

## My Grandmother Tells Me This Story

*Some say the story begins* in Europe, and your mother would no doubt interrupt and say it begins in New York, but that's just because she can't imagine the world before she entered it. And yes, I know you think it begins specifically in Belarus, because that's what your grandfather tells you. I've heard him describing those black sedans speeding down Pinsker Street. I've been married to the man almost sixty years and know how he is with you—he makes every word sound like a secret. But he wasn't even there. He was with his youth group by then and even though I *was* there I don't remember being scared—even when they knocked on our door, I didn't know what was happening. Even when they dragged us outside with our overstuffed suitcases spilling into the street, shouting through megaphones to walk in the road with the livestock, I still didn't know. I was thirteen.

The story really starts in the sewers. Everybody in the uniform factory whispered about them, and everybody had a different theory. Some said they were an escape route a plumber



had spent years charting, an underground system of tunnels running from Poland to Belarus to Lithuania. Others said they were an impossible maze with no way out. But the truth was that when my mother pulled me aside after only six days in the factory and whispered that she'd worked out a plan for me—smuggled vodka for the guards, a shoulder bared, my poor father, a lifetime of loving a woman who knew just how to spark another man's sympathy—I simply stood there, taking notes in my head. After dinner, she said, I'd slip past the guards and down the street, around two corners and up a road where I'd see the slats of a sewer. The grate would slide off easily, she said, and she and my father would find me soon. I had no reason not to believe that was true, no way of knowing the sewers would lead me to the forest—that night all I knew, as I climbed inside the manhole and down the metal ladder, was that it smelled worse than anything I'd imagined, of shit and piss and garbage.

It was black in there, and dank and cool, the ceiling so low I sank to my knees and crawled. I just kept following the crowd of voices—in Yiddish, which was both comforting and horrible, hearing that language forbidden in the factory. Then there was a rumble, and water rushed in and knocked me down. I gasped and tried to wade forward. The sewer started filling up and I felt around in the slimy water for the person in front of me. But everybody seemed far ahead, and it took me a minute to realize dinner must have been ending aboveground, everybody washing dishes and taking baths and pouring water down the drain all at once.

Soon I had no sense of how long I'd been underground. My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and I saw the shapes

around me. The woman up ahead, the hunched slope of her back, the walls of the sewer. The shadow of a rat before it ran across my arm. Then my whole body started to wobble and I knew I wouldn't make it through a wave of morning dishwashing, so when I saw lines of light through the grate, I stopped.

Keep moving, the woman behind me whispered.

But I couldn't. I waited for the group to go by and when I heard nothing above, I slowly lifted the grate and climbed onto the streets of a village that looked as if it had been passed over by the war. I wasn't used to the sun after an entire night in the sewers—it was just rolling up over the houses, and the forest beyond was so bright it looked painted. Dirt, river, sky—everything stunned me. That the wooden cottages lining the road were still intact, that people were feeding their horses and selling vegetables and sweeping leaves into the gutter.

A man walked past with his young daughter and she stared. The father took one look at me, yanked her arm and hurried down the road. I knew not to spend another minute standing there in the daylight, so I crossed the road and entered the forest. It was cold and dim, and when I leaned against a tree trunk, exhaustion came right at me.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been asleep when I heard footsteps. I opened my eyes and stared up—into the barrel of a gun. I swallowed, hard, refusing to make eye contact. That much I knew. I looked at the sticks and pinecones littering the forest floor and thought up a story. I was lost, searching for mushrooms, and could he help me find my way back? But how to explain the smell, or my work uniform, and before I opened my mouth, a boy put down the gun and said my name.

How odd that the first word I heard in the forest was my



own name, and for a minute I wondered if that night in the sewers had made me crazy. Then I looked up. I know how you see your grandfather, sweet and smiling, always insisting that we put on a movie after dinner and then dozing on the sofa halfway through. Your chess partner, your theater date, the man who checks out the minute your mother and I start up. You wouldn't have recognized him. His long, bony face splotchy from the sun, his light brown beard growing in sparse, threadbare patches—he was only fifteen—and his straight hair obviously hacked off with a knife. But even with that terrible haircut, even with a rifle over one shoulder and paper sacks swinging from the other, he still looked like the same Leon Moscovitz I'd grown up with.

It was one of the great miracles of my life, finding someone from home, right there, in the middle of the woods. But I won't lie and say he was the person I'd wanted to see. I barely knew him back in our village. He was two grades above me and had struck me as bigheaded and bossy, one of those boys who always raised his hand in class. I hadn't been the shiny student he was but had been a good girl, a rule-follower—and your grandfather had not only seemed the opposite, it was like he saw anyone *not* challenging every point made in class as a weakling. His whole family was like that. His father had been a professor, and the one time I'd gone to his house to make a delivery from my parents' tailor shop, I remember how dark and dusty it was, books pulled from the shelves and strewn on the floor in a way that must have made them feel intellectual though to me it just looked sloppy, brown drapes so thick you immediately forgot about the sun outside. That past year your grandfather had stopped coming to school one day, but I wasn't

surprised—so many were fleeing by then that I hadn't spent much time wondering where the Moscovitzes had gone to hide.

You look like shit, Raya, he told me then.

I know, I said.

No, he said, eyeing me more closely. You have actual shit on you.

I came from the sewers, I said, and he nodded, as if I wasn't the first he knew who had, then said, And your family?

Back home. In the uniform factory.

Your grandfather nodded again. He reached into a paper sack, but when he handed me a loaf of bread, it was so heavy I almost dropped it.

When's the last time you ate? he said, and I had no idea. I didn't know what time it was, or even where I was. As I followed your grandfather through the brush, he talked. His family had escaped to a city in the north that past winter, he said—this was all happening in September—where he and his three younger brothers had trained with a youth group. The entire family had gone from there to Palestine, but he had met a plumber, Yosef Zanivyer, who'd seen something special in him (I couldn't help but roll my eyes that even then, in these silent, deserted woods, your grandfather had to let me know how fabulous he was) and asked him to stay. Yosef was the plumber who'd engineered the sewer route I'd just come through, he said. For the past few months, your grandfather and his group had been roaming a labyrinth of tunnels, committing them to memory for an evacuation and supply route they'd use to smuggle weapons and food into the forest.

He led me through a zigzag of uncleared scrub and over so many marshes and creeks I couldn't count, until finally we



reached the densest part, a cluster of trees so tall and thick it suddenly felt like evening—an area protected enough by branches, he told me, that no military plane could spot us from the air. He took my hand and we elbowed our way around trees and bushes until an entire village emerged. There were blanket tents held up by logs, what looked like an infirmary, a makeshift kitchen surrounding a fire pit. About forty people, all teenagers, almost all boys, unbathed and bedraggled, were at work in different stations. Everybody was speaking Yiddish and the whole scene was so stunning I didn't know what to look at first. But your grandfather just kept leading me forward, as nonchalant as if he were giving a tour of our school back home.

This is Yussel, he said, pointing to a squat, suntanned boy. He was a medical student and runs the infirmary here. And this is the kitchen—here he handed me a potato, still hot from the fire—and this is where we run drills after dinner. He waved to a bigger kid, this one fifteen or sixteen, oafish and freckled with red, flyaway hair, the parts of a gun spread out on his lap. That's Isaac from Antopol, he told me.

Isaac, your grandfather said, meet Raya. We grew up together.

I'm trying to concentrate, Isaac grunted without even shooting me a sideways look, and your grandfather shrugged and said, He'll grow on you.

Then your grandfather stopped. Can you cook?

Not really. My mother cooks. I could barely say it.

What can you do, then?

I thought about it. I can do ballet, I said. I can play the flute, and that was when your grandfather started laughing. Wow, he said, throwing his hands in the air, thank God you're here, and I wanted to smack him.

But your parents are tailors, right? he said. So I'm guessing you can sew, and I can't tell you how much it meant to me right then that there, in the middle of the forest, someone knew this basic fact about my family.

Yeah, I can sew.

Good, he said. We already have a tailor, but if you're quick with your fingers, you can go in the armory.

So that afternoon I went to work, learning how to repair broken rifles and pistols, how to mend cracked stocks and replace the worn and rusted parts. He was right: all my years helping my parents sew on buttons and rip out seams made the job come easy. I was grateful I was good at it, and for many hours I sat alone, a little relieved Isaac was such a grump that I could work in silence. Your grandfather was running around, stopping at every station. It seemed obvious he was the leader, which I learned for certain that night at dinner, when five new boys arrived at the campfire.

They were young, your grandfather's age, and had just come back from a mission. Your grandfather crouched beside me and explained. Everyone here was part of a brigade, he said, called the Yiddish Underground. He'd started it back with his youth group, doing combat training in basements around the city. In the beginning, they'd slipped into nearby villages and robbed peasants for food and tools and blankets. But every day the war seemed to be getting worse, he said, and now the brigade was traveling farther to carry out attacks. They torched cottages and stole guns. When they ran out of bullets, they sneaked into cities with empty shotguns and long, straight branches, which, from a distance, could pass as rifles. They chopped down telephone poles, attacked supply depots, burned bridges to disrupt



military routes—and that night, the five boys at the campfire had just returned from dislodging two hundred meters of rail line.

And? Your grandfather said then, turning to one of the boys.

And the conductor stopped the train, the boy said, spearing a sausage from the fire. And I walked right on and shot four soldiers in the dining car. They didn't even have time to put down their forks.

Your grandfather clapped the boy's shoulder like a proud parent, and I just sat there swallowing.

I told the other passengers to tell the police the Yiddish Underground was responsible, the boy continued, and your grandfather nodded. Everyone on the train was so scared, the boy said, and I just kept saying it as I walked through the cars, taking all of this, he said, gesturing at the suitcases and sacks of vegetables and bread by his feet.

Perfect, your grandfather said, and when he flicked on his radio, everyone put down their food to listen. He tuned through static until an announcer came on with word of the day's casualties. But when the announcer described the ambush, he said it was the work of Russian guerilla fighters, communists camping out in the woods. The Yiddish Underground wasn't mentioned at all. All around us were these kids, huddled together in stolen coats, waiting for their commander to speak. Your grandfather cleared his throat. He'd looked his age for that second, wide-eyed and serious and more than a little frightened, and I'd had a flash of that same boy in the schoolyard, the market, walking his younger brothers down Pinsker Street. I'd known that whatever he said, inside your grandfather felt as lost as every one of his fighters. But he stood up. He switched

off the radio and said the only way they couldn't ignore us was to plan bigger. We have to let them know, he said, that there's a secret army they can't touch, soldiers fighting back with weapons taken from them, then retreating deep into the forest to plan their next attack.

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THIS IS the part of the story where I know you want to hear how we fell in love. I understand—don't think I haven't noticed how you're always free to visit your grandfather and me, even on Saturday nights. How five years out of college you're still living like a student, still alone in that shoebox studio. Even when you were little, it was your favorite part of every story. It used to kill me when I'd overhear you asking your mother those kinds of questions about your father, this young chubby you with long blond braids and a dreamy expression, as if with your eyes half-closed you could envision a time your parents weren't sneaking around your living room at night, scribbling their names into each other's books, or storming after each other outside your old apartment, fighting over who got to keep this ceramic fish-shaped platter your mother said she made at summer camp but which your father claimed he made at an Adult Ed class at the Y—a fish, he yelled, that held his nachos just right.

And I remember after he left, you and your mother piled all of your possessions into a taxi and headed over the bridge to our apartment in Queens, where the two of you moved into her childhood bedroom, sleeping side by side on her trundle bed, surrounded by her spelling ribbons and stuffed-animal collection, as though you were living in a permanent exhibit



in the museum of her life. And I remember all the dates she'd bring back, Philip and Hugh and the one who wore his sunglasses inside, how she'd parade those men into my home with the same defiance she had in high school, only she was thirty-six then with a four-year-old daughter eating dinner with her grandparents in the next room. From the kitchen the three of us would listen to her carrying on, her voice high and clear and always drowning out the other person's, which probably made her a good teacher during rowdy assemblies but not such a hit on those dates. There were so many nights when I'd watch her crawl into bed beside you after her date had left, her back to the wall, her bare feet wrapped around yours, holding on to your stomach so tightly it was like she feared the distance you might fall was so much greater than from the bed to the carpet.

I want to tell you mine was a great love affair, but the truth was that the only reason your grandfather started coming into my tent at night was to protect me. There were so many things to be afraid of in the forest. Not just the soldiers but bears and snakes and wolves. Russian communists who lived in other parts of the woods, coming by our camp, offering bullets for a night with one of the girls, sometimes taking one even if refused—men who disliked your grandfather but respected him enough, even as a boy, not to touch the one he was with. Anyway, it was almost winter—I will always remember that as the coldest season imaginable, the winter I watched hot tea freeze in a cup—and when your grandfather climbed inside one night and lay beneath my blanket, his hands roaming up my shirt and into my pants long before he thought to kiss me, it didn't feel romantic—more like a basic physical need that had little to do with me.

We'd already seen each other naked, anyway—we all bathed around each other, there was no other choice—and even though I was thirteen years old and he was my first kiss, I wasn't so naïve to believe your grandfather was in love with me, though for a lot of my life I did believe our relationship wasn't so bad. We had no one but each other when we first arrived in the States, and a big part of me wondered if I had another option. We never even talked about marrying—we just did it. I think your grandfather and I both wanted to forget everything that had happened and try to be as normal as all our neighbors on Dinsmore Avenue. It was only years later when you and your mother were living with us that I had to listen to her opinions on how I would never be normal, my fuse was just too short, she'd never met a person who could go from zero to sixty so quickly. From the beginning it was like that with your mother and me: even in the womb I think she was kicking me on purpose. Whenever we argued, your grandfather would walk out the door and around the block, as if your mother and I had taken up all the air in the apartment. But you would always stay. It used to drive me crazy, watching you watch *us*, as if our fight were being transcribed and filed away in the Dewey decimal system of your mind. But the truth was that there were moments when I'd look at you—you always resembled me more than your mother, especially when you were young, with your light hair and cheeks that went red no matter what the weather—and think that you reminded me of an alternate version of myself.

I too might have lived in my head if, when I was a girl, I'd had a school to spend my days in and an apartment for my nights, rather than a tent and a bed of pine needles that



I shared with your grandfather. But to his credit, he never once tried to pretend ours was some sweeping romance. At fifteen, he'd already had a life separate from our village, a life of organizing and combat training and falling in love with Chaya Salavsky, whom he called the most brilliant thinker from his youth group and promised to reunite with one day in Palestine, where she had gone with his three younger brothers and most of their brigade. After the war, he said, he'd join his brothers on the collective they'd started, and every day he'd swim in the sea and eat grapefruits and lemons that grew wild from trees. You can come with me, he'd say, always an afterthought, but during those talks I'd be lying quietly beneath the blanket, trying to convince myself that if anyone in a uniform factory was going to stay alive it was tailors like my parents. I'd heard reports on the radio that the soldiers were finding themselves ill equipped for the Russians, and since winter was coming, they'd put more people to work sewing uniforms and fixing weapons and equipment. I held on to the belief that my parents were safe for as long as I could—it would be another eight months until I knew for sure they were not.

When your grandfather wasn't talking about Palestine he was talking about the war. The rules were changing every day, he said—soldiers patrolling nearby villages in grimy work clothes, passing as farmers; military planes flying so low we'd hear their engines rumbling. And the day before, Isaac had been on watch when he found a teenage boy wandering the woods, claiming he was looking for blackberries, when anyone from the area knew they weren't growing so late in the year—

it was halfway through November, I'd been in the forest two months by then. Your grandfather felt it was time to move, to scout another location in the woods to set up camp, but first he wanted to plan one more mission, and he wanted me to come. With my light hair and green eyes I could easily pass through town unnoticed—and anyway, your grandfather said, who would suspect a girl so young?

I didn't want to go. In those two months I'd found a routine that made me feel almost safe: cleaning barrels and collecting spent shells from the forest floor, going to target practice after helping the other girls clean up dinner, or working with Yussel in the infirmary, where he was always concocting a new treatment out of herbs and pig fat and other loot the fighters brought back. But the forest had become home to me, the brigade a kind of family, and—I know this will make you uncomfortable, so I'll say it very quickly—in many ways your grandfather was beginning to feel more and more like an older brother than a boyfriend, even those nights together in the tent. I think that, at thirteen, I still needed to be taken care of, to have a hand guiding me through the forest, and if your grandfather felt I was ready for a mission, I believed him. So I sat and listened the following night as he and Isaac strung together the plan in the dugout beside the kitchen, where they always held their meetings.

The train, your grandfather told me, would carry sixty-four soldiers and two cars' worth of supplies. At nine-fifteen the following night, it would stop in Haradziec, where I'd have already laid out explosives.

It's a stupid idea, Isaac said, crouching low in the dugout—I was the only one short enough to stand up straight under the



ceiling of blankets. Maybe she'll go unnoticed, he said, but she'll slow us down.

Secretly I agreed with Isaac, but your grandfather ignored him. He had a way of dismissing people without angering them, simply by pretending he hadn't heard them to begin with—a trait I appreciated then and now can't stand: sometimes I feel like he's walking around the apartment wearing earplugs. But that night I admired it, watching him roll out a map on the dirt floor, the yellow light of the lantern flickering across his face, which was getting thinner every day. It was an old map, one I remembered from school, when my village was still part of Belarus. Right then I didn't know what was what. I stared at the names of towns, trying to will them to memory as your grandfather dragged a finger along our route.

We won't have to worry about snakes in this weather but watch for bears, he said, passing out pistols and bullets to Isaac and me.

I'd never pointed a gun at anyone. I'd held plenty: in the armory workshop and at target practice, and back home my father had a rifle above the fireplace but I'd never seen him load it. I touched the slide of this one now, feeling my way to the trigger.

A pistol's entirely different, Isaac said, and I sensed he was right: I'd been using shotguns during practice, but these would be easier to hide. You know how to push your weight against a shotgun, remember? he continued. With this, it'll be twice as hard to have the same accuracy.

I wrapped my hands around the grip. Even before Isaac could criticize me, I knew my stance was wrong. My shoulders were hunched, my arms stiff. I hated the way your grand-

father looked at me then, as if he suddenly recognized every risk in bringing me and was embarrassed for thinking the plan up at all.

But he just sat beside me and said, Push the magazine all the way up until you hear a click, then pull back the slide to chamber a round—that's the only way to know it's loaded for sure. You probably won't need it anyway since you'll be with us. And remember that if you *do* hear something, don't shoot. It might just be an animal.

I nodded. I knew the rules. They'd been hammered into me since my first day there, your grandfather reciting them around the campfire every night: Don't get cocky with your weapon. Remember what happened to three of our fighters who were loud and overconfident on a raid and were gunned down from a window, their stupidity already forest legend by the time I'd arrived. If you kill an animal, make sure the carcass doesn't drip blood as you carry it back to camp: never leave a trail. Don't forget that many of the peasants in the surrounding villages are good people, suffering as well, some even risking their own safety to protect us. If you have to rob them, take only what you absolutely need.

These rules were important to your grandfather. To Isaac and some of the others, not so much, though they always listened. I didn't know if Isaac had always been gruff or if the war had made him that way. I knew he'd seen things I hadn't, that when he'd heard soldiers coming into his village, he'd been quick to scramble behind a barn and from there had submerged himself in a river to hide, and when he crawled out hours later, he found himself completely alone.

It was like Isaac was running on adrenaline to stay alive,



whereas with your grandfather it was something different. Even that night in the dugout, I knew he was considering morals only partly out of decency—mostly he saw himself, in his heart of hearts, as a boy with a legacy. A boy who, after the war was over, would be written about in textbooks, talked about in reverent tones: Leon Moscowitz, whose rebel army not only changed the course of the war but did so ethically.

I had never met a person so aware of his own voice, carefully stringing together sentences with the hope they would be quoted later, even as he told me to cup my hands as he passed out explosives. First a grenade, then six long sticks of dynamite.

This part's easy, your grandfather said. Lay the sticks flat on the tracks.

And then what? I said.

For God's sake, Isaac said.

Just before the train comes, your grandfather said calmly, hold the spoon of the grenade down with your thumb. Then twist off the pin with your other hand, and the moment you throw it, start sprinting toward the woods.

This is ridiculous, Isaac said. She'll get us killed. Why not stay back in the armory? he said, and right away your grandfather stood up, as if secretly grateful Isaac was running his mouth so he had a reason to lecture. Just this week a statement went out all over the country, he said, offering farmers two sacks of grain for every one of us killed. Do you think anyone else is wasting their time with these concerns, pondering the differences between kids and teenagers, girls and boys? he said, his eyes flicking around the dugout as though his audience were much bigger than Isaac and me.

Then your grandfather turned to me. If anyone stops you, he

said, you have to remember, even if you're terrified, to keep the Yiddish out of your accent. Okay?

Okay, I said.

You could be a Dina, he said then, looking at me.

Or maybe Henia, Isaac said. Henia from the north, visiting her family?

He handed me a stack of clothes, all from a previous raid. Folded on top was a knit brown hat, which I slipped over my head. Your grandfather pushed it back, scrutinized my face and said, There. Already she looks like a different girl.

Yeah? I said, fingering the hat. What about Sonya? Sonya Gorski, I said, sounding it out, almost beginning to enjoy our game. It was like the dress-up I used to play back home, my best friend Blanka and me goofing off in my parents' tailor shop, darting between the tall spools of fabric and draping the scraps around each other, pretending we were classy society ladies dressing for the opera, where our handsome, imaginary boyfriends would be waiting outside on the marble steps in suits.

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THE FOLLOWING day I got ready for Haradziec. A gray wool dress and coat, leather boots and thick brown stockings. The boots were too large but everything else fit so snugly it was as if I'd picked out the clothes myself. In my pocketbook were my pistol and a case of bullets. I clutched it under an arm as I followed your grandfather and Isaac down the dark, mulchy path. These woods I knew—it was where we foraged for shells and mushrooms. We were quiet walking through, your grandfather brushing the ground with a stick to cover every footprint. Then



Isaac called out to me, If the police stop you while you're casing the station—

I'm Henia Sawicki. Staying with my grandparents nearby.

And if they ask what you're doing on the tracks?

Looking for my ring. It slipped off somewhere.

These lies, I knew, were the easy part. But really, the entire plan was simple. We'd walk along the edge of the forest—far enough in the woods to go unnoticed, close enough to glimpse the villages through the trees. In Haradziec, I'd slip out and cross the tracks, set the explosives down, run back into the forest. Your grandfather had made it sound so effortless in the dugout, but here I worried about keeping it straight in my mind. If one wary soldier saw through my lie, that was it—I'd be shot, your grandfather and Isaac probably next, or maybe tortured in an attempt to be led to the brigade. So I was trying to remember the plan—Henia, the ring, the grandmother—while clonking around in my too-big boots, and that was when I tripped on a rock and fell to the ground, twisting my ankle so hard I couldn't stand up. There I was, splayed in the dirt with my ankle throbbing, and even before your grandfather helped me to my feet, Isaac was already moaning about how he *knew* something like this would happen.

Twenty minutes out, he said, and your grandfather snapped, Tell me, Isaac, one of us couldn't have fallen?

Before your grandfather could hoist himself back onto his soapbox, I started hobbling along the route and all they could do was follow.

Don't be stupid, Isaac called.

He's right, your grandfather said.

I was suddenly so angry: with your grandfather for always

acting like he knew what was best, with Isaac for being so hard on me, with myself for botching the attack. For the first time since the sewers, I felt utterly hopeless and alone. I had no idea what to do, or who to *ask* what to do, because—and this was the first time it really became clear to me—I had no one left. The only people I had in the world were these two boys I barely knew at all, who looked so unbelievably *confused* right then, walking in their oversized coats, Isaac breathless and spastic, your grandfather's cap falling over his eyes. Up ahead, through a gap in the trees, I saw straw roofs, the jagged steeple of a church. I kept limping down the path, and when an entire village came into view, I slipped out of the forest. We were still two hours from Haradziec. My ankle was swelling, my clothes were covered in dirt, and I pushed through town, not even sure what I was looking for. The streets were empty and so eerily quiet it was as if something terrible had happened the second before we'd arrived.

Your grandfather and Isaac hurried behind me, whispering to get back in the forest. But I kept on, and that was when I realized this was the town I'd crawled into from the sewers. Huddled along the road were the same houses, the same barns and mill and school, only now the buildings were deserted and destroyed: broken windows, piles of bricks, rats darting up stairways leading nowhere. The war, it seemed, had finally arrived here. A few cottages were still smoldering. A man, hard-faced and dirty, dragged a skinny horse past without even looking up. This time, I knew, I was no more shit-stained than anybody else.

Along the strip of shops was a bakery. The door was open, and when I walked inside, the glass cases were smashed, the



shelves bare, only half the tables standing. But as I moved through the kitchen and up the stairs, I saw shadows flash beneath a door. I pulled out my gun, pushed the door open with my shoulder and strolled inside.

The room was small enough to take in all at once: just two wooden chairs facing the fireplace with a bed and dresser in the corner; a stove, sink and table against the wall. A mother washed dishes. She had a cinched little mouth like a balloon knot and dark hair twisted tight at her neck. A boy, eight or nine, bent over homework at the wooden table. The mother glanced at me and at my gun and put down the pot she was drying. The boy stared. My hands wobbled as I aimed at them.

I need something to wrap up my ankle, I told the mother. It was the first time I'd spoken and my words sounded loose and clunky in the silent room. And boots and a coat and your warmest hat and scarf. And gloves, I added greedily as she sifted through drawers.

She handed over the clothes and I peeled off my dirty ones. I didn't even have my tights off when the mother yanked the boy's head toward her chest, and it took me a second to realize I'd gotten so used to bathing around everyone in the forest that it hadn't seemed strange to strip down in front of this family.

Henia, Isaac hissed from the doorway, where he and your grandfather were standing. Let's go.

But I couldn't, not yet. As I sat at the table and tied a clean sock around my ankle, bruised and puffy but possibly only sprained, I looked at the math problems the boy had printed out neatly on lined white paper, and imagined, for just a second, what it would be like to have homework again. Not that I'd even liked math—it had been my worst subject, the one my

father had to spend close to an hour correcting every evening. But to be at a table again with my mother, to have classwork and meals and chores—I had wished for my family every day in the forest, but never before had what I'd lost been flaunted so vividly in front of me, and I was filled with a sudden rage at this boy. This kid who had so little, whose father could be dead or at war or just not around, whose school was certainly shut down and whose mother was probably trying to keep up some semblance of routine by making him practice math in the middle of this chaos, and at that moment I resented them both.

What was for dinner? I asked them.

Soup, the mother said.

What kind?

Potato.

Fill three bowls for me.

It's gone, the mother said. She held up the empty pot she'd just dried.

What *do* you have? I said.

She handed over a potato and three turnips.

I pocketed the food as I walked the length of the room, opening cupboards, rifling through drawers, feeling under sweaters and pants for a hidden stash of *something*.

I need your money, I said.

We don't have any, the mother said.

Why should I believe you? I opened their closet, overturned pillows, shook out blankets.

I promise you, the mother said, looking at me pleadingly. It was already stolen. Everything was.

You'll be sorry, I said, if you don't give me your money. It took me two tries to pull back the slide, but it didn't matter, I



realized, when I was the only one holding a weapon. I grabbed the boy, circled an arm around him and pressed the gun to his cheek. He was shaking, and his fine brown hair was damp with sweat. He felt like such a *child* next to me, his skinny arms tight at his side, his breath coming out in short, hot gasps.

The mother was blinking quickly, and she kept looking at her son, then back at me. A sound came out of the boy's throat, squeaky and remote, and I pressed the pistol more firmly against his skin. The mother closed her eyes. Then she crawled under the bed, ran her hand along the bottom of the mattress and pulled out a thin stack of bills. It was a small amount, enough for maybe two weeks' worth of food.

Give it to me, I said.

We'll starve, she said. Leave us something. Please.

Give it to me, I said again, and when she did, I let go of the boy. I waited for him to run to his mother's arms, but it was like his feet were nailed to the floor. The room was so quiet I could hear a horse's hooves clicking past outside. I walked backwards with the pistol still cocked, out to the stairs where Isaac and your grandfather were waiting.

They wouldn't talk to me as we made our way through the bakery and out the door, where the cold air chilled me through my new coat. We were halfway down the road when your grandfather caught up with me and said, That family did nothing to you.

He grabbed my shoulders and shook me, like a box my voice might fall out of. How could you take everything they had?

But I kept walking. I don't know how to explain it except that I was struck by a haziness where I could hear his words but they suddenly meant nothing to me—I will always mark

that as the moment I stopped listening to your grandfather, and also as the day Isaac started looking at me with a curious, cautious respect. We were back in town, the same route we took in, and as we passed that row of gutted shops, I caught my reflection in a broken window. There I was, thirteen years old and stumbling around in someone else's boots, looking more hideous than I could have imagined. I hadn't been in front of a mirror since back home with my parents, I realized, and in that time I had become an ugly girl. My hair was greasy and knotted and so beaten by the elements it was a shade lighter. Black circles rimmed my eyes, scabs dotted my chin and forehead and lips, my teeth had gone as rotten and brown as tree roots. In only a couple months I had become a Medusa, a monster, a creature from the forests of a fairy tale.

I still see glimpses of that ugliness now. At the salon, when the hairdresser finishes my blowout and spins me around to face the mirror. Or sometimes on the subway, when the person across from me gets up and I'm shocked to see that same terrifying beast staring back at me in the scratched, blurred glass. But I want you to know it wasn't that way for everyone. Your grandfather did the same things, lost the same things, watched that same boy doing math at the table—and responded by patiently sitting with your mother the entire time she was growing up, helping her with algebra and history and even with spelling, though it pained him to sound out words in a language he barely knew. I'd watch the two of them hunched over her homework at the kitchen table and wish I was the kind of person who could be grateful I was still in the world to join them, rather than always standing a few feet from everybody else, slouched in a doorway.



Your grandfather, once the biggest loudmouth I knew, became a quiet, almost invisible man in America, stumbling over his English, bashful in public, shy to ask directions on the street after hearing some teenagers singsonging his accent. He was rejected for every job he tried to get, an immigrant without even a junior high school education. I was the one who found work first, in a clothing factory if you can believe it, back in a hot room sewing in zippers and finishing seams. Your grandfather was humiliated that he could provide for the brigade but not for his own family, humiliated when he finally *did* find a job, making deliveries for a beer distributor, just another tired man dozing on his subway ride to work.

Still, he found small parts of his life to genuinely appreciate: growing tomatoes on the patio, listening to the radio after dinner, taking the train to the city on weekends. And yet none of those things I could ever teach myself to love. Your mother and I may not have the easiest time together, but I'll admit when she's right. And though it pains me to say it, she told me something once that I know is true: I never stopped thinking people wanted to hurt me, even when they no longer did, and that rage would rumble through me during even the nicest times. Walking in the park with your grandfather on the first real day of spring, eating at a good restaurant on our honeymoon in Atlantic City, on vacation in Israel, almost forty years ago, when we could finally afford to go. Finally your mother met that side of her family, finally your grandfather visited his parents' graves, finally he saw his brothers, middle-aged by then, with wives and children and grandchildren. I remember sitting in your great-uncle Natan's backyard in Ramat Gan, drinking orange soda and picking at a plate of grapes, and right away

your grandfather started asking about Chaya Salavsky. I hadn't heard his voice climb so high since his speeches in the dugout. Did they still see her, what was she up to, he assumed after all these years she'd married?

His mouth quivered on that last word, and when his brother said she'd died a couple of years ago, rather than taking my husband's hand and murmuring condolences while he blinked back tears, I started chewing on my lip the way I always did before saying something risky.

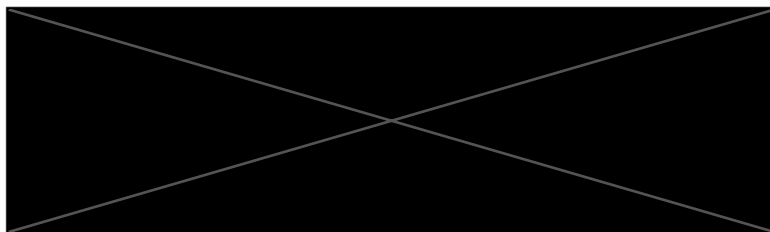
How dare you ask about her with me right beside you! I yelled, in front of all my new in-laws, in the backyard surrounded by the grapefruit and lemon trees your grandfather had dreamed about for so long. Get over yourself, I continued, though I wasn't actually angry, or jealous of a dead woman I'd never met, a woman he hadn't seen since he was a boy. I was simply filled with an urge to fight, so electric and immediate I felt my face flush. So I carried on, even as your grandfather cleared his throat and looked at his shoes and rattled the ice in his empty glass.

And no, I won't tell you the rest. You can guess. You can go to the library and read about the sixty-four soldiers killed that night in Haradziec, in a train explosion engineered by an unknown anarchist group. You can waste full days in the research room, ruining your eyes scrolling through microfilm. You can read about the attacks that followed—eight more before the war ended and your grandfather and I missed the quota to Palestine and were loaded instead on a boat to the States: not an option either of us had ever considered, a place that didn't feel real even as we docked at the immigration port and saw Manhattan glittering in front of us. You can even find



stories about Isaac, killed a year after we left for New York when his homemade bomb went off prematurely, still on his way to some unknown mission. One of those kids who couldn't imagine living anywhere but Europe even once we were allowed to leave. Maybe because he was addicted to the fighting, maybe because he could finally go home but no one was there. Search for his story in the library—for that and everything else. But you won't learn what happened to that mother and son I robbed, because believe me, I've looked and looked and there's just no way to find out whether those two people survived the coldest winter of their lives.

I don't understand you. All your life you've been like this, pulling someone into a corner at every family party, asking so many questions it's no wonder you've always had a difficult time making friends. It's a beautiful day. Your grandfather's on the patio grilling hamburgers, your mother's new boyfriend is already loud off beer, she's hooked up the speakers and is playing her terrible records. Why don't you go out in the sun and enjoy yourself for once, rather than sitting inside, scratching at ugly things that have nothing to do with you? These horrible things that happened before you were born.



## The Quietest Man

*The news was waiting* when I came home from class: my daughter had sold a play. Not the kind she'd put on as a girl, with a cardboard stage and paper-bag puppets, but a real one, Off-Broadway, with a set designer and professional actors—one of whom would portray me, because this was, Daniela said in her breathless phone message, a play about our family.

I set down my briefcase, stuffed with my students' blue-books, and hit rewind. Then I called Katka.

"She's twenty-four!" I said.

"So?"

"So when we were her age we were living under Husák, and *we're* not writing autobiographical plays."

"Your fatherly pride astounds me."

I wondered how the wife I had known when Daniela was first born—the quiet, sunken woman who read the Czech newspapers in the library every morning and then wrote long letters to her mother in Prague, letters Katka had known would



be swallowed by security—could have become this confident voice on the line.

"I'm just suggesting," I said, "that Daniela may not know what she's getting into."

"Well, she's the one with the play, and you're an aging man who begins sentences with 'When we were her age.'"

"Ha," I said, and after we hung up I spent the rest of the evening calling Daniela, getting her voicemail each time. Finally, just before eleven, she answered.

"Congratulations!" I said. "I hope I'm not waking you."

"No, now that people are actually going to see the thing, I'm up trying to fix it."

So there was still time for revising.

"Why don't I fly down this weekend to take you out?" I said.

"Dinner, a show, whatever you want."

"What about July?"

My yearly New York trip. "I'll come then also."

"You don't want to be down here," she said. "It's a hundred degrees and pouring."

I told her I'd fly her up to Maine, then. It was humid here for May, too, but being on the water was almost pleasant. She'd never been up and it was an easy ninety-minute flight; we could make a leisurely weekend of it, driving along the jagged green coastline, stopping at Ocean Street Pier for taffy. "They have this big machine," I said, "where they'll make your own flavor right in front of you."

"Sorry," she said, and my heart flopped: didn't she used to have a sweet tooth? I had no idea what she *did* like. I pictured her in her apartment on 103rd Street, a glum matchbook studio she had brightened up by painting it yellow and lining the sill

with ferns. She would be on her bed, doing ballet stretches, and her hair, long and thick and the color of cola, would be falling into her mouth. "I've got a lot of work."

"So?" I said. "Me, too."

"I figured as much."

Ah, this directness was new. The young artiste emboldened by a sale. "I'm so proud of you, Daniela. I just want to celebrate," I said, and finally her voice softened and she said okay. I knew I was laying it on thick, but what were my options? I pictured a velvet curtain pulled open to reveal the stage. I saw that Queens backdrop: the low huddle of brick tenements with the metallic sparks of the city beyond. Under the spotlight sat a girl on her stoop, pudgy and pale with dark brown bangs cut straight across. She was waiting for her father. It was his weekend; he should have arrived an hour ago. She waited and waited. The theater lights brightened as the afternoon got hotter, and when the mother returned from the third house she'd cleaned that day, she took one look at her daughter and led her inside. The mother, tired and tall in bleach-stained sweats and sneakers, called the father long-distance as her daughter slumped on the sofa, still clutching her lavender suitcase with both hands. And when the father told the truth, that somehow the Saturday pickup had become Sunday in his mind, the whole strained story of their relationship was revealed in the way the mother drew in a breath to stop from yelling, before ripping open a package of cold cuts and making their lunch.

\* \* \*

I KNEW ANY good parent would have been thrilled. And I wanted to be. In some ways it would have been easier if I'd



been a monster—at least I'd know what was coming. Instead, I just hadn't been around much. And so, for the next few days, sitting through office hours or doing laundry in preparation for Daniela's visit, all I could think about was being written into her life story—especially because I knew just where she had gotten her facts.

Daniela was two when Katka and I separated; she was bred on a lifetime of her mother's tales about me. Katka, I imagined, would begin by saying that I was the one who dragged her to America in the first place. In Prague we had written anonymously with our colleagues for the journal the *Chronicle of Our Time*. We wrote by hand—the government had a record of everyone who owned typewriters—and late at night I'd sneak into different university buildings to type the materials. Every time we finished an issue, we'd distribute it to people we knew, who then passed it along to people they knew, until we had thousands of readers throughout the country. But when the StB still managed to link me to a typewriter, I was brought in for questioning and fired from my teaching post in the political science department. At the time Katka had seemed like the lucky one: she was on maternity leave from the economics department that term, and so avoided suspicion. But it was my name people chanted outside the university. It was my name that made international headlines and reached the desk of Saul Sandalowski, the Collins College professor who campaigned to get me a visa and a teaching job to avoid imprisonment.

She'd tell Daniela about packing our entire flat in three days before boarding the long flight to the States. She'd talk about the brick faculty apartment that awaited us in Vermont: boxy and carpeted and new; a million times nicer than our flat on

Bořivojova Street, but dimly quiet without our friends crowded around the living room, chatting away the evening. She'd talk about how my assistant professor's salary barely covered our rent, let alone food or doctor's bills—and she'd talk about working the early morning shift as a janitor at the college, mopping the same mahogany classrooms I lectured in, emptying the garbage can full of my students' crumpled napkins and paper coffee cups.

Katka came from a long line of intellectuals. She was the one who was supposed to be offered a professorship in America. Her father had been shipped to a psychiatric prison for writing his own anti-government pieces when Katka was still a baby, and an enormous part of her childhood was watching her mother devote herself to getting him out. I remember meeting Katka back in university and trying to impress her with my big ideas, only to realize the political books I was reading for the first time were ones she had already dissected and gleaned an understanding of years ago. There was something so exciting, almost romantic, about watching this brawny college girl reduce my ideas to a lumpy pile of porridge, making me feel not like a rising star at the university but what I really was, deep down: a skinny kid from a family of uneducated dairy farmers in Moravia. A big part of me had always believed I was destined to ride *her* coattails. The only thing I had over her was fluency in English; I'd studied in London after college. I could see how hard the move to Vermont was on her. I could see it in the way she closed into herself when I dragged her to cocktail hour at the provost's house, the way even meeting me for a quick lunch before class made her anxious. The woman who had once stood outside Party headquarters, chanting "StB



Equals Gestapo," was suddenly afraid to order at the campus sandwich shop because she didn't understand the menu.

At this point, Katka would say the transition would have been difficult no matter what, but that I certainly didn't help. She'd say even when I was home I wasn't really *there*—at the dinner table, or lifting a crying Daniela from her crib, I always seemed to be silently working on another essay. How I ducked into my study at every possible moment, how birthdays and anniversaries slipped into a murky, irretrievable place in my mind—but how I never seemed to forget the dates of Saul Sandalowski's dinner parties. And she would be right. But those dinners! Saul, with his floppy, wheat-colored hair and shirt-sleeves rolled to his elbows, clamping a hand on my shoulder as he led me inside. His stone house on Seminary Road, so mazy and grand I always got lost looking for the bathroom. I was the honored guest, the man with the stories scholars and journalists and philanthropists wanted to hear.

And so, over glasses of Borelo, I told them about the two StB officials waiting outside the political science department on U Kříže Street. "Tomás Novak?" one had said, and I had said, "Why do you need to know?" and they dragged me into a black service car. It was late April, sunny but cold, and as we pulled away from the curb, I saw people outside the university, staring away or feigning conversation so they wouldn't be witnesses. In the headquarters, the officials led me down a long hallway into a windowless room with white walls and a steel desk with a green-eyed, round-faced man behind it. He calmly asked me to name the other writers involved in the journal. I refused. He asked again. He asked again and again, so many times that the hours began to blur and I couldn't tell

if we'd entered the next day. All over Czechoslovakia, writers were breaking down and naming names. But did they really believe sleep deprivation would crack a father with a newborn? I joked to Saul's guests—though I remembered the moment I'd started to cry, sitting in that hard-backed chair as I recalled stories of people brought in for questioning and never heard from again. The lights were bright and one of the chair legs was shorter than the others so I felt as if I was perpetually sliding off, and every time I nodded into sleep the man would slam his desk drawer shut, jolting me awake. But I continued to refuse. And when one of Saul's guests would ask where that bravery came from, as someone always did, I'd tell them we all had a reserve for when we needed it most. I believed that, though sometimes I wondered if I could ever depend on it again. When I was finally released, word spread and I became famous among other writers—they called me the Quietest Man.

Yet as I circulated Saul's living room, with Brubeck on the stereo and little salmon crudités being passed around, I understood I could finally name the names of the *Chronicle* writers without consequence. So I told them about Ivan and Michal and Dita, and most of all about Katka Novak. My brave, brilliant wife who unfortunately wasn't here this evening because we couldn't find a sitter, I lied—when in truth she rarely wanted to leave the apartment except to take Daniela out in the afternoon. My wife who, for the four days I remained quiet in the interrogation room, was anything but. With a newborn on her hip, she led rallies outside the university, marching through Nové Město and up to a podium in Wenceslas Square. She spoke with such force that she persuaded an American reporter



to write a piece about me. So while people with less evidence against them were jailed, enough support came through that my family and I were given emergency clearance—and when I described Katka to Saul's guests, it was like she was back up on the podium, drawing so large a crowd that children climbed the trees to glimpse her.

But then Saul's dinners would end and I'd tiptoe into our silent apartment and find the new Katka in bed with the lights off. "You awake?" I'd whisper, a little drunk off the Borelo as I ran a finger along her pale, freckled arm. "No," she'd say, rolling over, and it was only hours later as the sun came up and I walked her through campus that she'd unlock the lecture hall with her ring of janitor's keys and say, "Imagine eating alone while I was at dinner parties." That's how Katka was: she'd pick up a conversation I thought had ended eons ago without ever reintroducing the topic. "I'm not saying we go home, I know we can't," she'd say, "but maybe New York." Somewhere, she said, with people like us. Somewhere that didn't feel like the edge of the earth. But before I could answer, the first students of the day would breeze past as if we were no more significant than the chalkboards and long wooden desks that filled the room.

Katka continued to push the idea of moving to New York, but things were changing for me, and fast: my two books of essays were translated and published by a university press, and I was invited to speak at colleges all over the Northeast, in Hartford and Amherst. Katka said I was being selfish. I told her I was working hard for all of us. She said I owed it to our daughter to be home more, that if I didn't consider her feelings she'd leave me and take Daniela to stay with her second cousin in Queens. I begged her not to, but there was a secret part

of me that wanted her to go, that longed to be free from the responsibility of my family. I wasn't ready to leave Vermont—not when I felt my life there opening up, wider and wider.

Of course I didn't really expect a woman with no money and next to no English to leave, and it was only when I made the first custody drive down the Taconic that it actually felt real. Of course I didn't expect Katka to find steady enough work cleaning houses in New York, or that she'd parlay it into her own business with a dozen employees before eventually selling it and enrolling in business classes. And of course I didn't expect that three years after Katka left, communism would collapse and the work I'd dedicated my life to would be done. That the dinner discussions at Saul Sandalowski's would suddenly revolve around Bosnia and that a young female Serb would become Saul's newest honored guest—and I certainly didn't expect that same woman to win tenure over me. That my thirties and forties would be about mastering the delicate, tricky dance of pleading for adjunct work up and down the east coast—Albany, Durham, Burlington—and now, for the past two years, in Harpswick, Maine, which, if Katka thought of Vermont as the edge of the earth, would have made her feel she'd fallen off completely.



DANIELA LOOKED different than I remembered. When I'd seen her the previous summer, she still had that self-consciously sloppy, post-college look. Gone now were the flip-flops and baggy hooded sweatshirt, and with that change I would have hoped—and, deep down, expected—that she'd have continued to take after her mother. I had expected her dark hair to be



wavy and loose like Katka's. I had expected that she too would straddle the precarious line between fatness and fullness, settling on the latter, and that she would have the same thick black eyelashes that first caught my attention, more than thirty years ago, on the street outside the Clementinum Library.

The sad fact was that Daniela was turning out plainer than her mother, but she was certainly more polished and put together. Though the afternoon was hot and gray, she wore a white button-down, pointy sandals and creased jeans cuffed at the ankle. Her long hair was so flat it looked ironed, and her pale blue eyes—she had my eyes—were hidden by thin-framed glasses. Standing outside the arrival gate, she could have easily passed for one of the students who used to trudge slush into the classrooms Katka had just mopped. I'm certain that to anyone else Daniela would have appeared exhausted from her flight; rumpled, nervous and probably overwhelmed to be seeing her father after almost a year. But to me she looked like one of those girls, who, with one quick toss of her glossy hair, used to make me feel like an awkward foreigner with an ill-fitting sweater and tangled teeth.

"Daniela!" I got out of the car. I wondered if I should hug her. "You look . . . older."

"Thanks. You, too."

I glanced at my shorts and striped shirt, my stomach puffing over my belt. "You got in early," I said.

"There was a delay at JFK but the pilot said he made up for it in the air."

People rushed past us and through the automatic glass doors. Somewhere nearby, a car alarm went off. I looked at my daughter and she looked back.

"So," I said, just as Daniela said, "So," and then she said, "Jinx."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Everything's good with you?" I said.

"Great."

"Good."

"Your semester's almost over?"

"Yup."

"That's good."

Ever since I could remember Daniela had been so bumbling and nervous around me, so desperate for my attention that she'd blurt anything. And now she was just standing there, looking deeply amused as I sweated through the conversation, her hip cocked and her leather suitcase at her feet. Finally I swallowed and said, "We just finished the Battle of Königgrätz."

"I don't know what that is."

"Ah," I said, and we fell into silence.

Traffic was light for Friday night. Alfalfa fields blurred past, dotted with the occasional farmhouse before the land seemed to give up altogether and retreat into marsh. As we made our way into town, I followed Daniela's gaze, trying to see what she did. There was the hardware store that doubled as a market now that it was May and apricots were everywhere; the movie theater, which for the past three weeks had been showing a film about a foulmouthed man trapped in the body of a baby; the fire department, which hosted pancake breakfasts every fall. I rolled down the windows and the soupy smell of algae swelled in. I liked living a block from the water, away from the perky bakeries lining Willow Road or the Neanderthal bars



closer to the college. I remember taking long walks along the harbor when I first arrived and knew no one in the entire state of Maine, and I sat with some of the men who looked as old as the weathered wooden dock they fished on, making small talk that helped me feel less alone than I feared I was.

But when I pulled into the driveway and Daniela saw my small gray clapboard, when she saw the front yard, wild with tall grass and calla lilies and the rope swing the previous owners had left hanging from an elm, she said, "So this is it." And then her face opened into something between a smile and a smirk, as if anyone belonged here more than I did.

I was admittedly a bit of a slob, and in anticipation of her visit I had washed the floors, vacuumed the two butterfly chairs that faced the fireplace, even organized my record collection: the Ellington I'd coveted in my twenties, the Gould that had felt like required listening at Collins, the Billy Joel I played now that I figured I was old enough not to give a shit. I had wanted Daniela to see I was stable, homey and responsible. But now, leading her inside, I wondered if she was making mental notes for the script.

"You want to wash up?" I said.

"I'm okay, thanks."

"You need some time to settle in and unpack, then?"

"Not really," she said. "It's two days."

Daniela, it seemed, was going to revel in making me work for everything this weekend. She set her backpack in the entryway and I wheeled her small suitcase into the guest room. "We can walk out to the water," I tried.

"If you want."

"Or maybe you're hungry?"

"Not really."

"Daniela," I said, unable, suddenly, to control the shrillness in my voice, "just tell me what you want."

"Fine," she said. "Let's eat."

I brought cheese and a baguette and a bottle of wine out to the porch and dragged two Adirondack chairs together. "To my daughter the playwright," I said, filling her glass.

Daniela raised her drink, then took a long sip, as if unsure how to navigate the line between excitement and bragging. "The craziest part," she said, "is that they did Mamet on that same stage."

"Impressive," I said, a knot pressing into my chest. It hadn't occurred to me that she might actually be good.

"Or bizarre. Mom was worried—I was working on it every night after work, and I think she was nervous about what would happen if nothing came of it."

"Your mother's the biggest worrier around, isn't she?"

Daniela looked confused, or annoyed, as if she were searching for the joke in my words and couldn't find it. I knew putting down her mother would score me no points. Katka and I worked hard at keeping up a friendship, mostly for Daniela's benefit; sometimes I felt as if tolerating me was just another item on her long list of things to do for her daughter, right after making sure that the security system in her building worked and she was getting enough protein in her diet. I wanted to change the subject to something tame and tried to remember the name of the company Daniela had been temping for this year. While I had no real interest in the job, I liked envisioning my daughter at a desk in a bright buzzing office, staring out at buildings and sky. I liked imagining that she also chewed up



her pens and that she popped her knuckles while she wrote—that she'd gotten certain traits from me that were irrevocable.

"You know when I heard, I didn't tell anyone the first day?" Daniela said, swallowing a bite of bread. "Not even Mom. I was convinced they'd made a mistake and that the producers would call to apologize."

"I've always been the same way. The moment something good happens I'm waiting for a bus to speed around the corner and kill me."

"Mom said you had that side."

So, they *did* talk about me. "We're both just really happy for you," I said, a little too fast. "Did I ever tell you that when my first book was published here, your mother spent an entire weekend making a celebratory meal?"

"Really?" she said, her voice beginning to rise. Daniela loved stories about times she was too young to remember. When she was little I used to catch her staring at this one photo of me and a pregnant Katka outside our flat in Prague, as if looking long enough would reveal what we were saying just before the shutter clicked.

"She took the bus all the way to Burlington to get lamb and then spent the next day baking dumplings," I said. "It was outstanding." That was a lie; Katka used ingredients from the Stop & Shop and the dessert came out charred and inedible, but the conversation finally seemed to be flowing and I imagined us sitting up late, finishing one bottle and then the next, swapping stories and secrets. At least I thought we would, until Daniela stood up and said, "Is the guest bed ready?"

"It's not even ten." I hoped it didn't sound like a plea.

"It's been a long day."

I'd set her up in my study, just off the kitchen. It was my favorite room: wood-paneled and dark, with a wall of books and an old copper lamp I'd bought at a yard sale years ago. But when Daniela walked in, the space felt small and dusty, and I wondered if the futon, which I napped on every afternoon, would even be comfortable for her.

"Here are towels," I said, setting two on the desk chair. I hesitated, unsure how to say good night.

"Dad?"

Here it came. I blinked, twice, and stepped closer. "Yes?"

"I need to change into my pajamas."

"Right," I said, backing toward the door. "I'm out here if you need anything."

I spread my students' bluebooks across the kitchen table and listened as Daniela walked down the hall to the bathroom. The faucet turned on, then off, the bathroom door opened, the guest door closed. And then, finally, the band of light beneath her door went out. I opened the first bluebook and read the sentence "Austrian forces arrived near Sadowa" three times without registering a word. I got up, poured myself a glass of water, sat down. Then I took off my shoes and slid quietly through the kitchen, the living room, and into the entryway, keeping an ear out for Daniela. Her backpack was still leaning against the mail table. I coughed, masking the sound as I unzipped it. Then I thought about what I was doing, how easily I could get caught, and closed it back up. I told myself to go back to my bluebooks. But I couldn't. I crouched on the floor, unzipped her bag in a single motion and searched the entire thing. But there was no notepad or laptop, nothing at all resembling a play—just her running clothes, a neck pillow and the



Sunday crossword, and it occurred to me that Daniela wouldn't be stupid enough to leave the play out where I could find it; I'd kept every copy of the *Chronicle* hidden behind my medicine cabinet until we were ready for distribution. Or was I being too cynical? Could Daniela not even trust her own father? I shut it again and returned to the kitchen. But the last thing I wanted to do was read another student essay, so I took the cordless out to the porch. It embarrassed me that I was dialing Katka's number for a second time this week, when she never seemed to make these desperate calls—at least not to me.

"This is a disaster!" I said when she picked up.

"Tomás?"

"She's barely talking to me."

"You got in a fight?"

"Of course not." Right then I wanted nothing more than to confide in Katka about what I'd just done, but it felt too terrible to say aloud. "Daniela's impossible to read. And to be honest, she's getting on my nerves a little—the whole too-confident-to-notice-I-exist thing is a bit much. She's hardly asked anything about my life—and you two *talk* about me?"

"She's probably just stressed."

"What does *she* have to be stressed about?"

"I don't know, Tomás. Sounds like a relaxing weekend to me." Katka's voice drifted. She sounded bored. "Where is she?"

"She went to bed. What twenty-four-year-old is in bed at ten?"

"Can she hear you?"

"I'm outside," I said, but suddenly I worried that Daniela could. Living alone, I never had to consider this. I ran across the lawn and let myself into my hatchback. The interior still smelled like Daniela's buttery lotion. I reclined the seat and

closed my eyes, the way I did after takeoff. "Have you been in all night?"

"Sam and I were at a concert earlier." Her boyfriend of the past few months.

I could see Katka as clearly as if she were in front of me, sprawled on her sofa in an oversized sweater and ankle socks, one of those crime dramas she liked on mute. It was always so comforting to slip back into Czech with her, and in the beginning I'd wonder if sitting on the phone long enough we could begin to feel like us again—not the "us" in Vermont but the "us" that was good, back on Bořivojova Street—but it never happened; she told me about Sam and all the other men she dated with loose, offhand ease, as if she could barely remember why she had married me in the first place.

"Listen," I said, "just tell me what the play's about."

"I honestly have no idea."

"You expect me to believe that? Daniela probably lets you read her diary." I looked out the window at the clear night. I caught my reflection in the glass, warped and blurry. The critics, I knew, would call the father character "unsympathetic" and "unreliable." My neighbors would read about it in the paper. My students would laugh. In one night in some dim Off-Broadway theater, Katka's version of the story would become the official one. My entire legacy as the Quietest Man would be erased and for the rest of my life I'd be known as The Egomaniac, The Itinerant or maybe, simply, The Asshole.

"I asked her," Katka said, "but Daniela said talking about her work too early would kill it." She said the last two words as though she were wrapping air quotes around them. But I knew it made her proud to hear our daughter trying to sound like an



artist, and suddenly Katka seemed to be purposely flaunting their closeness. That's how I felt this past summer in New York, anyway, seeing them together at brunch. Over waffles Daniela had talked about her temp job and the new play she was working on. She'd just read *Catastrophe*, and watching her enthuse over Beckett, I remembered first encountering Anna Akhmatova's poems and feeling like I was sliding back into a conversation I'd been having for years with the writer. Even the new vocabulary Daniela was trying out—she kept talking about the “exhibitionist nature of the theater”—was offset by her genuine ease at the table: she was so animated, talking with her hands, moving the salt and pepper shakers around to enact her favorite parts of the play. Katka seemed to be reveling in every second of it, and for the first time I wondered if our daughter's desire to be a writer allowed Katka to finally accept the fact that she no longer was one. As I watched them, squeezed in the corner booth, swapping food off each other's plates without even asking, it seemed as though their relationship had morphed into a genuine friendship.

I knew that should have made me happy, but I hated the way Katka had kept mentioning Daniela's friends by name that morning. I hated the way Daniela talked about the professors she'd stayed in touch with after graduation, and when she said she was going to see one of them read at the National Arts Club, I wondered if she was intentionally rubbing it in that I'd never been invited to talk there (though how could she have known?). Even Katka's supposedly nice gesture of heading back to Queens to give us time alone had felt like an aggressive challenge: how would we fill the day?

But Daniela seemed to have it all planned out. The moment

her mother said goodbye, she led me down Amsterdam, pointing out her morning running route and the Greek diner where she stopped after work. We walked and walked, long after I craved refuge in some air-conditioned store, and before I knew it, we were in the theater district.

She stopped in front of a theater, small and brick with a ticket-seller who waved to her through the glass booth, then went back to reading his magazine. “I've been ushering here a couple nights a week,” she said. “They let me see free shows.”

“That's nice.”

“The guy who runs it, he said he'll read my script when it's done.”

She was staring up at the marquee, and I knew that if Katka were there, they'd already be fantasizing about her play being sold and all the glorious things that would follow. But I was afraid it would have been cruel to indulge the dream. This was the theater that would end up taking her play, but I didn't know that then. That summer afternoon, it didn't seem possible that my daughter would have her name up in lights. I didn't doubt she was intelligent—she'd always done well in school; all her life teachers had commented on how hard she worked, how creative she was, how nicely behaved. But she had always presented herself to the world in too apologetic a manner for me to take her ambitions seriously—because it hadn't yet occurred to me that it was different to be an artist or writer or thinker here in America. That one didn't need to be a persuasive speaker, or have a charismatic presence, as so many of my colleagues had back in Prague. Daniela simply needed to live as an observer, sitting discreetly in a corner, quietly cataloging the foibles of those around her.



"I know it's not one of the fancy places," she said. "But it has a history. Yulian Zaitsev did his gulag plays here."

"Zie-tsev."

"What?"

"Zie," I repeated. "You're pronouncing it wrong."

Daniela didn't respond. She looked like such a mess in a loose black t-shirt with her hands stuffed in her denim cutoffs, her face blotchy and raw in the heat. "This is my life," she said, quietly.

I could barely hear her. I felt as if we were on the loudest, most obnoxious street in the world. Cabbies were having detailed conversations with one another entirely through their horns, and throngs of people kept pushing past us, their foreign, sweaty arms rubbing against my own.

Daniela took a deep breath. "I'm trying to show you—my life."

"Yes," I said. "Thank you." I was hot, and tired, and I didn't have the energy to tell her she was twenty-three, that this wasn't yet her life, this was an unpaid job she did a couple days a week with a bunch of other theater kids lucky enough to live in New York.

I just wanted to get out of there. I hated midtown, especially in summer, and though I was a tourist myself, I didn't want to be surrounded by them, so I turned away from the theater and started up the block. The disappointment was all over Daniela—in her face, in the heavy way she walked—but the last thing I wanted was to have a conversation about any of this. All I wanted was to get through the rest of the day without making things worse, my flight back to Maine that evening the light at the end of the longest, most excruciating tunnel.

We just kept heading uptown, in the vague direction of her apartment, neither of us saying a word. She's just guarded around everyone but her mother, I tried to tell myself, but I saw the way her entire face opened up when an acquaintance called to her from across the street, how she joked so effortlessly with the lady at the coffee cart. I loaded her up with groceries and a new fall coat she didn't need, and after a while even the bustle of the city couldn't cushion our silence, so I suggested we slip into an afternoon movie. It would have seemed impromptu and fun if we were different people. But I could feel how depleted that afternoon was making us both. We passed popcorn back and forth and I studied her soft profile as the screen colors flickered across her skin, wondering if I could come up with anything new to say before the credits rolled and the lights came on.

\* \* \*

BUT NOW it was up to me. If I needed things to be relaxed, I had to make them that way. So when Daniela shuffled into the kitchen in the morning, still in her pajamas, I handed her a mug of coffee and said, in a tone I hoped wasn't too falsely cheerful, that I had the day all planned.

"I'll show you around town, and we can walk through campus. For lunch there's a decent fish place on the water," I said. "Or you can stay in and write, if you need to. You can even bounce ideas off me."

"No," Daniela said. "Let's check out the town."

But she didn't move. Instead we both sat there holding our mugs and staring at our laps, and suddenly it was like this could have been any one of our visits—in Burlington, Durham or,



the last time she was allowed to stay with me as a kid, when she was ten and I still lived in Albany.

It was one of those interminable winters like the kind I'd known in Prague, where you don't see the sun for months and your life seems like it's being filmed in black and white. That year had been especially hard: Saul Sandalowski was hosting a South African performance poet, always apologizing for losing touch but things were just so busy. Even my old friend Ivan, who had immigrated to Toronto that fall, would go silent when I called and tried to talk politics. We'd been close friends since university and saw each other every week to work on the *Chronicle*, and at first I'd thought his silence on the phone was the residual fear of tapped lines. But after a few conversations I sensed he just wasn't interested—he was working double shifts at a sporting-goods store, trying to save enough to move his wife and sons to the suburbs, and after we joked around and updated each other, our calls grew shorter until they finally ceased altogether.

But in the midst of my self-pity, a small press in Minneapolis had asked me to write an introduction to a new anthology of dissident writings. It felt good to be on a tight deadline again, and what I really wanted to do the Sunday of our father-daughter weekend was brew a pot of coffee and stand at the sink eating cereal straight from the box, thinking aloud. But every time I walked into the kitchen Daniela was there, wanting a push-up pop or a cheese-and-cracker pack or some other kid-friendly snack I'd forgotten to buy. Or to show me the imaginary city she'd built out of water bottles and paper-towel rolls and my coffee canister, the grounds of which she'd spilled all over the linoleum. And when I snapped that I was busy, she followed me into my cramped office and said she'd work then, too.

So she crouched on the carpet with her Hello Kitty pencil case and began, amid my piles of papers, a story. It was hard to stay annoyed while she sat writing with an eraser tucked behind her ear: her vision of an academic. I loved watching her bent over those pages, and I even loved the smell: the room smelled fresh with pencil shavings. We were quiet for hours. Every so often she'd sense my presence and look up, but then, just as fast, she'd return to her story, and I loved that, too. I loved it because I got it. I knew that feeling of wanting more than anything to stay uninterrupted in your head, because there your thoughts came out with confidence and ease, as if, at that moment, a little bit of your life was lining perfectly into place.

But when I looked at her story that evening, I was disappointed: she was merely writing her way into a book that already existed—*Daniela, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—without even changing the other characters' names. And I was more than disappointed when I discovered that the paper she'd used to write and illustrate it on were the first eighteen pages of my introduction. These were still the typewriter years; I'd have to retype the entire piece before the morning deadline, and I still had a stack of student essays to grade.

Daniela saw my frustration and crawled onto my lap, still in her pajamas, her breath warm and a little milky. But she was too big, and beneath her weight I felt hot and crowded, and at that second I'd known what I had feared all along: I just didn't have it in me to take care of another person.

"Get out," I said, pushing her off. "You just gave me about five more hours of work."

But Daniela didn't move. Instead she stood there swallow-



ing as if willing herself not to cry. Her hair was falling into her face and she kept pushing it back with her hand. I carried her into the spare bedroom and slammed the door, then walked into the study and slammed *my* door, and I didn't emerge until Katka's headlights glowed through the window. Daniela stood in the doorway of her room. She had changed into corduroys and a sweater, and when her mother walked inside, she seemed to express everything that had happened just by blinking. It was deeply uncomfortable watching my daughter wordlessly tattle on me. I'd only ever seen that kind of unspoken closeness once before, between my father and the other men out in the dairy in Moravia. They'd survived ice storms and village raids together, and though they rarely said a word to each other, even as a boy I knew an understanding existed between them that I would always be excluded from.

"Give us a couple minutes, Daniela," Katka said, flicking on the television for her and following me into the kitchen. Usually during these Sunday night pickups I'd turn on the kettle and Katka would drag a chair to the table and fill me in on Daniela's friends and parent-teacher meetings and any news she heard from her family in Prague. She always had good stories from the brownstones she cleaned, about the arguments she overheard and the untouched cartons of yogurt and juice those rich people let rot in their refrigerators. We'd laugh as though we were above them in some way, and sometimes, sitting together long after our tea mugs were empty, it would feel as though Katka weren't talking with me simply for our daughter but because she truly enjoyed my company.

This time Katka stood against the refrigerator with her arms across her chest, and before I even opened my mouth I knew

anything I'd say, even "You want something to drink?" would sound loud and defensive.

"Daniela's not staying here again," she said.

"You don't even know what happened." I went into the study and came back with Daniela's scrawlings all over my introduction. I fanned the evidence across the table. "Tell me you wouldn't have yelled."

Katka began to gather Daniela's things from the floor—her backpack, her schoolbooks, her socks, balled beneath the table—saying that from now on I could come to New York to see our daughter. "Do you have any idea how much Daniela looks forward to these weekends?" she said. "All her friends have birthday parties and softball games back home and she never cares about missing them when she's coming here. I've always known you saw her as a burden, but you had to let her know that, too?"

And when I said that was ridiculous, Katka looked around, at the coffee grounds on the table; at the dishes, sticky with food and littering the counter; then back at me, as if I were just one more thing preventing this small, dirty apartment from being childproofed, and started using words like "selfishness" and "neglect" with the same force that had drawn people from all over the city into Wenceslas Square.



HARPSWICK WAS small, just under a thousand excluding the students, and I felt its size even more now with Daniela beside me. We'd exhaust my entire afternoon of activities in under an hour, once we made our way down the two blocks of shops, circled the tiny college, and there was nothing to do but look



at the bay. I walked slowly and feigned interest in the window display of a bookshop. "Pretty lamp," Daniela said, and I followed her in.

It was one of those stores designed to rip off weekenders, with more overpriced nautical picture books than novels and Tiffany lamps like the one Daniela had pointed out. I watched her scan the bestsellers, then poke through the tiny classics section. As she made her way to the even smaller political science shelf, I watched her eyes move through the *N*'s. I always reflexively looked for my books, too, though they'd gone out of print fifteen years ago and I had trouble even special-ordering them online. It touched me to think that every time Daniela walked into a bookstore she thought of my essays, but it also struck me as pathetic that she'd probably never once found them, and I flushed at her witnessing another of my failures. Suddenly I wanted to be anywhere but in the *N* section where my books were not. I lifted the Tiffany lamp out of the display window and brought it to the counter. "We'll take this."

"You don't need to buy that," Daniela said.

"It's a gift."

"How am I supposed to get it on the plane?"

"We'll figure it out," I said. "You see anything else?" I tried to remember the setup of her apartment.

"I don't want any of this stuff."

"You said the lamp was pretty."

"Would you just put it back?"

But I couldn't stop. I pulled a mug off the shelf. I grabbed a globe. What a perfect, fitting end to the play: the aging man darting around this store while his daughter slunk back, embarrassed and ashamed. I wanted to buy Daniela the lamp and a

stack of books and the plastic reading glasses dangling near the register and anything else if she would only stop writing this play, and as I watched her move through the shop, putting things back where they belonged, I felt myself starting to spin and finally I blurted, "Do you really have to do this?"

"What?"

"Write about our family."

She stared at me. "Amazing," she said, "that you of all people would tell me what to write."

She swung the door open and headed toward the water. She was walking swiftly, purse thumping her hip, her long dark hair ribboning out behind her. I caught up with her at the dock. She sat on a bench and put her face in her hands. She was right. I had asked her to do the one thing that went against everything I knew about myself, and yet I still wanted to destroy every copy of her play.

"Listen," I said, "I know what you wrote."

"How could you?"

"Your mom."

"She doesn't know."

"She told me everything," I said, and it was only when the words were out that I understood what I was doing. "So you might as well come clean."

"But she doesn't know," Daniela said. "You're lying," she said slowly, almost like a question.

"She told me all about it," I said. "Last night on the phone."

And right then I remembered how I'd felt in that hard-backed chair in the interrogation room, when the StB agent sat behind his desk and told me things I never would have believed about the people I was closest to, that my friend Ivan from



the *Chronicle* was the one who had linked me to the type-writer, that the rest of the group was quick to name me the ringleader. So much of me had known to trust my instincts, but the betrayal had felt so real in that bright, windowless room. "We had a good long talk after you went to bed."

"But she never read it."

"Maybe you left a copy lying around her house. Maybe she found it on your computer." I met her eyes. "Or maybe she went into your apartment when you were at work one day, just to have a look around. She has a key, right?"

When Daniela nodded, I said, "Then that's probably it. Mothers have their ways. *Your* mother certainly does."

Daniela was gazing down at the row of shops, then behind us at the water, as if searching for a way out of this, and I said, "So tell me."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Say it, Daniela," I said. "The play isn't about our family. It's just about me, isn't it?"

And that was when her eyes filled up, and there she was, the Daniela I'd always known, whimpering and vulnerable and small. "Just tell me," I said, and when she didn't respond, I said it over and over, until finally her voice broke and she said, "Yes."

I watched a fisherman sift through his bait bucket and pull out a frozen minnow. The air was salty and humid and behind us boats bobbed silently in the harbor.

"Daniela," I said.

But she wouldn't look at me, and I couldn't blame her—I didn't want to look at myself then, either. Suddenly I had no idea what to say next. Part of me was saddened that my

daughter was the kind of person who would crack so quickly, that the wall she'd built around herself could be so easily kicked down, but a bigger part just needed to know how the play would begin. Would it start with the time I forgot to pick her up in Queens, or when I missed her birthday because I was giving a talk in Hartford? Would it start with that last visit to Albany?

Daniela turned to me then and said, "It's called *The Quietest Man*. It's set during your last year in Prague, and how when you were brought in for questioning, you were too fearless to name names."

I was so stunned I just kept standing there, wondering if I'd heard her correctly. Finally I sat beside her on the bench and said, "I'm floored, Daniela."

Her face relaxed and I thought I saw something real coming to the surface. "I've been so nervous all weekend. I thought you'd think it was stupid that I was writing about something I'd never lived through. That you'd see it onstage and think, She got my life all wrong. I kept trying to imagine what it was like for you."

"It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing," she said. "They starved you. They kept you awake for days. You could have died."

I decided not to mention the beef and gravy they fed me every day of the interrogation. The guard who pushed an extra chair under my legs so I could sleep a couple hours that first night. Relief was slowly settling in, and what I really wanted was to lie down, right here on this rusted iron bench, and close my eyes for a very long time.

"I've been wanting to ask you about it all weekend," she said.



"The hardest thing to get right is the meetings. When you put together the *Chronicle*."

I thought back to those days. This I could help her with. This was the one thing I wanted to remember. Daniela was staring up at me, a more captive audience than anyone at my readings had ever been, than all of Saul Sandalowski's guests combined. I leaned back and started to talk.

We always gathered at Ivan's after lunch on Sundays to work on the journal, I told her—his was the one flat we were convinced wasn't bugged—and as Katka and I rounded the corner to Táborská Street we'd grow quiet and glance behind us. I told Daniela about the stray cats that darted up Ivan's dim stairwell, and how once inside we'd slip off our shoes and close the curtains and work silently in his kitchen, all five of us cramped around the rickety wood table. We had to be completely silent, I told her, just in case we were wrong about his place being tapped—so much that when I needed to use the toilet I poured water into the bowl very slowly instead of flushing.

"We'd stay at that table for hours," I continued, "until it got too dark to see." I told her we wrote by hand, on thin sheets of paper I'd gather at the end of the evening to transcribe at the university, and the more I talked, the farther I felt from the bench where we were sitting. Far from Harpswick and all the other towns on this side of the Atlantic that I had tried so unsuccessfully to make my home, unpacking and repacking my books and dishes so often I finally started flattening my moving boxes and storing them in the garage. As I talked, these places started to look like nothing more than spots on a map I had marked with pushpins, and my memories of those afternoons in Ivan's flat felt so clear it was almost as if I were back inside,

the linoleum floor cool beneath my bare feet, involved in the single most important project of my life.

I was taken the year we were covering the trial of Jiří Vondráček, a colleague of ours accused of crafting his syllabus from banned books. The government hadn't allowed any journalists into the courthouse and none of it was being reported in *Rudé právo*, so we gathered as much information as we could from Jiří's wife and mother, and every Sunday at Ivan's we'd write up what we had learned. I remembered Katka beside me at the table, her forehead wrinkled like linen as she worked. I'd never been a quick writer—with the luxury of time I could spend half a day piecing together a sentence—but Katka thought in full paragraphs, and sometimes we'd all stop and watch her small white hand move briskly across the page, rarely crossing out lines. All of us assumed she'd be the writer our children and grandchildren associated with the movement, and that was the thing, I told Daniela—everything she'd probably heard about that time was about surveillance and poverty and fear, and that was all true. But there was also something beautiful about those silent afternoons as long stripes of light came in through the corners of the curtains.

"You could hear the whole city downstairs," I said, "but it was like nothing outside that kitchen mattered."

Daniela's knees were tucked beneath her and her hands were clasped. She looked like a girl then, pale and a little eager. "Was I there, too?"

She wasn't. Bringing a crying baby into Ivan's flat would have been too risky, and the most annoying part of those mornings was trying to figure out what to do with her when the downstairs neighbors weren't around to babysit. But I saw how much



Daniela wanted to hear that she'd been there. And if not in Ivan's flat then at least somewhere in the story I was telling—and I deeply wished I could say that she was. I wished I could say I thought about her during those meetings—as much as I wished I could say I remembered birthday parties and pickup times and to stock my house with juice boxes and string cheese before her visits. That I found it endearing that she built imaginary cities and wrote her way into preexisting books, that I had flown her up this weekend not out of fear but from the selfless and uncomplicated pride her mother seemed to feel so effortlessly. I wished I could say I was the kind of person who turned to Daniela then and told her it was her mother's story as much as it was mine—that it was Katka who deserved the attention, rather than being forced to sit in the audience, yet again, while I took center stage. But I wasn't, and I didn't. Because I knew that with her play, Daniela was giving me the chance to feel relevant in the world again, and all she seemed to want in return was to hear she'd once been relevant in mine.

So I lied.

"Every Sunday afternoon, I'd bundle you up in a knit blanket and wheel you down Táboritská Street. I'd park your stroller outside Ivan's flat and stare at you, completely flummoxed. The first time you opened your eyes and focused: it was on me." The warm afternoon was all around us; in the distance I could hear the calls of the gulls. "Inside Ivan's kitchen we'd all take turns passing you around. But I loved it when you came back to me. You were so good—you never made a sound. It was like you knew how dangerous a cry could be in that room. I'd put down my pen and whisper the same song my mother did when

I was a baby. Tichá Malá Panenka. And you were. You were my silent little doll."

I knew the second Katka saw any of this onstage it would all be over, but I couldn't think about that now. Because for this moment Daniela looked as if she believed every word. Or probably just wanted to badly enough. Her gaze was fixed and wide, as if she were watching television. I couldn't tell which of us had scooted closer or if we'd done it simultaneously. But she was so near our elbows were almost touching, and as I continued to talk, I wondered if any of what I was saying would begin to feel like the truth. It didn't yet, but I was just getting started.