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Threnody

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Threnody

By Amy Fitzgerald

English Department Honors Project, May 2012
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Glossary of Words, Terms, and Institutions

Commissie voor Oorlogspleegkinderen: Commission for War Foster Children; formed after World War II to relocate war orphans in the Netherlands, most of whom were Jewish (Dutch)

Crèche: nursery (French origin)

Fraulein: Miss (German)

Hervormde Kweekschool: Reformed (religion) teacher's training college

Hollandsche Shouwberg: Dutch Theater

Huppah: Jewish wedding canopy

Kaddish: multipurpose Jewish prayer with several versions, including the Mourners' Kaddish

KP (full name Knokploeg): Assault Group, a Dutch resistance organization

LO (full name Landelijke Organisatie voor Hulp aan Onderduikers): National Organization to Aid Persons in Hiding, a Dutch resistance organization that operated between mid-1942 and 1945

Moeder: mother (Dutch)

Mevrouw: Miss or Mrs. (Dutch)

Mineer: Mr. (Dutch)

Onderduiker: literally "one who dives under"; a person in hiding (Dutch)

Plantage: avenue (Dutch)

Razzia: raid (Dutch)

RVV (full name Rad van Verzet): Council of Resistance, a Dutch resistance organization

Threnody: a song or poem of mourning, composed in memory of a deceased person (English)

Vrije Universiteit: Free University, one of Amsterdam's two universities

Vogel: bird (German)

Ware Stem: "true voice"; not a real newspaper, but based on similar publications during this period (Dutch)

Za: for, preposition (Czech)

Zentralstelle (full name Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung): Central Bureau for Jewish Emigration (German)

--Do not wish for a soul, for souls are full of sin.

--But also full of love!

Rusalka, opera by Antonin Dvořák, libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil

Chicago, July 1990

More condolence letters have come in the mail. I set them with the others on the coffee table, where they sit waiting to be opened. Let them wait.

Nothing else is different yet. The apartment is quiet but it has often been quiet, for hours and days at a time throughout our many years here. The quiet is normal. The slow accumulation of cinders in the ash trays is normal. The growing stack of unread mail is normal.

The bed? He could be up late composing—up all night, asleep at his desk, sheet music for his pillow, to awaken only when I bring him his morning coffee. The bed passes as normal.

The phone calls are not normal. Mostly it's just Hannah: "Talk to me, Veer." As if there's anything to say, besides fine, I'm fine, it hasn't sunk in yet, it's almost as if it hasn't happened...

What I would never say, what I can't believe she *does* say, is, "In a way it's for the best, he's out of his misery at last..."

At last? At last? How far back does she date his misery? To the medication? To the nightmares? To 1939? And—misery? Was that all?

There were days, I know there were days, when he didn't think of it. Whole days. I'm sure of it. There must have been. Even recently—near the end, I suppose I should say in hindsight. Days when he looked in the mirror and saw nothing to gut him—when he looked at me and saw only me, with no ghosts behind my back.

We were happy. He was happy, with me. These people who say there can be no happiness, no poetry, no life after such death—I refuse to believe it. I refuse to believe that nothing we shared was life. I almost hang up on Hannah. But I think of him saying, "She can't help it, Verishka. Don't be too hard on her."

His voice. That's the one absence I feel already. I've never gone this long without hearing his voice—even if only a sentence, a word, a grunt.

I can't open those envelopes. Why can I answer the phone—listen to the endless stream of *so sorry, so sorry, anything I can do*—but not confront the same sentiments in writing?

Tonight no one calls. The only sound in the house is the scrape of a single fork against a single plate. When I finish eating I must turn on the television, the radio, something. Anything.

The French windows are visible from where I sit. A beautiful sunset tonight. Other evenings, we would've gone out to the balcony to look at a sky like that.

I realize I haven't been out on the balcony since. Might never go out there again.

Now there it is: a wave of it, hitting me right in the chest. There it is: something different.

I know, rationally, that I'm still capable of breathing. I convince myself of this. I achieve it. A long-cultivated skill of mine. How else does one live to be nearly sixty-seven?

I leave the plate and fork on the table, don't even bring them to the sink. I move to the living room, burrow into the couch, find the remote under the envelopes; the stack has outgrown its balance, slipped into a haphazard sprawl across the whole coffee table, covering the remote and the coasters and the transparent glass of the table's surface.

There is nothing on television. Nothing at all. Despite the manic moving collage of color, all I see on the screen is the whispery reflection of my own face, staring. Listening in vain.

Oh my love. Talk to me.

Amsterdam, August 1942

The ghetto is quiet today. So quiet that I can hear the faint hum of my bicycle's wheels, like the buzz of a tiny dying insect, as I pedal past rows of houses that Rembrandt would've

recognized. These streets never seemed old to me until now. It's like riding through an outdoor museum—the sidewalks empty, the windows shut, no sign of life.

That's better than the alternative, though. At least there's no *razzia* happening. Last time I was here to visit Hannah's parents, I got caught in the middle of the latest Nazi raid. The memory is still gnawing at the edges of my mind—a wraith too hideous to show itself in daylight, but ever-ready to ravage my dreams. And it shadowed me all the way to the Kleins' house today, filling the emptiness with echoes of that roundup's crushing chaos. The sirens, the savage barking Dobermans straining at their leashes, the SS men pounding down doors and brandishing rifles, the shouts of "Jews out! All Jews out!" Flares planted every few meters along the street, machine guns mounted on the roofs, black vans with their loudspeakers blasting matter-of-fact German accents: "All Jewish people must come out of their houses..." People running everywhere, yelling, weeping, and me wading through the throng with my bicycle. The tear-streaked face of the young mother—no more than four or five years my senior, surely—who knew by the bicycle and by my unmarked sleeve and by my white-blond hair and that I belonged on the other side of the barbed wire: "Can you take my baby? Please, can you take my baby with you, can you get him out?"

"I can't"—even as she thrust the baby at me, a chubby-cheeked doe-eyed bald bundle—"I'm sorry, I can't, they won't let me past the gate with him. I'm sorry..."

¹ And on through the crowd, through the mayhem.

Thank God for a quiet day.

And in any case nothing can harrow me just now. I'm out of my head with relief. I've just been to see Hannah's parents again, to tell them that I've found a place for them, and they've agreed at last to "dive under," as they've heard some family friends call it. Hannah's already

been at my house for two weeks, but *Mineer* and *Mevrouw* Klein have been insisting that they don't want to be a burden to Moeder and me, or to anyone else. Today, at last, when I explained that Mineer Dreyer had *volunteered* to take them, that he'd already arranged a meeting place and a time, they consented. I think it was that last *razzia*, more than anything I've said, that's changed their minds. Mevrouw Klein spoke today, in that headlong dramatic way that she and Hannah share, of the raid's aftermath. "There were little children wandering the streets crying for their mothers—they'd been missed, somehow, in all the confusion, and there was no one left in that neighborhood to take them in. Nowhere to go—"

"They've probably been put in the orphanage." This from Mineer Klein. Hannah gets her vigorous levelheadedness from her father, though his love of tranquility eludes her. He said very little today—not unusual; he always leaves ample room for the expressiveness and expansiveness of his wife—but then Mevrouw Klein told me that Mineer Klein's business partner and his whole family had been rounded up. This is the man he's always lent books to and gotten cigars from, with whom he plays chess and debates scripture—who has been to him what Hannah is to me.

When I spoke of Mineer Dreyer's offer, Mineer Klein said only, "*Onderduiker*. I like the word, at least. It's almost whimsical."

So it's settled now. Soon they'll be safe. Just thinking about it, I feel as if everything inside me is opening up to hold more air—lungs, chest, brain, luxuriantly expanding. The lingering phantom of the raid slinks away from my peripheral vision, de-clawed. The Kleins will be safe. I'll never have to come back to the ghetto.

And then I see the black van parked in front of the orphanage. I shift over to the other side of the street to give it the widest possible berth, but even so I don't get past it.

The van's doors yawn open, and so does the door of the orphanage, and in the space of two minutes I see a dozen children dragged from one to the other. Some as old as eight or nine, others barely able to stand on legs still plump with baby fat. I see the German soldiers seize them by the arms, the legs, the hair; see them flung, *flung*, with less care than these SS men would give sacks of grain. See the Germans laughing, joking, as one does when performing mindless manual labor. The children flailing and screaming, or paralyzed. The door of the van slamming shut, the cries muffled as suddenly as if the children have had rags stuffed in their mouths. The van pulling away and looking—looking so ordinary. Black but silent, unobtrusive.²

I've watched this all from directly across the street—half-perched on my bicycle, one foot on the ground, the handlebars shaking in my grip. I haven't moved. I've watched it all and haven't even moved.

And now—quiet again. A normal day.

No full-scale roundup this time. Just this. A single, minor errand for those SS men—one small delivery to be made. To get it out of the way, to save trouble during the next razzia. Just this on a normal day.

Can you take my baby? Please...

I can't.

I have to get away from here. I try to get fully astride my bicycle but it wobbles beneath me—or my body wobbles above it—and we almost topple sideways together. I disentangle myself awkwardly, forced to fight every twitch of my quivering muscles.

I walk, pushing the bike alongside me, though I have such poor control of it that the front wheel often veers out from under the frame. It is like having a drunk in my charge. Or being a

drunk, I suppose. My whole body is cold, the way it is when you have a fever but can't stop shivering.

I felt so sturdy a few minutes ago. Sturdy and feather-light, both. Thinking only of how Mineer Dreyer had agreed to take in the Kleins. Thinking I could sleep tonight.

Once I cross the bridge over the canal I'm no longer in the Jewish quarter. I'm at the heart of the city, on Plantage Middenlaan, with the botanic gardens on one side of the street and Wertheimpark on the other. Though officially it isn't called Wertheimpark anymore because the Germans insisted on changing its name. Wertheim was a Jew.

There's the theater—right there, up ahead of me. I can smell it from here. All those people, far more than the building's capacity, and their luggage too, crammed together in there, for days, for weeks. The children from the van will be in there by now. Without even thinking about it I've been following that van, limping along in its wake.

Keep walking. Straight ahead. I don't let myself look at the men standing guard at the theater entrance. I don't know whether they're Germans or NSB men. If I look I'll see their uniforms and know, and I'd rather not know. Invaders and collaborators can be hated equally but not interchangeably. I hate our Dutch Nazis differently than I hate the SS. But just now I'd rather hate them all together, hate them without uniforms or faces, hate them all as I hate the driver of that van.

And just now, too, I can't bear to look at the theater itself. Our elegant Hollandsche Shouwberg, where my father used to take me to plays and revues: built like a temple, transformed now into a prison—no, a holding pen—for hundreds upon hundreds of people awaiting deportation.

Soon enough I'll have to see it all the time. This fall I'll be enrolled in the *Hervormde Kweekschool*, the teacher's training college directly across the street. There'll be no escaping it then.

No escaping? What an idiot I am. What a selfish, self-pitying idiot. I won't be *in* the theater. Or in the trucks or in the train cars or in the camps. I'll take classes and then go home. What is that if not escape?

The stench from the theater—more powerful than anything at the zoo on the next street—fades once I've gone another block or so. It gets easier to breathe. I pass restaurants and cafés where I used to go with Hannah and some of our other friends, until Hannah was banned from them.

I want to scream. A throat-tearing scream that will leave a rawness. I want to slam my fist or my shoe or my bicycle into the wall of the nearest building.

I thought I was angry before. When I first saw the yellow star pinned to Hannah's sleeve—my Hannah, my sister in all but blood, my mirror image since we were six—my Hannah marked, and forbidden to go to our school, and sealed into the Jewish quarter as if she were a contagious disease. And when she got her call-up notice last month and I realized that this was all she was to them, a worker—a body—yes, I thought then that I was angry.

But now. Those children. All bodies, only bodies. By the arms, by the legs, by the hair—to be *flung*.

Hiding Hannah and her family isn't enough. The children in that van are gone. And I am not angry after all. What I feel, what I have felt all along, is not anger. It is helplessness.

I'm still walking. If I stop I know my knees will buckle and I'll collapse right here in the middle of the Plantage.

Here's the plaza, and the Muiderpoort, the great hulking city gate that Louis Napoleon came through when he entered Amsterdam a hundred and thirty years ago. This is where he was given the keys to the city. My father, when he was alive, could talk about the Bonaparts for hours, through whole dinner parties. He should've been a historian instead of a judge. Or a professor of literature: that would've given him a use for all those Greek myths. We used to play a game, he and I, where I would try to think of a question he couldn't answer, and he always won. Most of the questions had nothing to do with his areas of expertise; most of his answers were fanciful, some outright jests. But he always came up with an answer of some sort. Sometimes even now I pretend I'm playing that game with him—though eighteen is far too old for fantasies of a father already a decade in his grave. I pose all my questions to him in my mind and then imagine his responses.

Who gave away the keys to Amsterdam, Pappa? Who would do that?

Well, Veerke, they probably had no choice. Or didn't think they had.

We cross the next bridge, my bicycle and I, over the next canal. Here's the Oosterpark. The truck would not have come here. And it must be empty again by now anyway. Only a truck again. And I am only a girl with a bicycle in a park.

So now what? Sit down somewhere and look at the trees? With this helplessness devouring me?

What other choice do you have, Veerke?

Not an answer. Not good enough.

Here's a bench. I throw my bicycle on the ground. I sit. I breathe.

Not good enough.

But now, slowly, a new feeling is stealing upon me. Entirely new. It is warm and cold at the same time, as wispy as the sly little summer breeze and yet also white-knuckle firm. The most versatile of sensations, definable only by the words it spells out in my mind: *There must be something I can do.*

I keep breathing, letting those words settle, letting this new feeling dispel the other. I clench my fists around it as if I will never let it go.

Chicago, November 1953

It isn't even my idea to go to the symphony. Hannah talks me into it: "It's high time you got out more." Certainly it isn't my idea to meet the conductor after the performance. I merely say how wonderful it was, how moving. And she says, "Let's go backstage and introduce ourselves, and you can tell him so."

"Hannah, we can't do that. We can't just go back there and expect to talk to him."

"Of course we can. He'll recognize my name."

"Hannah. That's presumptuous. We'd be imposing."

"Nonsense. He knows Theo Krantz, they were in Auschwitz together. That practically makes us friends already."

She's like this—dragooning friends wherever she goes. Theo Krantz himself is one such case—somebody she's met three or four times and now deems a kindred spirit. It always amazes me that she's so quick, and so wholehearted, in bestowing the title of friendship. And that nearly all of these friends are as happy to be thus labeled as Hannah is to claim them. I accumulate friends sparingly—one here, two there, a scatter-plot stretching the length of my thirty years—and never uninvited.

“We’ll just get a few words with him. I’m sure he’ll be gratified to know his work is appreciated.”

“He’s an internationally renowned conductor, Hannah, I think he knows already.”

“One can never have too much positive recognition. Especially if one is a Jew.” She rises from her seat and flaps her program at me impatiently. “Up-up-up.”

I sigh and let her shepherd me along. She loves doing this, meeting people, giving her opinion, making her presence known. Anybody who didn’t know her might think her arrogant. But no: she simply has so much to prove. She needs to be looked at and seen and recognized, to prove she is alive, to prove she is living, to prove her life has weight on some sort of scale.

So I don’t protest any further, though I hate importuning people, hate drawing undue attention. Kurt regards me as an almost cartoonish opposite of his wife; he can’t help but laugh at the idea of our having grown up together. Snow White and Rose Red, he calls us, which Hannah thinks is merely a reference to our hair colors; like most aspects of Kurt’s second-generation German-ness, his copy of the Brothers Grimm has never merited her attention.

In any case, I’m not against meeting the conductor, if Hannah’s literary and philanthropic credentials do warrant a few minutes of his time. His name—though I wouldn’t dare to try pronouncing it aloud—is not unfamiliar. I’ve heard about him, snippets here and there, in newspapers and conversations, over the last three or four years. I remember that Hannah’s friends on the American Jewish Committee were in raptures when he defected from Czechoslovakia after the coup—at last, a figure they could embrace as that rarest of commodities, an anti-Communist Jew. And I remember reading some article shortly after he became the Chicago Symphony’s music director—an article that paid due homage to both his remarkable talent and his tragic past. I think it may even have gone so far as to call him a musical Moses,

emerging from the barren desert of postwar Europe to call down Zelenka and Mahler from the sky.

Strained metaphors aside, he's put on a magnificent concert. And I have some defect of my palms that prevents me from making much noise when I clap; I always feel as if I'm not contributing as much as I should to a round of applause.

Hannah has made up for five unspeakable years by almost always getting her way since then. She gets it now; Mr. Libenitz appears to shake our hands. Up close he is taller than he looked onstage, but just as wiry and fragile. Yes, a man in his forties, who has survived death camps—which, some people say, spared only the toughest—seems fragile. But handsome, too, in a lean-featured, inconspicuous sort of way. You could pass him on the street without a second glance, but if you come near enough to shake his hand and look at him squarely in the process, you can see that he is handsome. You can see, too, that he is brilliant, and shy, and still perhaps a little bewildered as to how he got here. When he speaks you can hear, under the thick accent, the polished diction and measured cadence of a cultured mind. When he speaks you hear a gentleman.

Hannah lumps her praise and her introductions together and leaves him to sort out one from the other. "...Oh, the pleasure is all ours, Mr. Libenitz, we were absolutely enthralled tonight, this is my dear friend, Vera Anholt."

"Ah, of course, I remember from the book." Oh God, the book. Hannah devoted almost an entire chapter to me; I've joked that she should've titled it *Case Study of a Gentile with a Conscience*. One would think, from reading it, that I singlehandedly started the Amsterdam Student Group, when in fact I was only one of its members, a latecomer at that. I hope Mr. Libenitz's memory of Hannah's account includes a sizeable grain of salt.

This is the part when he actually shakes my hand. His grip somehow manages to be simultaneously gentle and firm. I think I admire him for that even more than for his mastery of tonight's music.

"You were the young lady who hid her, and saved so many others."

"Not *so* many others," I say truthfully. "Not enough."

"Well, it could never have been *enough*, could it?" He is very soft-spoken, with none of the fiery expressions and gestures that he used onstage. "But what you did—and your husband too, yes?"

"Former husband." Barely audible. Even after a year and a half I can't work myself up to say it without embarrassment.

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Well, it was most admirable, what you did. Truly." Not even a pause—not even a flicker of disdain in his voice. As if divorce is just something that happens, not worth his attention.

"Well, if it was, I've done nothing admirable since," I say, which is a stupid thing to say, but this is what happens when I talk. Hannah is always oblivious to my blunders; she thinks I'm a perfectly competent conversationalist. She's also one of those mothers who believe their children are musical protégés if they enjoy banging out random notes on a piano.

But this time she comes to my rescue. "Whereas you," she tells him, "have done *such* admirable work, here tonight..." As usual, the clumsiness of the remark is cancelled out by the aplomb of her delivery.

I say something else that's complimentary, but I have no idea what. He says something gracious in response. Hannah talks some more. Hannah can always be counted on to talk more. Then somehow, apropos of nothing, it is suggested—by Hannah, obviously; who else would

presume?—that he join us for lunch tomorrow, and somehow he accepts the invitation, and times and meeting places are discussed, and I have nothing to do with any of this and am not really sure what to think of it, but perhaps the mere fact that I am wondering what to think of it is a sign that I already think something.

“Very pleased to meet you” is the last thing he says to me. I notice he’s avoided assuming a prefix. A remarkably apt omission, given my status as a recent divorcee. Am I still a Mrs.? I’m no Miss, though Hannah has used my maiden name. I really must finish that Ph.D. so I can go by “doctor” and resolve the confusion. In the meantime, Mr. Libenitz is either incredibly intuitive and has chosen not to risk embarrassing me, or he has already forgotten my name and could not address me more directly even if he wished. Either way he is the soul of courtesy.

In the cab on the way home, I ask Hannah how to say *his* name. As if she knows Czech. Well, she *knows* everything, but she *speaks* only Dutch, Yiddish, English and pidgin German. Still, she pronounces these syllables with such an air of authority that I choose to trust her, and to mimic her intonation. *Rah-doh-meer Lib-en-itiz. Radomir Libenitz.*

Back at my apartment, I rummage through the trunks and cardboard boxes that, even after two months, still dominate the sparsely furnished rooms. Eventually I find Hannah’s book in one of the boxes marked—in an absentminded moment when I forgot to stick to English—*Boeken*. I skim through my chapter to remind myself of what impressions will need correcting.

Despite our differences, Vera and I were mirror images of each other in some ways; we were both only children, both imaginative and deeply curious, intrigued by all that was new to us, happy to be included in others’ lives. She came to my house on Saturdays for our Sabbath meal and picked up so much Yiddish from my parents that she was almost fluent by age ten. I went with her to the harbor every 6th of December and watched for Sinterklaas to arrive on his

steamship from Spain. And I read every book in her house—from the English classics that her mother brought from her homeland to the prayer book gathering dust at the back of a shelf. That prayer book served us well during the war, when we had to teach so many Jewish children how to pass as Christians. “Give us this day our daily bread...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

All true, but she endows it with such disproportionate significance, as if it led inevitably toward what was to come, and we were building, from those earliest days, the foundations of something momentous.

I close the book. No point in reading more. What I am and am not ought to be obvious enough in person.

The next day, when we meet him at the café, he asks, “May I call you Vera?”

So yes, he does remember.

Amsterdam, August 1942

Just after supper, but well before the eight o’clock curfew, I knock on Willem Segher’s door.

Willem was a year ahead of me at the Amsterdam Lyceum; he’s studying law at the *Vrije Universiteit* now. I’ve gone out with him a few times. Most girls our age have gone out with him a few times, because he’s so good-looking and clever and interesting that it’s hard to resent him for having the constancy of a moth. He was the first boy to ever kiss me, and for all I know the only boy who ever will, and I promised myself I wouldn’t speak to him again after I found out he’d kissed two other girls the same week.

But I know he's doing resistance work. Everyone knows he's doing resistance work—except, one hopes, the Germans and the NSB. At the beginning of the occupation—more than two years ago now—he fashioned a lapel pin out of a one-guilder coin, back when guilders still had Queen Wilhelmina's image on them, and wore it everywhere. Until a German officer stopped him on the street to berate him, supposedly for ruining perfectly good money. I overheard him telling some of his friends about it the next day: “So then he said, ‘Let me see your papers,’ and I said, ‘Go to hell’—because it's not required, you know, to show your papers, unless you're suspected of a crime—remember that if they ever demand that you show yours—anyway, then he dragged me down to Gestapo headquarters and a whole pack of Germans shouted at me for about twenty minutes, and I shouted right back, until they threw me out. Took my pin first, of course.” All this recounted almost as a joke.

He did the same sort of thing at the time of Prince Bernhard's birthday—wore a white carnation in his buttonhole just as the prince does. That time it was an NSB man who accosted him and ripped the flower off his lapel. I remember him being truly outraged then—to have been so abused by a countryman.³

Not long afterward copies of an anti-Nazi newsheet called *Ware Stem* started finding their way into the lyceum. Even if he hadn't chosen a name that shared his initials, I would've recognized his particular verbal flair, a Molotov cocktail of pithiness. Judging by that fiery rhetoric, I'd be very much surprised if the paper is the extent of his underground activities.

I know as soon as he answers the door that he has only the vaguest memory of who I am; I can tell by the way he sizes me up, casually enough that he could almost just be squinting against the light of the setting sun.

I try to be businesslike. I pretend we're longstanding cordial acquaintances, which would be true if he remembered it. "Willem, do you have a minute?"

"Of course." With a tilt of his head he invites me to step inside.

I wait to say more until he's closed the door behind me. Somewhere in the house I can hear a muffled voice speaking in my mother's native language. He's got a BBC radio. And isn't bothering to conceal it. If anyone catches him with that it won't matter if he's stockpiling weapons or conducting sabotage; he'll get arrested, and executed, for the radio. I suspect that would be a blow to his pride.

"So," I say, striving for briskness and falling severely short. "I wanted to talk to you because I—I'm interested in—the work you're doing."

"Go on." He betrays nothing. His voice is still generically courteous, conversational.

I practiced this on the way over, but it still sounds wobbly. "I was wondering if—if there was anything being done to—um, to extend *hospitality*—to certain people in need of it..."

I'm self-conscious about not knowing the proper code, but he picks up on my meaning instantly. "Ah. Why do you ask? Have you got any of your own?"

I almost say *Just one*, as if one isn't enough to get me killed. "What kind of question is that?" I snap, implying that he's a fool to ask, that the answer—whether a yes or a no—should be obvious to him.

This is the right response. He looks relieved—even halfway impressed—at my circumspection. "Good. But if you do—you know what happens if they're found. To you, I mean. Don't you?"

Moeder said the same thing when I brought Hannah home. *Do you know what will happen if we're caught?* Really there are only two things that can ever happen, no matter what we do. We die or we don't. "Yes, of course I know."⁴

He nods, satisfied. I've passed his test. It's not a very strenuous test. He should probably be more discriminating.

"Well, then, you know it's difficult. Finding people who are willing. Especially here in the city. Now, some of us have contacts out in the countryside, where it's safer for everyone involved, and people are more open to the idea. But then it's a matter of transportation...and other factors, still, no matter where you place people. Factors that"—he gestures at his face—"can't be changed."

I think I'm following him. Does this mean that I catch on quickly or just that the Nazis have taught us well?

"It's easier when people can—fit in—where they're going," he continues. "If they can look—like they belong."

I nod briskly, almost insulted that he feels he has to explain it to me, but at the same time almost flattered that he's taking the trouble. I wonder if he's doing it because he still thinks I don't know what I'm walking into, or because he's decided, probably mistakenly, that I do. I can't believe I even care what he thinks of me.

"What about children?" I say, surprising us both. For the first time his sangfroid falters a bit. He blinks, stutters slightly.

"Well—hem—they're often the easiest to hi—to place. Especially infants. But then there's getting the parents to agree, and again the transportation..."

"It's difficult. I understand. Everything's difficult. But are you doing anything?"

This might be the first time he truly looks at me. Ever. I can't tell what he sees but it doesn't seem to be anything bad. "We're getting something organized. There's a group out in Utrecht, a friend of a friend...I'll let you know what comes of that."

"Please do." I nod, not knowing how else to end the interview, then turn and fumble with the doorknob—I can never manage to open doors properly on the first try.

"Um..." he says with telltale hesitation. "Listen..."

I turn back. "Vera."

"Right. Vera. I knew that."

"No you didn't."

"All right, I didn't. Anyway. Where can I reach you?"

"You know my address," I can't resist saying.

"Oh. Do I?"

"I gave it to you last year."

"Ah. Yes. I must've—hem—misplaced it..."

Good, he's embarrassed. All those scraps of paper with girls' addresses—probably enough to carpet the floor. "Here, I'll write it down for you. On something you won't lose. Like your identity card."

He can either stay embarrassed or laugh. He laughs. What children we are, both of us.

Chicago, November 1953

"May I call you Vera?"

The three of us are just sitting down at the café and Mr. Libenitz has pulled out my chair for me. Such a gentleman. There's no real call to go to such trouble in a mere café.

“I—of course, if you like, Mr. Libenitz.”

His mouth quirks upward in a half-smile, as if only one side of his face remembers how to do it. “Oh no, that won’t do. If I presume to call you by your first name then you must do the same. Radek. Call me Radek.”

“Oh, but it’s different. Everyone calls me Vera.”

“Everyone calls me Radek.”

“No, I don’t believe that. If you go to a coffee shop every day and order the same thing and the workers recognize you—if that were me, they’d call me Vera. ‘Good morning, Vera. The usual today? Take care, Vera.’ But you—no coffee shop worker would call you just Radek.”

“All right. None of them would call me Mr. Libenitz either. They’d call me the tall Jew who uses too many sugar packets. You can call me *that* if you like, but it’s a mouthful.”

“I’ve never had to work so hard just to address somebody with respect.”

“Yes, you’re very strange.”

“*I’m* very strange?”

“Yes. To make things so much more difficult for yourself. I’m trying to save you four syllables.”

“But they’re good syllables. I like them.”

“Are either of you going to order?” demands Hannah. “Because I know what I want.”

“So do I,” he says, covertly scanning the menu.

“And so do I,” I lie, which he can tell because he just lied too, so when we catch each other’s eyes across the table and he gives me another half-smile I have to make a conscious effort not to laugh.

With the formalities attended to at last, we proceed to an actual conversation. He asks how I like living in Chicago and I reply truthfully that I don't know yet; I only moved here from Winnipeg three months ago. Since then I've spent most of my time working at the bookshop owned by Hannah's friend Miss Enright, and getting lost amongst skyscrapers. Ordinarily I wouldn't mention that I'm also applying to the University of Chicago's graduate program for English literature—new acquaintances are usually still recovering from the discovery that I'm divorced—but today I venture to add that bit. He takes it in without visible astonishment.

“English literature. What an interesting thing for a Dutch woman to study.”

“Do you mean interesting or strange? If you think it's strange I won't be offended.”

“Vera's mother is English,” Hannah inserts. “So it isn't strange at all. She grew up with the language.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I can't blame you for liking it. It's a fine language, very rich.”

“Not as rich as yours,” I say.

“German?”—skeptically. “Or Czech?”

“No, no, music.”

“Oh! Hm. You know, I never thought of it that way. I'm afraid I don't have a very poetic mind.”

“Neither do I! I'm sure that metaphor is stolen from something.”

“Probably,” he says, as if that doesn't diminish his opinion of me in the slightest.

We talk about the city, and music, and books, and his orchestra and my shop, and what we're each eating, and all sorts of nothing, and it occurs to me that he might be the first person I've met who would understand if I said I left my husband because I felt I had nothing to say to him anymore.

Hannah doesn't know what to do with us. We talk for more than two hours and she barely gets a word in. This has never happened to her before. At last she says, "Well, I have a meeting in a bit," by which I know she means she's having a drink with her editor sometime considerably later in the evening, but as the favored addition to what by rights should have been lunch for two, I defer to her.

When we get up to leave, he helps me into my coat and wishes me luck with my academic ambitions.

"Thank you. I wish you luck with your conducting." Oh dear. "Not that you need *luck*, that is. I only meant, I wish you well."

"And I wish," he says, "you'd call me Radek." It's almost a full smile now.

"If I ever see you again, I'll try to."

"I'd like that." Now his expression is one of purely serious concentration. He clears his throat, fumbles with his scarf. "I'd, uh...I'd like to see you again. Sometime. If it would ever be convenient for you."

I hear a loud thud. Hannah has dropped her purse on the floor.

"That would be lovely," I hear myself saying, which is far more coherent than anything I would've thought myself capable of. "Let me, um, give you my telephone number."

A napkin from the table, a pen from Hannah's purse—which I scoop up from the floor while it's still waiting for her to notice it—and a timid shadow of a smile from Radek: this is all I need.

Amsterdam, September 1942

Tamara still won't let go of my hand. We're already on the platform at the central station, the train will be here any minute, and nobody's given us a second glance. Petite as she is, Tamara can pass for under six even though she's nearly eight, so most officials will assume she's too young to need travel papers. And in any case she doesn't look the least bit "Jewish." She's got long tawny hair just a shade darker than Hannah's burnished red, and a pert round little face that I suspect will be quite pretty when she grows up.

When.

She's as close to safe right now as she's likely to get. But her grip hasn't loosened. If anyone tries to take her away from me they'll end up taking my whole arm with her.

This, though, is the only sign of her fear. She skipped to keep up with me on the way here, and she talks with the buoyant lilt of somebody going on a holiday, or an adventure. She wants to know all about Utrecht. "Do they have streetcars there? I used to love riding the streetcars, before—"

"Yes," I say, a little sharply, to curtail the rest of that incriminating sentence. "Yes, I'm sure they do have streetcars. And you'll ride them all the time, whenever you want, just as you always do here." Pitching my voice to a whisper, I add, "Remember, nobody minds if Christian girls ride on streetcars."

"Oh! Yes." Her eyes fleetingly grow to the size of teacup saucers, but the alarm is exhaled and dissolved with her next breath. "But Utrecht is small, isn't it? Smaller than Amsterdam?"

"It is, but it's full of lovely people." This is the truth. Willem and his university friends have connections with a group of students there, who in turn have made contact with a whole network of families in their area. Families down by Utrecht are just what we need. The farther

away from Amsterdam, the safer our smuggled packages—*this*, I've learned, is the code—will be. Which means that, for each delivery, someone needs to undertake a journey of several hours, if not a full day or two.

It's dangerous for men to travel by train—they could so easily get snapped up as laborers—and besides, it'd look suspicious, a young man with a child. So they, Willem and his cohorts, need girls. They have a code word for this, too, a word for what I am now: *courier*.

“Fraulein, your papers, please?”

I flinch. I can't help it. I didn't see him approach us. Now he's right at my elbow. A black uniform and a pair of eyes. Tamara couldn't grip my hand more tightly if she'd fallen off the platform and was dangling over the tracks.

I can't trust my voice to feign calmness, so I say nothing as I take my identity card and travel papers out of my handbag. He looks it over; then his eyes flicker to Tamara. “And the little girl?”

So I have to speak. “She's only five.”

“No I'm not,” blurts Tamara. “I'm—”

Now we're both dangling over the tracks. The swoop of the fall rushes through me.

“Stop that, dear,” I say, with a light teasing tone dredged up from distant memory, while my mind is scrambling.

“She likes to pretend she's older,” I say. “It's her favorite game. She pretends that she's twelve and all grown up, going to the cinema on her own. Her sister's twelve and never lets her come along anywhere.” Will he find this too far-fetched? Hannah used to do it, though she never had a sister, only older cousins. Will it seem too elaborate an explanation? Have I overdone it?

“She's tall for a five-year-old.”

“Runs in the family.” I don’t think I sound frightened, but I know I’ve started to panic because Willem’s voice is in my head, reiterating his most important instructions: *If you get arrested, you just need to hold out for twenty-four hours. That’ll give us time to move your onderduikers to new addresses and dive under ourselves. It’s all right if you talk after that; everything you tell them will be outdated. They won’t find anybody.*

Except Tamara, who’s right here.

“You’re not her mother?”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “You saw my age on the card. Am I old enough to be her mother?” But the real question is, *What am I? Aunt, cousin, nursemaid, what?*

“But you’re related?”

“She’s my niece.” *Mine.* I squeeze her hand, partly as a signal for her to stay quiet. *She’s mine.* I’ll claw out his eyes before I let him take her. I’ll do it, with my one free hand. And then hold out another twenty-four hours. “Are you always so curious about people?”

“Only the pretty ones.” Straight-faced, he hands back my identity card. “Have a pleasant journey, Fraulein.”

As he walks off, Tamara asks in a stage whisper, “Was that a German?”

Mother of God. I crouch down so that my ear is level with her mouth. “Yes,” I hiss, “and I *told* you not to talk to anyone. Especially not the Germans.”

Her whole face wavers, stricken. A thin ribbon of tears forms at the edge of each of her eyelids, poised to spill over onto her red-gold lashes. “I wasn’t sure he was a German. I never saw a German who was nice before.”

The bottom drops out of my stomach, as it does when you wake from a nightmare and still think, for an instant, that you're actually falling. "Oh, sweetheart." I press a kiss onto her forehead. "It's all right. It's fine."

We are fine. We will not get caught.

I always tell myself that. So far it's worked. Is it the power of the thought itself? In case it is, I've gotten in the habit of visualizing each step of each day in advance, mentally summoning up a future to meet.

We will not get caught. We will get on the train and then get off at Utrecht, where someone—probably Hetty—will be there to meet us and take Tamara to the family she's found.

I will take the train back to Amsterdam, reading the whole way—I expect to get through most of Moeder's sensational English novels during these train trips—and be home by late afternoon. In the evening Willem may ring me up, just as he did yesterday. "I've got a package of ersatz tea, three containers"—that means a girl, three years old—or "a package of ersatz coffee, eleven containers"—meaning an eleven-year-old boy. "Can you keep them for me for a few days?" And when I say yes, he'll tell me the location. Tomorrow, I'll go to the address he's given me. Usually he sends me to a house in the ghetto; sometimes for one child, sometimes as many as four at a time. Often, they're under six—young enough that they're not required to wear a yellow star—and almost always, they can pass for gentiles on the street.

I will take my new charges to my house and get them settled with Hannah in the attic—ideally only for a day or two, until I can place them elsewhere. Hannah will see to their "training," as she half-facetiously calls it: drilling them until they've memorized their new names and fictional family histories, and sometimes teaching them a few Christian prayers, which—thanks to all her childhood visits to my house, and to her own tenacious memory—she knows

better than I do. And she'll make certain they're familiar with the "emergency procedures." For awhile these revolved around our attic window and the roof next door. But now, thanks to the carpenter from the underground, whom Willem sent over a few weeks ago, we have a wondrous little hidden closet, large enough to hold Hannah and two or three other grown people—meaning four or five little ones—in the event that the Nazis raid our house. Even when we aren't using it, just having it there makes us feel safer. I hope the Dreyers have managed to rig up something similar for Hannah's parents.

In the afternoon I will do my grocery shopping—for Moeder and me, and for Hannah and however many children I happen to have in my house. That can amount to a suspicious amount of food; to be on the safe side I spread my business among several different shops—getting some of my meat here, some of it there, some of it yet another place, and the same for everything else. Even with the extra ration coupons Willem provides, it'll be a stretch to get enough. Our baker has started setting aside extra bread for me, though, without saying anything or setting a price on it.

The next day, Monday, I will go to my classes at the kweekschool. I will not bring up the subject of rescue work with my fellow students. I tried that once or twice with some of the girls I was beginning to consider friends. "You've got to look at the larger picture," I remember Louisa, the brightest of my new classmates, telling me.

"I *am*," I said.

"No, I mean, think of yourself as floating far above the earth, and looking down on what's happening here. Imagine how small it all is from that perspective, how transitory and inconsequential."⁵

And Cornelia, whom I'd pegged as the most daring: "Well, think about it, Veer, how much sense does it make to risk one life—say, mine or yours—for the sake of one other life? Then failure means *two* lives lost. What good does that do? The fact is, the Germans can't be stopped and the Jews are doomed no matter what. There's no need for us to go down with them."

Even Edith, who's sweet and generous and as devout a Reformist as I've ever met: "If it is God's will for Jews to survive, they will survive. It is out of our hands."

Tamara is cutting off the circulation in my fingers. And I wouldn't have it otherwise.

Wilmette, November 1953

"I can't believe you," says Hannah. She's brought me out to Wilmette to have dinner at her house, and now I'm drying dishes as she washes them, while Kurt puts the children to bed.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't pretend to be stupid. Telling him he could call you..."

"Hannah, it was you who invited him to have lunch with us."

"Because that's what I do, Veer, I invite people to lunch, I don't produce Hepburn-Tracy films. I had no idea you were going say he could *call* you..."

"He was friendly..."

"Radomir Libenitz is not friendly. He's notoriously not friendly. He's a brooder. And you know why?" She turns up the water and blasts it over a plate. "Because before he went into Auschwitz he had a wife and two children, and when he came out..."

"Stop it, Hannah." I can't tell what upsets me more: that the poor man lost his family or that this is how Hannah sums him up.

I stop wiping down the drinking glass in my hand. It's still foggy; does that mean it isn't clean enough?

"You don't have any business with a man like that, Veer. A man who's been through something like that. Things you couldn't understand. He's lived a whole life already. And lost it. And look at you, a decade and a half younger, worlds younger. Forget about it."

"Forget about what? Nobody's setting up a huppah for God's sake."

"No, you're right, and that's another thing. What that man needs is a good healthy Jewish girl from Skokie. God knows there are few enough of us left and we need a higher birth rate for the next generation."

"Oh, so the problem is that I'm not Jewish. Not that I could never understand. Because it's not as if anyone from Skokie understands any better."

"All right, fine, think of it that way if you want."

"I don't. I don't think of it that way at all and I'm surprised that you do."

She thrusts the clean plate at me instead of answering. I still have the glass in one hand.

"This glass isn't clean."

"Then give it back."

"Here."

She attacks it with the scrub brush.

"Hannah, I just enjoyed his conversation. I'd just like to *know* him. I'm not trying to deprive the world of Jewish babies."

She sighs and turns down the faucet. "You're the last person I would ever accuse of wanting to do that."

Amsterdam, October 1942

Babies are the easiest. Nobody can ever point out a baby who looks Jewish. Babies look like babies. People are more willing to take them—less risky, less demanding, than taking someone older who can think, or act without thinking.

So I deliver a lot of babies. I carry them out of the ghetto inside potato sacks, food crates, my knapsack, Moeder's old valise. I bring them, on my bicycle, to families on farms outside the city, or take them by train to Utrecht, Groningen up north, Limburg all the way in the southeast corner.

"How do they explain these babies to their neighbors?" I ask Willem at one point.

He shrugs. "As nieces or nephews. As foundlings. As somebody's bastard child they've taken in."

Which is how I get the idea to start registering babies as my own. It gives them a new, safe identity in the city hall records: illegitimate offspring of a gentile. I do this for the first time in September and manage another one by February. No one bothers to check to see when the last baby was born to me. No one regards me with suspicion. They can tell I'm frightened but they think it's only because I've given birth out of wedlock; they can tell I'm abashed, and they think it's because I don't know who the father is. They shake their heads at me, at the disgrace, but they forget me quickly. There are worse crimes after all.⁶

I don't limit myself to babies, of course. Especially after October, when the Jewish nursery next to the kweekschool is commandeered by the Germans as an annex for the overstuffed theater. Children under twelve are being sent to this little crèche, while their parents remain in the Schouwburg, until their scheduled deportation time arrives.

I go over to the crèche after class one afternoon and introduce myself to Mevrouw Pimentel, the director, asking if there's anything I can do to help. She's touched but has no real answer for me: Every Jew slated for deportation is registered at the Schouwburg, so the Germans will notice if anyone goes missing.

I talk to Willem about it. Willem talks to his friend Piet Meerberg. Piet talks to some of the men on the Jewish Council—who have access to the records in the theater—and they talk to Mevrouw Pimentel, and then Mevrouw Pimentel talks again to me. From then on, whenever Mineer Suskind and Mineer Halverstad are able to destroy some documents, I find myself with a few newly anonymous Jewish children on my hands. If we can find families to take them, and if their parents consent, Mevrouw Pimentel and the Jewish girls who work for her at the crèche do whatever they can to help me smuggle them out.

The crèche itself isn't guarded, but the soldiers posted at the Shouwberg keep a sharp eye on it from across the street. Most of the time, the best I can do is wait just inside the crèche with a child in my arms until I see a trolley car coming down the street. As soon as the trolley passes in front of the crèche, blocking the German guards' view from the theater, I'll dash outside. Then I'll sprint alongside the tram until I'm a safe distance away. Anyone aboard—driver and passengers—can see what's going on, of course, but the most they ever do is laugh. *Laugh*—as if the sight of me running away from the deportation center with a Jewish child on my hip is no more than a spectacle, a farce. At least, thank God, nobody's reported me yet.

And even this business of child-smuggling is only a fraction of Willem's activities. He knows he can ask for my help in other areas. He's decided I'm reliable; that's the word he uses. I like the way it sounds. Like a plate that won't break if you drop it.

He's in constant need of identity cards for adult onderduikers. The counterfeiters usually charge for their services, and though he has some money at his disposal—funneled to the resistance through the National Bank—it's still a great deal of trouble to get papers drawn up from scratch. The process is faster when existing documents can be modified.

So I agree to steal identity cards for him. At my great-uncle's funeral in the winter of '42, I lag behind as everyone is filing into the church. While the opening hymn is being sung, I'm in the cloakroom, rifling through the pocketbooks that the other mourners have left with their coats, stuffing identity cards into my brassiere.

Back at home, I leave them with Hannah, who soaks off the seals and replaces the owners' photographs with pictures of onderduikers in the same age range. After she seals them up again, she returns them to me so I can deliver them to Willem.

Willem also needs people to deliver his illegal newspaper and smuggle radios to other underground operatives. I hardly ever have time for this sort of thing, though. There are so many children to be hidden, transported, fed, moved again. And only one of me. So I must make the most of myself.

Chicago, November 1953

I placate Hannah by saying, "He probably won't actually call me anyway."

He calls me three days later. He sounds so tentative that I want to pat the back of his hand, like some sort of maiden aunt, and tell him he has nothing to worry about; it's only me.

He has a very sensible excuse: A member of his orchestra is married to a costume designer at the Goodman Theatre and has been urging him to go see their production of *Anna Christie*. But he's not confident about his fluency, and as he has two tickets at his disposal,

perhaps I'd be willing to come along and lend him my linguistic expertise? And perhaps I'd like to eat something beforehand?

I'm to meet him at the orchestra hall on Saturday evening after his rehearsal. I arrive early, slink into one of the seats at the back, and listen to the tail end of what sounds like one of Shostakovich's symphonies, though I wouldn't wager anything on that guess. Whatever it is, he's conducting it marvelously. When one thinks of people who need energy and grace combined, one thinks of athletes, not of conductors. But his motions are so fluid, yet so precise. The flexibility it must require, the concentration, the channeling of passion, to navigate these ebbs and swells and richly textured patterns of audible emotions. Even in the last few minutes of this rehearsal he has me spellbound with the controlled intensity of his movements, of his sounds.

I stay seated while the musicians are packing up, so he doesn't spot me right away, tucked as I am in the shadowed cheap seats. When he does catch sight of me, he leaves the stage and strides down the aisle toward me, with a tentative eagerness hitching onto each step.

"You didn't have to hide back there." And yet I can tell from his voice that he's relieved I did, that it has set him at ease about me.

"I wasn't hiding. I just didn't want to disturb you."

"Are you thinking I have one of those artistic temperaments, shouting at people and throwing things and such whenever something doesn't happen as I expect?"

"No. Not yet, at any rate. I might think so later if you throw anything at me."

He laughs like someone for whom the laugh itself, even more than the amusement that prompts it, is a genuine and welcome surprise. Like someone who's been given a double gift.

Over dinner, he hardly talks about himself at all. He mostly asks questions. About my family, my childhood, my favorite things to do. I can't remember the last time I was part of a

conversation that revolved around me—me for *me*, and not for things I know; I've always avoided being in such a position. I cast myself as a listener, a blank slate to receive others' confidences, dodging their attempts to probe and interpret who *I* am—for that, I've long been convinced, can only be a disappointment. And besides, there's something almost offensive about the way some people will peck at you, try to *draw you out*, as if your essence were in your blood and they were leeches, medically applied. Something unbearable about the idea of someone *getting to know you*—in the sense of getting, of taking, of seizing upon pieces of you that suddenly look completely different in their possession and that you can never get back without traces of their mental fingerprints.

But this is no interrogation. No imposition. His questions are breadcrumbs I follow, not hooks that latch onto me. He talks to me rather like I used to talk to my father—with the kind of curiosity that's almost reverent, though not too reverent for flashes of humor, even of teasing. I have the sense that nothing I say, however inarticulate or uninteresting, can erode the solid tenor of respect in his voice. And that nothing I reveal to him will be stamped by his judgment.

I give him my parents. My mother with her economy of words and feelings, her occasional unexpected arrow-points of wit, and her shelves upon shelves of books in English—the only places I dared to search for what her voice used to sound like. My father with his compulsive giving, of knowledge and kindness and jokes and guest bedrooms; with his stubborn refusal to acknowledge the weakening and stiffening and dull painful aches of his muscles until he could no longer move.

I give him my happiest early memories—which, after Pappa's death, all revolve around Hannah. Hannah's house on Friday evenings, soft with candlelight; the Sunday market in the old Jewish quarter—long before it became the *only* Jewish quarter—where the whole city flocked

each week, because that was where we could get the best bread, and the only bread sold on Sundays anyway; the orchestra concerts on the Rembrandtsplein in summertime, where Hannah bought us ice cream and lemonade with the pocket money she'd wheedled out of her mother, and where I kept shushing her—a rarity in our childhood—so that I could hear the music.

Of course, once I've answered each question, I turn it around and send it straight back to him, like a child who's come home for lunch and then returns to school, full of good food, ready to learn more. But his responses are shorter, more concretely informative and yet, at the same time, vaguer. He was born in a little village called Tučapy, his father was a brewer, he went to Prague to attend gymnasium when he was twelve and never left. "Not even to visit your family?" I ask. They visited him, he says. And two of his three brothers moved to Prague after him.

"How many of you were there? Siblings, I mean."

"Seven." The tenor of his voice shifts just slightly, flattens out. His eyes drop away from mine. I don't recognize this as a warning until I've already started to ask another question.

"So four boys and three girls?"

"This is what always happens when I meet people who are their parents' only children. Siblings suddenly become a novelty."

He's working hard to keep his tone light, like a doctor trying to bolster a terminal patient's spirits. But that doesn't mask the sharpness around its edges, the unspoken command of *Step back. You don't belong here.* He still won't look up. His fork skates aimlessly over his plate, herding food back and forth in brisk futility. So I know, with a cold swoop in my gut, that he's the only one left.

"Speaking of novelties..." And he has steered us past it already: He's talking of Prague. Of the wonder it held for a little country boy who, until then, had never been beyond walking

distance of anything in his world. “There was a clock, on the town hall in the old Jewish Quarter, that ran backward. Like all traditional Jewish timepieces, I’ve discovered. But I’d never seen such a thing before. I barely recognized Hebrew letters. I was German-speaking, German-thinking, like most of the other Jews I knew.”

“But you still went to the Jewish Quarter.”

“I went everywhere when I first got to Prague. I ran about like a mad urchin, chasing after everything at once. In case I should have to go back unexpectedly, and lose my chance. Even as a boy I was distrustful of good fortune—distrustful that it would last. So I didn’t know how to savor. I just took in as much as I could hold, as fast as I could. I never did learn Hebrew, though. Or Yiddish for that matter. I still think in German. And feel, I suppose, in Czech.”

“And here you’ve been saying you don’t have a poetic mind.”

“I don’t. Just a multilingual one.” He explains that he grew up able to speak *some* Czech—“enough” Czech—“but then I came to Prague and realized there is no such thing as enough.” So he worked hard to become fluent; “Besides, it was a good excuse to go to Dvořák’s operas whenever they were performed.” Much later, in the DP camps, he learned English. “But that was a great deal harder. I was so much older, my mind had lost its—what is it called—”

From the inner pocket of his jacket he withdraws a tiny, battered thesaurus. Not a dictionary, a thesaurus: I’d be less than surprised if his vocabulary actually surpasses that of most native English speakers.

“Elasticity?” I suggest, just as he starts to open it.

“Exactly! You see, this is why I need someone like you. And why I cannot afford to let go of German, even though I prefer these other languages.”

I've never drawn such comfort, warm and tingly and steadying as a nicotine rush, from an exchange of trivialities. I think because I sense he's doing this consciously—having us begin with the little things, the things about one's life that usually matter only to oneself. It's like settling down with a long book that you plan to read word for word, instead of skimming for the most exciting parts. The looming tumors of the momentous can be left for later. This is his way of promising, as I already did in my clumsy outright way, that there will be a *later*.

"I do speak some German," I venture.

"The book said flawless German."

"The book is not to be trusted," I say in bad German.

A laugh! "Then we'll keep to English. I don't much like the sound of German anymore anyway. And I want to be prepared to understand this play."

It turns out that he's justified in his concerns. One character is a Swede, one an Irishman, and one an ill-educated Minnesotan. None of them speaks my mother's language. For awhile we try to cut through the thicket of accents and colloquialisms, but then we give up and write notes to each other on our programs, speculating about the plot, the actors, and our fellow audience members. All we know for certain is that it ends happily.

Amsterdam, January 1943

I come home from class to find Willem sitting in my kitchen, sipping from a teacup while Moeder refills the kettle. It's pathetic, I know, that my first instinct is to wonder if I look all right, instead of to wonder what urgent business brings him here. I should know better by now.

“Afternoon,” he says, with his usual rakish flash of teeth. I gather, from the leisurely way his eyes settle on me, that I do look all right. I think fleetingly—pointlessly—of hummingbirds, fickle but still selective.

“He says he’s a friend of yours,” says Moeder dryly, with that blend of skepticism and indifference that, I’ve gradually realized, comes across too clearly to be wholly unstudied.

“Your mother was kind enough to let me in. I’m hoping, actually, that you can extend that hospitality for a day or two.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He swallows his latest sip of ersatz tea and sets the cup down in its saucer without the faintest clink. “I got raided this morning. I had to escape by way of the roof. I’m working on finding a more permanent place to dive under, but in the meantime would you mind putting me up for the night?”

I look at Moeder, who’s standing by the stove waiting for the water in the kettle to boil. In the whole of my life I don’t think she’s ever expressly forbidden me from doing anything: she simply lets her expression, with the eyes of a martyred stoic, lodge itself in my conscience like a needle in a pincushion. I look away.

“Why did you run?” I demand of Willem.

“Wouldn’t you, if the SS came to your door?”

“They have,” I snap, though I wasn’t actually home when it happened. Once, last fall, while I was at class, Moeder got a visit from a German officer. She didn’t even mention it to me when I came home; it was Hannah who recounted what she’d overheard from upstairs. The German had been asking if Moeder was harboring any Jews. She’d scoffed at him—“Absolutely not. Do people actually do such things?”—then offered him some ersatz coffee. “This must be

such a thankless job. I don't envy you at all. Won't you sit down a minute?" So he sat in our kitchen and chatted with her for almost half an hour, and then left without bothering to check the house. A relief on more than one front: Hearing this from Hannah, I could be sure, at last, that Moeder is on our side.

"Well, it was pretty obvious that they'd come to arrest me," says Willem. "They're hauling in students left and right for not taking the loyalty oath."

"*Nobody's* taking the loyalty oath," I protest. There's been a groundswell of student resistance, partly thanks to the urging of the government-in-exile. "They can't possibly be trying to arrest every student in Amsterdam."

"No, but they can certainly try to nab the loudest ones. And I think I qualify, after that speech I gave at the university last week." He lifts the teacup to his lips again.

"I understand," says Moeder, in her discussing-the-weather tone, "that the Germans are planning on closing the universities because so few students will take the oath."

Willem nods. "Looks like it. I think your school will be all right, Vera. There are so few of you—"

"Eighty-four," I say, a little miffed, because that doesn't seem like so few when I'm going in and out of the crèche every day in plain view.

"—and your headmaster seems fairly inoffensive to the Germans. He has to be, if he's ignoring what's going on across the street from him. The kweekschool will stay open, I expect. But the two main universities, they'll be shut down. And there've been six hundred-some students arrested already, just in the first wave. So, if you don't mind hosting me until I can arrange something with my other contacts..."

"How are you going to arrange anything if you're hiding in our house?"

“Well, I’ve got some messages for you to deliver for me....” He takes out a little pocketbook and starts flipping through it. “First off, I need you to split up my list of onderduikers. There are about a hundred and fifty total, so you can take these pages”—he tears out two or three—“to Geert Zingel—damn, I mean Geert van Houten. He’s passing, so be careful about the name.” He fishes a pen out of his shirt pocket. “I’ll write down the address. Then take these”—he rips out several more pages—“to Piet Meerburg, at the sorority house on Utrechtsstraat. Lucky bastard, his girlfriend lives there, so that’s where *he* dove under. Right across the street from Gestapo headquarters, no less. Nothing like being right under the enemy’s nose, *and* surrounded by women. Anyway, you can keep the rest, here.”

Three tiny pages, covered in cramped encrypted handwriting, find their way into my hands.

“Don’t worry, I’ll teach you my cipher so you know what it all means. It’s just names and addresses, nothing you haven’t dealt with before.”

“How—how many?” The paper is almost weightless between finger and thumb.

“Forty, fifty, something in that vicinity. Most of the names have initials by them—see there—for the network or at least the contact person in the area where they were placed. We shouldn’t need to do anything more for them unless we hear otherwise from the local groups. It’s only the ones without initials that don’t have another network taking care of them. So you’ll need to bring them new ration coupons every month, and move them if their hiding places become unsafe.”

I do a hasty tally. At least fifteen. “How will I get enough ration cards?”

“There’s a group up in Friesland that always has extra ration coupons. They steal them from their city hall, I think. Anyway, I’ll give you the contact information. If you’re ever really

desperate you can go to the LO, but they always want to know the addresses for the onderduikers before they give out the coupons, and that's too many links in the chain for my liking. I *do* need you to get in touch with the LO, though. They help anyone who needs to go into hiding, whatever the reason, so they can probably find a place for me. I'll write down that address too, and a note to give them from me. But meanwhile you can go drop off these names with Piet and Geert. I suggest making two separate trips, that way in case you're caught with the list on you at least you'll only have one piece of it."

The kettle starts to sing. Moeder makes no move to take it off the stove. "Where do you recommend she go first?" she asks Willem with frigid sarcasm. "The Jewish hideout, or the house across from Gestapo headquarters?"

Willem either doesn't notice the frost in her tone or doesn't care that it's there. "Whichever's closer," he says matter-of-factly, already scribbling something on a blank sheet of his notebook.

Steam is unfurling from the mouth of the kettle, but Moeder pays it no heed. She looks at me. "Veer." For the first time in my memory, her voice cracks.

Rather than meeting her eyes, I glance down at the pieces of paper I'm holding. I'll need to find a safe place for them, somewhere in the house. For now, I place it on the table and pick up the pages Willem set aside for Geert whatever-he-goes-by. These I fold in half, in quarters, in ever-reducing fractions until I have a hard wad of paper the size of my thumbnail. I kneel down and tuck this into the heel of my shoe. When I straighten up, Willem hands me one more sheet of paper: Geert's address.

"Veer," Moeder says again. I can scarcely hear her over the whining of the kettle, which is spewing its fumes with increasing urgency. "You don't have to."

I walk over to her and take the kettle off the stove. Its wail dies away almost instantly, though it continues steaming. “Yes, I do, Moeder. We can’t afford to have a guest on our hands for very long. Our spare room is taken.”

I hand her the kettle and turn to leave. Out of the corner of my eye, I think I catch Willem winking at me.

Chicago, January 1954

He knows everything about me after two dates, I could swear. Divorce and death and all. I must be talking too much. But he talks too—just only in certain ways, of certain things.

It slips out in fragments, as rare and accidental as slitting one’s finger on the edge of a piece of paper. A stray comment here and there, never dwelt upon. Not enough to draw blood.

Once he’s in the middle of explaining how, all through a day, any ordinary day, he constantly hears music in the back of his mind, companion and counterpoint to whatever he does or sees. “We’re never rid of it, we who truly live on music. It follows us everywhere. There was a friend of mine from Prague, Rafael Schächter—a composer, much better than I was, even when I still tried to write my own music. He was—let me find the word for him...” He consults his trusty thesaurus, finds a whole cluster of possibilities: “Dogged, persistent, tenacious”—mispronounced, *tenahcious*—“any of those. When we were in the ghetto at Terezín, where they sent us in ’41, he organized a choir, in secret. They rehearsed in a basement, with a stolen piano for accompaniment. He had them singing Mozart’s *Requiem*—had them practice until it was flawless, with the group shrinking every day as more and more people were being deported to Auschwitz—insisted on perfection, and only then performed it for the rest of us. We all did that sort of thing while we were in the ghetto—organized concerts, and plays, and lectures. Absurd,

when you think—But that is how passion works, isn't it? It doesn't go away, it is always in your head.”

Tangents, anecdotes. Listening, I could be an archaeologist dusting for bones.

We're seeing each other once or twice a week, for a few hours at a time. More than month has gone by before I work up the nerve for a direct approach. One day he asks, in some harmless context, if I think I'll ever go back to Amsterdam. I tell him that the war spoiled Amsterdam for me; I ask if that happened to him with Prague.

“Yes, but—but not only Prague. The world—didn't look the same afterward. I never imagined there was anywhere I could go that would be *unspoiled*.”

I wait almost a full three seconds before I take the plunge and just say it. “Because of your family?”

His eyes have been somewhere else. Now they snap back to me. They remind me of windows that usually have the curtains drawn but have been inadvertently left open, just this once, by some careless child. “Yes.”

“Hannah mentioned...” I flail a little with one hand.

“Yes.” He nods. The windows are re-latched but the curtains remain parted.

“What were their names?” I don't know why I ask it. I should let it drop. I should change the subject. But I can't. They're peering at me through the windows, asking, *Who is this woman? What does she want with our Radek?* And I am wondering the same thing.

“My wife...” He pauses, swallows. “My wife was named Emilie. And I had a son, Adam. And a daughter, Darina. She was five. When they shipped us from Terezín to Auschwitz. Adam was seven.”

“When—when was that?”

“October of ’44.”

Of all things, I’m doing addition in my head. He’d be sixteen now, she’d be fourteen. I’m too young to be their mother and too old to be their sister. Of all things to think about. How stupid.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

“Sorry,” he says. “You. How many children did you smuggle out of the ghetto in Amsterdam? How many babies did you register as your own?”

He knows all about that. Knows, too that when the Canadian doctor told me I wouldn’t have children, I tried to laugh it off. *Oh well—I’m already a mother of five.*

I shake my head. “That isn’t—that doesn’t—what happened to you—”

“Would not have happened,” he says, “if there had been more people like you.”

“Then I’m sorry for *that*.” I pause. I haven’t yet learned how to read his expressions, how to gauge his moods. I suppose there’s no reason to assume I ever will, but I hope it will get easier with time. For instance, I notice that there’s none of the boundary-drawing coldness that marked his voice when I questioned him about his siblings. Instead there’s a weariness, a hollowness, as if I’ve stumbled upon—not an open wound—but rather an empty place carved out in a part of him that used to hold vital organs. Which are still inside him somewhere, I think, but have been moved someplace else, where no one will find them. What he shows me is not them but the chalk outlines they left behind.

“I don’t mean to pry. Should we talk about something else?”

He draws in his breath slowly, as if testing the air. “Yes. We should.” But it takes us longer than usual to think of something else.

Amsterdam, March 1943

I've been invited to a party at the home of an old school friend, Christina—one of the friends who said nothing when Hannah was forced to leave the lyceum, who changed the subject when I tried to ask about a possible haven for the Kleins. I go, because Willem—who's been hiding out at his friend Geert's house and carrying on as many of his resistance activities as possible—needs identity cards for several onderduikers around our age. After I've been there awhile, grasping at small talk, I excuse myself to go outside for a smoke. I don't actually smoke, but I pretend I've taken it up recently and even ask one of the boys for a spare cigarette. Though I come in for a fair amount of teasing—"Picked a fine time to start, didn't you? You owe me one from your next ration"—at least I have a reason to leave the room. When I'm alone in the front hall getting my coat, I start going through the pockets of the other coats.

I've nicked four identity cards when Ludo, Christina's new boyfriend, steps into the hall. "I decided you had the right idea."

My hand jerks out of someone else's coat pocket and reburies itself in mine. "Er, sorry?"

"Taking a smoke. I could use one too. And it's too stuffy in here." He speaks with the sort of bluff, head-on friendliness that has nearly the same effect on me as hostility. There's something almost confrontational about it; something that demands deference. "You haven't been out already, have you?"

"Oh—no. Just been looking for my scarf." It's still cold enough outside that this passes as a valid excuse. I'm prepared to stall that way until he's put on his coat and gone out, but he says, "Oh, take mine. I'll be fine for a few minutes." I can't think of any alternative to accepting his scarf, thanking him, and trailing him out the door.

Outside Ludo offers me his lighter. I awkwardly clamp the cigarette between my teeth and wait for the flame to catch. “Puff,” he says. I don’t know what that means, so I just compress my mouth more tightly around the cigarette. It lights.

I take the smallest breath I can manage and instantly start coughing. The hot smoke unfurls inside my mouth, searing as the iron or the stovetop on which I’ve sometimes burned my hands.

“It’s easier if you inhale deeply,” he says.

He’s right. The smoke still burns, but it slides more smoothly down my throat and sends a reeling tingling feeling through the rest of me. Ludo smiles like a father who’s just caught his child playing a game without knowing the rules.

“Tina tells me you’re working on your teaching license,” he says.

I nod. I take the cigarette out of my mouth and hold it, pinched between two fingers, while a barely visible tendril of smoke snakes up from its charred glowing end.

“Must be a lot of work.”

“Sometimes.” *Be conversational. Act relaxed.* I know this is what Willem would tell me. His voice has replaced Pappa’s in my head.

“Were you at university with Christina?” Christina, I think, was one of the few students who did take the loyalty oath before the universities got shut down. Which doesn’t surprise me. She’s a sweet girl, but also the sort of person who would let people copy her maths assignments just to avoid being teased for refusing.

“No. I work for the *Zentralstelle*.”

I almost drop the cigarette. The German word sits so comfortably on his tongue. He’s cut it down to size. *Central Bureau for Jewish Emigration* wouldn’t slip out quite so easily.

I cross my arms to prevent any more sudden spasms. “Oh?” *Relaxed, damn it.* “What’s that like?”

“Busy. I’m with the Henneicke Column, so we’ve got a lot on our plate. Word is there are something like fifteen thousand Jews still in hiding.”

I should say something casual in response: *Really, that many?* Or something admiringly inquisitive: *Have you caught any yourself yet? I hear the reward is seven and a half guilders a head.* But I can’t. I can’t speak. I’m standing inches away from a bounty hunter, I’m wearing his scarf, and I have four stolen identity cards in my coat pocket.

“Tina told me that you and she used to play with a Jewish girl.” Still that heartiness, that affability. I feel sick to my stomach. That damned smoke.

“Everybody used to play with Jewish children.” I’m surprised at what’s happened to my voice. It’s turned to stone and grown a set of jagged teeth. “Up until a few years ago nobody noticed a difference.”

“True, I guess. Incredible, when you think about it.” He exhales a little cloud of smoke, or air, or both, mingled. “Do you know what happened to her? That Jewish girl? Tina says you hung around her longer.”

Hate. Hate hate hate. I hate you. The thought swells and pulses in my head, and in some other remote corner of that head, I note that I finally see the appeal. It’s such a meaty thought, something you can bite down on the way I’m biting the insides of my cheeks.

“She got called up early on. She’s long gone.”

“Mmm.” He takes another long drag from his cigarette. “And her whole family too?”

“As far as I know. If I ever have a tip for you, I’ll be in touch.” My tone dances just on the safe side of sarcasm—the side that can mean, *This is amusing.* Not *I hate you.*

A chuckle piggybacks on his next whiff of smoke. “I’d appreciate that. It’s just, when you think, fifteen thousand—somebody has to have known each of them. Most people think there’s not much for them to do, that the Germans are running the whole show, but really, almost everybody knows something, everybody can contribute something. And it’s *our* country, after all.”

Is this supposed to make sense? Does this sound coherent to him? All I hear is a string of non sequiturs. No: All I hear is *Hate. I hate you.* I hear that in *my* voice—my strange new voice, a grappling hook sunk deep into that thought.

“So what will you do for a living once you’ve caught them all?” I ask. Relaxed.

“I suppose I’ll see about that when the time comes. Maybe go back to law school....Are you finished with yours?”

He means my cigarette. I shake my head and lift it to my lips again. Inhale—sharp, deep—there it goes, straight to my lungs, and the tingling, spreading, little sparks all through my veins. “I’ll be awhile longer. No need to wait for me.”

“I don’t mind.” He could bludgeon down a door with his smile alone. It’s relentless.

“Oh, you just want your scarf back.” And I actually fling a smile of my own at him. I think of Medea sending those beautiful wedding clothes to her husband’s new bride—just wait, just wait, until they burst into flame.

I’ve got the scarf off my neck, am thrusting it into his hands, am saying, “Go on, go on back in, I’ll be right behind you,” and this is his weakness—civility, brazen impenetrable civility—this is his downfall, he has to go inside. He’s driven by my smile, by that signpost of common courtesy and ordinary life advancing on him.

He leaves and I finish the cigarette, I devour all its fire, all its breath. Then I go in, find his coat in the hall cupboard, and take his identity card.

For the rest of the evening, I'm more vivacious than anyone has ever seen me—the hard, brittle vivacity of socialites and con artists. Once I hear Christina whisper to another of our old schoolfellows, “I think Vera’s finally come out of her shell.”

At any rate, I'll probably have to start buying cigarettes.

Chicago, April 1954

He's different today. Not quieter necessarily; he's still quite willing to talk to me—but it seems more of a chore to him than usual. Each word, each thought, becomes a weight he hefts, dutifully, without pleasure. I suspect that, if anyone—almost anyone—but me were here, he wouldn't speak at all.

As planned, he's met me outside the bookshop at the start of my lunch hour, and from there we've walked to Grant Park to enjoy one of the first truly warm days of this year. I assumed, at least, that we'd enjoy it.

Strained: that's the word for him today. There's a current of tension running along his jaw, down through his neck, and up across his forehead. His eyes offer me no foothold.

By the time we reach the spewing bronze sea horses of Buckingham Fountain, the conversation is so threadbare that I consider giving up, but I can't bring myself to actually stop talking. I've somehow become a rambler. Only around him: When I see Hannah—less and less often, lately—I'm taciturn enough to make my mother proud. With Radek, though, I feel as if my voice is the clew of string leading him through whatever labyrinth he lives in, and if I let it drop even for a moment, he'll never find his way back to me.

So I jabber, shamelessly. I tell him how I've discovered a little volume of Slavic folktales on one of the more obscure shelves in the bookshop. I ask Radek if he's ever heard of a rusalka.

"Oh, yes," he says, with the kind of tone that, in its very neutrality, betrays disdain.

"There's a Dvořák opera—his best—but the legend itself is its own animal."

"And you don't care for it," I surmise.

"Tragic water spirits luring men to their deaths with their singing? It may not be for everyone."

"But you like the opera?"

"In the opera her song is not so much a seduction as a—wait, let me find the word." Out comes the thesaurus; he does this all the time. "A song of mourning," he adds for my benefit as he flips through the pages.

"A lament?"

"Yes, but there's a better word, I found it once..."

"Elegy."

"Yes, but no. A song and poem, in one. Here: *threnody*." A rare word I've never heard before: two thrumming syllables like the vibration of harp strings. I don't even know if he's pronounced it properly—like melody or parody—but he seems satisfied with it at any rate. I'm sure *lament* would've done just as well, except that he fixates more on sound than on meaning. And he seems, today, to find my contributions insufficient.

"So," he goes on, "I prefer that to the traditional story, where it is all so sinister. You are the future professor—tell me, why is it that in all literature, women are either the cause of men's doom or the instruments of their salvation? Why must they either destroy a man or save him? Never just love him or, God forbid, befriend him, without extraordinary consequences?"

“I suppose because art is drawn to the extraordinary. It prefers the extreme cases.”

“It *invents* the extreme cases.”

“You think so? You think nobody was ever saved by a woman’s love?”

“I hate when people talk of it in those terms. I think—love saves us all the time, all kinds of love, but to paint it in terms of a giver and a receiver, a patron and a—a—”

“Beneficiary?”

“Yes—that’s absurd. In reality it is never ‘Oh, you, young man, you’re in despair, you’re on the brink of the abyss, here, take this—a healthy dose of pure love from a virtuous woman, a virgin of course—and there you are, you are whole again, aren’t women useful creatures.’ It is never like that, when love saves people.”

“All right,” I say, half-laughing, pleased to hear him talking with fervor again, despite the irritability mixed in with it, “what is it like, then?”

He’s quiet for a long time. His gaze slides sideways and inward. “During the war,” he says. Stops. Goes on: “During the war. In the camp. I would think of Emilie—no, more than think, I would conjure her up. Carry on conversations with her in my mind. Picture her face. In such detail—things I never realized I’d noticed, a freckle of a certain shape, the particular curve of her left eyebrow. I kept her with me. And I lived—for that. She saved me, yes. But it wasn’t just that she was good and pure and loved me. It was that *I* loved *her*.”

He pauses again. Shifts himself back into the present. Almost impatient. With himself or with me? “So these stories, all their talk of a woman ruining someone, or of a woman saving someone—it is never *just* a woman, just a woman existing, or just a woman who loves. It is a man and a woman together and what comes of that.”

I nod to show my agreement. I can't speak just now. My voice is curled up in the back of my throat, trembling.

He turns away from the fountain. "You should be getting back soon." Brusquely, without looking at his watch.

What was she like, his Emilie? But I am afraid to ask.

How to be jealous of a dead woman? Impossible, unconscionable.

How to be better than a dead woman?

Friesland, April 1943

The first time I lose my temper, it's not with a German or a collaborator. It's with a Frisian mother who volunteered, last month, to take a child, after she saw her neighbor's new arrival. Up here, so far from the city, the need for secrecy drops away like an ill-fitting coat. A whole town block can gather to cluck over a charming little onderduiker like the two-year-old beauty I brought her a few weeks ago. "Oh, what a darling," I remember this particular woman gushing. "Have you got more like her? I'll take the next one."

So here I am with the next one—the same age, the same coloring even. Little Mirjam, half asleep in my arms, worn out from the journey. I'm worn out myself—hip sore from balancing her there, shoulders throbbing like old battle wounds. I hate coming all the way up to Friesland. Especially the ferry ride from Hoorn to Stavoren; there are always German soldiers on the ferry—young recruits, not seasoned like the SS in Amsterdam, but Germans still and all. Wanting to coo over my children, and play with them sometimes. And I have to sit there and let them, and chat with them politely, and pray from the marrow in my bones that my children—the

ones who talk—won't let anything slip. Mirjam is just getting to the prattling stage, so I was holding my breath all the way across the bay. My whole body's still in knots.

And this woman dares to stand here and say, "But this isn't what I wanted. I ordered a beautiful child like the other one."

If I could cut her to pieces with my voice I would do it. "You didn't *order* anything. You agreed to help save a life. A human life. Shall I take her back, mevrouw? Shall I hand her over to the Gestapo—here you are, gentlemen, it seems this one isn't pretty enough to be kept safe."

She shrinks back from me—from *me*, nineteen years old and shaking like a palsied old woman, and still told every day by my mother that I'm too skinny. "Well, I, well—"

"She just had chickenpox!" I shout. "Of course she doesn't look her best. They would've shipped her out on Tuesday. Do you think she would've fattened up in Westerbork, or wherever the hell they send them after that? We could've waited to see, I suppose, but the trouble with that is nobody comes back from Westerbork—" *Stop*, I hear Willem telling me in my head. *Stop now, you can't talk to contacts like that. You can't alienate them. You can't afford to.*

"Well, well, now, there's no need to go on so. I can still take her."

I breathe. I realize I've terrified Mirjam. With an unsteady hand I stroke her head, blonde as my own. "She's just had chickenpox," I say, softly now. "You have to understand."

"I'll still take her," the woman repeats. And I realize this is all she can understand of me, of what I do. And all I will ever understand of her. We've each sprung up, from oblivion, into the other's life, and will fade away again by day's end. That I am nineteen and haven't taken a deep breath in months—that she is a middle-aged spinster who never saw the Hollandsche Schouwburg in her life and who's probably daydreamed for years of having her own perfect child—doesn't matter. Only Mirjam—our point of contact—is what matters between us.

She will take her. I will give her. This is all that need be understood.⁷

Chicago, May 1954

“I was a bit out of sorts the other day.”

“I noticed.” Coolly, as if I didn’t lose sleep over it, wondering if it was me, if I’d gone wrong somehow.

“I wish I could say there was a good reason. But it just—happens—from time to time. I might see something, or hear something—I couldn’t even tell you what, if you knew to ask—it could be anything. The color of a piece of clothing. The way the sun hits someone’s hair. Anything, and five minutes later I’ve forgotten it. But it—sets me thinking. Not even thinking. If you can imagine a current that is always pulling at you, tugging at your feet—and then a slight nudge, no matter from what—well, that happens. From time to time.”

He’s waiting for me to respond. All I can manage is, “That’s a very poetic way of putting it,” which—I realize too late—sounds cruel instead of graciously lighthearted.

“I’ve been thinking about it for two days. Looking for the right words. I’ve never tried to explain it before. I never mention any of this, to anyone else.”

My stomach rolls over. Happy: yes, *happy* in the face of his anguish, because he has made this effort, this unprecedented effort, to translate it for me. Only for me. So happy: I don’t know what to do about this little spark of selfish triumph. I shrink back from it, tamp it down.

“There are things...” Pause; no breath. “There are things I can’t—talk about.”

“I know. That’s—” All right? No. “I understand.” No again. “I don’t expect you to be able to tell me everything. Things beyond words.”

A long, slow release of air now. “Thank you. I knew...” But he leaves it at that.

“Is there—anything I should be doing differently?”

“No. No, no. I—” He makes a noise that must be the shattered pieces of a laugh, crushed up while it was still in the closed fist of his throat. “The way you say it—‘beyond words’—it is beyond *everything*. And for years I thought, who would come near me? Near that. But you know—you may laugh at this—when I read Hannah’s book, and came to the part with you in it, I thought, ‘*There is someone...*’”

“Someone...who what?”

He shrugs, shakes his head. “I don’t know. That was all I remember thinking. There is someone.”

Amsterdam, April 1943

“You’re going to have visitors in the next couple of days.” The voice on the other end of the telephone is unfamiliar, but I recognize the message: Willem told me, ages ago, to expect a call from his “friend” at Gestapo headquarters if our house is ever slated for a raid.

How do I respond? “Thank you”? Hang up without saying anything?

“You understand?” says the brusque unknown voice.

“Yes.”

“Good.” And he’s gone.

The receiver clatters clumsily back into its cradle. And I’d thought my hands were getting steadier.

It isn’t as if the Nazis haven’t crossed our threshold before. But that was a routine patrol, not targeted specifically at us. The early raids were indiscriminate and, on that account, cursory. This is different. Houses aren’t being chosen randomly anymore.

Someone must suspect us. Probably Ludo. I shouldn't have stolen his identity card. If he didn't assume, naively, that he'd lost it, he wouldn't have had much trouble guessing who among Christina's guests might want it. Stupid of me, cavalier and stupid.

I have to get Hannah out of here.

It only takes fifteen minutes to cycle to Geert's house. Nothing compared to the miles upon miles that I trek every month to deliver ration coupons—courtesy of Willem's Friesland contacts—to the seventeen addresses that lie within forty kilometers of the city. But my legs feel like warm mush by the time I get there. I must need more meat in my diet.

Geert lets me in when I knock. He's a thickset twenty-five-ish man with a riot of curly hair which, thanks to frequent reapplications of peroxide, is always a slightly different shade of blonde. He always seems to be wearing the same maroon sweater—either because he hasn't got any others or because he happens to like it—and I always imagine, falsely I'm sure, that I can see a minutely fainter patch of fabric where his star would've been sewn before he got false identity papers and started passing.

“Vera, good to see you. Come in, sit down. How are you?” I can't tell if he makes a conscious effort to be cordial, to enforce some semblance of normality on our situation, or if common courtesy is so ingrained in him that he couldn't shake it off even if he tried.

“Is Willem here? I need to speak with him.”

“Oh, we moved him the other day. Got him a much safer place—better if I don't tell you where. He'll still be in touch, though. You can pass messages back and forth through me whenever you need to.”

I look down to assure myself that there's still a floor under me, though it doesn't feel as if there is. "I—I don't think I can wait—for messages to get passed. I need a place for someone right away."

"Well, maybe *I* can do something about that. Have a seat. Would you like anything to drink?"

"I'm fine, thank you." What was he in his previous life? A salesman of some sort, a storekeeper? He's so unruffled, but in a way that soothes rather than intimidates—quite a contrast to Willem.

"Cigarette?" asks Geert, who's lighting one for himself.

"No—well, yes, thanks."

"There you are. Oh, and before we talk about your project, I don't want to forget, Willem left something for you. I'll be right back."

He ducks out for a moment, leaving me alone in the front room, which is conspicuously Spartan. He must keep all the supplies for his forgeries and illegal publications squirreled away in the less public parts of the house. But the very emptiness of this parlor is telling: the conscious emptiness of a house that has something to hide.

He's back, carrying a small bundle wrapped in checkered blue and white cloth. "Willem thought you should have one of these. Just in case."

"What is—" But now he's undoing the cloth covering and I see. "Oh." There's no excuse for me to be angry. Willem meant well, surely. But doesn't he know me at all? Doesn't he know the first thing about what I need?

To Geert, I stammer, "Well, I—I don't know how to use one."

“I can show you. But first, your business.” He sets the revolver on a bare end table and listens while I explain what sort of onderduiker I have and how quickly I need an address. He assures me that he and his colleagues can scrounge something up, promises to get in touch by tomorrow morning, and then, before I leave, makes a well-meaning attempt to demonstrate how to fire the revolver. I don’t absorb anything he’s saying. I just want to get back to Hannah. And I don’t need a gun. I need Willem to be here.

When I do get back, I go straight up to the attic and shove the revolver under the false floorboard where I keep the onderduiker list, before Hannah has a chance to ask about it.

Chicago, May 1954

For the first time, he hasn’t left me at the door. I must’ve invited him up and I must’ve poured these drinks in our hands, and at some point awhile ago I must’ve bought that wine, because otherwise it wouldn’t be here.

He touches the rim of his glass gently against mine. “To your distinguished future as a doctor of philosophy.”

“That may be overreaching. It’s one thing to be accepted into the program, and quite another to be welcomed into academia with open arms.” I’m already babbling and I haven’t even drunk any of the wine yet.

“You’ll manage, I’m sure.”

Yes. Yes, I will manage. I am managing. I am learning. I’ve learned to recognize when he’s having one of his days, and to give him just the right amount of space. To talk without expecting much active reciprocation from him. To make certain that we do something, go somewhere—but to not expect that he linger in my presence afterward, as he otherwise would.

To accept without comment this perfunctory version of Radek, until the rest of him comes back. Which happens, I think, more quickly on account of my having learned so well. Tonight all of him is here.

I can see my reflection on the concave surface of his glass—very faint, and only if I look for it specifically, ignoring the dark liquid that hovers just below and beyond it. At least I haven't neglected to keep my dishes well polished. It would've been embarrassing to offer him a dusty glass.

There's a very decorous amount of space between us on the sofa, enough to fit a medium-sized dog. Except now he reaches across that space and touches two fingers, very lightly, to the scar over my left eye.

"Where did you get this?"

"In Amsterdam, during the war. One of the times I was arrested." I want to shrug but can't make my shoulders move. Do muscles hold their breath? I think they must.

The two fingers trail timidly down my cheek. "They weren't gentle with you, were they?"

"Well, no. But it's nothing compared to...to what others went through." I rush on, like pedaling a bicycle faster to keep it from overturning. "Even in our network. I'd need both hands to count how many people I know of who were shot. And how many got sent to the camps. All sorts of awful things—and that was only us."

"What do you mean, *only*?"

"Well, just that—we *chose* those risks. I chose this scar."

"Exactly."

"Strange girl that I am," I add, half-hoping to make light of it.

"Strange and wonderful girl," he says, and leans forward to kiss me.

Amsterdam, April 1943

“You’re under arrest.”

My head is ringing from being slammed into the wall by the two Nazis on either side of me. They’re still holding me by the wrists, which seems unnecessary, unless it’s to keep my knees from buckling.

They haven’t even searched the house yet. And they won’t find anything if they do. We “emptied” the house two days ago. Hannah—her hair bleached blond with peroxide, her picture and fingerprints flawlessly imposed on an identity card I stole while out grocery shopping—has gone with Geert, on someone’s donated bicycle, to one of the farms in Geert’s network. I don’t know how long she’ll be able to stay there before we have to move her again, but at least she’s out of Amsterdam.

And Moeder, thank God, is visiting friends in the country. I suggested that she go this week—hoping she wouldn’t be here when the Gestapo showed up. Not because I don’t trust her to keep quiet when questioned; God knows *I* can’t pry anything out of her, and she’s got no reason that I’ve ever discovered for being tight-lipped with her own daughter. I’m glad she’s not here, though, because she isn’t the one who brought people to our house. I’ve brought the Germans here as surely as I’ve been bringing my *onderduikers*.

“Did you hear me?” barks the balding German who seems to be in charge of the other five. “You are *under arrest*, Fraulein.”

Twenty-four hours, I think, as if Willem knows and is checking his watch. “I don’t understand you,” I say in Dutch. “I don’t speak German.” That’s what Willem told me to say if I

ever found myself in this position. They'll need to get a translator now; having an intermediary during the interrogation will give me more time to think, to form the right responses.

By the time they've finished cursing and tramped through the house and managed to procure an interpreter, my skull has settled down to a dull throb. I haven't stopped shaking, though. God, for a cigarette....

They sit me down across from the interpreter and the balding German, who takes notes with his left hand and, with his right, keeps pushing his glasses so far up the bridge of his nose that they dig into his flesh. The left hand has a wedding band on it. Somebody married this man. Some German woman is proud of him, and worried about his safety. I have a fleeting insane urge to laugh, but of course I can't. And I suspect that if the time comes when I *can* laugh, I won't find this so amusing.

"You've been hiding Jews," in German.

"You've been hiding Jews," in Dutch.

"No," I say.

"Sie sagt nein."

"Our sources say otherwise," in German.

"They've heard that you are," in Dutch.

"Well, I'm not."

"Sie sagt wieder nein."

And so on, for an hour. They show me a picture of Hannah—where did they get that?—and ask if I know her. While the bald man is asking this in German, my instinct is to deny it, but by the time it's translated into Dutch, I've realized how stupid that would be. A hundred different

people could testify to my knowing her. “Of course I do—I mean, I *did* know her. I haven’t seen her in years. What do you want to know about her?”

My knees are jerking up and down as if I’ve got a restless baby in my lap. I cross one leg over the other, but find that this only exaggerates their trembling, so I uncross them.

“Look at her showing off her legs,” mutters the German to the interpreter. “You should tell her they’re not that impressive.”

I hope my face doesn’t show that I’ve understood that remark. It wouldn’t do for him to catch my relief—that he’s human after all.

Thin veins of control are branching out through my body; now I can contain the trembling. My knees grow almost still, the stillness of a tightly packed spring but good enough.

“I don’t see what all this fuss is about,” I say, suddenly flippant. “I don’t know anything. I haven’t done anything wrong. And I’ve got better things to do than sit here answering pointless questions.”

When this gets translated—rather badly; *pointless* becomes *stupid*—the German gets up, stands over me for a moment, and then cracks me across the face with fleshless knuckles. Somehow that’s worse than when the other two threw me against the wall. Not more painful, just worse. All that carefully cultivated control, built up sliver by sliver over so many months—gone in this instant. Or not gone so much as useless, a sham. It counts for nothing, it protects no one. He could kill me. He could do anything. *He* may be human but I, at this instant, to him, am not.

There’s something warm above my left eyebrow—a small shallow pool of heat. Part of it trickles down into my eye and stings. I blink it away.

His wedding band has split open the skin over my eye.

“Ask her again.”

“About the one in particular? Or if she’s hiding any at all?”

“I don’t care. Just ask.”

“Are you hiding Jews?”

How many times can he hit me in twenty-four hours? How many will it take before I can’t pick up the scattered slivers of myself off the floor anymore, can’t remember what to say or why?

“No.” At least one more.

The German turns away, extending his fingers and then curling them up again into a fist.

“Tell her she’s free to go.”

They can tell me—in German or in Dutch—but I know better now.

Chicago, December 1954

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be.”

“I—haven’t done this in—in a long time.”

I almost say, “Neither have I,” but I realize it’s not the same. So I say only, “I know.”

And then, with a kiss, “It’s all right.”

It’s all right, I tell myself. Even if it’s bad this time, it will be better the next. I can make it better.

It isn’t bad, as it turns out. But that isn’t what I will remember anyway. I’ll remember how, even afterward, all night and past dawn, we stay intertwined, his arm curving under my back and around my shoulder, my head on his chest. I worry about his arm pinned beneath me,

afraid I'm cutting off his circulation. But whenever I ask him if he's comfortable he says yes. Except the last time I ask, when he simply turns his head to kiss my eyelid.

There is a feeling one gets from a solid night's sleep, a sense of warmth and soundness, of being settled. I hardly sleep at all, but in the morning I have that feeling.

Emilie, whoever you were, please understand. Understand that you are dead. I am sorry that you died. But if you had lived, I would not be here now, rising and falling with your Radek's breathing. So I am sorry but I cannot wish you alive again.

And if *he* does, I hope he never tells me.

Outside Amsterdam, May 1943

"You've got to get me a new place, Veer. The husband won't keep his hands away from me." Hannah whispers this to me in the cellar of the farmhouse where I sent her last month. I've come with ration coupons and extra clothes. What she needs is another address.

"Oh, God, Hannah, I'm so sorry. I'll find something else as soon as I can. Is it very bad?"

"I'm managing all right so far. I've kept my nails long. Just don't send any girls over twelve here in the future."

Easier said than done. I'm running out of addresses. I'm running out of everything, including time. The deportations are speeding up. We can't even pretend now to keep pace with the turnover of children at the crèche. We can't tell ourselves that we're saving as many as we possibly can. There's a current of them sweeping past us, faster and faster, and already my house has been raided again, and the baker who used to set aside extra bread for me has vanished—"Arrested," I heard from another regular customer. "For harboring Jews."

Not a day goes by that I don't bring a child home. After class I wait at the corner of Plantage Middenlaan and Plantage Kerklaan until one of the crèche workers walks by with a gaggle of children; they're allowed out of the building for walks now, and one or two of them—the ones whose parents have agreed and whose documents have been destroyed—will go with me. The rest will keep walking; sometimes their chaperones encourage them to sing, so I'll hear their thin quavery voices following me as I slip away with my “packages.”

White swans, black swans,

Will you sail to England with me?

England is locked, the key is broken.

Is there no key-maker in the land who can fix the key?

Come forward, come forward

And the last one we will catch...

A German guard counts them upon their return, just as he did when they left—but one of the workers will have sneaked an extra one out under her coat, or had one passed out to her through the crèche window, so that the numbers still match up.

But I can't keep these children at my house for very long; it isn't safe, considering how often we've been raided. And I don't have enough addresses.

Not for lack of trying, either. I've outgrown my initial wariness of address-hunting. I can't depend on Willem to do the legwork for me now that he's in hiding, and I hate to ask Geert for too much help, considering that he's courting exposure every time he steps outside. So every Saturday I ride my bicycle out beyond the city, stop at some farms I haven't visited yet, and ask whoever comes to the door, point-blank, if they can take in children.

One—two, if I’m lucky—may say yes at once, as casually as if I were requesting the loan of a book. Some will ask to sleep on it. Most will say no, in one way or another, and then I’ll ask if they can suggest anyone else who might be willing; they’ll usually give me a few more addresses, just as someone else gave me theirs.

The handful who agree become my responsibility; once I’ve brought children to them, I’m committed to returning with ration coupons, extra food, and sometimes money, depending on the families’ needs or demands. As for those who refuse, they can still provide more promising contacts, which I can pursue on my next excursion.

This is what I do. It’s becoming almost instinctive. I know now how to phrase my inquiries and how to read people’s responses.

I’ve learned to grit my teeth. A lesson that serves me well at times like this, when hosts prove less than spotless in their conduct.

“I’ll send them boys from now on,” I assure Hannah. “Or infants, to be on the safe side.”

“Oh yes, the safe side,” says Hannah dryly. “Speaking of which, I don’t suppose there’s anything useful I could be doing while I’m out here? Forging the identity cards was tedious work but at least it was something.”

“I know. It isn’t practical, though, for you to do that here. The travel time would slow the process down too much.”

“Yes, yes. I’m aware.” She huffs out a sigh. “Really I ought to just link up with the KP or the RVV. Start smuggling arms, assassinating people, whatever it is they do, to hell with hiding.”

“No, Hannah. It’s far too dangerous, what those groups are doing. Anybody found with a weapons cache gets shot on sight. That happened to some of Willem’s contacts in the RVV just last week. People our age.”

“Oh, go on, *you* lecture me on what’s too dangerous.”

For lack of a better rebuttal, I say, “Well, it isn’t practical either, a lot of their activities. You cut a phone line, it gets fixed. You kill a high-ranking Nazi, somebody else gets promoted to replace him. It’s a lot of stupid risks for very little in the way of results.”

“Just listen to the expert. As if you don’t enjoy taking your fair share of stupid risks.”

“I don’t *enjoy*—”

“You do, Veer. There’s a part of you that enjoys it. I can tell. And I don’t blame you.”

That stops me short. Enjoy it? I never would’ve used that word, but—can I refute her? There is something about this work that’s—invigorating. Something that withstands even the moments of utter helplessness that burst upon me, occasionally, in the form of blows from German interrogators. The insecurities of ordinary life are swept from my mind. I no longer need to ask questions of my dead father. I no longer have to worry—at least, not in the mundane superficial way of my childhood—about what people think of me, what I think of myself. I never wonder if I’m doing the right thing. Not in a large sense at any rate; it’s obvious. And even if I worry that I’m erring in smaller ways, I know that that is no excuse for hesitation. Someone has to do this, and if I didn’t—if I weren’t taking this child to that place on this day—there is absolutely no reason to think that anyone else would. As far as each particular child in each particular set of circumstances is concerned, it is me or nobody. I with the worst of my blunders am better than nobody.

There is something perversely reassuring in that knowledge. And I do suspect that, after this has all ended—it must eventually end, somehow, mustn’t it?—I will never be so sure of myself, about anything, again.

Chicago, September 1955

I've taken to bringing a book with me to read while I wait for rehearsal to finish. But the past few weeks I haven't been able to concentrate on it—any more than, after the first few months, I was able to pay close attention to the music. My mind is always flitting back to hover, in awe, around a new combination of syllables that it will soon have to claim: *Ve-ra Lib-en-it-z*.

Today I have a timetable for the commuter train that runs through Wilmette. I circle far more times than necessary and jot superfluous notes around the edges of the schedule. When Radek makes his way over to my seat, the first thing I say is, "Hannah wants to see us."

"I'm glad. She rang you at last?"

"Yes." I ignore the *at last*. It hasn't been that long. We last spoke when I told her about the engagement, and that was only a month—six weeks?—ago. "She wants us to come for dinner on Sunday. I've looked over the train schedule, and, see, if we leave at three..."

There's something his jaw does—not exactly clenching, but close—when he's troubled.

"What? What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Um...I don't mean to be—but do you think....It's just that—" He stops. He has a particular way of stopping, whenever his answer is more than ten years old. "I don't much like trains," he manages, apologetically.

"Oh. All right, then. I'll ring her back," I say, folding the timetable decisively in half, in quarters, "and ask if she and Kurt can come here instead. Kurt's mother could watch the children for an evening. We could go to a restaurant, I'm sure she would love that. Not having to cook."

"Yes." Such relief. "I *am* glad that she wants to see you."

"Us. Both of us."

"You are her friend."

“Yes, but I’m also the one she’s been displeased with.”

“I’m not entirely sure of that.”

“No, I’ve explained: She thinks I’ve overstepped...”

“Phsh.”

“Well, it’s not so unreasonable of her to think so.” Instinctively I defend her, though I’ve had countless rousing arguments with her on this very subject. “Plenty of people would think so, looking at it a certain way. A younger woman, gentile, divorced, latching onto a famous—”

“Famous? Am I losing something in the translation?”

“In the music world, you *are* famous. Anyway it could easily seem—inappropriate. As if I’m—taking advantage, in some way, without having your best interests at heart. Without even understanding what your best interests are.”

“No one who’s known you as long or as well as she has could possibly think that.”

“She wouldn’t think I’m deliberately reeling you in under false pretenses, no. But she does consider us a mismatch. She thinks you’d be better off with—well. With somebody like her.”

“Assuming somebody else like her exists, which I rather doubt,” he says with that quirk of his mouth that I live for. “Just as well, too. I wouldn’t trade you.” He doesn’t say *I wouldn’t trade you for anyone*, and I’m not sure that’s what he means either. But it’s still the most romantic thing he’s ever said.

Until a few minutes later, when we’re on our way out of the concert hall and I’m stuffing the folded timetable into my handbag. “Do you know what I think? That she’s jealous.”

“Of me?” I laugh.

“No,” he says, twining his fingers through mine. “Of me.” He raises our linked hands and kisses mine, just a swift peck, but still enough to flood me with warmth. “And rightly so.”

Amsterdam, July 1943

The garden behind the kweekschool adjoins that of the crèche, and on Professor van Hulst’s instructions the gate is always unlocked now. Our headmaster, it turns out, is not so indifferent to the Jews’ plight as he lets the Germans believe; he’s offered Mevrouw Pimentel the use of both the garden and one of the kweekschool’s spare rooms. Which she desperately needs: Now that the deportations are increasing so much, the crèche has become as overcrowded as the theater. So the Jewish girls who work at the crèche often bring children over to our side if they need space for the children to take their naps or run around. Or if they have some for me.

The term is over, but the elderly concierge still lets me in when I show up at the front entrance of the kweekschool. He has instructions from Professor van Hulst to open the door for anyone but the Germans.

Out back, Rebekkah, one of the crèche workers, is overseeing a game of blind man’s bluff. There are eight or ten boys darting in and out of the blindfolded boy’s path, some of them even going so far as to tap him on the shoulder or let his roving hand graze one of their sleeves. He staggers about, flailing, all solemn earnestness. The others occasionally let slip a snicker or a warning yell, but for the most part they keep silent, not wanting to give away their position.

“Mineer DeBrun dropped off three yesterday,” Rebekkah tells me in her usual brisk undertone. I don’t think I’ve ever heard her voice at a normal volume. “He just picked them up off the street in the middle of the razzia.”

“Unbelievable what that man will do,” I murmur. I don’t know DeBrun. And I don’t know his real name either. But he’s a legend of sorts among the underground: someone who knows everybody and will do anything. I can’t decide if there ought to be more like him—so that, when he gets arrested one of these days, there’ll be others to take on his role—or if our fragile spidery networks of subterfuge and contingencies would collapse under the weight of too much outright heroism.

“He said he knew he could get places for two of them,” Rebekkah goes on. “The other one he was less sure of.”

“Which one?”

“Ben—the tubby one over there, by Daniel. Daniel’s taken him under his wing. Hasn’t left him for a minute.”

They’re standing at the fringes of the group—a gangly, dark-haired boy of about ten and a shorter, plumper, lighter-complexioned shadow. The older one, whom I recognize as Daniel, occasionally makes a brief run forward—only a few halfhearted steps—then backtracks to Ben, who hasn’t moved at all. I’ve seen Daniel here a few times before in the past week or so. Always looking out for the younger, shyer boys, a benevolent scarecrow. He won’t be among those we can place. He’s too old, too dark, too “Jewish” in his features. Ben, though, looks like a prime candidate: He could pass.

“His parents...?”

“Rounded up and deported already. Mineer Suskind checked for us. Not that we bother much about consent at this point anyway. Do you know, some mother actually changed her mind a couple of weeks ago? Insisted that she wanted her son to come with her to Westerbork after all. It was Nico’s mother, you remember Nico?”

“I do.” I placed him last week: a boy of not-quite-two. “You didn’t tell me the mother had second thoughts.”

“Well, what’s the point? We weren’t about to send him to Westerbork when you’d already made the arrangements for him.”

“What did you tell his mother?”

“We didn’t tell her anything. The message came through Mineer Suskind; we just didn’t send a reply. She got shipped out and that was that.”

I try to think back to Nico’s delivery but can’t come up with anything particularly remarkable about it. I seem to recall that he fussed a great deal and was very heavy; that my arms ached from holding him. Where was his mother just then, as I was sitting on that train trying to soothe him, trying to find the right way to hold him, if there even was a right way? Was she on a train too already?

Would she really have traded two lives away just to feel that familiar ache in her arms again? Did she feel it still, even then, even on her train?

“So this one?” says Rebekkah. “What do you think? There’s no rush, since he’s not registered at the Shouwberg. There’s no record of his being here. You have time to check around.”

I nod. “I’ll see what I can do. I’ll let you know in the next few days.” If I can’t come up with anything on my own, I’ll consult Geert. Geert’s fabulous at finding places—he’s helped me move Hannah three times now—and always willing to help, even though he’d be completely justified in keeping his head down and looking out for his own safety.

I can also go to Mevrouw van der Molen. She was the external assessor for our oral exams last month—the first woman to earn a doctorate from the Vrije Universiteit, a veteran

journalist, and, since the beginning of this year, the leader of a resistance group. She took me aside after the exams, said that Professor van Hulst had told her about me, and proposed that we “coordinate our activities.” A formidable woman in every sense of the word—old enough, and severe enough, to be my mother—seeking *me* out. It would be flattering if it weren’t so terrifying: here, I am the veteran.

“Got you!” yells the blindfolded boy, who’s just tackled a too-brazen playmate. “I’ve got you!”

“Who is it? You have to guess who it is,” calls Daniel, from a safe distance.

“Ernst!”

“Wrong!” squeals a boy who is probably Ernst.

“Frits? No, I know it, it’s Hendrik, I know it now!”

I turn and go back into the kweekschool, but the names repeat themselves unbidden in my head. Ernst, Frits, Hendrik. Daniel.

It’s impossible to save all of them. If every child vanished from the crèche one week, we’d be exposed and arrested the next. Most of them have to stay—a smokescreen, as I’ve heard one crèche worker call it, for the few we smuggle out. To save one life we have to forfeit twenty, fifty, hundreds. Or it would never work.

Ernst, Frits, Hendrik, Daniel: for Ben.

I take this for granted now. The process of elimination, the choices that hold life in one hand and death in the other. The choices I make.

This is what I do.

Courier: that’s one word for it.

Chicago, September 1955

“I forgive you,” says Hannah, not altogether in jest. We’re in the restroom of the restaurant, powdering our noses in front of the mirror. Her idea; she practically dragged me up from the table. It’s refreshing to have her pushing and pulling at me again, with such casual affection.

“Thank you, Hannah. You know how much I value your opinion.”

“What does Peggy Enright say about you staying on at the bookstore?”

“Oh, she was scandalized at first.” I imitate my employer’s typically overwrought intonation: ““You mean *after* you’re *married*?”—but I brought her round. I’ve been working less there anyway since I started my classes, and she doesn’t much like the girl she hired to fill in during those times. I think she’d rather not do without me. Especially as I told her straight out that I can’t have children, so working for her won’t interfere with any maternal prospects.”

“But you had those plans to teach after you got your Ph.D.”

“Yes; why the past tense?”

“Universities won’t hire a married woman, Veer. You would’ve had a hard enough time in the first place...”

“Don’t tell me you’ve started advocating a realistic approach to life? That’s hardly like you.” I smooth back a few wayward strands of hair. “You realize you’re not talking me out of anything.”

“You’re certain, then? You’re certain you’ll be happy?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t say it like that, there’s no ‘of course’ about it. It’s hard to tell, you know, how *he* feels about *you*.”

“That’s just because he’s not very demonstrative.”

“I haven’t even heard him say he loves you.”

We’ve been at the restaurant barely twenty minutes. “Well, he doesn’t say it often. That’s not the way of Czech culture.”

“Hmph. *Czech* culture.”

“Just as you were Dutch,” I snap, though the past tense is a concession in itself. “Anyway, he doesn’t think of it as a very durable expression. He saves it for the moments when it truly counts. Moments,” I add pointedly, “when others aren’t around to hear.”

But she strikes a nerve, all the same. He’s very sparing, always, and not just with words. Sometimes he can go through whole days without offering a caress. But then he’ll touch my cheek, or take my hand, or brush the stray hairs out of my face, and in a single gesture there is more feeling than I could find in the most extravagant displays one sees in public parks or outside of bars. And when he calls me *Verishka* I know he means—what I call him—*my love*.

Does it have to be said, to be real?

“He does get moody, though, doesn’t he?” Hannah presses. Her eyes seek out the reflections of mine in the mirror.

“Nobody’s perfect,” I say.

“And he doesn’t mind that you can’t have children?”

Adam would be eighteen. Darina would be sixteen. “No, he doesn’t mind.” I snap my powder case shut and return it to my handbag.

“What will you do with yourself during the High Holy Days? Hm?”

“He doesn’t observe them, Hannah.”

“Oh, naturally. Your luck, picking a lapsed one.”

“My luck indeed.”

Amsterdam, August 1943

The interrogation room at the police station is furnished with only a table, two chairs—well, three, now that they’ve brought one for the interpreter—and a flickering light bulb. Someone must’ve actively decided not to change that light bulb. Must’ve said, “No, actually, the effect is better this way. The shadows, that wavery sputter of the light—let’s keep it.”

These are my thoughts while I sit across from my German interrogator, waiting for the interpreter. My mind won’t retain anything of real importance. Which, on the whole, might prove to be a good thing. There’s nothing there for them to wring out of me.

Not that I’ve ever talked before. But everybody has a breaking point. I only know that mine is somewhere beyond the broken rib I walked away with last month. And I know that they broke my rib not so that I’d talk, but so that the pain would be that much worse the next time.

Moeder will be wondering where I am by now. It must be more than an hour since I set out for Geert’s house. She’ll know what’s happened, though. Not specifically: She won’t know that, when I knocked on Geert’s door, a German officer opened it, and that it only occurred to me to run after I’d already been seized by both arms. She won’t know *that*, but she’ll know I’m in trouble. And the only thing that will change, on account of her knowing that, will be how firmly she clenches her teeth as she goes about her chores.

The German is drumming his fingers on the tabletop, an almost lulling rhythm. I should be tense, alert, but I can’t muster the energy for it. How many times have I been through one of these now? Five, six? I’ll never be able to turn it into an entertaining anecdote, as I’m sure

Willem could, but the experience no longer leaves me blistered and bleeding—on the inside, anyway. I've calloused over.

I can't worry about Geert. Maybe the SS caught him, maybe he escaped, maybe he conveniently wasn't there when they came to arrest him. In any case, they won't have much reason to hold me. It's standard procedure for the SS to remain on the premises for a few hours after they've successfully raided a house, and for them to pick up anyone who happens to come along during that time. But this is a hit-or-miss way of widening their net and they know it. All I need is a valid excuse and a plea of ignorance.

And Geert—No: don't think about that now. Safer for everyone that way.

The door opens. The interpreter. I miss a breath: Recognition squeezes at my chest, and everything compresses inside me, like an animal curling up in anticipation of a blow.

He nods to the German, flips the third chair around and straddles it backwards, arms crossed jauntily over the back. "Hello, Vera."

"Hello, Ludo."

"Not much of a German speaker?" The same invincibly conversational manner.

I shake my head.

"Tina told me you were one of the brightest pupils in her class."

"Not at languages. Except English. Christina just assumed everybody who did their own work was brilliant."

He laughs. Convinced? Satisfied, at any rate. He's the sort of person, I suspect, who routinely underestimates everyone but himself. In his eyes I must be as flat as an image on a cinema screen—able to talk and move, quite able to be looked at, but not a real person who could ever potentially outthink him. I might be able to manage this.

“Ask her if she knows Gerard Zingel,” says the German, impatient after the delay.

“So,” says Ludo, breezy as ever, “they’re wondering if you know this fellow, Gerard Zin—*wie heißt er denn?*”

“Zingel.”

“Zingel.”

“No. I don’t.”

“Then why were you at his house?” Ludo asks, as if he finds my denial amusing, even endearing, like the quaint tales children tell in innocence. *Why. Why. Pappa.*

Don’t be a child. Think now. I should’ve been working this out while we waited for him. Damn my complacency, or my numbness or whatever it was, damn the flickering light bulb. Innocence, go for innocence. Stupidity even. Stupidity always buys time.

“Whose house?”

“Zingel’s.”

“I don’t know anybody named Zingel. I was visiting a family friend—you’re not talking about Gerard van Houten, are you?”

He turns to the German. “*Seiner alias?*” Good: He’s taking my show of surprise at face value.

The German sighs and pulls out a folded paper from his jacket pocket. Geert’s identity card.

So they did catch him. He didn’t get away.

Ludo opens it up and reads. “Gerard van Houten. Yes, that’s what he was calling himself. That’s the name you knew him by?”

“That *is* his name.” I recalibrate as I speak: more innocent, a fraction less stupid. “There must be some mistake. Mineer van Houten isn’t Jewish.”

Geert has good papers, I know he does. Willem told me. Copies in the city hall register and everything. If his papers say he’s not a Jew, and *he* says he’s not a Jew, and *I* say he’s not a Jew, then how can they prove it? And if they can’t prove it, mightn’t he have a chance?

“He’s an old friend of my father’s,” I blurt. “I’ve known him for years. He’s not a Jew.”

“That’s not what his neighbors say. Listen, don’t feel bad about it. A lot of people are fooled by the ones who don’t look Jewish. Some of these Jews, they’re like violets in the woods.” What a terrible analogy. What is that even supposed to mean?

“Know how we catch them? The boys in my column and I?” He leans forward almost conspiratorially. “It’s the corners of their eyes. You look at a Jew next to an Aryan, you can see, their eye corners are different. That’s how we catch them on the street, even if they don’t look Jewish otherwise. But the average Dutch citizen can’t be blamed for not being an expert on eye corners.”⁸

This I never expected: He’s giving me a way out. His expression is sympathetic, as if he pities me for being duped. Not only that, but he’s actually clearing a path for me, nudging me toward what I need to say: *I didn’t know he was a Jew*. He’s making it surprisingly easy for me to extricate myself. Perhaps he wasn’t the one, after all, who originally brought me to the Germans’ attention. Or perhaps he dismissed his initial suspicions after those first searches turned up nothing.

I don’t say anything. I can’t relent just yet. If I say “I didn’t know he was a Jew,” I acknowledge that he really is one, and then there’s no hope. If I can insist on Geert’s *not* being Jewish, and if Geert himself has been making the same claim, and if Ludo is starting to see me as

an innocent girl in distress whom he'd caused undue inconvenience in the past, for whom he might find it worthwhile to do a favor...

"Well?" snaps the German. "Has she said anything about Zingel?"

"Ja, she knew him." Dismissively, still half-smiling at me.

"Ask her what their relationship was," says the German. "If they were close we might be able to smoke out a few more. She may know others."

"Oh, I know she knows others." I don't flinch—I'm almost certain I don't—but alarm pulses at my temples and I know it's bleeding into my eyes. I know he sees it. And I know, when his own expression doesn't flicker, that I haven't fooled him for a second.

"But I don't want to push her," he goes on. "That's not the way to get her to talk."

And just like that, Geert is gone. The edge I thought I had, the wild hope of some miraculous deception—it all shrivels up. For a split second I need to scream, I need to lunge across the table and do something heinous to Ludo's Aryan-cornered eyes. And then the light bulb sputters, so I think about that until the rest drains out of me.

"So you're an expert on interrogations, are you?" the German is saying to Ludo.

"Angling for a *real* job?"

"*Nee*, I'm making perfectly good money with the column. Business is booming—even with you boys poaching some of our best informants. I don't need to be stuck behind a desk. But I've met this one before. Give me a few more minutes to coax some more out of her."

He smiles again at me. "Now then," he says in Dutch, "shall I tell this fellow that you understand German, or would you rather keep talking to me?"

For the next five hours nobody hits me. Nobody lays a finger on me. They're the longest five hours of my life. I'd much rather be beaten than be sitting in this chair while Ludo insinuates

himself into every vulnerable corner of my brain. Should they arrest my mother too and see what she has to say? Did I know that so-and-so who lives down the street from us has reported that we harbor Jews? Can I remind him again what I was doing at Geert's house? I wasn't *involved* with Geert, was I? Because I know what the laws are about *that*, don't I? And I know what kind of trouble I could be in if anyone thought I was romantically linked to a Jew, don't I? Should they ask my classmates at the kweekschool whether I've ever said anything that could be construed as suspicious? I know that if I help them find more Jews, the past can be overlooked, don't I?

I get lucky: the German doesn't seem to like Ludo very much. At any rate he doesn't appreciate Ludo's usurpation of the interrogation. And he gets bored with my silence.

"This is getting us nowhere," he says eventually. "I don't have all day to sit here."

"Well, I do," Ludo offers. "You could just leave her with me..."

"Oh, aren't we the eager little pageboy. Well, in case you need reminding, you're not in charge of this investigation. If I say it's time to release her then we'll damn well release her, and you can go back to your own little games."

So I'm released.

"Take care of yourself, then, Vera," are Ludo's parting words. Underneath his unshakable flippancy I can tell he's sulking—and not the sulk of the defeated. There will be other chances—if not for him then for somebody else—to finish this. They can bring me back whenever they choose, and always make it a little bit worse, until something like protecting Geert becomes not just an impossibility but a concept I don't even recognize. Ludo is disappointed only because he hasn't got the distinction of completing the process.

I step outside into summer, still empty. Like a leaky boat that's just been bailed out, even though the hole's still there. Dry for awhile.

Chicago, July 1955

Hannah and Kurt leave the children with Kurt's mother and come to the city to help us move. We spend the weekend at my flat, repacking everything in boxes that still have their Canadian shipping labels from two years ago, and then hauling the boxes to the car Radek bought last month, which he then drives to the new building. Only recently have I realized how well the orchestra must be paying him. What with the flat—a charming spacious flat, six rooms and a little balcony with an actual view of the sky—and the car and the piano and the television and the fancy radio and all the new furniture, he's spent more than everything I've ever earned at the bookshop. But he insists. And he encourages me to buy whatever I want for our new home—kitchen supplies, rugs, knickknacks, anything at all.

By Sunday afternoon we're bringing the last of my dishes to the new apartment. We're all sweltering in the heat, despite the many pitchers of water and lemonade Hannah has forced on us. Kurt, who's no longer quite as fit as he was in his G.I. days, is huffing from his last trip up the stairs. "God, Radek, how are you surviving in long sleeves?" My husband's name sounds so oddly American in Kurt's voice that I don't recognize it. Neither, perhaps, does Radek, because he doesn't respond. Just leans over to set down his box, exposing the sweat-stains running down his shirt.

"Have some more water, Kurt," I say, and Kurt forgets. Not that he would've pressed Radek. He's far too docile a fellow. But I am getting into the habit of clearing a path around Radek, a space free of questions.

If Kurt saw more of Radek, he'd have noticed by now that Radek is always overdressed. Sweaters upon sweaters in the winter, and sleeves always. I never see the stark black numerals charred onto his wrist, except in the dark, or early in the morning if I wake first.

Radek checks his watch. "I have just a few things to get from my place. If I go now I should be back in an hour."

"Oh, we'll come along and help," says Hannah, but Radek is shaking his head.

"No, no, no. I have hardly anything. I can manage it myself in one trip. Stay and help Veer unpack." He almost never calls me Veer. When he speaks of me to others, I'm Vera; when he addresses me directly, I'm Verishka. Unless he's having one of his days; then I become Veer to him, as if he can't quite stomach a full endearment.

"It's true," I assure Hannah, as if sharing a joke, "he's got a squat little bookcase that comes up to my waist, and one cabinet full of records, and a record player and a radio. The rest of his furniture he's leaving behind. And the walls are bare as a cloister."

"Oh yes, because I've been inside cloisters to know what their walls look like," says Hannah dryly.

"Well, neither have I. It was just a figure of speech..."

"You and your figures of speech."

Radek is taking this opportunity to sneak out the door.

For the next hour or so I keep Hannah and Kurt distracted with picture-hanging: Kurt wields the hammer and nails, Hannah the executive aesthetic decisions. After that, I enlist their help with making dinner. Radek finally returns just as the food is ready, sidling in silently with the first of the five boxes he's brought back. He leaves them in front of the hall cupboard, which

he's already stockpiled with every household cleaning appliance we could possibly need, and two or three first aid kits and enough soap to disinfect a continent.

I expect him to unpack them after we've eaten. Or after Hannah and Kurt have left. Or after he's walked slowly through each of our new rooms, stopping to touch things here and there—an ash tray, a paperweight, the frame of the painting that one of my *onderduikers*, Henriette, sent with her latest letter. Or after he's stood out on the balcony with me to watch the sunset. Or after he's sat down at the piano in his new study and played three quarters of Dvořák's *Piano Quartet in A Minor*.

Meanwhile I've washed and dried the dishes—marveling as usual at how spotless Radek always leaves his plate—and have read half of a book assigned for one of my courses. At the end of a chapter, I wander over to the cupboard and take stock of the boxes. Two hold clothes and shoes and personal grooming items. These I leave. One has his records, which I add to my own shabby stack, and one his books, which I slip in among my own on our new shelves. I've never really noticed before how new they all are—each purchased no more than a few years ago. His Kafka, its spine barely strained, puts my battered Galsworthys and Dickens to shame.

The last box, full of sheet music, I bring to the study.

When I knock on the door he calls, "You don't have to knock, Verishka," so I go in. He's still playing the Dvořák piece, very quietly now, his fingers fluttering listlessly over the keys.

"I thought you might want this in here."

Seeing me with the box, he goes still. "You unpacked for me." Not a question, and not a grateful tone. Not accusatory, either, but—clouded.

I don't know what this means. I've always been welcome to browse among his things at his apartment. "Just your books and records. I didn't do anything with the rest. I'm sorry. Would you rather I'd left them?"

The lines in his face smooth out, albeit with conscious effort. "I just—I'm not sure, yet, where any of it actually belongs. I thought I should wait and—and—see where it fits best. If it fits at all. I..." He grimaces, embarrassed. "Never mind. It was foolish."

"I'm sorry," I say again, feeling uncomfortably like a repentant television housewife, "I just wanted to be helpful. There's not much else for me to do—no children to corral into bed or anything. I'm afraid I'll always be making myself a bit of a nuisance at home, trying to find a use for myself. You might as well be warned now."

Having salvaged my response from contrition and pretzeled it into this phantasm of lightheartedness, I set the box on top of the piano.

"Nonsense, Verishka," he says softly, by which I know he means a hundred other things without a language.

Amsterdam, October 1943

The crèche is empty. So is the Schouwburg. So is the ghetto.

But my attic is not. I'm keeping a seven-year-old girl there: Jetta. Owl-eyed, frazzle-haired, so quiet I thought at first she was mute—but with tiny china-doll hands that are always wanting to do something: draw or put toys together or find things. Right before the crèche closed and the remaining children were shuffled back into the theater to await deportation, I took her home. The last fruits of Mineer Suskind's tireless efforts to doctor the record books, and of the crèche workers' ingenuity and dedication.

They're gone now—Mineer Suskind, Mineer Halverstad, and the rest of the Jewish Council. Mevrouw Pimentel and her girls. Never once did any of them ask me to help *them* go into hiding. They thought only of saving as many children as possible. Mineer Suskind, I've heard, has a two-year-old daughter; she went with her parents to Westerbork.

It's a terrible idea, having a child in our house indefinitely—especially one who looks as Jewish as Christ himself. But every other contact I have is already hiding too many.

And I let so many others go. Ernst. Frits. Hendrik. Daniel. The names, the handful of names I know, out of thousands, have arranged themselves into a song of sorts in my head. It accompanies my footsteps, the rhythm of my bicycle wheels as they turn beneath me, the slow inhaling and exhaling of cigarette smoke.

I've dropped out of the kweekschool. To be surrounded by those vacant buildings every day was actually worse than to live amidst the stench of suffering and desperation. I couldn't concentrate on my coursework, I couldn't look anyone in the eye except Professor van Hulst. And besides—I'm so busy.

Even with the deportations over, there's always work to be done. Ration cards to be procured and delivered. Money and supplies to be obtained. And unexpected crises all the time.

Like when I get a call, one morning, from a couple that I know through Geert; I brought them a child a few months ago, just temporarily until I could get him up to Groningen. But apparently they've also been hiding a whole family of five, including a sickly grandmother who died last night. They don't know what to do and, with Geert gone, they don't know anyone else to go to.

I know that, for the right price, the city officials will look the other way and let you bury people in the Jewish cemetery still. But I don't know the price or the officials. And the couple,

when I arrive at their house, seem to expect me to dispose of the body immediately. This tiny shriveled old woman, curled in on herself, surrounded of necessity by the rest of her family. For they're all still crammed in the same basement room. Her sons and daughters, or her children and their spouses, hard to tell, impossible to tell. The young man who's still holding her stiff wrinkled hand—almost certainly her own son. And the woman who asks, “Is there any way—the burial rites—?” Probably a daughter, or a very conscientious daughter-in-law.

An old sheet, a handcart, and eighty pounds—little more than a full sack of potatoes, easily lifted with some help from the man of the house. A short walk to the nearest canal, a tilt forward, and tears battered dry on my cheeks by the autumn wind. These are the best burial rites I can manage.

I return to the house, return the handcart. I want to ask the woman of the house to please remove the false floorboards once more and let me go back downstairs for just another minute. I don't know what I plan to say to the family. I must say something, surely.

But then I hear them, below me. From beneath the floor comes the quiet, insistent murmur of their voices, broken and hushed but more or less in unison. “I think they're praying for her,” says the woman.

I nod. They must be reciting the mourner's Kaddish for her. The Kleins explained that ritual to me long ago; what a fine pair they are for explaining things—Mineer Klein gives you the essence of it, and then Mevrouw Klein fills it out with words.

“I left your handcart out back,” I say.

I walk home. Step: Ernst. Step: Frits. Step: Hendrik. Step: Daniel.

Step. Step. Step....

Wilmette, June 1956

Hannah's little daughter likes to spin in circles and sing. Mostly nonsense songs, but one or two real ones she's learned. One day we're all sitting in the backyard, at the rustic little wooden picnic table Kurt built a few years ago, and Naomi starts twirling out in the middle of the lawn. There's something about the way the light falls at this particular time, before sunset, a sort of waxing-before-the-waning, a threshold between afternoon and evening, when you think, *This day will end*. And also when you think, *Light just like this has fallen on different objects, different people, in other places, on days that ended already. And now it's back, for us*.

So Naomi is spinning and singing in her shrill little wisp of a voice.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happyyyy when skies are gray. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you..."

Radek gets up from the table and walks around the side of the house. I sit fidgeting for a moment and then follow him.

He stands slumped against the wall, arms wrapped around himself, face contorted with the effort of sobbing in utter silence.

"Oh my love," I breathe, but he doesn't hear me. Doesn't know I'm there until I reach out to touch his shoulder; then he sees me out of the corner of his eye and something in the way he tilts his tear-streaked face to look at me stops my hand in midair.

He tries to say something. He's not equal to it.

My outstretched arm hovers, an inch away from him. So far away from him.

"Darina?" I say quietly.

He nods, twice, still convulsed.

"Do you want me to go?" Almost a whisper.

Nods, three times.

I don't think I'll ever know whether I should've actually left him there or not, but I do. I hate myself for it but I do.

Seventeen minutes later he comes back and sits with us, quiet but composed, until dusk is falling and it's time to leave. When the parting pleasantries are over and we've both gotten into the car and Hannah and Kurt have retreated to the front steps, I look over at Radek. Manage to say, "I'm so sorry about earlier."

He lets out a long tremulous breath that seems to have been coiled up inside him for hours. Says nothing for a moment. Then, "*I* am sorry. I try not to show it, when it comes over me like that..."

"You don't have to do that. You don't have to hide anything. Please don't worry about that anymore."

"I don't want it to be difficult—for you."

Difficult for me. Part of me wants to say, *Of course it's difficult for me, and it always will be*, while part of me knows better, knows that what's difficult for me is agony for him. I say neither of those things. I only say, "Shhh," and take his hand. It surprises me with its warmth. I expected ice. Or maybe just the brittle sharpness of bone. But his whole hand is there, still. Still warm.

It fits itself around my own hand and lifts it to his lips.

Then it lets go and sets about starting the car. In the meantime I lean sideways to rest my head on his shoulder and keep it there, awkward though the position is for me, the whole way home.

Amsterdam, October 1944

Mevrouw Dreyer is at my door, hysterical.

“Oh Vera—oh God—you have to let me in, please, you have to let me in—”

“Of course, of course—” She stumbles into the front hall. I’m barely aware of shutting and locking the door; my mind is already teetering on the edge of what she says next.

“They’ve shot Jan, I ran out while they were upstairs but I heard the shots—Oh God, Vera, what can I do?—Where can I go? Oh my God, oh my God...”

Everything is cold. Everything. “Mineer Dreyer? They shot him? The Germans shot him.” It stops being a question.

“Not the Germans—*our* police. It happened so fast, they came barging in with dogs, there was nothing we could do...”

The Kleins. The Kleins are dead too. I don’t even ask.

My whole body is numb. I don’t feel my arm reach out to steady Mevrouw Dreyer; I don’t feel hers in my grip. I don’t feel the sound rippling up through my throat as I speak: “They’ll come looking for you. You need to dive under. I’ll get in touch with my contacts in the resistance, someone will know of a place for you. You can stay here until then. Upstairs, come on. Come on.”

I get her into the attic with nudges and pulls that she barely feels, coaxing that she probably doesn’t hear above her sobs. Jetta looks up from her puzzle and stares, instinctively petrified. “It’s all right,” I assure her, which is what I say no matter what. Someday she may learn not to trust me. “Mevrouw Dreyer is going to be staying with us for a bit. You’ll have to share your bedroom, but it won’t be for long. And she is a very nice lady, but she’s not feeling well just now. So just go back to your puzzle, sweetheart.”

I ring up Willem, who's been back in touch with me directly since Geert was arrested. He works mainly with the LO now, and they're good at helping people dive under. Especially gentile adults, whom they can shepherd quickly from place to place, across borders if they have to, without the need for all the delicacies of child-placement.

"Shot?" Willem says, incredulous, as if anything ought to surprise us now. "But that doesn't make sense. Why would they shoot them instead of just arresting them?"

"Because they *can*," I snap. "Because the Allies are coming and they know it. Because the trains haven't run since the railway workers went on strike and they have no way of shipping people anywhere. Because they just can. Christ, Willem."

He says he'll get back to me as soon as he's found something.

I boil water for ersatz tea. I bring a cup of it upstairs to Mevrouw Dreyer, along with a handkerchief.

I can't stay with her. I don't belong anywhere near these sobs, these sounds of utter loss. I go back downstairs and sit in our library, in the armchair that was always Pappa's favorite. I light a cigarette, and then another, but I don't feel the fire in my veins. I see Mineer Klein with his ubiquitous cigar. Mevrouw Klein lighting the Sabbath candles.

I don't feel the tears on my cheeks, though eventually I see one of them slip off the edge of my chin, reflect the sunlight for an instant before it's gone.

How will I tell Hannah?

How long before Willem finds something?

How...?

Pappa, Pappa—A question with no words. No answer.

Chicago, October 1958

I don't get much of a salary at the tiny women's college where I've at last managed to snag a faculty position, but after months of being passed over by larger institutions—which balk at hiring women in general and matrons in particular—I'm in no position to complain. And I at least make enough that I can finally buy Radek something for his birthday that isn't purchased with his money.

I come into his study with the gift behind my back. He's working on arrangements for the next concert, but when I say, "I have something for you..." he gamely puts down his pen.

"This is more fanfare than usual."

"Well. I know how much you love Dvořák, and I've been through your collection enough times to notice that you were missing something. So..." I take the record, wrapped in tissue paper, out from behind my back.

"Verishka."—amused, warm.

Then he unwraps it. His eyes lock onto the case, on the swirling letters that spell out the opera's name—*Rusalka*—but I can tell he's seeing something else.

"What is it?" I blurt. "What's wrong?"

"Oh. Nothing. Nothing. This is lovely of you, Veer." I'm Veer now.

"You're not pleased," I say, because if I don't the words might ripen and fester inside me, become truer.

"It isn't that I—It is a lovely gift. And it is—it is one of his best works. But I—I can't—listen to it."

My chest is suddenly very heavy. It weighs more than the rest of me combined. I sink down onto the piano bench. “Why not?”

“I—I can’t explain.”

“I just—I want to understand, so I won’t do it again. Make a mistake like that.”

“You did not make a mistake.”

“Clearly I did.”

“No....”

“I wanted to give you something that would make you happy and instead I’ve upset you. I call that a mistake.”

A sigh, deep, the exhaled dust that gathers in the empty places. He sets the record on his desk, clasps his hands together between his knees, and looks at me. They all look at me. “There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Don’t say that. *Don’t* say that. How am I supposed...” I flail. Deep breath. “If I at least *knew* what things would do this, what things to avoid...”

“That would be impossible.” Now there’s a tiny hard kernel of frustration in his tone. “I’ve said this before. There are too many things. Sometimes they—they—disrupt—and sometimes they don’t. It depends on the day, on the light, on a thousand things. I can’t tell you, ‘Here are the things that will remind me, that I won’t be able to bear’—or even, even ‘Here are all the things about my life, about that life, so make certain we avoid all of them.’ I walked across streets, I ate carrots, I—it would be absurd, can you see? And every day there are things—my wife’s hair color—*birds*, my God, Adam loved birds, that was one of the first words he learned, *vogel*—I don’t go into a tailspin every time I see a bird. Do you see?”

He called Emilie his wife. As she was, of course. But then who is he talking to now?

“It isn’t anything you can anticipate. Or change. Verishka. Do you understand?”

Verishka again.

I gesture at the record. “This isn’t like that.”

“This is—I should have mentioned this before. There is nothing else like this. I promise.”

“Don’t,” I say, and for the first time in years I know, as I speak, that I am being cruel. I am speaking with the hope of hurting him. “Don’t promise. I won’t believe you if you do.”

He lowers his head and raises his clasped hands until they meet, forcefully, knuckles against forehead.

For one dead instant there is nothing to say.

Then I slide off the piano bench and get down on my knees beside him and wrap my arms around his bowed head. He disengages one hand from the other, reaches up and around, and curls his fingers over my forearm. Grips so tightly that he must fingerprint the bone.

There is still nothing to say, but for the moment that frightens me less.

Amsterdam, October 1944

Another raid. This time no one called to warn us.

I suppose something happened to our man at Gestapo headquarters. He got transferred, he got caught, he got a cold.

Moeder and I have been sitting quietly in the library while they ransack the house, room by room. They’ve been at it for hours. I suppose it takes longer to conduct night raids now that they’ve shut off everyone’s electricity; they have to go from room to room with torches, relying on only a beam of light at a time.

That's the only reason I can breathe tonight. In the dark they won't see that there's no dust clinging to the toys and storybooks and scribbled drawings in the attic. They'll see nothing to distinguish them from the trunks full of Moeder's old party clothes and Pappa's law tracts. They'll see nothing unusual about the empty cupboard.

As long as they also don't *hear* anything. Jetta's been sick all week and I've been praying she doesn't cough. She knows to take long slow sips from her thermos of water whenever she feels a scratch at her throat, and to make the best possible use of a thick pillow if she absolutely can't keep it in. She's a bright girl, small as she is. After a year in my attic she knows how to survive better than I know what to tell her.

But the Germans are at least as interested in wrecking our furnishings as they are in finding Jews. They're quite thorough about that. Not a single book has been left on its shelf, not a single kitchen utensil will be fit for use again without first being washed. We should take the pictures off the walls, save them the trouble of knocking them down. What Jew can hide behind a fifty-centimeter-square Vermeer print?

At last they finish and file out. One of them actually nods to us and says, "Sorry to trouble you," in German. I look at him blankly as if I don't understand a word he says, which isn't far from the truth. The Dutch policeman who's with them doesn't bother with pleasantries. I shut the door on his heel.

"Don't worry about cleaning up now," says Moeder. "We'll do it in the morning. Let's go to bed, Veer."

"You go on. I'll wait up awhile. I want to check on Jetta."

"Don't let her out of the cupboard yet, in case the search party comes back."

We both know that the Germans tend to do this—leave, and then return an hour later—hoping to catch people after they’ve left their guard down. “I won’t,” I assure her. “Good night.”

I spend an hour and a half straightening the house—haphazardly, without any of the strategic efficiency Moeder would employ—and then I go upstairs.

She may very well have slept through the whole thing. But as soon as I pry open the false door of the cupboard and peer into her little nook, Jetta’s eyes flutter open. These are the eyes I couldn’t walk away from last year when I saw them in the crèche: too big for her face, too trusting for this attic. She lifts her head, the only part of her that’s visible under the quilts.

“Is it night still, Tante Veer?” she whispers. She always whispers, when she talks at all: not something I had to teach her.

“Yes, sweetheart. I just came to see how you were faring. Do you have enough water?”

She nods. “Can I come out in the morning?”

I’m drawing breath to say “yes” when I hear the door burst open downstairs.

“Shhh,” I hiss at Jetta, though she hardly needs the reminder. My hands are shaking so by the time I get the false wall back into place the footsteps—heavy but imprecise in their rhythm—have progressed to the top of the stairs.

I turn. It’s the Dutch policeman. Already on the landing. Did he see...?

At least he’s alone. An impulsive one, acting on a hunch rather than on orders? Or a glory hound like Ludo, hoping to net a catch all by himself? He sways slightly in place, and I fleetingly wonder if he spent the last hour and a half downing beers. I can manage this. I can manage one traitorous drunken Dutchman. Will. Will manage.

“Forget something?” I ask. The words catch on their way out of my mouth, which has gone dry as bone.

“Perhaps,” he says, with a slur that confirms my suspicions about the beer.

But he’s not looking at me. He’s looking over my shoulder at the wall.

Jetta starts to cough.

Chicago, April 1961

There’s no getting away from the trial. Even if we turn off the news, it’s in all the papers, people talk about it on the street. It seems so unreal—as if strangers were discussing the contents of your diary, or of your dreams. There it is out in the open air. There it is in black and white—Eichmann himself in his raised glass booth, and below him, at the front closer to the judges, all these people. So many people, talking about it.

Some of them weep and have to be given tissues. Some constantly sip from glasses of water. But they talk. In whatever language they can muster they *talk*: to one of the men who orchestrated their suffering, to the judges, to the world of cameras. Surely, surely they talked to their families first.

For the third or fourth night in a row I’m riveted to the sofa, legs tucked up beneath me, staring at these people. Radek comes home late from his rehearsal, takes one look at the television, and says—the first words out of his mouth—“For God’s sake, Veer, not again.”

“What do you mean, not again?” I hate what’s happening to my voice but I don’t bother to temper it. “How often does a top-ranking Nazi stand trial in Israel?”

“Every day for the next month at least. Haven’t you got anything to read?”

I stab out my cigarette so forcefully that little embers, still sparking with life, fly up out of the ashtray. “I’m not watching it for *entertainment*. I could be doing any number of other things. Grading term papers for instance. But I watch this because I think it’s important.”

He's taken off his coat and is pulling one of his too-many sweaters over his head, so what he says next is muffled.

"What was that?"

"A show trial," he repeats, once free of the sweater.

"Does that make it less important? Does that make what these people have to say any less important? Look at them, Radek. Baring their souls—"

"Yes, and much good it does anyone."

"It might do *them* some good. How would you know?"

"I find it cheap." He leaves his coat and sweater draped over the back of the armchair, as he does every night, and walks toward his study.

"Why?" I throw after him. "Why is it cheap that these people can actually talk about what's happened to them, instead of letting it eat them up inside for the rest of their lives?"

He whips around, but then waits a moment before answering. Every wrinkle in his face—there are a fair number now; he's fifty-three—suddenly seems carved of stone.

"Don't comment," he says quietly, "on things you don't understand."

And there it is, in the open, in black and white.

I'm on my feet. Shaking worse than I have in almost two decades. "Oh? Then what should I comment on? Literature and—and fashion, and what to have for dinner tomorrow? Can't comment on what the children are doing, can I, because we haven't got any—my fault, I know—but it's just as well, really, because how could you bear it? How could you endure living children? Still, I can let it be my fault—I can let everything be my fault—it's my fault I can't be more domestically minded, hounding you to get some new household appliance, instead of asking you to share some of who you are. I'm sure Emilie would've done better. But then if you

had Emilie you wouldn't be like this, would you? Not so much like this—you'd have fewer people locked up inside of you—"

Oh, what have I done to his face—clawed it with jagged nails, poured hot oil on it? What have I done? "No more of this. *No more of this, Vera.*"

I'm shaking so hard my teeth are knocking together. "You say that but there's no such thing. There's no such thing as *no more* of it. All these years I've been so careful, I've tried so hard to respect, to not press—but it's there every time you turn around. And me too. For me too, Radek. And in a way it's worse for me because—"

"Worse *for you*?" I think he might strike me if he were close enough.

"No, I didn't mean that, no, not worse, but—Anytime *I* think of the war—of Jetta, of Geert, of what I did or didn't do or should've done, of what I lost—every time it comes back to me I think, but this is nothing, nothing compared to—and I don't even know what it is I'm comparing it to."

He's collected himself a bit. His anger is controlled now, deliberate. "I can't help it," he says—almost growls it—with savage precision, "if you insist on this—this..."—for a moment I wonder if he'll actually take out his thesaurus, but then he lights upon the words—"this dramatic *humility*. Not a hero, you say, never a hero, you did so little, everything about you is so unremarkable you say—well then, fine, tell yourself that, but then don't throw it in my face as if *I'm* responsible for your feeling that way—"

"I'm not—"

"You are! Mourn your own dead! There! I freely give you permission! But leave mine alone!"

"How can I? How can I, Radek? They won't leave me alone."

“And you think it would help if I did this?” A violent gesture toward the television. “You think it would help either of us, if I carved myself up on a platter for your inspection?”

“Not *inspection*. Christ, Radek. Just—”

“What then? Is this an experiment? Try it, see what happens? I know what happens. I know.”

“I just—I just want to be able to understand—”

“You *can't* understand! *You—can't—ever—under—stand!*”

That voice could shatter glass. I think it has, somewhere inside me. “Then what do you want of me?” Less than a whisper.

For a long time he doesn't reply. He looks at the floor. Then, in something like the voice I know: “Just. Just that you *be* here.”

A tendril of dying smoke floats up from the cigarette in the ashtray, exhaling its scent into the air.

Someone on the television is talking in German, and someone else is mangling it into English. I don't understand a word of it.

“I didn't marry you,” I say, “just to *be* here.”

Silence. Years, lifetimes.

“I've told you everything,” I say, through a stranglehold. “Everything. No matter how painful. And if it is—misplaced humility—for me to excuse you not doing the same—then don't I have a *right*? Don't I have a right to you?”

“You have as much as I can ever give. If that is not enough for you then—”

“Then what? What should I be doing, Radek? Tiptoeing round for the rest of our lives? Never knowing when some memory will seize you out of nowhere and I won't be able to reach

you. And retreating more and more, to keep from intruding, until we don't even know each other at all. Is that it? Is that where we end up?"

A long, hollow sigh. He turns and walks into his study. Shuts the door.

I stand, shaking. Deep breaths. All right, shallow breaths will do. There.

I turn off the television. I go to the cupboard, shift his coat and sweater onto their own respective hangers, settle them in amongst the other coats. I take out my light spring jacket, put it on, find my purse, find the door.

I walk. I breathe. If I cry I don't feel it.

Amsterdam, October 1944

The policeman brushes past me, opens the cupboard, starts running his hands along its false wooden back. I can't move. Jetta is still coughing.

Do something.

On my knees. Find the floorboard. Fingers scrabble for a hold, hook into the gap between the boards, pull, pull, and it's out, and there's the revolver where I left it.

"Just a minute, little one," purrs the policeman. "I'll have you out of there in no time..."

I have the revolver—I don't remember Geert's instructions for firing it—doesn't matter—turn, point—he gave it to me loaded—hold it, stop the goddamn shaking long enough to hold it up—pull...

It's deafening. I've heard gunshots before but never this close, I never imagined the sound could get inside your head like that. It opens up two gaping cavities deep in my eardrums.

And it misses.

He whirls around—Angry? Surprised?

Again. This time I don't miss.

Chicago, April 1961

I walk.

I wander along the waterfront until it gets too dark and cold. From there I drift into the thick of the city, to the shelter of abundant street lights. The longer I walk the colder it gets.

There are people I could go to. Hannah and Kurt, up in Wilmette. Peggy Enright. A few of the women I work with at the college. The wives of two or three of Radek's musician friends. Apart from Hannah I don't seriously consider any of them. They're the sort of people one does favors for and makes a point to meet for coffee—not the sort who bear your burdens for you, who open their doors for you when scandal and heartbreak are nipping at your heels. And Hannah—my dear well-meaning Hannah—will only be able to say “I warned you...” I know she will.

Where did I go last time? I could almost laugh at the thought, it makes me seem so cheap: the last time I walked out on a husband. As if I do it chronically. Anyway I remember: I walked round Winnipeg until I found an apartment building with a vacancy, and I took it on the spot. Came back for my belongings later. Left a note: cowardly but efficient. But that was summer and daylight in Winnipeg ten years ago and remembering does me no practical good now.

Somehow I end up at the train station on Randolph Street. I get on a train and when the conductor comes to my seat I buy a ticket for the end of the line—somewhere in Michigan. No, Indiana, but it's called Michigan City, probably just to confuse foreigners who end up there by mistake. I sit with my head leaning against the window, cheek to cheek with my reflection, vivid against the darkness outside.

How long has it been since I've ridden a train? I took one from Winnipeg, didn't I, when I first moved to Chicago? And since then—never, for Radek's sake. Odd, the things one discovers one has missed. This particular kind of motion, of momentum, that you can trust to continue if you doze or read or tend to a fussing child. This particular kind of rest—what seemed like rest, to me, in those war years—when all you have to do is sit, and wait to be taken where you're going.

I get off the train a few hours later and grope my way to a bench on the open-air platform. I sit. I breathe. I smoke every cigarette from the pack in my purse by the time dawn comes.

It's Saturday. A convenient day to go rogue. No classes to miss. Nothing for which I'm accountable.

I still could go to Wilmette. Or wander round the city until something leaps out at me as a place I could—not live, living is too much to ask—but *stay*, for awhile.

There are things I can do. And things I can't.

Some keys are simply lost.

I get on the first train back to Chicago. The rocking of the car along the tracks lulls me to sleep—though every time we grind to a stop, I wake with a jolt and several outdated instincts: *Where's the child? Are there any Germans? Who's watching?* All jumbled together for an instant in my mind and then, gratefully, released. And then the tightening around what remains.

Amsterdam, October 1944

It's Moeder who thinks to contact Willem. After she comes running up to the attic, the first thing she does is to check that the policeman is dead, the second is to get Jetta downstairs—

her sobs soothed to a murmur against Moeder's shoulder—and the third is to ask me how she can reach “that Segher boy.”

I sit on the floor of the attic with the empty revolver in my hand, staring at nothing in particular. The body is there in front of me, limbs splayed, eyes open, and that may be what I'm staring at but it doesn't necessarily feel that way. It's odd: I only remember firing twice. But I must've put four more bullets in him because the cartridge, when I check it, is spent. And there's so much blood, dry and dark now on his uniform, on the floor all round him. It was absurdly bright at first. Like the paint that actors use in plays. I remember thinking some local production of Julius Caesar was ridiculous because the blood was such an unbelievably vivid shade of red. But blood actually does look like that, before it adjusts to the open air.

“He's coming first thing in the morning.” Moeder's back. “He's going to bring one of his fellows from the resistance—an undertaker.”

Incredible convenience, the sorts of people who do this. Carpenters. Bakers. Undertakers. Girls with bicycles.

“Do you think anyone heard the shots?” I ask.

“I'm sure plenty of people did. But no ordinary citizen's about to come running over here to investigate some gunshots after curfew. Or at any time of day for that matter. And if there'd been any other police or SS in the area they would've been here by now.” She stoops down and takes the revolver out of my hands. “Come downstairs. Have some coffee.”

“Jetta—”

“Is asleep in my room.”

“That's not safe. Leaving her out in the open.”

“No child can sleep properly in the same room as a corpse. Come downstairs, Veerke.”
Moeder’s never called me that before. It was Pappa’s nickname for me. When I have children I won’t wait to approach them until something like this happens.

“It’s such a mess,” I say. His eyes are still open.

“I’ll mop the floor. It’ll wash out. It looks worse than it is.”

Only my mother could say that about a dead man.

“He wasn’t very old.”

“No,” she agrees, then adds, “You did what you had to do.”

I’m trying to remember who it was, all those years ago, who warned me that I was only setting myself up to destroy more lives. One of my classmates at the kweekschool. Cornelia I think. Asking me what made one life more valuable than another, what made one worth saving and another worth losing. Did I have an answer for her then?

“Come on, Veerke: up.”

Well before dawn Willem arrives with a man carrying a coffin.

“How are you going to bury him?” I ask.

“This coffin’s for somebody else,” the undertaker friend explains matter-of-factly. “Old fellow getting buried today. It’ll just be a bit crowded.”⁹

Moeder leads the undertaker and the coffin upstairs, asking him if he knows any tricks for removing bloodstains from wood. Willem stays in the kitchen, sits down across the table from me. He took quite a risk coming here, when he himself ought to be in hiding. But now that he’s here there’s no use for him: even I see that.

“Do you think that old man’s family will mind?” I ask him.

“Nobody’s going to tell them.”

“Oh.” I look down at the dregs of chicory in my mug. “I hope they would’ve understood, if they’d known.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He reaches across the table and places his hand over mine. How is it possible that I still feel a little jolt in my veins, a rush of warmth to my face, from the pressure of his fingers? At a time like this. What is wrong with me? You don’t kill a man and then blush because a boy who happened to kiss you once is trying to comfort you. It’s absurd—worse than absurd.

I snatch my hand away.

He clears his throat. “I’ll see what I can do about a new address for the child....”

“We’re keeping her,” I say.

“That’s not a good idea.”

“No. It never was.”

“You really shouldn’t be harboring anyone at this stage.”

Instead of answering, I get up from the table to go find a cigarette. His abandoned hand clenches into a fist.

“Vera. Listen to me. I don’t want you getting hurt because you insist on being stupid.”

I can’t think of the last time he seemed genuinely upset about anything. I wonder if it’s just the general strain, or if it’s me. If he’s worried about me professionally, as a colleague who’s slipping up, or—or what? Why do I still let questions like this matter? “A few years late to start worrying about that, isn’t it?”

Now for that cigarette.

Chicago, April 1961

He's asleep at the kitchen table, facing toward the door, his head propped up by both hands. When I set down my purse, he jerks upright, bleary, haunted. In the split second it takes for him to blink away his dreams, I see what I've done to him reflected in his eyes.

He knows I've left one husband already. And that it isn't even among the hardest things I've done. He knows I have nothing to tether me here but him. He knows that if he pushes me away there will never be anyone else hopeful enough, reckless enough, to come near. He's so frightened.

Which is what I hoped would happen, isn't it? That he'd be frightened, desperate, at the realization that he could lose me too. That I am not merely a consolation, a stopgap: *He could lose me too*. What profound selfishness, what cruelty, to wish that on him. And what sort of love can that possibly be? What sort of Frankenstein's monster, backboned with my possessiveness and laced all through with ligaments of his fear?

I still have my coat on. He has two livid indentations on his forehead from where the heels of his hands dug into it. His arms lie sprawled awkwardly across the table now, the hands palm-up and open, limp as the limbs of a corpse.

Neither of us is fully awake. I realize, only now, that I never thought of anything to say.

"I wish," he ventures, his voice hoarse from disuse, "I wish I knew—how to ask for your forgiveness."

Forgiveness: for something he can't help. Something I can't help. What an impasse I've brought us to.

He raises one hand to comb roughly through his graying hair. He stands up, as if to come toward me, but then seems to think better of it. Hovers, embarrassed to sit down again. "I've been trying to think—all night—trying to find the right words."

I let out a harsh puff of breath, a graceless surrender, and spread my arms for a moment, let them flail fleetingly and then drop. “There *are* no right words.”

“I know.” So helpless.

I step forward—two steps, three, four—and close most of the distance between us. I leave just enough space—not even a full step’s worth—to make an embrace impractical. My arms are crossed over my ribs, his dangling uncertain at his sides. “But,” I say slowly, deciding as I go, “there are also no *wrong* words. I just. Need you. To talk to me.”

“I know. I’ll try. I’ll try, Verishka.” He takes the last half-step.

Amsterdam, January 1945

The rubber from my tires has long since been confiscated by the Germans, so I cycle to the Schermers’ farm on the bare skeletons of my wheels. I can actually be grateful for the frozen ground—less mud, no puddles, no soft sinking dirt to slow the laborious rotations of the metal.

It takes me four hours to get there, with a handful of Pappa’s family silver in my knapsack, and my lunch—half a tin of stale biscuits and our last black-market potato—churning in my stomach. At least the air is crisp and fresh. I’ll take that over the smell of boiling sugar beets pervading our house. I sometimes wonder what the pigs are eating now that every Dutch family north of the Rhine has started using their fodder to make ersatz sugar. Mainly, though, I wonder how I’m going to keep my mother and Jetta and myself alive, without heat or electricity or real food, until the Allies finally reach us.

By no means do I have the road all to myself. There are others trickling northward on similar bartering errands—some traveling on foot with handcarts, others ricketing along on rubber-less bicycle tires like me. Like me, they must be taking family valuables—jewelry,

linen—to trade for whatever food the farmers will part with. People are starving left and right all over west Holland, but especially in Amsterdam. They’ve taken to eating cats. And to risking their lives for an armful of vegetables. Even if ration coupons could get us anything at this point, my supplier in Friesland has been cut off since September, when the railway strike shut down all the trains. I have three mouths to feed and sugar beets only go so far.

By the time the Schermers’ farm is in sight, my hands are swollen inside my gloves and I’ve lost the feeling in my feet. What a curious experience, to be pedaling away steadily, see the ground moving beneath you and the sky rolling past above you, and yet to have no sensory connection to the part of you that makes it happen.

There’s already a crowd of Amsterdammers gathered around Mineer Schermer. I knew I should’ve left earlier, but Jetta had a fever—malnutrition breeds disease, how many times has Moeder said that?—and I didn’t want to leave her until she was doing better. Now I have to wait my turn while the earlier arrivals haggle with Mineer Schermer for vegetables.

It’s been cloudy all day but now the halfhearted sun is dwindling away. Still, it’s not much colder out here than it is inside our house. Since the Germans shut off the heat we’ve been depending on a tiny fire inside an old coffee tin—stove and heat source, both. I keep Jetta swaddled in our spare blankets, and her dexterous little hands submerged in several pairs of my old gloves, day and night. The earthenware gin bottles that we use as hot water bottles help a bit too; I wish I’d thought to tuck one inside my coat before I set out this afternoon.

It’s nearly full dark by the time it’s my turn. In exchange for my silverware, Mineer Schermer gives me a sack of beans and enough potatoes to fill my knapsack. It’ll have to do.

“Staying the night?” he asks, as he’s asked the last half-dozen people he dealt with. They all said yes, and he told them all the same thing he tells me: “Our house is full, but there’s room

in the barn.” He doesn’t charge the usual guilder and a half, which surprises me. I don’t know the family—I only heard that they own three farms and don’t shy from black market customers like us. I expected the same sort of business transaction I’ve been having with other farmers in the area: the sort where they get as much as they can out of you.

“Thank you,” I say. “The barn will be fine.”

There must be at least twenty of us—beggars all, in appearance and manner. Some people walked here with no shoes; they could probably take fresh slabs of meat home with them, strapped to the ice blocks that used to be their feet. I should pity them—or feel, at least, some sort of comradeship. But all I can think is that someday they will say, “See, we *all* suffered. Us too.” As if the Kleins were no different. And what will I be able to say to them, really? Nothing, if we all starve before the Allies get here.

Even if it weren’t so crowded I’d know better than to smoke inside a building full of hay. So after I’ve staked out my spot, I venture back out into the open air for a few more minutes.

Mineer Schermer materializes beside me, a bulk of shadows, his craggy face illuminated only by a few careless brushstrokes of light from my cigarette. “Sorry we can’t do much for your comfort,” he says. “I’d offer spare blankets if we had them, but...”

“No bother.” I take a long drag of white-hot energy. “We’ll all manage, I’m sure. It feels a bit Christ-like, even. No room at the inn, and such.”

He grunts, whether in amusement or disapproval I can’t tell. “Catholic?”

“No. Reformed, or raised that way at least. I’m not much of a believer, really.”

“Ah. My people are Calvinists.” Oh dear. I’ve never heard of a Calvinist who doesn’t have some version of “strict” tacked on as a descriptor of his religious convictions. Even Mevrouw van der Molen, who broke with her roots when she went to university, carries that

severe, unrelenting faith about with her—wears it on her sleeve, I might've said once, before that phrase rang too true.

“Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean any disrespect.”

“That's all right. The world has room for all sorts.”

Now it's my turn to grunt. “I'm not so sure it does.”

“Well. This farm does.” Something in his tone alerts me; I've become so attuned, now, to the particular ratio of caution to deliberateness that infuses such statements of secret purpose. He's harboring onderduikers. Probably too many for either comfort or safety. That's why his house is too full for the rest of us.

“Not *enough* room,” I can't forbear to point out.

The shadows on his face shift; he might, just briefly, have smiled. “No. But more than you'd think.”

Chicago, April 1961

We sit on the sofa, with a child-sized space between us, and he talks.

There's no order to it, no semblance even of narrative, only memories strung together, one bleeding into the next, connected by something outside of time and sense.

All day, he talks. It occurs to me once or twice that we should probably eat something, but neither of us ever feels hungry. He sips a glass of water that I refill for him at least fifty times. He doesn't stop. If he does he'll never be able to go back to it again.

He gives me everything he can think of, in whatever order it arises. Sometimes he speaks so quickly I can barely keep pace with his train of thought. Sometimes he has to fight, through tears, for every word. Sometimes—this is the oddest—the memories are of good things, happy

moments, that he actually enjoys reliving, even sandwiched as they are between the reasons he never spoke of them before.

He met Emilie in 1930, when he was twenty-two and she was nineteen, and I was seven and far away. She was the younger sister of one of his friends—Walter, an aspiring doctor who looked with affectionate bewilderment on Radek’s decision to enroll at the Prague Conservatory. Still, Walter agreed to go to the opera with Radek and some of Radek’s more musically-inclined friends. He brought along his sister on a whim, and right away she and Radek got on famously. She wasn’t pretty; she was plain and not the least bit self-conscious about it. She wasn’t sophisticated; her taste, in everything from art to literature, tended toward simple beauty, or beautiful simplicity, however one preferred to put it. She was sprightly and frank and funny and fearless. The opera they saw that night—or rather, went to, because neither of them took much note of the performance—was *Rusalka*.

He gives me this, and a hundred other shards of Emilie, and of the children, and of the six lost siblings, and of Walter who was as close as a brother, and of his parents and his friends, and of selections and marches and long hours of labor in brutal weather with hardly any clothes. He gives me the orchestra performance that he was forced to put on, during his last day at Terezín, for the benefit of a German film crew that was making a sham documentary called *Hitler Gave the Jews a City*.¹⁰ He gives me the days spent in the cattle car on the way to Auschwitz, and the arrival on the train platform in the dead of night, and the shouted instructions—“women and children over here, men over here”—and his last words to them, which he knew, even then, were lies: “It’s all right, go ahead, it’s all right, I’ll see you in a bit...”

He gives me the two years he spent, after the war, waiting for the official confirmation that they were dead. He gives me what *he* was given in the meantime, by a friend of Emilie’s

whom he ran into at the DP camp: this woman's memory of watching all three of them straggle off in the line bound for the gas chambers, less than half an hour after the train pulled into Auschwitz.

I just listen.

Finally he stops, and drains yet another glass of water with an air of finality. "Enough, Verishka," he says, quietly but steadily. "Let that be enough."

He holds out his hand, palm up. I take it. "Fresh air," I suggest.

"Yes. And the sun is setting."

We go out on the balcony. Glorious colors, this evening. He stands behind me, arms linked around my wrist, chin touching the back of my head. I wonder what his face looks like just now, but I don't twist around to see it.

"Here is one thing," he says after awhile. "I had never thought of this. I don't know why. But you know—the burden, the indescribable burden of being—the only one left—who remembers them—who *feels* that they have been in the world: That is—less, now. I never meant to force it on you. Though there was really no avoiding it entirely, I know. And you would've tried to do it anyway. So that—that does help. They do not exist in my mind alone, anymore. Thank you for that, Verishka."

I never thought of it that way either. But I realize he's quite right. They've migrated over to me, to join the Kleins and Geert and all those children who walked by me still singing of swans. Is that what Radek really meant all those years ago, when he told me that he always hears music in his head? Did he only mean the steady threnody of names that unfolds with his steps?

But no. No: he meant just what he said. He hears music.

“For everything,” he adds now. It takes me a moment to recognize this as an extension of his thanks.

“Nonsense, my love,” I say.

Amsterdam, June 1945

“I made you a new drawing,” Jetta says as soon as I reach the top of the stairs. She’s learning, slowly, to speak at a normal volume. “It’s everyone from yesterday’s story. That’s Perseus and that’s Anda—Anda—”

“Andromeda,” I say.

“Yes. And Zeus and Danae and the evil king. And that’s the sea monster.”

“That’s wonderful. Especially the sea monster.” She really is quite a marvelous artist for an eight-year-old. Her skill probably comes, partly, from having so little else to do for two years. “Thank you, sweetheart. Now how would you like to go outside today?”

Her face closes up, as it does every time I make this suggestion. “That’s all right. I’d rather stay here.”

“But it’s a glorious sunny day, and I have so many outdoor toys you can play with.”

She shakes her head. “I’d rather stay here.”

“Jetta. Sweetheart. You *can’t* stay up here forever. It’s safe outside now. I promise.” Not for the first time, I’m aware that my promises may have lost their currency. Yes, the war is over, and yes, there are enough Canadian soldiers for every Dutch girl who wants one—me being one of the very few who doesn’t—and yes, it is a glorious sunny day. Anything beyond that is tenuous at best, a willful lie at worst. Like telling her that we’ll have enough to eat again soon.

And that her parents—who are barely more than words to her now anyway—might be among the trickle of “displaced persons” making their way back from the camps.

“*Why can’t I stay here?*” Jetta asks plaintively. She’s starting to tremble, as she never trembled when I locked her in the cupboard. “It’s nice here.”

I suppose it’s something that she can still think so even though the bloodstains never completely came out of the floor.

“It’s nice outside too. It’s really lovely outside. And you’re a growing girl and you need exercise and fresh air and sun.” She shakes her head. She’s so skinny that a single sob racks her whole body like a bolt of lightning.

My hands are shaking too; I haven’t had my mid-afternoon cigarette. I hold them out to her and let her see them, let her see that that’s all right. “Come on. I’ll be right there with you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

There’s no reason for her to trust me. I’ve barely kept her fed and almost gotten her killed. I make promises wantonly. My hands have never really stopped shaking. But today she takes them anyway.

Wilmette, August 1962

Anyone else on this beach, watching us from a distance, probably thinks Radek looks ridiculous. Dressed for a casual business meeting, he lounges on our side of the industrial-sized blanket that Hannah brought in her monstrous basket of supplies. The umbrella that Kurt produced from their trunk and carried out to the shoreline in the crook of his arm now looms over us all, fondly imagining that it can block the sun’s heat as well as its brightness. But Radek seems inexplicably comfortable in his slacks and button-down shirt—which, to be fair, is mostly

unbuttoned now, though the cuffs remain securely in place at his wrists. He must be getting more of the lake breeze than I am, despite the fact that his head is less than half a meter to the right of my crossed legs.

He's dutifully admiring the handful of shells Naomi has brought back from her excavation of the surrounding sand. The boys are down at the shoreline with their father, their horseplay only vaguely observed by Hannah, who's airing potential names for the unborn, unexpected, addition.

"I think Judith if it's a girl. And David if it's a boy."

"Why not Vera?" suggests Radek, momentarily distracted from Naomi's collection. "For a girl, obviously."

"I can't name her after a living person," says Hannah, with the particular brand of offense she uses on those who disregard Jewish tradition.

"Imagine all the confusion there'd be at gatherings," I add. "Besides it has to be something that'll have a nice ring to it at her bat mitzvah."

"What do you think, Naominka?" Radek inquires of the soon-to-be-ousted youngest child.

"Judith isn't very pretty," she says.

"It has a good story behind it, though. Do you know it?"

She shakes her head, eager as always for one of Uncle Radek's stories.

"She's too young for that one," Hannah intervenes.

"If *she's* too young for it, how on earth will the baby manage?"

"I want to hear the story!" whines Naomi. It'll be just as well for her to be usurped from her reign as the object of everyone's doting attention. She's verging on spoiled.

“When you are older,” says Radek—aware, no doubt, that a heroine who beheads her would-be seducer is not after all an appropriate role model for a ten-year-old. “And in the meantime, a different story. Do you know where *your* name comes from, Naominka?”

Another shake of the head.

“Well, once, a long time ago, there was a woman named Naomi, and she was called that because it means ‘cheerful’ and she was always smiling. But then one day her husband and her sons all died, and this made her very sad. So she stopped smiling and told everyone that she was changing her name to Mara, because that means ‘bitterness.’ But one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, stayed with her and helped her, and together they made a new life for themselves and became happy again. So we still know her as Naomi, not as Mara. And you are named after her.”

“And after my mother,” murmurs Hannah. The only subject that can ever mute her voice. I squeeze her hand briefly. In a way, one more child is one more reminder. Which is why, I suppose, I’ve managed to make peace with my own infertility. Adam would be twenty-five, Darina twenty-two. Ernst and Frits and Hendrik and Daniel would all be in their twenties. And Henriette, my little Jetta, is a fine flourishing young woman of twenty-seven, somewhere in Israel.

I never could’ve chosen a name for one of my own.

“Ruth is pretty,” says Naomi. No accounting for this child’s taste.

“There’s a thought,” says Radek. He stretches out prone on the blanket and rests his head in my lap. “You could call her Ruth, Hannah. Ruth Vera Feldman, *that* has a fine ring to it.”

“Stop,” I scold, even as I trail my fingers through his hair—nearly all gray now, and starting to thin out. The curls are damp with sweat, the tips of his ears sunburnt. He smiles up at me, an unrepentant teasing smile, a full smile. “Just wait,” I say, “after all this it’ll be a boy.”

This will be a moment I forget. Nobody stores away such moments, especially if they're common. You remember the time a hundred dollars are stolen from your wallet but not the time you find a penny on the sidewalk. Until someday perhaps when you're destitute, and you think suddenly of all those pennies that you could've saved, enough to fill a thousand jars, enough to sustain you in your poverty. For some reason—the thought of Hannah's parents, the thought of Hannah's child—I mentally scoop this one up and hold it in the light. The weight of my husband's head in my lap, the stiff fragile silver threads that slide between my fingers, and a smile. This is all I need.

“Vera isn't very pretty,” says Naomi reflectively.

“As a name, you mean,” specifies my gallant Radek.

“Does it have a good story, though?”

“Oh yes,” he says. “But that is also for when you are older.”

Amsterdam, September 1945

“I've come for my daughter,” says the pale, emaciated woman on my doorstep.

“You're Mevrouw Bleich? Oh, I'm so glad”—so glad you're alive, so glad my Jetta is not an orphan—“so glad my message got to you. Please come in.” I've rehearsed this often, just in case, but not the way I lay the foundations of my days as I hope to live them; more in the way you'd prepare for a possible disaster. Not because you want it to happen but so that you won't panic if it does.

She seems to have forgotten how to sit. She stares at the chair I offer her as if it might be a wild animal in disguise.

“Would you like any tea, or coffee, or...”

“No. Where’s my daughter?”

“Jetta’s just down the block, playing...”

“Playing with whom?”

“Just some neighborhood children. I’ll run and get her—”

“You let her just play with children? Any children? How did you keep her alive?”

“Mevrouw,” I say—gently, I think—“the war is over. She’s quite safe. But she may not remember you very well. I’ve explained to her that she has parents who love her and that they’ll come back to her if they can, but this may be hard for her. I’ll just run down the street and get her now, and I’ll explain to her on the way back. Make yourself comfortable here, I’ll just be a few minutes...”

Step. Step. Step. Selfish girl: You knew from the minute you took her that you would lose her, one way or another. This is the best possible way for you to lose her.

Jetta is holding one end of a skipping rope and chanting a song, along with the other girls gathered round, to keep the rhythm.

White swans, black swans,

Will you sail to England with me?

England is locked, the key is broken.

Is there no key-maker in the land who can fix the key?

Come forward, come forward,

The ones who are behind will be the first.

That’s not the version I remember but I rather like it. I call to Jetta, and she comes at once, hastily tossing a wave over her shoulder to the others. “Is it dinner already, Tante Veer?”

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Just breathe.

Chicago, 1987-1988

Nightmares. What a weak word.

I can't say for certain when I start to notice them. Or if they've been happening all along and he's never told me and I only know about them now because they're worse. Because I can't possibly sleep through them. He thrashes around so much that I'm convinced he would work up a sweat even if the dreams themselves didn't unleash a flood of perspiration.

Sometimes he can't breathe. I find myself wondering whether he'd suffocate if I weren't here to wake him.

But sometimes I can't wake him. Sometimes I shake him and call out and it doesn't matter. I have to lie there holding him, talking to him, until finally he comes out of it on his own.

And sometimes he screams. Her name. All their names but mostly hers. Over and over and over and over and over and there is nothing I can do.

At first he won't go to the doctor. "Just to help you sleep better," I say, but soon he is hardly sleeping at all. He's writing his symphony.

Suddenly he wants to compose. Wants? Is compelled. His study is a blizzard of paper, he can never find any of his pens amidst the clutter, but he always remembers where he left off.

When he's not working—sometimes even when he is—he plays the recording of *Rusalka*, untouched for thirty years. I memorize it by proxy, hearing it through the door of his study. My Czech is nonexistent, but the album included a little booklet with the English translation of the libretto, which I swipe one morning while bringing Radek his coffee.

I know you are nothing but magic

And will fade away

And be dispersed in the rolling mists—

But while there is still time left to us

Do not flee...

I begin to wonder if I should retire. I've done my thirty years; I'm sixty-five. I could. But when I bring it up, he says, "What for? You'd be bored to death, here at home, with only me doddering around. And then you'd start cooking all the time and feeding me too much, or take up knitting or adopt stray cats or some other garish thing that old people do."

Old people. He's nearly eighty—retired himself for almost five years, though he often takes advantage of his successor's standing invitation to drop by Orchestra Hall whenever it suits him. But these days he usually only goes if I can join him; it's too long a walk, and with city traffic being what it is, we both trust my driving more.

I always expected that he would fade first. But not like this. What else, if not like this? It seems so inevitable now. But we never expect the inevitable, do we?

It takes him seven months to finish. Only months, his former colleagues marvel, when they come round for dinner and want to hear all about it. So many months, I think. So many months without sleep.

One day, soon after he's given me the pages to copy and mail off to his agent, he plays me fragments of it on our piano, warning me that it will sound different with all the proper instruments. "This is Darina's," he says, for a lilting light-footed movement that will have woodwinds and little interjections of the triangle. And "This is Adam's," almost all for the clarinet, mournful and meandering, solemn without knowing why. And "Here is Emilie." A melody on tiptoes, almost holding its breath, and then deepening into a richer strain, swelling and soaring under the auspices of the imaginary orchestra—then drifting back down, feather-like, to

the final wistful notes, which each instrument will sustain at whisper-pitch until the musicians run out of breath. Here is Emilie at last.

A week later I come home from the college at the end of the day to find that he's ransacked the apartment—upended furniture, thrown things, broken some of the things he threw—and doesn't remember doing any of it.

We go to the doctor. We get medicine. And another doctor. Different medicine. Another. More. Sleeping medication, antidepressants, antipsychotics.

That's when everything goes silent. He's groggy and lethargic much of the time. Or he's wandering in his head.

He still listens to *Rusalka*, though. Over and over again.

By all that lives on in my dead heart,

I entreat both heaven and earth,

God and all the devils,

Speak to me. Tell me where you are.

Amsterdam, 1945-1948

Hannah isn't coming back to Amsterdam. In her latest letter from Heerlen, from the hospitable little farmhouse where she ended up, she tells me she's going to the DP camps in Germany to look for members of her extended family. Not that she expects to find anyone. She thinks perhaps she can get some sort of job there, a secretarial position—God knows there must be unthinkable amounts of paperwork involved in sorting out the lives, past and future, of displaced persons. But I can tell that she has no real plan, other than to leave. She promises to keep writing and says that she'll be so sorry to miss my wedding.

I can't tell, from the letter, what she thinks about my marrying Willem. Does she consider it childish on my part—a schoolgirl's impulse, founded on a daydream that should've been discarded long ago? Or does she see that it actually makes perfect sense? The other men who were involved with the resistance are either already spoken for or too good for me. Anyone who *wasn't* involved with the resistance—even the Canadian soldiers who've made themselves so at home among Amsterdam's female population—wouldn't know what to make of me.

Willem decides not to go back to university. Instead he and some of his friends from the resistance set about raising money to buy a cinema. "Why?" I can't help asking. "Who feels like going to the cinema after what we've been through these last five years?"

"Say the last part of the sentence again," says Willem. "That's my answer."

"But why *that* cinema? The Nazis used that place to show propaganda films."

"Exactly. Now we're liberating it."

I don't really have much leverage to dispute with him. What am *I* doing with my time? Finishing up my teacher's training at last, and otherwise, pretending I know how to cook.

Mevrouw van der Molen has asked me to work with the *Commissie voor Oorlogspleegkinderen*, the government committee formed in August of '45 to deal with the Jewish war orphans: more than two thousand without surviving parents to claim them. Mevrouw van der Molen is in charge and she wants my help. But it occurs to me that it is really none of my business. Who am I to say where a child belongs, what a child's dead parents would've wanted, what sort of upbringing a child deserves? What right do I have to uproot a child from a home where he's been loved—or to deny a child the culture and religion of her ancestors? I'm just a girl with a bicycle.

The coward's way out, perhaps: Mevrouw van der Molen is disappointed in me, I can tell. But haven't I earned the luxury, by now, of doing nothing?

Not that I really want to be doing *nothing*. Willem's always working, or claiming that he's working. Moeder's brother, some English uncle I've never met, is in failing health and has managed to convince her to go live with him; I half-wonder if, all these years, she has only been waiting to be *asked* to take care of someone—if the failure was mine. Hannah is gone—still writing, but gone and not coming back. Our resistance colleagues—the ones who weren't shot, the ones who didn't die of disease or starvation in the camps—are scattered, and busy picking up their own debris. And I can't cook to save my life.

After I finally get my teaching accreditation, I start working at a kindergarten. But it's hard—once I've come to know them all, learned all their names, fretted and labored over their respective behaviors and literacy levels—to find that the year is over and they all move on to another teacher, never to be heard from again. It will be better, I think, when I have children of my own, whom I can keep.

Hannah writes that she's met an American soldier in the DP camp, a nice Jewish boy—of German extraction, no less!—and that she's going to marry him and go back to the states with him.

One day I pass Ludo on the street. I'm on my way home from the kindergarten and there he is, just strolling down the sidewalk, as if he belongs there. So ordinary. He sees me too: sees me staring, and I swear that's a smirk on his face. I lurch into the nearest shop and nearly vomit all over a baker's display of bread, the beautiful white bread of peace and supply lines. Nearly, but I hold it back.

That night I fume to Willem: “Why isn’t he in prison? Why didn’t anybody denounce him as a collaborator?”

“I’m sure someone did,” says Willem, with insulting patience. “But those people generally didn’t get very long sentences unless they’d done something really heinous.”

Willem’s cinema goes under after two years. He starts talking about Canada. His sister married a soldier from Manitoba and moved over there with him in the great war-bride emigration. This Canadian brother-in-law is some sort of builder with a family business. “Must be grand,” Willem says, reading Louisa’s letters, “a fresh start, an unspoiled country.”

“Neighbors who didn’t inform on you,” I add. “Buildings that didn’t...”

“Exactly.”

We move to Winnipeg in late ’48. This is the last thing of significance on which we agree.

Chicago, April 1990

He’s having one of his good days. I’m at my desk in the spare bedroom, which doubles as my office, realizing that I’m running out of different words for “atrocious”—whatever happened to that treasured thesaurus of his?—when he pokes his head in. He has a copy of the *Tribune* in one hand: a promising sign.

“Did you know they finally launched that space telescope? Hubble?”

“Yes, I heard. And it’s just Hubble, silent *e*.”

He sidles over to the desk, already distracted. “What are you writing?”

“A speech.” I tilt my head up to show him my grimace. “I agreed to speak to a high school class next week.”

“What about?”

I could lie. I could say literature. But I loathe the convenience of dishonesty, the way it so efficiently shortens and simplifies conversations. I loathe that it is so often necessary now; I resist it when I can. “The war.”

“Ah.” He nods, once, if not in approval then at least with respect. “Are you going to bring your medal with you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You should.”

Time, now, for an easy lie. “All right.”

He’s prouder of that medal than I am. When it came, ten or so years ago, he insisted that we put it on one of the most visible shelves in the living room, and that we clear space on the wall for the certificate. Whenever we had guests he’d have to point out these items—not too ostentatiously, to my relief, but still with insistent gravity: “And you’ve seen these? Vera’s, from Yad Vashem. Righteous Among the Nations. You know she’s always wanted to go to Israel, to visit some of her children who live there. Children she rescued, I mean. I’d like to take her someday, and find her name on the Wall of Honor. The rest of Israel I can take or leave, but that I would like to see.”

Now he says severely, “You’re not going to be modest, are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you talk to these students. You’re not going to act as if you did nothing extraordinary. If you do they’ll get the idea that it was normal, that everyone did it, and then the numbers won’t add up.”

A very good day for him: fathoming such things as numbers, or at least ratios.

“I’ll explain that there weren’t very many of us,” I assure him. “And that I was lucky more than anything else.”

“Phsh,” he says.

“I was, you know.” DeBrun, whose real name was Joop Woortman, was shot. Hetty and Gisela, from the Utrecht network, got sent to Vught and then Ravensbruck, though they both came out alive. Walter Suskind died in the camps. Geert too. I never found out what happened to Mevrouw Pimentel or Rebekkah or most of the other crèche workers.

“Yes,” says Radek, impatient, “but it was not luck that made you act.”

I drum my pen against the edge of the desk. I shouldn’t ask this. If I was going to ask it, ever, it should’ve been long ago. I shouldn’t ask him now. On the other hand he might forget, by tomorrow, whatever answer he gives me, and there’s something strangely, shamefully liberating in that. “Would you have married me,” I say, “if I hadn’t?”

“What do you mean?”

“If I hadn’t done what I did. Would you still have married me?”

“What an odd question. You *did* do what you did.”

“But if I hadn’t. Would you have wanted to marry me, as just me?”

“But it *was* just you who did those things.”

“Not the everyday me. Not the me you live with now.”

“I see no difference.”

“Don’t you?” I killed a man. I lied and stole and kept up with trolley cars. Now I’m exhausted by a few words.

He thinks for a moment. Then he says, “So, all right: there is this. How many other people have a medal like yours? A few thousand?” With his free hand, the one not holding the

newspaper, he brushes a wisp of white hair away from my forehead. “I would not have married any of them.”

Which is, I must admit, the best possible way of saying no.

Winnipeg, May 1950

Our second spring in Manitoba is marked by the worst flooding that the province has ever seen. The Red River overflows its banks, charges through eight dikes and four city bridges, and roars through the region on a holiday.

Willem is very calm throughout the evacuation. Of course he is: He thrives on crises. As I once did, too, in a way. But you don't marry someone for how he behaves in a crisis. Not even if he's absolutely heroic under those conditions. You marry him for what he is on ordinary days.

We spend the night hunkered down in the fire hall, packed in with other refugees from our neighborhood, and Willem boasts to our neighbors, “This is nothing. You wouldn't believe what we went through back in Holland, during the war...”

People listen politely for awhile but they've heard this before. They've heard about the Schouwberg. They've heard about Willem's brazen little symbolic gestures of defiance, about his rousing speech at the university decrying the loyalty oath. They've heard how he fled his house via the roof when the Germans came for him. They've heard and they've stopped listening and he may know that, but he can't find anything else to talk about.

I don't say anything. If I were a better wife I'd be embarrassed for him, even feel sorry for him.

As soon as the worst of it is past, he starts talking, with relish, of all the demand there'll be for the construction company's services. He can barely wield a hammer—his brother-in-law

employs him to manage the accounts—but he talks as if he could rebuild the entire city singlehandedly.

“Isn’t it a bit in poor taste,” I hint, “to be so pleased about it?”

“Oh, Lord, do you always have to be buttoned so tightly? It’s not as if the world ended. Only one person even died in the flooding.”

I ought to respond to that, but to do so would probably only expose my hypocrisy. I thought of it the same way: *Only* one person died. A wave of the hand. It mustn’t have seemed so trivial to anyone who cared about that person, but for us everything is always stacked against impossible numbers now. And I’m no less guilty than Willem is. I have to consciously relearn the ordinary kinds of compassion—saying courtesies as if I really mean them, commiserating with an acquaintance who has a headache.

But Willem is out in the world most days, and I, most days, am not. I could become a teacher again, if I went through the muddle of paperwork and more training. But instead I’m improving my cooking. Which seems like a worthwhile investment of time and energy until I finally consult a physician and find out that there will never be more than two of us to feed.

“Well, that’s bad luck,” says Willem when I tell him what the doctor told me. “But I’m sure Louisa will share hers with us whenever we want them. And look at it this way, I can take you to better restaurants now and not be worrying if I’ll have enough set aside for university tuitions and such...”

“You’re not being funny,” I say.

“Well, maybe you need to stop taking everything so damned seriously. So you can’t have children. Worse things happen.”

“Of *course* worse things happen!” I explode. “That’s not the point! We’re not talking about worse things, we’re talking about *this*.”

“Look, there’s no need to shout. Jesus.”

That fall, Hannah’s book is published and she sends me a copy. Reading the part about me, I feel as if I’m encountering a shadow-puppet of myself, derived from the same basic features but magnified, transmuted, rendered by turns fanciful and mythic.

In the winter I leave Willem. If pressed, I can tell people that it was because he was unfaithful—which I’m almost sure he has been, though I have no proof and never went looking for any. All I know is that, at his most affectionate and appreciative, he looked at me no differently than he looked at any other woman with good legs.

It takes another year to get the formalities ironed out but during that time, I get a job in a shop, and I make plans.

I will go to graduate school. I will get a degree and then I will get a teaching position—teaching adults, because they sear me less, because they will not expect me to learn all their names. I will apply to schools in the United States. Somewhere close to Hannah, in Illinois. I will see Hannah again at last. I will be fine. I will find a way to make the most of myself.

I have no expectation—though would I be lying if I said I had no hope?—of love.

Chicago, July 1990

“Veer,” says Hannah when she comes to visit a week afterward, “there was nothing you could have done.”

I’ve never heard those words from Hannah before. Why does she choose now to start lying to me? “I could’ve been there.”

“Yes, yes, you could’ve never left the house, watched him every waking minute, watched him in your sleep.”

“I should’ve realized the medication wasn’t—”

“Veer, for God’s sake. Don’t do this to yourself. It wasn’t your fault. If he were here he would say it wasn’t your fault.”

“He would *say* that.” What else, I wonder, would he say? I’ve been trying to remember the last time—or any time, really, any specific instance—when he told me he loved me. I’ve been trying so hard.

“I wish”—I look down at my hands, an old woman’s hands, mostly bone—“I wish someone would calculate for me. To see how long it took him to fall.”

“Veer. My God.”

“I just wonder—if he had time to think. *As* he was falling.” If he thought of her. If he thought of me. If he knew where he was. When he was.

“You know what he said to me when I told him I was going to the play with you?”

“You told me.”

I tell her again. “He said, ‘Of course, go. High time you got out.’”

Hannah winds her arms around me and I bury my head in her shoulder.

I can breathe. I can breathe. I know I can. But the sobs make it harder.

Later, finally, we open all the envelopes together. Hundreds of them: from everyone we’ve ever known, it seems, and even strangers. Greeting cards, notecards, stationery, an incredible variety of materials. Hannah reads them aloud to me, which somehow is easier to stomach. Then she passes them to me, and I set most of them aside without looking at them. But there are at least fifty that I linger over long enough to find their signatures.

Tamara...Ben...Mirjam...Nico...Henriette....These I set aside in a separate pile. These I can keep.

Chicago, August 1953

It's been eight years, nearly, since I had any word of Jetta. I've heard from several of the others, over the years, but nothing from Jetta. Going to Israel, her mother said. So I've been picturing her in Israel, imagining her taller and less scrawny by the year, imagining her quick tireless little hands learning to work all sorts of marvels—cooking and writing and sculpting with clay, and teasing the knots out of some pet animal's fur.

And now suddenly here she is: a letter, forwarded from Amsterdam to Winnipeg and here to me at last, words that she wrote with her own hands.

She remembers me. She's fourteen, almost fifteen, and she's so sorry that it's taken her so long to get into contact with me. She's well and happy and her mother has remarried and it is very good, she says, for them to all be together in Israel. But she remembers me.

She signs it "Henriette Bleich (your Jetta)"—as if this is a secret between us. Or as if she long ago became somebody else but still carries that extra bit with her, a little awkwardly, yet not unwillingly.

I read the letter over and over again.

And I write back, of course. To thank her and to ask a thousand questions and to say I would love to have a picture of her if she's got one to spare, and to tell her how happy I am for her.

After that more letters arrive, along with artwork she's done and the photo I requested, of a fine healthy-looking girl whose eyes fit more comfortably into her face. Whenever I've been

thinking too much of anything else, I look at this bounty and remind myself that at least—wherever else I may have failed—what was most painful is also what I least regret.

Chicago, November 1990

Radek's symphony is in good hands. The conductor, who replaced him as music director when Radek stepped down several years ago, has always been a sort of protégé of Radek's. It shows in the performance; his gestures as he conducts are echoes of Radek's signature mannerisms, and the sounds he draws out of the orchestra mesh flawlessly with the verbal descriptions I've been carrying round in my head.

I recognize each movement by the fragments he gave me. There's the light-footed trill of birds in the countryside; the half-frenzied, half-lazy slapdash fiddling of his village's self-proclaimed musicians; the sober steady tread of his father, Franz, and the bubblier but still self-contained voice of his mother, Sophie, and a riot of leaping woodwinds and scrambling strings for the siblings—Edith, Karel, Max, Odilie, Stephan, and what was the third girl's name...?—in all their exuberant youthful mischief. Then there's Prague, manic and rousing, too much happening to take in all at once, but not enough time to tease out all the different melodies, all the overlapping interrupting intricacies of the music. And then there is Emilie and then the children, and then the slowing, darkening strain of the waiting years, a dwindling of the music, punctuated by defiant bursts of sound, echoes of Prague and of country birds, revived with desperate fervor. And then there's the long, pin-drop quiet sequence of the camp, notes stretched out to their breaking point and then submerged violently, with a clash of discordant noise—all the ugliest sounds that instruments can make, no easier on the ears than on the soul—and then a

return to those weakest threads, which occasionally transform into Emilie again, or Adam and Darina, or the country birds.

Hermine: that was his youngest sister's name. I finally retrieve it in the middle of the third movement.

It occurs to me that nobody else is hearing it this way. No one else is putting names to each melody, attaching memories to every instrument. This is a language that I alone, among the living, have been taught to interpret.

Only a brief recurring interlude, a violin solo that timidly fills each silence between movements, is unfamiliar. It's so short and so simple that I'm surprised he never played it for me. The symphony ends with that, after Emilie's final reprise.

When the lights go on again, I panic at the thought of having to move. But it's all right; Hannah, who's sitting beside me with her hand in mine, doesn't stand up either. Neither do the others: Kurt is on my other side, and the whole rest of the row, it seems, is taken up with Feldmans—A.J. and his wife and their three squirming boys, Sam and his fiancé, Naomi and her husband, Davy in the aisle seat. We all sit while the concert hall slowly empties around us. A few people who know me make a point of ducking into the vacated row just ahead of us and reaching over to clasp my hand and murmur something sympathetic. Beautiful performance. I'm sure he would've been so proud. He's very much missed. So sorry, again, unremittingly, for your loss.

At first I don't realize that the latest of these condolers is the conductor. Then Hannah says, "You were so splendid, I'm sure Radek would've been immensely pleased..."

"Oh yes," I blurt, anxious to compensate for the blank-faced emptiness of my initial courtesy. "You did a marvelous job, sir, truly."

“I’m so honored that you think so, Mrs. Libenitz. I know he wrote it with you in mind, so if *you* approve of my efforts—”

“Oh, that’s very kind, sir, but I don’t think he wrote it with me in mind at all. I don’t actually know anything about music, it’s quite embarrassing.”

“No, Mrs. Libenitz, it’s very clear in his notes—he marked up the music quite a bit, in Czech no less, just to be ornery I think—and anyway, that recurring violin interlude—he wrote, in the margin above it where it first occurred, *za Vera*. So that bit was for you, Mrs. Libenitz.”

From somewhere far away Hannah is saying, “I knew it, I knew he couldn’t have left her out entirely, it didn’t make *sense*. You see, Veer? You see?”

Deep in the pit of my stomach, something is unclenching. Suddenly I’m aware of so much space inside me, so many channels conducting my blood, so many cavities storing up oxygen. A long fluttering sigh runs through it all, through every pathway of my body, warm and tingling, and then settles. Nearly fifty years of *There must be something....*

I look down the row: a whole row of living people who have never seen my attic.

And I can hear it still, that violin, a new companion for my footsteps.

Maybe not enough, maybe never enough. But real: yes.

I will go home. I will grade some papers and, if the apartment seems too quiet, have the record of Rusalka playing in the background. Tomorrow I will teach my classes and buy groceries and write a letter to Jetta and try to smoke fewer cigarettes than usual as a concession to my doctor. And in the evening, if the sunset is worth watching, I will go out onto the balcony and I will breathe.

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List of Real People Mentioned in Text

De Brun, Theo (alias of Johannes “Joop” Woortman): Dutch non-Jewish rescuer (1905-1944)
Halverstad, Felix: member of Amsterdam’s Jewish Council and rescuer (1904-1978)
Meerberg, Pieter (Piet): Dutch non-Jewish rescuer (1919-2010)
Pimentel, Henriette: Dutch Jewish rescuer (?-?)
Schachter, Rafael: Czech-Jewish composer (1905-1945)
Soehnlein, Gisela: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer (?-?)
Suskind, Walter: member of Amsterdam’s Jewish Council and rescuer (1906-1945)
Van Hulst, Johan: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer (b. 1911)
Van der Molen, Gesina (also spelled Gezina): Dutch non-Jewish rescuer (1892-1978)
Voute, Henriette (Hetty): Dutch non-Jewish rescuer (1918-?)

Real People Used as Basis for Characters and/or Events

Ancerl, Karel: Czech-Jewish conductor, major inspiration for Radek (1908-1973)
Dijkstra, Clara: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer; partial inspiration for Vera, slight inspiration for Willem
Kubelik, Rafael: Czech (non-Jewish) conductor and composer; partial inspiration for Radek (1914-1996)
Levi, Primo: Italian-Jewish Holocaust survivor, chemist, and writer; partial inspiration for Radek (1919-1987)
Meerberg, Pieter: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer; major inspiration for Willem (1919-2010)
Nirenska, Pola: Polish-Jewish dancer whose family perished in the Holocaust; partial inspiration for Radek (1910-1982)
Poons, Karel: Dutch Jewish rescuer; major inspiration for Geert (?-1992)
Pritchard, Marion van Binsburgen: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer; major inspiration for Vera (b. 1920)
Schotte, Marie: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer, partial inspiration for Vera and her mother
Steenstra, Louisa: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer; loose basis for Mevrouw Dreyer
Strobos, Tina Buchter: Dutch non-Jewish rescuer, Marie Schotte’s daughter; major inspiration for Vera (1920-2012)
Voute, Henriette (Hetty): Dutch non-Jewish rescuer; partial inspiration for Vera

¹ This incident is based on an experience of Marie Schotte, mother of Tina Strobos.

² This incident is heavily based on an experience described by Marion Pritchard. The phrase “by the arms, by the legs, by the hair” is hers.

³ Both of these incidents are based on the experiences of Clara Dijkstra. She did not tell the German to “go to hell” but rather said “No, I don’t have to.”

⁴ This is based on an actual exchange between Tina Strobos and her mother, Marie Schotte, which consisted of the same spoken words.

⁵ This is based on Hetty Voute’s recollections of an exchange she had with a peer.

⁶ Marion Pritchard did this three times, once with a gap of only four months.

⁷ This incident is based on an experience of Piet Meerburg’s cousin, a courier, who did respond to a similar comment by saying “You didn’t order anything,” but did not lose her temper quite this grievously.

⁸ This exchange about eye-corners and the reference to “violets in the woods” is taken from Tina Strobos’s recollections of interrogation. More general interrogation experiences are also based on Hetty Voute’s accounts.

⁹ This entire incident, including the means of disposing of the body, is based on the experience of Marion Pritchard, who shot a Dutch policeman after he discovered the three Jewish children she was harboring.

¹⁰ This was an actual documentary that featured an orchestra performance conducted by Karel Ancerl.