COUNTRY OF THE LOST

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In
Creative Writing

by
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Part Two
In the week since my grandmother died, I have been to her house almost every day. Though my mother and her brothers were not raised in a religious home, one of my uncles had some kind of transformative experience at a Chabad house in Panama while studying abroad in college, and has since become much more observant. He married a woman who covers her hair, and their four sons, my cousins, all wear *yarmulkes* on their heads and have spent at least one year in Israel studying in yeshiva. My uncle was adamant that we sit *shiva* for my grandmother, even though everybody else agrees that she would not have been bothered either way.

Still, here we are. The mirrors have been covered in black cloth and we all sit on low stools and boxes on the grey and white patterned rug in the den. Neighbors and friends come by with platters of bagels and homemade quiche and cartons of Peet’s coffee, and my mother and her brothers talk about my grandmother, retelling the same silly stories over and over again, parceling their childhoods out into neat little anecdotes that can be paired with the yellowing pictures stored in the dozens of leather-backed scrapbooks my grandmother kept in her bedroom. My father comes by in the evenings, after work. He feels uncomfortable in most social situations, never mind those involving family or mourning, so he usually stands on the porch outside, smoking his one-a-day cigarette.
I knew my grandmother as a steady, graceful woman. Nothing quick or explosive about her, she was quiet, constant, and deeply affectionate. She didn’t laugh easily, but when she did laugh, it was long, overflowing, unstoppable. She only laughed when she would laugh until she cried. It was somewhat of a family mission, and competition, to get her to laugh, because when we did we felt somehow chosen – blessed, even. And though she was quiet, she did not drag around with her an air of melancholy, or sadness. She always seemed to know when something was off or not quite right with her children or grandchildren, and would find some way to slip a bundle of wildflowers or a sweet treat into our hands.

The summer she spoke about Kaminke and Raisa was the only time I had felt a longing exude from her. A powerful yearning I could not quite believe her old, frail body was strong enough to contain. I had imagined that it was only the beginning of her stories, that she would have to continue talking for months and years in order to unveil all of these hidden tales, but three years ago, when the summer neared its end, I found a job as the blog/social media/marketing/copy “writer” at a local non-profit, which brought my daily visits to my grandmother to an end. We had talked Raisa’s last night in Kaminke into the ground, and my grandmother seemed suddenly tired, spent. My grandmother told me she heard from Raisa only a few times after she left for New York (so she knew that her mother had made it), but that soon the letters stopped and she did not hear from her again. When my grandparents finally made their way to the United States after World
War Two, my grandmother said she spent some time searching for Raisa, but never found her.

The recordings I made of that summer of stories were stashed away in a desk drawer and forgotten about. It was just this week, after her death and the funeral and the awkwardness of shiva that I brought them out again, if only to listen to her voice. I started to wonder if my grandmother had been satisfied with our recreation, our imagined explanation, our fictionalized closure. I no longer was. Especially given the revelation – one that I had not paid close enough attention to that summer, as my job began and I moved out of my parents’ home – that Raisa had not written to Mira, much the same way that Dov had not written to Raisa. What was it about these great-grandparents of mine that allowed them to completely cut ties with everyone and everything they had left behind? What was it about America, this new world, this “country of the lost,” that facilitated this kind of silence? Or does silence just run in our family, like poor eyesight and high cholesterol?

One day during the past week of shiva, my mother found a manila envelope in my grandmother’s bedside table, with my name on it. Inside was a note scrawled in my grandmother’s hand: Darling Lily, thank you for the tikkun. Several other photocopied documents revealed what appeared to be the fruits of my grandmother’s search for Raisa when she and my grandfather first arrived in the United States. A postcard with a picture of the Williamsburg Bridge on it, the scrawl on the back faded to be now illegible; the address of a tenement building in the Lower East Side of Manhattan; the name of a
factory that used to make paper boxes – Cymrot and Cohen’s; the dates and times of Children’s Story Hour at the Seward Park Library during the years 1927-28; lines in a strange type of ledger that read:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Country Name</th>
<th>New World Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dov</td>
<td>Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raisa</td>
<td>Rose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not clear to me what any of it means, but once again I have found myself with scraps, fragments of information, hints at a life, a world. This time, my grandmother is not here to work through it with me, to piece the story together, bit by bit. But nevertheless, this story is both hers and mine. It is a type of reckoning with this woman we are both descended from, an attempt to grasp hold of her, to bind her to us, and to make her real.
The ship was saturated in the odors of orange peels, tobacco, garlic and disinfectants. Down in steerage, the newly homeless packed in together like cattle. Yiddish, Russian, Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian murmurings sounded in between the wooden bunks piled in tiers, stretched out along the length of the rooms. Families claimed whole sections to themselves – children on the bottom, parents up above. The solo travelers shuffled in between the already established groups, claimed sunken mattresses and grey, woolen blankets wherever a space opened up, occupying the borders between countries, between men and women, between seekers and fleers and old and young. Some sought out neighbors of the same language, traded scraps of dried meat for days-old crackers, attached themselves to others for the sake of comfort and safety and strength in numbers.

Lines of barter and exchange opened up among the discards of the old world; tailors took out their rulers and sewing kits; the literate took out pens and paper and offered their letter-writing services; women pieced together sweet treats from scraps of oranges and sugar and exchanged them for buttons, for tin cups, for anything that might be useful in the days ahead. Networks sprang up over night, connections made, deals settled with handshakes and promises of partnership when they reached America.

In the night, the foghorn bellowed low and uncanny and petrifying. It collided into the cramped sleeping quarters, wrenching the migrants from dreams and night terrors and sent babies and children wailing, grown men and women shaking and trembling in
their bunks. A storm hit early on in the voyage and the ship pitched on the roiling waves. Plates and cups that had been scurried quickly away from houses and then stacked carefully in the ship’s corners to give a semblance of stability, fell and crashed on the deck floor. Women screamed. People vomited. There were fits and fits of vomiting. Some could not get out of bed and so they stuck their heads over the edges, letting their guts and insides tumble out of them in rank, yellow-colored waterfalls, onto the hands and heads and suitcases of the travelers lying beneath them.

Those that could lift themselves out of bed, those whose bodies were not yet wracked with chills and fever, ran to the side of the boat and let loose into the sea. Some ran to the washrooms, but there they found the same steel basins used for washing greasy tins after meals, for laundering soiled handkerchiefs and clothing, and they had to wait for the woman who was shampooing her child’s hair to finish, or else sink to their knees before the open troughs that served as the only toilets.

Food was doled out of huge kettles into dinner pails. At meal times, the crowds would surge onto the stairways, the narrow, steep, slippery stairways, desperate even for the soggy bread that was slung into their tin dishes, even for the hot water weakly flavored with sugar and brandy. The crowds pushed and lunged toward the kettles, and those in the back knew they would have to dip into their own stores, the hastily wrapped dried cakes and dried meats that had been stuffed into pockets and socks and shoes in the days before the voyage. Fresh drinking water was scarce, and the young boys were sent
out to steal what they could for their mother, their sister, their uncle who was feverish, who was tossing and moaning, who could not keep anything down.

Most of the Jews would not take the non-kosher food offered by the ship. They clustered together, finding each other through Yiddish secrets and shuckling movements, and pooled their resources so none would have to break the holy commandments. Raisa drifted amongst them for the first days, speaking little, taking their food, offering nothing. She recognized the hand movements, the skin creases, the fat rolls, the wisps of hair peaking out from under knotted kerchiefs, and for a few days she clung to these reminders of home in the midst of a vast ocean.

But in the tossing, rocking, lunging liminal space of the sea and the ship and the sky full of blue full of black full of stars, these remnants of home slowly lost their significance. Raisa withdrew into the silence of her fear, her yearning, her seasick-colored loneliness. She clutched at the wisps of Mira that filtered into her senses unannounced, at all times of day, startled suddenly out of mindlessness by the sweetly spicy smell of Mira’s hair, Mira’s skin, woken sharply by the sound of Mira’s laughter, left reeling at the ship’s edge by the weight of Mira’s hand tugging on Raisa’s skirts. Each time she was accosted by the physical sensation of her daughter, Raisa swooned in the smell of her, the taste of her, the touch of her, until she worked herself into agony, burning and choking from the loss of her.

Little girls ran through the ship taunting Raisa, mothers cackled and sneered at Raisa as they nursed their little ones, as they fed and cleaned and soothed their daughters
to sleep, their daughters to rise, their daughters to live and breathe just ten feet away from
them. Raisa wandered the ship in a haze of desire, desperate for a child, any child, little
hands and feet, little eyelids, little heads burrowing against her shoulder, finding comfort
against her collarbone. In her hunger for Mira, Raisa shuddered away from those whose
language she spoke, whose prayers she knew by heart; she could not bear the sound of
familiar words in unfamiliar voices, familiar actions by unfamiliar hands, familiar foods
cooked in unfamiliar pots. Every man could have been her father, every woman her
mother, every child her child.

So Raisa sought solace elsewhere on the ship, among those who did not know the
God of her father. She began to eat the non-kosher food ladled out each day, and begged
Mira to leave her be. When she stared out into the ocean, the blue black green water that
stretched out and curved against the horizon, the pieces of her started to un hinge, to come
undone. She felt the gasping urge to dissolve herself into the very air around her, to strip
down to the barest elements, to break free of the body that hurt, that ached, that yearned,
that remembered. *If I forget thee, oh Jerusalem.* If I forget thee, oh Kaminke. If I forget
thee, oh Mira, oh Papa, oh Mama. If I forget thee, then who am I? Who will I be?

On the seventh day of the ship’s voyage, Raisa unearthed the small plant her
mother had insisted on giving her, had insisted that she pack away in the deepest corner
of her case.
“So that you will always be rooted, Raisush,” Sara had said, “So that you will always remember where you come from, and your roots will be strong and steady, like a tree.”

She scraped her way up the narrow, slippery staircase, out of the stale stench of the lower decks and into the clear, bright air, where young people played cards and danced and quizzed each other on their English. She skirted the handsome Hungarian men who whistled and beckoned her over and found her way to the ship’s railing. The wind was cold and generous on her neck, her wrists, her ears. She held the small plant tightly in her hands, its leaves now brown and withered, the roots a tangled, bulbous mess. While behind her anonymous voices practiced, “Hello, how are you, I am fine thank you,” again and again, before her the sea was quiet, steady, unruffled. She held Kaminke’s weed out over the edge of the railing and then, suddenly, opened her hand and let it go. The wind whipped it down and away as Raisa stared, her hand still outstretched, still open, and while she watched, the tiny, crackling flower drifted down and out of sight, engulfed and lost into the deep recesses of the Atlantic ocean.

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The ship spotted land after fourteen days surrounded by ocean, and on the sixteenth day it weighed anchor and the weary, wobbly passengers disembarked in the new world. To Raisa it felt as though she had just been born, as though she had emerged from the womb of the ship and into the blinding, blazing world for the first time. The air was hot, hot, hot, and sticky with unfamiliar flavors and scents. She felt a deep and wide
lightness expand in her chest, her shoulders, above her head, as though she had fallen from some great heights and the rush of air was still sounding in her ears, or as though a heavy weight had been lifted off her, sucked out of her, and she had been left naked, exposed and wholly new on the ground of this unfamiliar land.

She looked back toward the sea, toward the sky. Suddenly these were the most familiar elements around her. Everywhere else was strange, new, different. Every sound accosted her ears in waves and tones her brain could not place, had never heard before; every sight was blurry, indistinct. She could not seem to figure out where one voice began and another ended, where one person began and another ended, where she herself began and ended.

They say that when a baby is in the womb it possesses the knowledge of the entire Torah. Just before the baby is born, an angel kisses it in the space between the nose and mouth, and the kiss erases this knowledge completely. Life is spent in a fitful and all-consuming attempt to remember. So Raisa felt, as she stood on the docks of Ellis Island, the crash and swell of hundreds of people swarming around her; the yelling, cursing, whispering noises of a dozen different languages; the blazing hot air of a New York summer pulsing against her skin; the ground unsteady under her feet; that she must feel as a baby feels upon being born, suddenly so light, so unanchored, so unsheltered. She tried to claw her way back to a sense of selfhood, of certainty; she felt a nagging sensation in her mind, weakly alerting her to knowledge once held secure and fast: her name, her child's name, her parents' names, her grandparents' names; her language; her
people; her home; her God – all suddenly gone, suddenly vanished, suddenly forgotten. Here on the banks of this new world, for a moment Raisa felt the complete freedom, and complete terror, of forgetting, of being lost.

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The first days were a blur. A blur of sights and sounds and smells and sensations. A blur of thick, hot air wrapping around thin bones, never quite penetrating into the hollow spaces within, the cold chill at the center. A blur of yelling and pushing and pulling and sometimes eating and sometimes sleeping. And words in English thrown at her like coins into a beggar’s paper cup, tossed at her like a life jacket, memorize, learn, quick, quick, quick, survive, move on, there are more behind you, more where you came from, we don’t have time to help you anymore.

Sometimes loneliness descended over her like a thick fog, and she ached with the ripping, tearing feeling of missing, of yearning. She crumbled under the weight of this loneliness, and longed for her mother. She was tired constantly, hungry only in spurts. Words shattered through her mind at an unearthly pace and volume, yet when she tried to speak, her mouth grew dry and sawdusty, her tongue heavy and disobedient, the words crushed somewhere in the back of her throat. She fumbled over her feet and her hands, sometimes wondering how to make her fingers move. Things once known intimately, unconsciously, were lost now in the swell of all that was new, so that it seemed she needed to relearn everything – how to speak, how to walk, how to eat, how to breathe,
how to be, how to be in this new place, where nothing was as it was at home, and where she, therefore, could not be as she had been at home.

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There are places in the body where missing resides. Missing. Longing. Homesickness. For some, missing resides in the pit of the belly, as a pain that swells and churns, so that it is often confused for nausea, or gas. Stomach aches are complained of frequently, and these people can often be found mixing bicarbonate of soda into water in the middle of the night and drinking the mixture quickly, desperately, trying to dispel the missing as though it were a kind of acid, or indigestion.

For others, missing resides in the chest. There is a shortness of breath when the missing comes on, a rattling in the lungs and a gasping for air. These people will often clutch their hands to their heart, feeling the sharp pain shoot out across the sternum, just touching the bottom of the collarbone. Some believe they are experiencing mild heart attacks, others blame it on their weak lungs, still others merely squeeze their eyes shut and shake their heads until the attack passes, and then continue on.

For Raisa, missing resided in her arms. In the heavy achy way her upper arms would suddenly sag down by her sides, as though great weights had been tied to her arms and wrists and it was all she could do to keep standing upright, keep her shoulders from being pulled forward by the weight of her arms, from hunching over, bringing her back and her neck with them so that at times it seemed as though her whole self was about to dip forward, to tip toward the earth, her arms hefty with longing.
The missing pains came upon her in unexpected moments – when she crossed from one side of the street to the other, when she caught sight of her reflection in the glass window of a store, when she picked up a tomato to check for bruises – random, disconnected moments that contained no warning signs, no deep significance that would signal the surging ache of missing that would wash over her, causing her arms to abruptly slump, often dropping whatever tomato or bag she might have been holding in her hands.

The missing did not produce extensive, detailed fantasies. She did not long to return to Kaminke, did not wish to cross again the dividing ocean, or arrive in her hometown to a crowd of rushing children and chickens. It was not the full, living life that existed there that strained Raisa’s shoulders and arms. Rather, it was tiny whiffs of Kaminke, small puffs of it that blew onto her so gently, so quietly, that she barely knew they were there until she was immersed in them. A vision, suddenly, of weak, baby rats held in the palm of a large hand; the feel, out of nowhere, of the rough, grainy edges of the headstones in the graveyard, and the tickling, feathery weeds that grew alongside them; a sense only, not quite a smell, not quite a touch, of her mother, the presence of her more than the actual body, more than the words or actions of her; the light echo of her father praying. And then Mira would come, enveloping everything in a fog, summoning Raisa’s arms down, down, down, as though they thought they could reach through the earth and find Mira on the other side of the world.

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She unpacked her single trunk's worth of belongings in the small, dark room she rented in the Lower East Side. Two long skirts. Several blouses. A shawl. A cardigan. One coat. Four pairs of thick, woolen socks. And there, wrapped between the folds of fabric packed away tightly, was her father's small, black leather-bound book of Tehillim, lying safely out of sight. She scooped it into her hands, drawing her finger along the creases of the leather cover, onto the unbearably thin, grey pages marked by the dark, Hebrew letters printed onto each sheet. She remembered her last embrace with Mira, when the child had slipped her the book.

"Mama," Mira had whispered, "Take this."

"What is it, Miraleh?"

"Grandfather gave it to me. But I think you should have it."

"Why?"

"Grandfather said that these words could be like a light in the darkness."

"And you think I should have them?"

"Yes," Mira nodded seriously, "Maybe it'll be dark in America, Mama."

Raisa held the book in her hand now - it was barely the size of her palm - and felt the smooth, silky creases on the leather cover. She brought it to her nose and breathed in the smell - it mingled the scent of her father's study, of wine and dust; the scent of her daughter, sweet, spicy; the scent of Kaminke, the rich earthiness, the rank mustiness of manure, and the gentle, syrupy warmth of carrots stewed for hours. The little book contained all these smells of home, and Raisa shivered. She slipped the book of Tehillim,
this book of lights, into her coat pocket, where she could find it, reach for it at any moment, and return home.

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Raisa found work at the Cymrot and Cohen paper box factory and stood with her shoulders hunched, her back spasming and her legs shaking, between numerous other pale-faced, red-lipped immigrant girls. At Cymrot and Cohen’s they made paper boxes of all kinds, for all occasions. Shoe boxes, cigar boxes with pictures of rosy-cheeked, heavily mustached men puffing on cigars imprinted on the tops, doll houses, boxes to hold candy or perfume or socks, and during holiday seasons, brightly colored and festive containers designed to hold gifts that nobody working in the factory would ever receive themselves.

The girl laborers began their days at ten minutes to 8:00 in the morning, and if they were late their meager pay was immediately docked. Most of the girls were a good deal younger than Raisa, and even still, the eleven and a half hours of standing each day gave them backaches, and many complained about problems with their stomachs. They were required to stand at their machines, for they were told they would not have as much work if they were to sit, and therefore their legs ached, and grew wobbly and weak, so that by 6:00 in the evening most felt as though they did not have any legs at all. Many whispered among themselves that the only way out of such a life, of such work, would be to get married, and girls as young as thirteen and fourteen longed – and schemed – for marriage. Still, the $7.50 they brought home each week was vital to themselves and their
families. Many of the girls were practically the sole providers for their families, with their parents ill or out of work and younger siblings to care for at home.

The piecework was excruciating – both because of the standing and because of the boredom. A shoebox, for example, required six different operations: staying and stripping the cover, stripping box, topping, labeling box and closing. Yet a girl laborer would not be responsible for seeing a shoebox through all its various stages, rather each worker was assigned a single operation for which she was responsible and could therefore spend hour after hour after hour for weeks on end simply stripping, stripping, stripping with no end in sight.

This was where they assigned most of the beginners and Raisa was placed in the stripping room immediately after being hired. A few young boys would hang around the corners with brooms and sweep out the fallen scraps that piled up on the floor. They sent the girls squealing and the older women cuffing their heads when they would angle their brooms in between the girls’ legs and bend down to have a good look. There were other areas of work at the factory that offered better pay and even opportunities for continued advancement. Some of these were die making, gluing, wire stitching, table working and the work of pressmen. Yet many of these operations required a deal of skill and knowledge. For example, in order to operate the gluer, the operator had to hold the cardboard in its correct position over the wheel, and then would have to fold the box together and insert it between the first pair of pressure rolls. A receiver sat at the opposite end of the machine and would count and tie in bundles all the glued boxes.
It did not take more than a week or two of endless standing for Raisa to look longingly at the seated receiver. She reminded herself, however, that she would not be there for long enough to learn a skilled trade or receive a promotion. She just needed to get by until she found Dov. That was the only reason she was here.

Yet for all the mind-numbing and desperately uncomfortable physical aspects of the work, Raisa sometimes felt a brief moment of gladness when she saw the piles of cheerily painted candy boxes or intricately designed dollhouses. For an instant she would marvel at the red and white striped candy canes printed large and enticing on the outside of the box, or picture a young girl – Mira’s age, or perhaps a little older – carefully arranging the inside of her dollhouse, lips puckered in the kind of concentration only children can achieve and with dirty fingers, neatly placing a tiny baby in a tiny rocker, or a miniscule plate upon a miniscule table.

In those instances, Raisa forgot the pain in her lower back or the numbing sensation that was buzzing in her calves, and let herself believe that every closed box or carton, painted and ribbon’d as it may be, may actually contain a whole new life just inside. She just needed to find the right box.
Dearest Raisaleh,

Thank you for your letter informing us that you are safe and arrived there in America. We grew worried when we did not hear from you for so many weeks during your voyage over. How we are all hoping to hear more about what it is like there and if it is everything you dreamed about! Tell us, what news of Dov? We pray for you each day, dear daughter, that you are well and whole, and we know that you are walking the path that God has set out for you and that only you can follow. Please, write to us soon to let us know more of your situation.

Where are you living? Are you warm enough? (Your mother implores me to ask.) What are you eating? Are you eating enough? Is it cold, there, in America? Have you seen Bessie's son and daughter-in-law? They left for America three years ago, you remember. Did you bring enough socks? (Enough already, Sara, she is a grown woman.) Now then, your mother has retreated to her stew and left me in peace to write.

Your work in this box factory does indeed sound trying and difficult. Your mother and I were surprised at the description of so many young girls working in this factory. Are their families so destitute that they must send their daughters to work? It is not the picture of America one usually hears in our sheltered area of the world. Perhaps you are glad, now, that Mira did not come with you, so she, too, would not be forced to stand before a machine that spits out paper, or sweep up the scraps on the floor from morning until evening. And even if you could work enough to support both of you, what would she have done during the days? Who would she stay with while her mother traipses off before dawn each day to this backbreaking work? Yes, my Raisa? I hope, indeed, that you have come to peace with your decision, and that you trust you did right by your child.

But even so, even so, of course dear daughter we are proud and glad that you have acquired honest work, and that you are able to pay for a place to live and food to eat. Though, as your mother insisted, we should, of course, like to hear more details of all of these parts of your life.

The news here is not much. The flowers begin to wither already, and the cold has begun to blow in. We are starting to prepare already for the High Holy Days and the atmosphere in Kaminke is rich, and holy. You do remember what it feels like, here, at this time, I hope?
But here I come to an important point. Raisa, I must insist that you do not work in this box factory of yours on the High Holy Days. And I do hope you will find a shul in which to pray and loving people with which to eat and celebrate. It is hard for us that you are gone at this time of year, and that we cannot imagine what your High Holy Days will look like in America. Please, Raisaleh, do not ignore these days, these holidays, these obligations of your tradition. We hope you will not be alone on these days.

Your sister-in-law, Rebekah, is again with child. We are all very excited! This will be Moishe’s fourth child already, all of them healthy, red-faced and such smart little ones, each devoted to their family and their people. On the other side of the coin, Reb Levi has taken very ill. If he dies he will be survived by seven daughters and no sons-in-law to speak of. So it goes, does it not? The world is changing, indeed. But still we are born and we die. Still that remains the same. Yes, we are still holding on to some things.

Well, my Raisaleh, I suppose also you wonder about your Mira. And perhaps you are worried for her. Perhaps you are doubting your decision to leave her here with us even as you see what this new world of yours asks of its young girls. Please, my daughter, do not worry. Do not doubt. Mira is fine and healthy. She is happy here. Yes, she asks for you sometimes – many times – but she trusts that you are doing what you need to do. It was wise for you to leave her here. Who knows if you would have been able to provide for both you and her in your new world? Here, at least, you can be sure she is eating well, she is sleeping, she is playing, she is learning, she is surrounded by those who love her, who have known her all her life. Well, I do not need to convince you yet again. We are here, are we not. And you are there. Yes, this is how it is.

So, my daughter. I will close this letter now. May God bless you and keep you always. May you be inscribed in the Book of Life. And do write to us again soon.

Your ever loving,

Father
3.

A dark-haired Italian woman lived in the room below Raisa. Sometimes Raisa would peek into her first-floor window and glimpse the life, the material world of this other immigrant, this other woman who lived alone. The windows were often shielded by white lace, perhaps cut from the veil she was married in, or the hem of her wedding dress. The lace was delicate and finely sewn, yet Raisa could see from its shape that it had not originally been intended for use as window coverings.

When the veils were parted, Raisa could see a room laid out much like hers - a small, rickety table next to a kitchenette; a single cot against a wall - but colored and arrayed with vastly different objects. Beside the bed sat a low chest on which sat a small mirror, strings of pearls, bottles of perfume. Alone on the wall hung a darkly colored wooden crucifix, the white, muscular body of Jesus twisted and strung, his finely wrought, bearded face suffering, yet compassionate. On the table was flung a brilliant red cut of cloth, with embroidered hems and large flowers printed along the sides. A mismatch of plates and teacups and spoons cluttered the table and the narrow countertop, while sprigs of pink and white and yellow flowers were tucked into empty jars and scattered around the cramped and bright room.

But it wasn’t the flowers or the mismatched plates or the pearls or the crucifix that kept drawing Raisa back to the window. Rather, it was the brown box that perched atop a wooden stand, squeezed into a corner between the bed and the chest that focused her attention again and again. One large black dial jutted out from the middle of the box,
around which were cut tiny holes bordered in silver metal. It was somehow through this
dark box that the noise came trickling, blasting out in invisible waves into the flower-
fragrant air of the Italian woman’s room. Raisa thrilled to the radio. A box that could
challenge the silence at will; that could fill the space around her with a thousand different
types of noise and touch. This was why she kept coming back to the window. The radio.
She wanted the radio.

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Silence reminded Raisa of Kaminke. Sometimes she walked into silent spaces,
silent moments - like the moment just after she had come home in the evenings and
closed the door, shut out the street - and suddenly Kaminke would be upon her, her father
would be upon her. He seemed to wait for her in the silence, in the silence that was
always swollen and tender and raw. He hovered in the gap between the inner and the
outer worlds, in the doorways, and announced himself as the whoosh of wind was
suddenly quieted, the buzzing rush of hundreds of people suddenly hushed. In the silence
of these spaces, Raisa felt herself again sitting on the hard-backed wooden chair in her
mother’s kitchen, saw again her father’s shoulders hunched up around his ears, his eyes
gazing fixedly out into some unseen distance, the silent fence erected once again around
his body, so that he seemed to move in a palpable haze of silence, one that could not –
must not – be penetrated by a hand reaching out to touch his arm, by a child asking his
father a question, by a woman smoothing her husband’s hair, by any kind of noise, any
kind of touch.
Touch and noise. The two were interwoven in Raisa’s mind. Noise was the same as physical touch; it had the same effect. A mother’s hand rubbing her daughter’s back; a lover’s mouth pressed against his beloved’s neck; a stranger’s arm brushing against another in the marketplace. For Raisa, each of these sensations had a sound, made a kind of noise, declared a type of intimacy. Each was a type of involvement, a type of in-touch-ness that mitigated the aloneness, mitigated the breathtaking heartbreaking stench of a dying horse she had inherited from her father – a sense memory passed down through the generations, imprinted into her skin, her nails, her hair, just as it was imprinted into her father. Noise and touch broke through the impenetrable raw silence that swelled and swarmed around her inside the doorways, inside her mother’s kitchen, inside the muted colors of Kaminke in her mind.

Each time she stepped inside at the end of the day, each time the whooshing, buzzing, intimate noises of the street were muted suddenly by a closing door, Raisa felt the bilious panic rise up in her stomach. She felt her breath narrow, become shallow and brittle; she heard the rattle in her chest, felt her lungs gasp for air as the silence swarmed up around her, clotted over her, drifted in through her ears, her nose, and her open, panting mouth. She felt herself drowning in the sudden density of silence, the tender haze that stank of horse sweat and her father’s hunched shoulders and the constant tiptoe, tiptoe, tiptoe-ing of her childhood.

Inside the doorways of this new world, her father called her back to Kaminke, and each time she ran from him. Ran to unfasten and open windows, stick her head out into
the dirty, swarming noise of New York; the yelling, cursing, haggling, jingling noises of
the streets below her; the noise that reached out and touched her, slapped her, tickled her,
caressed her, was intimate with her; the noise that cut through the layers of silence she
had brought with her from Kaminke, the silence that was stuck to her like filth but which
she longed, desperately, to be rid of.

Sometimes, leaning out of her window into the cool evening air, Raisa would
open her lips and her nostrils and her eyelids and then laugh and laugh and laugh. The
sound would ricochet off the window pane, down the brick wall of the tenement flat,
across the lines strung between windows where skirts and sheets hung out to dry, and
then blend into the car horns, the crying babies, the bleary-faced singing fools who
wandered alone at night, begging for change, begging for food. Sometimes these
strangers would stop and glance up at the laughing window, not quite seeing Raisa’s face
in the darkening night, and then they’d throw their heads back and laugh too, cackling,
guffawing into the smoky air, each one celebrating the unseen, faceless noise that reached
out and – for a moment – grasped hold of the other, brief and dark and intimate and free.

#

She first heard the Italian woman’s radio one night several weeks after she had
moved in to the brick tenement house. It seemed to her as though music were wafting up
like smoke through the tiles in the floor and she had fluttered and spun and tripped about
trying to locate its source, to seek out the burning fire which sent the smoke drifting out
and up, lilting lightly into the dreary silence engulfing her at that moment. Finally she lay
down on the cold floor, her knees and hip joints crushing painfully into the hard surface so that the next day she found small, blue circular bruises on each hip and knee, and pressed her ear against the floor.

She lay there for hours, her elbows bent and her palms resting on the floor just in front of her forehead, the tops of her feet cold and tender and her skirt twisted and wrapped around each of her legs. Her hair spread out against the floor, gradually drawing up dust and dirt into each red curl, and every so often she switched ears, so as to alleviate the ache in her neck, while Irving Berlin strummed his way up through the ceilings and the floors: *Shaking the blues away, unhappy news away/ If you are blue, it's easy to/ Shake off your cares and troubles,/ Telling the blues to go, they may refuse to go/ But as a rule, they'll go if you'll/ Shake them away.* In this position she fell asleep, and woke sometime in the night, cold, stiff and with the vibrations still pulsing through her cheek, through her belly, through the tops of her thighs.

Through the floor and the ceiling, Raisa became intimately acquainted with her Italian neighbor’s musical interests. The radio was turned up to full volume when the likes of Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin and Nat Shilkret came on, and Raisa was sure she could feel the downstairs woman spinning, bouncing and jigging around her red-covered table and flower-strewn room. It seemed the woman only liked songs with a quick beat, those where the drums and the violins syncopated in such a way that the feet and legs could not stay still, where they tapped and bobbed of their own accord, and a person’s heartbeat raced to keep up with the toes and the knees.
Whenever a slow song started on the radio, one that began with an orchestral sigh and then dipped into a minor key, Raisa could hear the rush of pattering feet below, the sudden halt in sound, the momentary silence that boomed out and up through her floor, and then the fervent twisting, creaking of the radio dial until a jazzy ballad came roaring out once again. In these silent moments, Raisa, as did the woman of Jesus below, held her breath, willing Kaminke and her father and the unseen God she had left behind not to overwhelm her new world, and then released it all in a puff of air once the music started up again.

As the days went by, Raisa began to edge closer to the fiery source of the musical smoke that swirled around her each morning and evening she spent in the dingy tenement room. She started by simply opening the door to her room a crack, finding that when she sat with her back against the open door’s hinges and her legs stretched out in the doorway, the sound of the music was greatly amplified from her usual spot of lying face down on her floor with her ear pressed against the ground. After several days seated in the doorway, Raisa grew braver still. Tucking a woolen shawl tightly around her shoulders, she would tiptoe out of her room and situate herself on one of the steps on the narrow staircase that led from the ground floor up. She hugged herself against the wall, peeling away the strips of cracking paint and plaster so that by the time she turned back to her room to go to sleep, she had collected an entire skirt’s worth of white and grey plaster strippings.
Though perching on the steps outside her room also gave Raisa access to the myriad noises of the other tenement building inhabitants – the sleepy, hassled yells of the Irish woman above her rousing her husband from his drunken stupor, shushing her three pink-faced, yelling children – it was the Italian woman’s music that Raisa now cleaved to in order to quell the heavy silence she felt hovering just behind and above her at all times. Each night Raisa lowered herself by one step, resting her head against the wall in the direction of the Italian woman’s apartment, ignoring the sharp ache in her lower back wedged up against the stair directly behind her, sucking in America’s best of the Roaring Twenties in radio form through the sound waves that resounded out into the Italian woman’s room, through the door and up the staircase, into the walls and the floor, and finally into Raisa’s shivering, sweaty body.

So that eventually, over the course of many days of snatches of listening, of stolen sound waves and borrowed radio music, Raisa found herself one evening back on the ground floor of her building, a draft of cool air tumbling in from the outside world, the radio blaring close and loud now all around her as she stood face to face with the door to the Italian woman’s apartment.

She reached out her fingers and traced down the rough wooden door to the brass knocker, briefly contemplating knocking. But she was distracted by the thrumming noise that pulsed through the door and into her hand as she lingered over the darkly smudged brass knocker. The noise collided over her, swept through her body and whisked away all thoughts of the honey and chicken fat smell her mother always wore, the curled fingers
and dirtily streaked face of her beaming daughter, the haystacks and the graveyard and the tottering stories of Yankel the barber. All that was left in her was this thumping, twisting, roaring space, a blankness of vibration and silly sounding words. She sank to the ground and rested her head against the Italian woman’s door, slumbering into a loud and jazz-filled oblivion.

#

It was in this pose that the Italian woman found Raisa sitting when she abruptly opened the door later in the evening. As though sensing the presence of another body outside her apartment, the Italian woman flung the door open and almost tripped over the crouching, red-haired woman in her doorway. Raisa scrambled quickly to her feet and the two immigrant women stood staring at each other. The one, dark-haired with a purple kerchief tied loosely around her long, coiled hair, hands on her full hips, her head cocked to one side and a bemused smile dancing on her red lip-sticked mouth; the other, woolen shawl clenched tightly around her raised shoulders, biting her lip in embarrassment but unable to turn away and run from the soft, rosemary scent wafting out behind the Italian woman.

It was the Italian who broke the spell between the two women.

“What is this?” she asked, Duke Ellington trumpeting out behind her, the veils of white lace fluttering over the windows, the strings of pearls cascading over the edge of the trunk in the corner.
Raisa startled at the sound of her voice. It was like the deep, sonorous church bells in the Polish section of Kaminke that would clang each hour of the day.

“I, I’m sorry,” Raisa began, taking note of the Italian woman’s hands, the fingers long and knuckles prominent, the muscles of the palm clear and defined. Hands that had certainly rubbed tired, aching feet, rubbed listless, weak arms, had spent hours kneading and molding bread dough.

“Yes?” the lip-sticked lips said again. “Who are you? What are you wanting?”

“I live upstairs,” Raisa said, her glance darting off the woman’s thick ankles, the embroidered red tablecloth, the black knob of the radio, anywhere but the woman’s face.

“Okay, yes, so you are living upstairs. Good! But why are you sitting here on my door?”

“It was the music,” Raisa said.

“The music? What, it is loud for you? You want me make it quiet?” The woman made as if to turn back inside toward the radio. Raisa reached out and caught the woman’s arm.

“No,” she said, “no, no. Not quiet.”

“Okay,” the woman said, “So then, what?”

“I,” Raisa said, removing her hand from the woman’s arm, “I like it. The music. I like it. I want to listening to it.”

The Italian woman stood quiet and still for a moment, little lines crinkling up beside the corners of her eyes. Then she let out a ripple of laughter, which sent her heavy
bosom shaking and tears streaming down her cheeks. The laughter gurgled and careened out into the drafty hallway, and Raisa leaned into it as she would a hand gently caressing her hair, her face.

“Oh,” the Italian woman said as she caught her breath and the waves of laughter subsided, wiping the tears from her face and sniffing. “Yes, okay I see. You like the music?”

“Yes,” Raisa said.

“And so you come to sit here at my door to listen? Yes? Like some naughty child or some thief, yes? Stealing my music!” She clutched her stomach and began to laugh again, joy rolling up from her belly and out through her red-painted mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Raisa said again, pulling the shawl more tightly around her, “I’ll go now,” and turned back toward the staircase.

“No, no!” laughed the Italian woman, skipping out to reach Raisa and taking her by the hand. She pulled her back toward the lace and pearls of her rosemary-scented room. “Why go? You like the music. I like the music. Okay, so come inside! Why sit out here, cold, alone. Come in! Listen with me.”

Raisa felt the warm, sandpapery touch of the woman’s hand grasping hers and her face loosened into a smile as she followed her Italian neighbor back toward the open door.
“Yes, come in, come in. You want some tea? Some food? I love this song! *Blue Skies.* You know it, yes? Oh, this woman, Josephine Baker, oh she sings just so. Beautiful!”

Raisa let the shawl slip from her shoulders in the warmth of the flower-strewn room, easing into the deep, bell sounds of her companion’s chatter.

“Ah, but wait!” the woman said, turning to face Raisa, “what is your name? My name is Luisa. Loo-eee-ssaaa. But you can call me Lou.”

“My name is,” Raisa began, while Josephine sang: *Blue skies/ Smiling at me/ Nothing but blue skies/ Do I see,* and Lou swished her hips and hummed along with the melody, and warm water bubbled and boiled on the stove and all the various noises wrapped themselves around Raisa, easing her down into a warm, sweet peace.

“Raisa,” Raisa said, “My name is Raisa.”

“Rraa-iii-sssa,” Lou said, rolling the “R” sensuously. “Okay, Raisa, come, come you must dance with me!”

Lou grabbed Raisa’s two hands in hers and led her into the tiny space between the sleeping cot, the radio stand and the rickety table. And there they twirled and spun to Josephine’s trill and the clarinet’s loose, swinging beat, the warm air gurgling around them and each woman’s laughter trickling out and merging with the other’s, and with the smooth, silky notes of the saxophone.

*Blue days/ All of them gone/ Nothing but blue skies/ From now on.*

#
Lou and Raisa began to cling to each other, haggling over the same cuts of meat, sitting next to each other with shoulders hunched and eyes squinting over a sewing machine, in line at the bank. They were magnets for each other, one lone immigrant woman to another, and they grew dependent on their evenings together, to lounge in Lou’s tiny apartment, rub the sore muscles out of their aching feet and legs and shoulders, to gossip and tell stories, to eat and drink and turn the radio up full volume until the neighbors began to yell and complain, and then to laugh and hold their bellies and forget about wherever they came from.

Quiet and shy the first times she joined Lou in her room, Raisa sat with her knees drawn up to her chest and leaned her back and head against the wall, crouched in the same position she had been in the night Lou had found her outside her door. Lou talked and laughed around her. She talked of the sacred and the mundane, of landladies and employers and Charlie Chaplin’s most recent film. She talked about recipes for creamed celery and where to get the best root beer float.

In her approach to the English language, Raisa mirrored her father’s movement from silence to speech half a century earlier. While Chaim was led into speech by Kaminke’s rabbi, who steered his silent disciple through the emotional depths of the sacred stories, the holy language of the Torah, Raisa’s guide was Lou and the holy language they plumbed came from the jitter-bugging songs that tumbled out of Lou’s radio each evening. Lou, like the rabbi had done years ago, recognized in her student the same deep emptiness, the same chasm that had afflicted Raisa’s father.
And yet, unlike Chaim, Raisa did not seek to fill the emptiness, to blur the lines into wholeness. No, Raisa sought to maintain her emptiness, to widen and broaden the vacancy until it had expanded throughout her body, until it encompassed her completely. The emptiness was weightlessness and noise, the emptiness was without memory, without history, the emptiness was without God; the emptiness was forgetting, was laughing, was free. And Raisa wanted it. Lou had seen this in her upstairs neighbor the night they met, when she had found Raisa crouched by her door like a beggar, close to drunk on the syrupy, gliding notes tumbling out of Lou’s radio. Lou had laughed at the sight of her, laughed at the meeting of the beloved friend, held out her hands and invited her to dance and twirl with her, just as the rabbi had wanted to do with Chaim. For Lou too had discovered the music when she first arrived in New York, and since then she kept it with her at all times, either by listening to the radio or perpetually humming. Indeed Lou, as a rule, was never absolutely silent.

#

Lou had been born in the northern part of Italy, surrounded by sharply jutting mountains covered in snow, and stretches of meadow covered in thick grass and dotted with wildflowers. She was raised by her grandmother, a short, round woman who loved wine and Catholicism, and who spent many evenings getting drunk on the light of the Lord and beating the catechism into her granddaughter. The result of this two-pronged passion of their grandmother’s was that Luisa had no interest either in the luscious red grape industry of her country, or in the promised grace of her grandmother’s brutal faith.
When Lou was perhaps three or four, she perceived a strange buzzing in her left ear. It sounded as though a fly or a bee had been caught inside her ear, and the little girl attempted many ingenious ploys to free the trapped creature. She would stand for hours with her head tipped to the left, calling upon gravity to wrench the fly free of her ear. She coated the outside of her ear with honey, with sugar, hoping the smell would entice the bee out from the inside. She would often slap the right side of her head, thinking perhaps the strength of the reverberations through her head and ear canal would propel the buzzing thing out from inside of her. It was no use. The buzzing remained, growing louder as the child turned five and then six, interfering with her balance, with her ability to sleep. In time, Luisa became angry, and quick to rage.

Several years into the buzzing, Lou discovered that if she lightly hummed to herself, she could relax the effects of the buzzing on her balance and her general mood. Somehow, sounding a continuous note of harmony settled Lou’s body and mind into a type of peace. She began to hum constantly, finding the pitch of the buzzing and matching it with its third, its fifth, or its octave pair. The other people of her village came to know her as the ‘humming girl,’ and winked at her as she trailed between the houses. But the continual humming drove Lou’s grandmother to insanity, and in the evenings, with wine-stained lips, the round woman took a wooden soup ladle to her humming grandchild, all the while screeching:

“Who made you?”

To which the little girl would respond, “God made me.”
"What else did God make?"

"God made all things."

"Why did God make you and all things?"

"God made all things, including me, for His own glory."

As Lou grew, she took to staying away from home for as long as possible, hoping to wait out her grandmother’s rage until sleep overcame her. She loitered in the meadows, by the village edges, outside kitchen doors and windows, and quickly became an accomplished chicken thief, beggar, and pickpocket. Often she linked up with other pickpocketing children in surrounding villages, and each shared what they had managed to scrounge that day.

It was while swatting flies and tramping over blue wildflowers that Luisa first heard about America from some of the neighboring villagers. She was enticed by the promise of money, by easy work for all and the thought of eating bread and meat at every meal. The stories were the same in northern Italy as they were in the Polish countryside. The streets were paved with gold. A person who had been born to nothing could make his fortune in only a few years. Anything and everything was possible. Quietly, steadily, Lou made her plans to leave.

She stole away in the night, hopping on and off carts, carriages and trains until they reached the sea, and boarded the great, steaming ship bound for America. At the
time when Lou found Raisa crouching outside her door, she had been in New York for
four years.

#

Every evening Lou and Raisa squeezed together on Lou’s narrow sleeping cot, the
radio cranked up all the way, and mimicked and memorized the melodies that came
lifting out.

From Gene Austin and Nat Shilkret’s orchestra they gleaned the ways in which
American men would eye pretty ladies on the street:

_Ain't she sweet?_
_See her walking down the street_
_Now I ask you very confidentially_
_Ain't she sweet?_

With Fred and Adele Astaire they explored the possibilities for reconciliation, and
took notes about famous American historical figures in the process:

_Don't you know_
_Ben Franklin wrote a book_
_About this thing at length,_
_On the proposition that_
_In union there is strength?_
(...)

_Let's kiss and make up,_
_Come on, let's wake up,_
_For I need you and you need me!_

From Al Sherman and Howard Johnson they learned about Charles Lindbergh’s
solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean:
Through that long dark night, on his famous flight,
Lindbergh stuck right to his post.
Making good his early boast,
As he flew from coast to coast.

To cheer their spirits at the end of each day they looked to Walter Donaldson:

In a little cottage, cozy,
The world seems rosy
At sundown

When they wanted to learn about their new country’s geography, Lou and Raisa

turned to James Cavanaugh:

Sittin’ in the bayou country,
just me and my fishin’ line
I raised a lot of hell and I hollered,
sippin’ on that Georgia moonshine

On rainy days they recalled Irving Kahal and Francis Wheeler’s words:

Whenever skies are gray
Don’t you worry or fret
A smile will bring the sunshine
And you’ll never get wet

So, let a smile be your umbrella
On a rainy, rainy day

And when they listened to Annette Hanshaw, they felt sure that the song, “Who’s
That Knocking at My Door?” had been written just for them, and they swished their hips
and tipped their heads back so their hair tossed along their backs while they sang at the
top of their lungs:
"Who's that knockin'? Don't stand outside there, come on in here!

I just had a sort of feeling this morning
Something good was gonna happen today
Now there comes a sound without any warning
I just know it's good luck coming my way!

#

There was a kind of weightlessness to the English language that Raisa delighted in. Because the words carried no significance other than what they meant right now, in the moment she first encountered them, there was none of the heaviness, the weightiness of speech she had felt in Kaminke. In Kaminke every consonant and syllable bore significance, contained a story, carried a history. The word for 'soup' was the same word for 'sorrow.' And everybody's soup had a tale of sorrow. The children were nourished on it, fed it when they were sick and when they were healthy. And since the All-Mighty One no longer listened to their sorrows, the mothers passed them down through the generations by stirring them into the soup and churning them into the butter.

In Kaminke, Raisa couldn't take more than two steps, two breaths, or speak two words without encountering the ghosts of her people's past. They flitted among the living dispersing advice, sighing in consternation, shaking their ethereal heads and wagging their invisible fingers, whispering their burdens into little ears, chastising the living for living as they did, and reminding them always of the ever-watching Eye of the Master of the Universe. Nothing went unnoticed, unseen, unmentioned. Everybody's life was laid out for the entire shtetl to witness, discuss and pass judgment (for given the centuries-
long silence of the All-Merciful One, the shtetl had long-since decided that the right to judge had passed from the Divine down to His people). In Kaminke, Raisa had suffered from wheezing attacks of claustrophobia, and she had grown hunched and bowed over from carrying the unbearable weight of the entire history of her people on her back and shoulders.

But it was not so in America. Nor in English. In English, soup was soup, and sorrow was sorrow, and a person could eat and be satisfied without having to taste the tears of generations past. Raisa felt light here, untethered; as though she had shaken off the weight of her history the way a dog shakes water off its back. She felt the lightness in her bones, in her arms and hips and the top of her head. It spread through her like an emptiness, sweeping out the clutter that had been anchoring her body to the earth for all her twenty-seven years, and left her hollow, vacant, and free.

#

At first, Lou and Raisa had fallen into a kind of unspoken understanding about the places they’d each come from. No questions. No questions. That was the rule. If one of them mentioned something about the Old Country, or became distracted in a fit of reverie, eyes suddenly unfocused, hands trembling in the air, the other would quickly shout out some lyrics or spin around and grab the remembering woman’s hand, pulling her out of the past and into the right now. The here we are, in this place, in this moment. That was what they committed to each other without needing to say a word about it: wherever they’d come from, whoever they’d been, none of that mattered now.
But as the months wore on and the women became more and more at ease with each other, and Raisa more comfortable communicating in English, so that real conversations could be had without fits of embarrassed giggles interrupting every sentence, slips occurred. A question or two—“how do you say ‘paper box’ in your language?” or “was it cold like this where you come from?” Raisa would often linger before the wooden crucifix on the wall, sometimes reaching up to run her fingers over the smooth, cut edges of the body of Jesus, the severely defined muscles and the tangled waves of his beard. How was it possible to shape suffering so precisely, she wondered. She, who had never seen an image of her God, who understood His presence only through story and ritual (and silence and absence), was drawn again and again to the idol adorning her friend’s wall. The eyes that looked out of the downcast head, the arms that stretched open, yet were still supplicating, still tender, still loving. God as a man! As a man whom Raisa could see and touch and recognize. Nostalgia surged up inside of Raisa. Strangely, suddenly, sweetly. She turned from the crucifix as the quiet pain settled down in her belly.

Lou had seen her looking.

“Carina! Is like you never see a Jesus before? Is not even very good one. Very simple, see? My grandmother, she make me take it.”

Raisa didn’t say anything.

“What? There is no God where you come from, Raisa?”

Raisa laughed. Closed doors and haystacks tumbled in her mind; her brothers’
constant joking, pushing, winking, fighting; the weak, sickly boy who traipsed behind her as a child, who came back from the war drunk and mutilated; the yellow weeds on the edges of the graveyard; the legendary horse that fell; her father’s silence; her mother’s herbs; the rabbi’s tears and laughter and his humble, bent way of walking through the shtetl, hands clasped behind his back, plodding on and always on, in the service of something, someone, nothing and everything. The weight of it all came hurtling down on Raisa, the voices that did not belong in New York, in this Italian woman’s room, with the eyes of Jesus staring down at her. She gasped, gripping the back of the wooden chair and was reaching her hand out to turn the radio up, to drown it all out, to send it all back where it came from and to twirl her way back into oblivion, when she caught sight of one of Lou’s many teacups.

Lou collected things - scraps and discarded objects. Some had come with her from Italy, others she had acquired on the voyage over, still others she’d found and hoarded since arriving in New York. Her room was packed with various odds and ends. The teacups now caught Raisa’s eye. Small, delicate, white china cups and saucers, with gold-plated handles and pale floral designs painted along the sides.

For a moment, Raisa tried to imagine her mother drinking tea out of these cups. Her wide-hipped mother with a roll of fat for each child she had borne, with hands thick and powerful and always a faint dusting of flour coating her skin and hair. Her mother who whisked together potions and teas flavored from the flowers and plants growing in Kaminke’s untamed wildernesses and drank them scalding hot from tall, clear glass
pitchers with several lumps of sugar. Raisa began to laugh. To see this mother try to daintily sip from these floral china teacups – she would crush the thing in her hand before she had even tasted the tea! It was too much. She laughed and laughed, and then Lou laughed too, not knowing why, not caring why, laughing at the ghosts that had come to haunt them, guffawing out their defiance: \textit{you cannot get me here, you cannot hurt me here, you do not belong here, I do not belong to you anymore.}

Some of the wickedness of her childhood came back to Raisa now, the triumphant mockery of her people that she and her friends enacted in the haystacks flooded back in with a warmth and mirth she had not felt for years. Raisa collected her breath, wiped the tears from her face and collapsed down in the chair by the table. She rested the teacup in the palm of her hand and ran her finger over the ridged circumference of the cup’s opening, feeling into the rough edges where the cup was chipped. Then she said:

\textit{“No, Lou. No God where I come from.”}

#

Saturday morning.

Raisa woke up to the pale light drifting in through her windows. Bare trees poking up like church spires, bricks slapped together with crumbly, grey cement, men in brown golf caps and tartan scarves blowing on their hands as they opened up newspaper stands, little Irish feet running over the floor overhead. Raisa curled up on her cot, wrapped the woolen blanket tightly around her shoulders, made sure to tuck her feet under the cloth. Peeling paint strips alongside the cot, black trunk in the corner of the room open, skirts
and socks draped over the sides. The intermittent drip, drip, drip of a faucet, streak of bright blue sky darting in between the white, cloudy glaze. Raisa waited until she heard the radio turn on below.

This had become their sign.

Raisa rose quickly, keeping the blanket wrapped around her like a shawl, like a cape. Thick, mismatched socks pulled on quickly, somewhere a hat, only needed for the walk between their rooms, the drafty staircase. Once inside Lou’s room the heat would curl around her, water boiling, dark, musty tea bags brewing inside. She tiptoed out of her room, discarding the blanket at the last minute, dropping it crumpled by the door so it would be the first thing she’d find when she returned that night.

A stop in the washroom. Cold water tossed on her face. A dirty mirror above the sink. She traced the faint red line of the birthmark with her finger. Her lips were cracked, dry, the freckles on her nose bright against the wintry skin. Her mother’s skin.

She tripped down to Lou’s room, the radio and the heat and something floral wafting out through the hinges. Knock. Knock.

“Carina, good morning,” Lou already lip-sticked, cream-colored shawl draped over her shoulders.

“Good morning.” Kisses on each cheek, hat quickly discarded, red curls let loose, socks tossed in the corner.

“What were you finding this morning?” Raisa asked. Lou visited the markets early in the morning, to have first pick of the meat and vegetables of the day.
“Fish,” Lou said, unwrapping the shimmering pink and grey scaled fish, its glassy eye gleaming dully. “We will make it with breadcrumbs.” The smells of salt and the ocean and something glistening and oily attached themselves to Lou’s fingertips, the tabletop. A yellow cardboard box of breadcrumbs stuck out from underneath the newspaper wrapping. After Lou had scraped the scales from the flesh, ripped out the bones and placed the head in a pot of simmering water to make broth, she would drench the cutlets in oil and coat them in breadcrumbs. Then they would bake for the afternoon.

“Sit, sit, carina, tea is almost ready.”

Raisa wandered to the brown, wooden cabinet, lodged between the bed and the window. Though the varnish was chipped and mottled, the curved edges spoke to careful craftsmanship, loving and attentive woodwork. Dozens of tiny drawers of different sizes made up the cabinet. Handles and knobs of different shapes and colors adorned each drawer. A black and white striped zebra handle. A blue and yellow swirled button. A white chess piece. It was in these drawers that Lou kept many of her trinkets, and Raisa loved to peruse the drawers, pulling out bundles of dried flowers, spools of silver thread, four heavily embroidered handkerchiefs, and hear Lou’s stories behind each drawer.

Today she began on a row near the bottom of the tall cabinet that she had not yet explored. Drawers cut like triangles, knobs made of the tops of saltshakers. Inside one she found a trio of ivory colored doilies. Loosely crocheted circles of cloth, the stitches closer and closer together as they neared the center.
"They were made by my great-aunt, my grandmother’s sister. She gave them to me before I left to America."

The next drawer over, an array of playing cards, mismatched decks, too many jokers.

"The little boy of the woman whose house I cleaned when I first arrived. He would steal cards from the other children at school and slip them into the pockets of my apron each day."

In the next drawer, Raisa found a stack of crinkled letters, held together with rough-hewn twine, written in large, looping letters, in a language she did not recognize, did not understand.

"What are these?"

Lou looked up from the half de-boned fish. "Ah, those," she said, wiping her brow with the back of her hand, "Those are letters from Dani, a man I used to love."

Raisa sat on the floor, her back resting against the bed, the letters in her hands, the drawer still opened. She unwound the twine ribbon, filtered through the letters, pulling out Luisa and Lou from the greetings at the top of each letter, lingering over her lover’s signature at the close.

What was it like to have a drawer full of your lover’s letters? To know where he was, what he was thinking. That he longed for you. This is what she wanted to know, hoped to access by touching another woman’s letters. The ground was cold and hard beneath her. Her hands trembled. She rifled through the stack, pretending they were hers,
pretending they were from Dov, that she was back in Kaminke, in her home, that Mira was sitting beside her, or in another room, or playing just outside. She allowed herself to imagine that her husband had written dozens and dozens of letters to her, that her past five years had been filled with his words, words of longing and love and desire, words of promise, words describing the life they would lead, the world they would inhabit.

She imagined the envelope, her name printed on the outside, a stamp in the corner, moistened by Dov’s tongue, the envelope smelling of him and New York and the ocean and all the hands it had passed between before arriving in hers. The weight of it, the smoothly hewn paper, the way she would have ripped it open, not bothering to be careful. Then the flutter of papers inside, each folded on top of the other, the ink leaking through so that she would be accosted by a barrage of words, smudges, the rolling, curvy penmanship that she could not decipher quickly, that required patience, time, devotion.

She would have created rituals around receiving letters, the same movements each time, so that it would have become a type of consecration, a sacred act. An entire afternoon set aside for reading and rereading, because the first read would have been fast, an engulfing, swallowing it all whole, not pausing or savoring any word or phrase in particular, taking it all in like an elixir. And this is what it would have been – life giving, affirming, a reminder of all she was, everything she had staked herself on. The next weeks would have been spent rereading, dwelling on a single passage for days, repeating lines of it to herself before she fell asleep at night, when she woke up in the morning, like a prayer.
Instead she’d had five years of silence, five years of absence, five years of an ever-increasing distance between her and him, between her and who she had been. The contraction of self, of beloved, the opening of a space so deep, so wide, she wasn’t wholly convinced it could be traversed, that even after she had crossed an ocean, even after she had crawled her way through miles and miles of darkness, she could still feel the immense gulf that existed – a gulf that was not marked by physical space, but something else, so many things else – that still had to be bridged. And could it ever be? Would it be? She had found a measure of relief here with Lou, a rosemary-scented, jazz-filled release that dulled the edges of the ache she carried in her, but now it rose up again, and with the letters tumbling around her and the ground hard and cold beneath her, she felt her breath shorten, her chest contract, and a dizzying heat swirl up around her head and heart.

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“So, carina, you want to read my letters, hey?” Lou washed her hands, came to sit heavily on the floor beside Raisa, pulling her from the misty fog that had overtaken her.

“I never have letters from Dov, from my husband,” Raisa said.

“Yes, yes, that crazy man you chase here, I know.” Lou took the stack from Raisa and rifled through before tossing them to the ground.

“Who needs these men, hey? Come, carina, enough with this. Forget him a minute! Let’s go out. For ice cream. You have not tried this thing yet, have you? Okay, up, up now. We are going.”

#
The harsh light had mellowed when Lou took Raisa to discover ice cream for the first time. Raisa held the cone reverentially in her hand as she brought the ice cream close to her nose to smell it. A smudge of cold cream tacked itself to the edge of her nose and her eyebrows shot up at the coolness of it. She tried to inch her tongue up to her nose to lick the smudge off, and in the meantime, the ice cream began to melt down the edges of the cone onto her fingers. Raisa switched the cone into her other hand and pulled apart her fingers, feeling the sticky, ice creamy residue on each of them. She looked around wildly, wondering at this cold, messy food. Finally she turned back to the melting cone, and tentatively sticking her tongue out, took a long, sweet lick of the creamy top of the cone. Raisa’s face scrunched up, and a shiver rippled through her. Then she opened her eyes wide and gave a *whoop* of sheer delight, spinning and jumping in place, until she saw that the ice cream scoop threatened to fall out of the cone and onto the ground. Lou giggled behind her hands as Raisa learned the trick of it, licking the ice cream around and around the circumference of the cone to keep the melting trickles from escaping, becoming an expert ice cream eater only minutes after her first bite.
My beloved Raisush,

Well, my dear daughter, this is your mother writing to you. How I wish I could see where you are living now, the streets you walk on, the sky that covers you. I know you can understand this need, my Raisa, this need to know the place where your child walks, where she sleeps, where she breathes. I hope you are finding comfort in being able to picture the world in which your own child now lives.

It is already several weeks past Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. It is always such a big happening here, you remember? Your sisters-in-law and your aunts and even little Mira and the other grandchildren were up all night for days before Rosh Hashanah to help with all the preparations. Such a feast we made! Tzimmes and three different kinds of kugel and the roasted lamb that your father likes, and so many challahs all sweetened with honey. There was much laughing and celebrating here in our home, you know, all of your brothers and their wives and children were with us through the holidays and oh, my Raisa, how we missed you. How I missed you.

Now tell me, my Raisush, did you celebrate the New Year with other Jews? Are you finding the others from Kaminke who have gone ahead of you? You know, because you are not the only one to make this trip to America, it is not like you are the first of our home to go to New York. You do not have to be alone there. The women tell me there is a whole community of our children and our grandchildren who live together in America and they celebrate as we once did and they cook together and eat together and help each other find work and places to live. Oh, my silly child, I have a feeling you are not taking advantage of this Kaminke-in-New-York. Why is it you must do everything by yourself, without help, without letting those who love you, love you?

Your father says I must not chastise you in my letter, that I must write and tell you of the gossip of Kaminke and who is getting married and who is leaving for the cities and who has run off to become a socialist. But I feel myself so tired by these things. These pieces of news that are just words, just filling the page. What is it I want to say to you, my daughter? That I am scared for you and resigned to the fact that I may never see you again, and yet each day I tell your daughter that she will see you soon, soon, that we must just wait a little longer until you have found Dov. Oh, this Dov. How could we ever have let it get this far? What will become of you? What will become of us?
Enough, your father says, I am sending you only tsuris and more tsuris and what you need is a little joy. Okay then, I told him, why don’t you find her husband for her, then, or send her some money so she can quit with this paper box business? Hmm? But how can we do that? You know we can’t. Only God can help you now. You must put your trust in the Holy One Blessed Be He, my child. If you are to find this good-for-nothing husband of yours it will be because God wills it.

Now, perhaps I should tell you a little of your sweet child? Oy, Raisush, she is growing like a weed in a potato patch. Everyday it is like she is inches taller! She doesn’t let me brush her hair, you know, she is your child – no question. She screams and hollers and runs away whenever she sees me coming at her with the comb. But her pretty curls are becoming dirty and matted all together and I warn you I may soon have to cut them all off. Why don’t you write to her and tell her not to make such a fuss when I bathe her, let me comb out all of the tangles? She is a good girl, yes, but stubborn, oy, I can’t even tell you. How do you raise such a girl? I tell you, I would give her a good klap on the backside if it were up to me, but no, your father has made a precious princess out of her.

He misses you, you know, my Raisush. We are all missing you in our ways.

Well, dear daughter, enough tsuris for one letter, yes? Now, be sure to look out for Bessie’s daughter Frayda and her husband. Don’t forget to scrub your potatoes before boiling them. Who knows what kind of drek is stuck to them in this new world of yours? And write to us, daughter, you must write to us.

Eat well and stay warm,
Your ever suffering,
Mother
4.

The streets of New York seemed to talk in a hundred different languages, all broken up and broken down until they sound something like English. There were always new people shuffling in in the nights, suitcases packed with pictures and teapots and dirt and buttons. Each morning some new family had snuck in through the rafters, set up camp behind the fruit-stands. Pale faces like cream puffs, deep black circles around the eyes, here to get rich, here to get free.

The streets of New York were dirty and cramped. Everyone stuffed into matchboxes, into shoeboxes, climbing over each other to get to the bathroom, climbing under each other to get to the kitchen, rats flying, cockroaches jumping, lice catching. All mixed with the smells of potatoes frying, meat curing, raw soap itching on red skin, tobacco, tobacco, tobacco, smoke twisting and winding its way up your nose, in your ears, sticking under your fingernails. In this way, the streets of New York were not so different from the paths in Kaminke.

The streets of New York were filled with the lost ones. The ones who were running, running, chasing after letters, after dreams, after brothers sent on ahead, after daughters sneaking out with the colored boys from across the street, after money, after jazz, after God, after the unions, after freedom. The ones who were fleeing, fleeing from burnt homes, from Cossacks, from wars, from peace, from fathers, from ancestors, from God. Everybody was searching for someone; everybody had someone who has been
swallowed up in the streets of New York, the farmlands of America, the mines, the factories, the train tracks.

They would stop and ask: have you seen, have you ever met, do you happen to know, my brother, my cousin, my uncle, my child, he came here a few years ago, she would have been here already several months, in New York, yes, in New York, please, can you help me find him? Do you know where I could find her? Sometimes they stared on the streets, the way he talks with his hands, do you see, over there, the man over there by the corner; the way her hair curls over her ears, that smile, I’d know that smile anywhere, it has to be, oh, it has to be.

And then they would run. After the uncle or the sister or the husband they’re sure is standing on the corner, next to the taxi. They would run the way Raisa ran now, with one hand clamped down on her hat so that it didn’t fly off her head of unruly, red curls, and the other hand clenched around the canvas bag filled with cabbages and potatoes and a slab of whitefish wrapped in wax paper. Her brown, American boots pinched the toes that had broken through the thin stockings, the holey stockings she had patched and patched because who can afford new stockings when you must also eat, must also have a bed and roof to live under. The boots pinched and rubbed as she ran through the black, tarnished streets, trying not to slip as she wound around the careening cars, wound around children swinging at balls with sticks and slabs of wood, and the women squeezing vegetables, squeezing babies, squeezing sweethearts.
The bag twisted around and around her wrist, cutting off the circulation to her ungloved hand and yet still she ran, sending up splashes of muddy, slushy water as she pounded through the crackling, spitting streets. She ignored the peddlers and their broken dolls and black purses; she ignored the men in their caps, holding out the deep fried potato knishes wrapped warm and greasy in yesterday’s newspaper; she ignored the popping, whizzing, fizzing of the streets as she ran, ran toward the dreams and the letters that never came, ran toward the strange boy bird, toward tangled haystacks and tangled bed sheets, toward the mole on his shoulder, toward escape, toward love, toward the crash-into-me-please, toward her husband of ten years, toward Dov! because she knew it was him, because it must have been him, Dov...Dov.

Yes, she hadn’t seen him in five years, yes, it was true she had trouble conjuring up his face in her mind. But still, she knew it was him, she was sure it was him. She knew it from the way her stomach leaped into her throat when she him, saw the man in the overcoat stride out of the butchery, she knew it from the jutted nose, the way his ear...the way his neck, she knew it from the way her hands began to tremble, from the way her mouth dried out and her tongue grew thick and heavy.

And so she ran after him, afraid to call out his name in case he disappeared, as he had disappeared again and again, from the streets of New York, from the dirt pathways of Kaminke, from her fitful nights of hallucinations in the cold tenement building, from her mind, from her hands. She ran again this time, sure it is him this time, because why else was she here on these streets? Why else did she spend eleven hours a day huddled over a
machine that cuts cardboard paper into squares and rectangles? Why else did she share a washroom with strangers? Why else did she leave her child across the world? For this, for Dov, for the man in the woolen overcoat, for the way he stuffed his large hands in his pocket, for the meeting of the beloved friend, the bird who squawks out in the same tones as she, for promises whispered over and over again thousands of years ago, for the shared mutiny, for the desertion of the Holy One Blessed Be He, for everything she has been staking her life on.

But even as she ran she felt the wind break through her chest, burning her lungs and stinging her face. Even as she ran she lost sight of the man in the woolen overcoat, he blended into the crowds of men, the crowds of all the lost ones, the ones with hunched shoulders and chipped teeth. And she, too, blended into the crowds, the throngs of people running, seeking, fleeing, wheezing, believing, still, desperately believing. It was not him, it was not Dov. And it was also not her. She was not herself. She was one more haggard woman on the streets of New York, one more stranger washed up on the shores of this cavernous land. She stopped running at the end of the street, her thin stocking’d legs soaked from the knees down.

A rip had started along the seams of the canvas bag in her hand and several of the potatoes had fallen out along the way. She stared back behind her, along the path she ran. She watched as hungry, dirty little children darted in between legs and wheels to snatch the fallen potatoes out of the snow. For a moment she imagined that it was Mira who was sliding across the pavements, Mira who was gathering potatoes into her pockets, Mira
who was wiping the dirt off of one and eating it raw, right there in the street. She blinked and cradled the bag in her arms, feeling the weight of the cabbage against her body, the rank smell of the whitefish seeping out of the bag and onto her coat, her skin, her fingernails.

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It was while standing beside the aching, whispering, giggling girls at the paper box factory that Raisa learned of the Jewish organization created to seek out missing husbands. It was at Cymrot and Cohen’s that Raisa first understood that she was not the only woman who had been left, who had been stranded with a babe in arms by a man who promised to return, promised to send money, only to disappear. It had happened not just to women back home, in the shtetl, but also here in New York, in America. Even after they’d made the trip together, the excruciating, nauseating, sea-sick trip across the Atlantic, children and all, still the husbands ran off, never came home, disappeared into the forgetful, dark night, leaving their wives and children hungry and alone. And it was at the paper box factory that Raisa learned of the many orphanages that had sprung up in New York, places where deserted women could take their children, could leave their children, could abandon their children, when there was no money, no food, no family to take them in. Raisa felt the nausea surge up in her belly at the thought of Mira in such a place, and for the first time since she had left Kaminke, something like gratitude toward her father stirred in her chest.
Over weeks that led into a month, maybe two, Raisa collected information about the Bureau of Missing Husbands. Would they know where to find Dov? Could they help her? She was afraid to go to this Bureau – this office that would wearily, systematically write down her name, Dov’s name, into a registrar of documents, a ledger of unfeeling, typewritten information. Whittling their whole lives down into a few facts on a piece of paper. Name: Raisa; Age: 27; Birthplace: Kaminke Shtetl; Occupation: Factory Worker; Children; One daughter, Mira. Husband’s Name: Dov; Age: 27; Birthplace: Kaminke Shtetl; Occupation: Soldier, no – Tailor; Last Seen: Five years ago.

She was afraid of the judgments that would come, the pitying looks of, five years honey, that’s an awfully long time. She was afraid of the need to explain, to defend herself, defend him. No, he didn’t desert me, he didn’t run away…he’s just missing, he’s been hurt, maybe, or he was sick, or he got mixed up in something he shouldn’t have. But he wouldn’t just leave without a trace – he promised, we had plans, we had dreams, something must have happened. Please, can you help me? Can you tell me if he’s alive, if he even made it to America? No, no, I’m not angry at him, I’m just worried, you see, just concerned. I’m not angry, I’m not angry, I’m not angry.

And the Bureau was overwhelmed – she knew that. That the city and the country were swarming with the deserting and the deserted. That there were only so many ways to seek out and entice the deserting, missing, disappeared, running husbands to come back to their wives and families; that once they were gone, if they wanted to remain lost, they could do so easily, without much effort. And so what were the chances? What were
the odds that she could get her name to the top of the list; that her husband would be easy to track down? She didn’t have a photograph of him, she could barely remember enough physical details of his face to describe him (besides, wouldn’t he have changed, after so many years in this strange and unfriendly country?), she didn’t even know if he had made it, if he had arrived, if he had wobbled onto the multicolored, multi-voiced land, if he had struggled to eat, to breathe, to walk, to speak, if he had suffered under the crushing loneliness, if he had missed her, if he had chased after women in the streets thinking for a moment that they were her, his wife, his Raisa.

No, she couldn’t go to this Bureau. It would be admitting he was actually lost, admitting she was lost, confirming every bitter fear, every knowing look that ever passed between her mother and father. It would mean she could not find him by herself, when of course she could, she could find him—that was why she was here, why she had come to America after all. This wild and dizzy country, where things whooshed and cracked with great noise and speed, where there were no aching silences crushing down on her, where she could revel in the weightlessness of being unanchored, undefined, unspecified. Yes, of course that’s why she had come. Of course she could find her own husband, her Dov. She didn’t need this Bureau, this place of weeping, and miserable, pathetic women. She didn’t need their services or their charity, she would seek him out herself, reach into the cracks and crevices, calling to him in the language they had invented for themselves in their childhood, the language of laughter and rage and desire.

All she needed to do was find Cousin Shmuly.
To my Mama,

My cousin is helping me write this. He wants you to know that.

Grandfather says you are in America and that soon you will find Papa. Did you find him yet? Thank you for the postcard from New York! I never saw such a bridge before! The "Williamsburg Bridge," the picture says. Have you walked across it, Mama? Grandfather says I can keep it by my sleeping mat and so I put it on the wall and now I can see what you see everyday.

Did you eat pickles yet? How many did you eat? Are you sleeping on a bed made out of feathers? Is it true what they say, that people in America eat meat and fish and bread every day, not just on Friday nights? I am fine and being good and also yesterday Leah, you remember Leah who I play with sometimes? Well, yesterday Leah and I had a fight because she said I did not invite her to play in my games with my cousins but it is not true, of course I would invite her it is just that I did not have much time to play and so I did not tell her. Because I was learning again with Grandfather for most of the afternoon.

Oh, Mama, I am looking very hard to find all of the light and repair the broken vessels. Grandfather says only then will we be together again because you must look for Papa while I look for the light. But I wish I could help you look for Papa and I wish you could help me look for the light. It is very hard to be looking alone. But I am not alone because I have Grandfather and Grandmother but I think you are alone in America, Mama and I am sad and I miss you.

Grandmother says to tell you that I am being a good girl and helping her cook and clean even while I study with Grandfather and play with my cousins. And I go to bed when I am told and get up when I am told and I am learning how to make challah and prepare the whitefish. But I do not like it when she combs my hair because it hurts and she does it very hard and not at all how you used to do it. And I know in your postcard you said not to make a fuss when she does it but I think it is not fair that I know there is a way to comb my hair without it hurting because that is how you used to do it and why can't she do it like that too? Maybe you can write to her to tell her how you did it?

Grandfather asked me about the Tehillim that he gave me and so I told him that I gave them to you and he was quiet for a long time but then I told him that I gave them to you.
because maybe it would be dark in America and you would need light. So then he smiled again and said I had done right but that he hopes you are taking good care of them. But I think they are probably taking care of you, right Mama?

Grandfather and Grandmother are calling me now to come and eat so I will have to stop writing even though I am not actually writing but my cousin is writing. Mira says to cross that out but I am not going to. Hi Tante Raisa! Can you send me a postcard from New York too?

Okay now we are really finished.

Please write to me (us!) soon and tell me (us!) all the things you are seeing and doing and eating!

Your daughter/Your nephew,

Mira/Baruch
Every morning Seymour (né Shmuly) slicked and combed his thinning hair carefully over the balding patch of skin gleaming off the top of his head. He brushed down the brown sports coat and neatly tightened a thin purple tie around his neck. He filed his nails to a perfect oval and glossed his mustache. Then he kissed the cheek of his thin and ever-frowning wife, tousled his sons’ hair, and walked jauntily toward Orchard Street to check on his businesses, several cigars tucked into his inner breast pocket, a felt, grey hat perched on top of his balding head.

These were the things that let Seymour know that he had made it. Yes, indeed. In the ten years since he had been in this country, Seymour had carefully observed the manner and dress of all those American-born – or if not quite American-born, then American-rich. He noted the accessories they had and he went out to find them – hats and ties and well-shined shoes. Even before he had the money or the know-how to step inside Brooks Brothers or Sears and Roebuck, Seymour scouted and scrapped and managed to find his way into well-pressed pants, slimming waistcoats and perfectly folded collars.

But of all the accoutrements that he had acquired over the years so as to be able to swagger through the Lower East Side, doling out advice to his less-capable shtetl-transplanted brethren, it was his mustache for which he felt the greatest pride. From the days he had spent peddling lace gloves in SoHo, to offering up his tailoring services to the bankers on Wall Street during their lunch hours, Seymour had been growing and grooming and perfecting his mustache.
And it was a thing to behold. It seemed that, while the top of his head was gradually depreciating in hair, leaving only a few straggling, greasy threads for him to arrange, the tiny spot between his large, beak-nose and the thin, too-red upper lip, was only increasing its capital. The mustache was thick and soft and waved in just the right places. Seymour didn’t allow anyone to touch it. When he stepped into the barbershop for a shave, he took care to note the trajectory of the blade in all its minute movements, and was known for once grabbing the shaving blade and nicking the tip of his barber’s ear off when it had inched too near the mustache.

Ten years in America had produced both the magnificent mustache and a new paunch above Seymour’s waistline. His perfected swagger had just as must to do with his flourishing tailor and candy businesses, as it did with readjusting his pelvis to handle the additional weight of his stomach. Strutting down Orchard Street, as he did every morning, Seymour tipped his hat to the various gaunt old ladies who hurried by him muttering and cursing in the old language that Seymour was gradually forgetting (and which he never let his sons hear or speak). He selected several plump peaches from old man Harry’s fruit stand, tossed a few coins into the outstretched hand, and strolled toward “Seymour Corner” – as he liked to call it – peach juice squirting out of his mouth and plummeting down his face and hands, leaving a sticky, pink trail along his skin.

“Seymour Corner.” It sent goose bumps shivering in pleasure down his spine every time he thought about it, and though by now, everyone in the Lower East Side referred to it as such, still he wondered what it would take before the city would erect a
sign officially and publicly announcing the spot. He spent hours envisioning the unveiling ceremony of the sign at Seymour Corner – named so because of the two stores opposite from each other that Seymour owned. He imagined himself at the center of a throng of people, cameras flashing, and reporters taking down every word he said. Mayor Jimmy Walker himself would be there to shake Seymour’s hand and congratulate him on his business acumen, welcoming him into that great and coveted society reserved for Real Americans.

Seymour stood on his Corner and looked first toward the tailor shop, and then toward the candy shop. Every morning he paused, resting in the delicious uncertainty of which store he would enter first, which accounts he would check first, which store manager he would have meaningless and idle chatter with first. Would it be the candy shop, where the nauseatingly sweet air would accost him as soon as he entered – a swirling mess of hard, cherry-red candies and root beer floats topped with soft, creamy foam and sticks upon sticks of pink-and-white whirled mints? Or would it be the tailor shop, musty and quiet, with folds and rolls of fabric draped on every open surface, and sewing machines and tape measures precariously placed on top of chairs and wooden tables?

Seymour sighed deeply. He laid his hands, still pink and sticky from the peaches, on his belly and rested his weight into his heels. His grey, felt hat was hot and itchy on his head and sweat was mixing with the grease in his hair. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and turned toward the tailor shop – his first American love.
In 1917, Seymour – then Shmuly – was a bumbling, under-skilled tailor with a thin and bird-like wife and a sickly young son. The Tzar had sent his summons to all the young Jewish boys in the Pale to join his army, and the sons of the shtetls were scrambling. But while most surrendered to their duty, some – like Shmuly – took their families and fled. Through a series of underground routes and hideouts, Shmuly, his wife Bluma and their son Mashel (now Murray), escaped the vicious war that ravaged Europe – destroying Gentile and Jew alike – and arrived hungry and blessed on the free shores of America.

Shmuly took to it immediately. He loved the crackling sun gleaming off cement streets and glass windows tucked into brick houses. He loved the speed, the fast-talking, fast-walking jauntiness that spoke to ease, to pomposity, to the self-made man. He loved the sound of the English language, less guttural and harsh than the language from home, silkier in its construction. He spent years rehearsing the new shapes his mouth needed to make in order to speak “American”. He twisted and turned his tongue, his lips, his throat, grinding the Yiddish out of him, the mongrel tongue that mixed Hebrew and German and Polish, the self-deprecating humor, the subtle nods to Loshen Kodesh – the Holy Language – out of him, and threw his whole self into the glossy richness of English.

Still, the first years were hard. Bluma began to suffer from blinding migraines soon after they arrived and lay in the cot in their one-room apartment most days, her body and soul wasted almost to the point of disappearing. Their young son, Mashel, would sit
on the front steps throwing rocks, and crushing the beetles and ants with his fingernails.

Meanwhile, Shmuly hustled. He peddled what he could and bartered for swaths of fabric.

In the evenings he hunched over the rickety table, shushing his son and sewing the
delicate women’s lace gloves, which he flashed the next day on the streets of SoHo. Thus
slowly, excruciatingly, began to establish his reputation as a smooth talker and master
tailor.

But his big break (as he had learned to call it) hadn’t come until the day he
received his new, American name. Establishing himself on a corner of Wall Street,
Shmuly carted his sewing kit around with him each day, and offered up his services to the
men in their suits and hats: “Got a rip? Hey, mister? Got a rip? Let me fix that for you,
real nice, real quick, missus won’t even notice.” He followed after the men brandishing
thread and needle, until some of them relented, showing him cuffs and hems that were
coming undone, and allowing the strange, hawk-like Jew to sew them up.

Pretty soon, though, he became a kind of informal institution. He even had regular
customers, who brought their shirts and pants and ties to the wizard tailor on the street
corner in the morning, and picked them up again in the evening after work. They liked
the easy way the Russian-born man joked with them, tried out new idioms with them,
treated their fabrics with reverence and fastidiousness. He walked with great precision on
the line between deference and ambition, and the Wall Street men liked to see that, liked
to feel that their position was coveted, that they, too, could provide a service to this
street-side tailor, but who, in the end, was certainly no threat to them.
One morning, a young, up-and-coming stockbroker named Jules Pratt stopped by Shmuly’s station with a rip in the ribbon around his felt hat. It had happened just that morning, and young Jules needed a quick fix before commending himself to the mercies of the upper echelons of the banking world. As he stood on the corner, hatless and fidgety, while Shmuly tucked the dark, purple ribbon back into place, his eye fell on the sack of lace gloves resting by Shmuly’s feet.

“Well, I’ll be,” Jules said, whistling admiringly as he reached down to pull a glove out of the bag. “My sisters would kill for one of these babies,” he continued.

Shmuly, with his mouth full of pins and his hands flying across the ribbon, only shrugged.

“You know,” Jules said, fingering the glove while reaching into his pocket for a cigarette, “you should think about opening up a shop, my friend.”

Shmuly extricated the pins from his mouth and kept his fingers moving, lovingly folding and stitching the ribbon around the hat.

“Me? A shop? No, no, mister, is very expensive, a shop. I got no money. No burns in my pockets, see?”

Shmuly glanced quickly at the young man’s face to determine whether he had used the idiom correctly. Jules was still fumbling with a lighter and showed no smirk of condescension, no raised eyebrows in confused surprise, and so Shmuly was satisfied, and tucked this new idiom into his cap like one more feather.
Jules lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply, holding onto the sweet, burning air until his lungs could no longer contain it, and then releasing it, the grey smoke billowing out onto the grey concrete background. Shmuly reached out gingerly, deferentially, and extricated the lacy glove still draped between Jules’ fingers.

“Oh, money,” Jules said, flicking the still-burning ashes out and away from him, “money can be got, no problem.”

Shmuly reached the last stitch around the hat’s circumference, but paused, delaying its completion, desperate to learn the American secret for no-problem money.

“Anyway,” Jules said, shrugging and checking his watch, “you almost done with that?”

Shmuly slumped in disappointment and, then, in a second, tied up the thread and handed back the neatly stitched hat.

“Perfect,” Jules said, turning the hat around in his hands and admiring the needlework, “you can’t even hardly see the stitches!”

He turned to Shmuly and stuck out his hand.

“Thanks, pal. Say,” he paused, “what’s your name, again?”

“Shmuly.”

“Well,” Jules laughed, “you sure can’t open up a shop with that name.” He put his newly stitched hat back on and made as if to leave, but Shmuly called him back.

“Wait, wait. What name, then? What name is good for shop?

“Oh,” said Jules, anxiously looking at his watch, “you know, you need a good
American name. Like...Seymour or something. Gotta go, pal. Thanks again!"

That same night, Shmuly went home and announced to his family that he had a new name.

“What are you saying, Shmuly?” Bluma asked, her voice shooting up from the cot where she lay with a cold compress over her eyes.

“Not Shmuly – Seymour,” her husband thundered. “We are American now. New country, new language, new life, new name.”

Bluma tossed on the bed.

“And Mashel, where are you my son?” Seymour called the boy to him, “You must also have a new name. I have been thinking about it all afternoon. From now on you will be Murray, yes? You understand? You are no longer Mashel. You are Murray.”

The boy nodded mutely.

“Mashel was my father’s name!” Bluma sputtered from the cot.

“Your father is not here,” Seymour said, not turning around. “So,” he said to his son, “We must practice. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Mash – Murr-ay,” the boy rolled the new sounds around his mouth.

“Good, boychik,” Seymour bellowed, ruffling his son’s hair. “Practice it! You must practice so you do not sound like a cat who is stuck in a chimney.”

Murray stood by the table, his face twisted in consternation as he unraveled the identity with which he had arrived to this country, and reconstructed another one from the same threads, but organized and arranged in a new and unfamiliar way.
Seymour turned toward his wife. “And you, Bluma—“

Bluma struggled to raise herself up to a seated position, the cold shmatte sliding from her eyes and settling toward her ear, caught in her thin and unwashed hair.

“No, See-more,“ she spat the name out of her mouth, “You will not give me this new name. I am not American! Maybe you will be, and you will make our son into this thing, but not me. Okay? Not me. I am named for my mother’s grandmother. You remember my mother? She had black hair and black eyes and was strong as an ox. Yes? You remember? Or perhaps you are forgetting the people as quickly as you are forgetting the names. Feh!”

She collapsed back down onto the cot, her eyes searing with hot, white pain as the migraine clenched into her forehead, her jaw, her shoulder blades. She reached for the rag tangled in her hair and placed it back over her eyes, settling into the cool dark where peace was just barely possible.

“Mu-ray. Murr-ay. Mur-ray.” The little boy stood stock still by the table, repeating his new name over and over again until the sounds had no meaning left in them at all.

#

But despite Bluma’s disdain and protestations, Seymour’s new name did indeed appear to offer a ticket onto the American ladder of success. So much so, that Seymour would later categorize his life into periods denoted as “Before Seymour” and “After Seymour.” Shortly after his naming, Seymour, with the help of his Wall Street regulars,
applied for a bank loan to open up his own tailor shop in the Lower East Side. He vowed that the child who was conceived on the night his loan application was approved would not be given an Old Country name at all, that the child would be a fully American child, with an American name, speaking the American language, and who someday, would inherit a large sum of American wealth from his father.

Nathan was born just as Seymour’s first shop opened its doors, after a harrowing pregnancy and a labor that almost killed Bluma. By this time, Seymour had spoken so often and so emphatically about the transformative effect of his new, American name, that the fever for renaming had swept through the tenements on the Lower East Side. Seymour became the guide for those seeking American-ized names, and the people flocked to him as they might King Solomon. Soon there were women stopping him on the street with days-old infants in their arms, begging him to name their American-born children; young men waiting for him outside his home offering up their Old Country names and trembling with anticipation as Seymour paused, considered, and then baptized them anew.

In order to meet the high demand of name-seekers, Seymour began to stop strangers on the street and ask them their names; to pore over newspaper articles, his eyes straining over the English lettering, seeking out the captions under photographs, the writers listed under the headings. In this way, he created a compendium of names in his mind. At times he liked to close his eyes and slide over them, Sam, Bernard, Claire,
Jennifer, as though he were running his tongue over sweet candy, savoring the syllables, relishing the fact that they were his to dole out as he pleased.

For the most part, Seymour simply rearranged the sounds of the Yiddish name into its American counterpart. There were only a few times when he made a significant error, like the young man, Yehudah, who Seymour re-named as Judy; or the young woman, Fruma, who Seymour re-named as Freddie. Still, all in all, Seymour was diligent and considerate in his powerful new role in the community, and all the more so when he realized that his naming services could entice new customers for his tailoring services.

So that when the tailor shop opened its doors, it was already intended for a dual purpose – in the front of the store, a tailor and his sewing machine; spools of thread; swaths of cloth and fabric; rulers; pins; pencils. Yet in the back of the store, Seymour added a little room with a desk, an armchair, a lamp, and several tall, hard-backed wooden chairs, where he met with the Name Seekers, as they had begun to be called. He started keeping a detailed ledger, marking the date and the Old Country name of the Seeker, as well as the new name given by Seymour.

Eventually, Seymour became something of an unofficial record keeper, with meticulous accounts of the new names of all the Jewish immigrants crowding the streets of the Lower East Side. A reclaimed, self-made Ellis Island, where those who came through were given glasses of ice water in the summer and hot tea in the winter, who came seeking their new names out of a belief that it would provide the new identity needed to thrive in this new world, and where the provider of these new names, though
slickly mustached and paunch-bellied, though carefully manicuring any trace of a Yiddish accent out of his speech, was still one of their own. He could still recall the way the shtetl smelled on Friday afternoons, the air thick with honey and caraway seeds and stewed carrots, could still, with some prompting, recite the morning, afternoon and evening prayers by heart, and who, being the shrewd businessman he was, charged only slightly more than they could afford for his tailoring services (a fact which caused the Seekers both to resent and admire Seymour, and even as they muttered and fussed over their money pouches, they felt pride that one of their own had so definitively “made it” in America).

By 1927, Seymour, his Corner, and his Ledger of Names were Lower East Side institutions. So when Raisa began searching for a distant cousin she had never met, whom she knew only as Shmuly, whom she believed would lead her to missing husband, Dov, it was only a matter of time before she found her way to Seymour Corner. She arrived hoping that somewhere in the ledger would be the proof of her husband’s existence – an existence she was no longer completely convinced of, but clung to as a child clings to an imaginary friend, insisting on his reality long after she knows he is nothing but air and vapor.

#

On the morning when Seymour patted his belly and sauntered into the tailor shop, a trail of peach juice still drooping sticky and pink from his mouth to his chin, he found not only Lenny (once Lazer), his store manager, puttering and putzing around in his too-
big overalls, but also a slender, red-haired woman, with bony, restless fingers and a faint, scar-like birthmark running down the left side of her face, perched on a wooden stool. She was wearing a faded, flower-print dress, with a long black trench coat wrapped tightly around her. She clutched an empty, canvas bag and stood up quickly when Seymour entered the shop.

"Mr. Seymour," she began, stepping toward him.

"Well, well, well," Seymour said, turning his face into a congenial smile and reaching out to clasp her small hands in both of his. He glanced over her head at Lenny, who rolled his eyes up, shrugged his shoulders and turned his palms toward the sky, as though to say, "who knows what will be? Only God, the unmerciful, non-existent Master of the Universe, can know such things." Seymour shook his head and turned his attention back to the pretty, anxious woman before him.

"Now then, what can I do for you? You need a dress fixed maybe? Or your husband's dress shirt?"

"No, no, Mr. Seymour -"

"No? Ah, maybe you want a new name? Yes? Is that it, my dear? Are you recently arrived to our fine city?"

"Yes, I am, but - "

"How wonderful! Welcome, welcome. Come with me into the back, my dear, are you thirsty? Yes? Come, sit here and we can find a new name for you." Seymour guided the red-haired woman through the mess and clutter of the front of the shop and into the
clean, quiet back room. He settled her down on a wooden chair and then let his own weight sink into the cozy armchair that sat behind the desk. He slung his hands over his belly, leaned back, and looked expectantly at Raisa.

“So, my dear, what is your Old Country name?”

“My what?”

“Your Old Country name. The one you were given in the shtetl or the village or the Russian or Polish town or wherever you came from. The one you want to leave behind.”

“My name is Raisa—“

“Raisa?” Seymour’s eyebrows knitted together.

“Yes,” she said, pressing her palms into her thighs, “but that’s not why I am here.”

“I see,” Seymour said, removing his hat and setting it gently on the desk in front of him. He reached up and traced the curve of his mustache with his finger.

“So, then, why are you here?”

“I’m, I’m looking for someone… I thought, maybe you could help me…” Raisa’s eyes darted around the room as she spoke. They settled on the wall just behind Seymour, where the wallpaper seam was visible and — at the point where the wall met the ceiling — the slightest rip was just beginning to form.

“Who are you looking for?”
“My husb-no, my cousin, well, his cousin, I guess…” The paper dangled away from the wall, curling around itself and revealing the cracked, off-white siding underneath.

“Well, which is it, then, sweetheart, your husband or his cousin?”

“My husband,” she said, the thick grey and yellow columns of the wallpaper pattern flashing in her brain even as she lowered her eyes from the peeling rip. “He came to America before me and I…I haven’t heard from him. But I think his cousin might know where he is.”

“Well, well, well,” Seymour said, briskly now. He reached into a drawer and brought out a thick, black, spiral-bound notebook, with pink and blue and green tabs sticking out. “When did your husband come to America?”

“Five years ago.”

Seymour cocked his head and paused, his eyes resting on the birthmark on her face, which was now slightly more pronounced than it had been earlier, the pink glinting out against her white skin. Then he opened the book and flipped toward the middle.

“What was his name?”

“Dov.”

The muscles around Seymour’s mouth began to twitch, so that it seemed as though his mustache were jumping up and down above his lips. His thick hands shook slightly and he stopped flipping pages in the notebook.

“Your husband’s name was Dov, you say?”
“Yes.”

“And your name is Raisa?”

“Yes,” Raisa clutched the canvas bag and inched toward the edge of her seat, her knees pressed into each other and her shoulders hunched up around her ears. “Do you know him? Did he come through here? Do you know where I could find him?”

Seymour sat back in his chair, his hands gripped around the wooden edges of his desk.

“And what did you say was the name of your – his – cousin? Who you think might know where he is?”

“Shmuly,” Raisa said, “His name is Shmuly. He is a tailor also – like you.”

#

A chill shook through Seymour’s belly and chest, even as the sweat began to drip down the back of his neck, behind his knees, in his armpits. He regarded the slight woman before him. She was prettier than he imagined she would be. Prettier than his good-for-nothing cousin deserved, certainly. A weak flash of hot anger sparked behind his eyes. He pressed his fingers to his temple at the sudden pain and wondered whether Bluma’s migraines were contagious, or whether perhaps she had willed them onto him out of spite – poor, suffering witch.

Images of his pale-faced cousin played like a reel of film in his mind. The ugly stubs of his two missing fingers. The dark purple circles under his eyes and the way Seymour’s suits had sat huge and boat-like on Dov’s small, skinny frame. He
remembered the shy, eager way Dov had stared at New York, had wanted to touch the fire hydrants, the telephone poles. The way Dov had smarted under Seymour’s clap on his back, the way he had sat hunched over their kitchen table and eaten the meal Bluma had prepared as a man who is not sure when or if he will ever eat again eats, belching and dripping food onto his chin, not looking at any of them.

Seymour shook his head, as though to cast out the images and memories that kept bubbling up to the surface now, as the pretty, red-headed woman sat waiting, as he flinched away from the sight of the birthmark, pink and glaring. Images of his second tailor shop, the beginning of his brand, his chain, his own monopoly. Images of Dov behind the counter, assuring Seymour he could work the machines, no problem, even with his missing fingers. Seymour shook his head again as anger rose up in his gut and he dug his heels into the floor beneath the cozy armchair.

The sweetly nauseating smell of rancid wine now accosted Seymour, evoked out of nothing, out of the memories that called the scent forth, manifested into reality. Saliva gathered behind his tongue and he reached for a handkerchief to dab at the corners of his mouth, the eager red-headed woman still just sitting, just sitting there, sparrow-like, so unaware, so foolish, so bold, so uncomfortably beautiful. Suddenly he felt a strange prickling, pulsing sensation expand down below his American paunch, as he smelled again the reek of liquor, saw again the bootleggers gathered in the back of his second store, in the back of Dov’s store, saw again his pale-faced cousin passing money and crates quickly, underhandedly, all the while Seymour now staring face to face with the
red curls, with the red birthmark which he suddenly, desperately wanted to run his finger down, down, down, into the crease of her ear, into the hollow of her neck, her collarbone.

The fragrance of wine grew heady, while the saliva in his mouth threatened to spill over; the anger flashed behind his eyes and in his gut as he saw again the dark and boarded up windows of his second store, saw again the silent, contemptuous figure of Dov disappearing into a car, into a car with one of the bootleggers, with all the carts of liquor, all the carts of money, and still the prickling pulsing sensation below his belly continued to grow. It grew and grew, his hand still gripping the edge of his desk, his heel still pressed into the floor, his anger and his desire mixing into a rush of rage and frustration and longing. Longing to own and possess the trembling, fragile, red-marked woman sitting before him, in the way he was unable to possess his tailor shop chain, in the way her husband had denied him this pleasure, had taken from him what he rightly deserved to own; in the way he was unable to own and possess his own wife, who had refused to lie with him since Nathan was born, in the way she denied him this pleasure night after night, depriving him of his right as a husband, his right as a man, his right as an American.

Seymour mopped his brow, pressing the handkerchief over his eyes for a moment too long, savoring the dark pressure, the brief respite. When he looked back again at Raisa it seemed as though she had deflated, sunk back against the wooden back of the chair, her chin rolled down toward her chest and her shoulders slumped. Seymour sighed
deeply. He suddenly felt utterly and inexplicably sad. Weariness soothed the pulsing anger that had been throbbing through his body and as he softened his weight again into the enveloping folds of his armchair, he felt tired, and old. A surge of pity for Raisa welled up within him.

#

“My dear – “ he began.

“Yes,” Raisa said, suddenly alert again, pulling her body upright.

“My dear,” he said again, laughing awkwardly, “this may come as a surprise to you,” he shifted in his chair and reached out to hold his felt hat in his hands. “This may come as a surprise to you,” he said, “but… I am your – Dov’s – cousin. I am Shmuly.” He spoke his old name with difficulty, working hard to keep his nose from wrinkling in disdain, and turned his hat around and around in his hands to distract himself from Raisa’s wondering gaze.

“You – you are Shmuly?” she said.

“Yes,” he replied, “yes, I used to be called Shmuly, when your husband and I were young, when we knew each other as children, they called me Shmuly. But now,” he coughed, tossed the hat back on the table, “now I am American, you see, so my name here is Seymour.”

“So, but, oh, oh, Shmu- Mr. Sey-,” Raisa fumbled for words, starting out of her chair, letting out short puffs of laughter and weeping.
“Yes, yes. Now, now, Raisa, it’s all right, dear,” Seymour handed Raisa his handkerchief. “And you ought to know, too, that your husband also shed his shtetl name in favor of an American one. He goes by Dave now, I believe.”

“Da-Dave?”

“Indeed.”

“But, why would he-? Oh, but that means he made it? He must have made it. And you know him, you must, oh surely, you must know where he is, what happened?”

Seymour shook his head slowly. “My dear, I’m afraid I don’t know where your husband, my dear cousin, is residing now.”

“But, what, but, how,“

“He did come, oh yes, he was here,“

“Oh, thank God.“

“Yes, he arrived to New York just about four and a half years ago, I would guess.”

“And didn’t he work with you? Didn’t he run your shop? Oh, what could have happened that you don’t now know where he is?”

“Yes, he worked with me in my shop. But,” Seymour paused. He rolled his eyes up to the sky in the gesture of the old country, and shrugged. “But,” he continued, “the shop failed. It didn’t work. And so Dave – Dov – moved on.” He glanced at Raisa. “We lost touch, I’m afraid. I haven’t heard from him in quite some time.”
Raisa’s face blanched white and her legs trembled. She reached out her hand to steady her, while Seymour jumped up from behind the desk and clasped his hands around her shoulders. She grew heavy against his arms as the blood drained away from her head.

“There, there,” Seymour soothed, “Steady does it, you’re alright, you’re alright.” Raisa shook herself free of his hold and stood alone, rooted and still.

“So you don’t know where he is? Or where I could look? Maybe someone else I could talk to?” she asked quietly.

Just then the door to the backroom opened and Lenny’s gray-haired head peeked in through the crack.

“Well, Lenny?” Seymour said.

“Customer here, boss,” Lenny said.

“So deal with him.”

“Says he wants a new name.”

Seymour sighed. “Alright, I’ll be just a minute.”

The door closed with a click and Seymour turned to Raisa once again.

“Now listen,” Seymour said, “let me just think a minute. Maybe I can, yes, maybe I can do a little digging myself, you know, ask some of my people. I’ve been here a long time, I’ve got friends, maybe somebody’s heard something. Now, how would that do? Hmm?”
“Oh,” Raisa began, but Seymour was already steering her out of the room and back through the scraps and rolls of fabric mess into the cold, sunlight-dappled front section of the shop.

“Now, then, that’s a good idea. Yes, yes. Well! Now I’m so glad you came to see me, and that we can reunite old families! Family is so important, you know, isn’t it, isn’t it? Now, what do you need? Do you need money? Can I give you something?” Seymour patted his pockets as they stood in the doorway to the street, not looking at Raisa, his voice hard and cheery.

“No, I don’t need any,” Raisa said.

“Ah, I know!” Seymour continued. “Why, of course, of course, you must have a new name! Yes, a new American name. Free of charge! Because you’re family, eh?” Seymour winked at her.

“But I don’t,”

“Now, what shall it be? What shall it be? Raisa, Rrr-ayyy-za. Hmm. Yes, yes. Ah-ha! I’ve got it! Why, you must be Rose. That’s it! It’s quite perfect for you, really.” Seymour said, his thick fingers reaching out as though to touch the tendrils of red, curly hair that fell across her forehead. He stopped at her flinch, his fingers mid-air, and shrugged.

“Yes, yes, well now, Rose – ha ha, yes it fits you quite well! – thank you for stopping by. And good luck to you! Good luck to you, indeed. I shall let you know if I find anything out about our mutual relation.”
And with that, he gently pressed her out of the doorway to the shop, pushed her back out onto the blaring, blazing streets, where he stood watching as she disappeared into the grey noise, a tiny streak of red darting between the glinting cement, the lightest whiff of roses lingering behind, tickling the hairs in Seymour's nose, fondling the wavy curves of his perfect, American mustache.

#

Weariness clung to Raisa's skin like cold sweat as she ran back through the streets, back through the days and the hours that had brought her to here, clutching the empty canvas bag, clutching the fading wisps of memory that kept her focused always, always on Dov. Her certainty had always resided in her body. Even as the images of her childhood sweetheart blurred and mixed with the images of her brothers, her cousins, her father, the handsome Hungarian men on the boat, the bearded, hunched, wandering men she kept running after on the streets of New York; even as the image of her daughter became isolated to specific parts of her face, her body, so that while Raisa could clearly remember the pale fuzz of hair that coated Mira's left ear, she could not seem to connect that ear to a head, to a face with eyes and nose and mouth; even as all these images blurred and isolated and were swept away into whatever hidden repository for memories exists within the human brain, still Raisa's body would remember. It was because she could still summon the warm heaviness of her husband's hand resting on the small of her back; because the spicy-sweet scent of her daughter's hair lingered permanently just
below her nose, because of all these things that Raisa knew she existed, knew Mira existed, knew Dov existed.

But New York had unsteadied her senses. It filled her nostrils with thick air, laden with smells she could not name, could not place. It accosted her eyes and ears with colors and lines and hums and vibrations she could not translate into language, could not locate within her context, among her references. As her body stretched and clenched and shifted and pulsed beneath a strange and unfamiliar sensory world, the certainties that her body had kept locked within itself began to tremble, to morph, to slip out of the newly opened pores and disappear into the cracks in the pavement.

Perhaps this same sensory confusion had happened to Dov. Perhaps in the newness, the bigness, the grayness of New York, his body had expelled the memories of their shtetl home, expelled the haystack kingdom, expelled the two fingers he lost in the Great War, expelled his wife, and expelled his child. Perhaps this was the process that had led him to change his name, to discard Dov for Dave, discard Kaminke for New York, discard Raisa for –? Perhaps as his body forgot her, his mind also forgot. Perhaps this was why no letters came; perhaps this was why she waited for five years; perhaps this was why she was here now, feeling her past slither out of her as though it had never been, looking for a man who no longer existed.

Rose. She had been given a new name, too. Rose. Rose. Raisa prickled under the Americanness of it, the empty openness of it, the clear, gentle simplicity of it. She felt the ease of slipping into it, the way it gave order to the dark, weightless noise surrounding
her, the way it placed her into this world, situated her on these streets, under this sky,
beside these cars, among these people. She wanted to slide the name over her, to step into
it as though it were a new skin, and to let the remaining sensations of Kaminke drip out
of her, to forget completely the smells of caraway seeds and honey, to never have eaten a
cake full of salt, to never have dreamt of a man who wanted to gouge out her eyes, to
never have felt the itch of hay behind her knees, or the gaping hole within her womb after
her baby had been born.
On the corner of East Broadway and Jefferson, overlooking Seward Park, stood a three-story, red brick building with large windows, high ceilings and a limestone frieze with the words, ‘New York Public Library’ emblazoned across. A copper railing across the rooftop indicated the open-air reading room, and the windows along the ground floor looked into the main reading room, where passersby could glimpse men and women hunched over open books spread over tables, dozing off in armchairs, books in their laps, reading glasses hung crooked across their faces, or hugging their children close, tracing the words along the page with their index fingers.

Raisa walked by the building almost every day, and each time she paused before the windows, staring in at the readers much in the same way she had once peered over the shoulders of her brothers as they studied the holy books, or jammed herself up against the closed door of her father’s study in protest at being locked out. Here was another building of books, a study for the entire neighborhood, and though she had spent her adolescence scorning the book learning of her father and brothers, still the sight through the windows brought her to a halt each time she walked by.

It was the women and children who captured her attention, rather than the men. Raisa watched closely as they entered and exited, trying to ascertain whether there was some kind of ritual act she was unaware of, some incantation that would open the doors, whether anyone was ever turned away. But everyone, it seemed, could enter the library without question, select a book, and sit and read.
For months Raisa had only observed from the street, too nervous to actually go inside. But as she ran from Seymour, disappointed and repelled by his fat fingers, glistening mustache and syrupy voice, she found herself again in front of the library and this time, with no hesitation, she walked up the stairs to the heavy front doors, pushed them open and stepped inside.

Inside was a hush at once familiar and strange. The noise of women’s heels tapping over the floor, pages rustling open, whispered murmurings of librarians directing people to the correct shelf, filtered in through the spacious quiet that pervaded. Rooms housing English language lessons, the Yiddish Mothers Club, and the East Side Debating Club unfolded along the hallway that led out from the main reading room. In the center of the entranceway was a long countertop, behind which stood a woman in a pencil skirt and collared shirt, glasses hanging from a chain around her neck. A sliding panel of glass rose up from the counter and the librarian leaned through, resting on her elbows.

Raisa walked toward the counter, clutching the empty canvas bag, the bones of her shoulder blades creaking against each other.

“How lovely! Welcome to the neighborhood, my dear. We must get you all set up then.”

“I am not sure what you mean,” Raisa said.
“Why, of course, of course,” the librarian said, “We must get you a library card, first of all, so you can check books in and out as you please. And there are all kinds of excellent programs. English lessons – though your English seems very good, dear – and lectures and clubs. There’s always something going on, here.”

“Check books out?”

“Yes, of course. With your library card you can take books home with you to read – we don’t expect you to finish reading here!”

“I can take books home with me?”

“That’s right. And then bring them back when you’re done, of course.”

“Any of the books? I can take from all of them?”

“Why, what do you mean, dear?”

“Are there books not for me? That I cannot take with me?”

“Don’t be silly. All the books are for everyone, dear.”

All the books for everyone! The words fell like a balm against Raisa’s ears, mitigating the echo of Chaim’s words to Raisa as a young girl: the wisdom in here, in this room, in these books, is not for you, little one.

“All right,” Raisa said, “I want the card.”

“Lovely,” the librarian said, “Now, I just need your name and your address here in New York, dear.”

Raisa paused, considering. The librarian held a pen in her right hand, poised above paperwork ready to be filled out with Raisa’s information. Raisa smiled.
“Rose,” she said, “My name is Rose.”

Raisa, her new library card like a rock weighing down the pocket of her coat, walked the stacks, running her fingers over the wooden shelves, investigating the various textures of the different books. Her favorites were those that had cloth backings, with gold embossed titles and strings that had come unthreaded from the covers dangling down. She dipped her head to smell the books, confusing momentarily the dust of New York with the dust of Kaminke, the dust and wine smell of her grandfather, Max, trapped in her father’s study.

The books were in languages that reflected the neighborhood’s population. Hebrew, Yiddish, English, Romanian, Hungarian, Polish, Italian. Raisa started at the sight of books with titles she recognized, books her father and grandfather and great-grandfather had studied, books she had been cut off from as a child. Here they were, free for her to take off the shelf, to take home with her if she wished. For a moment she imagined herself rocking back and forth on the hard-backed chair in her small room, these books written in *lashon kodesh* – the holy tongue – spread out on the rickety table before her. She imagined invoking the ghosts of her family to visit her across the ocean, showing them, proving to them, that she was worthy of this wisdom, too.

But other titles in other languages called her attention, too. The weightlessness of English had not yet lost its appeal, and she was drawn to the books in her adopted language, in the unholy, unsanctified tongue. She wondered if she would be able to read
yet, in English, or whether these cloth-bound books would prove inaccessible, too
difficult, still.

Continuing up the staircase, Raisa heard the sound of children’s laughter coming
from one of the rooms on the second floor. She slipped inside the half-opened door and
stood in the back, the Children’s Reading Room now engrossed in Story Hour. An older,
grey-haired woman sat on a caramel-colored armchair in the center of the room, her back
to the windows, through which a pale yellow light curled in and around her, alighting the
edges of her hair and shoulders. She held a large, square picture book in her hands, and
had tipped her body forward and down, angling herself toward the group of hushed
children crouched on the ground by her feet. They sat cross-legged, lying on their
stomachs, chins resting in their hands. Some had their hands across their mouths or eyes,
as they waited, barely breathing, to hear what would happen to their hero.

To Raisa it looked as though there were twenty Miras sprawled before her. She
felt dizzy from missing, distracted by the sight of her daughter replicated twenty times on
the floor in front of her. Her arms grew heavy, burning, sharp waves of pain rushing
down from her shoulder blades to her elbows to her wrists. And then she wanted to run,
to escape, to flee from the drowning sensation that accosted her, to close the door on all
these Miras, all these daughters, all these parts of herself. And yet at the same time, she
wanted to reach out and pull the Miras to her, to sink her face into their little heads of
hair, to feel the weight of their bodies against hers, to kiss their sticky, pudgy hands a
thousand times. She wanted to pretend that Mira was here, among them, that if only Raisa
could squint her eyes and conjure up the scent of her daughter, the scent that Raisa kept
hidden within her, ever present, then she could imagine that all was well, that she had not
split herself into multiple pieces when she left her daughter in Kaminke. Perhaps here,
she could have a proxy of her daughter, a proxy of herself, full and whole. And so she
stayed.

Raisa slid a small, Mira-sized chair out from a Mira-sized table and sat down in
the back of the room. The grey-haired woman glanced up briefly, nodding to the quiet,
thin woman in the floral dress, never breaking the singsong quality of her voice, laying
the story out piece by piece for her listeners. Raisa closed her eyes. The children’s story
was at just the right level for her to comprehend the English, and for the first time since
her encounter with Seymour, Raisa felt her body relax, her shoulders unclench, and her
mind clear.

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In the next weeks, Raisa became a regular at Story Hour at the Seward Park
Library. The children grew used to the quiet, red-haired woman sitting in the back of the
room, and called her, “Miss Rose.” The grey-haired librarian – Miss Eva – welcomed the
presence of another adult in the room, and did not press when Raisa gave a vague and
anxious “no” to the question of whether she had any children herself.

One afternoon, Miss Eva met Raisa on the stairs, touching her lightly on the
shoulder.

“Rose, can you help me this afternoon, I wonder?”
"Yes, of course, what is wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing, but there are some staff missing today and I need to help downstairs. Could you read the story to the children today?"

"Me?"

"Yes. They know you, and it would be such a help to me. Could you?"

"Oh, okay, yes, yes, I suppose I can."

"Oh, thank you, thank you. I’ve already picked out the book, it’s on the armchair."

Miss Eva squeezed Raisa’s shoulder and glided down the staircase.

When Raisa entered the Children’s Reading Room, the children ran to her, sticking their sticky hands into her pockets, grabbing hold of her fingers, the fringes of her dress.

"Miss Rose, Miss Rose!" they said.

"Read us a story, Miss Rose!"

The children led her to the caramel-colored armchair and arranged themselves on the floor in front of her. For a moment, the library room turned into Kaminke’s haystacks, and Raisa was back in her last night in the shtetl, the itch of hay tickling the backs of her knees and elbows, the shtetl’s children crowded before her, begging for a story, calling out Tante Raisa, Tante Raisa, her daughter seated across the circle, cheeks flushed, nose crinkled like her father. A goodbye embedded within a fable, storytelling heavy with departure. She shook her head to dispel the vision, to return her to caramel and
weightlessness and curling yellow light, to return her to these children, in this place, reading somebody else’s story.

The Magical Medicine Tree

By Clara Grace Walters

Once upon a time, there lived a young girl named Doris-Anne. Doris-Anne’s father was an explorer, an adventurer who traveled to many distant lands and countries. He would always bring back small gifts and surprises for Doris-Anne, along with stories of fantastical people and animals. There were horses that could fly, people with four arms on each side, like spiders, plants that could talk and flowers that could direct lost travelers back home. In Doris-Anne’s room, she had collections of rocks that turned different colors in the different seasons, chains from which dangled the teeth and talons of man-sized birds, bright, shiny scales plucked off the backs of fish. Doris-Anne loved when her father returned from his trips, partially for the stories and the gifts, but mostly because it meant she didn’t have to be alone with her strict and wrinkled grandmother, a woman who never laughed, who made Doris-Anne eat overcooked and mushy peas every night, and who “did not believe” in dessert. Doris-Anne’s mother had died when Doris-Anne was just a baby,
so whenever her father left for one of his extended trips, Doris-Anne was left alone with her grandmother.

After one particularly long trip, during which Doris-Anne's tongue had started to turn green from all the mushy peas, her father told her about a magical medicine tree hidden in the forests of an island country halfway between the Eastern and the Western worlds. The people of this island told him that crushing the leaves and berries of this medicine tree would produce a potion so powerful it was capable of curing a broken heart. Doris-Anne asked if her father had brought any back with him. But her father said that the people on the island would not even let him see the tree – it was too powerful, they said, and therefore dangerous.

Several years later, while Doris-Anne's father was trekking across the desert of a country that had never seen rain, Doris-Anne and her grandmother learned that Doris-Anne's father had died of a strange and terrible illness that dried his body out from the inside. Doris-Anne cried and cried. She cried for days, for weeks, for months. Her grandmother tried everything. She baked cakes and cookies and spoon-fed Doris-Anne all kinds of sweets, but Doris-Anne would not stop crying. Her heart was broken.
Doris-Anne remembered her father’s tale of the magical medicine tree that could cure broken hearts. She decided she had to have this potion, and that she would go to the tiny island nation and convince the people there to give it to her. The only problem was, she didn’t know which island country it was that housed the magical medicine tree.

So Doris-Anne set out to find the tree. She traveled for years, exploring all the different islands in the ocean halfway between the Eastern and Western worlds, meeting people and seeing animals and plants even stranger than the ones her father would tell her about when he returned from his adventures.

Finally, Doris-Anne found the island of the magical medicine tree. She pleaded with the people there, begging them to give her the potion. They were scared of the tree’s power, and did not want to lead Doris-Anne to the place where it grew in the forest. But Doris-Anne would not give up. She showed them a picture of her father that she carried in a locket around her neck. The people on the island remembered the adventurer from years ago, and they saw the grief in his daughter. They decided to take her to the tree and make her the potion to cure her broken heart.
The magical medicine tree was not like any tree Doris-Anne had ever seen. Its roots stretched out below and above ground for miles. Its trunk was larger than a house. Its branches were so thick and heavy they rested on the ground, coiled like sleeping snakes. The people silently crushed the leaves and berries of the tree into a tin cup, mixing it with coconut water. They handed it to Doris-Anne and watched her drink it in one large gulp. When she finished, she closed her eyes and leaned against the trunk of the tree for a long time, so long they thought she might have frozen in place. When she opened her eyes, she looked around in confusion. Then she asked, “Where am I? Who are you? Who am I? What’s happening?” For it turned out that the cure for a broken heart caused a person to forget everything: her past, her present, and her whole self.

The End.

Raisa was quiet for a long while at the end of the story. The children squirmed on the floor.

“Miss Rose, Miss Rose!” they said.

“What’s wrong Miss Rose?”

“I wish I could find that tree,” Raisa said, as though in a dream, not seeing the children in front of her.
“Why, Miss Rose?”

Raisa shook herself awake, as the sticky fingers reached out to her again, and she felt the worn leather of the caramel-colored armchair against the skin of her wrists. She closed the book, put it aside.

“Nothing, nothing, kinderlach,” she said, “Nevermind.”

But as she rose from the caramel-colored chair, the small book of *Tehillim* in her coat pocket felt suddenly heavy, weighting her down so that the right side of her body tilted slightly toward the earth, straining at her shoulder, at the fabric of the pocket, and bumping painfully against her hip, so that the bone ached.
Raisa could not pinpoint exactly the moment when New York stopped feeling strange and exotic to her, when the faces around her no longer drew her stares and curiosity, when the grayness, the flashiness, the rushing of it, no longer caused her to lose her breath, no longer slammed into her with unfriendly newness. But a moment came when she became aware of it. It was a moment no different from many others. A routine had been established: the same route to the factory each morning and each night; pausing at a stand for a small bag of hot, roasted nuts on Thursday afternoons; selecting a few potatoes and carrots on Mondays and Tuesdays; fish on Saturdays; Story Hour on Sundays. She had carved out her habits in this new place, had begun to recognize others whose routes crisscrossed or mirrored hers, had fallen into regular patterns of engaging with the young girls in her factory, and had started to trust that Lou would be at home in the evenings, happy to combine resources to share a meal and to tell stories about the people they interacted with during the days.

So it was during one of these moments: while the red-faced, bearded fishmonger hovered over his young son wrapping up Raisa’s fish selection in yesterday’s newspaper; while the dark-eyed, wrinkled man at the nut cart ladled a selection of hot nuts into a paper bag, adding an extra scoop with a gentle wink; while running across the street between two taxis, that Raisa suddenly realized she knew how to be here. She knew how to laugh and haggle and duck out of the line of sight of children in windows high above the ground knocking people’s hats off with wire and string; she knew how to twist her
way between the throngs of people without tripping or bumping into anyone or losing her bag of carrots and tomatoes; she knew how to identify how long a person had been in the country by the way they used their hands when they spoke, by the depth of dark circles under their eyes, by the degree to which they shifted from foot to foot as they stood in the midst of it all, uncertain, wondering, and hopeful.

At some point she realized that she, too, along with the American-born, or those who had been in America for many years, stopped and stared at the newcomers, the ones clutching suitcases, backpacks, or large bundles slung over their backs or resting upon their heads. She saw the way the children clung close to the adults in their group, how the adults shooed them along if they paused to stare at someone or something, how they slapped the children’s hands away from touching anything. Raisa, too, watched the newcomers trickle by, each bearing the stench of the ship and their origin country with them, stinking of awe and anxiety and adventure, as well as whatever particular tragedy or misguided rumor of the Golden Land had spurred them to abandon homelands and families, and she knew that she was no longer one of them.

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Raisa had learned to keep home at bay, somewhere behind her, trailing after her in the shadows, kept firmly at a distance. There were never the right words to explain the way the light was here, how it was different from there, how the air, the earth, the food, the people, the way of thinking, being, walking, how everything was different. How to
describe such differences? And how to explain that she, too, was different, here in this new world?

So Raisa didn’t. She stopped writing, stopped explaining, stopped describing. Raisa had to believe that the longings would eventually fade, that home would stop haunting her on every corner, that a type of split would occur in the self, so that the person who lived in New York would not be the same as the person who had been born in Kaminke. And though the woman in the new world would contain all the memories of the woman from the old world, it would be as if they had been inherited from someone else—an ancestor, a past life, or a story once heard.

Everything was susceptible to this movement, to this shift in belonging—from *mine* to *hers*, that other person, the one who fled, who boarded a ship, the one who did not speak a word of English. People once loved, once hated. Parents, friends, sweethearts, children. Even children. Although Raisa had arrived to New York as a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a wife, and a mother, slowly, slowly, the old roles were slipping away, shed and discarded into the sea, while new roles and new selves were taking their places.

Eventually, Raisa stopped even opening the letters addressed to her in her father’s scrawl, postmarked from across the sea. Instead she tossed them into the trash, unread, like a throttled scream.
My beloved Raisush,

This is your mother writing again, dear daughter. We have not heard from you since the postcard you sent to us. Such a sweet child, to try to help me picture your world! But now it has been several weeks and we long to hear from you. It is not good to be silent over there, my child. You know what it is to wait and wait for some news and nothing arrives. Do not give me such pain, please, Raisa. Enough already, write to me.

Oy, Raisush. I tried to be a good mother to you. From so many sons and then along comes a daughter! What was I to do? You were the child of my old age. Did I wrong you? Is that what caused such stubbornness in you? Such willfulness? Is that what produced this desire of yours to go so far away from your family? Who ever heard of a girl traveling to America by herself when she has an entire family here, at home, who loves her? This I ask you, Raisush. This I ask God every day.

Enough already, your father reminds me. Yes, yes, you are a grown woman he says. But even a grown woman has need of her mother! Even a grown woman can forget that she must write to her family (apparently). Even a grown woman must be reminded of her mother and father at home, of her brothers, of her nieces and nephews, of her daughter, yes even of her daughter, all waiting at home for a little letter, a word or two to tell us you are still alive. For how will we know if you die, dear daughter? Who will know to write to me and tell me that my child has died, alone in some box she has made at her factory? Hmm? Perhaps it would be better for you to wear a locket around your neck, with a note inside to tell the person who finds you dead:

PLEASE WRITE TO MY MOTHER: SARA, YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF THE RABBI OF KAMINKE AND LOVING WIFE OF CHAIM, SON OF AZRIEL HALEVI. TELL HER THAT I DIED WITH WOOLEN SOCKS ON MY FEET.

Yes, my Raisush. I should feel better if I knew you wore such a note on you at all times. Especially if it would mean that you must also always be wearing woolen socks.

So, what news can I tell you from home? It is well and truly winter now in Kaminke. You remember what is winter here, my daughter? Such a cold, a bitter cold – there is nowhere that has such a cold like the one that comes to Kaminke! Everybody goes around with icy lips and fingers, breathing out white smoke and finding icicles in our nose and ear hair. The ground is already covered in sheets of snow, which the children run through and fall
into and then come home with their socks and trousers drenched, shivering to the bone so that one must boil water for them to stick their feet in, and rub their little hands until the purple goes out of them. And who has time for such attentions? When there are husbands and neighbors to feed, and food that is spoiling as the wet and the damp come in through the cracks, in through the mud and doorways.

Do they have winter in this New York of yours? Are you feeling the cold in your bones, as I am? Do your hips creak and moan in the early mornings, when you are wakened by the light, that pale, frozen light that sets in during the winter months and makes a person blink? Oy. Raisush. I am worried that my eyes are beginning to go. Sometimes all I see is a kind of haze, a blue cold haze that tickles at my eyelashes and always I must stop right where I am, in the middle of the marketplace, out in the tangle of bushes searching for the right herb or flower, I have to just stop where I am and wait. Wait for the haze to have its way with me, envelop me in it so I don't know from my right to my left, which way is up and which way is down. And then it will pass. Everything must pass, yes, my daughter? Even this, this too shall pass.

Well, dear Raisush, the chill in my fingers lets me know it is time for this letter to come to an end. I hope you will still listen to your mother, even though you are a grown woman, even though you are now an American, and write to your poor family. It is a very hard thing each day to have to tell Mira that no, no letter has come, her mother has not yet written. She begins to grow quiet in your absence, in your silence. I thought at one time that silence was our blessing. Your father and I found each other in silence, you know. But it would seem, instead, that we are perhaps cursed with it.

I pray for your health and happiness,

Your ever suffering,

Mother
To my Mama,

Grandfather says I must write to you but I am not sure what to write about. It has been many, many months since the postcard came from you in New York and we are very worried and I am sad because I have not heard from you for so long. Mama, are you okay? Are you sick, are you hurt? Mama, did I do something to make you angry with me? Every day I ask Grandmother if a letter from you has come and everyday she says, "no," and I don't know why. I promise I am being a good girl and I do what I am told and I am waiting for you just like you said so when you find Papa you will bring me to America also and then we will be together.

Grandfather says to tell you what I am doing during the days. In the mornings I help Grandmother by collecting the eggs from the chickens because it is hard for her to bend down now and reach out and pick them up. But it is not hard for me so I do it every morning. I like the eggs when they are still warm and sometimes I will play a game to see how many I can hold in my hands before they drop. So far I can almost hold four eggs in one hand. But last time I dropped some and Grandmother was angry with me so maybe I cannot play that game anymore.

Then I will help Grandmother at home either with washing and laundry and sometimes cooking, or sometimes I go with my aunts to the marketplace and help them sell things. I like the marketplace because there are so many people and always I can find apples or cherries or chestnuts that have been dropped on the ground and then I can have a feast with my cousins and my friends. Leah and I are not fighting anymore, Mama, so we are best friends again. I told Leah that soon I will be going to America to join you and Papa once you find Papa and she said some of the other children don't believe me that I will go, but I know that I am going soon and Leah believes me and we try to imagine what it will be like once I am there.

Oh, please, Mama, can you write and tell me what it will be like? Where will I sleep? And what will I eat? Will I go to school? My cousin Baruch said he heard from some of the boys that everyone goes to school in America even the girls and then he laughed and said that was silly because girls don't need to know how to read or write they just need to know how to cook so then I chased him and I am faster than he is even though I am a girl and I pushed him down so that he would say he was wrong. Anyway, he knows that I am a better student than he is because when Grandfather asks all the children questions on Friday nights I always know the answers and Baruch hardly ever knows.
But Mama, many of the other children laugh at me or whisper about me I see them doing it. I know what they are saying. They are saying I am an orphan now, that my Mama and Papa ran away to America and will never come back, and will never bring me to them. They say that’s what happens when people go to America, that they disappear. Is it true? Have you disappeared? Has Papa?

Always in the afternoons I go to Grandfather in his study. It is soft and dark and quiet and I love it because it has a dusty smell and Grandfather smiles and talks there but usually he is mostly quiet and not smiling when he is not in the study. So I love it in there, also because only I am allowed in and I love to touch all the covers of the books they are sometimes rough and sometimes soft and sometimes the letters kind of shine in the dark and that is what I like the most. And oh, Mama, I love it when Grandfather opens a book and I scoot close to him and I can feel him thinking through his skin I can’t explain it but I can, and then I will read out loud to him and he asks me questions and everything feels good and safe and warm. Grandfather says I am doing a good job searching for all the light. And I hope that soon we will find all the light and repair all of the vessels and then I will see you and Papa again.

Please, please write to me.
Your daughter,
Mira
Dearest Raisaleh,

It is much, much time now since we have heard from you. Not since the postcard that arrived so many months ago. This postcard is still tacked to the wall beside your daughter’s bed and though the edges have begun to fray and curl, your Miraleh still takes down the card each night before going to sleep, reading and re-reading her mother’s words and running her little fingers over the picture. She wonders if her mother walks across this Williamsburg Bridge, or whether her mother walks by it every day and looks up, marveling at its height and length? Does her mother remember the postcard she sent and does the bridge perhaps remind her of her daughter? Or has her mother forgotten her completely?

My daughter, it is difficult for us to bear your silence. We cannot understand it. Mira especially is changing under it. She is wilting, my child, like a flower with no water. I cannot watch and say nothing. I know your mother has written to you, imploring, begging you to write. And yet still nothing. Now I must do the same. Must compel, demand that you send us a line, a word, something so your daughter does not wither away completely.

Raisaleh, my Raisaleh. What can you be thinking now? For so many years I watched you wait for a word from your husband, from Dov. I watched you suffer in his absence, in the emptiness he left in you. How is it you can do the same thing to your daughter, now? Do you not see the tragedy of it? The irony of it? I cannot believe you would ever have done such a thing if you had stayed in Kaminke. This America, this New York. It must be a place where HaKadosh Baruch Hu does not dwell. For how could you live in the presence of the Holy One and keep quiet in this way? Cause such suffering and anxiety in those who love you?

Oh, my daughter. I am not a stranger to the seduction of silence. Yes, I have felt its deep pull, the sanctity that one can sometimes find within its walls. Perhaps you know this about me, though we have never discussed it. In my youth, too, I became intimate with silence, I learned the feel of it, the touch, the taste of it, how it can shelter and protect you, how it can nourish and nurture the suffering soul, the broken heart. My mother, too, begged me to speak – my father demanded it. And still I stayed silent. But daughter, please heed what I write now: my silence existed only in speech, in word. My body was here, my hands, my face, the whole of my self was here, in my home, with my family. So that I was never so very far away, even in my silence.
But you, my Raisa, you are not here, neither in body nor in word. Your silence is all consuming, all encompassing. We cannot access you, cannot touch or see or sense your presence. We cannot know when you eat, when you walk, when you lie down to sleep or when you rise up again to start the day. We cannot know if you are well, if you are sick, if you are happy. Can you not see? If you do not write to us, we cannot know you at all. It will be as if you do not exist, as if you have simply vanished. I have seen this happen so many times before, and yet I cannot bear it now that it is happening to me. We are losing you, my daughter, I feel you slipping away from us.

Ah, well, my child. Perhaps it is not for me to demand such a thing from you. Only God can soothe and soften a hardened heart. But still I ask, my daughter, even if you are suffering, even if you are hardening, what trouble could it be for you to send us word that you are alive, that you are working, that you are healthy and sound – in body, at least, if not in soul?

Think of your Mira. You are still her mother, though she is here and you are there. She yearns for you, even as her memories of you grow weaker, thinner, farther away. She wonders if she has done something wrong, something that has made you angry with her, something that has made you disappear from her. Please, for the sake of your child, write to her and calm these fears. Let her know that you still care for her, think of her, love her, that this will always be the case – even in times of silence. For perhaps you have inherited this penchant for silence, and perhaps it will not be the last time you drift into it.

Be well, dear daughter. And write to us. You must write to us.
Your ever loving,
Father
In the dark, in the night, Raisa tossed on her narrow bed. She curled up on her side and hugged her hands under her cheek. She flopped onto her back and spread her arms wide. She rolled over onto her stomach and shoved her face deep into the thin mattress. She sighed. She couldn’t sleep.

Raisa stood and wrapped the thick, woolen blanket around her shoulders like a shawl. The room was dark, but light from the moon outside her window cast large and oblong-shaped shadows along the floor and the walls. Raisa walked to the window and sat down, pulling the blanket tightly around her shoulders and leaning her forehead against the cool glass of the windowpane.

Outside, New York was dark and quiet – only the night rustlings of a few hungry and sleepless souls roaming the streets could still be heard. Where, in daylight, throngs of people would crowd and rush and yell and haggle, all was now empty. There was an illusion of spaciousness.

From where she sat, Raisa could see a few lights flickering in windows up and down the tenement blocks in front of her. Other wakeful tenants paced over cold floors, nursed and soothed babies, wrote letters home, puffed on cigarettes, the smoke trickling out into the gray air, and counted coins and children, scheming out a week’s worth of meals that would leave at least one child hungry.

From where she sat, Raisa could see the black sky, and the pale white of sheets and shirts that hung from washing lines and gleamed against the blackness of the sky.
During the days, women leaned precariously over railings and balconies to drape clothing over the lines, while naughty children sent the clothes tumbling down onto the dirty streets or onto the heads of unsuspecting pedestrians. But at night the children slept, and if the women were awake, they kept indoors, perhaps drawing back the flimsy curtains and staring out, just as Raisa was doing now.

From where she sat, Raisa could see the small, black book that had fallen out of the pocket of her coat. She reached out and pulled the book toward her, sending the cockroaches scuttling into their corners and holes, and wiped the dust off the book’s cover with the edge of her blanket. She drew her knees into her chest and held the book up into the light that shone through her window. The gold letters embossed on the leather cover read in Hebrew: Tehillim.

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Raisa opened the book. On the inside of the front cover she saw written in the top, right-hand corner, her grandfather’s – her mother’s father’s – name: Rabbi Shimon son of Rabbi Yonah. Below, her father’s name was scrawled in his familiar hand: Chaim son of Azriel haLevi. Below her father’s name, in the large, looping writing of a child, Raisa made out another: Mira daughter of Raisa. Raisa blinked. She ran her right forefinger over the letters in Mira’s name again and again.

Raisa turned open the book: the rich, Hebrew lettering stood out black against the pale pages. She angled the book to the light and read a few lines:
Rabim omrim...many say: ‘Oh that we could see some good!’ nisah aleinu, ohr panecha. Adonai...lift up the light of Your countenance, God.

She flipped forward several more pages and read:

Adonai ohri v’yishi...God is my light and my salvation...mimi ira...whom shall I fear?

She sighed. Then again she flipped forward several more pages and read:

Oteh ohr kasalma...You wrap Yourself in light like a garment.

As she scanned through the little book of Tehillim, Raisa noticed that pencil marks dotted the poem-prayers, little circles scattered throughout the book, calling out words every few pages. She paused at each circle and took note of the word within. It was the same word each time: Ohr. Light. Someone – her grandfather, her father or her daughter – had called out the light in every psalm. Grandfather said that these words could be like a light in the darkness. Maybe it will be dark in America.

Raisa leaned her cheek against the glass of the window and closed her eyes. The darkness pulsed against her, even as the moon glimmered weakly in the sky and the few lamps flickered in her neighbors’ windows. The blanket slipped from her shoulders and she felt a chill in the back of her neck. She shifted on the floor, stretching her legs out in front of her. She unlatched the window and lifted it open.

Raisa turned to the first psalm. It began: Ashrei haish...Happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked.
She gripped the page in between her thumb and forefinger, rubbing it gently, feeling the soft silkiness of the paper. Then she ripped the page out of the book in one sharp motion, crumpled it into a little ball and tossed it out of the open window. She watched as it tumbled lightly through the air, and then disappeared from her view, lost in the dark gutters of the streets below.

She turned to the second psalm. *Lama ragshu goyim*... Why do the nations rage?

Again she gripped the page in between her thumb and forefinger and ripped it out of the book. Again she crumpled it into a tiny ball in her hand and threw it out of her window. Again she turned back to the book of *Tehillim* and prepared to repeat.

All through the dark night, Raisa sat by her window and ripped page after page out of the tiny leather-bound book that bore the names of her grandfather, her father and her daughter. Out of the book that called out the light. She ripped out the psalms one by one, all 150 of them, and sent them, marred and crumpled, out into the black and quiet air.

Like little sparks of light they fell, some caught by the wind and sent drifting out onto distant streets and the hoods of cars, others trapped in corners and crevices, covered in dirt and dust and slime, their glow dampened, hidden. Each one sent out alone, discarded and dispersed, until all that was left was the black, leather cover caving in on itself. This, too, Raisa wrenched and stretched and scratched at, until it was nothing but a frayed and disfigured cut of leather. Then this, too, she threw out of the window, shut the glass, and slid back into bed.
Part Three
Berkeley, 2015

Octavio Paz wrote, “Time is not succession and transition,/ but the perpetual sound of the present/ in which all times, past and future,/ are contained.” I’ve been thinking about this recently. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe there are no lines of dominoes, no such thing as linearity, no progression from one thing to the next. What if there is just right now, and in this now, everything that has been and everything that could be, also exists. When I think of my grandmother, and the townspeople of Kaminke, this makes some sense to me. They each held within them all the stories and memories and experiences of generations past, even as they lived each day of the present time, even as, by their living, they created ever new stories and memories that influenced and shaped the future.

I’ve been thinking about the story Chaim taught my grandmother – the one about the vessels of light that shattered and broke, scattering the sparks all over the world. When I knew her, my grandmother was not religious in the conventional sense. But it’s true that she did think of herself as a collection of vessels, vessels that had splintered and broken and expanded and contracted. And it’s also true that her bookshelves were filled with light. She continued to learn, to seek out the light inside words and texts even as she expanded her search beyond the confines of the Torah. I have been wondering if her decision to tell me these stories about Kaminke and Anshel the Fool and Yankel the Barber and Lazer the Gravedigger, about Chaim and Sara, about Dov and Raisa – was
that her attempt to mitigate the silence that had flowed through so many generations of our family? From Chaim and Sara, to Raisa and Dov, and then on to my grandmother, silence has swarmed around us, a force that both connects and disconnects us from each other. I wonder if these stories were a way for my grandmother to repair her own vessels, those that were stacked one inside the other, cracking, holding the weight of all things, all times, within the body of a single woman.

Now I, too, contain these stories, these shards, fragments scattered across time and continents. If the work of Chaim and my grandmother was a work of gathering, of finding what was lost, what was still precious, then maybe that has been my work, too, in all of this. To gather the pieces of me, from out of the dark alleyways and gutters, out of ships and graveyards, out of paper boxes. I can feel the weight of them, and there is a part of me that wants to flee, that still remembers the sense of the weightlessness that abides in oblivion. Raisa is in me too, she who discarded these scattered sparks, who left the vessels broken, who perhaps even actively broke and scattered the various parts of her. There is a freedom in brokenness, a freedom in scattering, a freedom in being lost.

And yet I am compelled to seek out these lights, these bits of eternity lodged within us, within the world around us. Maybe, as I put them back together, they will not be in the same design or formation that they were in originally, before they were broken. But what if that does not really matter? What if it is not the point to rediscover the original pattern and configuration? Maybe it is enough that they should be unearthed at all. Maybe the whole beauty of it comes in finding new shapes and structures and
relationships, new creations out of the broken pieces, out of the gathering, out of all the light we are able to find.

#

I am still curious if Raisa ever did find Dov. I hope so. I hope she found what she was looking for.
My dear Rose,

Rose! Ha, ha. The name fits you perfectly, does it not? Indeed! Yes, yes, I am quite pleased with this particular naming. I think it is one of my best. How are you liking your new name, then, dear? I trust it is helping you feel right at home here in our great city of New York, our great country of America.

Isn’t it swelling to say “our” New York? “Our” America? Are you beginning to feel that this is true for you, too? That this is your home? The Promised Land! Out of the lowly shtetl and into this great, big country. And what do you think of this new word I have just learned: “swelling”? It means “great,” “good,” “wonderful!” I will be happy for you to also add this word to your vocabulary of English words. We must always help those who have come more recently to our country!

Rose, my dear cousin, I must apologize that we have not yet invited you over to our home for a meal. My wife, Bluma, has not been well for quite some time. But when she is recovered we look forward to having you eat in our home. Other than this, though, life is good in Seymour Corner! Business is excellent! Perhaps I will see you in the shop some day? When you need a seam fixed in your dress? Or have a craving for an egg cream? On the home! As they say.

But this is not the reason I am writing to you today. Maybe you think I have forgotten my promise to you at the end of our conversation when we met in the back of my tailor shop. But I did not forget. I have been looking for Dave – for Dov – for you, just as I said.

And, my dear, I have found him!

Yes, it’s true, I have found my no-good cousin, and your beloved husband. Do not ask me how, or where, or what he has been doing these past years. I know nothing of the details! It is enough to know that I found him and he is well. Indeed, he tells me that he has been here in New York all the time! But again, you must ask him what questions you may have.

What now, then? What now, indeed. Well, he is willing to meet you, dear Rose. And so the question is, are you? Are you willing to meet him? Ah, but this is what you came here for! It is a silly question, no? Of course you are willing.
So, then. I will be happy to offer the backroom of my tailor shop to you for your meeting. He asks me to invite you there next Sunday at 5:00 in the afternoon.

Well, dear cousin, I wish you swelling luck in this meeting with your beloved! And I hope also that you remember what they used to say in the old country: Sometimes the cure is worse than the sickness.

With affection,
Your Cousin,
Seymour (Shmuly)
Spring drifted into New York in little pockets of warm air, in patches of pink and white blossoms that sprinkled out over the gray streets, in flowering tufts of red and green and blue that bloomed out above the piles of black and ashy snow heaped up along the pavements. Spring came and the people lowered their shoulders from up around their ears, loosened their arms from clutching tight around their midriifs, stretched out their limbs and their muscles, which were tense and achy from a winter of clenching to keep warm. Spring came and scarves and gloves were shoved into boxes that were then stuffed under beds and into closets, out of sight until they would be needed again next year.

Spring came and people lingered longer on the sidewalks, outside storefronts, exchanging news and pleasantries. Their breath no longer fogged up the windows, their nose and ear hairs no longer froze. Spring came and with it the rains, great sloshing waterfalls tumbling out of the sky, sending rivers gushing down the gutters, the drains, pooling in the potholes and melting the last of the stubborn piles of snow and ice. People unearthed plastic galoshes, anoraks, rusty and broken umbrellas. On Seymour Corner, children jumped in murky puddles and sent old women shrieking after them, their stockings and hems soaked.

Raisa almost hadn’t come. The note. She’d read the note so many times she had it memorized. *Are you willing to meet him? Of course you are!* Of course she was. Of course she was. And yet. She almost hadn’t come. She couldn’t say what gave her such
pause, what brought about such hesitation. She hadn't known this very morning whether
she was going to come or not. She'd sat on the edge of her bed wrapping and unwrapping
the sheer, floral scarf from around her hair for far too long. She'd heard the bells of some
distant church – from Kaminke? – strike three, strike four, and still she hadn't moved.
Still she sat.

Until, for absolutely no reason at all, she had stood, put on her shoes, knotted the
scarf under her chin, walked down the stairs and out onto the street. And kept going. She
hadn't thought it through, hadn't thought about what she'd say to him once she saw him,
what she hoped he'd say to her. She just walked and walked and walked. Through the
stretches of concrete and dust and grime and spring blossoms and laundry tumbling out of
every window until she was just twenty paces away from Seymour Corner. It was
strange, now, to see it not through the eyes of the newly arrived, the tiptoeing shuffle of
the immigrant, but rather through the lens of Rose, the American, the English-speaker,
the holder of a New York Public Library card.

Sweat accumulated on her upper lip. She was nervous. She wondered wildly
whether she should walk past the tailor shop, turn back, go home before Seymour saw
her, ushered her inside. But where was home, now, anyway? Tante Raisa, tell us a story!
So, my dear, what is your Old Country name? We all have our own wisdom to find. We're
the best there is. What's America, mama?

She tried to imagine the meeting between Seymour and Dov. How had Seymour
found him? What had he said to convince him to come now, today, back to this tailor
store to see her? *Your wife is here. She’s looking for you.* Perhaps Seymour had shown up at his door at dawn, unannounced, tie perfectly straight, mustache perfectly waxed, cool as ever, businesslike as always. Dov wouldn’t have known how Seymour had found him; Seymour wouldn’t have said. Seymour would have tipped his hat. Perhaps Dov had pulled on a white shirt and closed the door quickly behind him so the woman he had slept with the night before wouldn’t wake, wouldn’t see, wouldn’t hear.

*Your wife is here. She’s looking for you.* Had Dov felt caught suddenly, trapped, like a hungry child who has pinched a jar of preserved plums, who has opened the jar and stuck his hand into the sweet syrup, who still claims innocence even as the syrup drips down his fingers, down his chin? Guilty. Guilty. Perhaps he would have been startled with memories. Flashes of dirty hay and sickly mice and his face in the ground while his brother’s knee angled into his back would have come quickly. Bits of longing, bits of rage, bits of sweet, sweet mouth against his, fingers along his shoulder blades, tracing his freckles, his moles. Bits of childhood slamming up against his ribs, up against bits of war, bits of love, bits of unshakeable sadness. Bits of a baby: his baby, their baby, bits of their daughter toddling into his vision.

She was ten paces away from the storefront now. *You must ask him what questions you may have.* What questions did she have to ask? After five years of waiting and almost one year of searching, what will she say when she reaches him? When she touches him lightly on the arm, when he turns around and looks at her, when she beholds his face before her own, when the only thing between them is air, the moving, dancing
air. When she can ask him what questions you may have, will she know what they are? Will she be able to remember what it is she has come to find out? Do you love me? Do you hate me? Do you remember me? Do you know me? She had been sure she would know the answers in the way he stood, in the way his shadow angled against the wall, in the way he was, just was. But maybe she wouldn’t.

Five paces away. A familiar smell overtook her. Even here, even now, she could conjure up the smell he used to wear. He had smelled of cinnamon, and lemon juice, and ginger, and other things that had no name, things that were only his, that hung on him like the long silky threads of cobwebs. He is there already, she is sure of it, inside the back room of Seymour’s tailor shop, where the wallpaper is curling down from the ceiling and the hard-backed ledgers containing the names of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people just like her, seekers, escapees, the lost ones, sit on the desk. Soon she will be able to touch him. If she called out now, would he hear her? But the smell invites her forward, forward. She wants it before she wants him. She wants to sink in it, to close her eyes and spin in it. Her whole self gasps for it. Because it is hers, the smell. It is her smell too.

Three paces, two. So close he must know she is almost there. She imagines him, where the barber has missed patches of hair on the back of his neck. She imagines kissing him there, right there. And now Seymour is at the door, guiding her inside, his hand on her arm, whispering words she does not hear, does not understand. She is close now. So close that all she has to do is breathe and he will appear, breathe and he will see her, breathe and the light will change, breathe and time will stop.
They reached the door to the backroom and Seymour opened it for her, pressed
his hand on her back, pushed her gently inside and then slipped away, leaving Raisa and
Dov alone.

“Dov.”

It was him. Or someone like him. He stood in front of the desk, facing the
doorway where Raisa had just entered. Alternately leaning his weight against the desk
and then standing up straight, his hands in his pockets, his hands on his waist, his hands
in the air, unmoored, shaking. The gap on his left hand where his two fingers should have
been.

“Raisa.”

It was his voice. Or something like his voice. She had not moved from the
doorway, had not properly entered into the room. He took a step toward her. Paused.
Took a step back.

She had imagined colliding into him, collapsing into him. She had imagined a
mixture of fury and desire and a desperate need to touch, to embrace, to engulf. She had
imagined they would not have been able to stand apart, that they would have fallen
toward each other, that she would have swooned in the taste, touch, scent of him.

But instead she couldn’t move, couldn’t approach him. Or the person who looked
like him, spoke like him. Instead she was rooted into the ground, staring, trying to
collapse the image of Dov she held inside of her into the man who now stood in front of
her. Trying to superimpose one onto the other. Trying to make them into one and the same. She placed her hand on the doorframe to steady herself, blinked her eyes a hundred times to try to blur the two Dovs who now invaded her sight, into a single Dov. The Dov of her escape, Dov of her childhood jealousy, Dov of her wild imagination reared up before her, clouding her vision. He was not the same as the Dov of this back room, the Dov standing before her, the Dov right here, right in front of her.

She couldn’t move, because a cavern of disappointment had opened up inside of her.

Again he took a step toward her. He hesitated. Took another step.

“Raisa.”

Now she, too, entered the room. Took a step inside the cool, dark space. They began a type of dance, a slow circle. Step for step. Once before, under the chuppah, she had circled him. Seven times then, to enact the creation of their world together, the rabbis explained. Now they circled each other again, but this time as though caged and wary animals, sniffing at the other, trying to piece together the missing years through scent, sight, through the subtle changes time had wrought on the other’s body – he had gained weight, she had cut her hair. But there was more, too, deep shifts had occurred inside each that they themselves had not noticed, but saw them now reflected in the other. Lovers become strangers.

It was Dov who stopped first, Dov who tried to bridge the space between them. Dov who reached out his hand as though to touch her.
“Wait,” Raisa said, her voice trembling. “Wait, wait.”

He paused.

“I have to know,” she said, “First, before anything. I have to know. Why, why didn’t you write?”

“I don’t know,” Dov said. “There’s no good reason…I just didn’t.”

“That’s not good enough,” she said, “I need to know, Dov, please, I have to understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand,” Dov said.

“But there is, there is. There’s everything to understand.”

Dov was quiet. Somewhere outside a mother was force-feeding her son raw egg yolks to boost his immune system; little girls in pigtails were drawing hopscotch squares on the sidewalk using charcoal they had rummaged at the shipyard. Pedestrians dragging pushcarts rumbled along the street; bicycles whizzed; families and couples strolling on this warm, Sunday afternoon rustled by.

In the space that seemed to have opened up between her and Dov, Raisa remembered the year that Kaminke had fallen out of time. In the year before their marriage, Dov had visited Raisa in the evenings. When Chaim and Sara retired to bed, they had warned Dov that when the church bells of their Polish neighbors struck midnight, Dov was to be out of their home. So Dov had ransacked his father’s hordes of money, choosing the most beat-up, well-worn coins he could find, and bribed the bell-ringer of the Polish church to ring the midnight bells an hour later than they ought to have
been played, to give the lovers an extra hour together. And so for one year the entire shtetl of Kaminke had existed in a slightly different time than the surrounding villages, all because of the love between Dov and Raisa.

“It’s just that I had promised myself,” Dov said, “On the way over. I told myself that the first letter I wrote to you would contain the money for your passage. The very first letter. Do you see? And then I came here, to this, this, steel hellhole, and I saw. You must see it, now, too. Who is getting rich here? Not people like me. Sure, Seymour had a job for me – but he was taking eighty percent of whatever I brought in each day. No, no. I cut and run from him early on.”

“But even then, even when you saw it wasn’t happening, you didn’t write then? To explain?”

“No, no. How could I? I had promised myself. I had promised you. And how could you understand from over there? Would you have understood?”

“I didn’t hear from you for five years!”

“I never had the money. I still don’t. I’m still waiting to write the letter.” His voice had gravel in it. Like when he came back from the war. Like when he was drunk, and ashamed, and scared.

“How can you talk like this? Don’t you see what you did to me? I waited for five years. I thought you were dead. I thought you’d deserted us.”

Dov was silent. He spread his hands out before him and raised his eyes to the sky in the attitude of the Old Country.
Raisa felt as though she had been struck, and her whole body reeled from the impact. She looked at him now out of the eyes of her childhood self, the self of a forehead streaked with dirt, red curls tangled, tied up hastily, scraps of hay stuck to the backs of her knees, under her arms, wherever there was sweat. There he was, the hollow-cheeked, gangly boy with too-large hands, the only one remaining in the haystack kingdom, the only one to respond to her plea to revolt against the adults of the shtetl, against the God of these same adults. But even then, she had to admit to herself now, now in the grey steel of New York, now in the body of a woman, even then – as now – she had felt the faintest intimation of disappointment, even as she hardened herself, calloused against her father, her brothers, against the locked door of the study, of the holy books, even as she beheld the boy before her and understood that he was hers. In that first meeting between Raisa and Dov, she had needed him in a way that was unnerving, in a way that made her hasty, fearful. She had been afraid of the loneliness that loomed up around her then, she had wanted a companion in the war she was preparing to wage, and if this ragged, long-limbed boy was the only one to step forward, then he would be it for her.

So she had fashioned him into the image of her revolt. Given him everything he had needed to become her hero, created him out of dust and ashes. She was a storyteller, and she had storied him a world. A world he ran to, again and again. Away from his father, away from his brother, away from the corpses piled high in the rotting earth, away
from the crunch of a mouse’s bones between his teeth, away from the Tzar, away from the All-Mighty One. Built it out of straw and starlight and noses pressed up against each other. Built it out of desire, out of rumor, out of jealousy and anger, out of silliness and hope.

She had woven it around him, propelling him forward, binding him to her. And he had followed. Had followed her to the haystacks, to the *chuppah*, to the bedroom, to America. America, where the streets were paved with dirt and cement, where people begged to sleep in the prison, in jail cells, to avoid sleeping on benches, under bridges, crouched up against shuttered storefronts. America, where it was a hundred times more crowded than Kaminke, where fathers still beat their children, where little girls worked in factories, where doctors wrote out prescriptions for sugar pills and families shut their doors on their cousins, their brothers, their aunts and uncles unless they could pay for their bed. He had followed her stories here, along the path she had laid for him, deeper and deeper into the world she had constructed for him.

But that world had collapsed. She saw that now. Imploded in on itself. The stories were nothing but words, nothing but illusion, nothing but lies. Just like her father’s stories. Just like the stories of the rabbis. After all these years, was it possible that she was no better than them, no better than her father? And here was Dov, still living her stories out. Still walking along the path she had laid for him. Still trying to write a letter five years too late.
Dov reached out and put his right hand, his five-fingered hand, over hers. He curled his fingers around her wrist, lightly caressing the skin, until he enclosed her entire hand in his. The way he used to hold the chicks, and the mice. The way she always thought he would crush them in his large hands, but he never did.

“What happens now?”

It felt like sliding into velvet.

It felt like slipping toes into warm sand.

It felt like gentle, gentle, unbearably gentle.

It felt like every story she ever told, every imagined world she ever built, every song on the radio, every paper box, every ice cream cone, every sweet release she ever ran to.

Raisa tucked a stray hair behind her ear, under her scarf. Dov buried his mutilated hand deep into his pocket. They stood in the silence that followed Dov’s question, in the silence of the unanswerable, the unknowable.

In the silence, the earth revolved along its axis. In the silence, their daughter grew tall, stubborn, a dreamer. In the silence, their hair turned grey; their parents died. In the silence she knew that they were both still trapped, still not free. Even in America, they were still living out the stories that had been written for them so many years ago, in Kaminke. For wasn’t every story she ever told just an attempt to unlock the closed door to her father’s study? Didn’t it all begin there? If only Chaim had never shut the door; if only Leib the Tailor’s horse had not spooked; if only Yankel the Barber’s scroll had not
gone missing; if only Azriel haLevi had not died in the winter, when the ground was hard and chapped; if only King David had never seen Bathsheba; if only the Israelites had never made a calf out of gold; if only the sun had not risen; if only the world had never been; if only the sparks of light had not been scattered and lost; if only the vessels had not broken; if only The Holy One Blessed Be He was not silent, was not hidden; if only, if only, then yes, then maybe, then possibly Raisa would not be standing in the backroom of Seymour’s tailor shop now, today, beside this man she once knew, once loved; an ocean away from a child who did not belong only to her, and only inches, inches away from the feeling of *home*. If only she could get there. If only she knew how.

“What happens now?” Dov asked again.

Still and still he was asking her to tell the story, build the world, create him in her own image. She recoiled. Pulled back her hand from out of his. No. No, no, no. Enough. She could no longer be the weaver of his dreams. He could no longer be her escape route. She would have to do it on her own. She had already been doing it on her own for so many years.

The ground seemed to open up beneath her.

#

Raisa lurched out of Seymour’s shop, stumbled into the evening light, into the rushing, crashing sounds of this new world. She walked and walked, Dov and Seymour somewhere behind her, their faces twisted in confusion. The rain began to fall and shoots of green sprouted up out of the ground, out of the gray brown trees that had stood stark
and bare through the long winter, their branches poking up into the sky like metal spires. Now Raisa saw that the trees had softened with green, become pliant, tender with blossoms and leaves. They trembled in the new warm breeze, lightly rustling, murmuring, and sifting out the smells of cherries and oak and gladness into the air. They caressed the skin of those who turned up toward them, just as Raisa did now, as she ran her fingers over the newly formed buds and stuck her face deeply, sensuously, into the feathery flowers.