang on one of the walls in our home when I was a child. I have no idea how the photo survived the war, but one day my mother took it down.

“We don’t need him here,” she muttered, half to herself, scowling.

The next day, when I went to take out the trash, I found the picture in the garbage. Torn. The frame dismantled. The glass shattered.

I asked her why. That picture had been in our house forever.

“He may have been my father,” she said, “but he wasn’t a good father.”

To my child’s eyes, he looked like a good man. His eyes were kind. A little sad. I couldn’t understand how someone could say something like that about their father, but I didn’t ask. The look she gave me when she said it made it clear I shouldn’t.

And when we were in Łódź, she absolutely refused to go to that cemetery. Eventually, she said, “Not everyone was saintly. My Holocaust started before the war.”

I’d heard her say that sentence before, many times. But every time I asked what she meant—not really wanting to hear the answer, rather more out of duty—I got no reply. This time she added a few more words: “No one ever takes into account that there was life before the war. And, in that life, bad things happened. Things Jews did, too. Like any other people. There were families—and not all of them were good.”

I let it go.

I was afraid of what I’d hear. Maybe I was also afraid the truth would be

so horrible that I'd be forced to feel compassion. And I just wasn't ready for that.

"Your mother is a remarkable woman," says M., one of my mother's friends. We're standing inside her flower shop in a town in northwestern Poland that we reached during our trip. She opened the shop after returning from Israel, once she'd saved up some money. It's a beautiful shop. Not just flowers—vases, decorative items, and lots of Judaica. It's a little strange. There aren't any Jews in this town near the Baltic Sea, and yet every gift store is packed with figurines of klezmer musicians, eight-branched menorahs, and hamsas. A lot of hamsas.

Whenever someone says my mother is a remarkable woman, I feel torn. That mixture—two sides inside one woman—doesn't settle easily in me. Even though I know that every remarkable person has parts that are less remarkable. Still, when I hear the compliment, I nod and smile. Sometimes I even say, "I know."

When someone says the same thing about my father—that he was a remarkable man—I feel whole. To me, my father was good through and through, inside and out.

But not to my mother. "You don't really know him," she would sometimes say to me. "He knows how to hurt me perfectly. He'll say something that cuts like a knife straight into my heart." And often she'd add, "As do you."

Like I said—every remarkable person has less remarkable parts, and maybe those parts only come out with certain people. My father may not have been the exception.

Still, I identified with him. Of course, I couldn't judge. But he always struck me as more worthy of compassion. I followed the pull of my heart. And my heart told me she was the one who started it.

"For you, he always has money," was something my mother often said. It was true. Anything I asked for, I got. Always. She, on the other hand, had to manipulate to get what she wanted.

Now I see how awful that was. My mother was a housewife, like many women of her generation, entirely financially dependent on my father. It's hard for me to speak badly of him. But he must have made her life difficult. And she repaid him with condescension.

On second thought, I don't know who started it.

## CHAPTER 9

The summer humidity is killing mom. That's why we're going to Jerusalem. To a health resort. Only sometimes she takes me with her. Most times she leaves me with Aunt Vera or Aunt Esther. This time she only left Smadar, my little sister, with Aunt Esther.

But why a health resort? I don't really know. It's not like either of us is sick. Mom says it's good for her nerves. I don't totally get the nerves thing. On the one hand, she says the war ruined her nerves completely. On the other hand, sometimes she tells me, "You're going to ruin my nerves." Which means she must still have a few left.

So we drive to Jerusalem in our little car. Dad drives because, even though Mom has a license, she doesn't drive. Dad doesn't trust her and by now she doesn't trust herself either. It's weird, because Dad failed the test around seven times and Mom passed on her first try. But every time Mom wants to take the car, Dad offers to go with her. He says she's not confident enough. And he's right. Her confidence is so low that she finally decided she shouldn't drive at all.

As the car climbs up the road, Mom starts again with how the old clunker can't take hills anymore and it's time to get a new one. But Dad won't let go of the car—he's the only one who drives it anyway—and every time Mom says something bad about it, he loves it more and takes even better care of it.

In Jerusalem the houses are big, with iron gates, and the streets are full of bearded men wearing black clothes and black hats, walking fast along the streets. But the health resort is tucked into a grove of cypresses and pine trees.

As the car approaches, I can already smell the scent that's supposed to heal my mother. That dry, piney smell, like the little public garden at the end of our street. "This smell reminds me of my childhood," Mom once said as we walked past it and, when she said that, her eyes filled with tears and she went all soft, like a feather pillow.

The building's entrance has round columns and arches and inside there are high ceilings and patterned tile floors. Dad drops the suitcases at the reception desk and says to me, "Take care of your mom, let her rest, okay?"

We get a big room with two beds, a sink, and a wardrobe. The bathroom's down the hall. Mom opens the suitcase and starts putting her dresses away—the red one, the blue one, the orange-green one, and the yellow one with brown stripes that Tzipora sewed for her this year, the one that makes her look like a tiger. When Tzipora, the seamstress, comes over, the house fills with fabrics and threads and words like *demi-saison*, *haute couture*, *brocade*, *organza*, and *décolleté*. Tzipora fits my mom for dresses and says:

“Mrs. Naomi, I’ve never seen a waistline like yours. And, believe me, in my work I see a lot.” Or, “You have such a beautiful *décolleté*, Mrs. Naomi, and that bust—like a seventeen-year-old’s.” Mom always tells Tzipora not to exaggerate, but it never works.

When Tzipora is at our place, she sews for me too. She and Mom stand over me and consult—what cut won’t make my shoulders look too wide, what pattern won’t make me look fat, what collar won’t shorten my neck, what fabric will fall nicely, fit well, hold my body the right way. When I try the dresses on, Tzipora says: “You look nothing like your mother. Who do you take after? Completely different body. Completely different.”

Mom finishes putting her clothes in the wardrobe and we leave to check out the bathrooms. This is how things work in the shared bathrooms: In the mornings, everyone lines up in their new robes and new slippers they bought just for the vacation. No one talks and no one wants to be looked at. Everyone stares off into a corner like the others don’t exist. Mom says the shower isn’t all that clean, but never mind—we’ll shower in flip-flops so we don’t catch anyone’s fungi, and we won’t sit on the toilet seat because we don’t know who sat there before us.

Later, we go down to the reception desk and Mom tells the clerk, “On Friday, please add a bed to our room for my husband.” When Mom says “my husband,” it gives me a nice feeling. The clerk writes it down, and I think to myself, everything’s okay with us.

Dad doesn’t come with us on vacations. He says you can’t just close the business like that. Sometimes he visits at the end of the week. When he does, I try to make sure everything pleases him. In the dining room, I keep an eye on him to see if he likes the food. He eats everything but, at the end of the meal, he says to Mom in Yiddish that it lacks flavor. This really means: It’s nothing like your cooking, and nothing else will ever please me.

When he says that, Mom looks at him half-angry and half-amused. Angry, because it’s impossible to travel anywhere with him or eat at restaurants.

Amused—well, that part's obvious. At home, when Dad gets back from work in the evening, Mom always serves him a hot meal and waits to see how he'll smack his lips in delight and nod to show her he's satisfied. Dad doesn't talk much. He wouldn't even say a word if Mom didn't have dinner ready for him (which never happens) but, maybe because of that, people really listen when he does talk. And when he says the food at the resort isn't tasty, it ruins everything for me.

In general, I don't even get why he loves Mom's food so much. I really don't like it. At our neighbor Malka's, the food is way better—fries and eggplants and grilled chicken and stuffed vegetables and spicy salads and figs and olives. At our house, it's just white chicken floating in noodle soup, sweet carrots called "tsimmes," and boiled fruit compote that Malka says has been cooked so much it's lost all its vitamins. If Mom ever tries to cook something like Malka's food, Dad smiles that weird smile I hate and leaves half the plate untouched. Mom gets mad and mutters something to the kitchen wall.

When Dad comes to visit us at the resort, I'm constantly guarding him. I make sure he wears a nice shirt and ask him to clean out the black stuff under his nails from work. I ask him to put on the good aftershave Mom bought so the smell of work disappears and to take part in the conversation with the people Mom met during the vacation. I know that if I don't do all that, Mom will later say he doesn't dress properly, his hands look like a laborer's, and he isn't friendly to her friends.

Usually Dad doesn't respond to those comments.

He's like a deep well filling up slowly with everything Mom says. And I don't know what will happen if he ever fills up all the way. That's why I have to protect Mom too. I keep her from being *too* friendly with the new people she meets. When I see her connecting with someone, I call her or talk to her or try to pull her away because, if I don't, she'll be even less nice to Dad when he visits. She'll compare him to everyone else. And later, at home, when Mom tells Dad about all the wonderful, interesting people she met on vacation, he'll say she's too naive, that she gets too excited about people and ends up disappointed. He'll say that other people matter more to her than her own family. Then they'll start arguing.

Mom will try to answer but, as usual, she won't actually be able to because Dad starts bringing up all kinds of past examples to prove he's right.

Then Mom gets completely fed up and says he's putting her on trial and

it's too bad he's not a real lawyer, just an amateur. I don't totally get it but, at the end of those trials, Mom always goes to the bedroom, sits on the bed, cries quietly, clenches her fists and mutters things to herself that I don't understand. And it's scary.

In moments like these, all I can do is bring Mom a glass of water, or stroke her head, or tell her something cheerful that happened at school. But, at the same time, I also have to check on Dad, to make sure he's not about to have a heart attack.

Even though Mom always talks about heart attacks and how we shouldn't upset Dad too much, Dad's never had one. As always after a fight, he sits on the couch, smoking, eyes locked on some distant spot on the wall. If he ever did have a heart attack, maybe Mom would run to him and do something—maybe even hug him. But this way, I'm the responsible one. And I really don't know what to do. In these moments, when we've reached the last straw, like my teacher, Bella, says, I come down with a little heart attack of my own. My stomach starts to ache. It hurts so much I have to lie down. Then Mom rushes to the kitchen to make me tea and Dad sits next to me, stroking my hair, singing me a sad song in Yiddish. And then I know everything will be okay. I fall asleep for a bit and, when I wake up, Mom's in the armchair knitting and Dad's by the radio, fiddling with the knobs.

It was always like that. But this summer, I'm definitely older. And I hope maybe Mom and Dad have grown up a little too, and maybe they'll understand that they can't act like children. Maybe this time I won't have to protect them quite so much.

In the morning Mom and I head down to the dining room, which smells like omelets and coffee and plastic dishes. We load up our trays and sit down. Someone walks over and asks if they can join us—a man with a boy. I hope Mom will say no, but she says, "Of course, go ahead."

The man looks familiar, though I can't place him. He reaches out a hand to Mom and me and says, "Nice to meet you. Aryeh<sup>1</sup> Fox." Then he introduces his son, "This is Aharon." Aharon is probably two years younger than me—short, chubby, and covered in freckles.

Mom says, "Nice to meet you. I'm Naomi, and this is my daughter, Tova."<sup>2</sup> I hate that name. It belonged to my grandmother who died in the Holocaust. I once told Mom I didn't like it, and she said I should be glad she didn't name me Gitl, which was Grandma's actual name. "Tova is the



Hebrew version,” she said. “And just so you know,” she added, “that name obligates you to be *truly* good.”

But I wasn’t as good as she wanted me to be.

Aryeh and Aharon sit with us and we start eating. Aryeh has long fingers, clean nails, and a gold ring with a red stone. He offers us the bread basket and says, “Please, help yourselves.” His eyes are on Mom the whole time. Where do I know him from? It’s on the tip of my tongue. Mom doesn’t seem to notice him watching her. She takes two slices of bread, thanks him politely, and turns to fix our plates.

Aryeh turns to me. “Do you know how to play checkers?”

“Yes.”

“There’s a tournament tomorrow,” he says with a smile. “And in two days, there’s a ping-pong tournament.”

“I don’t know how to play ping-pong.”

“No problem,” Aryeh says, stroking Aharon’s hair. “Aharon will teach you. Right, Aharon?”

Aharon nods, his face still buried in his plate.

“Do you know how deep the pool is?” Aharon asks. Aryeh cuts his omelet with a knife and fork. The red ring glints on his finger.

I thought of Dad. Dad has a gold watch and diamond-studded cufflinks. But he keeps them in a box in the closet and never wears them. I once asked him why, and he laughed and said, “Picture me wearing them at the printing press—does it make sense?” I laughed with him. It *definitely* didn’t make sense. But then Mom chimed in, “But you *could* wear them when we go out, couldn’t you?” I instantly regretted asking, because I knew she’d start bugging him about his hands always being so black and how he’s never elegant—the way she likes him. “Right, I’ll think about it,” Dad said, winking at me. He was in a good mood, and I was so happy. I knew he’d never actually think about it. When someone says “I’ll think about it,” it just means they’re avoiding an argument. That’s what Dad did.

Aharon looks at me and asks again, “Do you know how deep the pool is?”

“No, how deep is it?” I ask. What a pest.

“Like, four meters. And I know how to dive headfirst off the big diving board.”

Baby.

“There’s a really nice grove here—you can go on walks,” Aryeh says, glancing at my mother.

“Really?” Mom responds.

Mom doesn’t say much and she isn’t trying to be charming. It’s a little strange. Maybe she’s thinking about what Dad always tells her, and that’s why she’s holding back. Or maybe she’s just not interested in all this chatter about what there is to do around here—because, when she’s on vacation, she just likes to sit in a lounge chair and grow her nerves.

Aharon asks if I want to go to the pool. Mom looks at me and nods.

Aryeh says enthusiastically, “You should! The pool’s great.”

I agree.

We leave Mom and Aryeh in the dining hall and go change into our swimsuits. On the way, we run into Effi, Aharon’s older brother.

“Aharon, where’s Dad?” Effi asks.

“In the dining hall.”

“And where are you going?”

“To the pool.”

Effi looks at me. He’s older than I am, with a swoopy forelock that falls over his eyes. He looks nothing like Aharon—neither in body nor in face. I pretend I’m not interested in him and keep walking. “I’m coming too,” Effi says from behind.

I keep walking like I didn’t hear him. But once I’m out of their sight, I dash to the room and put on the new bathing suit Mom bought me—two-piece, light blue. I tighten the top to push my breasts up a little. They’ve just started growing, so it doesn’t really work. I let my hair down, then pull it up again, and check myself from every angle in the mirror.

When I get to the pool, Aharon and Effi are already splashing each other.

“Let’s race—two laps!” Aharon shouts.

“Forget it, I’ll beat you,” Effi says, and dives under.

Aharon pops up on Effi’s shoulders. Effi face has reddened, his body shaking with the effort. He holds Aharon steady while looking straight at me, until Aharon crashes down into the water laughing and squealing.

I climb onto the small diving board, stretch forward, and dive in headfirst.

Effi swims toward me. “You don’t dive well,” he says.

“Better than you,” I swim toward the railing.

“You haven’t seen me dive—how do you know?”

he laughs.

I dive underwater and swim away from him. Under the water, I open my eyes and see Aharon’s pudgy legs. I swim toward him and surprise him. We

start splashing each other. I jump on his shoulders and push him under. He breaks free and lunges at me, trying to dunk me into the water. We're laughing and shrieking, dunking each other again and again. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Effi. He's swimming lap after lap with perfect, graceful strokes. Aharon gets tired and climbs out, dripping, and sits on a bench by the pool.

Suddenly someone grabs me from behind and dunks my head under. Effi. I struggle to break free and start kicking. He lets go. His face contorts in pain, his body curls up in the water. The lifeguard jumps in and swims to him. He says something to Effi and helps him out of the pool. I think I hit him in the balls. I've seen boys double over like that before. I panicked. Effi is pale and can't straighten up.

I keep swimming, glancing at him from time to time. Slowly, he calms down. I get out of the pool and go look for Mom.

At the health resort there's a beautiful garden with a big lawn and a pine grove. From a distance, I see Mom and Aryeh sitting in lounge chairs. Now she's being nice to him. I can see them talking and laughing. Aryeh reaches out and strokes Mom's arm. When I get closer, he pulls his hand away.

"And how's the young lady?" he asks.

"I'm fine," I mumble, hoping Effi won't tell him about the kick.

"Weren't you with Aharon at the pool?"

"Yes, I was. But I left. They stayed there. Mom, let's go to the room," I say, hoping we can shake him.

"Yes," Mom says. "You shouldn't be walking around in your bathing suit. It's a bit chilly."

They get up and I run ahead toward the room. Suddenly I trip on a sprinkler and fall onto the grass. Something sharp cuts my leg and blood starts running down in little streams.

"Oh my goodness, there's so much blood," Mom hurries over, panicked.

"It's fine," says Aryeh, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to stop the bleeding. He wraps it around my leg. "We'll take you to the infirmary," he says and lifts me up from the grass. "Lean on me."

He puts his arm under my armpit and I hobble beside him. He smells like cigarettes and aftershave. It irritates me and I pull away.

"I don't need help," I say. "I can walk by myself."

"This is exactly what I need..." Mom says when we get back to the room, "Can't you be more careful? You're such a wild thing."

Just like at home—I'm a wild thing here too. I've already caused trouble: kicked Effi in the balls, cut my leg, and now I'm starting to hate Aryeh. I hope Mom won't regret bringing me this time.

I can't go to the pool. The medic told me to come by every day to change the bandage.

In the evening we see Aryeh, Aharon, and Effi in the dining hall.

"I don't want to sit with them," I whisper to Mom. They don't see us, and we sit somewhere else.

"Where's their mother, anyway?" I ask.

"She died," Mom says.

"From what?"

"A disease." I can feel Mom speaking more briefly.

"What kind of sickness?"

"I don't know."

When Mom avoids questions like that, I know I should keep asking.

"Try and think, please, what did she die from?" I press.

"They don't really know."

"But what did she feel?"

Then I remember—Mom didn't even know the Fox family before the health resort.

"She died of sadness," Mom says.

Sadness? That doesn't sound real. I see Mom and Dad sad all the time, but dying from it? Suddenly I start feeling scared. I remember all the fairy tales I've read about people who died of sorrow. Maybe it's real after all.

"But how did she die? Did she just lie in bed and suddenly die?"

"Enough with the questions," Mom answers. "I don't know exactly—I'm not even friends with them."

I start to feel sorry for Effi and Aharon—that they don't have a mom. But the more I think about it, the more I figure maybe it's not so terrible. At least they have each other. And their dad seems like the kind of person you can share secrets with, laugh with, go on trips with, play ping-pong, row a boat. Their house must be happy—not like ours. Silence. Tombstone. Mom and Dad are quiet with each other like a dog and cat forced to live under the same roof.

After dinner we go out to the lawn and somehow find ourselves with Aryeh and his sons again. Effi didn't hold a grudge about the kick in the balls—he even asks if I know how to play chess.

“Only checkers.”

“You know there’s a checkers tournament the day after tomorrow?” he asks.

“Yeah, your dad told me.”

“So let’s see who wins,” he says. “I have a board in our room.”

I don’t want to go with him alone.

“Aharon, are you coming with us?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says. “I know how to play checkers too.”

“Then we’ll have a championship,” I say.

“Ugh,” Effi groans, kicking at the grass.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he says, twisting his face.

We walk together to their room. I’m glad Aharon walks between us because I know if Effi gets too close, he’ll feel the goosebumps on my arms and the pounding in my temples.

Their room doesn’t look like ours. Clothes everywhere, shoes, newspapers. You can tell they don’t have a mother. Effi pulls the checkers board from his suitcase and we head to the small balcony with a table and two chairs.

“You sit on the railing,” Effi tells Aharon.

“I don’t want to,” Aharon complains. “You always take the best seat.”

“That’s okay,” I say. “I’ll sit there.”

“Must be nice not having a little brother,” Effi says. “Do you know what little brothers are like? You always have to give in to them. ‘Effi, clean up Aharon’s toys,’” he mimics their dad. “‘Effi, watch Aharon. Effi, Effi.’ My dad spoils him all the time.”

I know what a little sibling is like. I have one too. A younger sister. They spoil her too. She stayed with Aunt Esther, Mom’s younger sister. Aunt Esther is still single and loves looking after my sister. Mom always criticizes her for going out all the time, for not having her act together, for losing her mind, for picking the wrong friends—but when it comes to my sister, she trusts her completely. I once heard Mom joking to Dad, “She’ll run off with the baby one day, you’ll see.”

It’s actually a good thing that Mom has Esther, even if Esther sometimes causes trouble. Esther and Mom were quite close when they were little. And if Mom doesn’t have a mother, and her older sister, who practically raised her, lives in the States now, well—at least she has Esther. And also Aunt Vera, but I’ll talk about her later.

"I don't need you," Aharon whines. "I'm going to play ping-pong."

"I'll come with you," I say.

"What? Why?" Effi asks. "Forget that baby. He's always like that. He'll get over it. Come on, let's play checkers."

I don't know what to do. It's not that I feel sorry for Aharon—it's just that Effi is a little too much for me. He starts setting up the pieces.

"I'll teach you chess next time. You'll like it."

Aharon walks off into the dark.

"You ever smoked a cigarette?" Effi asks.

"Me? Of course not. Are you crazy?"

He laughs. "What are you so scared of? Big deal." He gets up and pulls out a pack of cigarettes from a drawer.

"Want to try one?"

"No, no, no."

He lights one, inhales, and blows the smoke out through his nose.

"Does your dad know?" I ask.

"No," he says. "Sometimes I sneak one from his pack—he doesn't notice."

I get up.

"What's the big deal?" he says. "Look, I'll put it out and we'll play." He waves the smoke away, and I think to myself what it would be like to do something my parents don't know about. If I ever did anything like that and they found out, Mom would get sick and Dad would have a heart attack.

Once we crossed the street, not at a crosswalk and a cop came over to write us a ticket. Mom told him, "Officer, my husband has a weak heart—please don't give him a ticket, he might have a heart attack." The cop gave us the ticket anyway, but ever since then, I've been terrified—even though I've never seen a single sign of Dad having a weak heart.

We play. I know how to play checkers. Dad taught me. I win the first game. Effi gets mad, but tries not to show it.

"Forget it. I don't feel like playing anymore," he says. "Let's go."

I stand up. He puts the pieces back in the box and I help him. He smells like lemon, and his fingers are long. As I pick up the pieces, I can feel his warm breath near my arm. He leans in a little closer.

"Anyone ever tell you that you have nice hair?" he says, touching it.

I straighten up. He's standing right in front of me. My head is under his lips, my legs shake, and my stomach feels hot.

Outside, we hear Aharon's voice. "Effi, come play ping-pong!"

Effi steps back and smooths his hair, not looking at me. I go out first, and he follows. Aharon's waiting. We walk across the lawn and head to the lit-up game area. Effi and Aharon start to play. Effi's bangs keep falling into his eyes and, every time he brushes it away, I get this little shiver at the back of my neck. I straighten up, hold my stomach in, and take a deep breath.

In the distance, under the garden lamp, I see Mom and Aryeh walking together. I don't think they've noticed us yet. Mom is laughing that high-pitched laugh of hers and Aryeh is watching her. They're walking very close. Eventually, they see us and walk over. Aryeh joins the boys at the ping-pong table. He jumps and laughs like a kid.

When we head back to the room, I ask Mom if Aryeh was in the war. She says yes, he was in the war.

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason," I say. "Is he young?"

"No, he's actually a little older than Dad."

"So how come he's like... that?" I ask.

"Like how?"

"Like... never mind," I say. "He's just annoying. Him and his sons."

We get ready for bed. Mom puts on her sheer nightgown and sits in front of the little mirror in our room. She dabs cream around her eyes and on her neck.

"My stomach hurts," I say.

Mom keeps looking at herself in the mirror. "Lie on your stomach. It'll pass by morning."

I lie on my stomach but the pain doesn't go away. Waves roll through the bottom of my belly. Mom falls asleep and I keep tossing and turning in bed.

"Can you stop moving around already?" she mutters.

I force myself to lie still. Mom sleeps and I watch the tall pine trees and the moon floating between them through the window. I think about Effi. Tomorrow I'll brush my hair really nicely and I won't tie it up in a ponytail. I dream that Effi grabs my shoulders and kisses me on the mouth.

"Come on, time to get up," I hear Mom's voice. She strokes my arm. I open my eyes. Bright morning light floods the room. It's morning already. I want to continue sleeping. The dream. It was so nice to dream. I curl up under the blanket and pull it over my head.

Mom pulls the blanket down and laughs. "Come on, up you get, do you

think you're on vacation or something?" I look at her. Something's gotten into her—her eyes are sparkling and that striped dress Tzipora made for her fits like a mannequin in a shop window. I get up and swing my legs off the bed.

When we walk into the dining room, the Fox family is nowhere to be seen. Aryeh Fox—he really does look a little like a fox, I think to myself. Mom once told me that hundreds of years ago, people would choose last names and pay the government for them. Jews were named by profession, or personality, or where they came from. So what does 'Fox' mean? Maybe they were a sneaky family.

After breakfast, we go to the infirmary to change the bandage. On the way, we run into Aharon.

"What's wrong, Aharon?" Mom asks.

"Dad has a headache," he says, "and he asked me to get him some medicine."

"Tell him I hope he feels better," Mom says.

After they change my bandage, we go and sit on the lawn. I try to get Mom to play something with me, but she just lies back in the lounge chair with her eyes closed.

Effi and Aharon show up.

"Wanna go to the pool?" Effi asks.

"I can't," I say.

"Go for a walk," Mom says without opening her eyes. "You can sit by the pool even if you don't get in."

So we go. I sit on the bench by the edge of the pool, watching Effi and Aharon. Effi puts on a full performance of dives and jumps. Eventually they get out, dripping wet, and we go and play ping-pong. Effi teaches me how to hold the paddle and we play for a bit.

"You've got a talent for sports," he says. I'd rather he say something boys usually say to girls, like "Girls can't play ping-pong," or "You have to hit harder, not so daintily."

My leg wound stings and I need to go to the bathroom. But I hold it in. I'm a champion at holding it. Mom always scolds me for it, but I don't like wasting time. Eventually I feel like my underwear is already damp. The nearest bathroom is near the reception. I go in, pull down my underwear—and see reddish brown stains.

At first, I don't understand what it is, but then it hits me and I'm terrified.



Even though I know exactly what this is, it still terrifies me. I have to find Mom and tell her. I leave the bathroom carefully. The wet underwear clings to me and I'm sure the blood will stain my shorts.

I cross the main lobby. Everyone is watching me. They must all know something's changed in me. Mom's not on the lawn anymore. I go to our room and try the door—it's locked. Maybe they're in Aryeh's room. I go there and knock. I think I hear a soft creak from inside. I knock again. Silence. I try the handle. Locked. Maybe the sound came from the next room. I head back to the lawn, check the lobby, peek into the dining room, and check the second and third floors. Then, as I walk down the hallway toward our room, I see them. Mom and Aryeh. They're walking together, coming from the direction of Aryeh's room. Aryeh doesn't look like someone with a headache and Mom has changed her dress.

"Where were you?" I ask.

"I went for a walk," she says.

And then I remember. I remember where I know Aryeh from.

I remember that once, a long time ago—maybe when I was five—I went with Mom to a hat store on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv. Mom loved wearing hats. She had a whole collection of them in a round box in the closet. I was so excited about that trip because she said that, if there was time, we'd go to the beach afterward.

The hat store on Allenby had creams and perfumes and beautiful mannequins with real hair, swimsuits, fancy hats, straw bags, and shiny high-heeled shoes. We walked in and the salesman immediately came over to Mom and grabbed her hand, laughing like they were old friends. Eventually, Mom said to him, "Aryeh, this is my daughter."

Aryeh looked at me for a long time, held out his hand, and said, "Come, I have something for you."

We went behind the counter. Aryeh bent down and took a small package from one of the drawers.

"Open it," he said.

I opened it. It was a stereoscope viewer with 3D picture slides—landscapes and characters from movies. I couldn't stop looking at them. It was like watching a movie.

I stood there in the store with the viewer while Mom tried on hat after hat. Aryeh talked to me about the photos, explained where each one was taken. Then he went to help Mom. Every time she chose a hat, he'd place it gently

on her head and fix her hair around it for like an hour, like he was Tzipora, or at least her hairdresser. Then he'd step back, walk a few steps away, return, and adjust a curl that slipped out. Again, he'd step back and finally declare it looked just extraordinary.

When Mom and Aryeh were done arguing about who would pay for the hat (Mom wanted to, Aryeh would "absolutely and under no circumstances" receive payment), we went to a café near the beach. Mom ordered a coffee and I had a four-scoop ice cream. I asked Mom if she knew Aryeh from before and why he bought me a present. Mom said Aryeh's wife had been a friend

of hers.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now she's dead."

We sat facing the sea, the sun setting before us. Suddenly Aryeh showed up and sat down with us. I ate my ice cream and he kept looking at me. A scoop fell onto my white dress. Aryeh took me to the café kitchen and asked for a towel. He dipped it in water and wiped off the stain. Mom didn't budge. She kept sitting on the balcony, watching the sea, while Aryeh cleaned me up like I was his own daughter.

Then we went home and I'll never forget that bus ride. I threw up all four scoops of ice cream—on my white dress, on Mom, and on some lady sitting in front of us.

Now I don't understand why Aryeh introduced himself like we'd never met when we saw him and his sons at the health resort. And why did Mom act like she didn't know him?

"I need you to come with me to the room," I say to Mom.

We walk together.

"So," I say, "isn't Aryeh the man who owns the hat store on Allenby Street? We were there once and then we went to a café by the sea?"

Mom looks at me. I think I see a flicker of panic in her eyes.

"What are you talking about?" she says. "I met him here at the resort."

"But don't you remember how I threw up on the bus afterward?"

"No," Mom says. "You're confused. That was something else. The time you threw up on the bus was when we went to the beach with Dad and you ate too much ice cream. You got really sick and had a fever and diarrhea after that."

I do remember that time, and I'm sure she's wrong.

"Mom, don't you remember how you tried on all those hats, and Aryeh gave me a present, one of those viewers with picture reels?"

Mom furrows her brow.

"I buy all my hats in Giv'atayim, from Batya," she says. That's true. But I don't think Batya's store is that old.

I stay quiet.

Mom laughs. "And we got that picture viewer from America."

Dad has a cousin in America who sometimes sends us packages. When we get a delivery notice, Mom always asks me to go pick it up at the post office. Sometimes it's a dress for me, sometimes a scarf for Mom, sometimes canned food. Those boxes always smell good. "The smell of America," I call it. One of those boxes *did* have a picture viewer inside.

"You know," Mom says, "kids remember all kinds of things, and lots of times it all gets jumbled up in their heads."

We walk into the room. Suddenly I don't want to show her my underwear. But Mom asks, "What was it you wanted?"

"Nothing... really. I just wanted to be in the room a bit. I don't feel like playing with them right now," I say.

"Okay, then... I'll go and you can come later, if you feel like it."

She gives me a kiss and walks to the mirror, puts on lipstick and fixes her hair. I remember what Dad always says about her—that she gets way too excited about new people. But Aryeh isn't new, I think. And if she knows him that well, why has he never been to our house? I don't remember Dad or Mom ever mentioning Aryeh. So maybe Mom really is right, and I'm just confused?

I don't know anymore. Never mind. I don't want to think about anything uncomfortable right now. I want to think about Effi. But the nagging thought won't ease. Now I think I might've seen Aryeh some other time too. Only back then, his name wasn't Aryeh. He brought me that crying doll that sits on the pillows in the living room—I think. And when I think about it, I remember Dad didn't seem too happy about it. He came home from work and found Aryeh there. Aryeh, whose name was actually Leo, was wearing a fancy suit and his hands were so white. Not like Dad's—Dad's black hands. But maybe it wasn't Aryeh? I'm not sure anymore. Mom looks at me in the mirror and says, "So, you'll come later, right?" She looks at me like she's waiting for permission.

“Maybe,” I say. Even if I’m wrong and she’s right, I don’t feel like not being angry at her.

She leaves and I take off my stained underwear. I don’t know what to do with them. I take some cotton from her suitcase, tear off a piece, place it inside a clean pair, and put them on. What a strange feeling. I walk carefully, like I’m stepping on jelly. I won’t be able to do anything now. A cut on my leg and cotton between my legs. I throw the dirty underwear in the trash.

Someone knocks on the door.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“Effi.”

I open the door a little.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Can I come in?”

I don’t want him to see me like this, before I’ve gotten used to the cotton between my legs. But I let him in anyway.

“Same kind of room as ours,” he says.

“But without a balcony,” I say.

“Wanna play checkers?” he asks.

“No, I’m not in the mood.”

Effi starts wandering around the room, touching things. I sit on my bed. He comes over and sits next to me.

“Have you ever kissed anyone?” he asks.

“No,” I answer, and I feel my throat close up.

Effi leans in toward me. His clothes smell like baby detergent. He brings his face close to mine, his mouth to my mouth, and his hand slides across my neck. I shift away from him.

“What?” he asks, his face flushing.

Suddenly the door opens and Mom walks in. She sees us both sitting on the bed, and I can tell a shadow has fallen over her face.

“What are you two doing here?” she asks. “Come on, let’s go outside. I forgot my sunglasses.”

We head out of the room. Mom locks the door behind us. Effi walks off in a different direction.

Mom says, “Effi’s already a big boy.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“I hope he didn’t try touching you or anything.”

“No, of course not,” I say.

“Good,” Mom says. “Because it’s not allowed.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” she says. “Don’t ask questions. It’s just not.”

My leg heals slowly. The medic says I’ll be able to go back into the pool soon. But he doesn’t know that I can’t because of another reason.

Aryeh is always interested in me. Every day he surprises me with a little gift: chocolate, a mini checkers set with magnets, a ribbon for my hair. I have no idea where he gets this stuff—this place is in the middle of a forest, far away from the road and far from any stores.

He and Mom are always together. Even when they sit with other people—playing cards, chatting—I can tell they’re really just with each other.

I think about Dad a lot. About how he’s probably standing at the printing press with the loud machines and the terrible heat. And I want him to come already. In the meantime, I don’t know what else could happen.

The day before Dad arrives, Aryeh leaves with his boys. That’s when I finally tell Mom about the underwear. She hugs me and congratulates me, even though it’s a little early, you poor thing.

When Dad gets here, the usual cloud descends over Mom.

The hotel staff adds another bed to our room. I didn’t tell Dad about Aryeh. Now Dad and Mom sit on the lawn, each reading a book. Friday night we all eat in the dining room with the other guests. Dad’s hands are as stained and black as always, but I didn’t bother trying to hide it from everyone. After dinner, Mom says she has a headache and goes to the room. Dad walked with me along the lawn for a little while. At night I woke up and heard them talking in bed.

“The girl’s not asleep yet,” Mom says.

Dad doesn’t respond. In the dark, in the quiet, I hear him light a cigarette. A few minutes pass. “When do you want to go home?” he asks.

Mom is quiet for a second. Then she says, “I don’t mind going back tomorrow.”

“But didn’t you book the room through Monday?” Dad asks.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mom answers. “People cancel.”

The next day we went back home. Back to the heat. Mom started cleaning the house right away, complaining nonstop about the Asian sun and the dust blowing in from the desert. On Sunday morning Dad got up again at five and went to work. That afternoon, when the sun finally started to go down, I walked to the library. On the way I passed the little public garden and smelled the pine trees. Mom's childhood smell.

I'm not sure I even like it.

## CHAPTER 10

“Mom, M. and G. send their regards for the new year,” I tell her two days before Rosh Hashanah. M. and G., those old friends from Poland, send greetings every holiday. They don’t write to my mom anymore—now they write to me. Mom can’t write. Even talking on the phone is hard. She’s nearly deaf. I really like M. and G. They’re lovely.

“Oh no, how will we host them? I have to go buy something. I need to bake a cake, cook something...” Mom says, panicking, clutching the bed rail and trying to get up.

I calm her down. “They’re not coming here, Mom. They’re in Poland. They just sent a greeting.”

She relaxes. In her version of hospitality, food is top priority. You can’t host someone without feeding them. From ‘light refreshments’ (which are never actually light) to full meals. And you don’t just toss the food on the table. There’s a pretty tablecloth, nice dishes, and extra touches to make the guest feel special. This whole production takes hours—sometimes days. I never wanted to be like her in this regard. I thought she was over the top. I tried to keep things simple. Just coffee and a pastry on the table. But, somehow, more things always sneak in—nuts, dried fruit, fresh fruit, a little quiche. And yes, a tablecloth that needs ironing because of the creases, napkins that match the coffee set, flowers to brighten the scene. If it’s a lunch or dinner, all the more so.

The closer the event gets, the more I lose confidence in my simple plan and the more the menu expands. Soon the table’s so full you can’t even fit a fork on it. And I’m at the point where I’m ready to drop.

After Łódź we arrive at Mom’s hometown. One main road cuts through it, with a railroad track right down the middle, splitting the street in two—probably the same tracks that ran there decades ago. Grass grows along the roadside. The sidewalk is broken. Small, low houses with slanted roofs, some coated in plaster, some tiled, sprouting grayish moss. Wooden window frames with peeling paint. Rusted iron fences. Cracked walls. It’s like one of those sad photos from the edges of Russia and the rest of the Communist bloc—untouched by time.

The house stands on a side street. Not even a real street—more of a narrow

alleyway that ends in a field. It's still there, just like back then. Only now the second floor is gone—the floor where my mother's family used to live. The building is so low now, half-buried in the ground, the street-facing windows sealed with bricks. There used to be a bakery there. The smell would rise from the oven and drift down the whole street. It was the landlord's bakery. He and his family lived in the back, facing the inner courtyard.

"He pitied us," Mom says, "and sometimes he'd give us fresh bread. He even ignored the rent debt. He was a good man."

We circle around the house and step into the courtyard. It's square, surrounded by a clutter of run-down buildings. Asbestos roofs, broken wooden fences, laundry strung on uneven wires in disarray. Patches of grass here and there. We hop over puddles left from last night's rain.

"Smell the grass," Mom says.

A door creaks open. A tall, elderly woman stands in the doorway. Upright. Wearing a buttoned blouse, fastened all the way up to her neck, and a pleated skirt. She studies us. Mom looks at her. "I think that's Jadwiga," she whispers, excited. "The landlord's daughter."

The woman walks toward us. Mom hesitates. "Are you Jadwiga?" she asks in Polish.

"Yes," says the woman. "And who are you?"

She looks us over with eyes that are startlingly clear and young. Mom says her name and we see Jadwiga's face light up with recognition, shock, disbelief. She hurries over to Mom and hugs her. Tears well in her eyes.

"I thought all the Jews were dead..." she murmurs.

Jadwiga is a few years older than Mom. "She was a beauty," Mom tells me. You can still see traces of it in her high cheekbones, her finely drawn mouth, and her very bright eyes. Her clothes are the stark opposite of the poverty around her. Not fancy, just simple and crisp. She wears them like they're royal garments.

We enter her home. The front door is low. The entryway is dark and musty, filled with rags and sacks. The tiles are crooked and grass pushes through the cracks.

We pass through the kitchen to get to the living room. The stench of old garbage hits us. It's hard to imagine food being made in that kitchen. A tiny stove caked in years of grime. The sink sits on a few bricks and the cracked



counter holds a few dirty dishes. No table—just that cracked slab of stone serving as the only surface. A small fridge stands in the corner.

We enter the living room, which also seems to be the bedroom. It looks like the furniture hasn't been replaced in decades. Two armchairs with faded fabric—here and there you can still spot its original color, the color of wine. The couch is covered in a stained sheet. On a dusty sideboard are photos of Jadwiga's daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

I go to one of the windows and try to move the curtain. It's stiff with grime. The ceiling is crowned with water and mold stains that streak the walls.

Jadwiga invites us to sit. We perch at the edge of the armchairs, politely declining the tea and cookies she offers. She sits in her chair, upright and noble, as if we were visiting a palace. She asks Mom about her family. How's this one? And that one? They reminisce, they laugh. Two old women who suddenly look like little girls.

When Jadwiga laughs, you can see her decaying brown teeth. Mom sometimes slips into a guarded expression, like she hasn't yet decided whether to share with Jadwiga some of the bitterness she has for all Poles. It's clear it'll take a lot of warmth and flattery to peel away that thin armor she's worn since we landed in Warsaw. They need to flatter her now, this "dirty Jewess" they once cast out.

Mom asks about the missing second floor. Jadwiga says it was destroyed in a bombing. Mom looks at her skeptically, but says nothing. I try to picture the poor family crammed up there—eleven children in two rooms. The widowed father, the oldest sister, sixteen years old, taking care of everyone.

"We went to bed hungry so many times..." Mom says. "And in that tight space, my brothers used to beat me. And I mean beat me. I'd run off to the stream, put my feet in the water, and curse them. Curse my brothers. Wishing they'd die."

The conversation fades out. When we part ways, Mom slips a hundred-dollar bill quietly into Jadwiga's hand.

We walk back to the alleyway. Mom remembers that not far from the house there used to be a small thread factory. She stands still, looks around, trying to recall where it was. One of her sisters worked there. She was already married. Her husband, who was a foreman, got her the job. No, the

factory isn't there anymore. And maybe the building became something else. Not all memories come back in vivid colors.

"And that was my best friend Ruchelev's house," she says. "Her family had such a terrible end," she adds, shaking her head. "They were such a respected family. Her father was an important rabbi. Her mother was always helping the poor—with money, clothes, food. Every Friday she'd lay out loaves of challah on a long table and give them out to people in need. Ruchelev had two brothers. One day, the Germans came and took one of them. He tried to resist and they killed him—right in front of his mother. She lost her mind. She locked herself inside and never came out again. One day she just jumped off the roof," Mom's voice trembles, her eyes turning red.

"Mom, I remember Ruchelev," I say quickly, trying to keep her from slipping too deep. "She lived in Bnei Brak, right?"

"Yes, that's right. We visited her once. How do you remember? You were so little..."

But I do remember. I wasn't that little. I must've been eight or nine. Ruchelev lived in a tiny apartment in Bnei Brak. She was religious and had six daughters. They were all crammed into a three-room apartment. What I remember most was her laugh. She was so warm and cheerful and always laughing. I remember her showing Mom the girls' report cards. They must have been very talented. All of them were blonde and curly-haired, like lovely lambs, with smiling faces just like Ruchelev's.

Back then I didn't know what had happened to her during the war. After Mom told me, I thought about that laughing face for a long time.

We leave the alleyway and walk toward the main street, cross the railroad-divided road, and head toward the elementary school. We reach an iron gate enclosing a paved yard with a small, blue building in the middle. We go in and climb the stairs. The walls are painted a green, oil-based color. The air smells of fresh paint. They're probably using the summer vacation to get some renovations done. There aren't any kids, but the secretary's office is open.

We try to find Mom's name in the records. The secretary apologizes. They only started digitizing data in the eighties. All the files from before the war are gone. Mom looks disappointed. Very disappointed.

Time for lunch. We return to the main road and find a little fast-food place. There's a line, but it moves fast. We sit and eat. I watch the people. A girl

walks in. She looks so much like Mom's sister, it's uncanny. Mom doesn't see her and I don't say anything. I just watch. Her hairstyle is just like Mom's in those post-war photos: pulled back in a sort of banana-shaped roll, raised above the forehead.

They say a lot of Jews stayed in Poland after the war, afraid to admit they were Jewish—even now. And there are many with Jewish blood running through their veins. I look at the girl, wondering. Maybe she's one of them. Maybe she's the daughter or granddaughter of a relative who was never found after the war. We're in Mom's hometown, after all. The resemblance is startling...

We get in the car and head south. The houses thin out. The narrow road now runs through green fields. We pass over a small bridge.

"There's my stream!" Mom calls out, excited.

We pull over. The grass is lush, sprinkled with flowers. Trees crowd the banks. We push through the tall grass until we reach the stream. The air is cooler. The water flows gently, stroking the smooth stones on the bottom. The air hums with insect buzz and birdsong. A heady scent of blossoms floats all around. Summer is beautiful in Poland. It's hard to believe that horrors happened here.

We cross to the other side on a thick tree trunk that acts as a bridge, then make our way back.

"This is how we used to play as kids," Mom remembers. "Someone always ended up falling in. The water wasn't deep but it was freezing. One time my brother came home soaked and later got pneumonia. You don't know this kind of cold. This was mountain snowmelt. Pneumonia wasn't simple back then. There were no antibiotics. He had a high fever for days. They thought he would die. But he made it."

We drive on through the flatlands. Green fields stretch out in every direction. Tall trees shiver in the light wind. It's all so beautiful.

We arrive at a small village. Two streets, houses nestled in greenery, gardens filled with fruit trees and flowers. We stumbled upon this side street. We pass a tree bursting with small red fruits. Mom asks to stop.

She jumps out of the car like she forgot her age and runs to the tree. She lifts the hem of her dress and gathers the little red fruits into it like a basket. Cherries. She comes back to the car, already chewing a mouthful, red juice running down her chin.

"Tastes like paradise," she says. "Tastes like paradise."

Mom tells me that after she escaped from the ghetto, she wandered for a few months looking for another one to settle in. The loneliness was unbearable, as was living hand to mouth and the constant fear of being caught. Those were her words. Just a few words.

What really happened during those months? Where did she sleep? What did she eat? What did the fear look like? How lonely was she?

It's always sounded to me like something from the bible. Just the tip of the iceberg. No dramatic descriptions. Living hand to mouth. Deep loneliness. Fear of being caught. No embellishments. Every extra word would only take away from it. This story's been built up for years. It's what she chose to place at the tip of her iceberg.

After a few months of wandering, she entered the ghetto of a small town called Kolushki, not far from where she was born. As soon as she got there, she came down with typhus. They took her to a makeshift hospital in the ghetto. She was delirious for many days.

"But I pulled through," she says.

Who took care of her? I wonder. How did she recover under those conditions?

I pulled through, she tells me.

Once she told me: When we were kids, we were always hungry. We were thin because there was never enough to eat. And we were always cold—but we never got sick. Maybe that was the secret.

I picture my mom as a skinny, hungry child, beaten, shivering from the cold. I feel a lump forming in my throat and immediately force the image away.

Is this the pain of compassion finally making its way into my heart?

For years I struggled to feel compassion for her. But that doesn't mean she didn't teach me what compassion is.

When I was a child, there was a vegetable shop in our neighborhood. The greengrocer's name was Menashe. His wife, Sarah, helped him out sometimes. He was moody and gruff. She was sweet and gentle. My mom became friends with Sarah.

Sarah used to come over and lock herself in the room with my mom, telling her how Menashe would beat her. I heard Sarah crying through the door and my mom comforting her. Sarah always left smiling, lighter, like she'd unloaded the burden she'd entered with. When my mom offered to confront Menashe, Sarah begged her not to.

“He’ll beat me even more. Just be here for me. I need somewhere I can cry,” she told mom.

And so it was. For years.

My mom also had a very close friend who lived in the States. The friend had a son who was mentally ill. A gifted guy, a kind of tortured genius who never quite found his place. Sometimes he’d be hospitalized. When he was out, he lived in a sort of protected housing arrangement.

One day we got a call from Geha Hospital. Turns out the guy had come to Israel after hearing the voice of God telling him to come save the Holy Land. They found a notebook with my mom’s number in his backpack.

I went with Mom to Geha. The sights at the hospital were horrifying. People talking to themselves, screaming nonsense, staring blankly at nothing, wearing filthy or torn clothes. I couldn’t take it. I wanted to run.

But Mom walked in like she belonged, dragging me behind her. We entered his room. He recognized her—he’d been to Israel a few times before. She sat beside him, stroked his hand, and softly asked how he’d ended up here.

He told her there was an eye in his room that watched him, and one day a heavenly voice spoke through it (he was religious) and told him it was God—and that he must come save the land of Israel.

His mother couldn’t come—she worked at a school and couldn’t get away. “In America, they’ll just fire her on the spot,” Mom explained to me. “And you know they don’t have money.”

Her friend had asked Mom to watch over her son. For a month, my mother went to visit him every other day. I didn’t understand how she could do it. She’d come home pale, trembling, depressed. I begged her to stop. She wouldn’t hear of it.

“He’s so miserable. He has no one here. At least he sees a familiar face. It lifts his spirits. He’s happy to see me,” she said.

We arrive to that town, Kolushki, and park the car in a big, empty gravel lot across from the train station.

Mom looks at the station. “Unbelievable,” she says. “The same train station, the same lot. Nothing’s changed. The ghetto was around here. The lot looks exactly the same. A cursed place. This is where we were herded one night in ‘43. They always did it at night. Dragged us from the houses. Loudspeakers screaming.”

She takes a deep breath and looks at me. “Do you really want to hear all

these stories? Don't you ever get tired of it?"

I think about how much pain is tucked into that question. She once told me, "You know, when we got to Israel, we felt like nobody wanted to hear what we'd been through. And we were ashamed. Ashamed of what the Nazis did to us."

I know. I've read survivors' testimonies. There was resentment toward them because they reminded the pioneers, the "new Jews" who built the State of Israel, of the diasporic, weak, and persecuted "old Jews" they had wanted to forget.

"Tell me, Mom. I do want to hear. I never get tired of it. I'm recording you," I say, leaning down toward the tape recorder so she won't see my reddening eyes.

"I had a friend in the ghetto," she begins. "Her name was Hannaleh. I met her in the hospital. She helped the nurses. Her parents were with her in the ghetto. I was alone, and they kind of adopted me. We were standing together—me, Hannaleh, her parents, and hundreds of others—on that lot. They told us a train was coming to take us somewhere else. It was freezing. Armed soldiers surrounded us. Some had dogs on leashes. Hannaleh's mom held her close and cried softly. We didn't know exactly where they were taking us. But suddenly her father bent down and whispered, 'Girls, run. They're taking us to a death camp.' He pushed Hannaleh toward me. 'Run, Hannaleh, I'm begging you. Don't be afraid. Save yourself and your friend.' Hannaleh looked at him, terrified. 'What about you both, Daddy? I'm not going without you.'

"'You're going,' he said, pushing her again. 'We can't run. But you can. They won't catch you.'

"Hannaleh wouldn't go. She clung to her mother. And I thought—what do I have to lose? Her father must know what he's talking about. By '43, we'd heard rumors. We saw the cattle cars, heard the screams from inside, saw the hands reaching through the slats, begging for water. It was a pretty clear that the people shouting were not being led to a 'new settlement,' like the Germans called it.

"I started backing away. I pushed through the crowd. It was packed. I finally reached the edge. The whole lot was surrounded by soldiers. Not all of them were alert anymore—we'd been standing there for hours, and they were tired too. I saw a pair of soldiers standing together, smoking. They were talking and not really paying attention to their surroundings.

“I knew the area well. Why? Because I would sneak out of the ghetto every now and then to sell things—buttons, kitchen tools, sewing kits. Around Kolushki there were small villages. I traded those things for potatoes, flour, and cabbage. There was an old widow who lived in one of the villages. She always bought something. Even though it was junk. She was poor, but she always gave me something to eat. She had one son, a soldier in the Polish army. He was taken prisoner. She hadn’t heard from him in months.

“I thought she’d help me, so I stood there, watching, and when it looked like they were deep in conversation, I ran. I ran and ran. Cut through yards, jumped fences. I headed toward the woods next to the town. A minute later I heard yelling and barking dogs. I didn’t turn around. I just ran, without stopping. They chased me, yelling, the dogs barking. But they didn’t know the town like I did. There were shortcuts, paths I knew that they didn’t.

“I ran until I reached the forest. A dark forest with tall, thick trees. It was always dark there, even during the day. You could barely see anything. I kept running. I don’t know where the strength came from. It felt like I ran for half an hour. But I really don’t know, maybe it was only ten minutes. At some point, I stopped hearing the dogs and collapsed by a tree. I couldn’t breathe. I sat there, listening. It was quiet. I heard the train whistles in the distance.

“I was so tired. It was the middle of the night. I leaned against the tree and fell asleep. I don’t know how. In that cold. With that fear. I think I slept for maybe two hours. When I woke up, I was frozen. There was some light. I got up and started walking. I knew the paths in the forest. I walked until I reached the widow’s house. She saw me from afar—she was outside feeding her chickens. She brought me in, sat me by the oven, gave me a blanket and a warm glass of milk.

“She took me upstairs to the attic. There were some old mattresses and rags up there. She hid me. I stayed there for a few weeks. In the evenings I came down for a few hours. During the day, I stayed shut in the attic. It’s hard to understand how much she risked. If the Germans had caught her, they would’ve shot her without a second thought.”

“That really is incredible,” I say. Whenever I hear stories like that, I always wonder—would I have had the courage to hide someone in that reality? Would I have had the courage to do it? I’m afraid I wouldn’t.

“But how did you stand it? Hiding up there all day without going out?” I

ask.

“I don’t really remember,” she says. “So many things have happened since. That was just one small detail. You manage when you don’t have a choice. You’ve heard the stories—people hid for years, in basements, in holes in the ground. That’s much worse.”

“Yes.”

Mom looks at me. Knowing her, she’s probably wondering whether it was a good idea to agree to this trip. Whether she’s doing the right thing by telling me all

of this.

“We’ll pass that village, soon,” she says. “We’ll try to find her house. Though I’m sure it’s not there. Even back then, it was just an old shack.”

“What happened afterward?” I ask.

What happened afterward?

“Afterward, things weren’t good. And I think about that a lot. Even after all these years.” She lifts her head toward the sky. I see her throat tighten. I think she’s holding back tears. Finally, she turns her face back to me. “It’s hot today, huh?” Her mouth trembles a little.

She takes a tissue from her purse and wipes her face. “Let’s get back to the car. I need something to drink.”

We get into the car. She takes a few sips from our bottled water and calms down a little. “I promised myself before we left home that I wouldn’t get emotional. But how can you not?”

“Mom, it’s okay,” I say, touching her arm. Her eyes fill with tears.

We sit quietly for a few minutes.

“All right, I’ll tell you what happened next in a moment,” she says.

“It’s okay, Mom. We have time.”

“Okay.” She straightens up and takes another sip from the bottle. “One evening we heard a knock at the door. The old woman, trying to buy time, didn’t answer right away. I ran up to the attic. Another knock. She moved a chair and slowly dragged herself to the door. From the attic, I could hear voices. It was her neighbor—a bastard who collaborated with the Nazis. ‘I know you’re hiding a Jew,’ he said. ‘If you don’t turn her in, I’ll report you both.’ She denied it, forcefully. Scolded him. I never imagined she could stand up to him like that. ‘How can you suspect a poor old widow who can barely live?’ she told him. ‘I gave my son to the army. I haven’t heard from him in months. Aren’t you ashamed? What are the Nazis giving you to



betray people, huh? Shame on the Polish people. Get out of my house. Traitor.'

"I heard him walk toward the door, then the door slam shut. Silence. I was terrified. I was thinking more about her than myself. Then I decided—I had to leave. I got dressed and went downstairs. 'I'm going,' I told her. 'I don't want to put you in danger.' She clapped her hands in dismay. 'Where will you go on a night like this?' she asked, worried. Outside, the snow was falling heavily. 'I'll manage,' I said. 'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'Not all Poles are like that. Remember that.'

"She went to the kitchen, fixed me some bread and sausage, and walked me to the door. Before I left, she hugged me. 'May God protect you,' she said, and crossed herself. I stepped outside and stood there. I looked to the left, then to the right. Everything was white. I didn't know which way to go. But I started walking, because I didn't want her standing there. I wanted to convince her that I knew what I was doing. She finally went back inside.

"I walked away and found myself near a house I recognized. I knocked. A girl lived there—she used to hang around the ghetto sometimes. They said she was in the Polish underground. I had never spoken to her but, when she saw me at the door, she understood and let me in right away.

"I hid there for a few hours. I couldn't stay longer—she told me she was already under suspicion. Before I left, she gave me her old ID card. That card saved my life. At the time, a new law had come out—everyone had to renew their ID cards and include a photo. Until then, people were identified by their fingerprint. She gave me her old card with her fingerprint and I hit the road. I wanted to find a train station that could take me far away from there."

"Mom—and, after all that, you say you're not brave?"

"You don't understand," she replies. "There are times in life when you just don't have a choice."

"There's no such thing. You always have a choice. You could've stayed, like Hannaleh did."

"I think Hannaleh maybe believed that her father was wrong," my mother says. "Or maybe she just preferred to die with her parents. I don't know. She was an only child. If I'm brave, maybe she was too. In her own way."

"You were daring. You had the will to live. You had the nerve. You didn't give up on your life."

"Maybe. But all of that—I did in a split second. I didn't really think it

through. Sometimes you just need to let go of your mind. Take a leap. That's it," she answers, thoughtful.

She knew how to let go of her mind. Her entire escape story proves that. But in the years that followed—the years when she built her family—I didn't see that daring side of her anymore. She submitted herself to a proper, safe, family life, never allowing herself to step an inch outside what felt acceptable. What gave her security.

That's how it looked to me back then. But I was just a little girl. What did I know? And what really sank into me?

## CHAPTER 11

We went to visit Uncle Joseph and Aunt Vera. They lived on a hill below a water tower, surrounded by sand dunes and orange and lemon trees. Aunt Vera pulled porcelain cups from the cabinet, decorated with little blue drawings of lakes and mountains, and poured coffee for Mom. Then she went into the kitchen and brought back a marble cake in a long tin pan, cut two slices, and served us. There was always a little crystal bowl full of sticky candies on the table. I ate the cake and then chose a red candy. For some reason, whenever we were at Aunt Vera's, Mom never limited me. Not with sweets, not with cake. But she always said, right after the treats, "Now, go out and play in the yard a bit." That was her way of saying that she and Aunt Vera were about to talk about troubles—mostly Mom's, since she didn't have a mom to talk to.

Mom once told me, "I can talk with Aunt Vera, she gets it. Without making a big fuss."

I couldn't imagine Aunt Vera talking about her own troubles. Mostly because she didn't have any, I thought, they too were afraid of her and her sharp tongue.

Mom needed surgery. I didn't know what kind of surgery, but I hoped this one would finally make her feel better. That she'd stop saying things like "I feel so weak," or "I'm dizzy," or "I feel pressure in my stomach." That she wouldn't throw up all the time, or breathe with that wheezing sound, or bleed. I didn't see any wound on her, and I didn't exactly get what the bleeding was about. But when she said to my father, "I'm bleeding," he turned pale and rushed to the payphone to call the doctor. So maybe the surgery had something to do with that.

Mom brought me to Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph's house, like she always did when she needed to be away from me. And she needed to be away from me not only for surgeries or sickness. Sometimes it was just to rest. To go to a health resort to "recharge." I always hoped she'd come back from those breaks strong and healthy, but sometimes she came back and immediately started complaining to Dad—the food was bad, the hotel wasn't clean enough, the people were boring, and "actually," she didn't enjoy it. When Mom came back disappointed, I was even more disappointed. Because even

though I really didn't like being left behind, I tried so hard not to cry or complain. Mostly, I tried to forget unpleasant things.

So I said goodbye nicely, this time, too. I gave her a tight hug and tried really hard not to cry. I even whispered a little prayer in my heart—for her surgery, and for me. She hugged me back and told me to be a good girl.

"She's always a good girl," said Aunt Vera. "Don't you worry."

I stood on the porch and watched her walk down the hill until she was just a dot in the distance. I asked Aunt Vera, like I always did, if I could call her Grandma while I stayed with her. "Sure, sweetie," she answered in her raspy, cigarette-smoke voice, and pulled me into a hug.

Aunt Vera's head was always crowned with tight, precise curls, and pearl earrings dangled from her ears. Her clothes were always neat and stylish, even when she'd spent the whole day working around the house. Before the war, Uncle Joseph had fled Poland to England, where he found Aunt Vera. My mom said Aunt Vera was to be pitied because Uncle Joseph had dragged her out of her aristocratic English home and brought her to a village with nothing but sand, flies, and jackals. But Aunt Vera didn't seem pitiful to me. With her curls and pearl earrings, I thought maybe she was even related to the Queen of England—whose portrait hung in the hair salon in our neighborhood between photos of Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly. The Queen had perfect curls too, except hers were topped with a golden crown full of diamonds.

My grandparents died in the war and, since Aunt Vera was married to my grandfather's brother, it felt completely natural to treat her like a grandma. But that wasn't the only reason I wanted her to be mine. Aunt Vera wasn't like any grandma I'd ever known. She wore pants when women still weren't really supposed to wear them. She brought with her fancy dishes and trinkets I'd never seen before. And she had an English accent. When Aunt Vera set the table with her gold plates, it felt like a banquet fit for royalty.

But the thing I loved most about Aunt Vera was that she didn't make a fuss over everything. She didn't sigh dramatically, didn't cluck her tongue, and she didn't speak the kind of Yiddish old people spoke. She was sharp, quick, and smiley and, if it weren't for her curls, her pearls, and the thick blue veins in her legs, I'd have guessed she was no more than twenty-five.

I didn't like being away from my mom, but I did like being at Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph's place. Their big yard was full of interesting things.

Besides the fruit trees, vegetables, and flowers Aunt Vera tended, there was a chicken coop with colorful hens, a pair of ducks that swam in a small pond, two fat cats, and Sugar—the aggressive, mixed-breed dog who watched over everyone.

Sugar was chained to a long cable that stretched across the yard, letting him run while still staying tethered. His doghouse was next to the chicken coop entrance. At night Uncle Joseph let him off the chain. Nobody dared step foot in the yard once Sugar was loose. His viciousness was legendary in the area. Even the jackals and foxes were afraid of him—but not Carrot and Tiger, the two cats Aunt Vera fed every day. They ignored him and his attempts to scare them. Once I saw Sugar gearing up to pounce on one of them, but he stopped the moment he saw the cat's arched back and puffed-up fur and heard his frightening growl.

Around Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph, though, Sugar turned soft. When Uncle Joseph approached him, he'd flop onto his back and show his belly for rubs. When Aunt Vera gave him leftovers, he took them gently from her hand, like an innocent baby goat. He was indifferent toward me. When I went into the coop with Aunt Vera to collect eggs or feed the chicks, he didn't even move. He'd just crack open one eye, flick an ear at a buzzing fly, and give me a sideways look. I was planning on petting him one day—I loved dogs, after all.

The other side of the yard was like a blooming garden. Uncle Joseph used to say Aunt Vera had green fingers. She knew how to grow beautiful flowers, and all the fruits and vegetables she grew were delicious.

Their house was surrounded by citrus groves. After Mom left, I asked Aunt Vera if we could go for a walk in the orchard. She agreed, but asked me to wait so we could go together. I was hoping we might see a jackal or a fox, the same ones whose howls we heard at night, but they must've been sleeping during the day. Aunt Vera picked some lemons and grapefruits and put them in a plastic basket she'd brought along. The whole orchard smelled like blossoms and spring. It was after Passover and Aunt Vera said that soon Uncle Joseph would have to paint the tree trunks white so they wouldn't burn in the sun. Uncle Joseph loved growing citrus, and his oranges were big and juicy.

Uncle Joseph was a fancy man. He was tall and upright with silver hair and a big mustache. If Aunt Vera was the Queen of England, he could've easily passed for her King. He wasn't a farmer like most of the people in the

village. He was the council's treasurer. So he was always "dressed"—a crisp white shirt, pressed pants with a sharp crease, and shiny shoes. He had a pipe he'd sometimes pack with tobacco from a little tin with a picture of a blonde lady on it. (I never understood what that blonde woman with the giant red lips had to do with tobacco.) Sometimes he smoked, but mostly he just held it between his teeth and chewed it. Aunt Vera didn't like the smoke and didn't let him smoke indoors.

Uncle Joseph came home from work in the afternoon. When he saw me, he pinched my cheek and said, "Now I'm going to sit down to eat, and you'll sit next to me and tell me eeeverything you did today on the farm." I didn't really have anything to tell him, but I loved watching him savor the dishes Aunt Vera made for him.

In the middle of the meal, he would always say, "My dear wife, there is not a single woman in the entire northern hemisphere who cooks like you." But Aunt Vera barely looked at him. She just filled his plate, smacked it down on the table, and walked out into the yard.

I didn't know what to do—stay with Uncle Joseph or follow Aunt Vera?

Uncle Joseph looked at me for a second and said, "It's okay, Meydeleh, you can go. Go help Aunt Vera. I'm almost done eating."

I knew he was just saying that. His plate was still full. But I went anyway. Aunt Vera was outside, smoking.

When she saw me, she said, "Let's go see the new chicks." She knew that would make me happy. I had already petted them that morning. They were so sweet—yellow like yolks and soft like Tiger's belly fur.

"And be careful with Sugar," she reminded me again before we went in. "He's not used to you, so don't try to pet him. He's trained to guard the coop, and he might attack anyone who goes in."

But like always, Sugar didn't move. He was lying in the dirt by the coop, thumping his tail on the ground or flicking his ears to swat flies.

I thought Aunt Vera was exaggerating a bit. If Sugar wanted to attack me, he would've done it already. I figured he just knew I belonged to Aunt Vera, and he had no reason to hurt me.

That evening I was sitting in the kitchen with Aunt Vera when Efraim, her son, walked in. Efraim was about the same age as Mom, maybe thirty. Even though he was already married, he still lived with Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph.

For years Efraim didn't have a bride, and Aunt Vera said it was because of

his job in the government. When Aunt Vera talked about his work, she always lowered her voice. I was under the impression that, in the government, people talked quietly and tiptoed around, which is why I never understood how Ben-Gurion, our prime minister, could shout so loudly on the radio.

Sometimes Efraim traveled abroad, and once he brought us a gift: a record player and a few records. I didn't like listening to the songs because, when Mom listened to them, tears would stream down her face. She said Aunt Vera worshipped Efraim. The whole sideboard in their living room was filled with his photos—when he was a boy, when he was a soldier, shaking hands with the President of the State. Aunt Vera also displayed all his sports trophies right where you'd see them the second you walked into the house.

Efraim came back from one of his trips with a woman. "Meet my wife," he told his parents.

"I nearly fainted," Aunt Vera told Mom later, "but I pulled myself together pretty quickly. I thought, Efraim's a grown man—if he chose *her*, he must know what he's doing. I took a deep breath and decided to be nice. After all, who knows how things will go? And being nice never hurt anybody. So I went over to her, hugged her, and said, 'We don't know you yet, but if Efraim, our son, chose you, I'm sure we'll love you too.' That's what I told her," Aunt Vera concluded.

"That was very noble of you," said Mom.

But the truth turned out to be a little less noble.

Efraim and his wife lived with Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph and, whenever we came to visit, Aunt Vera always had a story to tell Mom about Nefertiti—Efraim's wife. And the stories were never very nice.

Nefertiti's real name was Dina. She came from Egypt. Her parents had fled the war from somewhere in Europe, crossed borders and countries until they reached Egypt. She was a little girl then. They settled in Alexandria which, according to Aunt Vera, was a port city full of diplomats and rich people. Her father was a dentist and all the rich folks in Alexandria came to him for treatment.

"She grew up like a princess," I once heard Aunt Vera tell Mom. "They had servants at home; her father had a driver who took her everywhere. She studied at Alliance High School. She knows French—and even Italian. But other than that..."

Nefertiti had long nails, big breasts, and purple eyes like Elizabeth Taylor.

I thought she was incredibly beautiful.

“What did he see in her?” Aunt Vera once asked Mom. And, without waiting for an answer, added, “My son’s such a fool, thinks you need to buy the whole cow just to get some milk.”

I didn’t understand why Mom suddenly gave Aunt Vera a strange look and made little hand motions behind my back—probably ones I wasn’t supposed to see. But Aunt Vera just laughed in that raspy voice of hers and said to Mom, “Don’t worry. She’ll know everything soon enough, sweetie.”

The door to Ephraim and Nefertiti’s room was always closed. Aunt Vera told my mom that Nefertiti did nothing all day. The most she ever did was put on makeup, polish her nails, or walk down to the shops to buy cigarettes for herself.

“How can that be?” Mom asked.

Aunt Vera raised her eyebrows and waved her hand questioningly. “Really, how? I’m also asking,” she said. “I have no answer. She thinks she’s a princess here too. That she has servants here as well,” and she pointed to herself. “It never occurs to her to look for work or do something around the house. She sees me working all day at home, and it never crosses her mind to offer any help. But forget the chores. Maybe that’s too dirty a job for her. She could have taught French, for example, or worked as a translator. But she has no time... because she sleeps until noon, and after noon she needs to rest from her morning sleep.”

When I was there, I indeed saw that Nefertiti left her room only around noon, ate breakfast, and then again in the evening, when Ephraim returned from work. They would have dinner together and then go out to have fun.

We sat in the kitchen. “Did you see her?” Aunt Vera asked, squinting with one eye closed, a cigarette dangling from her lips after the sound of Nefertiti’s high heels faded from the path. “She doesn’t even let him rest. He just comes home, and she’s already dragging him out again. She can dance until two in the morning, but when it’s time to get up for work or make Ephraim breakfast just once before he leaves... That’s beneath her, Her Majesty.” Then she blew out a long stream of smoke, smiled at me, and winked, “That’s how it is when you have kids, sweetie. You’ll see,” she said, looking at me with the gaze of a friend. And that was another reason I loved staying with Aunt Vera.

Aunt Vera tucked me into bed in a room with a big bed, books, and a dark



wardrobe filled with winter coats and blankets. “This was Ephraim’s room,” Aunt Vera said, “when he was a good boy.”

Without me asking, Aunt Vera plugged in a tiny nightlight so the room wouldn’t be pitch dark and, before leaving, she sat at the edge of the bed and chatted with me for a while.

I asked her to tell me about England. “Ah, England,” she sighed and smiled. “It’s been many years since I’ve been to England. It’s a beautiful country, full of rain, green hills, and a king and queen who live in a huge palace. You know I have a sister in England, right?”

Yes, I knew. Aunt Vera had an identical twin sister who looked exactly like her. She lived in a city called Leicester. “My sister is a doctor. An otolaryngologist, an ear nose and throat doctor. She works in a big hospital, specializing in ear diseases. People from all over England come to her for operations.”

Yes, I knew. In the family, people always talked about Jane, Aunt Vera’s sister. Mostly, about the fact that she’d never married. Sometimes there were whispers about it. They said she once had a lover who left her, and that was why she decided never to marry. Later, I heard another story, which I didn’t quite understand, about a female friend who lived with Jane. Anyway, they always said Jane was an angel because she’d devoted her life to healing people, often operating on poor patients without charging any money.

“Did you know that I also studied medicine?” Aunt Vera asked me. “Jane and I went to university together. But Jane was smarter than me, and I always had my head in the clouds. I wanted to date boys and have fun and then, one day, Uncle Joseph appeared, and I fell terribly in love with him.”

I tried to imagine a young Uncle Joseph with whom Aunt Vera had fallen in love. As if she read my thoughts, Aunt Vera laughed and said, “Uncle Joseph must seem old to you now. But he used to be young and handsome and swept me right off my feet.”

“Alright,” she said suddenly, “now it’s time to sleep.” She kissed me goodnight and left the room. I lay in bed trying to fall asleep. But from Ephraim’s old room, I could see things. I saw Uncle Joseph snoring on the armchair in the living room, Aunt Vera walking back and forth in the hallway, folding clean laundry, and moths fluttering around the lamp.

Finally I fell asleep, but woke up in the middle of the night. Ephraim and Nefertiti had returned from their night out and were passing through the

hallway. Nefertiti's narrow high heels clicked loudly and she laughed continuously. I got out of bed and went to the bathroom. A light shone under their bedroom door. Suddenly the door opened and Nefertiti stood there naked. When she saw me, she covered her large breasts with her hands and quickly shut the door. As I returned to bed, I saw her shadow. She went to the bathroom.

The small nightlight cast huge shadows on the wall. From the orchard behind Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph's house came the cries of jackals and, whenever the jackals howled, Sugar wouldn't stop barking. It was all a bit scary. I suddenly remembered Mom and her surgery. I imagined the doctor lifting a huge knife and cutting her stomach. All of a sudden, I felt as though tears were suffocating me. I buried myself under the blanket and tried to cry quietly. I didn't want Aunt Vera to think I was unhappy staying with her. It wasn't easy. My entire face hurt but, eventually, I calmed down.

In the morning I was woken by a ray of sunshine that filtered through the blinds, blinding me. At first I didn't understand where I was, but then I recognized the bookshelves and dark wardrobe and remembered I was at Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph's house and that Mom's surgery was scheduled for this morning—maybe even happening right now. It felt as though something heavy was resting on my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

I got up and left the room. The house was quiet. From the kitchen window I saw Aunt Vera outside scattering breadcrumbs for the chickens and ducks and my mood instantly improved. The air was clear, filled with the scent of blooming flowers, and the sun was pleasantly warm, exactly how spring should be.

"Ephraim went abroad again," Aunt Vera told me when I joined her.

"And where's Nefertiti?" I asked.

Aunt Vera placed a finger to her lips. "Nefertiti—that's just between us," she said. "If Ephraim knew I called her that, he'd be angry. Let's go feed the chicks."

We entered the coop. Sugar rose from his spot, shook himself, and followed us. Aunt Vera was holding a small bowl with grains she had soaked in water. "Hold this bowl for a moment," she said, "I need to add some water to Sugar's bucket." As soon as I reached for the bowl, Sugar lunged at me, sinking his teeth into my hand and scratching my leg.

Out of sheer panic, I dropped the bowl and all the grains spilled onto the sand. Sugar immediately lowered himself and started gobbling them up.

Aunt Vera pushed him away and shouted at him, “Sugar, you son of a bitch, tomorrow you’re out of here!” Sugar lowered his tail and slunk under an old chair in the coop. I started crying and Aunt Vera instantly pulled me into her arms. “Shh, shh, sweetie, let me see...” I reached out my hand and when I saw how deep the wound was, I cried even harder. Aunt Vera hugged me close and walked me back to the house. “That dog is crazy. I’ve told Uncle Joseph a hundred times we need to hand him over to the police. There they’ll make a decent creature out of him.” She cleaned the wound with soap and water, and it hurt a lot. Sugar had big, sharp teeth, and he’d sunk them deep into the palm of my hand. Aunt Vera dabbed iodine on the wound and wrapped my hand in a bandage. “We’ll go to the clinic soon,” she said.

At the clinic, the doctor examined the wound. He hesitated, debating whether to stitch it, and finally decided not to. He gave Aunt Vera an ointment to put on for the next few days and asked us to come back in two days so he could check it again.

“And you need to report it to the Ministry of Health,” he added, turning to Aunt Vera. “The dog has to go into quarantine.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because we need to make sure he doesn’t have rabies,” he said.

Aunt Vera waved a hand dismissively. “Nonsense. Sugar gets his shot every year.”

The doctor shook his head. “We still have to check. There are jackals around here, and it’s dangerous. The girl might need injections.”

I was frightened. I had heard once about a boy who was bitten by a dog and had to get twelve shots in his stomach. I clutched Aunt Vera’s hand tightly, feeling my heart fluttering like a pinwheel.

As we left the doctor’s office, Aunt Vera reassured me, “Don’t worry. I promise you, Sugar’s just crazy. Nothing’s wrong with him. He’s perfectly healthy.”

We returned home. Aunt Vera yelled at Sugar again as we passed the coop. He lowered his head like a child ashamed of his wrongdoings and crawled back under the chair. Inside, I sank into an armchair in the living room.

“Rest here for a while,” Aunt Vera told me gently.

She went to the kitchen and I leaned my head against the back of the armchair, looking out through the living room doors into Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph’s yard. Sugar ran along the cable, barking at something at the

far end of the yard. The ducks swam in the pool and chickens constantly pecked at grains on the ground. Aunt Vera brought me a glass of raspberry juice and turned on the big radio so I could listen to “Children’s Hour.” That day, they read “The Wonderful Adventures of Nils Holgersson.” I imagined Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph’s yard as Nils’s farm. But in Nils’s land, there was lots of snow right now, something that never happened in Aunt Vera’s yard.

The next day, I went out again with Aunt Vera to care for the chicks. This time she closed the wire door behind us to keep Sugar out and, as we exited, she kept me close by her side. Sugar lay stretched out on the sand, wagging his tail lazily.

“He won’t do that again, that wild boy,” Aunt Vera assured me. “Don’t be scared.”

I found it funny that Aunt Vera called Sugar a “wild boy.” For her, he really was a kind of person—she talked to him, scolded him, hugged him, and even got angry with him when necessary.

On the other side of the water tower stood the house of Crazy Hinda. Hinda had one child, Chaim. Whenever I went outside with Aunt Vera, I saw him standing near the fence separating the two yards, watching us.

“Hello, Chaim,” Aunt Vera greeted him as we entered the yard. “How’s your mother?”

Chaim just stared at us silently.

“Everything okay?” Aunt Vera asked again.

Chaim nodded. Aunt Vera made a face I didn’t fully understand.

“Why do people call his mother Crazy Hinda?” I asked, suddenly remembering the knife-sharpener who occasionally passed through our neighborhood with his cart filled with files, wheels, and brushes. He always wore dirty clothes of an indeterminate color, his gray hair, like steel wool, sticking out wildly around the crushed hat on his head. Our mothers hurried over to him with knives to be sharpened. He’d stand by his machine, cranking a wheel and holding knives over the fast-spinning wheels, which shrieked and threw sparks. Each time, he’d lift the knife to check its sharpness, mumbling something to himself. Only two stained, crooked teeth remained in his mouth, and white saliva always pooled at the corners of his lips.

“Who told you she was crazy?” Aunt Vera gave me a sharp look.

“I heard you talking about it with Mom once,” I replied.

“That wasn’t nice of me to say. If I said it, it was by mistake. She’s a sick woman.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

Aunt Vera paused briefly, then said, “She’s mentally ill.”

“What does ‘mentally ill’ mean?” I asked.

“It’s someone who behaves strangely because bad things happened to them, and they can’t handle the sorrow,” explained Aunt Vera.

“What happened to her?”

“Hitler killed her entire family,” Aunt Vera said.

I had already heard about Hitler from my mother. Many members of both my mother’s and father’s families had died because of him.

“Is my mom mentally ill too?” I asked Aunt Vera because sometimes my mom also behaved strangely when she couldn’t control her sadness. Whenever I saw her sitting on the porch, smoking cigarette after cigarette, staring blankly outside, I knew her sadness was about to overflow and I always feared what might happen next.

Once, it really happened. Someone upset her and she came home and sat like that on the porch chair; then suddenly, she got up and started pounding her fists against the wall, burst into tears, and ran to the bedroom, throwing herself onto the bed with her head buried in the pillows. I was very frightened. I had never seen my mother in such a state. I stood at the bedroom doorway, too scared to go in. When she noticed me standing there, she motioned for me to come closer. I sat next to her and she hugged me. Her eyes were red.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured me. “Sometimes I remember things that happened to me, and I just need to cry a little. But everything’s okay now. See?”

I looked into her red eyes and at her red nose, not entirely convinced everything was okay.

“Don’t worry,” she repeated when she saw my hesitation. “It always passes.”

“No, of course not,” Aunt Vera replied firmly to my question. “Your mother... she’s perfectly fine. A very strong woman. Sure, she cries sometimes, and she gets angry, but that’s normal. Everyone needs to let it out sometimes. With Chaim’s mother, it’s a different story.”

I wasn’t entirely sure I could trust Aunt Vera on this. After all, she didn’t live with us. And sometimes I wasn’t even sure I could trust my own

mother when she said nothing would happen to her. But I didn't want to bother Aunt Vera with more questions, questions my mother often found annoying.

After we finished scattering feed in the coop, Aunt Vera went inside and I stayed in the yard. Hinda's son approached me. "Want to climb the water tower?" he asked.

I glanced up at the towering structure. "We're not allowed," I replied.

"Who says?" he asked.

I didn't answer, looking instead toward Aunt Vera, who lingered briefly by her rose bushes.

"Come on, what are you scared of?" Chaim teased. His eyes were blue, just like the doll that sat on our living room couch. I followed him. We approached the tower. It was so tall that when I lifted my head to look up, I almost toppled backward. Chaim began climbing the rusty ladder.

"Come on," he called down to me.

I glanced once more toward Aunt Vera, watching as she entered the house. I started climbing after him. The rusty ladder crumbled slightly in my grip, dirtying my bandaged hand and hurting with each grasp. Glancing down, I saw Aunt Vera step back outside, moving about the yard and occasionally calling my name. Chaim looked down at me from above.

"Don't answer," he said, his piercing blue eyes fixed on me like nails in wood. I looked down again, feeling my heart drop. We were already very high. The wind howled in my ears. Aunt Vera had gone back inside. I wanted her to not stop looking for me. I wanted her to raise her eyes, spot me, and make me come down. I wished she'd help me resist Chaim's eyes. But Aunt Vera didn't look up and Chaim kept watching me. I kept climbing after him, like children following the Pied Piper.

Eventually we reached a small balcony encircling the water tank. The wind wailed like the jackals at night. We sat on the edge of the tank.

"This is my secret spot," Chaim announced proudly. "I love looking out from here over the village—everything looks so beautiful and clean, doesn't it?"

I was shaking all over and slowly lowered my eyes. I saw many red roofs and numerous trees. People looked like dwarfs and the animals appeared as colorful miniatures. Aunt Vera's duck pond seemed like a small blue basin and Sugar, standing and eating from his bowl, looked innocent and good.

The orchards behind the house stretched out into the distance and along the horizons stood blue mountains.

Chaim dipped his hand into the water and said, "Oh, it's not even cold. I'm going in." He stripped down to his underwear. His shoulders were pale and thin.

Suddenly he jumped into the water. "Come in," he urged with a trembling voice, "it's fun."

I removed my sandals and dipped my feet into the water. It was so cold it took my breath away for a moment. Chaim moved around in the water, his teeth chattering and his lips turning blue.

"I'm going down," I announced, putting my sandals back on.

"Wait, wait," he cried after me.

I began climbing down the ladder. My legs trembled and the wind roared. The ground looked impossibly distant. Chaim tossed over his clothes. They scattered through the air. The rusty ladder hurt my unbandaged hand as I descended. Finally reaching the ground, I heard Chaim shout from above, "You coward!"

I didn't look back and immediately ran toward Aunt Vera's house. Aunt Vera clapped her hands in distress when she saw me, "Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere."

I told her about Chaim and the water tower.

"You climbed the water tower?" she yelled. "I'm going to talk to his father." She removed her apron furiously, preparing to leave.

"No, no, please don't go!" I begged.

"That boy... something's going to happen to that rascal," Aunt Vera muttered angrily. "Always outside alone, poor kid. Someone has to talk to his father. It can't go on like this."

I couldn't understand if Aunt Vera pitied Chaim or was angry with him. Still, I begged her not to go.

"I won't do it again, I promise. I'll never do anything you don't allow," I pleaded. She didn't answer yes or no but, eventually, she didn't go.

That day I didn't see Chaim again. In the afternoon, Uncle Joseph returned home and I took my seat across from him at the table. Nefertiti also entered the kitchen.

"The princess has descended to the people..." Aunt Vera muttered quietly by the sink. I looked at Nefertiti and Uncle Joseph, but they didn't seem to hear her. We sat down to eat. Nefertiti was wearing a sheer greenish robe, a

little see-through, with a tall fur collar. She kept touching the fur, in a way that highlighted her pale fingers and bright red nails. Her manicure was perfect—every nail the same length—not like my mother’s, whose nails broke one by one “from all the washing up and scrubbing and cooking.” Nefertiti’s large breasts were clearly visible through the neckline and Uncle Joseph seemed very interested in them. He was talking about work, but his eyes kept shifting from her cleavage to Aunt Vera’s face. Uncle Joseph looked at Nefertiti in a way that, for a moment, reminded me of something—actually, someone. Maybe it was the doll’s Leo, or the Aryeh from the health resort, or whatever his name was, that used to look at Mom the same way.

A greedy kind of look, like he wanted to eat her up.

Aunt Vera asked Nefertiti, “Aren’t you cold in such a flimsy robe?”

Nefertiti lifted her violet eyes from her plate and said, “Cold? I’m hot. I’m always hot.” She reached up to the fur collar and stroked her neck.

Aunt Vera put food on the table that I usually loved—french fries and spaghetti and fresh bread and tomatoes with scallions—but I couldn’t eat. Aunt Vera looked at me and immediately put her hand on my forehead to check if I had a fever. I didn’t.

“Well then, I’ll make you a cup of tea,” she said. “You don’t have to eat. If you get hungry later, just let me know.”

But I wasn’t hungry later and I barely touched the tea either.

That night before bed, I asked Aunt Vera to sit with me for a bit. She read “Cinderella” to me in English, from an old book she’d kept since Ephraim was a child. I didn’t understand the English, but the pictures were pretty, and Aunt Vera’s raspy, quiet voice made me feel relaxed. She explained that the name Cinderella was given to the pretty, lovely girl because it came from the word “cinder,” as the girl was always dirty with ash. In Hebrew, she was called *Lichluchit*,<sup>3</sup> which I thought was a terrible name. She was dirty because she worked so hard, not because she didn’t want to bathe. I closed my eyes and tried to think of another name for her, but then my thoughts got all jumbled and I fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, I woke up again. This time it wasn’t Nefertiti I saw—it was Uncle Joseph. He was standing in the living room, staring toward Ephraim and Nefertiti’s room. I heard a door creak open. It was Nefertiti’s door. She was standing there and I saw Uncle Joseph signal to



her and start moving in her direction. He tiptoed and kept looking over his shoulder. I pulled the blanket over my head and squeezed my eyes shut. I prayed no other door would open—especially not Aunt Vera’s.

For a few minutes I heard creaking and moaning from Ephraim and Nefertiti’s room, and then silence. I must have fallen asleep again in that silence, because I woke to the sound of footsteps and breathing. It was Uncle Joseph returning, apparently, to the bedroom. But then I realized—Uncle Joseph didn’t sleep in the bedroom with Aunt Vera. Next to my room, which used to be Ephraim’s, there was a tiny room I’d thought was a storage closet. I knew it had a folding bed inside, but only that night did I understand that Uncle Joseph actually slept there.

When I woke up in the morning I remembered Uncle Joseph and couldn’t decide if it had really happened or if it was just a dream.

I found Aunt Vera in the kitchen, cooking. I looked at her carefully to see if anything had changed, but she looked the same and was as nice to me as always. A few minutes later, Nefertiti showed up in her greenish robe and sat at the table. She was truly beautiful—with her violet eyes, perfect nose, and painted lips. She also had this sweet way of talking and graceful hand gestures, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I figured that must’ve been what Ephraim saw in her. He probably just couldn’t stop looking at her.

“Come, sweetheart,” Aunt Vera said suddenly, “Go outside for a bit. I’ll call you when breakfast is ready.”

I didn’t really want to go, but I understood that maybe Aunt Vera needed to talk to Nefertiti—like she and my mom sometimes did. And, sure enough, as I walked out I heard Aunt Vera’s voice. At first, I couldn’t catch the words, but then I moved closer to the door.

She was speaking in her raspy voice: “... and I know it hasn’t happened just once. This wasn’t some one-time thing. So now, with all due respect,” she said, “pack your things and get out of this house. I don’t want to see you here anymore.”

Silence. Nefertiti didn’t answer. Then I heard a chair scrape and footsteps moving away. Ephraim, I thought—what would Ephraim think when he came back from abroad? It was all so confusing. But, somehow, I knew better than to ask Aunt Vera why she had told Nefertiti to get out.

Aunt Vera was very busy that day and didn’t have time for me. She lit cigarette after cigarette, her movements sharp and quick. She didn’t call me

to come feed the chicks with her. I thought maybe it was because of Sugar, but I wasn't sure. In the afternoon she changed my bandage. The wound hadn't healed yet, but it wasn't worse either.

"It looks okay," she said. "A few more days and it'll be fine."

"What about Sugar?" I asked her. "The doctor said he has to be taken to the Ministry of Health..."

"The doctor can forget about it," Aunt Vera snapped. "Sugar's perfectly healthy."

I thought about my parents, who always followed every instructions to the letter—especially if it came from someone in authority. If a doctor told them to take Sugar to the Ministry of Health, they wouldn't wait even a minute.

Aunt Vera wasn't afraid of anyone. She decided for herself who to listen to and who to ignore. And that was a good thing.

At ten o'clock, the ice vendor arrived. We heard him outside. He rang a big metal bell and called out, "Ice! Ice!" Aunt Vera went out, pushed Sugar away, and opened the gate for him.

"I don't know how much longer this can go on," we heard him ask through a sigh and a cough.

"What complaints do you have today, Mr. Yuskowitz?" Aunt Vera shot back.

"Your house. My horse is old. He doesn't have the strength to climb this whole hill anymore."

Aunt Vera laughed. "A hill, you say? Just a little longer, Mr. Yuskowitz. My sister is sending me a refrigerator from England soon, and then you won't need to come here anymore. I hope you'll still have enough work without us."

"Well, until your sister..." he started to say, then walked inside. In his hand he carried a big block of ice with metal tongs. He placed it in the fridge and sat down for a moment. Aunt Vera gave him a glass of cold water. He drank and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"Thank you, Mrs. Vera. If you don't get that fridge, I'll see you next week," he said, and winked at me.

After that I didn't have much to do. Aunt Vera stayed busy, and it lasted a long time. So I went to Chaim's house. Their yard was nothing like Aunt Vera's blooming garden. There were wooden crates scattered about, a rusty

cart, two broken chairs, and a lot of rags. No flowers, no chickens, no ducks. Their dog, Gedaliah, strained at his chain and barked at me loudly. His fur looked like a sheep's dirty wool. I knocked on the door. Chaim opened it just a crack and looked at me with one blue eye.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

"I don't know... fine, just for a bit, because my mom's not feeling well."

I entered. The house had a strange smell. Clothes were everywhere—in piles on the chairs, the table, the dresser. And newspapers too, strewn all over. In the corner, on a couch, lay Chaim's mom—pale, wild-looking, curled up in an old blanket. She didn't look at me when I came in. Her eyes were fixed on some point on the wall.

"They're coming to take her soon," Chaim whispered.

"Where to?" I asked.

"To the hospital."

"Why?"

"She... she's not feeling so good."

"What does she have?"

Chaim suddenly got angry. "Why are you asking so many questions?"

"I know," I said. "She's crazy and they're taking her to the mental hospital."

"You're so stupid," Chaim snapped. "You don't understand anything."

I ran out of their house and back to Aunt Vera and Uncle Joseph's. Gedaliah barked after me and then Sugar joined in. Aunt Vera was still in the kitchen. "What happened? Why did you run like that?" she asked. I didn't answer, and she let it go.

I went out to the porch. An ambulance was slowly making its way up the hill and stopped in front of Crazy Hinda's house. A man in a white coat got out and went inside. Chaim came out and started circling the ambulance, playing with its mirrors. The man emerged with Chaim's mom, wrapped in a tattered blanket and walking very slowly. He opened the back door of the ambulance and helped her lie down on the bed. Chaim helped him. Then the driver got into the ambulance and started the engine.

At that exact moment, I heard Nefertiti's heels clicking toward the door. She stepped into the yard. When she saw the ambulance, she started yelling at the driver to wait. He didn't hear her and began to drive off, but Chaim stopped him. Nefertiti was wearing a blouse and a tight skirt. In one hand she held a small suitcase and, in the other, her bag. She ran toward the

ambulance in her high heels and narrow skirt, nearly tripping. The driver got out, opened the door, and helped her in. Then he climbed back into his seat and drove off.

Chaim stood next to the house, looking thin and sad. He wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. Gedaliah and Sugar wouldn't stop barking. Aunt Vera came out of the kitchen and stood next to me. She sighed and murmured, "Poor woman. Poor thing..."

She didn't say a word about Nefertiti. We both stood there watching the ambulance drive down the hill, getting smaller and smaller until it became a dot.

"Where did Nefertiti go?" I asked Aunt Vera.

"She went to her and Ephraim's apartment in Tel Aviv."

I didn't even know Ephraim and Nefertiti had an apartment in Tel Aviv. "So why were they living here this whole time?"

"Because Ephraim travels a lot," Aunt Vera replied as she sliced an eggplant. "And Nefertiti doesn't like being alone."

"Then why did she leave now?" I couldn't help myself—as I knew mom would have expected of me.

"Because," Aunt Vera said, then paused for a moment, "because she realized it would be better for her and Ephraim to live alone, in their own apartment."

Something in her voice told me that this had to be the last question. So I went to sit on the armchair in the living room for a while. But after five minutes I went back to the kitchen.

"But why did she realize it?"

Aunt Vera looked at me with one eye half-closed, cigarette dangling from her lips. "When two people get married," she told me, "they need to build a life together on their own, without the parents. It's not healthy to live together."

I thought of my mom and dad, who didn't even have parents to try not to live with. I would have given anything to have grandparents living with us, in my home. That's not healthy? Illnesses come from drafts, or from drinking water after eating fruit, or from getting too angry. That's what I knew.

Aunt Vera kept looking at me. I had a feeling she wanted to say something else, but she didn't say anything. She just went back to the eggplants. Now

she arranged them on a big plate, sprinkled them with salt, and took them out to the sun.

I thought about Ephraim. What would he say? And Aunt Vera, as if reading my thoughts, said, “Ephraim will understand. He’s a grown man. I already talked to him about it. There’s no need to tell him everything that happened here. He’s got enough on his mind.” She lifted her eyes from the sink, where she was rinsing the cutting board, and examined me. I wasn’t sure I understood what she wanted me to understand, but I didn’t ask anything else. There’s a limit, like my mom always says.

But Ephraim didn’t understand, as I found out later. There was a big falling out. And back in those days, whenever we visited Aunt Vera and she sent me outside after the cake, I knew she and my mom were going to talk mostly about her troubles. Ephraim didn’t want to talk—not to Aunt Vera, not to Uncle Joseph. He divorced Nefertiti and kept living in his apartment in Tel Aviv. My mom visited Aunt Vera from time to time and, every time she came back, she’d say Aunt Vera was suffering terribly. Mostly because she missed Ephraim, but also because she was furious with Uncle Joseph and couldn’t bring herself to leave him now that he was sick.

Uncle Joseph became very ill. He spent a long time in the hospital and later at home. When we came to visit, the house smelled like a hospital. Aunt Vera didn’t look like the Queen of England anymore. Her hair had gone completely gray, and now she wore it in a kind of ball on top of her head. All of a sudden she looked old. “The wind has left her sails,” my mother said.

The good thing that happened, though, was Jane’s visit. She brought herself, but also the long-promised refrigerator—a real fridge with a freezer compartment. She and Aunt Vera were identical twins, but I could tell them apart. Jane looked the way Aunt Vera used to look before all the trouble with Ephraim and Nefertiti. She was full of energy and became queen of the house. It was amazing to watch her step into Aunt Vera’s shoes. She took care of the animals, cooked, cleaned, and also took care of Uncle Joseph—when Aunt Vera let her. Jane had retired, my mom explained, so now she could finally do whatever she wanted.

But, eventually, Jane went back to England. And not long after, Uncle Joseph died. Ephraim came to the funeral but didn’t want to say Kaddish. My father had to do it. Ephraim stood by the grave and hugged Aunt Vera tightly. She clung to him and looked like a lost little girl beside him. There

were eulogies from the council members and people who had known him. Aunt Vera and Ephraim didn't say a word. Aunt Vera held a tissue and every so often blew her nose and wiped her eyes. People from Ephraim's office and from the village came over to shake their hands and offer their condolences but, years later, I understood that Ephraim and Aunt Vera didn't need to be comforted for Uncle Joseph's death—but for the wreckage he'd caused in their lives.

Years later, when I was already married and had children, I went to a deli that had opened near my house one day. I was standing there, carefully eyeing the cheeses and pastries arranged in the display case, when I heard a voice say, "How can I help you?" She was standing behind the refrigerated counter. A heavyset woman wearing a scarf with the store's name on it. The voice was familiar, but it was the eyes that left no doubt. Violet eyes, framed with dark lashes, looking at me from a tired face. She didn't recognize me, of course—I was just a child back then. But I saw her studying my face. I didn't say anything. For a second, it looked like she wanted to say something to me too, but then she seemed to think better of it.

Her hands were red and worn, her nails trimmed short. I wondered how she'd react if I told her that Ephraim was now a successful lawyer, a partner at one of the biggest law firms in the country, with a wonderful wife and beautiful kids—and even grandkids.

Then I thought, maybe she already knew. Maybe she mourned her missed chance every single day. Then again, maybe she knew and didn't mourn at all. Maybe Ephraim wasn't good for her. Maybe, deep down, she wanted to escape—that's why she hadn't been careful. Maybe she was living the life she actually wanted all along.

## CHAPTER 12

It's a beautiful, sunny day. The green fields stretch all the way to the horizon. We're driving slowly through the village roads. Mom is trying to spot the shack where the old woman used to live. No chance. A few crooked wooden shacks are scattered across the fields, about to collapse. She can't tell which one used to be the old lady's. And, even if she could, they all look abandoned—or at best, used for storage. We're also looking for the house of K., the girl who gave Mom her old ID card.

Small houses are surrounded by lush gardens, flowers, trees, chickens clucking. People stand outside their homes, staring at us curiously. After all, strangers don't pass through this village every day. Mom steps out of the car, walks over to someone, and asks if they know K.'s family. They glance at each other and say we should ask old Magda. I see them leading Mom to the neighbor's house. An elderly woman is sitting out front. I can't hear what they're saying, of course, but I watch Mom hurry back to the car, her face pale.

She gets in and says with a choked voice, "Let's get out of here, quickly. I'll explain later." I start the engine and the car jolts forward. Mom sits stiffly, constantly looking over her shoulder. After we pass the village limits and drive a little farther, she says, out of breath, "Pull over for a second." I stop the car and turn off the engine. She glances back one more time, then turns to me and says:

"It's exactly what I was afraid of. I was afraid the Germans got her. She gave me her ID. They found her. They probably killed her." She lowers her head. Her hands are trembling.

"Why, what did the old woman say to you?"

She buries her face in her hands. "She told me there was such a family, but none of them stayed. It was hard to understand her. She looked over ninety. But I couldn't listen to any more."

"But Mom, why are you reacting like this? Why are you shaking so much?"

"This has haunted me for years..."

"What exactly haunts you? You don't know what happened. Maybe she just moved away, or died. It's been over sixty years."

“No. I don’t believe that.”

“Okay, but why do you think the Germans got her? I mean, you were the one carrying the ID. How...?”

She lifts her head and looks at me with tearful eyes. “It wasn’t that simple. The Gestapo caught me.”

After she left the girl’s house, ID card in hand, she started walking. She vaguely remembered where the train tracks ran and, luckily, they weren’t buried under snow. When she found them, she stayed close to them, figuring they’d lead her to a train station. She heard sounds behind her. Childhood legends crept into her mind—about demons and ghosts and wild animals that roamed the forests at night—and felt terrified. It’s better to not look back, she remembered. If it’s a wild animal, it’ll see your eyes and pounce. Just walk calmly—not too fast, not too slow.

She thought she heard wolves howling in the distance, but she definitely heard branches snapping and a bird of the night’s wings beating suddenly overhead. Eventually the sounds sharpened into a person’s footsteps. She turned and saw that neighbor—the one who’d ratted people out.

“Where are you going?” he asked, fixing his black, mean eyes on her.

“To the train station. I want to get to Częstochowa,” she answered, trembling.

He stopped, stared at her another moment, and vanished into the trees.

She didn’t know if she should keep going. Maybe she should head back into the forest and wait, she thought. He’s following her. He’s suspicious of her. He’ll turn her in. She was cold. The thought of crouching on the wet, frozen forest floor until morning seemed impossible. She’d freeze to death. Better to keep walking and take her chances. The darkness began to lift. In the distance, she saw a sign shaped like an arrow pointing to a town called Rokitzyna. Next to the name was a picture of a train engine. She picked up her pace and finally reached the station.

It was a large station, serving several nearby villages. She entered the waiting hall. It was already packed with Polish farmers on their way to the big city to sell their goods—vegetables, fruits, chickens, chicks. She squeezed in and took a seat.

She had the ID in her pocket. No need to worry. She sat for a few minutes until her breathing calmed, then got up and bought a ticket to Częstochowa, the big city.

She leaned her head against the wall and fought the urge to fall asleep. Her



eyes closed on their own. The sudden quiet in the room actually woke her. She opened her eyes and saw two soldiers standing in the doorway of the hall—the tattletale neighbor with them. “Her,” he pointed.

The peasants jumped up and scattered. Some climbed over benches, opened windows, and escaped. No one wanted to get tangled up with the Gestapo. Some of them probably had their own reasons to be scared.

She clung to the bench, petrified. The soldiers grabbed her arms and dragged her to the Gestapo offices near the station. Morning had arrived and people peeked out their windows to see the young woman being taken away.

My mom tells the grandchildren stories. She loves telling stories. She’s not one of those people who stay silent.

One of the grandkids looks scared. “What if they come back?” he asks. He’s six years old.

“No, of course they won’t,” I say with confidence. “That could never happen today.”

He doesn’t calm down. He curls into his father’s lap, who asks us to stop telling stories.

This year we didn’t have our own private “Remembrance Day” in my mother’s living room. I went to Mom’s in the morning, after the Holocaust remembrance siren which, luckily, she didn’t hear.

“How are you, Mom?”

“Now I’m okay. Before, not so much.”

“Why?”

“Because they were here. They beat me. They pulled his beard. I’m scared,” she hides her face in her hands.

“Mom, who are you talking about? No one was here.”

They *were* here. German soldiers and one Jew. They pulled his beard and beat him. Mom had accidentally pressed a button on the remote and saw a Holocaust documentary that was being aired for Remembrance Day. For her, there is no clearer reality.

“I’m scared they’ll come back. They hit me—right here on the leg,” she says, pointing to the same leg she hurt when she slipped in the bathtub. Her hip still aches and the pain shoots down her leg.

“Mom, that was a movie on TV. It happened years ago. That can’t happen now.” Even as I say it, I still argue with myself inside. Could it actually not happen today?

Years ago she told me that when I was little, she used to suffer from anxiety attacks. “I went to the doctor,” she told me. “I sat in front of him and couldn’t talk. I just cried. He tried to calm me down, but it didn’t help. I couldn’t get a single word out. In the end, he gave me a sedative. I took it when I got home. It made me so tired I threw it out two days later. I went to another doctor. I told him how much I was suffering. He said, ‘Get pregnant.’ I looked at him like he was insane. What does that have to do with anything? But when I got home, I told myself—You’ve been through worse in life. You’ll get through this too. Still, the pregnancy idea stuck in my head. I was suffering so much, I decided to try. You were an only child, and I didn’t want more kids. But I figured maybe the doctor knows something the others don’t. So I got pregnant. And guess what? The anxiety stopped.”

When my mom told me about the anxiety, I was a young mother myself. That doctor’s advice sounded totally insane. I couldn’t imagine a woman in that state taking care of a baby—being responsible for someone else, let alone a helpless little being. A woman like that can barely take care of herself.

But years later, I remembered that story. And it started to make sense. Pregnancy and birth do something to your body, to your soul. Your blood volume doubles. Your internal organs shift around, swell, shrink. Your pelvic bones spread apart. A whole new human grows inside you. And then it comes out—painfully. It demands everything from you. You’re totally at its mercy. It’s a shock to the system. You don’t have time for anxiety.

Large families always made her feel uneasy—especially if they were poor. They reminded her, of course, of her own childhood, a pile of kids crammed into two tiny rooms. She especially hated the phrase “a family *blessed* with many children.”

“The person who came up with that phrase definitely didn’t grow up in a family with many children. That’s for sure. Otherwise, he’d never have dared,” she once said.

She would’ve been fine with just one child. One daughter, to be exact—if it weren’t for that doctor’s suggestion. That’s also how she reacted to news about more grandchildren. With each new child, her enthusiasm shrank.

First pregnancy: “Mom, I’m pregnant.”

“Really? Congratulations. That’s great. But why now? What was missing in your life?”

“Mom...”

“You’ll see how much your life is going to change.

If you’d asked me...”

I always wondered how those reactions squared with the warmth and love she later lavished on her grandchildren—her endless care, patience, forgiveness, and constant worry.

We’re sitting in the car and Mom continues telling me the story. She was taken to the Gestapo offices. They brought her into a room where two interrogators sat. They took the ID she had—the one with no photo, the one that wasn’t hers. They spoke in German to each other. She understood everything. But when they questioned her, she pretended she didn’t know German. She recited the details she had memorized from the ID, plus some extras the girl had told her about the family. Her name is so-and-so, she lives in such-and-such village, she’s headed to Częstochowa to look for work.

“They were relatively courteous. I had the feeling at least one of them knew I was Jewish and was trying to find a way to let me go,” she says. They took her fingerprint to compare it to the one on the ID. “They kept looking at the ID again and again. It went on too long. They seemed tired. Yawned. Stretched. Talked about how they’d finish their shift in 15 minutes and go straight to sleep. Complained about not being able to sleep because of the noise from the market across the street. Finally, one of them came up to her. ‘Take your ID and wait outside,’ he told her. Just before handing it back, he looked her straight in the eyes. For a moment, she thought he was silently saying, ‘I know you’re Jewish. Run.’”

She took the ID and stepped out into the hallway. She waited for a second by the door. Nobody was there. The offices were empty that early in the morning, and she thought it was odd they let her stand there alone, with no one watching over her. She didn’t waste time—and started walking. Reached the stairs. Went down. Crossed the yard. At the far end were three wooden shacks—outhouses. She looked left, right—no one. She sprinted forward and entered one. She locked the door, climbed onto the toilet, folded her legs, and sat.

A few minutes later, commotion broke out in the yard. Running feet. Shouting. Someone tried the locked door, but gave up quickly. “Maybe he just thought it was locked and that the key was in the office,” she says. “Or

maybe, to him, it wasn't worth the trouble to catch a Jewish girl running for her life." That's what she wants to believe.

She sat that way the entire day.

At night when the commotion died down, she stepped out of the shack and slipped back into the train station. It was empty. Only the night guard was there. When he saw her, he clapped his hands in shock. "You? Where've you been? Do you know how hard they looked for you? The whole Gestapo was on its feet." He immediately took her into a small room and gave her a bowl of soup. "Don't go anywhere until the train comes," he ordered.

"You see," Mom tells me again, "I had a lot of luck. And there were good people who helped me."

We drive to Rokitzyna and stop by the train station. It's still there, still serving the villages in the area.

A large hall with thick, grimy walls and battered wooden benches. "That's where I sat," she points to one of the benches. We try to find the building that housed the Gestapo offices. She remembers it being very close to the station. What she wants most of all is to find the outhouses—but she's skeptical. "They were wooden shacks. They probably don't exist anymore after all these years."

We search the nearby streets, but there's no trace—not of the office building, not of the three wooden sheds. In the quiet little town, they're setting up for some kind of carnival or celebration. Stalls are being assembled near the train station. Families with children start gathering. A small band plays cheerful tunes and the air fills with laughter and children's shouting.

We leave and head toward Częstochowa, the city Mom fled to back then. From far away, we can already see the spire of "Jasna Góra," the stunning church to where Poles and Catholics from all over the world make pilgrimage. It's considered one of the holiest sites in the Christian world, thanks to the Black Madonna icon housed within. This was the city my mother arrived to.

She disembarked the train and walked toward the church, which sits on a limestone hill. She climbed the pilgrims' path, entered the church, and stood before the Madonna icon. The church was quiet. People knelt down, crossed themselves. In a far corner stood two German soldiers. Even here. She crossed herself and knelt. She rested her clenched hands on the prayer bench and bowed her head.

“I prayed to our God not to punish me,” she says. “And then I prayed to the Virgin, too. I mean, she performs miracles. She’s been around for so many years. She’s seen so many wars. She has scratches on her face. She must know what suffering is. So I prayed to her too. Maybe she’d give me a small miracle.”

After she prayed, she left the church and headed downtown. In early 1943, the ghetto in Częstochowa still existed, but she didn’t go in. She’d had enough of ghettos. She had a forged ID and she could walk around freely.

On the main street, she stopped in front of a large bookstore. She looked at the lovely display window with excitement. It had been so long since she had held a book in her hands. In the window, she saw a small sign: “Looking for a young, educated nanny for seven-year-old twins. Details inside.”

She went inside. The air smelled like books. She inhaled deeply, straightened her stained dress, smoothed her hair, and stepped up to the counter.

I never asked her how she washed her clothes. Where she bathed. These are tiny details—but actually, they’re pretty big. How do you stay clean, how do you stay decent under these circumstances? I didn’t ask. It didn’t even cross my mind at the time. I’ve just come back from a walk. A little sweaty, a little thirsty. I’ll take a shower, spray some perfume on. What did she do? Sure, during the Polish winter no one really sweats much—but still. I imagine that when you’re a fugitive, personal hygiene probably isn’t top priority.

Anyway, she went up to the counter. A beautiful, elegant woman stood behind it, wrapping a book for a customer. I can just hear my mom telling herself in that moment: Stand up straight. Speak your best Polish. Act confident.

She got the job.

We’re walking down the main street of Częstochowa now, trying to find that bookstore. We see one—a small, slightly dim shop.

“Maybe this one, Mom?”

She stops and looks. Wavers.

“No, no way,” she says firmly. “This one was big. Beautiful. It had chandeliers shaped like candles. Everything sparkled. The floor was polished wood. The counter was painted green. I remember it perfectly.”

We stand there a moment longer, then keep walking. Mom goes quiet. And

here comes the memory again—stretching sizes, distorting colors, adding or erasing. That little sign in the window, that elegant woman behind the counter, that glimmer of hope they brought to a hungry, lonely, terrified girl—turned the store into a palace. You can't go back to Paradise.

Mom got a nice room in a spacious house. She got nourishing food. The woman who hired her gave her second-hand clothes that looked like they'd just come off the rack. It could've been wonderful—if not for the constant thoughts about her lost family. The brain is such a strange thing. It's always busy with something. At first, it was all about survival. But once the panic started to ease, the worry about her family's destiny crept right in to fill the space.

But life in that house sometimes managed to push the worries aside. Among her responsibilities was taking the twins to church on Sundays. She'd take them, listen to the service, learn the prayers, learn how to cross herself with confidence. The sanctity of the place, with the painting of the Black Madonna and the stories of miracles—moved her.

To this day, my mom has a soft spot for Christianity. She loves Christmas. She would happily put a tree in the house. "It's so beautiful, that holiday," she sometimes says longingly, "with all the decorations and presents and songs and snow." For years she watched Midnight Mass on TV.

The twins were learning French and German. She listened in. Her German improved. She learned to hear the differences between Yiddish and German pronunciation. She's always been talented with languages. Later, she'd pick up Hebrew, and then English too.

A few months after she arrived, the city began conducting a population census. The household owners asked her for a birth certificate so they could register her as a city resident. She didn't have one, of course—just that forged ID. She was afraid it would be inspected too closely. She felt the ground beginning to shift again under her feet.

And then she lost her mind again. She was about to walk into the lion's den. She was going to do the craziest thing. If it worked, great. If not—well, too bad. She went to the labor office. On the way, she whispered *Shema Yisrael*, but she crossed herself too. Now she had two gods. Maybe it would help.

She went in, sat in front of the clerk, and asked to be sent to Germany for work. The clerk froze. "Why would you do that?" his eyes asked.

The Germans were snatching people off the streets in Poland and sending

them to forced labor in Germany to fill the desperate labor shortage. But to volunteer? You're Polish. In Germany, they don't like Poles. He looked her up and down. Finally, he said, "We'll see. Maybe we can work something out."

Mom is sure he knew. He knew she was Jewish and wanted to help. I mean, what Jew in her right mind would volunteer to go work in Germany at such a time? But maybe *because* of that, no one would suspect her.

To this day, my mother still doesn't understand how she survived.

To her, she's a coward. Weak. "I am not strong-willed," she always told me. "I could've studied. I could've been an author, I could've been a translator. But I wasn't strong enough. I always give up too easily."

Really, Mom?

I grew up thinking my mother was weak. She raised me to think that. She said it over and over, mostly to push me—to make sure I'd finish things I started, to not give up. And maybe also to share the opinion she had of herself, the one that shaped so much of her life. I also remember her as often "not feeling well." Asthma, ulcers, vertigo—these, of course, added to her sense of frailty. And to mine. I was always worried something would happen to her. That she and my dad would die. If they were late coming back from a night out with friends, I'd lie awake, imagining the worst, calming down only when I heard the key turn in the lock.

That affected me, of course. The fragility of my survivor parents. Their outsider energy during those first years in Israel, compared to the founders—the "salt of the earth," the native-born Israelis with their tough skin, their institutional militancy, their carefree freedom, their bucket hats and tan lines. Though I was born in Israel, a sense of foreignness split me in two. Because what am I? I'm split. Only recently have I come to appreciate this fractured existence. It's enriching, it's educational, it's interesting. To me, it reflects the duality in everything. Or maybe not just duality—shades of shades.

My mother was sent to Germany. The first place she worked was at a farm. The owners were German nobility. The husband had gone off to the front and his stunning wife would glide around the estate with two giant hunting dogs at her side. All the workers held their breath when she passed through the orchards, dressed in her riding pants. They had horses, of course and, in the summer afternoons, she would go riding through the fields and woods

around the estate. Sometimes guests would arrive, and they'd throw lavish feasts—music and laughter drifting all the way to the workers' quarters.

In the winter, when the fields were blanketed in snow and they needed fewer laborers, Mom was transferred to a factory. Most of the workers there were prisoners of war—French, Czech, Polish, Russian. One of the French prisoners fell for her. Hard. “It was good,” she told me, “he protected me from the other men. But he was crazy. He wanted me to promise I'd marry him after the war, go to France with him. Of course I never considered marrying him, especially not going to France. I just wanted to go home, to see my family.”

His love became suffocating. He followed her everywhere. Wouldn't let her talk to anyone. Wanted her all to himself. She felt trapped and tried everything to reject him.

“One evening, he came to me with a knife in his hand,” she tells me. “Held it to his throat and said if I don't marry him, he'll kill himself.”

That crossed the line. She asked for a transfer.

They sent her to work for a farming family in a village. The work wasn't difficult. No pressure. Just housework. The fields around her reminded her of the fields around her home—flowers, shrubs, a small stream she could hear pleasantly flowing during the nights. Life was quite peaceful.

But what most unsettled her sense of confidence was her appearance. And actually, the Polish laborers who worked in the area. When she ran into them at the market, they eyed her with suspicion. Once, a woman accused her outright of being Jewish.

But her Polish was flawless—no trace of a Yiddish accent. And she had that forged ID that proved she was Polish, not Jewish. She, of course, knew all the customs. Went to church. And just to be extra careful, she even went into the confessional from time to time and made up sins that would sound believable to a priest.

The couple she worked for were older, childless. “They weren't especially kind,” Mom told me. “They were condescending. Like Germans always were to Poles. And I was a servant. They gave me a tiny attic room. But it was enough. At least I had a roof over my head and bread to eat.”

“On the sideboard in the living room stood a framed photo of a soldier,” Mom tells me. “‘Who's that?’ I once asked Herr Joschke, the landlord. ‘That's our nephew, Hans. He's in the SS,’ he answered, full of pride. Every day, I dusted that sideboard. And every day, I had to polish that silver



frame. Just looking at the photo gave me chills. And when I cleaned it, I held it with the tips of my fingers, like it was something filthy. I kept thinking, who knows what that Hans is doing out there? Where is he stationed? How much blood is already on his hands? How many Jews has he killed? And the thought that one day he might show up here—that made my stomach turn.”

Mom goes silent. She’s telling me all this at a café in Częstochowa, in a quiet garden shaded by tall linden trees. Large flowerpots overflowing with color outline the garden’s edge.

“Look how beautiful it is here,” she says. “I always miss this green, this air, these flowers...”

“So what happened next? How did it end?” I urge her not to drift into different realms. I need a continuous plot. I need to pull all these shadows and ghosts into one whole. I need a beginning, a middle, and an end.

“So that’s how I worked,” she continues. “At sunrise, I’d wake up to milk the three cows, then collect the eggs from the little coop, and make breakfast for Herr Joschke and his wife. After tidying the beds and dusting, I’d go down to the cellar to get potatoes and meat to make lunch. Sometimes I’d do a little work in the garden and go to the market. I remember one Sunday—Mrs. Joschke said they were expecting a guest and asked me to make cabbage soup. I had a recipe for cabbage soup that I remembered from home. They liked when I made it. Of course, I didn’t ask who the guest was. It wouldn’t have been polite. I figured it was one of the relatives I’d already met.

“Herr Joschke and his wife went to church. I cooked. When they came back, Mrs. Joschke set the table for three. At noon, the doorbell rang. I was in the kitchen doing dishes. I heard laughter, shouts of excitement, and also, a deep man’s voice I didn’t recognize. My heart jumped. Anything unexpected made me nervous. A minute later, the kitchen door suddenly swung open. And who was standing there? The man in uniform from the photo on the sideboard. The SS nephew they were so proud of.

“He stared at me in such a way that I thought I might die right then and there. I stood by the sink, hands full of suds, not knowing where to run. His face turned red. Then he said, half-shouting: ‘And what are *you* doing here?’ He smelled like death. I can’t describe it any other way. That smell nearly suffocated me. He could sniff out Jews—no doubt in my mind. I felt like I was going to faint. But suddenly I heard Herr Joschke calling from the

living room: ‘Hans, come here,’ he chuckled. ‘Come on, Hans, that girl’s not for you.’ Hans kept staring at me with that murderous look. Then, through clenched teeth, he said, ‘You’re lucky, you filthy Jew.’ And slammed the door behind him.”

Did the nephew add it all up in his head? Did Herr Joschke save her? Maybe. But not out of the kindness of his heart. The war was nearly over. It was March 1945. You could feel the end coming. There were rumors. From far off, you could hear the thud of falling shells and the rumble of bombers. The Germans were terrified. The last days were tense. Everyone was on edge. The foreign workers feared one final massacre. Even in that tranquil village.

Then, one day, the roar of heavy vehicles echoed through the village. A convoy of American tanks rolled in from nowhere, straight down the main street. To my mother, that sound was like celestial music. She felt the frozen lump of fear inside her begin to melt.

She ran out of the house toward the tanks, blowing kisses to the soldiers. Her heart nearly exploded with joy.

Two days later, she said goodbye to Herr Joschke and his wife, still unable to believe the war was actually over.

Truck after truck came through, gathered the prisoners and foreign workers, and took them to the train station in the big city. She boarded one of the trains and began her journey back to Poland. This time, it was a normal train—with seats and windows. The trip took two weeks. The train crawled from station to station. Outside, she saw crowds on the move, people walking with their sacks, refugees, prisoners, prisoners who were hostages in camps, all marching home—or to whatever was left of home.

Mom arrived in Łódź, where the Jewish community was starting to reorganize. On the wall, lists of survivors were posted. She found out that at least two of her sisters had survived and were now in a displaced persons camp in Germany. Two sisters and two brothers had escaped to Russia, to Siberia—but their fate was still unknown. After two days in Łódź, she got back on a train and returned to Germany.

“I went back to Germany, to the DP camp. The exiles came back from Russia. We all gathered in the camp. Seeing my brothers and sisters again was a big celebration. So much joy. So many tears,” she says.

Mom pauses the flow of the story for a moment. She lowers her head and

starts rummaging through her bag. Finally, she pulls out a tissue and wipes her glasses. We don't look at each other.

"It turned out," she continues, sounding slightly broken, "It turned out that one of my sisters and three of my brothers had perished. One of them was married with a daughter. A sweet little girl, blond, with golden curls."

She lifts her head and stares at the sky, holding back her tears. She raises a clenched fist.

"May their names be wiped from history," she says hoarsely.

"Seven out of eleven siblings survived," she continues, "but the extended family was almost completely wiped out. I had uncles and aunts, a grandma and grandpa, cousins..."

"Is that when you met Dad?" I ask, craving a happy ending.

"Almost," she smiles. "But the story's not over yet."

"One day I took one of my sisters and returned to Herr Joschke's village. I knocked on their door. His wife answered. Her jaw dropped when she saw me—well-dressed, groomed. I no longer looked like a servant. She called for her husband, who was sitting, as always, in his armchair with a newspaper in hand during those hours. He shuffled over to the door and, when he saw me, the paper fell from his hand."

"Herr Joschke," I said, "I want you to meet my sister."

He started stammering. "Come in, come in. Please, sit down."

We stepped inside. I automatically looked over to the familiar sideboard. The photo of the nephew was still there, as always—but now there was a black ribbon around the frame. Good.

"Herr Joschke," I asked, "what happened to your nephew?"

"He was killed," said Joschke solemnly. "One of the bombings." He said sadly, dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief.

We talked for a bit—about the farm, people I remembered from the village. He didn't ask me anything about my family. To him, I meant nothing. Just a Polish servant who had worked in his home. We sat for a few more minutes, then stood to leave. Joschke and his wife walked us to the door.

Just before we stepped outside, I turned and said, "Herr Joschke, I just wanted to tell you—I'm Jewish."

I saw the flicker of shock in his eyes. But then he said, quickly, "Oh, I knew that from the beginning. What do you think?"

“I don’t think you knew,” I replied, then walked out.

“I was so lucky,” Mom says. “If he’d known I was Jewish, he would’ve handed me over to the Gestapo right away. He was not of the righteous kind.”

We didn’t continue on to Germany, Mom and I. From Częstochowa, we went back to Warsaw and, from there, we flew home to Israel.

But sometimes I imagine myself standing in that German village, at Herr Joschke and his wife’s door—dwellers of the dust, long ago—knocking, walking in, sitting down, and telling someone from their family who had inherited their home the story of my mother.

A few weeks after we got back we celebrated Mom’s eightieth birthday. The gift was an album—her life story, wrapped in photos of the family. I am writing her life’s story, writing and crying, writing and crying. Finally, I can feel compassion for her. Finally, I could feel sorry, from the bottom of my heart, for that little girl who lost her whole world.

On the night of her birthday, we gathered the extended family and read the story out loud. Mom was emotional and teary-eyed. “This is the most beautiful gift I’ve ever received,” she told me afterward.

Not long ago, I pulled the album off the shelf. I wanted to revisit the details of our trip to Poland. I sat down with Mom and we flipped through it together.

“Where did this beautiful album come from?”

she asks me.

“It’s the one we made for your eightieth birthday, after our trip to Poland.”

She looks at me, astonished. “I didn’t know I had something like this at home.”

I show her the photos of her family members, her siblings, her husband, her daughters, her grandchildren...

She’s touched. She doesn’t recognize everyone. Doesn’t remember them all.

“What a beautiful gift you’ve given me,” she says. “I think it’s the most beautiful gift I’ve ever received.”

## CHAPTER 13

Dan wanted to make me happy. He bought tickets to France. “Covid’s winding down over there,” he said, “they’ve reopened everything already. Museums, restaurants, everything. No masks anymore.” He booked a hotel room by a lake. Just for the weekend, he said. But I wasn’t as happy as I should have been. Traveling always makes me anxious and worried. I’m a known collector of reasons to worry. At the top of my worries this time was Mom. What if something happened to her while I was away?

“But Smadar’s here and Liza’s here and, in the worst case, we’ll come right back,” Dan said.

If it wasn’t Mom, it was packing. Packing exhausts me. First, I check the weather. I’m always cold abroad. And the fact that it’s spring complicates things even more. Spring there, I know, is basically winter for us. Twenty degrees at the foot of the Alps is not like twenty degrees at the foot of Mount Carmel. I don’t truly believe the picture of the sun hiding behind the cloud on weather forecast websites. So, sweaters and coats. But what if it’s warm after all? On the third day, temperatures will climb to 28 degrees. The sun isn’t hiding anymore. It’ll be blazing bright yellow. And, when it’s hot in Europe, it’s unbearably hot. Maybe I’ll need sandals and lighter shirts? Given this uncertainty (just a forecast, after all), it’s better to be ready for everything. I do loads of laundry and sort my clothes in the process. I haven’t worn some of these clothes for about ten years. I try them on again. For the tenth time, I decide not to wear them, but still don’t throw them out. Then I start packing. I struggle terribly to choose from the piles of clean laundry. I pack and unpack, then repack again. Finally, the suitcase can be zipped up. But if any tiny desire to travel remains in me, it’s extinguished the moment I think about unpacking when we get back, the laundry, the folding, and the ironing awaiting me afterward.

I have trouble falling asleep at night, tossing from side to side. Every half hour I glance at the clock. The flight is scheduled for nine in the morning, not the middle of the night but, for someone who struggles to fall asleep, that’s even worse. We have to be at the airport at six, meaning we need to wake up at four-thirty, shower, get dressed, put on makeup, drink

something, pack last-minute items, and leave. My eyes sting. I managed to sleep for an hour.

Things improve slightly when we arrive at the airport. The commotion wakes me up. I reach the duty-free, where no one ever sleeps, and inhale the medley of perfume scents. I buy myself perfumes and creams I don't need, listening seriously to the beauty consultant promising instant rejuvenation of my skin if I use this special cream, a global patent that costs only seven hundred shekels. Her remark about my aging skin slightly dampens the good mood that had just started to emerge, but I swallow my pride and buy the cream anyway. My handbag, already heavy, gets even heavier. I look at the people around me. Everyone walks around with the ease of seasoned travelers. They certainly didn't stand next to their suitcases for three days, packing and unpacking. They packed an hour before the flight (I have friends like that). They'll wander happily across the continent. They'll go with the flow. That's who they are. When they return home, they'll say it was wonderful.

We land in Geneva. Huge empty halls and shiny floors. A modest crowd greets the arrivals, whispers come from the loudspeakers in three languages. Our rental car is new. It doesn't yet carry the scent of other people. We hit the highway, heading south. To France. The road is wet and clean, lined with young trees carefully protected by metal bars.

"Why isn't it as beautiful at home?" Dan asks.

I definitely don't want another worry right now. I open the window and breathe deeply. A sharp smell of wet pines and rich earth. Or so I think. (I don't really know this scent, wet pines and rich earth, but why not write it down? It's beautiful and rich.) Now, free from Mom, packing, the thoughts of those easygoing people at the airport, and my heavy bag, I feel better. Silently, I thank Dan for taking the initiative.

We arrive at the hotel at night. A small place on the outskirts of a town. A gravel path leads from the road to a heavy wooden door. Above the door, an antique-style lamp illuminates a small sign: Hotel du Lac. "There should be a lake somewhere here," Dan points out. No lake visible, just a dark expanse with lights shimmering in the distance.

On the door hangs a latch shaped like a hand. We knock lightly. Quiet. In the background, we hear the sound of running water. We knock again, a bit harder. It's ten at night. Not exactly polite. A woman opens the door. She's clutching a robe around her and squints against the light.

“We booked a room,” we say. “Ha, oui, oui, d’Israel?” she says. I feel a little stupid speaking English. I immediately want to be French. The lady takes a brass key off a nail by the counter and leads us down a long hallway. The wooden floor creaks under our feet.

The room is a bit monkish for four stars and the rave reviews the hotel boasts online. But maybe it has hidden charms I don’t know about yet. Dan puts the suitcase on the little designated bench and starts unpacking.

“Why?” I ask, “We’re only staying four days—basically three.”

“Why do you care if the clothes are in the closet?”

he asks.

“Just extra work. Besides, it can wait till tomorrow. Come to bed already.”

“Shows you’re not really organized,” Dan says, still opening drawers and hanging clothes.

I collapse onto the bed. The mattress is soft and there’s a dip in the middle. I sink into it and close my eyes. Outside, the gurgling water is louder now. I already know it’ll bother me all night. I get up to check. Down in the garden, there’s a small fishpond, a few lounge chairs scattered on the lawn, and a white rose arbor in the distance. Everything bathed in the pale light of a streetlamp.

I get back into bed. Dan’s finished unpacking and is now in the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror. I see him stretching his lips and checking his teeth. Top, bottom, sides. Then he pulls out dental floss and starts his ritual. I have zero patience for these things. I pull a pillow over my head and fall asleep.

The dip in the mattress turns into a silent battlefield overnight. We both try to cling to the higher sides of the bed to avoid falling into it, each of us gripping our edge. But the double blanket is really designed for spooning couples. And we’re not spooners. Dan might be, but I’m not. I wake up to every move and every snore. I need space. Separate blankets, separate mattresses, distance. We wake up battered and sore in the morning.

On the way to breakfast, we stop at the reception desk and insist on a different room or at least a mattress without a crater. The hotel owner acts shocked. “Really?” Yes, really. She claims she didn’t know about the dip, apologizes profusely, and promises to improve our “sleep experience.” Sleep experience. I wonder how exactly she plans to improve our sleep experience. She didn’t offer a new room. Didn’t promise a new mattress. And I didn’t even know sleep was an experience. I’ll have to pay more

attention to things around me. Probably because of all the years of taking care of Mom, I'm not fully caught up.

Breakfast is served out on the lawn: smoked salmon, cream cheese, sesame rolls, and cherry tomatoes. The table is covered with a white cloth and floral plates. In the center sits a little vase with a bunch of violets. Real ones. The rich green grass slopes down to the lake.

The arbor I saw last night is heavy with white roses. How nice. It has white benches and a round white table underneath. Across the lake are tall mountains. Snowy peaks with a milky veil resting over them. The crisp air stings my nostrils. It's hard to believe I'm inside this postcard view.

I look at Dan, sitting across from me, patiently spreading cream cheese on his half-roll. Patiently. Thoroughly. Covering every corner. Then he lays a slice of smoked salmon on top of the cheese and caps it with the other half of the roll. He sees me watching and offers it to me. No, I shake my head. I envy him. His patience, his ability to linger, his total lack of impulsiveness. A waitress flits around us. "Madame, Monsieur, more coffee, more tea?" she smiles in French, click-clacking on her heels back and forth along the stone path. I still have no appetite. I just want coffee. I sip a little. It's hot and very bitter. I add some milk, but it's still way too bitter. Coffee is a thing. If it's not precisely made, it would be better to not drink it at all. How will I improve my coffee experience? I ask myself. Maybe later, in town.

Hotel guests gradually take their seats. It's lovely eating out here on the lawn instead of inside a dining room. At a nearby table sit a man and a woman. He looks about fifty. Bald. Round face with puffy lips at its center. One of his chubby fingers sports a thick gold ring with a big red stone. I don't like men with rings like that. At most—a wedding band, and even that I'm not wild about. Somehow it reminds me of a tethered ear. I got rid of my own wedding ring pretty quickly. For some reason, Dan actually kept his.

"So they'll know I'm married. Why not?" On the one hand, it's flattering. On the other—tethered ear.

Across from the bald guy sits Lolita. I hear my mother's voice in my head: "Wouldn't give her more than twenty-five." I'm not sure she even needs more than her twenty-five years right now. She has silky hair, tanned skin, and long fingers. Her face is hidden behind dark sunglasses, but you can tell she's beautiful. She looks like some actress whose name I've forgotten. Maybe it's even her, hiding out with her sugar daddy at this lakeside inn.



The sugar daddy is busy eating. Every now and then he glances up at her. She plays with her food. Not eating. She lights a cigarette. Blows smoke sideways out of her mouth.

There's movement. Another couple joins them at the table. The man is a copy of the bald guy, but a bit taller, maybe a little slimmer. No ring, but a thick, gold chain with a big cross hangs around his neck. The woman is platinum blonde, heavy makeup.

On the sunny path sits an old woman in a wheelchair, a blanket over her knees. Her hair is a thin fuzz. The hotel owner walks over to her carrying a plate. She sits down facing her, scooping porridge with a spoon and feeding it into the old woman's toothless mouth. Streams of porridge drip down the old woman's chin. The caregiver, who I believe is her daughter, quickly scrapes them up with the spoon and tries again. The old woman clamps her mouth shut and shakes her head stubbornly. More drips. The daughter sets down the plate and drops her hands helplessly to her sides. She wipes the old woman's mouth with a napkin, pulls a little comb from her apron pocket, and starts combing her hair. The old woman closes her eyes, a smile spreading across her open mouth. I think about Liza. God bless her.

A soft, fluffy feather floats down onto our table and lands on the grass. I look up and see a blue bird perched on a branch, fussing under its wing. Suddenly, a flock of blue birds bursts out of the trees, chirping deafeningly. They fly toward the lake, now fully visible. Metallic blue stretching far and wide. The green of the mountain across the way almost looks unrealistic. It reminds me of my parents' photo album. "Europe Trip, 1966," my mother wrote in her tiny, precise handwriting on the first page. Yellowing black-and-white photos with lacy edges: my parents climbing the Austrian Alps, stopping with friends on a mountainside, waving breathlessly, laughing into the camera. Mom stands there, beautiful in shorts and a wide-brimmed cloth hat. My dad stands a little above her, his hand on her shoulder. Photos from other events later snuck into this album. Like from a Purim party. Hard to tell when exactly—the ink on the back is smudged. A bunch of people in costumes, among them my father, wearing a green Tyrolean hat with a feather and a plaid shirt under short overalls with suspenders. My mother's in the picture too, but not next to him. You can only see her head in a blonde wig and a golden crown. Next to my father stands pretty Gita. Dumb Gita. At that Purim party, my father kissed Gita. That's what my mother told me. "He was a little drunk. I didn't talk to him for two weeks after

that.” It’s hard for me to imagine my father like that. But my mother had a ring with a black stone and an inscription on the back: “To my dear wife, with love...” When I asked her where the ring came from, that’s the story she told me. “He wanted to make it up to me, so he bought me this ring.” She almost never wore it.

I ask Dan to take a picture of me like this, at breakfast. Later, we ask someone to take a photo of both of us with the lake in the background. Somehow, in the corner of the photo, you can see the bald guy’s hand with the giant ring. I feel awkward asking the guy to take another shot. Never mind, besides the hand, the photo is beautiful. Vivid colors. We’re standing there, hugging, smiling. At home, I’ll arrange the pictures into our travel album and write the date underneath. We look happy.

After breakfast we head down to stroll along the lakeshore. The hotel owner suggested we walk to the marina. There’s a small maritime museum there, she said, and good fish restaurants.

We walk along a paved path close to the shore. On our left, the wide, sparkling lake. On the opposite bank, a cluster of boats, a marina, obviously and, above it, houses with red roofs climbing up the green hill. Probably a town like ours. Maybe there’s a couple like us over there, walking by the lake, looking across and imagining a couple like us.

To our right, all along the way, private houses with gardens surrounded by walls, flowers spilling over them, creating carpets of color along the road. When we get back home, I decide in my heart, I’ll plant flowers like that in our garden, make the garden over, maybe even build a rose arbor like at the hotel. And the house—it needs refreshing too. I drift into daydreams, making plans, but deep down I know that the moment we get into the taxi from the airport all these fantasies will evaporate. The everyday worries will flood back in, and I’ll soon be living inside them again, with no time left to beautify my life.

We keep walking along the lovely path and finally reach the pier. Along it, a small, colorful market and tiny shops whose doors jingle with little bells when you open them. In one corner of the pier, a painter sits sketching portraits. It’s almost a cliché. Dan nudges me. “Go.” The painter sits me down on a low stool and starts drawing. Dan stands off to the side, waiting patiently. I’m not. I must be fidgeting, shifting around, because the painter keeps scolding me to stay still. When he’s done, I look at the portrait, trying to find myself in it, but don’t really succeed. There’s a slight resemblance at

best. A quick glance at the other portraits lying nearby shows variations on the same face. He clearly has a woman in his life—she shows up in all his drawings.

The maritime museum doesn't interest us much, so after the portrait we head into a place that, to us, looks part café, part bar. A kind of rough pub. No surprise, the decor is a giant fishing net hanging from the ceiling, stuffed with shells, conches, and starfish. A heavy smell of beer and fish hits us, along with loud music. A few fishermen in rubber boots and baseball caps sit around a circular table, gulping beer from huge mugs. We hesitate a little. Is this a café? Can we get coffee here? I already know the coffee won't be good and the fish smell will suffocate me. But we take a seat. I order a Coke. Outside, the sun disappears behind a gray cloud, darkening the land. Through the pub window, I see the painter hurriedly packing up his canvases and paints. The market vendors are throwing tarps over their stalls. They're not panicking—their movements are confident, routine. A big lightning bolt slashes the sky and heavy raindrops start to fall. The lake foams. The gray waves toss the boats in the marina, bumping them against each other. Here's that cloud that hid the sun on the weather forecast drawing. I hope the sun wins soon. The pub looks extra gloomy in this grayness and I feel that gloom seeping into me.

I think about Mom. What is she doing right now? Probably sitting in her wheelchair, eating breakfast. Liza's feeding her. She chews slowly, her toothless mouth working on the soft little squares of bread Liza makes for her, spread with butter and strawberry jam. There's also a hard-boiled egg and a tiny chopped salad. And at the end, a soft cookie and a cup of coffee. If I happen to be there during breakfast, she insists I sit and eat something. "Mom, I ate at home half an hour ago. I'm not hungry."

"You don't have to be hungry for a cookie and coffee." That she can still say.

Suddenly someone bursts in from outside, yelling and waving his arms. A few people run toward him and he leads them behind a large boat propped up on stilts. In the pub, people crowd around the windows. The boat blocks the view but, after a moment, we see people carrying someone. One of them is soaked from head to toe. He must've jumped into the lake to save the drowning person. Turns out she's a woman. They come close to the pub and the door opens with a kick. They rush the soaking-wet woman to one of the benches against the wall. Someone bends over her, trying to resuscitate her.

It's so strange, watching this. I almost shout at him—you can't do that now, Covid! What if she's not vaccinated? What if she's got some weird new variant?

A few minutes later, an ambulance arrives and paramedics burst in. They push people aside and get to work on the woman. I can see her pale face. Her arm slips off the bench. A young woman, maybe thirty, in a soaking-wet tracksuit, puddles forming under her. The paramedics strip off her sweatshirt, sweatpants, and shoes, and cover her body with a dry blanket. She coughs, convulses, and vomits water. Her hair clings to her cheeks, her eyes red. Maybe she's crying—hard to tell with all the wetness around. Her body occasionally shakes with rough coughs.

That familiar headache starts to climb and rise up the nape of my neck, creeping inward and settling behind my eye. Nausea will begin shortly.

"Let's go," I urge Dan.

"We can't," he says, motioning outside. Hail is pounding on the pier. What can we do? Rain and hail keep coming down. Even the paramedics can't leave. So we stay there—with the woman, the paramedics, and a few fishermen, stuck inside the pub. A waitress comes over. "Anything else for you?" she asks. Water, I say. Dan orders a hot chocolate. I'm afraid that if I put anything else in my mouth, I'll throw it up immediately.

The woman is still lying there. She seems a bit better. She looks at me for a second and closes her eyes again. Her face looks tortured.

I wonder what happened to her. Why she jumped into the water. What she was running from. Suffering isn't picky. It doesn't care about the pretty lake, the flowered path, the green mountain.

The rain stops all at once and silence falls over the pub. Only the steady dripping from the gutters remains. The sun peaks out again, glinting off puddles. The vendors pull the tarps off their stalls and the painter returns, setting up his things again. Like a silent movie, I watch it all from the pub window.

"Come," Dan says, pulling me outside. The air is sharp and sweet, the colors vivid. The fishermen come out too.

"Let's go to the old town," Dan says, flipping through the guidebook. "There's a beautiful church and a fortress."

"I have a headache."

"Maybe take a pill?"

"I don't have one. And I'm going to throw up."

We start walking back. The lake on our right, the flowering gardens to our left. A woman with a wicker basket approaches, offering us a bouquet. I peek into the basket. It's full of bouquets of tiny, white flowers with a heavenly smell. I pick up a bouquet. It has three stems and on each one hangs clusters of small, white, bell-shaped flowers. My heart leaps. Mom's flowers. She always used to tell me about the white, bell-shaped flowers that bloomed in the fields after the snow passed. I buy two bunches and we continue on our way to the hotel.

I stick the flowers in the cup that holds the toothbrushes and place it on the windowsill. The headache is now sharp and clear. I darken the room and crawl into bed. Dan is used to this by now. He knows I need a few hours of silence and darkness. He mumbles something about buying a newspaper and leaves.

There's an afternoon quiet in the little town. A distant car, birds, a creaking piece of furniture somewhere in the house, quiet chattering and the smell of cooking. I fall asleep immediately.

The phone wakes me. My sister's voice, doubled with an echo on the line. "Mom's in the hospital. She didn't feel well last night. They think it's her heart."

What time is it? Four. "It's five here," she says.

"Why'd you wait until now?" I ask.

"I didn't want to worry you. Thought it was nothing."

"So why now?" I insist.

"Because Mom asked. She keeps asking where you are," answers my sister.

Okay, we have to go back. The righteous get their work done by others. I squash the little bit of happiness starting to bubble inside me. I won't have to see another old European town paved with cobblestones, or another church with stained glass windows, beautiful as they are, and Madonnas holding babies. I won't have to pretend we had a great trip and saw everything. I'll take the flowers and go home.

I get out of bed slowly. The headache pulls back. I start gathering the scattered clothes into the suitcase. Dan walks in with a newspaper, cookies, and a bottle of juice.

"What are you doing?" he says, alarmed.

"Packing. Mom's in the hospital."

I wet a page from the newspaper he brought—the page with the obituaries

—and wrap the flowers in it.

Dan sits down on the armchair. He starts to say something but falls silent. He steps out to the balcony, comes back in, pours himself some juice, and eats a cookie.

“We have to wait until tomorrow anyway,” he says.

Right. How did I forget?

“So let’s go to the old town now. Let’s eat something. See something,” he adds.

From the airport, we take a taxi straight to the hospital. Mom is lying there, hooked up to tubes, eyes closed. An oxygen mask over her nose.

“Mom,” I whisper into her ear. She opens her eyes. I show her the flowers and bring them close to her face. She pulls the oxygen mask aside and inhales their scent. A smile starts spreading over her face. She tries to sit up, reaches out a hand, wants to say something but falls back. Her lips murmur, “Bells of May, bells of May.”

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<sup>1</sup> Many Jews who immigrated to Israel were given Hebrew names. “Aryeh” is the Hebrew equivalent of “Lion” or “Leo.”

<sup>2</sup> Tova is the Hebrew word for “good” (feminine form).

<sup>3</sup> The name “Lichluchit” derives from the Hebrew word, “dirty.”