Chapter 18

Triangular Desire

If Grisha, my namesake, and Mrs. Kagan became lovers, and she was old enough to be his mother, then I could do the same. Wasn't Miss Raphael, our second grade teacher, at least twenty years old? And anyway, the crush I had on her was nothing compared to the one I had on Miss Waxman. To find out her birthday I called up her father. Then my parents helped me out by donating to her the extra balcony seat to the Risë Stevens concert at Plateau Hall. It was the first time that I sat in a darkened auditorium next to a single woman I loved. David Bach, the only one in our class who played the violin, got to turn the pages for the pianist, and I sat in the balcony, shaking.

Rumor had it that she was about to get married and it made me do something desperate. I showed her a page from my dreambook. How could she resist serving as my muse? I am acting out in class, she reads, and she warns me that next time I'll be punished. I do it again then flee down the stairs and out the building. When no one comes after me I sneak back up and find a pair of scissors, some rope, and two pieces of wood. Just then, Miss Waxman steps out of the classroom, I drop the scissors and find a place to hide. Catching sight of the scissors, she says, Now I know why. I run for it. She doesn't give chase, but turns to another kid and says, That boy pushed and kicked you. I'll bet you can run down three flights of stairs faster than he can run down two. I'm outside by now, hiding behind a telephone pole. This time she does come looking for me, and emerging from my hiding place I announce that it was all a big joke, and she takes me by the hand.

Instead of asking what I planned to do with that pair of scissors, Miss Waxman complimented me for typing up the dream so neatly. I chickened out after that and never showed her the dream about the whole of our third grade class jumping out the window to follow me through a thick forest and at the end of a disastrous sea voyage I am back in school with Dina Kolodny who washed up on the same desert island, and we are told that while we were gone Miss Waxman had "passed away."

Maybe that's why I killed her off, already foreseeing in this second dream that she would betray me for a guy named Tarasofsky. Two other great disappointments followed. The Folkshule relocated from its old building on Waverly Street to a modern complex across town on Van Horne, and Anna Miransky moved to Toronto. Anna had played the seventh Hanukkah candle to my sixth, but it wasn't until she left town that I learned from mother that she was the daughter of the Yiddish poet, Peretz Miransky, from Vilna, an elective affinity that would haunt me for years to come. The new school was nothing like the red brick building in the old neighborhood that I was just beginning to scout out on my own, with a perfect yard for playing handball and where the classes were much smaller. On Van Horne we were joined by another ten kids, none, except for Esther, who meant anything special, and I was still stuck in the same class with Howard Granovsky, who had forced me to play the alien from Mars all through kindergarten and now joined forces with another two ruffians, or *bulvanes*, as mother called them.

The proverbial sixty-pound weakling, I still preferred the company of my five imaginary playmates, all girls, who would fly in through my bedroom window each morning, like Peter Pan and Tinkerbell, and rescue me from mother's vigilance. When Ruthie brought me to kindergarten my first day, I was the only boy wearing knickers and brown woolen stockings held up by garters, and Dina Kolodny cried so hysterically that she had to be taken home. In first grade, I made the mistake of stopping a fist fight and was more terrified of the blood that

I accidentally drew from Philip Feldman's nose than of being hauled into Lerer Wiseman's office.

Because of the move uptown I was to spend three hours of enforced bedlam each day on the school bus, alleviated by the sweetness and pain of seeing Irene Deckelbaum, that cold beauty, get on the bus at Wilderton, and by my forty-minute lunch break with mother, who rather than allow me to eat a sandwich made of Wonder Bread in the lunchroom, preferred to serve me a hot meal that Xenia cooked with fresh black bread and butter in return for my undivided attention.

By the middle of second grade, I already knew how to spell the word Jew, after trying out dju, geoo, and jue, could spot it on a printed page in no time, and was puzzled by the cheery innocence of our English primer (See Spot Run! See Sally Jump!) as compared with what we were learning in Yiddish. Look to your right, said Lerer Wiseman at a yearly Warsaw Ghetto commemoration, and look to your left. One of you would have perished in Europe. Dick and Jane had no such worries. Nothing worse happened to them than spilling their bucket of water. Once it took forever for Jane's kettle to boil. These stories were OK for teachers born in Canada like Miss Raphael and Miss Waxman who visited my dreams at night. During the day there were other questions that they couldn't answer.

How come the Ferrons, my French Canadian neighbors across the street, had grandparents who visited them from Trois Rivières on Sundays whereas I and most of my classmates had none? For my sake, the Ferrons played cowboys and Indians in English, with French reserved for the climactic moment when you caught your prey and yelled, Haut les mains! and for a special treat, Robert or Marcel, both altar boys, would feed me a communion wafer from their special supply, and we would have become blood brothers, were it not that Dr. Ferron, their father, warned us of possible infection.

Robert and Marcel could pray in Latin and were taught by priests and nuns, while in Folkshule, we addressed the Lerer only in Yiddish or Hebrew and he came from a place called

the shtetl, the authentic source of Yiddishkayt. The nice thing about the shtetl was that everyone spoke Yiddish, even the shabbes-goy who removed the candlesticks on the Sabbath, something shtetl Jews were forbidden to do, because they were all very *frum*, save for our teachers, who didn't cover their heads, standing as they did for Enlightenment, Zionism, and social justice, while the bad thing was the terrible poverty, in spite of the many shops that surrounded the marketplace where the *balebatim* lived and the son of the money lender who lorded it over the other kids in heder, most of whom were so poor that an onion for lunch was a big treat and one kid named Topele Tuturitu nearly died when a hired bully burned his Simkhas Torah flag. Once, the Rabbi of Nemirov even skipped morning prayers to chop wood for a very old woman who lived all alone outside of town. There was hunger in Mother's stories too, but always for a reason, and Jews from America sent them bread during World War I, while the shtetl was too far away to be saved.

Things changed in fifth grade when Mr. Ryback became our home room teacher, because although he spoke Yiddish, he was born in Israel, and had served in the Israeli army, the source of new stories about fighting Arabs with fake grenades and fooling the medic into thinking you were running a high fever, and he would split us into two teams, Maccabi and Hapoʿel, and we'd tear the classroom apart in order to win. So by the time Lerer Dunsky became our home room teacher, in seventh grade, and we began each morning singing either Hatikvah or Teḥezaknah (a much more difficult tune to carry), I had figured out what it meant to be a Jew. It meant that I came from a place that I could hear about, read about, talk about, but never visit, and that when I grew up, I should move to another place where Hatikvah was the national anthem, which I and every other Folkshule graduate would sing with Lerer Dunsky's grammatical emendation, and meanwhile we lived in *goles*, Exile, where we needed to collect money for Israel and get a thorough education.

No place was really perfect. The shtetl existed only on paper. The State of Israel did not recognize the value of Yiddish, and instead of governing the people according to Mishpat

Ivri, a system of laws derived from the Talmud, its legal code came from the Turks and the British. As for Canada, where we almost had our own Jewish School Board, the rich Jews of Westmount pulled some strings and the project fell through. That is why, said Lerer Dunsky, just sitting in this classroom, in the Folkshule on Van Horne, we were making history.

Look to the right. Look to the left. Look straight ahead.

Waxer's Secret

Why was there no one else but me to serve as keeper of the world's infidelities? Didn't I know that Arthur Gerlernter, the big shot professor of economic history, had sired a bastard son in Warsaw, this, because I innocently called one of my teachers a *mamzer?* Or that greed came wrapped up in piety, in reference to one of my uncles? And when mother bought a dozen sets of Jena glass complete with an ingenious tea kettle and father questioned the need for quite so many, mother shot back that she bought them from Ronia and Sigmund, who got rich smuggling US Army supplies at Bergen-Belsen but were duly punished by losing their ill-gotten gains in the Levinthal Construction Scandal and their only son was born retarded, so if they now made a living selling German products it was a mitzvah to buy from them.

Once you knew Yiddish, then, you already knew the language of secrets.

My sister Eva's defense against mother was to lose herself in a good book, preferably a long historical novel, but I wasn't much of a reader and what little I did read fed my morbid fascination with death. That's why I made a bee-line to the shelf marked *khurbn,* the Great Destruction, when each fall Eva and I showed up at Kalles's Book Center on Park Avenue with our list of school supplies from the Folkshule: the Yiddish primers and chrestomathies for the higher grades, the books of the Hebrew Bible each bound separately, Kadia Molodowsky's *On the Paths of Zion,* plus a year's worth of the special blue-lined exercise books in which we practiced cursive Hebrew script. The textbooks were laid out by grade on a big table. So while Eva headed from there to Literature, I checked his latest acquisitions on the war. Appearing at the cash register with Emanuel Ringelblum's *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* caused Mr. Kalles to raise his wonderful bushy eyebrows.

"It's amazing," he said turning to Eva, "what you can get away with in English. "You'd think McGraw Hill would know better than to publish a translation so full of mistakes, based

on an edition produced in Warsaw under the Communists. Ber Mark and his team were forced to leave everything out, except for the jokes, and a few diary entries to make it look kosher."

Father was waiting for us in the car. As we drove up Mount Royal and passed below the huge crucifix I wondered what exactly Ber Mark and the Communists were trying to hide and

whether Eva already lost in her new novel knew the answer. The Jewish Hour with Nachum Wilchesky was just coming on the air, and his name reminded me that we had a Communist school in town named for Morris Winchevsky and a socialist school named for Avrom Reisen and a Labor Zionist school named for I. L. Peretz and a hasidic school named for the Lubavitcher Rebbe and a self-hating school named for St. George. The Workmen's Circle Choir would be performing tonight and next week the Vilna and Bialystok landsmanshaftn would join ranks for the first time to commemorate the liquidation of the ghettos, and Dora Wasserman was happy to announce her new play of the season, *Life Goes On,* translated from the Hebrew by Shloyme Wiseman and Shimshen Dunsky, which I already knew about because I had a walk-on role. So if the French Separatists ever came to power and herded us into a ghetto, I could preserve a record of all this and leave nothing out, thanks to the diary I was starting to keep, plus a scrapbook of memorabilia.

Parents' library had grown so large by now that book shelves were built in Ruthie's former bedroom and in the vestibule leading to the sun porch, because in addition to patronizing all the local writers, mother received books from Yiddish writers all over the world, which father dutifully paid for, and it took Eva and me a whole month to rearrange them first by subject, then alphabetically. I asked Eva why, except for a few gifts from Melech Ravitch, there were no prewar books in the whole collection, and she explained that parents' real library was left behind in Czernowitz. Ruth, meanwhile, had just come back from her first semester at Columbia University and told me about the used Yiddish book stores on the Lower East Side, Morgenshtern's and Waxer's, where you could find anything. "For a price," she added in a whisper. I just had to wait another five years, until I went off to college.

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The first landmark was staring me in the face when I stepped out of the subway station on East Broadway: the Forward Building, that proud monument to Jewish labor, its bold

Yiddish letters visible from blocks around. I expected to see peddlers and pushcarts and was disappointed by another kosher dairy restaurant on every block, another wholesale clothing store, more electronics and home appliances, another bearded man selling religious articles and prayer books out of some ancient alcove. The half-sour pickles at least were still being sold in huge barrels. From Gus's I found my way to Morgenshtern's.

Mr. Morgenshtern with his shock of wavy white hair greeted me warmly, and when he found out my father was from Bialystok, he sold me volume one of the YIVO's *Pedagogishe shriftn* in mint condition, so rare, he claimed, that the YIVO itself owned but two copies. Buoyed by my success I headed for Waxer's on Canal Street around the corner. The store was long and narrow and the man behind the counter eyed me with suspicion.

"*Sholem-aleykhem,*" I cried.

"*Vos zukhstu,*" a tired voice replied, "what are you looking for?"

"I came here to browse."

"No browsing here, *yunger man.* The books are arranged by size and not by subject. You have to know what you're looking for."

I thought fast. "Have you got any Kletzkin editions for sale?" Remembering my coup at Morgenshtern's I added, "Kletzkin was a friend of the family."

He almost laughed in my face. "I'd be happy to show you my collection, but there's nothing you could possibly afford."

"Alright," I almost pleaded, "how about Sutzkever's *Valdiks?* "I know Sutzkever. He did a poetry reading in our home."

Waxer turned to a shelf immediately behind the counter and pulled out a yellowish brown volume with a tree on the cover.

He let me hold it.

"Vilna, 1940," I said admiringly. "Wasn't Vilna under Soviet occupation at the time?" I was still hoping to soften him up.

Mr. Waxer's eyes grew narrower. Then he nodded.

"You must be Ruth Wisse's younger brother. She also came here looking for a bargain. And for prayer books published by Fradl Matz. Fifty dollars for the Sutzkever, not a penny less."

"In Montreal," I apologized, "we have no used Yiddish book stores. I'll come back some other time."

I never did.

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Not until my senior year at Brandeis when I was living off campus with my two roommates, Sid Blumenthal and Hillel Schwartz. The phone rang one Sunday morning. It was Ruth calling from Montreal.

"Dovid! You'll never guess what happened. Waxer just died. The whole store and warehouse are being put up for auction! Tomorrow at 11:00."

The store, she rushed on, wasn't worth bidding for. Remember his prize collection of Yiddish poetry? The old geezer had sold it to Brown University. What we were after was the warehouse, a block and a half away. His Holy of Holies. No one ever allowed inside. He had 20,000 books stashed away there, and father, ever-indulgent, was willing to advance us the money. Lenny, my brother-in-law, was flying down to New York with a check, but the earliest flight wouldn't get him there until noon, so it was up to me to make the bid on the family's behalf. What did I know about bidding? Nothing to it. The auctioneer was expecting me and knew from Ruth that we had no more than $2,000 to spend. Can I imagine? Ten cents a book! All we had to do was get these books to Montreal, where she would have them sorted and catalogued, and we'd be in business!

As a bona fide student I could fly half fare and at 10:00 the next morning I was among five other people, very professional-looking, crowded into Waxer's store. Things looked just the same. The auctioneer insisted that I call him Harold but we didn't speak much, because he

still had to show us around the warehouse. I tagged along, behind the grownups. The warehouse, up a dark flight of stairs, was huge, stacked floor to ceiling with books. Someone let out a whistle.

Harold began the auction promptly at 11:00 and things moved very fast. Do I have a buyer for the store and warehouse? Bidding starts at 5,000. Alright then. Is there a buyer for the warehouse only? Bidding starts at 1500. Do I hear 2,000? That was my cue, the moment I was waiting for. "I bid $2,000." The five others turned around with a look of surprise. I could barely hold back a smile.

Lenny wrapped up the deal two hours later. He did mention, over coffee and cheese danish at Ratner's, that an opening bid is just the asking price. If no one bids, you try to get it for less. Or you raise the bid by fifty. Harold, I protested, already knew I had two thousand to spend.

In a week's time, Lenny informed me, the whole warehouse had to be emptied out.. So together we mobilized the troops. From Boston came my best friend Khaskl, who was finishing up at MIT, and my roommate, Hillel. From Montreal came Ruthy and Lenny and father donated a truck from Huntington Woollen Mills driven by Palmer Heart. From New York, Neal Kozodoy, whose job it was to identify and evaluate the most valuable Hebrew books.

The first hour was a lot of fun, everyone calling out his latest find. "A bound volume of *Milgroym!* Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?" "A complete set of the Romm's *Shas.* From 1872!" "The Kletzkin edition of Opatoshu! But there's a volume missing." "*The Communist Manifesto* in Yiddish!" "Look at this. A monograph on the life of Peretz. Vilna 1939. By Menashe Waxer. A whole pile of them!"

By the second hour Hillel's asthma had kicked in and we could hear him wheezing on the stairs. Lenny said that Yiddishists and bibliophiles weren't what we needed to

pack up these books. We needed the U.S. Marines. Neal Kozodoy suggested that the strength of

Waxer's holdings may not lie in his Hebrew collection. With roughly 18,000 books still to go, Hillel was reassigned to cardboard box assembly and the chorus died down.

Khaskl, Hillel and I headed back to Boston late that night, on the Greyhound bus, to save money. When the shipment arrived in Montreal, the books would have to be sorted, which meant renting a warehouse for storage and hiring a team of students to shelve them in alphabetical order. Ruth would never produce the catalogue, father would never make back his investment, five thousand volumes would eventually be acquired by the Jewish Public

Library, and the rest would end up at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst. I couldn't sleep, so I started reading my complimentary copy of Waxer's monograph, *The Life of a Jewish Poet.* "During his lifetime," it began, "I. L. Peretz concealed himself from the world." Then, drawing on his considerable knowledge of Jewish books, the Hebrew language, and Russian literature, Waxer proceeded to lay bare the most hidden years of Peretz's youth.

Chapter 24

Going All the Way

Instead of staying with the Greens in Abu Tor or renting a room in Beit Noah, that cozy bed-and-breakfast-without-the-breakfast, the university put me up in a fancy hotel for three nights, but with the Palestinians at war again, I had the Moriah almost to myself, so lonely a prospect that I decided to revisit my old haunts in Rehavia. I walked up Jabotinsky Street and was approaching the Givant Pharmacy on Ha-Ari where in that delirious summer of 1969 I had gone in to buy a condom, practicing the word that Rochman had taught me over and over, *emtsa'ei meniyah*, contraceptive devices (why wasn't there a simpler expression?), absolutely determined to go through with it, not like the hero in the British film *This Sporting Life*, who chickened out and made his girlfriend pregnant, when in the midst of this reverie I looked up and saw Leah. She was pushing a double stroller and walking next to her was a tall and stately young woman. Could these little boys with velvet yarmulkes and neatly combed *peyes* be Leah's youngest children, numbers seven and eight? I made the calculation. No, they were obviously her grandchildren, and the woman at her side was just as clearly one of her older daughters, because they both wore the same upscale dresses down to their ankles, their heads covered with the same wrap-around kerchief, and both looked at me with the same hazel-green eyes. "Meet Professor Roskies, an old friend," said Leah enunciating with the clipped British accent she had adopted after her marriage. Her eyes were tired, very tired.

Leah was my first love.

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We caught each other's eye the moment she stepped on the bus, two out of 230 students on their way to Starlight, Pennsylvania, for a week-long Hillel Summer Seminar. I had just bought a pair of rimless glasses in Montreal, an act of profound identification with Tom Courtenay, who played Strelnikov in *Dr. Zhivago*, and here already was my own dark-haired, petite version of Julie Christie. Her paisley mini-skirt and matching top contrasted starkly with the schlumpy clothes the rest of us were wearing, but within a mere forty-eight hours Leah would be riding on my shoulders with that very same skirt hiked very high up her legs.

To pass as an intellectual or to play it cool? What lingering doubts I still harbored were quickly resolved by Leah's disarming intensity. She took a seat next to mine and launched straightaway into her personal odyssey: How Lindsay had become Leah; how a Sunday-school graduate from an ultra-Reform background in Highland Park, Illinois, with a Hanukkah Bush in her living room ended up at this very-Jewish seminar; and how (most amazing to contemplate) from belonging to a motorcycle gang in the mean streets of Chicago she had graduated to Wellesley College. Her great-grandfather had run for mayor. Somewhere back home there was an intermarried older sister and a twin brother, Leah's conduit to drugs, sex, and Negroes. Born to a life of extreme privilege -- she could ski, ride horseback, and ballroom dance -- there was hardly a rebellious path she had not yet trodden: tutoring Spanish-American children on Erie Street (wherever that was), working for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the North Shore Open Housing Project, collecting books for grammar schools in Mississippi, playing cards with mental patients at the Illinois State Mental Hospital. She quoted Archibald Macleish and Wallace Stevens from memory. She wrote perfect French, read classical Greek, and spoke passable Russian. She had been to the New Frontier and back.

For the next week, with the exception of Robert Alter's class on American-Jewish fiction, Leah and I signed up for the same sessions, and whatever the topic -- Faith and Reason, Messianism and Heresy, the Enlightenment and its Discontents, Jews and Other Minorities -- Leah had something passionate to say. Yet after hours, when she sat next to me

on the grass or sat on my lap, the endless concatenation of ideas finally began to peter out, and that is where I took over, with my stories and songs.

The experience was new for both of us. I had long since given up writing tales of seduction. Now I discovered that what I knew about the past was itself enormously seductive, both the Vilna Tales imbibed with my mother's milk and her black bread, and my own second-hand chronicle of massacres, expulsions, and pogroms, of ghettos, death camps, and heroic last stands. Piecing together sights and sounds from Yiddish literature, I then began to decribe the shtetl as if I myself had lived there, and in my retelling, the Jewish market towns of old became the ultimate refuge from the terrible self-hatred and alienation that we we were hearing so much about all week long. The shtetl was reborn as a Jewish mini-empire, a Covenantal Community wherein God alone held sovereign power. In the shtetl, I went on, waxing more eloquent still, all the warring sides -- Faith and Reason, Messianism and Heresy, Tradition and Modernity -- had been reconciled, until, inevitably, the shtetl and its Jews were consigned to the flames. Too powerless and innocent to survive.

Then I did something I had never done before outside of a ritual setting: I sang all the songs I knew from the Vilna ghetto. I sang her Kaczerginski's "Shtiler, shtiler," all three heart-wrenching stanzas; I sang her Leah Rudnitsky's lullaby, "Dremlen feygl af di tsvaygn"; I sang her Sutzkever's elegy, "Unter dayne vayse shtern"; and I ended with Hirsh Glik's love song, "Shtil di nakht iz oysgeshternt." In truth, the stars were out in full that night, and as she lay with her head on my lap, our right hands intertwined, the great divide between my family history and hers, between my dreams and her nightmares, my nightmares and her dreams, that great divide was spanned.

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We saw a lot of each other at the start of our sophomore year. Though neither of us owned a car and there was no direct link across the eight miles between Wellesley and Brandeis, she made twice as many trips to me as I to her. There was even more to talk about,

now that she had changed her major to Biblical History, Literature, and Interpretation. She resolved to teach me Russian, I to teach her Yiddish. My repertoire, though, was beginning to lose its edge, as Leah delved into new areas: the common background of Greek and Hebrew civilization; the Pauline antithesis between body and soul; a rational justification for observing the commandments. Where we did see eye-to-eye was on the question of God's role in history. Neither of us could go along with Mordecai Kaplan in rejecting the idea of the Chosen People, but neither were we ready to proclaim, with Richard Rubenstein, the death of God. "The god of my unbelief is magnificent," I quoted to Leah a line from Jacob Glatstein. The awesomeness of the slaughter, the sheer incomprehensibility of the destruction of European Jewry, demanded of us a religious response.

Verbal excess, however, had its dark side. Leah was incapable of keeping anything to herself, and the big secret was my inability to make the next move. I was by now expert at using songs and stories as means of seduction. I just didn't know how or where to go from there. Especially not with someone named Lindsay, an incarnated Hell's Angel. What could I pull off that approximated in any way the things she had doubtless seen and done? So Leah called upon The Committee for help. The Committee were our mutual friends, Elihu and Masha, the same Masha I had once rejected as a mate on account of her name. Leah confided in Masha who told Elihu who, in his typically gruff manner, came right out and said it: What the fuck are you waiting for? With my back to the wall, I took the initiative the very next Saturday night. It was Leah's turn to come to me and I arranged for Hillel, my roommate, to stay away as long as possible.

Do I have to reveal what happened next? I do not.

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The Committee was disbanded. Leah and I spent our Junior Year at the Hebrew University, as did Elihu and Masha. Leah amazed us all by how quickly and thoroughly she learned to read, write, and speak Hebrew. Only my accent was better than hers. By the

middle of senior year, she had taken on the full yoke of the Torah and become a strictly observant Jew, finding a centeredness and wholeness that had eluded her before. With that joyful certainty, she went all the way, and moved to Israel upon graduating from Wellesley, whereas my eastward journey was a lot more jagged.

Chapter 28

To Know Jerusalem

We were walking back arm-in-arm from the Temple Mount when Leybl turned to me and said, "Making love is like pouring boiling water over tea leaves. Just watch them open up."

"Leybl," I replied, "if only someone would *read* me the tea leaves first."

"Very well," he said, "then consider this: The way to know a foreign city is through a woman."

Surely he meant Jerusalem, though why call it foreign, if the whole point of my returning here for the summer with the money I had earned teaching Yiddish was to know the city on my own terms? And who might the woman be, given that my plans of marrying the daughter of a Yiddish writer had thus far come to naught? One Saturday at the Sutzkevers I met Kaczerginski's daughter. She spoke a richly idiomatic Vilna Yiddish with a slight Spanish lilt. What were the odds that someone currently living with an Arab lover would ever be inspired to know Jerusalem with me? In desperation, I composed a long letter to Anna Miransky, the daughter of another Vilna poet. Perhaps she still remembered me from the Hanukkah pageant back in the third grade. But the letter remained unfinished, undelivered.

Ilana, perhaps? How portentous to bump into her at the Jerusalem bus station and how surprising to be invited to visit her at Sdeh Boker, Ben Gurion's kibbutz in the Negev. We hadn't exactly broken up. I just stopped seeing her, some six months before, after a night of

great promise. Sdeh Boker, by pure coincidence, was also where my Yiddish pen-pal from Argentina, Avrom Nowersztern, was studying, at a seminar for new immigrants.

At Sdeh Boker, I learned to pick peaches, from 4:30 in the morning until noon every day, and to really break us in, the volunteers were taken on an arduous *tiyyul* to Ein Avdat, deep in the Negev, where we didn't stop at the first pool surrounded by sheer cliffs but continued on by foot, led by a fearless 18-year-old kibbutznik, each cliff revealing another fresh water pond, one reachable only by walking through a waterfall, at which point Ilana sat down inside a cave to await our descent, leaving only the male climbers to make it to the uppermost pool, and since we had ascended along razor-thin ledges, or by means of notches ingeniously carved into the rock, the only way down was to jump twenty-thirty feet into each successive pool below. I jumped. What choice did I have?

The night before I left, we made love, standing up and fully clothed. She had been a virgin when I met her, Ilana confessed, a startling revelation, for every woman I encountered, if she had long hair and ample breasts, I always imagined to be more sexually knowledgeable than me, but after walking out on her, Ilana had succumbed to the Teaching Assistant in Psychology, and to make amends I invited her to stay with me come August, when I moved into my cousin's apartment on 19 Harav Berlin. For the time being I was sharing a room with a very pious young man on Yordei Hasirah, a few doors down from the Rochmans, where one Friday morning, awakening later than usual, I walked into the garden and saw Abigail.

"Hey, *kokhlefl*!" she cried, addressing me with her one Yiddish word. We had hung out together at the end of senior year, a happy foursome, including Lynne and our Italian-American friend, Zoey Romero, who looked and acted like a Jew. Once the four of us were almost apprehended by the campus police on the top of a dorm building, trying to smoke a local brand of hashish. Abby, I knew, was enrolled in some Brandeis-sponsored program for the fall. True to form, she arrived two months early, with no definite plans and no place to stay. She threw me an ebullient smile, as carefree and unselfconscious as her floppy blue hat

and very-short yellow shift. How had she tracked me down? Through mutual friends, of whom there were many. For Abby had spent a summer at Camp Massad in Canada, where she and Bernie had reputedly become lovers.

"Come, let me introduce you to the Rochmans." And off we ran. How well she spoke Hebrew and related to Morva, the dog! No wonder that Leybl insisted that Abby join our group as we set out for the Old City before sunset, making her the seventh member of his entourage. I had traveled this route but two weeks before. Perhaps because it was Abby's first pilgrimage to the Wall, or because the past week of turmoil along the Suez Canal reinforced the stillness in the pre-Sabbath air, or because it was impossible to tell where her scented soap left off and the jasmine began, or because the square in front of the massive Herodian stones was not as crowded as usual, or because the Gerer Hasidim next to us were being led by a man with a stentorian voice that carried from here to all eight gates of the city, or because at the conclusion of Ma'ariv the young Hasidim drew me into their circle dance tighter than they had ever done before, or because they beat the rhythm with their slippered feet, now quicker, now slower -- for whatever reason, I felt one with the dancers, one with the stones, one with the air, as I now wished more than anything to become one with her.

There was no room, alas, for Abby to join our five-day hitch-hiking tour of the Galilee organized by Rivka who, with her poetic intuition, already sensed what was going on, but on Friday I finally took up residence in my cousin's apartment on 19 Harav Berlin, in honor whereof I decided to forego a Sabbath meal at the Rochmans and to cook one myself, to which I invited Abby and disinvited Ilana. With everything that summer coming together in ways that seemed to defy all logic, why not be magnanimous and include Bernie with his current girlfriend Sharona while I was at it? I put too much garlic, as aphrodisiac, into the food, and invited the three of them to stay the night.

Bernie and Sharona had no trouble falling asleep on the floor while I tossed and turned on the narrow bed. I was shivering. Suddenly I felt Abby's naked body next to mine. There

was little we could do, for fear of waking the others, though secretly I hoped that Bernie was watching out of the corner of his eye. Strangely innocent, playful, almost childlike, it was very different from what I always imagined. We giggled and tickled each other, until we too must have fallen asleep.

There was more, much more to Jerusalem than studying and praying. On a limited budget you could eat high-class vegetarian. There were ice cream parlors beyond the Ben-Yehudah-Yaffo triangle. The Khan housed an avant-garde theater with a disco in the basement, and after two drinks, even an elephant could fly. At the movies, the cracking and spitting of pumpkin seeds was tolerable if there was someone tickling your palm. The Rose Garden was a perfect place to give and receive a back rub.

With my brother Ben and his family about to arrive, for good, Abby and I took the train up to Haifa to meet them. I had never traveled by train in Israel, never seen so many Jews on a train, never been so torn between the visceral memories of those other trains and the joyful abandon of my fellow passengers. Amidst the bedlam, Abby and I carved out a quiet, even somber, space. "Beneath the whiteness of your stars," I sang to her in Yiddish, "Stretch out toward me your white hand; / All my words are turned to tears-- / They long to rest within your hand," part lament, part petition. The wheels clattered on, to a different rhythm.

In Haifa we separated, she to her father's friend, Dr. Bernfeld, and I to a spacious room in the Dan Hotel, owned by the Dresners, formerly from Czernowitz. The boat from Marseilles docked three hours early, so I found Ben, Louise, and the children ecstatic and exhausted, already in their hotel. For dinner, the kids had their first falafel, and for dessert, I took them to a pastry shop that Abby had discovered, where Ben treated us to the rum-and-whipped-cream cake. "It reminds me of Café Rudnitsky," I said to Ben. He didn't know what I was talking about. "What's important," he said to me, "is not what a person professes, but how he acts." This was his time for action.

And mine, as well, because time was running out. One very hot afternoon back in Jerusalem, we had the apartment all to ourselves. That is when I discovered the scars on her body. There were seven of them, mostly in places hidden from the sun. I climbed with my right index finger from one scar to another. I circled from her midriff to her back, carefully traced her spine, luxuriated in the nape of her neck, then made the plunge to her discretely cool buttocks. What these scars were from I did not need to ask. They came, I was certain, from her love-making with that Moroccan, whose role in her life I had learned about from an historian named Aryeh Bauminger who, though an expert on the Jewish resistance in the Cracow ghetto, knew of other unequal struggles as well, for that *pushtak*, he told me in confidence, had treated her real bad, sadistically, you might say. The word meant low-life, rifraff, and was reserved for the Jews who had come from North Africa. Abigail, in her wisdom, made no mention of this evil man, and rather nonchalantly counted my birth marks in return, twenty-three of them in all, some large, some merely cosmetic. In prior times, I pointed out to her, the birthmark on my left leg had been enormous. See how small it had become in adulthood, how innocuous. Her naked scars, her stigmata, were so terrifying to me, however, that I was grateful not to consummate our love, although I had dutifully purchased a condom at the Givant Pharmacy, with Rochman's guidance.

What also frightened me was knowing that there was someone else in her life, not the Moroccan, but someone with the prosaic name of Sam. They had been high school sweethearts, which gave Sam an unfair advantage. With one week to go, I was intent on waging a campaign so expensive and elaborate that it would vanquish all my foes. No matter that the insurance on my brother's car would not cover me. I rented an automatic and set out with Abby on a three-day trip to points north. No matter that back home she drove her own sports car and could manage the roads much better than I, that she could ride horseback and I couldn't, that she was a free spirit and I kept my hands neatly folded on my lap. This was my chance to lead, and to learn.

And learn I did. To wear my shorts and bathing trunks pulled down below the navel. To sip Turkish coffee in Shechem while the Arabic broadcasts were calling for a *jihad* to avenge the reported burning of Al Aqsa. To trot if not to ride horseback for real. To lose gracefully at ping pong. I learned the contents of her purse by heart. I learned to ride a bicycle holding hands. To cavort in the waves as I had not done since I was eight years old. To sit comfortably in a cable car. I learned that youth hostels hold to a strict 9:00 curfew. I learned to take road blocks and spot checks in stride (five of them in all) and to drive through a thick fog on the Latrun Road leading back up to Jerusalem.

On a dizzying stretch of the road, high in the Galilee, they played "Those Were the Days, My Friend" on the radio, signalling from above that the time-space continuum was now perfectly aligned. If only it could remain so through our last night together.

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I proposed that we go to the King David Hotel for pastries but Abby turned down my regal offering and took us back to the outdoor café in Bakaa where we ordered two ice cream "specials." Jerusalem, she promised, would belong only to us. Did her promise mean, I asked between spoonsful, never to share it with anyone but me?

"Only to us, *kokhlefl*."

I held my peace.

She struck a different chord as we walked through the German Colony and into town. "Happiness," she mused, "is being a blue shadow on pink stone." I pondered her meaning. Did she mean that happiness was as transitory as a shadow passing over pink stone, or did she mean the pink stone of Jerusalem at a precise time of day, thus linking our happiness, however brief, to a specific place that we could then revisit? By now, in fact, we had said goodbye to all the old haunts, traversed every familiar neighborhood. I was ready to call it a night. But not Abigail. Having reached the taxi depot on Lunz, Abby pulled me into a cab and ordered the driver to take us to the Intercontinental Hotel, in East Jerusalem, where we had never been

before, and where, sipping a Coke with an Arabic logo, we had a commanding view of Mount Scopus and the City of David.

"*Kokhlefl*," she said, "I'll miss your deep brown eyes and red-tickled sideburns. Who will give you back rubs in Somerville? Without me, I fear, you'll backslide, became your brainy self again. Be wary, my Davidel, of stories told in the dark."

I promised to write every other day. "No one writes letters like I do," I assured her, "except my mother."

"What if there's really a mail strike?" she asked.

"Then all my letters will arrive at once," I replied, "in delicious disorder. Just the way you like it."

It was getting late. At 1:00 am a *sherut* would be taking me to the airport. We splurged on an East Jerusalem cab, the only way back into town, and for the last time, she unfolded my hands from off my lap and started to tickle my right palm with her index finger, which was the signal for Leonard Cohen to come on the air, our Leonard Cohen, too late to hear the whole song, for the Mercedes was already pulling up in front of my cousin's apartment, and how much time could one reasonably take paying the fare, but long enough to hear him sing, "and you kissed her perfect body with your mind," and although her body was far from perfect, her body marked by some prior, wounded life, you alone could heal it, because together you had seen Jerusalem. Together, she had taught you, anything was possible.

At 12:45, as I began to compose the first of many letters to Abby, the doorbell rang. It was Leybl. He had come to say goodbye.

A Piece of Cake [Chapter 37]

Oh, the taste of black bread, so thick and tart! Strange how the tartness together with the crust can keep it fresh for days on end, though the daily supply seems in no danger of running out until early afternoon at the Bulochnaya across the street where the ticket lady will crack a smile on a freezing winter morning because my Russian accent is so terrible and I am the only male under the age of sixty standing on line at that hour, perhaps my obvious delight at receiving the magic loaf is contagious when there are chronic shortages in other basic food stuffs while bread, bread is still so heavily subsidized that even with the price going up, 28 rubles translates into 4 cents a loaf, while to purchase luxury items like cheese and peanut butter, you have to shell out hard currency at the Irish Store and have the driver wait outside because there is no free delivery in Moscow.

Free delivery in Moscow? Free anything in Moscow! Gone are the black sedans speeding at sixty miles an hour through downtown traffic in their specially marked lanes. Gone (almost all) the Lenin statues. Pass through security at the regular entrance to the RGGU campus--not the ceremonial entrance that faces the Bread Store -- and the first thing you see is the empty pedestal where He used to stand, illuminated by flood lights. By now, the failed putsch against Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union seem like the end of a Russian fairy tale, and the time has come for a whole new story to begin, or better yet, for the stories that were kidnapped or driven underground to be learned anew. That's my assignment, as Visiting Professor of Yiddish Literature at the newly established Russian State University for the Humanities, formerly the All-Soviet School for High Party Officials. Three mornings a week,

armed with my peanut butter and black bread sandwiches, I stand literally a stone's throw from the walls of the Kremlin, and teach the Yiddish classics.

Who's dreaming: I or my students? Eighteen months earlier, none of them even knew the alef-bet, and here is this professor from New York lecturing to them in Yiddish! Certainly their confusion bespeaks a dream. What did these American professors want of them, anyway? How could they be expected to master not one Jewish language, but two? How assimilate a plethora of new subjects, ranging from Bible, Talmud and Hebrew paleography to East European Jewish historiography and the Holocaust? And most confusing, how to obey the new rules of the classroom? When he asked a question, the professor expected everyone to listen; not to pass notes or exchange gossip, but to listen, even if the answer was wrong, and to regard this free-wheeling discussion as coequal to the formal lectures, which was obviously absurd, since none of this would appear on the final exam. Then again, who had ever been given a syllabus before, laid out in weekly installments, which the professor actually adhered to religiously? And why did he get so exercised if they forgot to bring the xeroxed readings to class? Wasn't it enough that they remembered to bring their blue note books?

My nightmares were a constant thirst for water and going to the bathroom. Forget lunch. There was no potable water to drink, not even down the block at G.U.M., Moscow's largest department store, now celebrating its 1OOth anniversary. How many ice cream bars could I consume in a week? In February? And despite the best laid plans, it was not always possible to avoid using the men's seatless toilet, a toilet that confirmed what I had been told, independently, by Rokhl Korn and Khaskl's mother, both of whom had been Polish-Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler, both expecting to find some kind of heaven-on-earth, until the train made its first stop across the Polish-Soviet border and they went out to take a crap. What they

saw in the W.C., or more accurately, what they smelled, dispelled years of Soviet propaganda in an instant. Rokhl was most shocked by the sight of a wizened and bemedaled Red Army soldier forced to stand guard at the door of the latrine. "Yes," one of the Soviet-Yiddish writers had admitted to her afterwards, "the U.S.S.R. has yet to solve the Shit Problem." Here it was February 1993 and the solution was nowhere in sight.

Our spanking new dorm was an isle of domesticity, and a source of kosher food, though the door to our Russian-made oven did fall off the first time Shana and Helise tried to use it, and the cabinet over the sink collapsed two weeks into the semester, yet by the end of April, Rita, our Jewish cook from Georgia, had learned that it wasn't cooking the chicken for three hours until it tasted like rubber that rendered it kosher, and who cared about the food anyway when our communal kitchen was the scene of an ongoing seminar on the sea changes taking place all around us with Sam Kassow as our resident expert on the rise and fall of the Evil Empire. Shana was reminded of the kitchen at Kibbutz Yavneh where the girls of her shevet were expected to work until they insisted on harvesting grapes alongside the men and I was reminded of the all-nighters we pulled in our communal kitchen at Havurat Shalom, while Aryeh, our seven-year-old, who was too young for such fond memories, thought the whole thing was a blast.

Why, we asked each other, if bread was so plentiful and so artfully baked, was it impossible to buy edible cakes anywhere in Moscow? Bread, Shana opined, was peasant food. Take that away and life, for whatever it's worth, is no longer worth living. Helise noted that the store-bought cakes, like the black bread, required no refrigeration, because they were baked without butter or cream, rare commodities in any event, though cottage cheese and raisins were commonly used in some pastries, but for fear that they contained lard, Yale, her husband,

banned all cakes from our new kitchen, which he zealously guarded ever since Sheva, an ardent Bundist and superb instructor of Yiddish, lived here, because Sheva had insisted that with the YIVO, a Yiddish secular organization, as one of our academic sponsors, it was her God-given right to eat trey/ in the dorm. I took a hard line and argued that the cakes were a typical product of the totalitarian regime, cloyingly sweet and superficially sumptuous, as befitted the members of the Nomenklatura who alone could afford to buy them. Sam, however, assured us that during the Soviet era, everyone could afford a cake, sometimes. Rather, there was no indigenous tradition of fine pastries. When the Red Army took Czernowitz, for example, in the summer of 1940, the first thing they did was gorge themselves on Sachartorte and pastries, and if ever Russia had a cafe culture, it was destroyed in the Revolution.

With Purim approaching, there was a pressing need to bake hamentashn, so after scouting around, Shana and Helise ended up using a Polish-made oven at the apartment of the CBS Moscow correspondent, though in the absence of mon, poppy seed, they were forced to settle on jam and prune fillings. Keeping in mind that six of the nineteen students were not Jewish and that Yuri Afanasyev, the charismatic rector of the university, had warned us not to turn this program into a confessional school, we decided to throw a Purim party in the dorm and invite all the students.

The job of mobilizing the students was left to me, so I walked into class and announced the date of the event and invited each of them to bring -- now how did one say "a significant other" in Yiddish? -- to bring a lyubovnik. After a moment of stunned silence the classroom erupted in laughter. Apparently, the word meant much more than I had intended. A little Russian was a dangerous thing. But a mood had been created, as Mother would say, and when

I polled the class for singers and musicians, Anya Shternshis, one of the five Anyas, and not the most talkative, raised her hand and offered to bring her guitar, whereupon an appreciative murmur went through the room.

"How wonderful," said I, "you're a folk singer. In that case, how would you like to prepare a few songs by Vertinsky?"

Another moment of stunned silence. Lev then raised his hand to ask, "Professor, how do you know about Vertinsky?"

"Come to the Purim party and I'll tell you."

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Eager to renounce the excesses of the older generation, the students didn't touch any of the vodka, and things got off to a slow start. They were embarrassed to accept our gifts, but gradually warmed to Yale Reisner's masterful reading of the Scroll; and laughed when he mimicked male and female, royal and plebeian voices, even as he adhered to the special Hebrew cantillation. When we got to the end of the Scroll and the Jews in the provinces of Persia slaughter seventy-five thousand of their foes, our five Anyas blushed in unison, embarrassed before their non-Jewish classmates, a perfect time to invite everyone for their first taste of home-made hamentashn, which in turn was a natural segue from the ritual part to the evening's performance.

From her downcast eyes there was no way to anticipate the number and diversity of the songs in Anya-the-folksinger's repertoire -- ballads, love songs, Gypsy songs, topical cabaret songs, unified by a melancholy, a mood of resignation, some that seemed to go on forever, and

none that I recognized from our trips to Cape Cod. Whether they were familiar to her classmates I could not tell, for only on occasion did they join in the chorus. Anya sang soprano, itself a surprise, given the low timbre of her speaking voice, in a lilting style bordering on recitatif, more intimate than the sensuous and theatrical delivery favored by Mother. All this, the work of a single songwriter-performer, who managed to elude Stalin's cultural genocide.

"So tell us about your connection to Vertinsky," said Lev during intermission. As with everything else, I replied, my connection is through Vilna, and I told them about another Lev, Leyb Stotsky, the Vunderkind, who had translated Pushkin, and just for fun, or perhaps to make a statement, would translate their beloved Vertinsky into Yiddish, which my mother and her friends would perform in alternating languages, and to illustrate, I sang them the only stanza I could remember of "Trink-zhe mayn meydele."

"Would you say they were completely bilingual?" asked Anya Levitova. "Multilingual," I replied, "with the changing borders."

"Is that the whole story?" asked Motya Chlenov, the youngest in the class.

"No, just the preamble. The real story is about my Grandmother Odl. "Odl lived in Bialystok, and one day she baked a special babka for her beloved Leybuchke. She baked it with plenty of butter (a last-minute detail inspired by the debate in our communal kitchen) and fresh raisins and cinnamon, then she and her daughter Perele carried it to the train station, looking for someone traveling to Vilna. They met a very elegant couple. Perele approached them and asked (in Russian) whether they would be good enough to deliver the babka to her brother Lejb Roskes on Zavalna Street. The elegant gentleman took the cake and handed her his calling card: "Aleksandr Vertinsky."

"Did Perele know who he was?" asked Anya Solntseva.

"She must have known. Perele was the one who first introduced my father to the theater. So the babka was delivered into good hands.

"Then weeks go by and there's no word from Leybele. Grandmother feels hurt but holds her peace until he comes home for intersession. 'Did you not receive my babka?' she asks. Leybele thinks a while. Oh yes, he did receive a cake, but not a babka, and not from her. One morning an elegant man in a flowing cape appears at his door carrying a fancy cake.

'Your mother,' he says, 'had given us a babka to deliver, its aroma so delicious that my wife and I ate it up en route to Vilna. After my concert, we went to the Rudnitsky Cafe and Pastry Shop on the comer of Trokke and German Street, and bought you this cake, which I hope you will find to be an acceptable substitute.' My father and his cousin Srolke devoured it in one sitting."

I might have stopped there, or have elicited my students' response. Instead, I let the players in my story have the last say.

"Was my grandmother placated? She was not. 'Leybuchke,'" she cried, 'how could you prefer store-bought cake to your mother's babka? Who knows if it was even kosher?' 'Mama!' said Perele, 'what a compliment to your baking that the great Aleksandr Vertinsky and his wife ate it all up!' And my father? My father maintained that the story had a happy end, because a cake that was meant to feed one person ended up bringing delight to four."

<extra space>

I had hoped to return home with records or tapes of Vertinsky for Mother, but they were nowhere to be found. The students offered to substitute a ten-record set of the renowned opera singer, Chaliapin, which I graciously declined, not because I hate opera, but because I had bought that very set for her in 1971, back in the days when the Israeli government was sending hundreds of us over secretly to make contact with Soviet Jewry and besides, I had already located two festival prayer books from the Press of Fradl Matz and Yisroel Welczer to make my mother happy.

Bearing precious gifts and memories, I left Moscow, thinking I wouldn't be back again for quite a while.

Six months later, the NYU professor who was supposed to teach a mini-course on the historiography of the Holocaust developed a hyperthyroid condition, and David Fishman, the director of our Moscow program, called me up in a panic. Was there any way I could substitute? At such short notice, it was agreed that instead of teaching historiography, which was not my field, I would offer a course on something closer to home: Yiddish writing during the Holocaust.

In the dead of winter I returned to Moscow, the first teacher from abroad to do so. They were waiting for me in the underlit corridor outside our locked classroom, all nineteen of them. And although my students were not given to displays of emotion, at least not toward people in positions of authority, they were as eager for my kisses and hugs as I was for theirs.

And although this whole course was a last-minute thing, it brought everything together, for them and for me. They now knew enough to appreciate why the writers in the ghettos and concentration camps adopted certain literary traditions and discarded others; and they

were now so at ease with my American teaching habits that they could actively listen and respond to one another in class; and as students of archival science, they knew what it meant to sustain an underground archive against all odds; and as former citizens of the Soviet Union, their parents were old enough to remember what it meant to write under conditions of tyranny and terror.

As for me, up at the front of the class, I felt strangely exalted, having come on my own steam this time, on my own assignment, not as a professor, not as a scholar, not even as a teller of buried tales, but as the son of Masha from Zavalna 28/30, who could sing the latest hits in Russian and in Yiddish, and the son of Leybl, bar mitzvahd here, in the shadow of the Kremlin, to share the taste of my grandmother's babka -- butter, raisins, cinnamon and all.

Chapter 34

Footloose in Vilna, 1939

The first thing I remember is hearing Nadianka sing out my name. "*Dó-vee-dl R-r-ross-kess,*" a rolling Russian *r* and coloratura soprano rising above the crowd. I barely recognize her in her pageboy cut and lavender short-sleeved summer dress. "*Do bin ikh!*" I respond, "I'm right here." There's a moment's hesitation. Do I embrace my aunt, whom I've never seen before? I kiss her gloved hand and she laughs appreciatively.

"Such a cavalier! Masha's trained you well."

"Grisha was detained at the TOZ Colony until tonight," Nadianka apologizes, and because he also took the car to work we need a porter to shlep my huge valise to the first available droshky. I've packed all the wrong clothes, never expecting that this summer would be the hottest on record. In Mother's photo album, everyone is in wool.

I want to linger awhile in the massive tsarist-era train station, trying to imagine my parents' leavetaking on their wedding day, when the whole gang sang them Broderzon's stirring hymn. But already we're surrounded by a group of predatory drivers, the famous *izvoshtshikes*, one of whom grabs my valise, and provoked by its foreign make, starts to inveigh against the latest news even as he leads us out into the blazing sun.

"Have you heard? Damn their souls to hell! The Russkies have jumped into bed with the Germans! A fine pair of lovers! Two syphilitics with moustaches. What are the Jews in America saying about it? Is it true that Roosevelt is a Jew?"

Nadianka and I exchange smiles. In my knapsack I am carrying yesterday's editions of the Warsaw dailies *Moment* and *Haynt*, which are filled with the pact between Molotov and Ribbentrop. The Yiddish press agrees with our cabby that it's bad for the Jews.

By now he's swearing under his breath, whether from the heat or the weight of my luggage I cannot tell. *Parshi'veh remi'zeh* is all I make out, which sound like obscenities to me, but when I return home Felix Dawang will laugh and tell me that it's Vilna slang for a coach-house, a corruption of the French *remise pour cheveaux*, dating back to Napoleon's legendary conquest of Vilna. With a flourish of his whip, our driver pulls out of the station, veering so sharply to the right that he cuts off an oncoming droshky whose driver yells "*Zol men mit dayne kishkes oysmestn di Zavalne-gas!*" to which our driver replies, "*Me zol dikh firn af Zaretshe!*" We happen, in fact, to have just entered Zavalna, the very street our interlocutor offered to measure with our driver's guts.

"Nadianka," I whisper. "'They should take you to Zaretshe?' What does he mean?"

"Zarzecze is the new Jewish cemetery. Your grandmother's buried there."

"'Drop dead!' in other words."

"They're very colorful, our Vilna cabbies. Grisha tells me that a team of folklorists from YIVO is studying their speech."

We have just passed a huge outdoor market. "Look at them, those greedy bastards," exclaims our driver. "*Fun a shteyn di veykhe*, they'll squeeze a stone to get its sap!" He is just warming up, our driver, for there are peasant wagons blocking the traffic.

"But look," says Nadianka, "there's the Jewish hospital to our right. Its major renovation, financed by the municipality, will be completed by December, and there to our left is the Choir Synagogue, where tickets for the High Holidays are already sold out, and quickly-quickly, see there, on the corner, is Tyszkiewicz's Palace, with the two *bulvanes*."

I nod excitedly. There, Mother was born and raised.

Before I know it, we are turning left off Zavalna and heading up a hill, tree-lined and elegant. "Not to worry," our driver calls out to the horse, "the Madame will make it worth our while." Which apparently she does, for we will see a grateful smile on his tanned and stubbled face as he offers to carry my valise to the door of No. 11, a former mansion which Mr. Vinitsky, founder of Vinitsky's Bank, presented to Nadianka as her dowry when she married Grisha. This is the same bank where Mother's 3,000 ruble dowry was deposited for safekeeping, and the whole ground floor is where Grisha and Nadianka live. It is mercifully cool inside, the ceilings are high, and the acoustics are excellent for Nadianka to practice and perform on her concert grand, but the moment Grisha comes home he will monopolize the conversation, not interested in me at all. Nervous, perhaps, that I may have been sent to reclaim the dowry, and he refuses to be drawn out about his

last encounter with Father at the Paris World's Fair. He prefers instead to detail the activities and accomplishments of TOZ, the Society for the Protection of Health, and especially of its summer colony where a thousand children are about to complete their rehabilitation. He wants me to see it so I can report back to Masha. Always impeccably dressed, he changes his shirt, vest, and tie several times a day, his hair is greased down, and his nose (a family trait) is fleshier than in the portrait that stands on Mother's dresser, taken when he was sixteen years old, on the eve of his evacuation to Yekaterinoslav, where he became Mrs. Kagan's paramour. Oh God, it's all coming back to me now. But Grisha is so self-absorbed that there's obviously no point trying to fill in the gaps of Mother's narrative, and though I've brought it along, I decide not to read them my first Yiddish story, "The International," which I've adapted to the 1930s by changing the U.N. to the League of Nations. I'm tired of singing for my supper.

Grisha sends Nadianka out to buy ham. I am about to suggest that we go to Levanda's Vegetarian Restaurant instead, but since I won't be keeping kosher for another seven years, and I dare not hurt her feelings, I say to myself in English: Let me break bread even if it means breaking the faith. Misreading my look, Grisha assures me that this is top-quality ham, bought from the delicatessen on Great Pogulanka where Regina Weinreich buys hers.

After dinner, I am presented with a copy of Zalman Szyk's *1000 Years of Vilna*, hot off the press, and Grisha urges me to cover the three-day itinerary, start to finish But why bother, I think, if the churches and civic monuments will survive the coming war and

Soviet rule, to be lovingly rebuilt under an independent Lithuania, while Jewish Vilna – the so-called Ghetto: the Great Synagogue and study houses, the Strashun Library, the YIVO, The Ansky Museum, the *Real* Gymnasium, the Old Cemetery, the densely populated Jewish streets – will be utterly destroyed?

"The first thing I want to see is Rudnitsky's Café. Not the fancier one on Mickiewicz, but the one on Trokke corner German Street."

Grisha and Nadianka exchange glances.

"All right," he says. "Let's walk over there now. It's still open."

I am amazed. Flabbergasted. Incredulous. The walk from Grisha's house to Rudnitsky's Café, which mark the two poles of Mother's existence, takes under ten minutes. This world of Mother's, which loomed so large that it eclipsed all other worlds, is tiny. On the way there, I have barely enough time to come up with an alibi. Even if *they* know about Mother and her unrequited love for Seidman, I mustn't let on that I do.

"My brother swears by their chocolates. He says they're the best in Poland. Mother's favorites are the *Provençalkes*. This may also be where the Russian matinée idol Aleksandr Vertinsky bought a cake to replace my grandmother's babka."

"I think you've got it wrong," says Nadianka. "The *Provençalkes* were Leybl's favorite, not Masha's."

"How do you know?"

"Because after each of his final exams they went to Rudnitsky's to celebrate and that would be his treat."

"My father had a sweet tooth? My ascetic father, who won't buy himself a new car until the old one dies, and won't order a new suit unless Mother pays off the tailor to trick Father into believing that he's getting a wild bargain?"

Not only that. *Provençalkes* are costly and rich: encased in dark chocolate is a luscious cherry swimming in thick almond liqueur., Its black orb stands atop a pedestal made of white chocolate.

"Maybe it appealed to Father because it looks like an observatory."

"Wrong again," says Nadianka. "Have you never heard Leybl lament that medical science robbed the poets of their favorite image? The heart as the seat of human emotion, he often lamented, has been rendered obsolete. Imagine rhapsodizing about the brain! Your father is a dreamer, a pragmatic dreamer, I would call him. That's why he married Masha."

"To make sure that the dream is never realized."

"Oy Dodke, Dodke," says Grisha, "you have your mother's wit."

"And your father's quiet charm," says Nadianka.

"Listen," says Grisha, "you have only three days to spend in the Jerusalem of Lithuania. If visiting Rudnitsky's is your idea of sight-seeing, you'll waste them all."

We agree that tomorrow Nadianka will show me around on foot, and that I will provide them with a list of people I wish to see. As for taking in a play, I've come between seasons, though should I care to meet some of the theater activists, the Yiddish Theater Society is meeting at Grisha's on Friday night.

*

I sleep in, and we don't get started until well after nine o'clock. Nadianka, wearing a two-piece pale yellow outfit and carrying a blue parasol, seems strangely out of place in the noisy Jewish quarter, which is one big Oriental bazaar, the shutters opening out onto street level and Jews doing business straight from the inside of their homes. From one of the windows we hear a gramophone playing a Vaudeville tune, "*Hot a yid a vaybele....*" Nadianka prefers to window shop on German Street, where there's ample room to walk

arm-and-arm with me, her cavalier. I notice men in uniforms parading in front of a fancy clothing store.

"What are they advertising?" I ask Nadianka, pointing to their placards. She doesn't answer. "Nadianka, what are they advertising?"

"They aren't advertising anything, Dodele," she answers quietly. "They're picketing the store. Urging Polish citizens not to buy from Jews."

"Why doesn't anyone call the police?"

"Dodele, it's perfectly legal. Here in Poland they're considered patriots."

I'm making other mental notes as we walk: of where Seidman & Freidberg is located, of how to access the Synagogue Courtyard from Yidishe Gas. Soon we leave the Jewish Quarter to begin our leisurely promenade along the Vileyka River, past the Maccabi Rowing Club, then across to Mickiewicz Boulevard, where she tells me not to talk so loudly. A few chosen stores are being picketed here, too, by Polish patriots, and I begin to understand how bold it was of Father and his buddies to be speaking Yiddish so demonstratively. The men doff their hats to her. Women cast an envious look.

Waiting for Grisha to come home in the late afternoon, we sit in the garden sipping lemonade, surely the garden where Mother posed for that engagement photo of herself,

looking so slim, brooding, and elegant in her long autumn coat and matching beret. I would be happy not to talk at all, just to drink in the smell of Nadianka's cologne, the melody of her voice, her rolling *r*'s.

All day I've been wondering whether she's had the abortion yet. I remember Mother telling me that Mrs. Vinitsky made her do it, but when exactly she never said. I learn the answer indirectly.

"Dodele," says Nadianka, using the name that only Mother calls me by, and only on the rarest occasions. "I'm surprised that Masha let you come here all by yourself, especially with the political situation being what it is. How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Really? You seem much older. Still, I admire Masha's confidence."

"Uncle Grisha was only sixteen when Fradl let him go off with Sophia Kagan. He helped Mrs. Kagan evacuate the school."

"Masha told you that? Why does she fill your head with such nonsense? Those were other times."

"For my mother, the only time is other times."

"She's a lucky woman, your mother, to have a son like you."

I know what she wants and I want it, too. She wants to cradle me in her arms, hold me ever so tight against her breasts, run her delicate long fingers through my hair, weep over me, her phantom son. Were I even to touch her at this moment, I would succumb to her love. Instead I say, "Nadianka, *shpil mir epes uf.*"

"What should I play for you?" she asks.

"'Starlet, Starlet, Little Blue Messenger,'" I reply, and she shoots me a penetrating look, as if to say: That *mamzer* knows much more about me than he lets on.

We go inside and she sings Kulbak's song to an elaborate piano accompaniment. Perched on the piano is Pierrot the Clown, a forced smile painted on his porcelain face. He is the prince of Nadianka's famous doll collection.

*

"I'm going out for an hour before dinner," I tell Nadianka, and rush down the hill toward the Jewish Quarter. Before turning in to Yidishe Gas, I put on the black velvet yarmulke I've brought from home, the most old-fashioned one I could find. Thanks to Szyk's guidebook, I know my way around the *shulhoyf*, so amazingly compact. I know my

mission is impossible, because I cannot be both tourist and pilgrim, and even as a pilgrim I must choose among a dozen different shrines. Shall I *daven* right next door to the Great Synagogue in the Kloyz Yoshon, the oldest study house in Vilna, which will celebrate its five hundredth anniversary next year, in 1940? Or shall I reconnect with my Litvak heritage and locate the Gaon's Kloyz? The prayer clock outside the Great Synagogue tells me it's time for Minhah, so I hurry to the Gaon's Kloyz. There I am met by a tiny emaciated Jew, almost a midget, who asks me, "*ir zogt kadish*?" Yes, I want to say, I'm reciting Kaddish. For you, for what is to become of this sacred place, and for this city of Jews. But I shake my head and take a seat at the back. The stench is horrible. A mixture of snuff and sweat. These backbenchers must bathe only on Fridays, and here it's late Thursday afternoon. I look around in the semi-darkness. I'm the only young person here, and the only one not wearing a filthy cap. At least no one has his *peyes* showing, so I'm not a complete anomaly. Could this be the kloyz where Yehudah-Leib Matz did not come to pray, preferring to have a minyan in his own home? After the Kaddish, I stuff an American ten-dollar bill in the charity box and make a run for it before the beggars can grab me.

Grisha is aghast to learn where I've been. Masha's youngest son has gone to shul? Just like that, in mid-week! "Nadianka," he calls out to the kitchen, "you'll have to get Dodke checked for lice!"

During my absence, Nadianka has made some phone calls. Most of the people on my list are away for the summer. Sutzkever is staying at the Czerniakow's dacha in

Wolokumpie. Kalmanovitsh may or may not be able to meet me tomorrow at the YIVO building because he's busy with Liba Schildkraut, a graduate student from New York. Do I know her?

No one has heard of Yitskhok Rudashevsky. There are no Rudashevskys in the phone book. When I explain to Grisha that he's a Young Pioneer, about my age, Grisha blows up at me. Don't I know that the Communist Party is illegal in Poland, that all their activities are carefully monitored? I must have nothing to do with them, and that's that!

My aunt Annushka cannot come down from Kovno to meet me, for two reasons. Although it's a hop, skip, and a jump to Kovno, Kovno is in Lithuania, and not even Lyova Warshawski can secure a visa at such short notice. Secondly, my uncle Nosn has taken a turn for the worse.

My uncle Nosn? What uncle Nosn?

Did Masha never tell me? Fradl had ten children with Yehudah-Leyb Matz, six daughters and four sons. Nosn, the youngest, is manic-depressive and ever since Fradl died he's been kept in a Jewish asylum in Kaidonov, now a part of Lithuania, where Annushka takes care of him.

There is also good news. Rivtshe Dreyer will be attending the meeting of the Yiddish Theater Society tomorrow night, and Grisha has invited her to come for supper

beforehand. Leyzer Volf will be doing a reading on Saturday night together with the members of Yungvald. And there's a phone line reserved for tomorrow so that I can call my grandfather in Bialystok and wish him a good Shabbes. Because he's completely blind, says Grisha, Dovid loves talking on the phone. It puts him on equal footing.

*

Day Number Two I'm on my own, and I make a mess of it. I find Seidman & Freidberg's dry goods store in no time, and stand near the door, pretending to look around. The man at the counter in shirtsleeves must be him. He's a head taller than Father all right, and broad-shouldered. His receding hairline looks like an Apache haircut. An aristocratic nose. Then what's he doing here, answering in Polish to a customer who is haggling with him in Yiddish? I can't understand what he's saying, but I recognize the Jewish inflection. Why won't he speak to her in Yiddish? He looks up for a moment and spies me at the entrance. "*Slucham Pana?*" he asks. I shake my head and rush out.

From there I head to the Strashun Library, where I immediately recognize the aged librarian, Khaykl Lunsky. He wears his hat indoors! I take in the famous reading room, which, despite the stuffiness and heat, is already almost filled, mostly with middle-aged and elderly men. I make a show of admiring the rare book exhibit. Then I ask to inscribe something in the Golden Book, where, under the signatures of I. J. Trunk and Joseph Roth, I write "*a grus fun der tsukunft*, regards from the future," and sign my Yiddish initials. This day I shall dedicate to Yiddish culture and books, even if I do end up getting

lost and never find the YIVO building either because I can't pronounce the name of the street or because passersby pretend not to understand me – and what I'm looking for in the bookstores I cannot find and what I find is not what I'm looking for. Forgetting that at Velfke's Restaurant they offer you Yiddish newspapers on reading sticks, I walk in carrying the latest issues of the children's magazine *Grininke beymelekh* and the highbrow *Literarishe bleter.* This turns out to be a big mistake, for not only is the coffee undrinkable, but a man at the next table calls out to me, "*Yunger man, vos zayt ir epes, a yenuke"* (young man, what are you anyway, some kind of child prodigy?), a clever dig at my eclectic reading material, which makes everyone turn around and laugh at me, this freak of nature.

By the time I get back to Grisha's, I badly need to regain by bearings. The long distance call to Bialystok is scheduled for five-twenty, and I suddenly realize that, should Grandfather ask me my name, I will blow my cover. Ashkenazi Jews are forbidden to name their children after the living, and here I am carrying his name! I needn't have worried. The high-pitched crackly voice on the other end is interested in knowing only one thing:

"*Eynikl mayner, du leygst tfiln*?" (Tell me, grandson of mine, do you put on tfillin every morning?)

I come clean, brace myself for a biting remark at Father's expense, and am surprised when the voice responds with a conciliatory rhyme: "*Nit gedavnt, / nit gelernt, / abi nit*

got dertsernt." (You haven't prayed, you haven't studied [Torah], but at least you haven't provoked the anger of the Lord.") I end by wishing him a good Shabbes and sending my warmest regards to Aunt Perele and the children.

Maybe Rivtshe will talk to me, give me some sign that I'm not dreaming.

"Seen any movies lately?" she asks, dispensing with formalities.

If her hair weren't cut so short, she could pass for Simone Signoret. To complete the effect, Rivtshe lights up a cigarette.

Waiting until I have everyone's ear, I launch into a detailed description of Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, which does for sound, I claim, what his *Potemkin* did for the silent screen. So eager am I to impress the grownups – barred from seeing Soviet films until next summer, when the Russians will annex Vilna – and knowing, as I do, that Rivtshe alone will survive the war and will go off to study cinematography in Moscow with the great master himself.

Rivtshe, will you remember that you first learned about this classic from me?

At the meeting of the Yiddish Theater Society, chaired by Uncle Grisha, where I recognize a very young Dovid Rogoff, I can take in stride what I hear: that Rivtshe's pet project, the Maydim Marionette Theater, is dedicated to revolutionary politics, that

Jewish Vilna has no professional theater company of its own, that there is a ban on performing Yiddish in Vilna's major theaters. When, at Grisha's bidding, I report to the assembled that in Montreal, Dora Wasserman's Yiddish theater has the backing of Gratien Gélinas and of the French-Canadian elite, it is they who look at me in disbelief. All except for Rivtshe, who brushes this revelation aside, because the French, she argues, are also being colonized by the English, just like the Jews, and one nationalist movement should naturally support the other. But Grisha says no, the difference is that in Montreal the nationalities can work together because Montreal is ruled from London, while in our Vilna, it is Warsaw that pulls the strings.

With one day left, Nadianka agrees that I should seek out youthful companionship and forgo a trip to the TOZ Colony. Grisha, however, is hurt that I refuse to visit Fradl's grave in the Zarzecz Cemetery, and this, in the penitential month of Elul, from a nephew who professes to be so *frum*.

Vilna may not have a permanent Yiddish theater, but it has every stripe of Jewish youth movement, and I am forced to choose sides. Heeding Grisha's stern warning and in deference to my friend, Chana Fuerstenberg, I choose Hashomer Hatzair. Their headquarters is within walking distance of Grisha's and, to compensate for my bourgeois class origins, I try to impress the collective with my knowledge of modern Hebrew. Only I make the mistake of using expressions like *ma pitom* and *lo-ikhpatiyut* that have not yet been coined, and Reyzl, the girl of my dreams, whose sumptuous braid would seem to belie her Party discipline, insists on being called Shoshana, and will not break ranks to go

roller skating with me. At best, she will meet me tonight at the Yungvald Evening where Hirshke Glik, one of their comrades, will be participating. I am fifteen years old and have not yet known a woman. If she would only let me, I would rescue her from this place, on the strength of my Canadian passport. Seeing my disappointment, Reyzl-Shoshana invites me along to their outing later today. They're going to Ponar.

"*Geyt nit ahin!*" I blurt out, then in Hebrew, "*Al tilchu l'sham!*" How can they picnic in Ponar, the future killing field of Vilna Jewry?

As they look at me with pity and derision, I understand what a mistake it was to travel back in time to here, as if communing with their living presences could alter the course of time. And although it is worth the whole trip to hear Leyzer Volf declaim his poetry, a cross between Dada and doggerel, and I marvel at the love that the young aspiring poets of Yungvald evince toward Leyzer (the ugliest man I have ever seen, with the short-cropped hair of a convict) – despite this last exalted evening, I am eager, no, desperate, to get out of here. Of back then.

Nadianka accompanies me to the train station. With so little traffic on Sunday morning, we take the scenic route, along the Zakret Forest.

"Let me see your hands," she says as she takes off her gloves. And I measure my hand against hers. Remarkably, her fingers are as long as mine, thinner, of course, translucent and perfectly manicured. As we touch hands, I stop my mind from racing ahead, to her

struggle to survive in the ghetto by giving pedicures. Because Grisha will already be dead, some say shot on a train by an *agent provocateur*, others say executed without trial by a firing squad, in the first week of the German occupation. And I refuse to either know or to ask how and where she perished, because Nadianka must be as real to me as the gentle touch and fragrance of her fingers that I will feel all the way to Warsaw.