

1.

All Is Perfect

SHE IMAGINES THE FINAL MOMENTS AS WHITE, PURE WHITE, AS the plane plunges through the blizzard. The snow obscures the cockpit glass until the mountain emerges in a split second of clarity, the cliff face surging forward in the instant before impact.

Her shrink tilts his head. Slightly. “Why only plane crashes?” he wonders. “Why not floods or train wrecks or any number of other disasters?”

She recalls the headline of the story that she had carefully scissored from the newspaper that morning with her sewing shears. JET HITS MOUNTAIN IN SNOW SQUALL. Below the headline, a photo of the wreckage revealed the result. A twisted, torn fuselage in pieces. Chunks of smoking steel.

“I think the crash of an airplane is different,” says Rachel.

Dr. Solomon frowns reflectively. An arm and a leg he’s being paid, so it’s his job to ferret out this young woman’s madness, isn’t it? Just as it’s her job to be just mad enough to be cured. “Different?”

“Because they are so sudden,” she explains. Quietly. “So complete. And so very few survive it. How is the decision made?”

The man tilts his head again. She can tell he’s not quite sure what she means. How is *what* decision made?

“Only a handful may live through it when most do not. How is that decided?” she asks. She began collecting the clippings from the newspapers sometime after she and her uncle had arrived in the States and taken up residence in the hotel for refugees on Broadway. She was

always buying newspapers at her uncle's insistence. To improve their English, he maintained, though what did he end up reading, her Feter Fritz? *Der Forverts* in Yiddish. Sitting at the little café table with his cup of Nescafé. But was that really when she began snipping out the headlines of aerial catastrophes?

She was twenty-one the year they arrived in the Port of New York aboard the *Marine Sailfish* in 1949. Over six years ago. The few photographs of her taken at the time show a haunted, dark-mopped waif. She was an open wound at that point. Bundled in ill-fitting castoffs, thin as a matchstick, and still faintly stinking of a continent burnt to ashes. Stumbling over her English, she was boiled by the summer's heat and overpowered by New York's towering intensity, the skyscraper architecture, crush of people, and blare of traffic. Berlin's Unter den Linden was famously perfumed by the sweetly honeyed scent of the linden trees, till the Nazis ordered them cut down, but New York City stank of exhaust and ripening garbage. It was deafening, smothering, and teeming with pedestrians trying to trample one another. Simply keeping up with sidewalk traffic was exhausting. Also exhausting was contending with the city's abundance. The lavish variety of produce, the sumptuous profusion of color filling the shelves of a corner market were so taxing to her senses that buying cabbage and cucumbers was enough to cause her to panic.

But surely it was after those first dizzying months had passed that she first started her collection of clippings. It had to be after the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society had helped them find the tiny apartment on Orchard Street. A tenement house populated by mobs of homeless refugees. Jews like themselves, just off the boats from the displaced persons camps. She remembers stowing the clippings in an Endicott Johnson shoebox. But she didn't start pasting them into scrapbooks until she married Aaron. That's when she began treating the clippings like a secret, a shameful secret, hiding them in the rear of the closet behind the vacuum cleaner, where she knew her new husband would never look. After all, why would he ever touch a vacuum cleaner?

“So am I here to make a confession, Doctor?”

“You’ll have to decide that for yourself,” the doctor tells her.

She nods. So that’s how it’s going to be, is it? All up to her? Should a sinner willingly confess to sin? Jews don’t make confessions inside little booths. They must expiate their sins on earth through good deeds, but she is not much for mitzvot these days. Last Christmas, there was a brass band from the Salvation Army playing outside Macy’s. On an impulse, she dropped a five-dollar bill in their pot, but she still couldn’t find a cab. Her bet is that God just pocketed it.

“I’d like you to consider painting again,” says Dr. Solomon.

Rachel stares. “Painting.”

“Yes.”

She feels a sickly terror and has to look away, glancing at the leather sofa to see if Eema has arrived, but it is empty of mothers. “And why should I want to do such a thing, Doctor?” she asks. To push a brush into the crazy woman’s hand. To shove her at a canvas and order her to *paint*? It’s dangerous. What raving madness might explode from her body and bloody the canvas?

And yet! “It could be very helpful,” the good doctor submits. “Creativity can often provide emotional relief.” But he does not press the matter. “Give it some thought,” he suggests. “That’s all I’m saying. Your art,” he tells her. “It seems to me that it plays a large role in forming your self-identity.”

Her self-identity. That ragged patchwork of truths and untruths. In the war, her identity was dependent on forged documents. It was her ersatz self that she clung to, because her true identity could murder her.



One of the first things that shocked her about New York City, apart from the looming towers of Midtown and the crowds swarming the sidewalks, were the filthy streets. Berlin was a clean city before it was

pummeled into ruin. No one dared drop trash in the street; it would have been unthinkable! Undenkbar! But New York is a pigsty in comparison. The gutters are clogged with trash. Ash bins and garbage barrels overflow. Dogs are permitted to soil the sidewalks with impunity.

Last year, the city government erected a gigantic wire bin in the middle of Times Square, loaded with trash collected from the streets. The accusation was clearly printed in huge letters: THIS LITTER BELONGS TO YOU! YOU MISS THE LITTER BASKET WITH 1,200 POUNDS A DAY IN TIMES SQUARE ALONE! Going down into the subway is not better. Squashed cigarette butts everywhere. Sandwich wrappers, crumpled bags, discarded pop bottles, fruit peels, and half-eaten hot dogs crawling with ants. Of course in Berlin, there was a time when she was one of those ants, trolling the gutters and bins for food.

Advertising cards on the Lexington Avenue Local provide a lesson on Good Subway Citizenship as the train bumps through the tunnel: PLEASE, DON'T BE A SPACE HOG, A DOOR BLOCKER, A FEET RESTER, A LEG PEST, OR A LITTERBUG! All instructions that are generally ignored by passengers. This is also a difference between New York and Berlin. In Berlin, who would have dared smoke where the sign commanded RAUCHEN VERBOTEN! Or dared be a Jew where the notice declared JUDEN VERBOTEN!

The crowd in the car thins out. It's then that Rachel notices a child staring at her. A little girl, four or five years old, with a knit hat and silky brown bangs across her little forehead. Her eyes are shiny buttons, and she gazes at Rachel with innocent interest. A contented little fox caught out in the open, yet who can look through a person to spot the animal truth of them.

It's not that Rachel does not *want* children. She *does*, or at least there are times that she does. The desire for a child of her own strikes her in moments of urgency. Perhaps that's how she herself was conceived. In one of her eema's moments of urgency. God knows it's difficult to imagine Eema actually planning for such a process as conception. Drafting

out a child in her mind, laying down the sketches in her heart before a child filled them in, filling up her womb. Before a child stretched out her body and confounded her life. Before it ruined her punctuality, disrupted her routines, drained the color from her lips, and demanded strict attention on a tyrannical scale simply to survive the day. Would she have ever actually agreed to such a disruptive intrusion with the benefit of forethought? Doubtful. Her daughter must have been an accident of the moment.

Gazing back at the girl with the straight brown bangs, Rachel can only view motherhood as a foreign concept. Like the moon or like the American Dream. To dream like an American? What does this mean? Even after becoming a citizen, she does not know. Perhaps because she is still only partially here in this country. Part of her is still buried in the cinders of Berlin. Before she was Rachel the American, she was Rashka or Rokhl or Ruchel, or her mother's Little Goat. And it is little Rashka's terror that punctures any urgent moments in Rachel's life that might lead to conception. Any true desire for a child of her own is restricted to a wistful reverie, in the same way she might imagine what-if. What if her mother had loved her as much as she loved art? What if she had remained an innocent? What if she had never shared a table with the red-haired woman in a Berlin café? What if horses could talk and pigs could fly? What if.

At home, they don't really discuss the Episode.

She and her husband, Aaron, that is.

It's not really on their agenda for conversation. Rather they talk around it, as in Aaron's refrain: "We don't want a repeat of *the Episode*."

The Episode being the night she ended up in a straitjacket for her own protection, locked up in Bellevue's psychiatric wing. The doctor there stitched and bandaged her hand slashed by the shattered glass so that no visible scar remains. But scars are often not so visible. Since that

night, the surface of the wound has healed over. Already, more than half a year has passed, and both she and Aaron have returned to the routines of their daily lives, except for one thing. One thing hardly worth mentioning really. The thin layer of dread that gives an undertone to the everyday colors of every moment. The Dead Layer below all her exteriors. Other than that? *Altes iz shleymesdik*. All is perfect.

For their first anniversary, Aaron's mother wanted to buy them a T.V., but Aaron is dead set against television, so it was a radio instead. A Philco 51-532 table model that sits on a shelf. If Rachel wants to watch T.V., she must drag her husband down two blocks to the window of an appliance store on West Twentieth. There's often a crowd when *The Lone Ranger* comes on, though it's hard to hear through the glass. Rachel doesn't care. It's an American western. Everyone climbs into the saddle. All the men have six-guns on their hips and are all expert shots, picking rattlesnakes off the rocks. The women wear long calico dresses, but even they can handle a rifle.

"We could buy a T.V.," she tells Aaron.

"Who can afford one?" he asks without looking up from the kitchen table, smoking as she cleans up the supper dishes. "Besides, T.V. is for suckers. It's all about moving the merchandise."

Rachel doesn't care about that. She *likes* the commercials. The cartoon giraffe with the sailor's cap selling the Sugar Frosted Flakes. You can eat 'em right out of the box! And she would like to be able to *sit down* while watching *The Lone Ranger* instead of standing outside a storefront. Or maybe watch an entire episode without Aaron nagging her about how his feet hurt after working the Thursday all-you-can-eat shrimp cocktail special lunch shift at the restaurant or that his back is getting to him standing there like a schmuck for half an hour. Aaron says, "Who needs a picture tube?" He liked Jack Benny better on the radio, 'cause he likes to use his *imagination*. It's cheaper.

"We could put it right there," Rachel tells him.

"What?"

"A television set. We could put it right there, across from the sofa."

"Hasn't she been listening?" he wonders aloud.

"It would fit."

"But there's a chair there."

"So we move the chair."

"No room."

"Then we give the chair to the Salvation Army."

"Thank you, no. That chair belonged to my mother's aunt Shirley and has great sentimental value."

"It was here when we moved in."

"And I've gotten very attached to it since. Besides, isn't there some *Jewish* charity, by the way? Doesn't the Joint run a thrift shop?"

"The Joint does not want our chair."

"Maybe not, but my point is this: Why give a perfectly good chair to the goyim? Let them buy retail."

"You're not very funny."

"No? Then go give your own family heirloom to the Salvation Army, why don't you?"

Only she has no family heirlooms. Nothing left of the elegant Klimt chairs or Biedermeier dining set. The silver Shabbat candlesticks or the Italian gilt-wood menorah. Nothing of her eema's Turkish carpets or the Silesian porcelain coffee service. Not anything. Not anything at all. Not even a speck of schmutz has survived from under the rugs. Her uncle Fritz is the only family antique that comes close to qualifying.

In the bedroom, while the ambient fuss of street traffic drifts up from below, the bedside lamps are switched off. Rachel and Aaron climb under the blankets. But it's immediately obvious that Aaron is interested in pursuing a little something other than the nightly routine of good-night pecks. The smell of him as he pulls her closer can still intoxicate her, even after five years of marriage. The feel of his skin,

the hair on his chest, that head of thick russet curls. It's easy for her to lose herself. The small ceramic night-light she bought for twenty cents at the hardware store is plugged into the electrical outlet under the window, and every night, she snaps it on because she cannot tolerate total darkness. In total darkness, she will drown. So the night-light glows like a petite yellow star.

Aaron has opened her pajamas. The blue silk pajamas he bought in Chinatown for their fifth anniversary, though probably picked out by his sister Naomi. Still, they are so luxurious. She slides her fingers through his hair as his lips brush her skin. His hand moves slowly, gently, as he slips the Chinese silk from her hips. Exposed, on top of the blankets, she feels the vulnerability of her body deepen. His lips find the curve of her neck. She kisses his ear, her desire tightening.

"Aren't we forgetting something?" she whispers softly. "Aren't we forgetting something?" But he doesn't answer. His hands are moving. His mouth. She can feel herself warming, her breath expanding. A void opening. But when she whispers his name, she is still repeating her drowsy question. "Aaron? Aaron? Aren't we? Aren't we *forgetting* something?"

Aaron's answer is to shift her body under him, and she feels a liquid craving, but also an edge of fear. Doesn't the Talmud teach that the obligation to be fruitful and multiply is on the man? So siring children is a mitzvah for the husband, which has contributed to Aaron's disdain of condoms. And Rachel would rather be in control of the process anyway. Women have more leeway. So she whispers sensibly, intimately. "Aaron, I don't have my *shield*."

She means her diaphragm. A word she mispronounces enough to elicit an indulgent correction: *Die*-a-fram, says Aaron. Like *die*-a-thousand deaths. Not *dee*-a-fram. So instead of *die*-a-thousand-deaths diaphragm, she calls it her shield, because that's what it is, isn't it? Her shield to keep her safe from her own body. She can slip through Eve's loophole and escape her own biology. Her own history. "Aaron..."

“Would it be so terrible, honey?” her husband wants to know. “Would it be so terrible if we made love like man and wife? Think of Ezra Weinstock,” he tells her. “He has three little Weinstocks already, with a fourth in the hopper.”

“Aaron.”

“My own cousin, that fucknik Ezra, *is ahead of me*, Rachel. Ezra Weinstock from Coney Island Avenue, so fuckin’ smart that, when he was ten, he stuck a pencil up his nose—*is ahead of me*. Do you know what that’s doing to my *mother*? Every Wednesday, she’s playing mah-jongg with Aunt Ruth, and *oy* what an earful she gets about the adorable Weinstock grandkids. How much longer can the woman stand the disgrace? She’ll have to adopt a different son.”

Rachel absorbs the smile in his voice. The spreading warmth of his touch. “Aaron,” she repeats.

“She’ll have to replace me with Hilda Auerbach’s boy. He’s a doctor now with his own practice in Prospect Heights. An eye-ear-nose-and-throat man.” He is saying this in the funny way, kissing her belly button and breasts once for each specialty: eye, ear, nose, throat. But Rachel can tell that he is also deadly serious. How can he face the world as a man? How much longer can he face himself with no children? Without that gift from his lovely wife? Time is running out.

He is moving into her. Pressing his advantage, exploiting her weakness for him, and she is feeling her resolve melt. “I can’t” is all she manages to say, but it’s tough to win this debate in the closeness of their room, in the sweetness of their bed. Words are slipping away from her. Sometimes, she thinks that she should just *let him be fruitful*. Let him cook up a baby inside her. Put a bun inside her oven. *Their* bun. But then the elevated West Side freight line roars past, and something in the unrelenting thunder from those tracks panics her. Trains lead to death.

“*Stop it,*” she hears herself snap. “*Stop it.*” A terror has gripped her, seized her by the bones. She feels like she might suddenly suffocate under his weight. Like her heart might stop. “*Aaron!*” she pleads,

frantically now, and this time, he's had enough. He quits, disconnects, and rolls onto his back.

For a moment, they simply breathe roughly into the darkness hanging above them. Rachel feels the tears heating her eyes. Is it really so much to ask? A child for her husband? He never made any secret of the fact that he wanted a baby. "I'm sorry," she breathes, smearing at her tears. "I'm sorry," she repeats, but it makes no difference. Her husband has become a solitary island beside her.

"No, it's okay. I get it." He sighs. "Not angry. Forget it," he tells her thickly. Issuing a quick peck on the cheek, he rolls over, turns his back on her, shifting the bedclothes to his side. Leaving her to the darkness. Alone in her body, her guilt is insistent: What right does a murderess have to create life? Blanketed by the night, only a small halo of yellow from the night-light keeps her from going under.

As far as talent is concerned, she must make do with what she has been able to scavenge. Her mother always encouraged her. Rachel was the daughter of Lavinia Morgenstern-Landau, Portraitist of the Great and Near-Great. One of only two women to be elected to the Prussian Academy of the Arts! The founder of the Berolina Circle! Of course the daughter must show talent.

But only up to a point. She could never be so skilled that she mounted a *challenge* to her eema's hegemony as the supreme painter of the family. Her father, she had learned, had gathered his laurels as a poet, which had been sanctioned because poems were only words, and words were no competition in Eema's mind. And Abba was dead by the time Rashka was a toddler, so she was not old enough to retain memories of him. He survived the war, survived the influenza, but then was devoured by consumption in 1928 when Rashka was only two. Her single memory of her father is shaped by the portrait that hung in the salon. Eema had painted him in shadows not long before his death, a

gaunt, handsomely distant face, half in the dark, already partially consumed by the disease that would claim him.

As she grew, people commented on how Rashka had his eyes. Sometimes his nose. Also, they said, his stubbornness and his silence. These ghost features, these traits that she has inherited from a dead father, were always like the spirit of a dybbuk possessing her but in a quietly paternal way. Eyes, nose, stubbornness. Silence. These are her abba's lone bequests to her. All else is Eema. Rashka was permitted to shine as a reflection of her mother's genius. This single fact defined Rashka's development as an artist. Even now, years after her mother's demise, it is there, sewn into Rachel's heart as she scrutinizes her reflection distorted by the aluminum face of the Proctor electric toaster.

Days have passed since their aborted attempt at marital intercourse. The air is growing chilly. The radiator hisses with heat. She is dressed in one of Aaron's old knit sweaters pulled over her pink chenille bathrobe and with wool socks on her feet, because she is always cold. One of her husband's Lucky Strikes smolders in the green glass ashtray on the kitchen table as she sketches her reflection on a pad with a charcoal stick. Her mother shares the table, smoking a rice-paper Gitanes Brune inserted into an elegant amber resin holder. A strong and pungent aroma in the past, but all that Rachel smells is the stink of ash that always lingers over her mother's arrival. Eema's face is a perfect heart shape and her complexion alabaster. She is dressed in her finery of velvet and sable. Her black bob is silvered by the arrow point of a widow's peak. Her face is coldly beautiful. Not exactly the nurturing parent, perhaps. Always happy to judge.

So we are here, you and I, she hears her mother observe. Azoy, mir zenen do. Always, between them, it's Yiddish.

"Yes, Eema. We are here."

Peering at her daughter with her usual mix of curiosity and disapproval, she wonders, *What is this you are doing?*

"I'm drawing," Rachel tells her.

Really? Eema is skeptical. *Is that what you think? This qualifies as drawing?*

“Es iz a shmittshik,” Rachel says and then picks out a few words from English. “A doodad, you know? A doodle.”

So you may call it. But is it a waste of your God-given talent?

“And now it’s about what God gives us, Eema? I thought my talent came from you. Besides, you said you had abandoned God.”

Eema replies in a leaden tone, *Of course! This is how a daughter speaks to her mother. Let’s be correct, Rashka. I did not abandon God. God abandoned me.* She expels smoke with a certain dramatic aplomb, but Rachel does not react, prompting Eema to frown at the silence. *So this shmittshik? You think it serves art?*

“Degas said that art is not what you see but what you make others see.”

Degas, Eema scoffs. *Degas was an anti-Semite and a misogynist, tsigele.*

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your little goat anymore.”

But still stubborn as one. When will you stop sleepwalking? You’ve been scarred, yes. We live, we die. But in between, for those chosen, we have a duty to create.

“Very simple for *you* to say, Eema.” Rachel’s charcoal stick scratches against the paper. “You’re dead.”

But her eema is deaf to this fact. She clutches at the sable collar of her coat. *When I was your age, Rashka, I was already a recognized artist. My work was highly valued. Hanging in the most important galleries in Berlin.*

“And yet not a single painting survives. They all went up in smoke. Just like you.”

As usual, you’re missing my point. You have your share of talent, Rokhl. A blessing or a curse? I can’t say. But why do you waste yourself?

“I’m not wasting myself, Eema. I’m protecting myself.”

Forget these silly drawings. Go! Pick up your brushes. Lay color onto your palette.

“No,” Rachel answers.

Open your easel and face an empty canvas!

“No,” Rachel answers more forcefully. “No, I cannot. I’m sorry, I cannot do it. It will hurt me.”

It will heal you!

“No! I’m afraid, Eema,” she confesses, her eyes heating with tears. “I’m afraid of what will come out of me.” She’s startled by her tiger cat leaping up onto the table, and with that, her mother’s chair empties. The smell of smoke returns to the cigarette in the ashtray. Wiping her eyes, Rachel seizes the cat. Kibbitz she calls him, because he’s always sticking his nose in, always getting into the middle of things.

Escaping to America, surviving the ruins of Europe, she felt she must—*must*—continue as her mother’s daughter. So for a period of years, she had dabbed a brush into globs of oily colors and smeared them onto canvases. “Ghosts” she called them. At first, they were only plumes of color. Whiffs of smoke. Nothing human. But gradually they began to take shape into more human forms. Of human memories. Over and over, she tried to capture the essence of what she had lost. The life of her mother? Yes. A life lost to a colorless killer, cyanide gas. The millions of lives lost. But she didn’t dare confess this, even when she found a gallery. Even after the gallery was selling those small works on small canvases or Masonite board. A newspaper printed her name and called her work both challenging and promising. She was married by then, yet Aaron didn’t seem to mind. He wasn’t exactly an art expert, he’d confess, *obviously*. Still, he was impressed that a painting could actually sell for money. He’d joke about retiring to easy street now that his wife could turn a profit!

But really, underneath it all, it was a lie. She was still *pretending* to be an artist. The human plumes of color she was producing were nothing. They were personal without being profound. Their impact was as meaningless as candle flames. A cough could blow them out. And they certainly weren’t Art. Not real Art like the Art of her mother. Secretly,

she was ashamed of how inconsequential they were. Ashamed but also relieved. Maybe she didn't *need* to be an artist. Maybe she could escape. Leave Eema's legacy behind with the ashes. Maybe she could simply be what her husband expected her to be. A wife and a mother. Those were both acceptable professions in his mind. Maybe she could sign on as a regular American woman. And if she painted a canvas or two on the side? Well, there was a word in English that took the curse off that. *Hobby*. A pastime, a way to pass time. And in the process, if she collected a few dollars doing it? Even better. It didn't mean she *had* to be—that she was *doomed* to be—her mother's daughter. Rachel could avoid a career with the same zealotry that Eema had cultivated hers.

But after Bellevue? After the Episode, there was no question. She had to face the truth. There was a monster inside her. Locked away so that no one could see it? Yes. But painting was dangerous. Painting baited the monster out into the open. It made her vulnerable to herself. Who was she trying to fool? God? History? Herself? She had forfeited her rights as an artist one day while seated in a Berlin café. So returning from Bellevue to their apartment on West Twenty-Second Street, she'd locked away her easel and closeted her Winsor & Newton painter's box. She no longer pretended that any of her soulless plumes of color had purpose. They were meaningless. Nishtik! They were trash, and she simply discarded them like New York litter, one at a time, leaving them behind on the subway or leaned against a fire hydrant in the street for dogs to piss on them.

Now? She confines herself to these scribbles. The Episode was a line of demarcation. After it, she could no sooner pick up a brush and apply paint to canvas than she could sprout wings and fly into the tree-tops. All that remains to her is the *shmittshik*. The doodle of her face mocking her warped reflection in a toaster. Her avowal of the truth of her inner distortion. The monster crouched so deeply within her.

When she hears the toilet flush, she removes the cat to the floor, then flips her sketch pad closed. "Good morning, Husband," she calls, tamping out her cigarette, rubbing the charcoal dust from her fingers.

Aaron is trim, with a handsomely ordinary face. His curls are uncombed, and he's dragging his tuchus, as he likes to say, shambling in from the bedroom in his pajamas. He's wearing the plaid flannel bathrobe with matching slippers that she'd given him last May on his thirty-fourth birthday. The robe hangs open, and its belt drags on the floor on one side. Rachel is up, padding toward the kitchen galley in her socked feet to pour him coffee.

"Morning, Wife," he replies and yawns widely.

The coffee streams into a china cup on the sink counter. "What time did you get home last night?" she asks.

"I dunno. *Late*," says Aaron as he plops down at the table. "Leo had a four-top from the U.J.A. who stayed forever. Mr. Big Shot as usual. Is there coffee?" he asks just as Rachel delivers the cup on a saucer. "Ah, great. Thank you."

"I can make you a fried egg on toast."

But Aaron is busy pulling a sour face. "What *is* this?"

"It's instant. Good to the last drop."

"The *last* drop? They should worry about the *first* drop. Where's the sugar?"

Rachel pops a slice of Levy's seeded rye from the bag into the toaster. "We have none. I forgot."

To which her husband can only shrug. "S'okay. I'll suffer." He sips at the coffee and ignites a cigarette with his Zippo as Rachel is busy fetching an egg from the fridge and cracking it into an iron skillet.

"So I heard this story," Aaron begins, exhaling smoke. "This guy, walking down the street on East Thirty-Third, minding his own business, when suddenly—*ka-chunk!* A piece of masonry falls off one of those big apartment buildings and lands right on his kop."

The egg sizzles loudly in the pan. "What happened to him?"

"What *happened* to him? Well, honey, whattaya *think* happened when a hunk of masonry goes *ka-chunk* on your head?"

"And did it actually make that sound? 'Ka-chunk?'"

“Yes. It made that sound exactly.” He smokes, done with this business of ka-chunking and what follows. “So. Any ideas for your birthday this year?”

The question automatically inserts a splinter into Rachel’s belly. “My birthday?” she asks and flinches inwardly at the sight of a dead rat sizzling in the skillet. Absorbing the horror, she blinks it away till it is once again a frying egg.

“It’s only a couple weeks away,” Aaron reminds. “Whattaya wanna do?”

“I don’t know. What did we do last year?”

Her husband relives the boredom. “Invited Naomi over for takeout and played Scrabble. Just like the year before and the year before that and on and on back to the beginning of creation.”

Rachel replies, defending something. “Okay. Well, I *like* Naomi.” The toast pops. Rachel grabs it by the edges and drops it on a plate, which she shuttles over to the table.

“Uh-huh. I like Naomi too,” her husband agrees in a flattened tone, scraping the burnt toast with a table knife. “She’s my sister, so what choice do I have? Is this butter or margarine?”

“Margarine,” Rachel tells him.

Again, he frowns but doesn’t complain aloud. “I thought this year we might do something *else*.”

This makes Rachel uneasy. “And what’s wrong with Scrabble anyway, I’d like to know? Scrabble is my favorite game.” The truth is that the Scrabble games with her sister-in-law make her feel safe. They make her feel as she did as a child in their home in the Fasanenstrasse, playing board games on the card table with school friends, rolling dice and counting off spaces. Walking the skillet over to the table, she scoops out the burnt egg using a spatula, plopping it onto the waiting piece of toast. “Sorry. It’s black around the edges.”

“S’alright. There’s pepper?”

She moves the pepper shaker from the middle of the table to a

spot within Aaron's easy grasp. God forbid he should have to reach for something.

The telephone rings. Aaron moves not a muscle to answer it. He only huffs a sigh. "*H'boy*. I wonder who *that's* gonna be."

The telephone is a black Bakelite instrument. It sits ringing on the old gossip bench that came from a flea market downtown. It continues to ring till Rachel picks up the receiver, because who else will answer it? "Perlman residence," she announces.

A familiar voice responds. A male voice, a fatherly Brooklynese voice, greeting her over the noise of a busy kitchen. "Hello? Mrs. Perlman? It's Abe Goldman."

She can picture Abe, the restaurant's majordomo. Aging but still a giant of a man with the kitchen wall phone tucked under his multiple chins, sweating into his tuxedo shirt.

"Can you tell Mr. P. that the refrigerator's gone on the fritz, and we're about to lose a shitload of red snapper, if you'll pardon my French?"

"Hold on, Mr. Goldman," says Rachel, proffering the receiver. "You're about to lose a shitload of red snapper."

Aaron has already left the table and appears beside her to accept the phone, muttering, "Stupid piece of junk." Then into the receiver, he says, "So, Abe, did I mention I hate your guts? *Where's Leo?*"

Aaron's job is managing Charades, a swanky seafood palace opened for the theater crowd by that maven of the Great White Way eateries, Mr. Leo Blume. "Fine dining till curtain time" on Broadway across from the Winter Garden between West 15th and West 51st.

"*Figures!*" her husband shouts into the phone with a kind of sour vindication. "The place goes up in flames, and Mr. Big Shot is nowhere to be found, as usual." His battles with Leo, his battles with the waiters, the busboys, the customers, the whole meshugaas—it consumes him like a flame consumes the candle. But Rachel is detached from his struggle. In fact, she's relieved by it. His obsession with work means less pressure on her. More solitude.

Kibbitz is mewling loudly to be let out, so Rachel shoves up the window sash, smelling the street fumes greasing the chilly air. The cat hops out onto the fire escape and charges upward toward the roof. There's an extravagant depth to the vastness above the buildings. The last ripe blues of November swelling the sky before the drabness of winter settles in. She compulsively breaks apart the color into painterly hues. Van Gogh said that there is no blue without yellow and orange. This sky holds undertones of cadmium yellow and vermilion to give it the proper weight. Then a blend of cobalt and white flattens it into an endless sheet.

"Haven't you heard me *tell him* a hundred times, Abe, that we need a new freezer?" Aaron is demanding confirmation. "A hundred times at least."

"You should tell him to phone the man you bought it from," Rachel calls from the window.

"Okay, okay, I'm on my way," Aaron is conceding into the telephone. "In the meantime, get what's-his-name on the phone. Gruber. The swindler who sold us the piece of crap to begin with." Aaron hangs up with a bang and puffs a sigh, resigned to his fate. "So whatta surprise," he says, frowning his standard frown. "The joint's in chaos, and Leo's uptown smoking a Montecristo B on his terrace."

Chaos! Enough to give him the gastritis. Just the way Aaron likes it! He is on his way to dress when the phone rings again. "If that's Abe," Aaron is yelling from the bedroom, "tell him I gotta put my pants on before they'll let me on the goddamned A Train!"

"You should hail a cab and have Leo pay for it," Rachel yells back to him and picks up the receiver. "Mr. Goldman," she says, "he has to put his pants on before they'll let him on the A Train."

"Rashka!" she hears and feels her grip on the phone tighten.

"Feter Fritz," she says loud enough for Aaron to hear as he reenters from the bedroom now wearing his trousers, his dress shirt unbuttoned. He responds to the mention of her uncle's name with an eye roll. Seizes a brownish banana from the kitchen counter and starts peeling.

“Bistu gut, Feter?” she asks the phone.

“Rashka, ziskeit, tsu hern deyn kul iz a brkhh.” Even though her uncle likes to insist that one language is never enough, he seldom speaks to her in anything but the language of their homelife. Not German like the good Yetta Jews spoke, raising up their Christmas trees, trying to be more German than the Germans. But Yiddish! Especially on the telephone, as if a phone call is a kind of spectral connection, voices thrown over distance, not bound by physical proximity, that must be anchored by a common touchstone of their past. Their vanished lives. Vanished in all ways except how they speak, how they think, what they remember or choose to forget.

She can see him in her mind, her uncle, ensconced like an exiled princeling on the scruffy velveteen sleigh chair that he drags out into the tenement’s hallway to make use of the pay phone. A lit cigar ribboning smoke upward to the tobacco-stained ceiling. She is buoyed by his voice, yet she knows that every conversation with her feter has a price attached. He wants to *see* her, he tells her. And not just *wants* to! “It’s *essential*, Rokhl,” that he sees her. And that she sees him. Normally, these conversations are chock-full of her uncle’s ersatz cheer, but this time, a smear of desperation underpaints his jaunty bravado. It makes her wish she had simply let the phone ring. But she agrees to meet him, because what else can she do? It means she doesn’t go to the grocery to pick up sugar for her husband’s coffee or take his shirts to the cleaners. It means she doesn’t use the morning to clean the oven or vacuum the draperies. Those are tasks she’ll have to leave to the mice if they want to make time. Aaron is tossing the banana peel into the trash as she hangs up, his shirtfront now buttoned and tail tucked into his waistline.

“So, your *uncle*, huh?” he says, still chewing the last bite of banana but frowning now, as if the mention of her feter has ruined the taste. She knows Aaron believes that her Feter Fritz is an open drain for her. “And how is *he*?” her husband wonders, lifting a wing tip onto his chair to retie a loose shoestring. “And by that I mean what does he *need*?” Licking his thumb to rub clean the toe of his shoe leather.

“Nothing,” she assures him. “He doesn’t need a thing. Just inviting me for a coffee,” she insists and retrieves her husband’s coat and hat from the hall tree by the door.

“So you don’t think he’s after another ‘loan.’ And I used that word ironically, since we’ve never seen a dime back.”

“No,” Rachel replies blankly, holding Aaron’s hat. “He’s not *after* anything.”

“Okay, sorry.” An unapologetic apology. “Don’t mean to sound insulting. It’s just that *usually*? He is.”

“Is what?”

“After something.”

“He’s not.”

“Okay,” Aaron says again as he shrugs on his coat. “Just don’t get bamboozled is all I’m saying.”

“How can I be, since I don’t even know what this means?”

“It means hold on to your purse.”

“I won’t even pay for his coffee.”

He accepts his hat from her. “Great, so now you’re making me sound like a putz.”

“I am?”

“Just try to keep it manageable is all. Pay for his coffee but make him leave the tip.”

“Yes, sir,” she says with a small salute.

“H’okay,” Aaron sighs, slipping on his hat. The old snood, he calls it. “How ’bout I bring home Chinese for supper? Whattaya want, the lo mein?”

“Surprise me,” says Rachel.

“If you wanna risk it.” He’s ready to go, ready to enter the world beyond the door, but then he wonders something as an aside. Something connected to the pesky problem of his wife’s mental stability. “So you’re not gonna lose track of time, right?”

“Lose track?”

“Aren’t you supposed to see what’s-his-name today?”

“Dr. Solomon. Not until three.”

“Okay.” He gives her a peck on the lips. “Just don’t miss him again, please. We’re spending a fortune on this genius.”

“I won’t miss him,” she promises.

“I’m just sayin’, is all.” Another peck on the lips. “G’bye.”

Leaving the apartment, Aaron’s day doesn’t get better. Rachel has closed the door behind him and is leaning into it as if she might need to barricade herself when she hears the easy, challenging voice of Aaron’s cousin, Ezra Weinstock, coming up the stairs. The Fucknik. “So, shvesterkind!” Ezra calls to Cousin Aaron. “Off to another day schlepping hash? When are you gonna stop screwing around and *do* something with your life, boychik?” he wants to know.

“Can’t say, Ez,” replies Aaron. “When are you gonna learn to raise the seat on the toilet before taking a piss? Your wife keeps complaining to mine.”

Ezra snorts a laugh. “All I’m saying is a grown man waiting tables?”

“I’m the *manager*, pal.”

“Sure, the *manager*. Your mother brags all the time, I’m sure. He’s the *manager*.”

And now Rachel hears the barely restrained aggression squeeze Aaron’s voice, the sure sign of an anger too complicated and dense to be contained by hallway sparring. “So who are *you*? Mr. Big Shot Public Defender, playing footsie with pimps and hopheads all day. I bet all those goyim at the courthouse think you’re one superior Jew boy, pal.”

She can hear Aaron pounding down the stairs after this, leaving Ezra shouting after him with snide passion. “Right! Big man! You think *you* know what it means to be a *Jew*? Well, I got news, bubbee. What you *don’t* know would fill a goddamned ocean!”

Rachel leans into the door till there’s silence in the stairwell. Kibbitz at the window has changed his mind, the silly beast, and now is pawing on the glass for entry.

She goes to the window and shoves up the sash, allowing him to hop down to the floor. But the morning air causes a cool shiver to creep through her skin. She shuts the glass and scoops the cat up in her arms, hugging the warmth of this furry feline body against her.

The day had dawned a stony gray on the morning that Aaron had arrived to rescue her from Bellevue. His face was bleached by shock, but it was evident from the deep shame coloring his eyes that it was he himself who felt in need of rescue. It was he who was the suffering one here. Salvaging his wife from the loony bin? More than he had bargained for, was it? God forbid his mother ever hears. All that was unspooling across his face like the headline ticker in Times Square.



There's an old-fashioned claw-foot bathtub in their apartment, with a showerhead installed on a tall pipe and a ring around the top from which a plastic shower curtain droops. Sometimes the water goes cold in the pipes by this point in the morning, but she's lucky that today it's still gushing hot, as hot as Rachel can stand. It brings the blood to her skin. She stands under the showerhead, eyes closed, allowing the steamy water to pour over her.

She and Feter had been permitted to come ashore in America by the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, slipping into the country during a narrow spasm of charity on the part of the American Congress as the mass graves of Europe settled into the earth. Their entry was sponsored by members of a Jewish labor board who also helped them get work. She found a spot at a five-and-dime, and Feter Fritz took a job as a janitor in an office building and sometimes ran the elevator. During the day, he worked with a mop and broom, but in the evenings, he re-created a version of his old self, changing into his baggy second-hand suit and sitting with an espresso. He would give his niece a dime and instruct her to walk down to Michnik Brothers Tobacconist on

Rivington Street to buy a certain brand of sickly sweet cigars because they were sold two for a nickel. In shlekhte tsaytn, iz a peni oykh gelt, Feter would say. In bad times, even a penny is money. This when they were housed in the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society's refugee house on Lafayette Street, along with a ragged collection of other Jews who had managed to escape the death's-head battalions and the crematorium chimneys.

But even with jobs, their incomes were meager. H.I.A.S. provided a small monthly stipend per head, but generally not much money was to be had. So Feter would attempt to ration his cigar supply, smoking judiciously. Always one cigar with his morning coffee, one after his midday meal of boiled mushrooms on toast, and one every evening after his usual bowl of kasha with a side of chopped eggs and onions. Or maybe the fried cheese kreplach with cream *if* he could manage a two-dollar supper at Ratner's and still afford his niece's lettuce and tomato sandwich for thirty-five cents.

But mostly the food was irrelevant to him. Feter Fritz had been taught to eat to survive by Auschwitz, which meant to eat without joy. The *cigar*, however, was what he savored. The ritual. The strike of the match, the whisper of flame. The rhythmic pace of puffing that kindled the tip into a glowing ruby. The long, low hush of smoke. It was during those few precious moments relishing his cigar that he would return to the man that Rachel had known as a child. The confident, charming, canny Feter Fritz, not the displaced person. Yet it was like watching a ghost inhabit a living body, a dybbuk of hubris that would possess him and then slowly dissipate with the smoke.

Out of the heat of the shower, Rachel's hair is dripping. Chilly air has slipped under the bathroom door as she towels herself down. Because she is always cold, she has bought a heater. An EverHot Ray-Vector space heater that's stationed under the bathroom sink. The heating elements glow in red-gold coils when she switches it on. The wave of heat calms her as she dresses in her slip, the rayon clinging to

her skin. She wipes the steamy fog from the medicine cabinet mirror with her palm, gazing into her own reflection. Then she pulls open the mirror that squeaks on rusty hinges.

The shelves of the medicine cabinet are crowded with a half-used tube of Brylcreem, a little dab'll do ya, a packet of razor blades, an aerosol can of Old Spice Smooth Shave, and a bottle of Kings Men aftershave. A Vaseline jar, a pocket tin of Anacin tablets, ten cents on special at Block Drug Store, a roughly squeezed tube of Preparation H hemorrhoid salve, because Aaron has problems with that and often needs more than a little dab. She has to rearrange everything to find the small bottle of pills prescribed by her shrink as a minor tranquilizer. *Miltown* it is called.

Her mother had sometimes dosed herself with an *extraite de l'opium* known as *Laudanum de Rousseau*, because a single teaspoon every three hours reduced the grief of menstrual cramps. It wasn't much of a secret. Women in Eema's circles carried on a love affair with *laudanum*. Eema decanted her elixir into a rose glass bottle with an elegant crystal stopper. But *Miltown*? Not so much elegant as commercially manufactured. It's a sedative with an advertising profile.

In the newspaper ads, wives and mothers on *Miltown* get their husbands off to work and their children off to school calmly and without fuss. Picking up a prescription for *Miltown*, the ads assured her, is as common and wholesome as picking up a quart of milk from the grocery. Two tablets, four hundred milligrams each, twice a day, morning and night. Rachel unscrews the cap from the bottle and swallows her dosage as fortification against her meeting with Feter Fritz. By the time she boards the Eighth Avenue IND at West 22nd, she should be feeling as relaxed as a cat poised on a sunny windowsill.