LOST IN TRANSLATION
A Life in a New Language
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Part I

PARADISE
It is April 1939, I'm standing at the railing of the Batory's upper deck, and I feel that my life is ending. I'm looking out at the crowd that has gathered on the shore to see the ship's departure from Gdynia—a crowd that, all of a sudden, is irrevocably on the other side—and I want to break out, run back, run toward the familiar excitement, the waving hands, the exclamations. We can't be leaving all this behind—but we are. I am thirteen years old, and we are emigrating. It's a notion of such crushing, definitive finality that to me it might as well mean the end of the world.

My sister, four years younger than I, is clutching my hand wordlessly; she hardly understands where we are, or what is happening to us. My parents are highly agitated; they had just been put through a body search by the customs police, probably as the farewell gesture of anti-Jewish harassment. Still, the officials weren't clever enough, or suspicious enough, to check my sister and me—lucky for us, since we are both carrying some silverware we were not allowed to take out of Poland in large pockets sewn onto our skirts especially for this purpose, and hidden under capacious sweaters.
When the brass band on the shore strikes up the jaunty mazurka rhythms of the Polish anthem, I am pierced by a youthful sorrow so powerful that I suddenly stop crying and try to hold still against the pain. I desperately want time to stop, to hold the ship still with the force of my will. I am suffering my first, severe attack of nostalgia, or łąknota—a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing. It is a feeling whose shades and degrees I'm destined to know intimately, but at this hovering moment, it comes upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions, an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt. Or a premonition of absence, because at this divide, I'm filled to the brim with what I'm about to lose—images of Cracow, which I loved as one loves a person, of the sun-baked villages where we had taken summer vacations, of the hours I spent poring over passages of music with my piano teacher, of conversations and escapades with friends. Looking ahead, I come across an enormous, cold blankness—a darkening, an erasure, of the imagination, as if a camera eye has snapped shut, or as if a heavy curtain has been pulled over the future. Of the place where we're going—Canada—I know nothing. There are vague outlines of half a continent, a sense of vast spaces and little habitation. When my parents were hiding in a branch-covered forest bunker during the war, my father had a book with him called Canada Fragrant with Resin which, in his horrible confinement, spoke to him of majestic wilderness, of animals roaming without being pursued, of freedom. That is partly why we are going there, rather than to Israel, where most of our Jewish friends have gone. But to me, the word “Canada” has ominous echoes of the “Sahara.” No, my mind rejects the idea of being taken there. I don't want to be pried out of my childhood, my pleasures, my safety, my hopes for becoming a pianist. The Batory pulls away, the foghorn emits its lowing, shofar sound, but my being is engaged in a stubborn refusal to move. My parents put their hands on my shoulders consolingly; for a moment, they allow themselves to acknowledge that there's pain in this departure, much as they wanted it.

Many years later, at a stylish party in New York, I met a woman who told me that she had had an enchanted childhood. Her father was a highly positioned diplomat in an Asian country, and she had lived surrounded by sumptuous elegance, the courtesy of servants, and the delicate advances of older men. No wonder, she said, that when this part of her life came to an end, at age thirteen, she felt she had been exiled from paradise, and had been searching for it ever since.

No wonder. But the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of. I told her that I grew up in a lumpy apartment in Cracow, squeezed into three rudimentary rooms with four other people, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle for existence. And yet, when it came time to leave, I, too, felt I was being pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden.

I am lying in bed, watching the slowly moving shadows on the ceiling made by the gently blowing curtains, and the lights of an occasional car moving by. I'm trying hard not to fall asleep. Being awake is so sweet that I want to delay the loss of consciousness. I'm snuggled under an enormous goose-feather quilt covered in hand-embroidered silk. Across the room from me is my sister's crib. From the next room, “the first room,” I hear my parents' breathing. The maid—one of a succession of country girls who come to work for us—is sleeping in the kitchen. It is Cracow, 1949, I'm four years old, and I don't know that this happiness is taking place in a country recently destroyed by war, a place where my father has to hustle to get us a bit more than our meager ration of meat and sugar. I only know that I'm in my room, which to me is an everywhere, and that the patterns on the ceiling are enough to fill me with a feeling of sufficiency because... well, just because I'm conscious, because the world exists and it flows so gently into my head. Occasionally, a few blocks away, I hear the hum of the tramway, and I'm filled by a sense of utter contentment. I love riding the tramway, with its bracing but not overly fast swaying, and I love knowing, from my bed, the street over which it is moving; I repeat to myself that I'm in Cracow, Cracow, which to me is both home and the universe.
LOST IN TRANSLATION

Tomorrow I’ll go for a walk with my mother, and I’ll know how to get from Kazimierza Wielkiego, the street where we live, to Urzędnicza Street, where I’ll visit my friend Kryśia—and already the anticipation of the walk, of retracing familiar steps on a route that may yet hold so many surprises, fills me with pleasure.

Slowly, the sights and sounds recede, the words with which I name them in my head become scrambled, and I observe, as long as possible, the delicious process of falling asleep. That awareness of subsiding into a different state is also happiness.

Each night, I dream of a tiny old woman—a wizened Baba Yaga, half grandmother, half witch, wearing a black kerchief and sitting shriveled and hunched on a tiny bench at the bottom of our courtyard, way, way down. She is immeasurably old and immeasurably small, and from the bottom of the courtyard, which has become immeasurably deep, she looks up at me through narrow slits of wise, malicious eyes. Perhaps, though, I am her. Perhaps I have been on the earth a long, long time and that’s why I understand the look in her eyes. Perhaps this childish disguise is just a dream. Perhaps I am being dreamt by a Baba Yaga who has been here since the beginning of time and I am seeing from inside her ancient frame and I know that everything is changeless and knowable.

It’s the middle of a sun-filled day, but suddenly, while she’s kneading some dough, or perhaps sewing up a hole in my sweater’s elbow, my mother begins to weep softly. “This is the day when she died,” she says, looking at me with pity, as if I too were included in her sorrow. “I can’t stop thinking about her.”

I know who “she” is; I feel as if I’ve always known it. She’s my mother’s younger sister, who was killed during the war. All the other members of my mother’s family died as well—her mother, father, cousins, aunts. But it’s her sister whose memory arouses my mother’s most alive pain. She was so young, eighteen or nineteen—“She hadn’t even lived yet,” my mother says—and she died in such a horrible way. The man who saw her go into the gas chamber said that she was among those who had to dig their own graves, and that her hair turned gray the day before her death. That strikes me as a fairy tale more cruel, more magical than anything in the Brothers Grimm. Except that this is real. But is it? It doesn’t have the same palpable reality as the Cracow tramway. Maybe it didn’t happen after all, maybe it’s only a story, and a story can be told differently, it can be changed. That man was the only witness to what happened. Perhaps he mistook someone else for my mother’s sister. In my head, without telling anyone, I form the resolve that when I grow up, I’ll search the world far and wide for this lost aunt. Maybe she lived and emigrated to one of those strange places I’ve heard about, like New York, or Venezuela. Maybe I’ll find her and bring her to my mother, whose suffering will then be assuaged.

My own sister is named after this person who exists like an almost concrete shadow in our lives—Alina—and my mother often feels a strange compassion for her younger daughter, as if with the name, she had bestowed on her some of fate’s terrible burden. “Sometimes my heart aches for her,” she tells me, “I don’t know why. I’m afraid for her.” I inherit some of this fear, and look on my sister as a fragile, vulnerable creature who needs all my love and protection. But then, my mother too seems breakable to me, as if she had been snatched from death only provisionally, and might be claimed by it at any moment. The ocean of death is so enormous, and life such a tenuous continent. Everyone I know has lost some relatives during the war, and almost none of my friends have grandparents. On the tramway, I see men with limbs missing—and the thought of how difficult life must be for them terrifies me. To be an adult, I conclude, is to be close to death. Only my father, who saved my parents’ lives repeatedly during the war by acts of physical strength and sheer willingness, seems strong and sturdy enough to resist its ever-present tug.

My father is a short, powerfully built man who, of course, seems very tall to me, and who, in his youth, had a reputation for being “strong as a bull.” I am later told that almost the only time he has
ever been seen crying was when I was born. But then, my life was claimed from near death too; I came into the world about two months after the end of the war. While my mother was in the advanced stages of pregnancy, my parents made the trek from Lwow—which during the war was unceremoniously switched from Polish to Russian territory—to Cracow, where they were going because it was the nearest large Polish city. They made this journey on a rattling truck filled with potato sacks and other people trying as quickly as possible to cross the new borders so they could remain within their old nationality even at the cost of leaving home. So when I was born after all these travails, in the safety of a city hospital and with some prospect of a normal life resuming after the horror, I must have signified, aside from everything else, a new beginning—and my parents wanted, badly, to begin again, to live. Later, they told me how happy they were to have “all that” behind them, how happy when, on rare occasions, someone they thought was dead reappeared from somewhere or other. But how poignant that happiness must have been! My father—this is one of the few hints I have of the pain of loss he must have felt—asked if I could be named after his mother, even though in the natural course of events, a first daughter would have been named after the nearest dead maternal relative. But my parents have no lack of the dead to honor, and I am named after both my grandmothers—Ewa, Alfreda—two women of whom I have only the dimmest of impressions. There aren’t even any photographs which have survived the war: the cut from the past is complete.

My parents tell me little about their prewar life in Zalosce, a small town near Lwow, as if the war erased not only the literal world in which they lived but also its relevance to their new conditions. “Well, we were just ordinary mass men,” my father once tells me in reply to some question, dismissing the significance of that chunk of their lives. Only sketchy outlines of a picture emerge. Both of them came from families of respectable merchants. My father was the coddled son and the village rake, who lassoed girls on street corners and didn’t finish high school just because he was a ne’er-do-well. My mother’s family was the more Orthodox, and even though she was a prize pupil, she was not allowed to go to the university, which she ardently wanted to do, or to study the violin when one of her teachers offered to give her free lessons because he thought she was “musical.” She was also not allowed to bare her arms or her legs, or to talk to boys on her own. I don’t have a clear notion of how my parents’ courtship proceeded, but I know that my mother’s decision to marry my father—one of the town’s bad boys—was an act of considerable rebellion. Her own history instilled in my mother a determined—and, in someone of her time, surprising—aversion to “feminine” pursuits, and throughout my childhood and youth, she is quite set on not teaching me how to cook or sew, lest such skills prevent me from turning to more interesting things.

My father, I think, in his excess of happiness, mistakes his firstborn for a son, and he tends in many ways to treat me like a little boy. He prefers to see me in “sports outfits”—meaning shorts or long pants—and with my hair cropped. Altogether, he wants me to be sportif—good at games and all manner of physical endeavor. So in our “first room,” he teaches me how to perform “gymnastics”—acrobatic exercises, which are very popular at the time, maybe because of the general call for physical fitness that is part of the new ideology and a feature of the New Man. Outside, he tries to initiate me into as many sports as possible. Sometimes his pedagogy is less than encouraging. When I am five or so, he buys me a boy’s bicycle that is too high for me, and once I learn how to keep my balance, he pushes me off, shouting “faster, faster, faster!”—till I rush headlong into a fall. He initiates me into swimming by that time-honored method of dunking me into a river and watching from a nearby bridge, till I nearly go under and come up again with my mouth full of water and a sense of injured dignity. He takes me to Cracow’s outdoor skating rink and pulls me around in the freezing cold at fast speeds. One of his happier inspirations for me and my sister is buying a Hula Hoop. This happens when the Hula Hoop craze, imported straight from America, hits Cracow with symbolic
force, and he gets this incredibly desirable object by cutting his way into one of the snakelike queues that are ubiquitous on Polish streets. My father is particularly ingenious at making his way into such lines, but in this case the item is so rare that some people have waited through the night for their chance to purchase it, and he is courting mob assault by his bold move. Nevertheless, he brings home an orange plastic wheel that, as far as I am concerned, is worth every risk, for it makes me extremely popular with my friends, and we spend hours learning how to twirl it around our hips, waists, and necks and holding competitions for who can do it the longest.

And then, when I am about eleven years old, my father acquires a motorcycle. Ah, the motorcycle! This pièce de résistance comes from Russia (nobody calls it the Soviet Union in ordinary speech), where my parents take their one and only trip in 1956, for the purpose of purchasing some advanced goods unavailable in postwar Poland—a fridge, a vacuum cleaner, a fur coat for my mother—and this large, ungainly machine, which is the envy of our whole neighborhood. At this point, no one we know owns a motorized vehicle of any kind, not to speak of a car. The traffic on Cracow’s cobblestone roads is made up mostly of trams and horse-drawn droszki, although in the busiest parts of the city there are occasionally several cars in a row, which seem to tear by at enormous speeds.

Now I get to taste how such speed feels on my body, for as soon as he learns how to operate the motorcycle, my father picks me as his first companion for an outing to the country. Over my mother’s worried protestations, I climb on the large seat behind him, the motor starts up with a great drumroll of noise, and then we are off, bumping over the cobblestones, moving smoothly over stretches of asphalt, and then gathering speed as we enter open country roads in the most thrilling, rhythmic momentum. We fall down twice during this first adventure—my father, as usual, is being more reckless than methodical—but somehow we get up with only a scraped knee or two, which I hardly mind. I’m certainly not afraid of a real accident—I have too much confidence in my father for that—and the truth is that I like being treated like my father’s buddy, and I come back flushed with wind and triumph.

“Bramaramaszerymery, rotumotu pulimuli,” I say in a storytelling voice, as if I were starting out a long tale, even though I know perfectly well that what I am making up are nonsense syllables. “What are you talking about?” my mother asks. “Everything,” I say, and then start again: “Bramaram, szerymery . . .” I want to tell A Story, Every Story, everything all at once, not anything in particular that might be said through the words I know, and I try to roll all sounds into one, to accumulate more and more syllables, as if they might make a Möbius strip of language in which everything, everything is contained. There is a hidden rule even in this game, though—that the sounds have to resemble real syllables, that they can’t disintegrate into brute noise, for then I wouldn’t be talking at all. I want articulation—but articulation that says the whole world at once.

I’m playing hopscotch or riding a sort of skateboard with handlebars on the street below our building when my mother’s face appears at the window, and she shouts, “Ewa, it’s time to come in!” After the requisite protest, I run in; the entryway, as usual, is blocked by the Fellini-fat figure of the caretaker, her enormous breasts emerging nearly whole from her sloppy dress. I try to slide by, but she angrily mumbles something about “The little Jew, she thinks she’s somebody,” and I run up the stairs half in fear, half laughing at this dragonlike apparition.

Our modest apartment is considered respectable by postwar Polish standards, if only because we have it all to ourselves. The kitchen is usually steamy with large pots of soup cooking on the wood stove for hours, or laundry being boiled in vats for greater whiteness; behind the kitchen, there’s a tiny balcony, barely big enough to hold two people, on which we sometimes go out to exchange neighborly gossip with people peeling vegetables, beating carpets, or just standing around on adjoining balconies. Looking down, you see a paved courtyard, in which I spend many hours
bouncing a ball against the wall with other kids, and a bit of a
garden, where I go to smell the few violets that come up each spring
and climb the apple tree, and where my sister gathers the snails that
live under the boysenberry bushes, to bring them proudly into the
house by the bucketful.

Aside from the kitchen, our apartment consists of the "first
room," with a large mahogany chifforobe, a blue porcelain-tile
stove reaching from floor to ceiling, the table on which we take our
meals, and my parents' sofa bed. The "second room" serves as the
bedroom for my sister and me. The bathroom has a gas stove to heat
up the water, and it's quite an ado to prepare a hot bath. At the
beginning of each winter, a man in peasant garb brings us a supply
of coal and thin-chopped wood for the whole apartment, and some-
times I'm sent to fetch some from the basement—a dark, damp
place into which I peer nervously before plunging in and filling my
two buckets with the coal stacked on our pile.

The three-story building is always full of talk, visits, and melo-
drama. The dragon caretaker is married to a thin, forlorn man, at
whom she shouts perpetually and whom one day she stabs with a
knife. After that, he slumps even more sadly than before, avoids
everyone, and takes to breeding chickens in the enormous attic
under the roof. Their squawks and flying feathers turn the interior
into a place of Bruno Schulz surrealism, and I'm drawn there as if
it were inhabited by magic.

The other downstairs apartment is occupied by a shoemaker,
who, in more classic style, gets drunk and beats his wife. Every-
one has heard her cry behind their leathery-smelling shop, and
everyone nods in commiseration when the couple is mentioned.
But nobody is astonished. Husbands sometimes beat their wives.
That's life.

Then there are the real neighbors—people between whose
apartments there's constant movement of kids, sugar, eggs, and
teatime visits. The Czajkowskis, on the second floor, are "better
people," meaning that they have some prewar cachet: perhaps they
had money, or education, or a prestigious profession. Pan (Mr.)
Czajkowski, a gaunt, handsome man, is ill often, and from his bed

he speaks intensely about what they did to "our country," as if he
is trying to burn some message on my mind. Later, I realize that
during the war he fought in the underground resistance. The
Rumek family gets the first telephone on the block, and from then on,
there are often several people in their tiny foyer waiting to avail
themselves of this instrument. Across the hall from us are the Tward-
dowskis, who come to our apartment regularly to talk politics and
listen to Radio Free Europe—our front door is carefully locked for
these occasions—and to discuss what snippets of information can be
heard through the static. I especially like the Twardowski's
daughter, Basia, who is several years older than I and who has the
prettiest long braids, which she sometimes coils around her head;
she stays with me and my sister when there is no one else to mind
us. She wants to study medicine, and she shows me books with
horrific drawings of body parts and diseases, and I talk to her about
questions that occupy me deeply, such as whether it would be worse
to die yourself or to have somebody close to you die first. But then,
one day when I go to her apartment to borrow something, I find
Basia in the middle of being spanked: she is stretched across her
father's lap—she is about sixteen at the time—and he is methodi-
cally applying a leather strap to her behind. He doesn't stop when
I come in, and, not knowing what to do, I stand there through this
humiliation, until Basia is allowed to walk away. After that, she does
not talk to me in the old friendly way.

The building where all of this happens, at Kazimierza Wielkiego
79, is situated on the periphery of the city, in an area where urban
houses give way to small rural cottages, patches of garden, and
weed-covered no-man's-land. And, like the apartment in which we
live, we ourselves are located somewhere on the tenuous margins
of middle-class society, in an amphibian, betwixt and between pos-
tion. This, actually, seems just fine with my parents. They are as
aware of the nuances of class as anyone, but their pretensions are
unaffected. In the melee of postwar Poland, they've done well, and
they tackle their lives with great zest. My father prefers the advent-
urism of independent entrepreneurship—illegal though it is in his
society—to the industriousness of everyday routine. Although he has a regular job at an "Import-Export" store, his real resourcefulness and cleverness are deployed in risky money-making schemes—buying forbidden dollars, or smuggling silver from East Germany. He is one of a large number of people who engage in such games—part of the constant, ongoing Game of outwitting the System of which so much Polish life consists, and which, given people's attitude toward that System, is thought to be honorable and piquantly reckless. Everyone—this is the common wisdom—is involved in an illicit activity of some kind: moonlighting, or using the factory equipment to make extra goods for private sale after hours, or going to Hungary to sell some items unavailable there—sheets or plastic combs, for example (for a while, plastic products are all the rage)—in exchange for those forbidden and invaluable dollars. How anyone can get along without such sidelines is a mystery, for the normal job wage is hardly enough to feed a family, never mind to clothe them.

So, throughout my childhood, my father vanishes for several days at a time, and reappears just as unexpectedly, bringing into the apartment the invigorating aroma of cigarettes, his capacious leather coat, and the great world. Usually, when he comes back, my mother and he fall into an earnest conversation in Yiddish—the language of money and secrets. But it's only when we are about to leave for Canada that he shows me a jigsaw puzzle he has made within our parquet floor, which opens to expose a little hiding place where, through all these years, he has kept his foreign currency.

It's pretty dangerous stuff, as we learn when one of his pals is sentenced to a camp in Siberia—but my father thrives on it, as he thrives on riding his motorcycle at top speed on Poland's bumpy roads. His illicit initiatives are also what keeps us within the bounds of the respectable middle class, which means that we go to a restaurant perhaps once a month, take long summer vacations, have a live-in maid and more than one change of clothing, and can occasionally afford to buy an imported item, like spike-heeled shoes for my mother, or a nylon blouse for me.

My mother, in a modest way, fashions herself as a lady and leads a pleasantly bustling life. She runs her household with the help of a maid, makes new friends at the park where she takes me and my sister daily, reads her books, takes me for ice cream to one of Cracow's lovely coffeehouses, and counsels my father in his enterprises. We go to the theater, the opera, the movies—all accessible to us at popular prices—and on a constant round of visits. For a while, my parents are satisfied, pleased to be in a big urban center with its culture, its lively talk, its news from other parts of the world.

Of course, both my parents want "something better" for their children. In fact, they have great ambitions, particularly for me—the firstborn, who turns out to be clever and talented. But neither of them is very clear about how you get to those other things, whatever they may be—how much work you need to do, how much discipline is required. No matter how many accoutrements of middle-class life they'll later acquire, my parents never quite buy into the work ethic. Life has been irrational enough for them to believe in the power of the gamble—in games of luck and risk—more than in orderly progress. Anyway, there is no such thing as orderly progress in the Socialist People's Republic. It's clear enough to everybody that you don't get anywhere by trying. Working hard in your "chosen profession," when the profession is most often chosen for you, when there's no reward and no possibility of improving your conditions, and when anything may happen tomorrow, is for fools or schlemiels. The System—compounded by the Poles' perennial skepticism about all systems—produces a nation of ironists and gamblers.

But aside from responding to their immediate conditions, my parents have inherited the ancient notion—which came from centuries of hard, involuntary labor—that the ideal state of life is getting enough rest. My mother has a not-so-hidden respect for lazy women. Laziness shows a certain luxuriance of character, the eroticism of valuing your pleasure. "You know, Ormianska calls the maid from the kitchen to get her matches, which are lying ten centimeters away from her," my mother says, half in criticism, half in admiration. Such egotism is at the heart of feminine power, which consists in the ability to make others do things for you, to
be pampered. My mother is not alone in this conviction—that a certain kind of selfishness is the most sexy of vices, a sort of queenliness. Later on, my mother will be amazed at how much energy I’m willing to expend in order to feed my ambition. She can’t quite figure out—and who can blame her?—why I’m in such a rush, where I’m trying to get to.

In some ways, my parents will always retain something preurban in their attitudes, something that escapes the categories of the industrial world. But at the same time, the war—their second birthplace—has thrust them, in one enormous leap across the abyss, into modernity. Most of their obedient preconceptions and beliefs have been corroded away by the lye of extreme suffering, and have been replaced by a perfectly modernist nihilism. They have little respect for law, politics, ideology. They have been divested of religious faith, and the residues of both Victorian and Orthodox prudishness. They are, in a way, unshockable; they’ve lost the innocence of an inherited, unquestioned morality. The only thing they’re left with is a deep skepticism about human motives, and a homegrown version of existentialism—a philosophy born of the War, after all—with its gamble that since everything is absurd, you might as well try to squeeze the juice out of every moment. They want happiness fervently, and they implore their children to be happy, to be happy no matter what. It turns out, in the long run, to be a terribly paradoxical recipe.

I am walking home from school slowly, playing a game in which it’s forbidden to step on the cracks between the slabs of the pavement. The sun is playing its game of lines and shadows. Nothing happens. There is nothing but this moment, in which I am walking toward home, walking in time. But suddenly, time pierces me with its sadness. This moment will not last. With every step I take, a sliver of time vanishes. Soon, I’ll be home, and then this, this nowness will be the past, I think, and time seems to escape behind me, like an invisible current being sucked into an invisible vortex. How can this be, that this fullness, this me on the street, this moment which is perfectly abundant, will be gone? It’s like that time I broke a large porcelain doll and no matter how much I wished it back to wholeness, it lay there on the floor in pieces. I can’t do anything about this backward tug either. How many moments do I have in life? I hear my own breathing: with every breath, I am closer to death. I slow down my steps: I’m not home yet, but soon I will be, now I am that much closer, but not yet... not yet... not yet... Remember this, I command myself, as if that way I could make some of it stay. When you’re grown up, you’ll remember this. And you’ll remember how you told yourself to remember.

I lower myself into the fast-flowing river on my back, and let myself be taken down by its tiny, foaming rapids without offering any resistance. I feel a slight, gratifying thrill of danger; it’s great to be enveloped in this current, to feel its energy and movement. Then I stand up triumphantly and run to the shore to join a gathering of family and friends. There’s my mother, her best friend, Pani Ruta—Pani means something like Madame—and several other ladies with their children. Their husbands, who can’t get away from their jobs, come just for part of the summer. The women are sitting on the green riverbank, with neat patches of wheat fields just back of them, playing cards, reading, or doing nothing much. The maids, who have come with us from Cracow, are either preparing our lunch or taking their pastimes elsewhere.

There is a group of about four families, which are in the habit of taking vacations together, and for several summers in a row, we rent a few peasant houses in the small village of Biaty Dunajec, in the foothills of the Tatry Mountains, where we ensconce ourselves for nine or ten weeks of unqualified leisure. Getting there is the hardest part of the enterprise, for the village is quite primitive, and we take with us not only our summer clothing but also such accessories of civilization as bassinets, soft bedding, pots and pans, and lots of books. One fine morning each summer, we get up early in the morning, take a taxi—a rare event—to the train station, and then, with much hustle and bustle, hoist all of our possessions onto the train. Then I’m ready for my summer mood, and spend much of the trip hypnotized by the train’s irregularly repetitive rhythm,
staring out the window at the patches of farmland, the rows of birches that give me such a sense of calm and order, the golden haystacks baked by the sun, and the peasants unbending from their work to wave at the passing-by train.

The houses we rent in Bialy Dunajec are owned by górale, a tribe of mountain people who speak a somewhat different dialect of Polish from us, and who are known for their fierce habits—many of the men carry small, graceful axes stuck into their belts, and sometimes, after weddings or other festivities, we hear of fights in which these instruments are used in very violent ways. But we are city folks, and such news reaches us only through the village grapevine. The house we stay in is clean and bare, with unsanded wooden floors and sharp straw sticking out of the mattresses, with oil-lit lamps and rough wooden tables. The rooms have a good, strong smell of raw wood and hay and clear mountain air, and outside there’s a small, casually planted garden, which seems to contain all of life’s dappled variety: many-colored pansies, sweet pea flowers climbing up the house’s wall, dill giving off its tangy smell, and hard, bright radishes, which we occasionally pick to have with our rye bread for breakfast.

In the mornings, I go inside the barns, where I can watch the peasant women, dressed in long, broad skirts, milk their cows or churn butter in small wooden barrels. They rarely talk to me or to each other, but I like to sit near them, following their hard, patient movements. Or I stand by as they do their wash in the cold stream, and I watch the linen turn dazzling white in the clear water. Later in the day, I go roaming through the nearby forests and fields with Marek, inventing games or discovering new parts of the territory. Marek is Pani Ruta’s son, and we have known each other since babyhood, running races in the park, visiting each other’s houses, and practicing our piano lessons together. He’s my best friend, I suppose, except there’s a twist here—I’m in love with him. I can’t stay away from him, even though sometimes he plays boyishly mean pranks on me: he drops an enormous tome on my head when I pass in front of his window, and once, he tries to stuff me into a hole

in the forest, which turns out to have been left there by the Germans, and might still have some mines in it.

For a while, his spirits get so wild that my mother forbids me to see him or play with him: but it’s no use—I run to his house at every opportunity. We talk to each other ceaselessly, and in games with other kids, we’re a team. Sometimes, in the evenings, we climb up through the forest to an open, flower-filled meadow, and we join a group of barefoot peasant children who are baking potatoes in an outdoor fire; the burned skin of the potatoes tastes delicious in the night air, and afterward, we make our way down using the gnarled tree roots as steps on the dark path. Or, on sunny days, we stand under a waterfall, getting our clothes soaked through, and I feel both the wildness of my own spirits and the safety of being with Marek. In spite of these risky games we play with each other, I have a deep belief that his greater physical strength is there to protect me.

When the hay-gathering season comes, Marek and I join the entire village and go off on rattling horse-drawn carts to the fields dotted with low, fat haystacks. We spend as much time burrowing into these straw igloos as using our pitchforks, but the peasants work hard, until the middle of the day, when some women come from the village bringing potatoes and sausage and sour milk. Then the work resumes until sundown, when we climb on the carts again, now filled with tall mountains of hay—so tall that they almost reach to the top of the barn where they get stored for the winter. After the hay is unpacked, Marek and I play around in the barn attic, which smells warmly of horses and fresh straw.

Often, while the adults are engaged in their card games or in their conversations, I lie down under the apple tree in the garden and look upward at the moving clouds, and it is enough. I like being alone sometimes, and having thoughts that are no thoughts, green thoughts against the blue sky. And I like meandering on the narrow paths through the fragrant fields after sunset, when the stars begin to come out and the horizon fills out into a great bowl and the silence hums just for me, creating a great silence inside me.
LOST IN TRANSLATION

On Sundays, the noises of village life stop, but at midmorning, the church bells start pealing, and a grave procession moves slowly down the main, unpaved village road. The peasants all wear shoes on these occasions, and are dressed in their festive Sunday clothes— the women have elaborately embroidered camisoles over their white blouses, and the men’s heads are covered by black hats with stiff broad brims, pierced by an aslant feather. They all walk together in a slow, common rhythm, singing sweet, naïve melodies about Jesus and Mary.

And at night, as I fall asleep, I sometimes hear the peasants coming back from fields and meadows, singing fierce, pure, modal songs that sound like no other music I’ve heard—and then I am filled by tęsknota, though I don’t know for what.

I’m in my bassinet, placed on our living-room table, and I’m being washed by Ciocia Bronia’s rough, large hands. They feel good, those hands, and I like the way she folds me into a towel as if I were a small, pliant animal. Then she dries my hair and molds it into waves, so that I’ll look “as pretty as a flower.”

Ciocia means “Auntie,” but I know that she’s not a real relative, and that in our house she has an ambiguous status. She’s a social inferior—that much is clear to me—but she also occupies a special, untouchable place in my parents’ affections. After all, during the war she helped save them from near starvation; perhaps she helped save their lives.

My parents met Ciocia Bronia in a house where they came to be hidden in the last year of the war, after their forest bunker was discovered by some Ukrainians. Despite the assurances of these chance passersby that their secret was safe, my parents knew that it was time to move on. Too many Ukrainians were on the Germans’ side. My parents turned out to be right; such hunches had to be right in their situation. A few days later, the area was intensively searched by the local gestapo; but by that time, my mother and father had found someone who was willing to shelter them. My mother offers a strange picture of the peasant who was effectively their savior—stingy, nearly mute, a hunchback. His two...

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strapping sons belonged to the Banderowcy—a Fascist group of pro-German partisans. And yet, this glum, seemingly harsh man started showing signs of affection and attachment to my parents, and found it hard, when the time came, to part with them. “You never know what can come out of a person,” my mother says musingly as she talks about him, and sometimes tears come to her eyes.

For one whole year, my parents were sequestered in this man’s attic, where they mostly sat on a clump of hay—cold, lice covered, often hungry. It was here that my father once saw the Germans approaching, presumably for a house search—and without thinking twice, decided to jump out of the back window. He tried to pull my mother after him—but she refused. “I didn’t care anymore whether I lived or died,” she told me. “By that time, it just didn’t matter. But your father, he wanted to live so much. That’s what saved us.” In this particular instance, the Germans were diverted.

It was in this house, also, that my parents came to know Ciocia Bronia. She was ostensibly a servant, working downstairs for the relatively rich peasant; but one day, she revealed to my parents the tainted secret—she too was Jewish. She had come from far enough so that nobody in this village knew it, and she looked enough like a Pole—large boned and broad faced—that she could easily pass.

From then on, whenever she could, she brought my parents some extra bread or soup. The Ukrainian never caught on to the fact that he was harboring yet another Jew in his house.

After the war was over, my parents and Ciocia Bronia, all of them left without any family, cleaved to each other. After spending some months in Lvov, they made their journey to Cracow together. They all had a hunch—yet another one of their hunches—that they’d rather be in Poland than in the new Russia.

So now, Ciocia Bronia lives with us, the first of a series of women—after her, they are all simply maids—to inhabit the narrow bed in our narrow kitchen. She’s my parents’ only link with the prewar past—and with the prewar hierarchy of the shtetl. Yes, almost a relative, except my mother comes from a family of solid merchants and she aspires to being a “better” person, while Broni...
will forever remain a poor Jew, nearly a peasant. My mother reads a lot, and sometimes, while I am pretending to sleep in the "second room," I hear my parents and their friends discussing a new book or film into the late hours of the night. I don't know where Bronia is during those talks, probably really sleeping in the kitchen, rather than just faking it like me. Bronia doesn't read or go to the movies. My mother follows the latest fashions in popular journals, and sometimes even—the excitement, when this happens, is great—in the pages of American magazines that somehow find their way into her circle of friends. We pore over the clothes shown in those magazines—we make no distinctions between advertisements and other pictures—with the closest attention, analyzing the minutiae of collars and pleats and waistlines, and we then show pictures of our chosen items to our dressmaker, who tries, to the best of her abilities, to imitate them.

Bronia wears no makeup; her dresses, invariably of flowery calico prints, hang loosely around her body; and she wouldn't know how to put on a pair of nylon stockings. She never opens the newspaper, and her speech is dotted with sighs and muttered invocations. "She's a bit primitive," my mother says to me in collusive tones. "So superstitious. She doesn't wash when she menstruates." But when my mother is pregnant, and Ciocia Bronia tries to divine from cards whether it will be a girl or a boy, my mother waits for the verdict with her eyes shining. As for me, I believe it absolutely—although I no longer remember whether it turned out to be right or wrong.

I feel a great trust in Ciocia Bronia—in the clothes she makes for my dolls, and the bread dunked in coffee with milk she feeds me in the morning. But I know that I don't have to listen to her as I listen to my mother, and I know too that she looks on me as a finer creature, that she's already deferential to me. "My kitten, my princess, my golden one," she intones, and then I feel singled out for special attention—but I am also infused with a gentle, disinterested love, almost as if I were its source.

When I am about seven, Ciocia Bronia gets married to a man I don't like and moves to Breslau, where I don't like to visit; it is still a city of rubble, and her husband starts pinching my breasts as soon as there is anything to pinch. My mother thinks Bronia should be happy; and I believe that in her quiet, peaceful way, she is. After all, she had never really expected to have a husband, to be a mistress in her own house. For her, this is an achievement, and it is one with which she rested content.

Ciocia Bronia remains devoted to our family even across the unimaginable distance of the Atlantic. In Canada, we get badly spelled letters from her, in which she pleads for some news from "her darling Eva," but I never write. There is no way, I know, that I can convey the nature of my new life to her, and besides, she is one of the many affections that are only causing me the pain of nostalgia, and that I therefore try to numb or extract from myself like some gnawing scruple, or splinter lodged in a thumb.

My father almost never mentions the war; dignity for him is silence, sometimes too much silence. After a while, he finds it difficult to talk about many things, and it is not until the events have receded into the past that he recounts a few stories from those years—by that time so far removed that they seem like fables again, James Bond adventures. How will I ever pin down the reality of what happened to my parents? I come from the war; it is my true origin. But as with all our origins, I cannot grasp it. Perhaps we never know where we come from; in a way, we are all created ex nihilo.

Before they had to hide in their forest bunker, my father had a narrow escape. This was when the roundup of Jews were intensifying in his town, and the Wydra brothers—there were three of them—were considered a prize catch because they kept eluding the gestapo so successfully. So when a German truck filled with Jews being transported to a nearby concentration camp passed my father on the road one day, one of the people on it couldn't contain himself and stupidly shouted out, "There's a Wydra!" The German in charge of course stopped and ordered my father to get on. None of the people on that truck came out of the war alive. My father did because, as the Germans stopped the truck for the night and herded people into some house reserved for this purpose, he noticed a door
that was a crack open and slid through it. Then he was out in the back and he started to run, toward the forest ahead. Within minutes, there were loud barks of dogs pursuing him. But he ran fast, and once he was in the forest, he managed to throw the animals off his track. The area was unfamiliar, and he wandered through the snow until dawn, when he found himself on the edge of the woods again. Approaching him was a figure of a peasant. My father couldn’t know whether the presence of the peasant meant rescue or death—but by that time, he couldn’t walk anymore anyway. He had to trust the figure. The peasant turned out to be all right; he took my father into his house—situated next to the concentration camp to which the transport was being taken. Then, word was sent to my mother of my father’s whereabouts, and she came to fetch him in a cart. For the next few days, she told me, my father had a cold.

When they hid in their bunker, my father had to come out each night to forage for food. Sometimes, he would make his way to the village church, where the priest would give him some bread. But one night on the way back, he was grabbed by two young Ukrainians—strong and drunk—who told him they were going to take him to the ghettopol. They each took him by the arm. But as they were crossing the bridge of a local river, my father—"strong as a bull"—threw them off violently, letting them fall against the bridge’s railings (he makes a violent gesture with his powerful arms as he tells me this), and then jumped into the river, though it was half iced over at this time of the year. He stayed in the freezing water, diving under the ice repeatedly for an hour or so, until he was quite sure that his pursuers had given up and gone away. "Ach," my father finishes, making an impatient gesture with his hands, as if to throw off these memories. What does it matter? It happened, it happened, what can you make of it?

My mother wants me to know what happened, and I keep every detail of what she tells me in my memory like black beads. It’s a matter of honor to remember, like affirming one’s Jewishness. But I don’t understand what I remember. To atone for what hap-}

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pened, I should relive it all with her, and I try. No, not really. I can’t go as near this pain as I should. But I can’t draw away from it either.

When I am much older, I try to get away more. Surely, there is no point in duplicating suffering, in adding mine to hers. And surely, there are no useful lessons I can derive from my parents’ experience: it does not apply to my life; it is in fact misleading, making me into a knee-jerk pessimist. This is what I tell myself, and for a while I have a policy of keeping my mother’s stories at a long arm’s length. But once, years later, in a noisy cafeteria in New York, I meet somebody who knew my parents in their town before the war. It is the only such person I’ve ever met—she has located my parents, on this other continent, by a series of flukes, and now she wants to talk to me. It is also the first time I get some glimpses of how my parents—whose history has always made them archetypal in my eyes—have a particularity, even within this metaphor. This woman is different from my mother: divorced, working on her own, tougher. Her daughter is as different from me as I can imagine—a saleswoman who takes dance lessons and doesn’t care a whit about the past—and this also comes as a surprise. We should be more like each other; we have been molded by the same Thing. The mother has a photograph of herself and other young women—including my mother’s sister. They stand on a tiny bridge in a frozen landscape, in coats with fur collars, looking older than their age, their heads cocked in an innocent gesture of coquetry. So that’s what she looked like; yes, a little like Alinka. But the image adds so little information; there is no way to penetrate the veil this way either. My parents’ old friend, though, tells me a story while we’re having lunch in the Union Square cafeteria that I have never heard: when my parents finally had to run for the bunker, she recounts, my mother, who had had a miscarriage, was too weak to walk through the snow all the way. My father ended up carrying her on his back, kilometer after kilometer. Another image for me to store, another sharp black bead added to the rest. As I listen, I lower my head in acknowledgment that this—the pain of this—is where I come from, and that it’s useless to try to get away.
LOST IN TRANSLATION

When I am a child, my father teases me once by asking who I would choose—him or my mother—if they were to get divorced. Then, seeing the terror on my face—they fight often and I think he really means it—he says, “Don’t worry, after everything we’ve gone through, our marriage is as strong as the Chinese Wall. Nothing is going to break it.” My soul, even then, twists with the wrenching complexity of this knot.

Every two weeks or so, my mother takes me to the library to provide for my next fortnight’s reading. Every time, I anticipate the event as if it were a trip into Sesame itself. The library is located in a narrow, old street, in an ancient building, which one enters through a heavy wooden door. The interior is Plato’s cave, Egyptian temple, the space of mystery and magic, on whose threshold I stand a humble acolyte. It is yellowly lit, smoky with dust and respectful whispers, and behind the counters, which stop the customers from entering farther, it reveals deep, ceiling-tall rows of shelves. When your turn comes, one of the guardians of the mysteries—most of them bespectacled women in black, satiny versions of a nurse’s uniform—approaches for a consultation. My mother mentions some author or title she’s interested in. And as for me—what might I want to read next? An adventure story? A boarding school novel? Something historical? The very thought of these possibilities makes the next two weeks a terrain of potential pleasure. The guardian then quietly vanishes into the cavernous interior, to emerge with a stack of musty, yellow-paged volumes. I open them; I sniff their aged smell; I read a few words; some of them have illustrations at which I look greedily; then I have to choose from the riches of Araby.

I come out, usually into the dim evening streets, enchanted with what awaits me, and as soon as I come home, I pounce on one of the volumes. Then there’s the prospect of reading for the entire evening. My parents are worried that I read too much—it’s not restful; it’ll strain my eyes—and sometimes I sneak under the table in the hope that they won’t notice what I’m doing. Sometimes they don’t.

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The boarding school novels, usually French, feature wicked girls who skip school and sneak out at night to do God knows what; I’m fascinated by them, but it’s always the quiet, bien pensant girls who seem to end up with a boyfriend, so I conclude that I should wish to be like them—though I feel regret for giving up, even in my imagination, the titillating possibilities of badness. There’s a book by an Italian writer called Heart about people so pathetic—deaf, blind, destitute—and children so filled with pity and kindness that I weep uncontrollable tears over the stories. There’s Jules Verne and Alice in Wonderland, and Doctor Dolittle, and Quo Vadis?—all of this very different from the reading we’re assigned at school, about boys and girls spending summers on a collective farm, being helpful to their hardworking mothers, or competing to do even more work than their two-week plan calls for—reading that I know not to take seriously from the teacher’s voice. “And what did you learn about the value of work from this story?” she asks the class with cheerful peremptoriness—and we answer in jaded tones, as if we were just disposing of a silly duty.

But this is not true of my library books, whose contents I take at face value and with complete suspension of disbelief. Like all Polish children, I am given lots of books by Sienkiewicz—the laureate of Polish nationalism—even though they might be considered strong fare by some standards. His historical novels about the trawls of Poland’s medieval empire, its triumphs and defeats, are populated by proud Polish beauties—I am particularly fascinated by one tall, pale, dignified countess to whom the hero is irresistibly drawn because of the strange restrained power he senses within her—by incredibly cruel Prussian knights clomping through the landscape in heavy metal armor, and by scenes of battle and torture. There are frequent descriptions of people being impaled on a stake or having their tongues cut out, or their eyes gouged, that are quite impossible to extract from my head once they’ve been put there.

Sienkiewicz’s Quo Vadis? should teach me a lot about Roman history and the beginnings of Christianity, but I read it mostly for its hints of a whole other knowledge—sex. Its scenes of Roman orgies don’t yield all that much detail but they’re enough to stimu-
late tantalizingly pleasurable images, which fill my head at bedtime—fantasies of bare-breasted women feeding grapes to reclining men and people bathing each other languidly, behind which I feel something else I can't get to, but which go round and round until I lull myself to sleep.

Then, by some oversight or mistake, I am handed Boccaccio’s Decameron—which I begin to read like any other book, until I realize what incredibly saucy material I’ve stumbled on. Of course, I don’t “understand” what I’m reading about: but there must be a foreknowledge of sex as there is of other things, for Boccaccio’s scenes of hermits giving in to fleshly temptresses and his casual couplings set my blood afire; it is a kind of ἐσκνοιμα, I suppose, though of a different kind.

But it is books that describe milder, less remote experiences—worlds closer to my own—that really matter to me. One day, I open Anne of Green Gables—and for the next few months I’m hooked. I ask the librarian frantically when the next volume might arrive; I’m anxious if there’s too much of a pause between them—I can’t be left hanging in suspense about whether Anne will become a teacher or not. My conversation is full of Anne’s bon mots and news from her daily life—that her friend, Diana, is tragically dying, that Gilbert invited her for a walk, that she got some dresses with bouffant sleeves for her birthday and was absolutely ecstatic. As long as I’m reading, I assume that I am this girl growing up on Prince Edward Island; the novel’s words enter my head as if they were emanating from it. Since I experience what they describe so vividly, they must be mine.

Like so many children who read a lot, I begin to declare rather early that I want to be a writer. But this is the only way I have of articulating a different desire, a desire that I can’t yet understand. What I really want is to be transported into a space in which everything is as distinct, complete, and intelligible as in the stories I read. And, like most children, I’m a literalist through and through. I want reality to imitate books—and books to capture the essence of reality. I love words insofar as they correspond to the world, insofar as they give it to me in a heightened form. The more words I have,

the more distinct, precise my perceptions become—and such lucidity is a form of joy. Sometimes, when I find a new expression, I roll it on the tongue, as if shaping it in my mouth gave birth to a new shape in the world. Nothing fully exists until it is articulated. "She grimaced ironically," someone says, and an ironic grimace is now delineated in my mind with a sharpness it never had before. I’ve grasped a new piece of experience; it is mine.

The yellowed pages I take out of the library draw me into them as into a trance—but only on the condition that they create a convincing mimetic illusion. I feel subtly cheated by Alice in Wonderland, because it is all pretend, a game, and of what interest is that? My reading is all mixed up, and it's not so long after I read Alice that I’m given War and Peace. This is something I should read carefully, my parents convey to me, a classic, something very important—but the usually discouraging invocation of duty has no effect on me this time. I don’t notice that War and Peace is a book, something I’m reading. Surely, this is just life.

It is a beautiful, sunny day in Cracow, and I’m holding my mother’s hand as we stroll toward our favorite park—Park Krakowski. But in the middle of this relaxed saunter, the tone of her voice changes as if she wanted to tell me something very important. “You’re grown up enough now to understand this,” she says. “It’s time you stopped crossing yourself in front of churches. We’re Jewish and Jews don’t do that.” It doesn’t come as that much of a surprise, really. Of course, I’ve known we’re Jewish as long as I can remember. That’s why everyone died in the war. But the knowledge has been vague, hazy; I didn’t understand its implications. I feel almost relieved at having it officially confirmed.

The sense of being Jewish permeates our apartment like the heavy, sweet odor of the dough that rises in our kitchen in preparation for making hallah. The Jewishness lives in that bread, which other people don’t seem to make; it’s one of the markers of our difference. But until I’m seven years old, I cross such markers regularly; I keep the distinctions blurry. Indeed, insofar as I acquire any explicit religious education, it’s Catholic. It’s hard not to Ca-
tholicism is everywhere: it's the atmosphere I breathe. "Jesus, Joseph, and Sainted Maria," my mother says in a humorous tone, when she's exasperated, or when things get out of hand. On the street, we often see nuns in their cowls and priests in graceful long soutanes, and I know by the respectful looks people give them that they're special, exempt from ordinary rules. My friends, with whom I play on the street or at the tiny local playground, are much concerned with the question of sainthood. Danuta Dombarska, an earthy, blond girl who lives in the next building to us and is one of my best friends, informs me earnestly one day, while we are waiting our turn at the swing, that she wants to be a saint when she grows up. St. Veronica, maybe, or St. Teresa. Her eyes grow dreamy; this is clearly a pleasurable, romantic fantasy. "I don't want to be any sort of saint," I tell her firmly by the time we're on the swing. I don't know whence this conviction comes, but it's very strong. Being a saint means lying down in a white dress, perhaps on a cross. I don't like this supine position. I want to roam the world and have adventures. Or maybe it's that I don't believe in saints, as I don't "believe" in what goes on when we attend church on Sunday. Yes, I go to church with Danuta and other kids quite often; my parents, until that official announcement, don't stop me. They're not, after all, believers themselves, and they don't want to make my young life unnecessarily difficult. Let her go and play with the others is their implicit message—and that's how the whole thing feels. It's a kind of charade, made more satisfying by all the trappings of seriousness—as if one got to play house on a very grand scale. I like the gray-stone, curvy Baroque facade of our neighborhood church, and its incense-smelling interior. I kneel down with the others, and I sing the beautiful anthems; I get a particular thrill when some clear, strong voice emerges from the unison crowd. And once, as we kneel in a row to receive the priestly benediction, the priest puts his hand on my head and, looking worriedly into my face, tells me that if I want to ask him anything, I should come in and talk. I guess he knows I don't belong.

I guess I know it too. For all these Sunday forays, and the fun of going to church at Easter, dressed up in a nice dress and carrying a basket filled with candied bunnies, I assume that in spite of the gratifyingly earnest looks I and the other children put on for such occasions, everyone knows this isn't really real. So it comes as a surprise to me when one day Danuta talks to me about God—his goodness, his intolerance of sin, his forgiveness—and her face again takes on that dreamy, deeply earnest look. Then I realize she means it. God is as real to her as her neighbors; I look at her with some awe—perhaps, after all, she knows something I don't?—but I have no images of God that are mine, that I've been taught to visualize or love.

Our maids make more concerted efforts to infuse me with some Christian feeling. The first of these is a fresh country girl, shy and fawnlike, but after being with us awhile, she starts coming into my room when my parents are out for the evening, and, curling up beside me on my bed, tells me stories of saints' lives and of Jesus Christ. During one of these sessions, she informs me that she wants to save my soul and give it to Jesus. I guess I'm impressed enough by this, or perhaps a little scared—will she really change me somehow—that I tell my parents about it, and after that the stories stop.

Another maid takes me to Cracow's great churches, particularly St. Mary's, a forbidding edifice in the middle of the city with a Gothic spire and famous medieval sculptures inside—angular, wooden, anguished figures of Christ in a coffin, surrounded by St. Mary and the apostles, which impress me with their contorted postures of deep suffering. Maybe it's this maid who tells me that I should cross myself in front of a church, which from then on I conscientiously do, even when we pass one on the tramway. Most of the other riders cross themselves too—a small, surreptitious gesture across the chest, repeated throughout the car and accompanied by quick, conspiratorial glances.

In the house, we have a Christmas tree every year, and I get gifts on St. Nicholas's Day; my parents do this not as a gesture of assimilation but so my sister and I won't feel left out of the surrounding festivities. I don't see any incongruity between this and the Passover dinner—the only Jewish ritual we observe at home. They are both exceptional occasions, both holidays. Even after my
mixed in some Christian blood with their matzo for Passover. "And this is an intelligent person?" my mother says furiously. But somehow the anger does not become wholesale enough for my mother to stop seeing Pani Orlov ska, or even liking her. There are other parts to Pani Orlov ska, after all, as there are to all the people who have drunk anti-Semitism with their mother's milk, but among whom we live in friendship and even intimacy, and with all the complexities of affection and impatience that those bring.

I gradually come to understand that it is a matter of honor to affirm my Jewishness and to do so with my head held high. That's what it means to be a Jew—a defiance of those dark and barbaric feelings. Through that defiance, one upholds human dignity. This is no Sartrean, conscious conclusion on my part, of course, but an outgrowth of some basic pride that is as strong in me as it is in most children. It seems a simple affirmation of justice, of rightness, of reason that Jews are human the way other people are human. After all, I see that with my own two eyes, and I'm too young yet to believe that the emperor is wearing clothes. Besides, maybe I don't want to be riven from my non-Jewish friends—not yet. I don't want to suspect the worst of them, don't want to look out for how they'll hurt me, to be on guard. My mother warns me: there's an anti-Semitic in every Pole; be careful; even the most educated among them are superstitious about Jews; even the best will betray you. But this is where I stop heeding her. I sense that if I want to keep my dignity, I cannot act suspicious, cannot wait for slights as if I knew they were going to come. Besides, I do not feel they will come. I cannot believe that the friends with whom I play so happily look on me as a dark stranger.

Still, there are incidents. One day, Julita, who's almost a friend, though not quite—she is too haughty, too beautiful, too earnest—passes me a note in class. "Is it true that you are of Hebraic faith?" she writes me. "I'm a Jew," I answer on a piece of paper, confused by her strange locution. But from that day on, I hate her, and cherish dreams of revenge. Someday I'll be more beautiful, more famous than she. Then she'll see.

My pride receives a more serious wound—because it's more
intentionally inflicted—in an incident involving Yola, a spoiled, timid little girl who counts as a friend among a small group of companions I hang around with, but whom we tease quite mercilessly and with considerable inventiveness. We concoct whole gothic stories for her benefit, complete with notes hidden in the ground, boxes with odd objects, and suggestions of ominous dangers. I don’t know whence these fantasies spring, or why Yola—perhaps it’s because she is so credulous and easily frightened—becomes the object of such inimical cruelty. After a while, though, she can help herself no longer; she tells her father. Our little cabal is summoned to her house. We stand in front of Yola’s father, heads hung down in some form of remorse—but it is me he singles out. “It was you who thought this up, right?” he says, while I shake my head no. “I know you,” he continues nevertheless, looking at me with utter disdain. “You are the leader of this. You little Jew.” It’s the gleam of malicious satisfaction in his eyes—as if he were tightening the right screw—that registers like a cold touch and that I can never forgive. From then on, Yola and I ignore each other with the consistency and pretended indifference of seasoned diplomats—a difficult feat, since we live in the same neighborhood and see each other frequently.

In 1957, prayers and religion classes begin to be instituted in Polish schools. This signals a shift in the political balance of power; in the constant tug-of-war between church and state, the church, for the moment, has won a substantial victory. So now, after the morning roll call, the class stands up and, led by the teacher, recites the Lord’s Prayer—the Polish version of it, which includes a special plea for the Virgin Mary’s intercession. Then we betake ourselves to the schoolwide assembly, where every day we sing the Internationale, whose stirring melody never fails to fill me with the requisite inspirational feeling.

I’m too young to appreciate the delicious political comedy of this juxtaposition. Indeed, it’s with a not altogether unpleasant sense of righteousness and heroism that I stand silently while others recite the Lord’s Prayer. This is what I have been instructed to do by my parents: show respect by standing up, but do not compromise yourself by actually saying the words. I feel a great self-assurance about this gesture. I’m upholding human dignity through it. And because I know I’m in the right, I’m doubly surprised when one day a group of kids I don’t know very well runs after me and starts pummeling me and shouting, “Out with the Yids!” In the melee, several of my friends quickly come to my aid, dispersing the assault, and it is to them that my feelings turn. Of course, I would be defended. The others are just stupid, primitive. My sense of trust is undiminished. Justice is justice. Truth is truth. At eleven, this is what every fiber in my body wants to believe.

Soon after these watershed events begin, Marek is accused of stealing by his schoolmates and gets into a ferocious scrape with them—a scrape in which he too is called ugly, anti-Semitic names. There are low-voiced discussions between his parents and mine, and they warn us that things may get bad. But we should know that we’re as good as anybody—maybe better. I don’t like these speeches, in which I hear a false, sententious tone, but the introduction of religion in schools, greeted by most Poles with joy as an anti-Soviet triumph, is taken by many Jews as an official mandate for anti-Semitism, and people are worried.

My own fledgling ideas of Jewishness, however, receive a more comical test. It is about this time that my parents go for a longish trip to Russia, leaving my sister and me in the hands of a maid, neighbors, and friends. And it is during their absence that Alinka begins to attend religion classes after school. She’s only seven, and remembering my parents’ tolerance of my own childhood Catholic foibles, I decide that she might as well go. Until, that is, I find her, one evening, kneeling in front of the light switch, hands clasped, eyes turned piously upward, reciting an evening prayer. What are you doing? I inquire. Well, the priest told the class to pray in front of holy pictures, she explains. Such pictures are a feature of every Polish home I know—usually cheap imitations of Raphael’s Madonna and Child, or some other variation on the subject—and people use them as icons in front of which to kneel in prayer. The light switch is the closest thing to such pictures that my sister could find in our bare-walled apartment. I don’t know why
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her very pragmatic solution strikes me as a sacrilege, as going too far. Passive participation is one thing, but she seems to be falling for the whole thing; she's taking it seriously.

I know it's up to me to provide firm guidance here, but I'm baffled as to what it should be, so I decide to take the very adult action of calling Marek's mother to solicit her advice. I feel very grown up indeed as I ask our downstairs neighbors if I can use their telephone, and dial it myself for the first time ever. I explain the situation to Pani Ruta breathlessly and ask her what I should do. "Leave her alone," she says in her husky, humorous voice. "What harm is it doing her? She can't understand these things yet."

Well, I should have known. Pani Ruta's tolerance on the subject of Jewish observance is even more extensive than my parents'. Her family was assimilated enough so that they could "pass," using "Aryan papers" during the war and living through it in relative comfort in their Cracow apartment. And she's not only irreligious but naughtily irreverent. My parents, for all their conscious disbelief, fast on Yom Kippur; they observe the dietary prohibitions of Passover. They do so partly out of respect for the dead—but partly because these central injunctions, for all their postwar secularism, still have the powerful force of taboos. But violating taboos is precisely what Pani Ruta likes to do, and one time during Yom Kippur, when everyone else is praying at the synagogue, she takes me to a restaurant and does the most shocking thing possible—she orders pork cutlets for herself and me. "You're an intelligent girl," she says. "You don't have to go along with these superstitions." I'm flattered, of course, and I eat my pork cutlet with a tingling sense of my own sophistication. Yes, I'm the kind of person who will defy superstition and convention. Of course. But I feel a bit uneasy too; the defiance seems too deliberate, as if it were calculated to betray. I don't think my parents would be happy about it, and I don't tell them of the incident until much later.

My family goes to the synagogue only once a year, on the High Holidays. The day on which this happens is a disruption of everything ordinary, a small journey into a hermetic otherness. The morning begins in a solemn mood; we all put on our best clothes,

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and my parents kiss my sister and me formally—not in affection, but as if they were stamping on our foreheads the seal of an impersonal legacy. For this day, we cease being their children and become something both larger and smaller. Then we begin the long walk to the synagogue—a walk that takes us gradually farther away from the familiar streets and into a sleepy, becalmed realm, the Jewish Quarter. Here the houses are white and low, the streets narrow and winding, and almost nothing stirs, except sometimes through the first-story windows we see a figure of a bearded man.

The synagogue itself has a Moorish facade with tiled mosaics and a portico with toylike, miniature arches. There's a courtyard adjoining it, where people who haven't seen each other all year exchange greetings with commiserating nods and talk in grave, sad voices. These meetings are commemorations of all their dead, as well as religious rituals, and everyone respects the mood.

Once the service starts, the children are left to their own devices outside, but from time to time, I go in to see my parents. I enter through a low-ceilinged, musty, long, damp corridor; on one side, there are hundreds and hundreds of candles, flickering dimly. They've been placed here to honor the dead, and I feel how many of them there are: an endless procession, and someone is always adding more. Then the interior, so dark that the men—they are all men downstairs—become spectral silhouettes, marked by the swaying movement of the white tallithim. An irregular arrhythmic hum, so unlike the music of the Catholic church—this is more rapt and more private—rises and falls in the darkness. Peering, I make out my father's figure, and I approach him eagerly. I want a little attention from him. But he barely notices me; he takes my hand without interrupting his chant, and I feel painfully that he has become inaccessible to me. Then I go upstairs to where the women are praying and sit next to my mother; she at least smiles at me, but she also soon returns to her book.

Across the lawn from the main temple, there's a tiny white building, no bigger than the space of a large room. I never know what its uses are, so when it's opened one day, I'm almost fearful to go in. When I do, I stand still with wonder, for what I see is a
circle of men, dressed in long, black coats, moving round and round in a drunken, ecstatic dance. They’re paying no attention to the few spectators who have gathered around them; their eyes are raised toward the Torah, which they pass on from hand to hand as tenderly as if it were a baby. ‘Hasidim,’ somebody tells me. I don’t know what that means, but I feel I’ve come upon something even more mysterious than the main synagogue.

One day, as I sit quietly under the one tree in this gnostic garden, a bee stings me on the back of my neck. At first, it seems like just an ordinary sting, but then my limbs swell alarmingly, I break out in a rash, and I can hardly breathe. My parents, terrified, rush me to a doctor, who offers a diagnosis: I’m heavily allergic to bee sting. Such an allergy gets worse with every injection of the venom. If I get stung again and don’t get help immediately, I may well die.

I don’t know why, but this sting under the leafy branches of the synagogue tree becomes my private transaction with Mystery. I’ve been injected with a bit of my own mortality; I’ve received a strange sign.

The rest of Cracow, the city of my daily life, is a place not of mystery but of secrets. Mystery only deepens as you go further into it, but secrets give themselves up unto the light. Cracow to me is a city of shimmering light and shadow, with the shadow only adding more brilliance to the patches of wind and sun. I walk its streets in a state of musing, anticipatory pleasure. Its narrow byways, its echoing courtyards, its jewelike interiors are there for my delectation: they are there for me to get to know. The quiet street that takes me to my music teacher’s is nearly always empty and almost strange in its placidity. It’s as if no one lived here, as if time stopped serenely and without fuss; but then, a breeze blows, making the sky clear, and the street is enveloped in warmth. In the park where I play with my friends, there are winding paths that let us out onto the wider, more lucid avenues, and a weeping willow by the pond that is just about the most graceful thing I know: it’s so melancholy, and melancholy
conversations with his acquaintances. They are mostly male, and they congregate there during the day. Whenever you drop in, there is a group to join. A cup of strong, black coffee, contentious discussion, and they are happy. My mother takes me to older places, where we eat yummy ice cream from elegant, tall glasses. Sometimes she treats herself and me to a taxi ride home, and then she asks me not to tell my father about this extravagance.

From the age of seven on, I am allowed to set out by myself on certain circumscribed routes. I can go to Krysa’s place—it’s within walking distance—or take the tram to Marek’s. Marek’s apartment is my second home; we visit each other, with or without our parents, constantly. I am fascinated by the fact that he has grandparents—elderly people, though in robust good health, who mostly stay at home and to whom great deference is due because of their age. Marek’s father has an ulcer, and he often stands against the living-room stove to heat away the pain. It’s understood that Pani Ruta doesn’t like him much, and that everyone is allowed to make fun of him. Marek and I, after our afternoon snack of rye bread and bitter chocolate, are usually allowed to retire to “the third room”—the Bergs’ apartment is bigger than ours—where we invent endless conversations and games. Once, when I come in, Marek greets me with the announcement—clearly, he has prepared this carefully—that the reason he loves me is because some women are good and some are beautiful, but I am the only one he knows who is both good and beautiful. At eleven, I’m stopped dead in my tracks by this declaration, I think it’s so gallant and romantic. I lower my eyes modestly, the way a woman who’s both good and beautiful should, but afterward, in our tussles and sex games, I resist him less coyly and allow him—though semisecretly, even from myself—to be more affectionate toward me.

Sundays, aside from being visiting days, are for strolling on the Planty, the broad, tree-lined park-boulevards, which used to form the border of the old city. On that one free day, the Planty are full of people promenading slowly, and sometimes my parents run into their friends and chat for a while, their voices lowering if the exchange takes place in Yiddish. Then I pick up some delicious gossip remarks, such as “Well, he’s not handsome, but he’s good to her; she’s a smart woman,” or, “He was nervous about something, no? Something about that deal, or is it her again?” But even if we just walk along without anything in particular happening, the Planty are full of enchantment. There’s the Esplanade restaurant, where we sometimes stop for dinner and where I always order the same thing—borscht with delicious meat-filled croquettes, their dough both soft and crispy, and a breaded veal cutlet. Why look any further if you’ve discovered complete satisfaction? When I play queen with my friends and get to ask for anything at all I want, I request breaded veal cutlets. But these dinners have more than a gustatory charm: they make me feel that I’m on a sort of stage, where I can observe and be observed. With the hum of voices and waiters bustling about, I feel as though I’m participating in a grown-up, public drama, and I try to sit up straight, nod my head graciously and discreetly, like the adults around me, and make mental notes on the other people in the restaurant, the way I’m sure everyone else is doing.

Then sometimes on our walks we stop at the goldfish pond, and I fall right into magic. My parents and I step onto a gracefully curving, miniature bridge made just to my dimensions, and then I stare and stare into the pond. The transparent water is filled with hundreds of tiny fish, which are not gold at all but red—and which shimmer and quiver with quicksilver motions like creatures brought to life by a genie. Even my father, who usually has no use for pretty things, stands looking into the water with an appreciative smile.

The Planty are another space of happiness, and one day something strange and wonderful happens there. It is a sunny fall afternoon and I’m engaged in one of my favorite pastimes—picking chestnuts. I’m playing alone under the spreading, leafy, protective tree. My mother is sitting on a bench nearby, rocking the buggy in which my sister is asleep. The city, beyond the leafy wall of trees, is humming with gentle noises. The sun has just passed its highest point and is warming me with intense, oblique rays. I pick up a reddish brown chestnut, and suddenly, through its warm skin, I feel
the beat as if of a heart. But the beat is also in everything around me, and everything pulsates and shimmers as if it were coursing with the blood of life. Stooping under the tree, I'm holding life in my hand, and I am in the center of a harmonious, vibrating transparency. For that moment, I know everything there is to know. I have stumbled into the very center of plenitude, and I hold myself still with fulfillment, before the knowledge of my knowledge escapes me.

My sister becomes a tomboy and a leader of children as soon as she is old enough to run around by herself. From our little balcony, we see her literally leading files of neighborhood kids in various exploits, like snail gathering and tree climbing. Once, my mother gets an enormous bill from our little local patisserie: it seems that Alinka brought fifteen or so children to the establishment, and with the generosity of a born leader, allowed them to order whatever their hearts desired. Sometimes she brings her companions home—ragamuffins she has befriended somewhere, and they run riot in our apartment, till my mother forbids her to bring anyone without her permission. But Alinka is a more willful customer than I—she doesn't obey so easily, doesn't feel the need I do to be "good." Perhaps this is because my mother was ill a lot when she was small, and she was practically brought up by our maids, so the sense of filial obligation and guilt does not flower in her so fully.

Whatever the reasons, in our family's division of archetypal labor, she is the difficult child, I the easy one. She is also supposed to be less pretty than I, though her dark hair, enormous blue eyes, and symmetrical features should secure this perception right out of countenance. Or it may be because my features have more of that irregularity—pouty lip, oblique cheekbone, slightly slanty eyes—which the Poles value as an ideal of feminine beauty.

Pure myth, all this, but the myths run deep, and we believe them ourselves, for years and decades to come. Still, in spite of such divisions, and though we fight and make each other cry, and I sometimes knock on the top of her scalp energetically in an effort to "beat some brains into her head," and she sometimes gets under the piano and bites my leg when I practice because it's so boring to have me play scales while she has nothing to do, we are sisters, sisters. My mother often dresses us in identical outfits, and then we feel the deliciousness of our doubling. We play tickling games in which whoever laughs first is the loser, and I put away rarities like raisins for Alinka and reproach my mother when she gets angry at her. It's only during summer vacations that I balk at her presence—I want to run around with my friends, with Marek, and I don't want her to slow me down. Then, one summer we become separated: my mother gets very ill and has to go to a sanatorium for several months, and she gives us away to different people. I am to spend my vacation with Marek and his family, and Alinka goes to some private establishment where several children are taken care of by a sort of governess. This is the summer of my most intense romance with Marek; we sleep in the same room, and I suffer the agony and the ecstasy of longing; we embrace and kiss and roll around on the floor until Pani Ruta feels called upon to give me a talk on womanly restraint. I forget all about my family for that July and August, but when we come back to Cracow and I enter our apartment, Alinka runs up to me silently and embraces me as if she wanted to fold herself into my body. She is pale, and for the first time I see the mark that will always be the telltale sign of her unhappiness—a muted but distinct greening of the delicate skin near her ears and nose. "They treated her very badly there," my mother tells me softly, and as Alinka cleaves to me wordlessly, I feel as though I'm holding another person's soul in my hands.

My mother and I are climbing the stairs to the Orlovskis', where I am to spend the day playing with Kryśia. Kryśia is deemed a highly appropriate friend for me to cultivate, because she is from a "better family." Kryśia's mother comes from an upper-class, almost aristocratic background; her father was a well-known architect. Kryśia's own father is a doctor. They belong to the prewar haute bourgeoisie—a status that continues to be respected in Poland's supposedly classless society. In most people's minds, coming from an old lineage counts for more than high position in the Polish
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People’s Republic; it is certainly better than being an influential party apparatchik, for example — though an apparatchik may have more money, a bigger apartment, and sometimes even, wonder of wonders, a car. Of course, party apparatchiks are compromised from the beginning by their political associations. But even aside from that, lineage gives a solidity, a depth that such newly minted success cannot bestow; it implies a moral uprightness and the dignity of not having to prove yourself, of being somebody to begin with — and being, by the still preindustrial standards of this particular society, is far preferable to striving.

There is dignity and uprightness to Pani Orlovska’s very bearing. She is a tall woman dressed with a resolute dowdiness; she wears shapeless sweaters, thick stockings, and sensible, block-heeled shoes. Her face, framed by beautiful white hair, tightly pulled back in a bun, is long, plain, and extremely attractive — I suppose because of her clear blue eyes, which she focuses on people with an energetic concentration. She uses no makeup and tells me that I should wash my face with the hardest laundry soap — it’s the best thing for one’s complexion. Cracow, roughly, is Poland’s Boston, to Warsaw’s New York, and Pani Orlovska is a sort of Boston bluestocking whose class confidence is evident in her very lack of ostentation. She greets us at the door cheerfully and says to my mother, “So you’ll leave her to us for the day?” “Till four o’clock,” my mother decides, but Pani Orlovska says, “Let her stay for dinner. They like to play with each other so much,” and my mother, smiling with pleasure, agrees. Then I’m ready to enter the eccentric Orlovski microcosm.

The Orlovskis’ apartment dates from the prewar days and is larger than the quarters of most people I know. It has not only two bedrooms — one for the children and one for the parents — but also the “little salon,” with its old-fashioned chaise longue and a big grand piano, and the doctor’s office, which Krysia and I occasionally enter on our tiptoes, and which contains all kinds of intriguing, gleaming silver instruments, with their elongated edges and sharp ends now rendered satisfyingly harmless.

The afternoon progresses through several stages. First,

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Krysia and I are allowed to go off on our own to play. Krysia could be pretty, with her blond hair and blue eyes, but there is something severe about her even when she is a child; her lips make a determined, thin line and her manner is brusque. Her mother calls her a porcupine, because she recoils from being hugged instinctively, as if she were an adult with an overdeveloped sense of privacy. She plans our games methodically, but they’re always interesting. To begin with, she shows me how to draw — a skill at which I’m singularly talentless, so I look on with wonder at the horses whose flaring manes and knobby knees emerge with such accuracy from a few movements of her pencil. Then, we go through her “botany” notebooks, in which dried plants are carefully attached to the pages and described in her neat, round handwriting, and she tells me about the various properties of weeds, trees, and flowers. When we are a bit older — about ten — she gets a small telescope, which she installs in the attic, where she spends long night hours observing the stars. This is a pastime I much admire; it’s something a boy might do naturally, but in a girl it takes imagination and daring. Her mother encourages Krysia in this; perhaps she will become a scientist.

After a few hours of undisturbed play, Pani Orlovska takes us into the “little salon” for an afternoon snack of tea and hard, bitter chocolate, which is considered to have some healthful properties, and for questioning. How am I doing in school? And what about my playing? Sometimes, we are joined in this interlude by Pani Orlovska’s mother, who resides in the little salon, and whose plump softness and curly white hair give her an unmistakable resemblance to her long-haired French poodle, Kiki. She is usually dressed in a long, embroidered brocade robe, and she seems to do almost nothing all day long aside from sitting on the sofa and petting Kiki, who never goes far from her. She seems to me oddly contented for someone suffering from such advanced age, and I can’t figure out the explanation for this — though maybe it is connected with her being what my mother calls dama, which means, approximately, a grande dame.

Often, in the course of these leisurely afternoons, there is a
musical interlude. I've started taking piano lessons recently and since Pani Orlov ska considers herself the discoverer of my talent, she also takes it upon herself to be its nurturer and guardian, and she likes to hear me play so that she can check on my progress. And sometimes, as a special treat, and a didactic demonstration, Kry sia's older brother, who is also preparing to be a pianist, is summoned to play for us—in order to show me what I can do if I practice enough, what marvels await me when I grow older. Robert, who is eighteen—glamorously grown up—and in the last year of music high school, isn't a real pianist yet, and even I can hear the studied laboriousness that prevents the music from lifting out of his hands. Still, he plays such adult music as Chopin's scherzos and Beethoven's late sonatas, and I am awed by having such big pieces performed for me in such intimate proximity. And there are moments, after he completes a difficult arpeggio or a particularly beautiful passage, when his rather sallow, birdlike face rises above the keyboard as if he were observing his own handiwork with triumphant approval. Then I feel the power that music bestows. Everyone listens intently. Is he improving? Will he be the great pianist the family hopes to produce?

Robert waits for Pani Orlov ska's permission to retire. His mother's authority over him is pretty complete, and he does not go out of the house without telling her his exact plans and agreeing on the hour of his return.

But Pani Orlov ska's position changes subtly in the presence of her husband, as does the atmosphere of the whole household. He appears only when dinner is on the table and immediately covers the gathering with tension. He is a beefy, balding, unsmiling man whose every utterance carries some hidden provocation. He criticizes the soup for not having enough salt, the napkins for not being folded properly; all of this is implicitly directed at his wife, who answers him with a forced courtesy; but she is clearly on the defensive.

I always know that the tension is not really about the salt, but it is not until I'm twelve or so that my mother tells me what the matter is. Dr. Orlovski has a permanent mistress, "a painted blonde," whom he supports in some nearby apartment and who is practically his second wife. "I don't know why she puts up with it," my mother adds. Such arrangements are common enough in Poland, and tacitly understood by all parties. But in Pani Orlov ska's case, the situation doesn't accord with her dignity; it throws some odd light on her, on what she might be as a woman, rather than as an impressive personage.

Nevertheless, in my mind Pani Orlov ska possesses a kind of female authority that I admire, and that I recognize in many vivacious and strong-minded women around me. I want to grow up to be like them, animated and sturdy and smart.

So does Kry sia; she would like nothing better than to become like her mother, but this, in postwar Poland, turns out to be a difficult trick to accomplish. Once I leave, I don't see the Orlovskis for eighteen years; when I finally visit again, Pani Orlov ska is little changed. Her skin covers her high cheekbones tightly, her white hair is beautiful, and her blue eyes are as clear and intelligent as ever. In her seventies, she has begun to write, and has completed a novel about Helen Keller; it has a romping, spirited tempo and a high-minded optimism. I'm having some romantic troubles at the time, and Pani Orlov ska, looking straight at me, gives me advice as in the old days: "A woman should be strong; she should love with her mind; let men love with their hearts." I look at her wonderingly, and, unexpectedly, she laughs at her own wisdom.

Robert, who is now in his forties, still reports his every move to his mother. He has never married, nor become a pianist. He is a well-known music critic instead, but he drops whatever he is doing to drive his mother across town, or help her move some piece of furniture. Dr. Orlovski never emerges from his office during my stay, and he is referred to only most obliquely. I notice that he does not appear in the numerous photographs of her wedding that Kry sia shows me.

As for Kry sia, the porcupine, it seems that her reserved little heart was a loyal, affectionate organ. After I left, she composed a poem about our friendship and the weeping willow in Krakowski Park, where we used to play so often. She also acquired a map of
the American continent, and stuck pins along the route of my family’s journey from Montreal to Vancouver, as she imagined me in such strange and exotic places as Quebec or Manitoba. Surely, the trip was grander in her imagination than in my reality. But by the time of my return visit, she has grown into a corpulent matron complete with three children. Like so many of my Polish peers, for several years after she got married, she lived with her husband and their first child in the old Orlovska apartment. Then they were lucky enough to get a place of their own in one of these boxy prefab buildings that give the peripheries of cities from Cracow to Marseille and Bangkok an oddly reiterative look. The electricity in this Polish version of modern housing goes out often, and the hot water can never be relied on. Kryzia, in all of this, is harassed as her mother never was—harassed by her job as a lab assistant, by the housework in which her husband never helps her, by the endless queues in which she has to stand to accomplish the simplest household shopping. Harassed, but proud—of her children, of her husband, of her vaguely Swedish rugs and the vaguely Danish furniture. As we try to tell each other of our lives, I can see that she can’t make out the sense of my story: that I am divorced, that I live on my own in a New York apartment, that I travel all over the place, that I have ambitions to write. Well, I can’t make sense of my own story either. What a strange sort of creature I’ve become! But as I listen to Kryzia, I know that I couldn’t any longer give up the freedom that often weighs so heavily on me, like a burdensome gift for which I can’t find sufficient use. I couldn’t, after all, exchange it for the weights around Kryzia’s life.

By the time I visit her, Kryzia drives a little Fiat, which is her proudest possession. More than anything else, the car makes her a part of the great, modern world. I get into it with her on one occasion, so that she can drive me around Cracow. She is parked on some ancient cobblestone street, and, as she starts up the motor, I see her making that well-remembered surreptitious sign of the cross. Then we look at each other and smile at the crosshatched ironies that have brought us to this place.
in stores, to carefully weigh various prescribed dosages of food. But my resistance is only cured when I fall into what is called "malicious anemia," which, rightly or wrongly, is attributed to my self-willed malnutrition. Then I’m removed from school for a whole year and made to lie in my bed under the quilt all day long, and moreover, every week a doctor comes to give me some painful injections of vitamin B. This is no fun at all, and I finally agree to accept food, which from then on, I begin to consume with a perfectly healthy appetite.

When I get a cold or the flu, Dr. Otto, our family doctor, comes promptly over with his enormous leather bag. He chats with my mother for a while, drinks a cup of tea, and only then takes out his beautifully curving stethoscope, which I like because I know it won’t hurt me. Then he writes out his prescription, recepta—a word whose musty crispness makes me think of yellowing old paper.

My mother tells me how, in her own childhood, she was cured of some awful illness by her father passing through their town, who made a mysterious concoction of herbs for her to bathe in. For most of my sister’s and my illnesses, these are the standard remedies: every time you’re in bed, you get kogelmogel—a creamy, thick, sweet mixture of egg yolk, sugar, butter, and cocoa. That’s almost worth being sick for in itself. For a sore throat, a vodka compress, made by soaking a piece of cotton cloth in vodka and wrapping it around your neck, which has first been rubbed with Mother’s face cream to prevent chafing by the alcohol. For serious flus, you get banieszki, or “cuppings.” This particular procedure is usually performed by Ciocia Bronia. While I wait uneasily, lying on my stomach with my arms over my head for protection, she pours a tiny drop of alcohol into one of the little glass cups, which are really shaped more like vases. She lights a match, quickly heats up the container, and then I hide my face in the pillow as with a small shock of burning heat the cup is applied to my back, where, with a sizzle, it suction the skin up into its interior. Then you have to lie still for several minutes, until Ciocia Bronia begins to pull the cups off, each one accompanied by a plop of released flesh, as if the skin had temporarily become inanimate matter.

The point of most such remedies is to generate as much heat and rest as possible, on the old idea that a sick body is cured by being cuddled and by conserving energy. When my mother gets seriously ill, she goes to a sanatorium—one of those Obblomovian institutions where the body is brought back to its equilibrium by being submerged in a variety of warm waters and encouraged to take the prone or at least the reclining position. But at some juncture in my childhood, my mother, who prides herself on being a modern woman, begins to take us to Dr. Gren, who is known for his advanced and highly unorthodox methods of treating children, supposedly picked up during his years in America—whence most advanced things unquestionably originate. His kind of medicine makes for a radical change in my and my sister’s childhood—for he introduces us to the invigorating merits of cold. Now, when I get a sore throat, I’m supposed to eat as much ice cream as I can; for the flu, I get dunked in a hot bath, followed by a pail of cold water. This is supposed to be done several times, but as usual, my mother colludes with me in fudging a little, and after about two alternations I jump out of the tub into the merciful embrace of the dry towel. Though we follow Dr. Gren’s stern prescriptions, they go against the grain.

But it’s not till I come to the land of progress where Dr. Gren supposedly got his education that I’m confronted with the idea of health as effort. Run, swim, do aerobics, I am urged by every cultural loudspeaker. Run harder, run faster, run more every day. Keep moving, keep on the move. Expend energy. Build your body up so that it’s as hard as a board, as muscular as an athlete’s, as invulnerable as a steel machine. Don’t stay in bed too long, my doctor tells me when I get the newest strain of flu; it’s slightly shameful to be sick, anyway, and probably slightly psychosomatic. I follow the directions; occasionally, I put on my sneakers and go out for a run to prove to myself and others that my body parts are in good working order. Once in a while, I go to a health club, that place where people, with a look of high seriousness on their faces, attach themselves to various contraptions and put successive parts of their bodies into strenuous motion. They are smooth, well-pre-
served, middle-class bodies for the most part—for class affects even how we get to look and age—and their healthy glow does credit to the machines and their own elaborate exertions. But I keep remembering the more indolent sensuousness that stood for health in my childhood, and I marvel at the eagerness to drive the body to the limit—as if one’s flesh could be properly castigated that way, and the danger of passivity exorcised, like a deadly sin.

Once a week, I am woken up early in the morning by sounds of peasant calls coming into the window from the street below. “Fresh vegetables, fresh cream, butter, eggs, young chickens . . .,” they shout out in strong, hoarse voices, elongating the vowels in a singsong lilt.

I jump out of bed, drawn to all this bustle, and a bit later, my mother and I emerge into the street, which for the day has been transformed into an improvised market. Peasant women, with their long, wide skirts and kerchiefs on their heads, stand or squat on the pavement in front of their array of wares. Some of them have unplucked chickens hanging from a string around their necks, so that the dead birds sway with the movements of their large, many-skirted bellies. I always feel relieved when my mother buys a chicken that’s dead. Sometimes, chickens are brought to our house alive, and then our maid closes the kitchen door and I hear horrible, high squawks which then, just as horribly, cease. Once, I come into the kitchen too soon, and, unbelievably, a chicken without a head runs toward me at full speed. I stare at it as if it were the Medusa’s head before beating a retreat; the chicken seems furious about being dead, furious enough to do something horrible to me.

Other sellers hold out little nubbins of cool butter and thick sour cream to be tasted. “Doesn’t madame want to taste it? Mine is fresh and not expensive,” a woman encourages us as we pass by. My mother stops at some of the improvised stands—though stand is a euphemism, since the displays are mostly set out on pieces of newspaper spread on the pavement. With relish, we taste the sweet, fresh butter, or a stinging white radish, or smooth sour cream, and after much choosing and bargaining—this involves pretending to

be in a huff and walking away to the next stands—we choose the best goods available on this stretch of the street, which my mother packs into her net shopping bag.

These produce sellers, who at dusk drive back to their villages in horse-drawn carts, constitute one of the rare pockets of private enterprise surviving within the cracks of our highly systematic System. So do our maids, who sometimes stay with us for a few months, sometimes for a few years. Both come to us courtesy of Polish peasants’ orneriness, and the persistence of old bourgeois ideas. After the war, when the Russians attempted to collectivize Eastern Europe’s farming, they found Polish peasants’ resistance too powerful—and, they knew, potentially too violent. The collectivization succeeded on only a small percentage of the land, and many farms remained privately owned, providing us with our vacation cottages, our weekly infusion of fresh food, and a supply of young country girls who come to the cities with no profession or way of making money, and who prefer working in somebody’s house to laboring on the assembly lines in the newly sprung-up factories.

From my mother’s point of view, a maid is a necessary part of a lady’s equipment. Everybody has one. But maids also fill in the great technology gap created by the Five-Year Plans, in which conveniences for the housewife do not occupy a position of high priority. Our household, like most others, is innocent of electrical appliances, and it takes pretty hard labor to keep it in shape. Once a week or so, the maid waxes the parquet floors in the first and the second rooms, and then polishes them by walking on two pieces of felt, her feet splayed and digging in hard. Once every two weeks, she undertakes the enormous project of doing the laundry—and then the apartment is transformed into a vaporous bathhouse of steam, soapy water, and expanses of white material being rubbed energetically against the washboard. Afterward, my mother and I stretch the sheets and the quilt cases between us by pulling their ends in opposite directions, to get them ready for ironing.

When we get a fridge—my parents bring it from their trip to Russia—everyone comes over to inspect it. It’s placed in the first room, the only one in which there is enough space, and there it sits
like a gleaming white, vertical boat. It seems less an object of utility than one of admiration, and we don’t use it much, or give up the habit of putting milk and butter on the balcony for the night.

To most of our maids, my mother is part “madame,” part friendly counselor, and they alternately bicker, work together, and fall into their appointed roles of mistress and servant, insofar as such social separation is possible in the revealing proximity of our snug quarters. “I told you to have dinner on the table at two. I told you to knock on the door before coming in,” my mother admonishes the maid, with whom only that morning she was peeling potatoes. No wonder that her tone in these exchanges does not have the proper hauteur; it’s hard to maintain self-importance in such circumstances.

Hanka is the maid who stays with us the longest. She is a slim, attractive young woman who wears her blond hair in a smooth roll close to the nape of her neck, whose eyebrows are plucked in an arching line, and whose dresses are stylishly tight. She comes to our house when Alinka is still an infant, and becomes as attached to my sister as Ciocia Bronia was once to me. She often feeds Alinka in the morning, takes her to the park, scolds her when she misbehaves, and reads her bedtime stories. Altogether, Hanka is more of a friend than most of these cohabitants of ours. She’s a lively, affectionate young woman who is eager to learn the ways of the city and the “modern world.” She is cheerful; she usually sings as she works in the kitchen, and my mother, who has a nice, mellow voice, often joins her, in a rhythmic accompaniment to their tasks. At other times, Hanka and my mother discuss “feminine” matters—I can always tell when such subjects come up from the coyness of their voices and smiles. At some point, my mother lends Hanka a book that fascinates me too. It is called For Women, and is illustrated with sly, curvy cartoons of women extending their spike-heeled legs, exhaling rings of cigarette smoke, or shaping their lipstick-stained mouths into a wicked, vampy moue. The book’s purpose is to give advice on how to be glamorous, sexy, and constantly seductive. I find its tone—so arch, so suggestive—irresistible and cannot refrain from repeating some of its bons mots to Marek: “What are women for? So that men will have someone to persecute,” I quote to him while we’re waiting for a movie in a theater lobby, but my attempt at feigning coquettish sophistication backfires as I notice the people around us suppressing their smiles and I end up blushing hotly. Hanka turns to this book for guidance often and then consults with my mother on whether the advice she gleans from it is quite respectable. Should she wear a skirt with such a long open slit? What about that cigarette holder, would it look good on her? Her boyfriend gave her some nylon stockings with seams in the back, and she shows them to my mother with some pride. My mother listens to the tales of those boyfriends with a sort of older woman tolerance, though once both of them seem worried. Hanka might be pregnant, I infer, and I also gather that my mother thinks this would be disastrous; the boyfriend should marry Hanka first, otherwise he’ll surely vanish.

Other maids come and go too quickly to become more than a collection of quirks and idiosyncrasies. There’s an elderly woman, always wearing a handkerchief on her head, who pretends to be deaf for a long time—until she is caught eavesdropping on my parents behind the door. There is another one, a tiny person whose outlines are indistinct because she is swathed in so many layers of skirts, underskirts, sweaters, and aprons, who refuses either to undress or to put out the light in the kitchen at night because of some strange superstition whose nature she can’t divulge.

It never occurs to my parents, or to us, that our apartment may be too crowded or that we may be suffering from invasion of privacy. After all, we have more space than many people we know, and there are often additional visitors who spend the night on the couch in the first room. I’m usually unsure who they are: my father’s acquaintances from the world of his business dealings, or maybe relatives of some people my parents knew before the war. They stay as long as they need to—sometimes several days, sometimes longer. For a while, a young man comes to our house every Friday and sometimes stays overnight. He is Jewish, and he lost both his parents during the war. Now he lives in an orphanage, and my parents invite him in the old Jewish tradition of taking in needy strangers.
on the Sabbath. He doesn’t seem cheered by these occasions, though, and he bites his fingernails and looks unrelievedly depressed throughout dinner.

There is always the heat of human proximity in the apartment, but it never seems uncomfortable to me. Seeing people so up close, in their intimate, unguarded behavior, is the very stuff of life, and I like to discuss the small daily events with my mother and to hear her converted into the witty, reflective, insightfully malicious gossip that is her characteristic tone.

In the evenings, I try to stay awake as long as I can, listening to the adult talk in the first room. Visitors often drop by, and the conversation veers from common acquaintances to food prices, politics, maids, movies, books. Everyone in this little circle seems to read the same books—often they are passed on from person to person like rare treasures—and the conversation about them is as impassioned and intimate as other gossip. Was she right to marry him, or to leave him? What could she have done instead? Voices rise in animated discussion, giving me the satisfying feeling that characters in books are contiguous with real people, a colorful addition to the gallery, and grist for my curiosity about human motives and feelings. It all weaves in and out, and I fall asleep with the sense that I am immersed in a stream, and that when I wake up, there will be more stuff, more talk, more life.

I know that something has happened as soon as we file into the main school auditorium. The various classes enter in an unusually orderly, hushed fashion; even some of the older boys who have a reputation as troublemakers and near hooligans aren’t whispering or throwing paper balls at each other. The stage is empty except for a lectern and two conspicuously placed flags—Poland’s and the Soviet Union’s. When the principal himself appears, we look at each other uneasily. This must be something big. He asks us all to stand up. Then he gives us the stunning news: Joseph Stalin has died. This is both very abstract and nearly unbelievable. On the one hand, since Stalin wasn’t really a mortal, but a great granite monolith in the middle of our lives, he shouldn’t have died. On the other hand, aside from surprise, one can’t feel much about the death of a granite monolith. He’ll just live in a mausoleum from now on, instead of the Kremlin. But the principal is determined to bring the tragedy of it home to us. His voice trembles; he’s clearly shaken. He reminds us of Stalin’s heroism during the war, of his special love for children, of his great friendship for our nation. Without him, we’ll feel leaderless, unguided, orphaned. All we can do is try to live up to his great Communist ideals, to carry forward Stalin’s dream of bringing equality and justice to all oppressed people all over the world.

After the speech, the whole auditorium breaks out into the “Internationale”—sung more gravely, slowly than usual. Then the flags are lowered to half-mast, as we observe several minutes of silence. By the time we return to our separate classrooms, there is hardly a dry eye in the crowd, and for several minutes the teacher lets us sit in silence, while people variously sniffle, let tears run down their faces, or cry with open abandon. For some reason, though, I’m not crying. I’m holding myself upright, and have an illogical sense of pride in my own resistance. I hardly know why, but I don’t think it’s right for me to mourn the passing of Stalin. I don’t think he was a friend of mine. I think my weeping classmates are sissies.

I don’t exactly know how I’ve acquired these sub rosa convictions. Politics infiltrates daily lives in the most porous ways. It is another one of those whispered, half-secret subjects, like Jewishness, and as with Jewishness, we kids pick up reverberations of half-finished political phrases like bat signals. The neighborly huddles around Radio Free Europe broadcasts are usually accompanied by undertone commentary: “So, well, are they going to go in there this time?” “Don’t worry, that’s not something they’ll go to war over.” The very mention of the word war sends me into a small panic, and my parents calm me down each time. “Nobody wants war again,” they say. “Nobody who has lived through it. Even the Russians won’t let it happen, not for a long time.” The bookshelf attached to my parents’ bed holds the collected works of Lenin and Stalin. But I’ve never seen them taken out or opened, and even
LOST IN TRANSLATION

when I’m very young, I know they are not like other books, there to be read, but because we’re supposed to have them—maybe in case there is a police inspection, as there once is.

Disbelief in all symptoms of official life is, of course, so taken for granted that nobody needs to talk about it very much. Politics, like religion, is a game, except almost no one—no one we know, anyway—seems to believe in it. Poles don’t need demystifying philosophies to doubt all sources of power and authority. Nose-thumbing the system is a national pastime, and every second street-corner exchange is a deconstruction. But, in this anarchic country, my parents are surely among the more anarchic citizens; my father is the person who didn’t register for work with the other Jews during the war, and he’s certainly not going to join the Party, or buy into a set of clumsily concocted ideas about Five-Year Plans and the New Man. His attitude toward such matters is of a piece with the way he jumps out of the tramway while it’s still moving, and with his high speeds on the motorcycle. On May Day, when all employees are required to participate in the enormous parade, in which tanks and soldiers alternate with regional costumes and wreaths of wheat celebrating Poland’s peasant power, my father is one of the first to sneak off. He spots us at some appointed place, makes a beeline out of the file, and then we quickly move through the crowd of onlookers to go for a walk on the Planty.

For both my parents, the sense of disaffiliation is radical enough that they do not feel the drive to develop an opposing ideology, or to join in patriotic or nostalgic discussions about the “real Poland,” which some of their non-Jewish friends, after a few glasses of vodka, mistily lament. They don’t have reminiscences of the underground resistance, from which Jews were mostly pushed out, and they were not engaged in the bitter fight for Poland that took place between the nationalists and the Communists after the war. On this political map, they do not figure: they are the ones whom nobody wanted. “Politics,” my mother is given to saying, “it’s all a dirty business.” Politics is what has habitually tried to crush them; and this Poland, after all, is not quite their Poland. As with the troubled subject of Jewishness, my parents don’t want to

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instill too many political lessons in me too early, though they sometimes warn me not to repeat an anti-Russian joke or some fragment of a discussion in school—such as the conversation that takes place one day when we receive the news that a friend has just been sent to Siberia. Several people gather in our apartment to console the exiled man’s wife. The mood is grim, but nobody seems to be shocked or outraged. “Ten years,” someone informs a new arrival who hasn’t heard yet, and he nods his head compassionately and resignedly. “Maybe they’ll reduce it to five,” someone offers to the weeping wife, mentioning stretches of time that sound like eternity to me. I don’t understand what this is about; I don’t know why Pan Gorczawski, a jolly, handsome man, has to go to an awful place called Siberia. “The bastards,” somebody says, but everyone accepts this event with a sort of fatalism that pervades their relations to the larger world. That’s how things are; it’s useless to protest or rail when you can’t do anything about it.

So I know better than to believe anything I’m told about political matters. In the newspapers and magazines, the Soviet Union is portrayed as a sort of parent country, the center toward which the whole world leans. In nearly every issue of my favorite journal, Cross Section, there are pictures of blond Russian girls in flower wreaths, gleaming with health, or of women in scarves standing near tractors, smiling broadly against expansive fields. On the radio, there are soulful Russian songs, and at the movies I see the bravery of Russian soldiers in battle. I can’t help being affected by all this optimism and heroism and brave, clear eyes and good cheer. I love the melodious, songlike sound of Russian language and pictures of men dancing Cossack dances. The Russians have spirit, flair, soul.

But then there are secret police, and Siberia, and the Party, which is half joke, half dirty word. If Russia is a parent, it’s a harsh one—like one of those fairy-tale stepmothers, perhaps, who are bent on stuffing their hapless children down the well. When I mention to Pani Ruta that I heard Moscow is supposed to be beautiful, she tells me that Russia is like a girl who wears perfume to cover up the fact that she is dirty. Moscow has been gussied up for show,
and it covers up the sores in the rest of the country. Pani Orlovskaja hopes that the United States will be the first to send a rocket into space. "They'll show them, you'll see. They'll teach these barbarians," she says vehemently, and if I'm a bit surprised at this total and frank inversion of the received pieties, it's only because she's so impassioned about a matter of politics.

And if Russia is the center, it is a heavy and leaden center, a sort of black hole sucking bright energy into its sinister recesses. From people who have been there, I hear tales of fantastic poverty, of informers and fear. On the other side of the world, whirling in interplanetary space like an enormous flying saucer, is America—another ambiguous land of vague fears and desires. On the newsreels before the movies, when the name Eisenhower is mentioned, it is in sharp, dark tones, and usually in association with an announcement of some military maneuver or warlike intentions. America is always getting ready to go to war, in contrast to those Soviet tanks, which are always wreathed in flowers and peaceful intentions. In a magazine, I read an article on lynching in the South and another one on the poverty of American workers. I also read Uncle Tom's Cabin, which makes me weep with frustration at the injustices perpetrated upon Tom and his family; perhaps—this is what people sometimes say—America is a cruel place full of cold-hearted people.

But everyone also knows that America is the place where all the better things in life—cars, dollars, chewing gum, ballpoint pens—are endlessly available, even, my parents assure me, to those supposedly downtrodden workers. Sometimes we get material proof of American wealth, as when we receive a parcel from a friend of my parents who somehow had the great good luck—everyone agrees it's good luck—to end up there. Hysterical with excitement, we slash through the ropes tying the cardboard box and begin to pull out such wonders as a large box of cocoa with foreign words written all over it, a nylon slip for my mother, and then, best of all, two dresses, also made of nylon, with lace trimmings and beautifully gathered in at the waist, for my sister and me. For a while, Alinka and I are the envy of the entire neighborhood, and
this never seems to happen, and after taking us through some lackadaisical exercises, the teacher chats with us—in Polish—about other things.

In the history courses, the textbooks we read present an endless succession of class wars, a heroic pageant of the oppressed triumphing over the oppressor: poor, dispersed Polish knights fighting the Prussian juggernaut in the fourteenth century, peasants rebelling against cruel feudal landlords in the eighteenth, workers rebelling against the cobra grip of their bosses in the nineteenth—and from then on, it's smooth going for the writers of these texts, for history becomes equivalent to the stirring progress of the Polish Communist party, from its beginnings as a struggling, hounded voice of true morality through its rise as the triumphant and ever-improving—no, Communism isn’t perfect yet, but it’s capable of self-criticism—knight-errant of universal Morality and Truth, and culminating, in the seventh grade, with a memorization of Marx’s Communist Manifesto.

I don’t know the exceedingly complex historical and ideological arguments that one could level at this version of history, but I know that my teachers don’t believe it. Through the approved conceptual grid, they show us glimpses of a different picture. That king, who supposedly oppressed his subjects so tyrannically... really, a teacher throws in, he was a great Polish patriot, he installed a decent sanitation system and brought Italian architects to build some of the most beautiful buildings in Europe. His wife, Queen Jadwiga, was so religious and good to the poor that she was considered a saint.

From this, I can infer several things: apparently, in this teacher’s book, being a patriot and being religious are good things, and apparently, he wants to convey this to us. When he tells us such things, his voice gains more warmth, and he leans forward at his desk, giving us to understand that this is between him and us—he’s telling it to us straight. In other words, the history books leave out important things. I should disregard them, I should look for the truth elsewhere.

Still, such images and ideas, and underimages and half-spoken phrases, float safely enough in the atmosphere; the coexistence of the official and the popular wisdom, and the disparity between them, is part of a whole package, an accepted order of things. Then, abruptly, everything changes. In 1956, Poland’s president, Bierut, who is almost as much a fixture on the scene as Stalin—he has been around ever since I can remember—dies during a visit to Moscow. This gives rise to many jokes about how for a true Communist going to Moscow is so deeply moving that you’re bound to get a heart attack. No one believes for a moment that a Polish premier just happened to die in Moscow of natural causes. Bierut’s funeral is honored by processions all over the country, and this time, my toughness is not given a fair chance, because over the crowds massively and slowly moving along Cracow’s streets, the knell of Chopin’s Funeral March sounds through the loudspeakers, and the solemnity of the music gets all mixed up with the occasion, so that I feel as if I’m in mourning, even though I know that Bierut was a friend of Stalin’s and therefore no friend of ours. But I also sense something else in the air—a sort of anticipatory tension, an uncertainty about what might happen next.

Soon thereafter, the tension thickens. I don’t exactly know what’s going on—no one is telling me—but I sense that some dangerous, rumbling upheaval is coursing through our lives. One day, when I come to school, everything has been turned topsy-turvy. The portraits of Lenin and Stalin adorning the walls of every classroom have been torn down, and in their place, long ribbons of paper are affixed to the wall, with slogans, scrawled in crayon, proclaiming things like POLAND FOR THE POLES and WE DON’T WANT SUCH FRIENDS—things that should never be said in the open, out loud. The classrooms are in complete disarray, with overturned chairs and a broken window. I’m intimidated by the daring that wreaked this havoc. Our homeroom teacher sternly delivers a dictat about “hooligan behavior,” which will be severely punished. But I sense that something much more serious is going on here than the standard transgressions—like overturning the inkwells, or stealing the notebook in which grades are recorded—that incur the equally standard pedagogical displeasure. The teacher’s
voice, under the familiar words, sounds earnest—as if she were addressing peers and not just childish pranksters. In the hallways, I see older students talking in groups—sometimes with teachers joining in—as if they had important business to accomplish.

Then the tension is turned up another notch. It is as if everyone’s attention is concentrated not on daily life but on something that will happen, and in this concentration, the air becomes even denser, heavier. In ominous voices, people begin to say awful words: “tanks . . .,” “pogrom . . .,” “civil war.” There has been some violence in Poznan, and every hour rumors and numbers run like a drumbeat through the street. “They shot into the crowd . . . they killed fifteen . . . twenty-five . . . fifty . . .” They’re singling out Jews . . . No, that’s not true, don’t panic . . . If it spreads to Warsaw, it’s all over . . .” Communications between Poznan and the rest of Poland have been cut off, and so there’s no real news, only the nervous snatches of conversation in hallways and on the street, but it’s enough for me to be filled with terror. The worst might actually happen. My friends and I hold a frightened conference about what we would do if shooting began on the streets, if bombs started falling out of the sky. We talk about this in lowered voices, exchanging what bits of knowledge we have gathered on the subject, and we come to the conclusion that in the dread event, it would be best to hide in the basement; people survived the war that way, down below, where the bombs cannot reach you. The only problem is food. We’ve all read stories of provisions running out, gradually, so that first people did without sugar in their tea, and then only one meal of soup a day, and then . . . “Hunger was the worst,” my mother has often told me. “May you never experience it.” Some people are already preparing for this new eventuality. Zosia’s parents, in whose house the discussion takes place, have bought enormous bags of flour and sugar. On the way home, in Cracow’s gray dusk, I see sinuous queues of people forming in front of our neighborhood store. They are lining up for provisions. That means it might start any day.

In a panic, I run home and begin to plead with my parents to go out and buy some food. But for some reason, they are remark-

ably calm. “Don’t worry, there won’t be a war,” they say, and my father even laughs at me. “And if there is, flour and sugar won’t help you,” my mother adds. Still, I plead with them to do something; what if we have to stay in the basement for weeks? Finally, my parents relent and send down the maid—or pretend to—to get some supplies.

Then, suddenly, the mood changes again. They have let somebody named Gomulka out of something like prison, and he’ll now replace Bierut. Everyone seems to be glad about this, though I’m a bit confused about how somebody who has been in prison can suddenly come out and run the country. It’s not that I think that in order to be upstanding, you have to respect the law. After all, just about everyone we know seems to play tricks on the law, and then boast about it to boot. Still and all, there’s some cognitive disjunction in accepting a lawbreaker as the leader of the country. The Party’s head is the law, the force that supervises the arrests I occasionally read about, of people who got rich by stealing some government goods and who, I surmise, just got carried away and took too much, or else weren’t smart enough to get away with it. Surely they haven’t let one of these familiar gamblers, congenial though they are, be in charge! But no, I gather there’s something different going on here. People’s voices, when they talk about Gomulka—still in those undertones—sound surprised and sort of hopeful. “Well, look, look, who would have thought that they’d let him out . . .” “Maybe they’ve learned something . . .” “Well, well, we’ll see what this means . . .” Then Gomulka becomes the first secretary, and on the radio I begin to hear new kinds of phrases: “We must examine the past honestly,” an earnest voice says. “This is a painful time for all of us . . .” “We must have the courage to admit our mistakes without losing faith . . .” “Comrade Stalin was a great leader, but there are many things coming to light . . .” I am arrested as much by the voices that say these things as by what they say—voices in which the usual “I’m the mouthpiece of truth” resoluteness is replaced by the more hesitant tones of uncertainty and persuasion, as if the speakers were sharing some difficult thoughts with their listeners.
"Well, who knows, maybe something will change," my mother sighs, though she doesn't sound as if she'd bet on it. Nevertheless, for the first time I feel as though the winds of the wider world, against which my parents are usually so indifferent or guarded, have been allowed to waft in through our window—and that this is a large change in itself.

It turns out that for us, the winds of change are real enough, for they sweep in the policies that will carry us, like acorns picked up in great numbers by a large breeze, across the ocean. The events I've witnessed happen so early in my life that my Polish political consciousness is left in its fledgling state, just beginning to discern the lines of force within which our individual lives are held. It seems, though, that my political unconscious is by then set firmly in place, as if that botched business of crude and contingent events entered the psyche as deeply as the first memories of our mother or father. Once, in the midst of all this turmoil, my father—no patriot he—shouts "Long Live Bierut!" out of his sleep, in a voice that implies a salute. I don't know what dream has provoked this uncharacteristic obeisance, and the line becomes a family joke. Years later, after I learn what these events meant in the more remote way of books and from the distant safety of a place where they matter little and could never happen—long after I find out that they were triggered by Khrushchev's twentieth Communist Congress Party speech and de-Stalinization, and that Bierut probably committed suicide in Moscow, and that Gomulka was a leader of a "deviationist" Communist faction I dream of Stalin in vivid, Technicolor detail. In my night vision, Stalin, looking very much like himself in his greenish, high-collared uniform, stands on a high podium in an immense hall to which my sleeping self refers as the Hall of the People. The room is filled with rows upon rows of ceremoniously dressed soldiers representing different ethnic groups. Women come up to the great leader to ask him to make them fertile. But I—small, lost, and without a uniform—know that I have to escape. I start maneuvering my way out, between sabered Cossacks in their red shirts, until I get to the exit—and then, I begin to run. For my life. Though when I wake up, I can't for the life of me figure out what I am running from, or how Stalin—a personage known to me as evil, but known only from photographs and movie footage—came to be so pertinaciously lodged in my brain.

When I am eight years old, I am taken for my first music lesson. Pani Grodzinska, the teacher who has been picked for me and Marek, is a homely, elderly woman with gray hair pulled back tightly in a bun, and her apartment is thick with rugs, dust particles swarming through the air, and a profusion of porcelain figurines covering every available surface. But in the corner of this bibelot paradise stands a majestic, black, quiescent beast—a grand piano. It may be the first such object I have seen this close up—and with its graceful curves, its shiny black surface, its lightly held massiveness, it strikes me as almost alive. When Pani Grodzinska sits down to play a simple melody for me—well, it's instant love. That such beauty can emerge from under one's fingers! Pani Grodzinska, as she begins to play, alters from a homely woman to someone whose movements become as harmonious as the sounds she is summoning. As soon as I hear this simple melody, I know that I want to be able to bring forth sounds like that, to attain such an adult combination of ease and command.

Piano lessons are part of my parents' ambitions for giving their children the better things in life. Musicians in Poland have sacred beast status; great pianists or violinists are endowed with the glitter of stardom and the prestige of high art. But playing an instrument is also a part of a good upbringing, of becoming properly middle class, and the adults in our circle—especially the Jewish ones—all seem to decide simultaneously that their children should not go without this advantage. Besides, who knows, maybe there's a prodigy among us? Having musical talent is an avenue of success open to everyone; if one of us turns out to have sufficient quantities of it, we may achieve that meteoric ascent from ordinariness to fame and glamour that all of us, not so secretly, dream of.

Marek and I embark on our musical education in tandem, and as the first step toward God knows what unknown heights, we are taken for a "hearing test"—something apparently advised by ex-
perts as a way of testing a child's potential "musicality." For an hour, we are led through such paces as singing fragments of melodies, repeating the pitch of notes played for us on the piano, clapping out rhythmic patterns, and trying to identify similarities between different intervals. Marek gets over all of these hurdles with flying colors; I have the humiliation of failing most of them. I do not have a good ear.

Later, though, one of my music teachers will tell me about the importance of "inner ear"—the ability to hear feelingly. In this, I turn out to be better. Music seems as lucid to me as books, as that moment in the park when everything was rolled into one, as the times when I feel a brimming love for my sister or for Marek. It speaks to me about everything in pearly, translucent sounds.

Of course, like any self-respecting child, I balk at practicing. To begin with, Pani Grodzinska doesn't let me play at all; instead, she wants me to practice letting my arm fall loosely on the keyboard, to achieve that state of relaxation that is considered at the time the sine qua non of pianistic technique. This is extremely dull, and so are the five-finger exercises I have to do through endlessly before I am rewarded with anything that sounds like a melody—though the monotonous scales I'm supposed to repeat till they become automatic are sweetened somewhat by the fact that I practice them with Marek. But as soon as I am given even fragments of real pieces—a simple transcription of a theme from a Beethoven symphony, or a movement of some Kuhlau or Clementi sonatinas—I plunge into them with enthusiasm. I don't wonder about what they should sound like—I seem to know. By the end of the first year or so, Pani Orlov ska, who is a trained musician herself, pronounces that I have Talent.

My teacher seems to think so too, and my "Talent" gradually begins to take on a sort of existence of its own; it becomes almost an objective entity—something that belongs to me but that is also outside of me, a valuable possession to which I have an obligation and which I have to nurture carefully. "You're only a child, but God gave you a golden apple," Pani Orlov ska tells me, looking down at me sternly with her cool blue eyes, "and that means you

have a duty. It's a sin to waste a gift. Discipline, you must have discipline. You must practice two hours a day. With the exception of Sunday." From then on, my idea of grace is fulfilling your talent completely, and my only idea of sin is misusing that gift. The dread of not becoming completely what you can be is so strong that sometimes in later life it will paralyze me. How horrible to do the wrong thing, the thing that doesn't express your essence—and how horrible to fall short of your powers, or to discover that they might be more meager than their seemingly limitless potential!

But for a long time, I don't worry about such possibilities. I'm filled with a quasi-mystical belief that my Talent is essential and complete. Else why would I play as if the music emanated from inside me, as well as from outside? Eventually, it is agreed that I should be passed on to Pani Witeszc zak, a teacher who has the reputation for being particularly good with young people and who has nurtured some well-known Polish pianists. She is not a beautiful woman, but although I am at first intimidated at the prospect of playing for so exalted a personage, I soon find something peacefully reassuring about the mildness of her brown, owlike eyes and her understanding smile. During my lessons, Pani Witeszc zak's mother, who is extremely old and frail, and who used to be a music teacher herself, lies on the sofa near the piano under a thick pile of quilts and occasionally offers some observations. The apartment is also shared by Pani Witeszc zak's son, and later his wife and their baby. Everyone in the household moves and speaks softly and treats each other with a sort of respectful tenderness. Much later, I learn—from one of her son's novels—that Pani Witeszc zak is a very religious person, and that during the war she sheltered several Jews at great risk to herself.

Although she never raises her voice, and is unfailingly kind, Pani Witeszc zak exercises great authority over me. She is the first in a sequence of music teachers to whom I owe the closest thing I get to a moral education. In this intimate, one-to-one apprenticeship—an apprenticeship mediated through the objective correlative of music—they teach me something about the motions and the conduct of my inner life. When Pani Witeszc zak attempts to convey
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to me what tone to use in a Bach invention, or the precise inflection of a theme in a mazurka, she is trying, indirectly, to teach me the language of emotions. "Music is a kind of eloquence," she tells me. "Ask yourself what it says here. See? This is like someone pleading. And here someone is getting angry, more and more angry, and trying to persuade somebody else, who is not listening."

It is that speech that Pani Witoszczak tries—by cajoling, by explaining, by guiding my hand—to tease out of me. Like all teachers in Poland at that time, she emphasizes the importance of tone, and I soon find out why: tone, I discover, is something about which I cannot lie. If I do not feel the kindling of a fire as I play, my tone betrays me by its coldness; if I do not feel the capricious lightheartedness of a scherzo, my tone turns wooden in spite of my best attempts to feign playfulness. By some inexplicable process, the precise nuance of what I feel is conveyed through my arm to my fingertips, and then, through those fingertips, to the piano keys, which register with equal precision the slightest swerve of touch and pressure. I gradually learn, though, that expressing this musical speech involves a paradox. For if the spirit is to flow into the keys through the conduit of my arm and hand, it has to move in the other direction as well—from the keys into my arm and soul. Pani Witoszczak's ideal is to make the music sound as if it were playing itself. It is to that end that one has to relax, relax as much as possible—relax one's arm and one's self, so that one can become the medium through which the music flows as naturally as melting snow in the spring. "Relax," she keeps saying. "All you have to do is let the music be itself." But there is a further twist of the paradox—for such freedom, such receptivity can be achieved only through the rigor of controlled technique, if I don't have to worry about just how I'll execute the next passage, and whether I can manage a jump or a trill. One's fingers can become boneless conduits only if they've been made very strong first. Music may express the deepest truths, but it expresses them through a material medium, and in order to say what I want, I need to bend the physical medium of my arms and fingers to my will. To that end, Pani Witoszczak insists on the virtues of strict, daily discipline. My mother is to keep a log of how much I've practiced each day—and if I haven't fulfilled my contract, I'm painfully reproached. "If you want to be a pianist," she tells me, "you have to decide to be like a nun. It takes total devotion. You have to make yourself strong." I try to imagine such single-minded dedication, but for now, I believe all too much in my God-given powers and my inner ear. I don't, however, believe in work. Effort, scales, time at the piano—I suffer through them with a very bad grace. Surely, such mere exercises are for the plodders, for lesser talents than me. Perhaps this large streak of self-indulgence is fostered by my parents, who coddle me to the best of their ability.

Or perhaps I am picking up notions about flair, and panache, and sparks of inspiration—tonalities of character that are the true Polish values, and that are encouraged by my peers and my schoolteachers, not to speak of the Romantic poetry we read. There is a romantic undercurrent to much of the education I get. What counts in a written composition—whether it's about our last school excursion or a poem by Mickiewicz—is a certain extravagance of style and feeling. The best compliment that a school exercise can receive is that it has polot—a word that combines the meanings of dash, inspiration, and flying. Polot is what everyone wants to have in personality as well. Being correct and dull is a horrid misfortune. "The good," in our eyes, is not a moral entity at all but spontaneity, daring, a bit of recklessness. Marek, in my mind, has polot. So did those Polish cavalrymen, about whom we hear so often, who went out to meet German tanks when the Nazis invaded. Chopin's A Major Polonaise coming over the loudspeakers in the last heroic moments of the Warsaw uprising, as bullets and grenades ricocheted through the streets—that is a gesture that captures the essence of polot. And polot, of course, is absolutely necessary in music; without it—without the flair, and the melancholy, and the wildness that ignite the sounds with fire and tenderness, you can practice all you want, and you won't come anywhere near greatness.

Music—philosophers have known its dangers—inspires me with such grandeur that I think I know what inspiration is about. As I progress to pieces by Mozart or Chopin or Beethoven, I begin to feel in possession of enormous, oceanic passions—anger and love.
and joy and grief that surpass merely being angry, or happy, or sad. "I know how anyone in the world feels," I confide in Marek once. "Anyone at all." "Who, for example?" he asks. "For example, a slave in America." I have just read Uncle Tom's Cabin and have wept over Tom's trials. "Or a murderer." Marek is perplexed. "How could you know what a murderer feels?" But I am convinced I could; a murderer, after all, is a human being with emotions, and I understand all emotions, no matter how raging or large. If I can express the passions contained within a Beethoven sonata or the Chopin Berceuse, then I know everything about being human. Music is a wholly adequate language of the self—my self, everyone's self. And I am meant to speak this language; life wouldn't be complete without it. Music begins to take the shape of Fate, or Destiny—a tremendously powerful magnet toward which my life will be inevitably moving.

My mother, in the meantime, conscientiously takes me to concerts so that I can hear some pianists who have achieved the blessed condition of greatness already. When the Chopin Competition comes around in 1955, we stay glued to the radio, following the play-offs like a five-act drama and supplementing our musical curiosity with every bit of gossip and information we can garner about the contestants. The announcements of the prizes, though, are greeted with skepticism and even indignation. Once again, they are "political," meaning dishonest. "The first prize was patriotic, the second diplomatic, the third one strategic, and the fourth one fair," goes an immediately circulated joke—for these honors are given, respectively, to Polish, Russian, Chinese, and French pianists. By popular consensus, the Frenchman should have won the first prize—but it is also the general understanding that the jury was never free from that ugly pressure which distorts everything, even music, from the start.

In 1958, though, a musical event takes place that has the symbolic meaning of transcending immediate politics. For the first time since the war, Arthur Rubinstein comes to play in Poland—and his arrival provokes an outburst of high excitement, patriotism, nostalgia and pure sentiment that art still has the power to induce here.

His long absence was a protest against anti-Semitism, but now he is awaited as a native son. He is the greatest in the world, he is Polish, and he plays the piano in the high Romantic tradition—as it really should be played. In Cracow, people spend the night on makeshift beds in front of Symphony Hall, so they can beat others to the tickets when the box office opens in the morning. My father, who as always prefers shortcut methods, waits until the evening, and then somehow maneuvers us through the onrush of the crowds, past the ticket takers, so that we are propelled into the auditorium, whose aisles are filled with people crowding right up to the stage and being squeezed ever tighter as more people arrive.

The hall is so overheated that two people faint during the concert and have to be carried out. But nothing interrupts the audience's breathless attention to Rubinstein's every note. His tone—warm, pliant, utterly "natural"—is the real stuff. It bespeaks an empathy that never violates the music—never interrupts its fluidity with a harsh or a wooden sound. As for me, I am fascinated by the way he raises his eyes, a beatific smile on his face, as if to focus on some point in his mind and breathe the music in, receive it from some outside source. The concert progresses through tiers of excitement. When, at the end of the first half, he plays the A Major Polonaise, with its heroic, revolutionary echoes, the audience spontaneously breaks out into a shout of "Witwat! Witwat!"—which is simultaneously a toast and a salute of camaraderie and celebration.

After the official program is finished, there are two or three of the usual encores—but the audience doesn't have any intention of letting Rubinstein go. People begin shouting out names of pieces they want him to play and, inclining his elegant head, the pianist stands on the stage listening to the requests, and then sits down and plays again and again and again, as if this were a family reunion, and he too didn't want to leave this packed and overheated hall. But finally he indicates by a gesture of the hands that this is the end, that he can go on anymore—and then the audience, as if moved by some unanimous impulse, rises and starts up the song "Sto lat, sto lat," which means "May he live a hundred years," while the pianist
stands there, visibly moved, bowing his head and blowing kisses. Then, exhausted and exhilarated, the crowd moves slowly out. We’ve had our moment of collective euphoria; we’ve had our catharsis.

How absurd our childish attachments are, how small and without significance. Why did that one, particular, willow tree arouse in me a sense of beauty almost too acute for pleasure, why did I want to throw myself on the grassy hill with an upwelling of joy that seemed overwhelming, oceanic, absolute? Because they were the first things, the incomparable things, the only things. It’s by adhering to the contours of a few childhood objects that the substance of our selves—the molten force we’re made of—molds and shapes itself. We are not yet divided.

Once, in New York, I met a Russian artist who tried to explain to me why his compatriots are so despondent when they get to America. Like most self-respecting Russian artists who end up emigrating, he was a pretty active dissident. And yet, he told me, his eyes filling with a revealing fire, he felt convinced that Russia was the greatest—really, the only—country in the world. “We defeated the Germans in the war, we had the greatest literature in the world, we had the greatest culture. It was such a pride,” he said intently. I looked back intently, trying to understand. National pride? It seems, for our globe, a terribly old-fashioned sentiment. I hardly know what it means.

No, I’m no patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be. And yet, the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions. Is it blind and self-deceptive of me to hold on to its memory? I think it would be blind and self-deceptive not to. All it has given me is the world, but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the colors and the furs of reality, my first loves. The absoluteness of those loves can never be recaptured: no geometry of the landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to

which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations. Later, of course, we learn how to be more parsimonious: how to parse ourselves into constituent elements, how to be less indiscriminate and foolish in our enthusiasms. But if we’re not to risk falling into that other absurd, in which we come unpeeled from all the objects of the world, and they all seem equally two-dimensional and stale, we must somehow preserve the memory and the possibility of our childish, absurd affections. Insofar as we retain the capacity for attachment, the energy of desire that draws us toward the world and makes us want to live within it, we’re always returning. All we have to draw on is that first potent furnace, the uncomparing, ignorant love, the original heat and hunger for the forms of the world, for the here and now.

“Basia and I were talking about you, and we were wondering about whether you were going to get married,” I say to Pani Konek shyly. Pani Konek smiles and tells me that we shouldn’t worry, in fact a very interesting man has asked her to get married, though she doesn’t know what her answer will be. I nod, feeling shy and flattered to be having this conversation with one of my teachers at all. After Pani Witeszczak, she is my favorite teacher, perhaps because she teaches my favorite subject—literature. In her class, I’ve learned how to recite poetry out loud, and how to “write beautifully”—that is, with smoothness of style and fanciful similes that show high flights of the imagination. And now, she has invited me for this walk on the Planty, where she’s talking to me as to a grown-up, about the high calling of literature, and this admiral of hers, who unfortunately lives in another city.

Pani Konek teaches at the Cracow Music School, which I’ve been attending for two years—ever since it has been decided that I should be trained as a professional pianist. I’ve always liked going to school. At the beginning of the year, I like buying the smooth navy blue fabric from which our dressmaker will make my school uniform—an anonymous overdress we’re required to wear over our regular clothes in order to erase economic and class distinctions; I like the feel of the crisp, untouched notebooks, and dipping
my pen into the deep inkwell in my desk, and learning how to make oblique-angled letters. It's fun to make up stories about the most eccentric character I know, or about the shapes icicles make on the winter windows, and to try to outwit the teacher when you don't know something, and to give dramatic recitations of the poems we've memorized—though once, I suffer the humiliation of hearing my voice come out in a high squeak instead of the low and sorrowful timbre appropriate to the poem's dark and tragic content.

But music school is even better than the neighborhood school I went to earlier. It's a venerable old institution that combines a basic curriculum with a full musical education, and it is situated in an old gray-stone building, which you enter through a dark corridor leading to a tall wooden doorway that makes a great ceremonial screech when you open it. Inside, the atmosphere is warm with sounds of violins, flushed kids running around the narrow, parqueted hallways, and the heat of competition. We still wear that democratic uniform, which hides the inequities of dress, but the degree of everyone's "talent" is gauged constantly. Everyone knows that little Marysia—an angelic looking with her pale skin and blond curls—is sensitive and has a beautiful tone, but she is too frail (that's because her parents are so old) ever to become a great pianist. Everyone knows that Piotrek—though you wouldn't think it, looking at his chubby body and unprepossessing face—has got all the fire and impatience and irrepressible drive to deserve the respectful looks reserved for the future greats. I seem to have something too—a quality of feeling—as Basia enviably tells me whenever we play new pieces for each other.

Basia becomes my best friend at the music school, and though she envies my piano playing, in everything else I am the admirer. She is beautiful in a "classically Slavic" way—with black hair plaited into a thick braid at the back of her head, sloe, brown eyes, and a face that is all high cheekbones and oblique angles. She knows that she is beautiful and that things will go well for her in life, and this gives her great self-confidence and charm. To me, she seems the acme of sophistication. She is a professor's daughter, and she flirts with the students who come to her house, and who are college boys; moreover, she is not only very smart and one of the best students in our class but she has the excitingly bohemian ambition of becoming an actress.

Basia and I often walk home from school together, and we talk about everything—music and the books we read, and that strange feeling, like an itch, but not quite, that comes over us at night when we think of boys or of the Roman orgy scenes in Quo Vadis? "But you shouldn't think about such things when you have your period," Basia tells me authoritatively. "Why?" I ask. "Because you'll get sick," she tells me, making it all sound mystifying and ominous, like meeting a black cat on the street. Then, one day she brings me an arcane bit of revelation. Her father, she tells me proudly, knows about a very famous man named Freud, and this Freud, who her father thinks was very wise, said that girls of our age are in love with our fathers and therefore want to kill our mothers. "But I don't want to kill my mother, I love her!" I protest, wide eyed with wonder at such ideas. "You may think you love her, but right now, deep down, you hate her. That's what Freud said," Basia tells me with her usual self-assurance.

This startling information—for I take it as such—makes enough of an impression on me that I feel I have to confess it to my mother in order to unburden myself of it. "Do you know that I am at an age when I am in love with my father and I want to kill you?" I therefore ask her, watching anxiously for her reaction. "And who told you so?" she inquires. "Basia," I say, and she smiles. "I don't think you really want to kill me, do you?" she says, and, reassured, I reply, "No, I don't really, but maybe I just don't know it." I might never think of Freud again—at least not until I find myself in a country where I'm forced to think of him all the time—but that evening, as I listen from my bed to my parents' conversation, I hear my mother laughingly repeat to my father what I had told her that afternoon. I burn with a sense of betrayal and utter shame. Now my father knows. How can I look at him again?

For a while, Basia betrays me too. One summer, she goes away to a scout camp for young Communists, and though I write her almost every day, she doesn't answer. I miss her terribly, and I don't
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understand how she can forget me like that; after all, we pledged friendship to each other, and friendship is serious, deep—something to which one ought to be forever faithful. When she comes back, we are polite to each other, but it isn’t the same. She is running around with a different, classy crowd, and she sometimes sports the red scarf worn by the Young Pioneers. My parents don’t allow me to join such groups of future comrades—and as I once observe Basia talking animatedly with a cluster of her new friends, I am prickled with pain and envy. “I don’t think she cares about me anymore,” I confide to Marek gloomily. “Don’t worry, I’m your best friend anyway,” he reassures me. “We’ll be friends forever.”

But as the time of our departure approaches, Basia remembers our friendship again. Once again, we have long talks; she makes me promise that I won’t forget her. Of course I won’t! She passes a journal with a pretty, embroidered cloth cover to my fellow classmates, in which they are to write appropriate words of good-bye. Most of them choose melancholy verses in which life is figured as a vale of tears or a river of suffering, or a journey of pain on which we are embarking. This tone of sadness is something we all enjoy. It makes us feel the gravity of life, and it is gratifying to have a truly tragic event—a parting forever—to give vent to such romantic feelings.

It’s only two years later that I go on a month-long bus trip across Canada and the United States with a group of teenagers, who at parting inscribe sentences in each other’s notebooks to be remembered by. “It was great fun knowing you!” they exclaim in the pages of my little notebook. “Don’t ever lose your friendly personality!” “Keep cheerful, and nothing can harm you!” they enjoin, and as I compare my two sets of mementos, I know that, even though they’re so close to each other in time, I’ve indeed come to another country.

When I leave, Basia writes me often. She is becoming morearty and bohemian every day. She is learning English, translating some stories from that language; she is beginning to act in some student productions and experiment with abstract designs for Christmas cards. I envy and admire her even from Canada; after all,

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she’s becoming exactly what she wanted to be, while I’m becoming a strange kind of creature I never meant to turn into. After a while, though, our correspondence stops. It is only when I go back to Poland many years later that her mother, whom I locate at her old address, tells me with a combination of anger and contempt that Basia gave up a promising career in physics and has become an unsuccessful actress who plays small roles in provincial towns. I don’t dare contact her; I don’t dare to see what has remained of our girlish romanticism—and our girlish romance.

I am afraid that my mother and I are occasionally guilty of reducing the high Romanticism of the music I play to the stuff of pulp romance. Sometimes, as we take our walk through the park, we fantasize together about how I will play on the stages of the world, in a long, blue taffeta dress—for some reason, it’s exactly this dress that satisfies both our desires—and how audiences all over the world will applaud. In my mind, there is a further delectable sequence to this scenario, which I play over and over again. In this part, the concert is over and I am on the stage, surrounded by a circle of men in dark tuxedos—men pale with admiration, who have come to pay me homage because they have been so moved by the high and essential human passions I’ve expressed in my playing. Far from summoning images of unlikable devotion, music in my mind has a definitely erotic tinge. It comes out of the very same place whence arise my night thoughts about Marek and those new longings that Basia and I talk about.

A performance, of course, is the peak toward which all such feelings gather, and in which—music’s fatal lure—they are sometimes almost fulfilled. In my first year at the music school, Pani Witeszcak decides that for the year-end concert we’ll really wow them with Haydn’s D Major Concerto, in which she will accompany me on a second piano.

This is my first public performance, and I approach it with all the serenity of inexperience. I simply don’t know that I’m supposed to be nervous. During the afternoon, I take a nap unmarred by any twinges, and all through the student concert, while I wait my turn,
I giggle with my friends and comment on various students’ playing. Then it is time to run backstage, and when I emerge to face the packed auditorium from the other side, I feel such a heady joy that I know nothing can go wrong. I am both half-conscious and hyper-conscious as I play—a state of grace in which my fingers seem to become deliquescent, pure instruments of my will, and in which I am not really playing but listening to the lovely music as it pours out. When it’s over, and after I bow to the applause in a haze, Pani Witeszczak looks at me and strokes my hair; it’s a happy moment.

But this is also the last time that I enjoy such an innocent calm. From then on, performing becomes more self-conscious, more problematic and difficult. I begin to develop various techniques to staunch my nervousness; I eat chocolates before performing to stoke up my level of energy; later, I take a book backstage and try to read some philosophy. I know that if I can concentrate on a passage from Plato—he is my preferred reading on such occasions, though he would presumably condemn the overheated excitement I’m trying to rein in—I’ll be all right.

I acquire another trick of concentration during a tour on which I am sent with a group of students and some supervising teachers. We are taking culture and the flower of socialist Poland’s youth to the provinces. In towns such as Bydgoszcz and Kazimierz, we stay in dirty dormitories with no private bathrooms and no toilet paper; we eat in those grim workers’ cafeterias which dot the Polish landscape and in which for very little money you can get a piece of dry bread and some greasy food on a poorly washed plate. Nevertheless, this counts as being “on tour,” and the glamour of the very idea makes me nervous about the technically difficult piece I’m to perform—Weber’s Rondo Brillante. I pace up and down the jerky corridor of the train and bite my fingernails until the teacher accompanying us, to keep me calm, tells me to sit down and go over the piece in my head, note by note, imagining what both hands are doing. If you can get through the entire piece that way, she says, then you can be certain that you can play it on the piano itself. I soon find out how hard it is to accomplish this Zen act of playing purely in the mind, without the reality and the resistance of physical

matter. But I also discover how much playing occurs in the mental act. Yes, if I can have the self-control to imagine all the sounds in my head, then the mind will translate them into the physical act somehow.

Still, when I come out on the stages of the various bare school auditoriums where I am supposed to repeat the same piece evening after evening, each time matching my own best form, I am nervous. My childish fearlessness is gone, and I can no longer count on a state of grace. From now on, I’ll have to get to that synthesis of will and receptivity by the more difficult route of full consciousness. I’ll have to acquire a new kind of self-knowledge; I’ll have to work harder.

The time I work the hardest is shortly before I leave. The school has decided to make an exception of its policy—usually, it resists making “stars” of us—and has allowed me to give a whole recital by myself. This is a daunting prospect—to get through so many pieces without losing my nerve and concentration—and in preparation, I start practicing like a dervish. I practice till my fingers hurt, I practice to make absolutely sure that I won’t shame myself, I practice till Pani Witeszczak gets worried and tells me to let up. Perhaps I also practice to ward off the moment of departure; as long as I’m still getting ready for the concert, I don’t have to think about leaving.

I am more terrified than I’ve ever been as I sit backstage waiting to come out, and I get through the program not in that hypnotic trance of my first performance, but through sheer focusing of mind and will. Afterward, though, I have my full reward. My friends are particularly generous with praise, and, to top it all off, Robert, Kryśa’s older pianist-brother, comes to tell me how well I’ve done and kisses me in an unmistakably adult way. For a moment, music, admiration, and sexuality all come together, just like they’re supposed to.

The last person I say good-bye to before I leave is Pani Witeszczak. For the first time within our acquaintance, I come to her house not for a lesson but to sit at the table and have tea and cake and talk. “What will you miss the most?” she asks me kindly. “Little things,
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I think,” I tell her. “The Napoleon pastry from our bakery. Not knowing what’s in Cross Section.” Then, as I let the question sink in, it comes upon me that I’ll miss much more than that, and I say, “Everything. Cracow. The school. Basia. You. Everything.” Pani Witeszczak strokes my hair to let me know that she understands, and from then on I don’t talk much, because I can’t stop myself from crying. It turns out that this is the person and the room I can least bear to leave; after all, it’s here that I’ve felt most intimately understood; it’s here that I’ve felt most intensely all my hopes for the future; it’s here that I’ve acquired perhaps the only ideal I’ll ever really understand—the ideal of an equilibrium between effort and pleasure, between mind and passion, between receptivity and power.

“You’re so delicate, like a mimosa.” Pani Witeszczak tells me, looking at me with her mild, intelligent eyes. “Delicate plants are more difficult to uproot and transplant. For a while, you’ll feel like a plant with its roots exposed. You’ll have to learn how to protect yourself.” Her mother tries to stop her, but Pani Witeszczak says, “Why? She should know what’s happening to her.” Then the floodgates really open, and I allow myself to cry without stopping. When I finally have to leave, I hold on to Pani Witeszczak hard, and I say, “I’ll be back, you’ll see.” “Of course you’ll be,” she says very gently, but I know that neither of us believes it.

It is an autumn afternoon in 1958, and we are all going, dressed more formally than usual, to the Bergs’ house. We are going to say good-bye. I am unprepared for this. I have not accepted the knowledge that Marek is about to leave “forever”—for that is how I understand it.

As soon as I enter the apartment, though, I am jolted into an instant recognition of departure, finality, the end. The apartment has been transformed from a place in which people have lived cozily and for a long time into a space from which they are fleeing—that image of lives being torn and uprooted that will be, from now on, imprinted on my retina with quickening regularity. The familiar rooms, which used to be warm and muffled with their

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thicknesses of furniture, now echo with emptiness and the wooden crates that line the hallway. There are some trunks and suitcases, and there are people awkwardly standing about. We don’t exactly know how to behave. What are the ceremonies for such departures—departures that are neither entirely chosen nor entirely forced, and that are chosen and forced at the same time?

But such leavetakings are becoming more frequent. In 1957, the ban on emigration, under which most of the Polish population lives, is lifted for Jews. Anyone who is Jewish can now automatically get permission to leave for Israel—and everyone who is Jewish is confronted with a decision. To leave or not to leave now becomes the main subject of conversation. Most people we know decide immediately, and the exodus begins. The Rotenbergs leave; the Taubes leave; the Leitners leave. Our personal world is changing; it begins to seem less and less possible to be Jewish and of our class—that is, definitely Jewish, non-Communist, without a particular stake or significance in the society—and to remain.

The Bergs have held out longer than most. They are assimilated enough to feel that Poland is their real home, and the grandparents especially are loath to leave the comfortable apartment where they have spent most of their lives and the city to which they are entirely accustomed. Israel doesn’t seem like a friendly prospect by comparison. “What will we do there?” they ask sadly. “We’ll never get used to it, it’s too late.” Separating the family seems out of the question; the decision has to be made for all, and eventually, after countless and anxious discussions, they take the momentous step: they’re going to leave, like the others, though they do it without much enthusiasm, and only because it seems impossible to stay. It will be different being Jewish in Poland from now on, in this once again depopulated landscape; it will be increasingly difficult for the children. The exodus is extremely large, and only Jews who are involved in the life of the culture, or are part of the Communist elite, remain—until 1968, when most of them too are forced out by an “anti-Zionist” purge. But for the less important, even if they’ve never given much thought to their Jewishness, there is, after a while, almost no choice.
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My parents have no doubts about the matter. Poland is home, in a way, but it is also hostile territory. They tried to get out once before, shortly after the war, when some Jews were given exit visas, but didn't succeed. The question is not whether to leave, but for where.

Marek knows exactly what he wants. He wants me to follow him to Israel. When we come in on that last day, he beckons me into the "third room" and tells me that this is a serious moment, and I should allow him to kiss me in front of the others: we should not act like timid children anymore. His voice is in fact so serious, and so full of urgency, that I say yes, he may—though when it comes to the point, we're both so nervous that his kiss lands awkwardly on my chin. Before we leave the Bergs' apartment, he shakes my father's hand, and, looking him straight in the eye, tells him that we must come to Israel, because I am supposed to be his wife. I have believed this also; like music, Marek has been a part of my Destiny. But I fear that my Destiny is going to take an abrupt swerve; I fear that we are going to end up in Canada.

This possibility arises because of a letter we receive, out of the blue, as far as I can make out, from somebody named Mr. Rosenberg whom my parents knew before the war and who lives in a place called Vancouver—or "Vanzo-outer," as we pronounce it. This man, whom my father helped in some way at the beginning of the war, offers to sponsor us as immigrants to Canada, which, he writes, is the real land of milk and honey, the land of opportunity, the place where you can grow rich and be happy. For my father, this is an irresistibly alluring vision—to become a man of means in the American way, a man of substance. We don't have the remotest idea of what we might find or do there, but America—Canada in our minds is automatically subsumed under that category—has for us the old fabulous associations: streets paved with gold, the goose that laid the golden egg. There is also that book about Canada from the war. And, my father reminds my mother, whose impulses really draw her toward Israel, in Canada there is no war, and there never will be. Canada is the land of peace. In Israel, there's a constant danger of war, and they take even girls into the army. Does she

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want her daughters to end up on a battlefield? Does she herself want to go through a war again?

I understand the force of this argument, but still, the thought of a place called Canada fills me with a sort of horror vacui. I don't want to leave Poland at all; I hardly see how I can be extracted from all of this, from everything I've experienced so intensely. But if leave we must, I want at least to go to a place that is beginning to be familiarized by the presence of a few friends, a place I've heard called our "real home." Once the Bergs leave, they send us bulletins of new impressions and adventures. At the airport in Italy, where they stop over for a few days, there was an automatic escalator, and the grandmother was so terrified that finally they had to carry her down. There are so many oranges there, and they are so cheap and large and fresh that after eating their fill and more, the Bergs are actually getting tired—imagine that!—of this great luxury. Apparently, one can get tired of just about anything.

Then, brief flashes from Israel: they are learning the language in special courses; they are in little settlements in the desert. Conditions are harsh; there is lots of sand and little water, and they are living like pioneers—but they love this country, this country which is their real home. Yes, Pani Ruta, of all people, has become a patriot. For all the hardship, she wouldn't want to live anywhere else. This is where Jews can feel that they are in their own place, at nobody's mercy; it is wonderful to be building it and fighting for it together.

Before we're sure where we'll end up, my mother, who is worried about my future as a pianist, writes to no less a figure than Ben-Gurion, a cult hero who is also "one of ours," to inquire whether I'll be able to get piano lessons if we come to Israel. This is the kind of gesture she knows how to make; the gesture of a person who does not have enough power or standing to go through the normal channels of influence but who can cut through the rules and appeal to some grand personage's ordinary humanity, to what's similar in everyone. "Just remember, everyone is human, everyone has the same feelings," she often tells me. "You should never be afraid of anybody."
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In Ben-Gurion’s case, her resourcefulness pays off, for within several weeks, a letter typed messily on onionskin paper and signed by the premier of Israel himself, arrives at our address. The letter is no bureaucratic form either; it is lengthy and sounds as if it were written by an actual person. Be assured, Ben-Gurion tells my mother—or perhaps someone from his office does—that your child, if she is talented, will receive all the attention she deserves. We do not like to let talent go to waste in Israel; there are excellent music teachers here, and, if necessary, she’ll get a scholarship. We’ll take care of her. This is a splendid response; we wouldn’t be lost in a country whose premier himself cares enough to write a letter to us. Israel begins to sprout a few tendrils in my imagination. In my internal geography, it’s closer than Canada, the journey to it less unthinkable. Somehow, one could get from here to there.

But for a long time, my parents hesitate—and then sway in favor of Canada. Once the decision is made to go there, persuading the authorities that they should allow us to follow our choice will take two years. It is a period during which we almost literally live out of our suitcases, during which my father, as the result of wanting to emigrate, loses his job, during which I am taken in and out of school—during which the matrix of ordinariness begins to dissolve in the suspended, provisional state of waiting.

The sense of impending loss makes me want to hold on to what I’ve had with all my might. I stoke up the images of Marek—they are not memories yet, he is too much alive within me—as if my will could make him materialize. Immediately after he leaves, I take to my bed for a week and plunge into fits of unstoppable tears, ending up in the dull thud of migraines that will visit me from now until our own departure. Then I begin to make weekly pilgrimages to the Bergs’ building, as if standing in front of it could prevent their afterechoes from vanishing. And every day—religiously—I go through a ritual fantasy about Marek. In this repeated scene, I am older, perhaps about nineteen, and I’ve managed, somehow, to come to Israel. I am disembarking from a ship, and there, on the shore, I see Marek. We begin running toward each other, and then—finally, at last—we fall into each other’s arms, and hold on to each other for minutes on end, wordlessly. The fantasy ends there, and then I am returned to the street I’m walking on and a state of ashen depravation. Fantasy is a sapping strategy, but for a long time I can’t stop recycling it again and again, like a helpless somnambulist; after all, this is a fantasy not of something unreal but of something I once had—and could have had—and this knowledge strengthens the vividness of that ritual scene, and my repeated disappointment.

As it happens, the fantasy, with some inevitable variations, comes nearly true. Marek and I have our reunion—though by that time I have imagined this meeting so often that I can hardly believe in its face-to-face reality. Even a fulfillment of a fantasy, it turns out, is different from a fantasy of fulfillment.

I am standing at the prow of the ship, watching the water tear away in a diagonal, forever repeating, forever receding line. For days, nothing but the sea. The Atlantic is mostly gray and not beautiful in this early April, but it’s so immense, so without end, that it makes me anxious to contemplate all of it, and I have to concentrate on the manageable straight rip within the water’s surface.

The first time I saw the sea was one summer, when we came to vacation on the Baltic coast—and its vastness stilled me into an enormous awe and peace. Now, it makes me restless. As soon as the Batory pulls out of the harbor, and I begin to explore its decks and its interiors, I plunge into a state of near-feverish excitement, in which all the pain of the last few weeks and all my calm are obliterated.

“What’s come over you?” my mother asks. “You never used to be like this.”

I don’t know what’s come over me, but I find it difficult to keep still, and I don’t want to stay near my parents any more than I have to. I fight with them and stalk off in fits of stubborn sulkiness. This transitory tempest follows months of bureaucracy and disarray. Our exit visas have been obtained by a combination of legal maneuvering and bribing the requisite officials with adequately large sums, paid out in the illegal foreign currency that my
father has wisely stowed away. We have even obtained a special permit to take my piano out of the country, although it belongs in the vast category of objects one is supposed to yield to the national treasury. This should be some consolation, but I do not think my piano will be of much use to me in that no place to which we are journeying. The only information I have about Canada comes from an article in *Cross Section*, which described it as a "cultural desert," a country in which no one cares about fineness, or music, or art. I have shown this article to my parents in an implicit accusation. They are taking me to a cultural desert! What am I going to do there?

As the day of the departure approaches, wooden crates begin to fill up our apartment, packed with our quilts and clothes and china. The new tenants—whoever they are—come to look over our furniture, which they want to buy from us. Then the police arrive, to inspect the crates for any possessions we might be trying to take out illegally. More bribes—and, as an extra, I’m told to play the piano for them. My playing has never been used as a currency of exchange before, and I chafe under the order.

As I wander around Cracow with my friends in the last few days, everything becomes heightened: some song we sing together, a movie we go to see, some playful or affectionate remark. By myself, I burst into tears as I pass a nondescript patch of garden, which, it turns out, holds a bit of myself, or a creek in which I used to play. Ordinary streets become luminous with the light of loss.

"Look," I tell my sister as we take the tramway to the train station.
"Look, remember. You may never see this again."

I don’t think my parents approve of this effusion of sentiment.
"Do you think you’ll want to come back here?" they and their friends have asked each other, and the answer almost invariably comes back as "What for? What is there to miss?"

Perhaps in another few years I might have come to feel the same way; perhaps the abstract issues of a collective identity would have developed an intimate logic that would have propelled me outward; perhaps. But for now, I hardly have an identity, except that most powerful one of first, private loves. So as my homeroom class gathers at the train which will take us to Gdynia, and from there to the great unknown, I only know that I want to stay, stay with them. The Orlovskis come into the train compartment with us, and Robert once again kisses me in a way that makes us both blush. Then they are told to leave the train, and I stop crying, as if the fluid current of life had suddenly stopped flowing. For the rest of the trip, I am overcome by dullness that is like Lethe.

There is nothing dull about being on the ship, though. Everything around me seems so elegant and glamorous that I feel I have been transported right into a sparkling, complete fictional world, perhaps like something in *Anna Karenina*. There is a bar, where people sit on high stools in languid poses and drink many-colored liquids early in the afternoon. The chandeliers in the main common room glitter in the evenings, and in the dining room we’re always seated at a table covered with a gleaming white tablecloth, and we get foods I’ve never seen before—olives and bananas and even a pineapple for dessert.

This is more of the great world than I’ve ever seen, and I wander up and down the decks, observing the people around me, and practicing nodding my head with gracious dignity as I pass strollers I’ve seen before. The *Batory* is carrying many emigrants, and sometimes we exchange our anxieties and fragments of information about the place we’re going to. There is, for example, Irena; she is the focus of the ship’s gossip mill, and she completes the novel I’m temporarily living in perfectly. In fact, she could be Anna herself. She has dark hair, cut short with bangs over her forehead; green eyes, slightly aslant; well-defined cheekbones; and almost olive skin. For the first few days, she had kept to herself, though she always had her German shepherd with her. Then, when the *Batory* stopped in Copenhagen, a handsome Dane came on, and since then they’re always seen together. The Dane is her ideal counterpart—tall, slim, blue-eyed, blond. Except for some smiles and brief words they teach each other, they are silent: they don’t know each other’s language. I assume they are lovers, but there is
lost in translation

also some extra secret attached to them—I can tell from the harsh, envious looks people give them, and from the invisible circle of exclusion that is always drawn around them.

There is also a group of kids who every day meet in the lounge or around the swimming pool. There is Lila, the authoritative figure among us, because she is older, and because of her evident strength and good sense. Lila’s parents were killed during the war, and she grew up in an orphanage. Now, she is being adopted by some distant cousins in Canada, whom she has never met. She is facing her new fate with a kind of open-eyed stoicism. She has been a good student, and she has wanted to study physics at the university; that’s exactly what she’ll do in Canada. She’ll let her cousins help her for a while, but she won’t be dependent on anyone. Then, there’s Janek—the central magnet drawing me toward this group. He is also older than I—about sixteen—and he has dark sandy hair that falls over his forehead in a strip and a nonchalant manner that includes smoking cigarettes with a great deal of deep inhaling and ferocious stamping out in the ashtray. Janek grew up with his mother, about whom he speaks resentfully; I gather that she was an alcoholic, and she was not kind to him when he was a child. He’s going to Canada to join his father, whom he has never seen; he left Poland during the war, before Janek was born. In Janek’s mind, the father stands for everything that is exciting and good and great. It will be “capital” to go hunting with him in the forests near which he lives; it will be “capital” to live in a small pioneering outpost in the part of Canada named Ontario. It’s practically a Karl May adventure.

Resourceful Lila has organized English lessons for our passage, so that, as she puts it, we don’t seem like “dumb peasants” when we arrive. She has a textbook, and each day she tries to take us through a few sentences. “‘Cannot’ is an exception to the rule,” she is now saying. “You can write it as one word, unlike other negative verbs. Or you can say ‘can’t.’” Usually, I would absorb this stuff easily, eager to pick up some new tidbits of knowledge. But now I can’t concentrate; I don’t want to let the sounds in. “I don’t think I like English,” I tell them miserably, and Janek says, “Barbarian.

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Primitive.” I’m a little cheered up by his teasing and wait till we can go off by ourselves for a while. I know that what I’m doing qualifies as “running after boys,” but I don’t care. I’m in a fog, and the rules, for now, don’t hold. When the sun comes out, throwing a midday glitter over the waves, I turn toward the sea hypnotically, full of a disconcerting, longing feeling. Tęsknota.

My parents have also made friends on the ship, with a couple who are a few cabins down from us and who are going to Montreal. The Berenstein’s seem lucky in comparison with us, because they have real relatives there, who have prepared an apartment for them and have promised to find Mr. Berenstein a job. They often come to our cabin and speculate on what their new lives will hold. “You needn’t worry,” Mr. Berenstein, a jolly, somewhat pudgy man keeps reassuring my parents, “all of ours have done very well there.” But I see that my father worries nevertheless and keeps pinching the flesh of his upper arms nervously.

The journey—it takes twelve days altogether—works up to several climaxes that make me feel as if I’m not quite myself, and temporarily existing in a denser, more artificial medium than what I’ve known as ordinary life. First, Irena and the Dane single me out to play Cupid. They have heard me practice the piano in the lounge, and now Irena asks me to play something just for them. I go through some Chopin mazurkas and turn around to see them staring at each other with an absorption that has made them forget me entirely. I play some more, and by the time I turn around again, they’re gone; but I don’t mind this unusual lack of attention.

Two days before we arrive in Canada, great preparations begin for the Captain’s Ball. I’ve been asked to participate in the evening’s program of entertainment, so I put on my best dress, and look carefully in the mirror while my mother combs my hair into something that I hope has a casual elegance.

The dining room has been transformed into a big bauble of color, streamers, and glittering lights. When my turn on the program comes, I am not nervous at all—because all of this is happening out of time, out of space. I am, for a moment, a figure of my own fantasy, and I play my appointed role as if I were in the movies.
After the program is over, and the orchestra launches into dance music, the captain himself, straight and resplendent in his uniform, comes to our table and, bowing smartly, asks me to dance. My heart, at this, knocks hard against my ribs, but he leads me through the lively polka and then a waltz with such assurance that I don’t seem to be able to make a wrong step.

As the last attraction before the evening’s end, the emcee announces a contest that entails dancing with a Ping-Pong ball between the partners’ foreheads. The couple who can keep their balance longest, without letting this round object slip, wins.

The floor quickly fills up with pairs trying, through variously ridiculous contortions, to achieve this feat, and then, just as quickly, begins to thin out, as couple after couple loses the ball. The last pair, of course, is Irena and the Dane. They move across the floor smoothly, holding against each other very straight, as if something as silly as a Ping-Pong ball couldn’t be an impediment to their union. By now I know their secret: she is going to Canada to join a husband who, by marrying her, has made her emigration possible. So everyone stops laughing and watches silently as this perfect shipboard romance plays itself out before us with such unashamed recklessness.

The next day, as soon as I wake up, I know that something has changed. Then I realize that the ship’s sideways shifting, to which I have become accustomed, has ceased. Today, I remember, we come to our first stopping place, called Halifax.

When I come out on deck, I see a bit of a world that returns all my sense of loss to me like a sudden punch in the stomach. The sea has narrowed to a gray, wide waterway, on the shores of which I can make out muddy land, some marshlike vegetation, and a few isolated houses. We are informed over the loudspeakers that we have entered the St. Lawrence Seaway. I don’t know what kind of body of water that is, or how it cuts into the continent we are so eerily approaching. There is something about the sight that is ineffably and utterly different from the watery landscapes I’m used to. Maybe it’s the air, maybe the enormous width of this inland channel, maybe the distribution of the houses on the shore, dropped into the land at odd intervals, like lonely sentries. Then the foghorn sounds, and the ship comes to a stop. We seem to be in the middle of nowhere. On the shore, there is nothing but a long, wooden building. The sailors throw a plank for crossing. It’s cold.

As I observe these proceedings, I notice Janek walking toward the gangplank, a suitcase in each hand. I run after him; I call his name; he turns back confusedly, and acts as if he doesn’t know who I am. A tall man is standing on the other side of the bridge, and Janek is moving toward him slowly, like someone who both wants and doesn’t want to reach his target. I watch Janek approach the tall man and put his suitcases down; I watch the man draw his son impetuously toward himself. I watch them walk off together, the suitcases now in the man’s hands. Janek is not going to turn back.

My private disappointment, however, is soon drowned out by the buzz of much more interesting news. Irena is refusing to leave the ship. Her husband has come to meet her and is waiting for her to disembark, but she won’t, and she is detaining the whole ship while they negotiate. For the next several hours, the husband paces back and forth on the cement platform on the other side—a short, corpulent figure, with a blond mustache, condemned in this melodrama to play the role of a satyr to the Dane’s Hyperion. Irena, intermittently, is seen to pace the deck, the German shepherd obediently at her side. She is smoking a cigarette and never looks at the man who is no more than a few yards from her.

“She’s holding out,” somebody reports. “Who can blame her. Why should she live in a godforsaken Canadian village with somebody like him.”

“He says Canada has a legal system,” another bulletin informs us. “He says he wants his money back for the ticket. And for the dog’s, too.”

Lila comes up to me, and we discuss the situation for a while. “Of course, she married him just because she wanted to get out of Poland” is Lila’s authoritative opinion. “But now that she’s made her bed, she should sleep in it. Which doesn’t mean she can’t sleep in others,” she concludes archly.

By midafternoon, the ship’s loudspeakers begin to summon
Irena, repeating her name in more and more peremptory tones. She has half an hour to make up her mind. At dusk, the whole ship gathers to watch her fur-coated figure step down the gangplank and walk on without looking at her husband, who turns with an angry movement and follows her into the wooden building.

The melodrama over, the crowd disperses to its private affairs, and I wander into the lounge—where I see something that stops me in my tracks. The Dane, all alone in the room except for a chaos of overthrown furniture, is doing a sort of furious dance with a chair, which he is about to throw at the wall. He notices me, though, and stops himself in midmovement. For a moment, we stare at each other expressionlessly. His face is flushed, he smells of alcohol, and his eyes are the brightest, clearest blue I’ve ever seen.

I think of Irena and the Dane in later years, and I try to accomplish the difficult trick of imagining a plausible reality for these half-real imago. Has the Dane become Claus von Bülow? Or did he go back to Denmark, to his wife and job? And what of Irena? Is she now baby powder’s Basia Johnson? I meet women like her often in my adult life—attractive, charming Polish women who come to “America” to seek their fortunes. They are usually impressively resourceful, with the spunk of those who play the game for all it’s worth, because there’s so little to lose and so much to gain. They are unhesitant in using their sexuality to advance themselves in the world, and they often marry for money or take lovers who can assist them in their careers. They do so with the self-confidence of women who are used to being the object of desire and who can clearly separate strategy from feeling. I admire this gambling wit, which, with the moralism I’ve acquired in America about sex and the sentiments, I could never imitate. But not all of them, of course, end up with prosperous mates or court settlements of $390 million. Perhaps Irena is a comfortable hausfrau in a Canadian town, the vivacious foreigner who runs her household efficiently and grows pansies and sweet peas in her garden. I know those women too, women whose bravado is more hidden and whose secret personalities come out only infrequently—women whose odd fates zigzag throughout the continent in idiosyncratic patterns. There are models for immigrant fates, as for all others, though I doubt that any of them feels entirely natural to those who live them.

But I have no map or model in my mind as I stand at the railing disconsolately, and the Batory, after having waited for Irena’s decision, begins moving again. The next morning, standing with my parents and my sister in a crowd at the ship’s prow, I discern the outlines of massive, gray shapes against the cloudy sky. Closer still, the shapes resolve into buildings, tall and monolithic to my eyes. Montreal. It actually exists, more powerful than any figment of the imagination. We look at the approaching city wordlessly. The brief Batory interlude is over, and so is the narrative of my childhood.