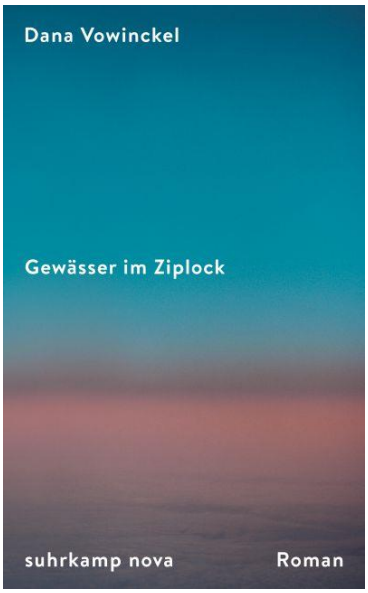

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The World in a Ziplock Bag

Novel

(Original German title: Gewässer im Ziplock. Roman)

363 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 21 August 2023

Sample translation by Adrian Nathan West

pp. 7 – 23; 257 – 265

He stayed once for Kiddush, the big meal after the Friday evening prayers. He sat at the head of the table, the room was packed, there were hardly enough chairs for everyone. It might be better if he left, he said, but no, they wanted him to stay, wanted him to sit at the head of the table, next to the Gabbai. They observed him as he nodded at the first offer of vodka before gracefully declining, as he carefully sliced his food with his plastic knife and fork. He looked a little big for his chair.

There had been three courses: hummus with salad, something with curry, then cake, all from a kosher caterer. He seemed especially to enjoy the vegetables, of which he took a second helping.

He laughed politely if anyone said something funny, and when asked a question, he responded neither tersely nor pedantically. They learned that he lived in Prenzlauer Berg, that he'd been in the same apartment a long time; so he liked it, sure, and he'd gotten lucky, the rents in Berlin were a nightmare. They asked him where he'd lived before, and he said Hannover, which surprised them, since they'd noticed his foreign accent.

They tried to get him to gossip about the Central Council of Jews in Germany, but apparently, he had no problems with the Central Council.

Up close, he looked tired.

He left before Birkat Hamason, said his goodbyes, his thanks, nodded to everyone, wished them all a peaceful Shabbes.

They agreed one and all that he was intriguing, this cantor, friendly, and the one with the best voice.

They wondered if he was lonely where he was returning to. Whether anyone was there waiting for him. He didn't have a ring on, but what did that mean, really, there were fewer people with rings than there were people that were lonely.

*

It was always loudest just before the prayers. They started at 7:03 PM in summer, 6:03 PM in winter, or sometimes at 7:07 and 6:07. Exactly five minutes before the hour, he walked through the secured entrance, and the candles had to be lit, that was the job of a woman who had no need to look at the clock to know when it was time, just seeing him enter sufficed. He would nod politely and climb the Bimah, and hear word of children born, partners who'd been brought along, matters major and minor, recipes, the living and the dead. The chitchat would grow louder with every minute past the hour, as if somehow to adjourn the prayers that they had come for. In exceptional moments, they had to wait until enough men had arrived. Ten men were required for worship. During the pandemic, not so many came, from fear, from respect, and those who did had to wear masks and sign a list. There were many arguments about whether women ought to count, especially

in such times, but even today, there were a few elders who wouldn't budge, old men who wanted things to remain as they had been, and he went along and tried not to get involved. He was paid for his voice, for cutting through the chatter, not for his opinions about politics with a capital P. Or even, perhaps, with a lowercase p.

If he took a deep breath for the first time on the Shabbat in question, no one would have heard it, not even he. The first words of his first song would begin to die away, and then, he imagined, a few visitors behind him would breathe more slowly and think: now we have tranquility, now we have respite. The first verse he sang alone, the second with the diligent sopranos in the women's row. If he turned to them, he might glimpse a timid smile, and someone would decide to try and chant along as well, because the music was so beautiful. *Yedid nefesh,* he sang, *Beloved of my soul, merciful father, bend your servant to your will, may he chase after you like a gazelle, bow to your glory, find your companionship sweeter than honey, sweeter than any delicacy.* His relationship with God was never so peaceful as then, when he thought of Him as a friend, as vocal accompaniment, gentle and still. As he sang, the faithful kept wandering in, choosing their row, sitting by their friends, their parents and loved ones, nodding and winking, as though to say: today is Shabbat. He sang them into a sense of ease. This was his favorite moment, even if the melody wasn't the most beautiful one, or the piyyut the most poetic. After a long walk, the shoes came off, and you wrapped your hands around a glass of warm milk with honey. At the end of the song, everything was completely still. The prayers could begin.

*

There were little pieces of something, bits of what once had been cherry, maybe, swimming in the yogurt. She hated that. At home, she never had to eat things she didn't like. She liked almost everything, but she hated these bits in her yogurt. Her cheeks grew hot from a longing for home, nostalgia for a place where no one would ever set such a thing before her, where morning meant peppered mackerel, or the best, creamiest feta from the market, or muesli with lots of nuts. Raw onion and lox and cream cheese on the weekend.

Expectant eyes observed her. "Thank you," she heard herself say, "yummy." *Yummy* was a kid's word, but Margarita's grandmother thought she still was one. She was already dressed in her uniform: a white starched blouse with pearl buttons and leggings that drooped in the rear—her *house pants,* which she also wore to the butcher's and baker's, but not to the supermarket or restaurants. For these, she had her *outside pants,* black fabric slacks. "Rita," her grandmother said, "why haven't you gotten dressed yet?" The warmth in her head increased. Her grandparents lived in a house on the South Side of Chicago, near the university, that was three times as big as the apartment in Berlin and at least three times quieter. Each time Grandma brought the yogurt to her lips, she bit down on the spoon. Audible: the whirr of the ceiling fan and the click of enamel on silver. Amazing she hadn't chipped a tooth after all these years. Margarita asked herself if her mother had felt the same disgust, sitting at that same table at fifteen years old and eating from the same silver. Or had she not noticed, or did she possibly bite down on the spoon as well when she ate yogurt. Maybe her mother had chewed the ice cream, too, that they often had there for dessert instead of licking it. Maybe when she ate a sandwich, you could see inside her mouth. Maybe you could watch the way the lettuce, cheese, white bread, and sour pickles got smashed into a mush.

Margarita spooned it up faster, carefully scraped the sides of the dish, and said, "I need to go to the bathroom." The bathroom was her refuge in those weeks. She liked to shower in the

evenings, until the hot water ran out, skipping out on the evening's plans and declaring she was awfully tired and really had to go to bed. She took baths, even when it was nearly a hundred out. She got an inflamed bladder from going so often to pee.

Only when her grandparents were asleep, and she could call Berlin—quietly—did she stop going so frequently to the bathroom. On bad days, she'd beg her father to let her go home, to come get her, and threaten that when she was back in Berlin, she wouldn't speak another word to him, not ever. He said nothing, or he calmed her down sometimes, humming a melody that never varied.

He didn't know where all the pain came from. He knew the circumstances, the longing for home, he knew all that, but he knew nothing about Nico. No one knew about Nico but Anna. Sometimes she asked herself if even she still knew about him, in the evenings, when she stared at her phone, when she tried to sleep, let her hand slide into her underwear and thought about what had happened. Every morning, her heart pounded before she turned on her phone, tapped the green symbol, got her new messages, never any from him.

Sometimes, when she really wanted to torture herself, she would imagine Anna kissing him. She knew that would never happen, because Anna was on her side. And yet she continued to envision it as she sat on the toilet lid whiling away the time her grandmother needed to finish her yogurt.

She thought of what Nico had said to her the last time they saw each other. Margarita had needed to call her father, because he always worried when she was out. Afterwards, Nico had asked her what language that was she was speaking. "Hebrew," she responded. "Cool," he said. "You're not like a Zionist though, are you?"

She had never thought about it before. They had talked about it a lot at school, how improbable their continued existence had been, how the country had been founded, why Israel was a safe haven for Jews all over the world, and about the Palestinians, and about terrorism.

"My dad's from there. That's why I speak it. Plus it's cool, it's like a secret language."

"Still you know, colonialism and all that shit, right," Nico had responded, and she'd nodded, not knowing whether her opinion should be different, not having any opinion at all. Then she changed the subject. It felt a little like a betrayal, but against whom, she didn't know. Her father, maybe, but she was already betraying him either way, by meeting with Nico and keeping the whole thing secret from him.

Grandma had finished off her yogurt by the time Margarita sat back down at the table. She smiled at her, and Margarita was embarrassed that she'd run away. The seething midday heat worked its way slowly into the kitchen. Margarita closed the door to the patio and lowered the blinds so the air conditioner would work better. A week before, she'd screamed herself hoarse at Fridays for Future. Now, even at night, she didn't cut off the AC in her bedroom. Instead, she slept under a thick blanket. Otherwise, she'd freeze.

*

Every year, after Margarita's departure, he would cover the mattress on the bunk bed with a cloth he'd bought expressly for the purpose of keeping off the dust. Then he'd close the door to her room and would only enter when he called her in the evenings, sitting in the chair where he used to read to her for hours on end, and listening to her faraway voice. As he did so, he'd stare at the shelf opposite, lovingly filled by him and his few friends, who, when Margarita was little, would bring

her books whenever they got the chance. They all knew how proud he was that she had begun reading so early. With great earnestness, she would decipher one word at a time. Margarita, the little grownup, he always called her when she read complete sentences with her stern face, well before the children around her could even write their names. When he thought about it, he had to laugh. Margarita had scarcely been able to bear the days when he couldn't keep her occupied, when there was nothing interesting going on. Once, he had found her with his keychain and his wallet in her hands, rubber booties already on her feet, in the hallway. She said she wanted to go buy apple juice, they were all out. She would find the supermarket on her own. But it's Shabbat, he responded. She understood.

Sometimes he would take down one of his favorite books to read aloud, the story about Pettson and Findus and the fireworks that she liked so much, or the one about the lonely bear at the playground with its didactic message about never shutting people out. Margarita didn't need to hear that, she had long been the shut out one, had borne it soberly and gone on reading until, after a change from the primary school around the corner to the Jewish High School, she'd found a small group of girlfriends. On rare occasions, she brought them over. He knew she was at an age when everything was embarrassing, but still, he wished she'd bring them round more often. He could set out a pizza for them, let them sit in front of the TV, listen to them giggle, Margarita would struggle through it, but that was fine, because all things considered, she was happy.

It moved him to know she missed him so bad. He was torn, during her weeks in Chicago, not knowing whether to take her at her word and book her the next ticket home or to tell himself: she doesn't mean it, it'll pass.

Berlin was cold that summer, July full of misty days. On the way to the synagogue, he thought of the heat of Jerusalem, of the many shoes whose soles he'd worn through there. The

walk seemed short when he thought of Israel. During those weeks, he was assigned to evening prayers, and on the days when he had time, he liked to go on foot. Before, he'd used the minutes before his departure to put everything on the hotplate, which was left on the entire Shabbat, turn on the kettle, even bake challah, so it would all be ready when he got home. For a few years now, Margarita had been permitted to stay home when he went to sing. On his return, he would sing again, this time just for the two of them. As quickly as she could, Margarita would light the candles with a match and say the prayers. After dinner, they'd play Monopoly. He lost, because he spent his money too quickly and seized everything he could, while Margarita quietly collected rent from him. Often, she was so tired from the school week that she almost fell asleep over the game board in the evening.

On the long summer days while she was gone, an unaccustomed but pleasant calm settled in. Apart from the holidays, he gave bar mitzvah lessons once a week. They consisted mostly of preparing the young men for their reading of a section of the Torah and the haftarah. The prospective male and female rabbis and cantors he instructed on the side had now all departed for yeshivas across Israel to study the Torah. So he could sleep in and do the shopping less often, read the paper in the morning, take long walks through Berlin. At the same time, these days were bitter, a sort of preparation for the fact that in a few years, Margarita wouldn't be there at all, that if things worked out as she wished, she'd be studying medicine somewhere in southern Germany and coming home only on break between semesters. Her friend Anna had taken her to her grandparents' place on Lake Constance, and she seemed to think now there were places that weren't sad in winter. The cloth would soon be spread over her bed the whole year.

He, too, had spent periods at yeshivas. The last time was two years before Margarita was born. As cantor for Berlin, he also sang at weddings, funerals, and days of remembrance; people

mostly died in winter, and the days of remembrance were in the dark season as well. You had to be able to imagine evil in every street in Berlin. In spring and summer, no one cared to waste the good weather on sorrow. On May 27, people preferred a first swim at the Prinzenbad to polishing Stolpersteine. And that summer, there were no weddings. Just divorces, and no one sang at those.

The security guard hired by the Jewish Community, who stood in front of the synagogue next the policemen people no longer trusted after Yom Kippur a few years ago, nodded to him from afar. He handed over his shoulder bag in the narrow secure entrance. Inside it was his organ donor's card, his passport, an emergency credit card, still unused, his phone, and a photo of Margarita.

It began. Lighting of candles, Yedid Nefesh, a few psalms. The conversations persisted as he uttered them softly, almost soundlessly. Sometimes, attendance was so sparse, there was little whispering, instead listening and prayers in accompaniment. When it got too loud, when the cries of children distracted him, he would raise his arms high in a gesture of appeasement. For some reason, the children tottering through the pews of the synagogue seemed to respect him, too. They couldn't tell when he was standing there with his back to him, but their horseplay made him grin. It distracted him, but it didn't disturb him. He liked children, and he knew there was no such thing as children without noise.

After the psalms came the Lekha Dodi. It must have had as many melodies as it did verses. His, the one he liked most, was brisk and a bit melancholic. It sounded best when a few higher voices sang along in canon, drawing the *lekha* out as long as possible. *Onward, my friend, to meet the bride, onward, onward,* they sang. *We will greet the sabbath's countenance. Onward, my friend, to meet the bride, let us greet the sabbath's queen. Lecha Dodi, likrat kalah, pnei schabbat, nekabelah.*

He liked that Shabbat became a bride, that one fled into her arms, and that the song sounded especially pretty when sung by women's voices.

The synagogue was full for an unremarkable evening in summer. Sunlight fell on the bima through the stained-glass windows, and a few spots of light blue danced on the pages of his open prayer book. It smelled of lacquer and the sticky hands of children.

He recognized the voices of many of those chanting. He sang the last verse especially loud, and they followed along. He wondered whether they were audible from the sidewalk, and what the passersby might be thinking.

*

Grandma shoved a meatloaf into the oven. She was getting ugly, Margarita thought, her head almost hairless, not just wrinkly, but sallow, too. Margarita was certain of it: there was no love there, she didn't love this woman, she didn't like her, she had to be here because she was fifteen and could do nothing about it and because it was hoped, as Aba said, she'd one day be grateful "for the time with her grandparents, and for the language." Today she'd be going shopping with Grandma. She used to like going with her. Now she sometimes asked herself whether she was trying to hate everything; whether she actually enjoyed the drive together to Hyde Park Produce, where the best melons and cherries were, and fresh spinach and green asparagus from California, whether she would miss them, if she were really honest with herself. At that moment, she didn't know what that meant, being honest with yourself. She hoped one day it wouldn't weigh on her so.

To give Margarita something to do, her grandparents paid for a costly summer class at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. Last summer, she'd done a three-week cooking class, which had been practical: while there, she'd eaten so much that she was still full at six-o'-clock dinner. Later, she would often slink into the kitchen for muesli or some toast. Naturally, her grandmother always heard her as soon as she came down the stairs, and ran after her as swiftly as her surgically repaired knee would allow. "Sweetheart, you should have said something! I could have made you something nice! Let me warm you up some chicken, or a bit of the kugel I made for you." Kugel, that was noodles baked in milk in the oven, like a sweet casserole. Authentically Jewish, apparently. What exactly was so Jewish about it, Margarita didn't understand. Nor could her father tell her.

This year, there was another cooking class, but her grandparents decided one was enough, and so, along with the daughters of rich parents from around the university, Margarita learned to write poems, or at least to try. So far, she'd only managed to write short stories, introducing line breaks when she finished, making them look like insanely long poems. When she made errors in English, the other girls found it "so interesting."

By foot, it was around ten minutes from her grandparents' front door on Blackstone Avenue to the campus. Detour onto 57th Street, where there was a bakery that offered delicious ice-cold lemonade and chocolate croissants the size of half a loaf of bread. Margarita's father gave her enough money that she could afford a lemonade or a croissant more or less every day. And books. Even lots of them, when she rationed it out well, either at 57th Street Books, where there were new releases—but not cheap—or at Powell's, a used bookstore at the end of the road by the sinister train station that connected Hyde Park with the rest of the city. It smelled there like a mix of musty cellar, fresh laundry, and old volumes with brittle pages, so brittle, you had the feeling they would

turn to dust if you rubbed them between your fingers. She had gone there often with her father when she was still too young to fly on her own.

As soon as she turned onto Blackstone Avenue, she slowed her steps. Often she had to grip the railing like her grandmother, pull herself up the small steps in front of the door, stare a minute at the doorbell, before she was ready to endure that *I'm coming, I'm coming,* seconds later, after the bell was rung, *just a minute now, I'm coming!*

When the storms came after days of dank heat, she would run out to the yard and let the rain pour over her until her underclothes were soaked, sometimes even until it stopped, amid the unmistakable scent of grass and the big paving stones of the sidewalks: scent of earth, of freshly washed stone, of carefully tended front gardens of aromatic flowers. Her father had once said that it was the smell of wealth.

But today was Sunday, Margarita couldn't run around alone as she did after summer school, in the afternoon, her grandmother wanted to go shopping. That was Chicago: shopping on Sundays. On Saturdays her grandparents went to shul, usually, and Margarita had to go along and let her cheeks be pinched. Shopping was on Sundays, and Margarita helped her grandmother carry her bags. This year, she also had to help her out of the car.

Household procedures were strict: breakfast at nine, an hour later than during the week. Then her grandfather spent a few hours reading the paper while her grandmother made dinner. Margarita, in the meanwhile, would lie belly-down on the bed, stare at her phone, read a book, or masturbate, or often all three, one after the other, in thirty-minute intervals. Lunch was at one thirty. After lunch came shopping: first Hyde Park produce, then Treasure Island. Everything they bought would be cooked in the coming days: not so much baked, boiled, or sauteed as reduced to mush. Her grandmother managed to burn her pancakes on the outside while leaving their interiors

runny. Her lasagna noodles were already falling to pieces before they even went into the oven. Margarita's prose poem about spongy lasagna had made everyone in class laugh. But she had been ashamed of her German accent. And then, on the walk home, she had been ashamed at her near lack of shame at her own meanness.

Now she was lying on the bed and waiting for lunch, for yet another meal to be over, for another day to lurch closer to its end. She stared at an empty page in a notebook, then at the black screen of her phone, then back at the page, a constant back-and-forth. At some point she wrote to ask Anna if she was still awake. Her best friend could party the whole summer away, drinking on the banks of the Landwehrkanal and at the Weinbergspark. Her father had said it was cold in Berlin, but still, Margarita imaged Anna, legs bare in high-waisted Levi's shorts, smoking as she rode her bicycle through the night.

Anna was so pretty that she automatically became the most beloved person in their clique. They met in the bat mitzvah class, where Anna was the only one no one knew, the only one who didn't attend the Jewish High School. Even at school, Margarita was the one who always looked after the newcomers. But Anna needed no looking after. She had learned effortlessly how to interpret the melodies, and had soon become the teacher's pet, because she always did her homework.

Only months later, on one of their long winter walks through Prenzlauer Berg, had Margarita grasped why. Anna spoke, in a soft voice, of her mother, who wasn't Jewish, and of her father, whose grandparents had survived the Holocaust. She said that her mother had needed convincing to let her convert. She was afraid Anna would let herself be victimized. Margarita had to laugh when Anna said that: Anna, who never hesitated to ask a stranger for a light, Anna, so painfully good-looking, with her gigantic blue eyes, full lips, golden blond hair. No one could ever

want to harm someone so beautiful, Margarita thought. Anna could choose whoever she wanted to make out with. At the Jewish High School, everyone had known each other forever, the lines were clear. The parents had set the ground rules. But Anna was allowed to do whatever she wanted, as long as her grades were good. At the Saturday prayers they had to attend during preparation for their Bat Mitzvah, Anna showed up alone, as did Margarita. That brought them together. All the others went with their families, but Margarita's father was off singing, and according to Anna, you couldn't have paid her parents to set foot in the synagogue.

And so Anna had started to stop by Margarita's on Saturdays, and they would walk together along Oranienburger Strasse, talking about the events of the two days that had passed since their Wednesday lessons. Anna went out on Friday nights. Margarita had to stay home. In her home, Shabbat was holy, and she accepted this from fear of losing her freedom on Saturday evenings, too, but also because, somehow, it felt right to her.

After their Bat Mitzvah celebrations, they had stopped going to the synagogue on Saturdays, instead sitting on the sofa and gabbing or buying falafel sandwiches and walking through the park. Or they'd help Anna's parents with the cooking. Unlike Margarita's father, they had visitors all the time, every weekend they went to the chic delicatessen on Rykestrasse and bought good wine, all sorts of cheese, and there was pumpkin soup and salmon in puff pastry in winter, and in summer salad and *Flammkuchen.* All of last year, Margarita had been allowed to stay over at Anna's after those dinners, where she'd been given a small glass of sparkling wine. In recent months, she'd met Anna's friends afterward, played drinking games in the park, or gone to parties at the homes of strangers' parents. Not long before Margarita had to fly to the US, her friends from the Jewish High School had started coming with them, too. They were shy, and for a while, Margarita found them irritating. She felt somehow experienced, since she'd started buying

thongs at H&M and taking tequila shots at parties, but she felt she owed it to them to bring them along. A few guys from Margarita's class had heard that she knew people outside their school. She ran into a few of them in the park when she was hanging out with Anna and Anna's friends.

Yesterday at summer school, their assignment was to choose a theme that they would write about for the rest of the coming week. Before then, she hadn't dared write about her life in Berlin, from fear of homesickness and of not managing to find the right words. Today she wanted to try, but just as she dug out her notebook, her grandmother bellowed, "Rita! Lunch!" Her words echoed through the house. She slowly walked down the stairs. Lunch was eaten at the round kitchen table rather than the long one in the dining room. The dining room table was set only on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings. They sat closer together at the kitchen table. That made the eating sounds even louder.

The meatloaf her grandmother had put in the oven earlier was for dinner. For lunch, there was gazpacho from a jar, because it was so hot out and because her grandmother thought it fancy. Slimy noodles floated in the gazpacho. "We ate this one time in Spain, in that wonderful hotel, remember, darling?" she shouted across the table. Grandpa was hard of hearing. Margarita suspected he turned his hearing aid down on purpose. He nodded amicably and went on slurping his soup. "And I thought it was so tasty," Grandma roared, "it was so tasty, and we were sweating like crazy, the Spaniards, you know, they probably still have no idea air conditioning exists." At this point, she laughed loudly and too long. Margarita turned in her chair from disgust. "Anyways, sweetheart, I thought I'd buy something special for our Sunday lunch. I always see you making those little sandwiches, and I thought to myself, you'll probably need some carbs, so I added some whole wheat noodles. Is it good, apple of my eye?" Margarita tried to answer, but her grandmother went on talking. "Anyway, hon, we're going shopping once I'm done with my afternoon nap."

Hon was Grandpa. Rita was *Sweetheart. We* was Grandma and her. Her grandmother smiled to herself. Lipstick and gazpacho clung to her teeth. Margarita felt a bottomless abyss of repulsion and loneliness growing within her.

"Sure," she said, "I'll get ready while you're napping." She stood and went upstairs, without putting her bowl in the dishwasher. The tears came as soon as she shut her door. She cried until her grandmother called for her. In the staircase on her way back down, she glared at a childhood photo of her mother and thought: You did this to me. You and no one else.

*

[…]

When Shabbat was over, Marsha decided to eat out, said, "Fuck it, that's why I've got a credit card." She wanted to go to the Cinémathèque. Margarita would love the restaurant there. Avi sent a text saying he'd come along. Margarita rolled her eyes. They walked across the park, the ground firm, firmer than in Tel Aviv, the footfalls there heavier, the valley started to glimmer faintly, there it was, Jerusalem in the last light of evening, her father had always talked about it, but till now she hadn't seen it, and it was quite sharp, quite clear, as if the rest of the globe no longer existed. As if there were no Lior, no Nico, as if they didn't matter for her, because Jerusalem existed.

But there was something else: the constant worry over her grandmother, still no news, monitoring in the ICU, that was all Marsha could talk about the whole way there, her fear of losing her mother and how awful the wait was. Margarita felt her shoulders slumping farther and farther forward, and between them her heart raced like a hummingbird from guilt and helplessness. She

feared another long-haul flight, incommunicado for hours on end, hours during which her grandmother could simply die. Or would everything get better just as soon as she got in the plane, the same way the tram always came right when you lit up a cigarette?

Finally they reached the Cinémathèque. A wave of people pushed through the doors. Apparently a film had just ended. Avi was standing by the entrance, looking forlorn.

Silence reigned as they sat down, but Margarita refused to broach any topic. Avi rocked nervously back-and-forth in his chair. Marsha stared out the window and scratched at the sunburn on her arm.

A waitress brought the menus, and Marsha ordered Spaghetti Bolognese without looking. Margarita did the same. The thought of eating pasta that hadn't been cooked to mush for the first time after seven weeks made her stomach growl. The school year had started four days ago. She had asked a few friends to take notes for her and had emailed her teachers the day before to tell them her return would be delayed by a family emergency. She knew the first weeks were always introductory material. She'd been ambivalent about passing to the next grade: she was happy to be done with the core curriculum and get on with her specialized classes, but at the same time, her grades now counted toward her college acceptance.

Most people in her class she already knew, they'd been together since seventh year, had gone on the same field trips, to Kabbalat Shabbat at the synagogue next door; had trudged together through Auschwitz not long before the academic year's end, wrapped in Israeli flags the school had passed out, and Jacob from class 10a had thrown up.

Their Bolognese arrived. Marsha sprinkled parmesan over it. Margarita saw her father's sidelong glance. A sudden rage overcame her, maybe because of the emails, maybe because he looked like shit sitting there and sweating into his risotto. She took the little spoon from the dish

of parmesan and shook the grated cheese onto her own noodles, but not much of it fell off the spoon, so she kept shoving it back into the dish, finally she had to just tip it, her eyes crossed his, he was staring at her, she scraped the bottom off the dish, the spoon clinked against the glass, and then she stirred her spaghetti. Marsha hid her smirk behind her hand.

"Bete'avon," Avi forced himself to say. Cautiously, she took a bite. She felt a slight disgust at this mingling of meat and milk, and it irked her that her father wouldn't let himself be provoked. To the contrary, he began to make small talk, mouth full of food. Asked which Margarita liked better, Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. "Eilat," Margarita said, and her parents laughed as though surprised that she sometimes had witty things to say and didn't always whine.

Afterwards, it was quiet again. No one seemed to know what they should talk about. The only things that occurred to Margarita were those they might fight over.

"I signed us up for Yad Vashem. Since we won't be leaving till the evening, we could get an early start on it tomorrow," Marsha said finally.

"Marsha, don't you think that's a bit much?" Avi asked. "We've got to be at the airport at five."

When Avi said *Marsha,* the *r* was so coarse, it sounded like her name were crumbling apart. *Makhsha,* that's how it should really be written, Margarita thought.

"The tickets are for nine. We could go straight from there to the airport, I'll return the car there."

Avi said nothing.

"Any news from Grandma?" Margarita asked.

Her father answered her in Hebrew. "She already said she'll tell us if there's anything new."

Margarita looked up from her pasta, seething. "Can't you say that in English?"

Marsha looked back and forth between them.

“He said you’d tell us if there was anything new,” Margarita said. “And Yad Vashem works. I’m sure I’d love it there.”

“Nobody loves it there,” her father said in English, and then, turning to Marsha: “The idea is completely ridiculous, she’s totally worn out. She’s already been to Auschwitz, isn’t that enough?”

“She’s lucky to have made it out alive,” Marsha said.

Avi rolled his eyes.

“I think a Jewish perspective wouldn’t hurt,” Marsha said, serious this time. “In Auschwitz, it must be all about the perpetrators.”

“Motek, is it just about the perpetrators at Auschwitz?”

She looked up. “Um. I don’t know. What do you think?” She didn’t understand what he meant. Obviously she didn’t have the least desire to drive to Yad Vashem, but she also had not the least desire to prove her father right.

He rubbed his eyes. “I’ve only gone to Auschwitz for work,” he said. He looked sad. Suddenly she felt pity for him.

“You don’t have to come, Aba,” she said.

“That’s not it. I want to protect you,” he replied, and he sounded insulted. She had wanted only to make things better, and now they were worse. In silence, she ate every bit off her treif dish while her parents went on fighting, relieved that they were ignoring her.

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Margarita had bent so far over the plate she looked ashamed, but he knew it bore an expression of rage, defiance, disgust, those downturned corners of the lips, the straight deep lines between the eyebrows were things Avi recognized from himself.

He found himself trapped in an argument he wanted out of, but it was as it always had been, as it was when Marsha and he used to fight before, she twisted around every sentence he uttered and saw it as a provocation, or still worse, as idiotic. She got so wrapped up in these political discussions that held little interest for him, he had his own muted opinions, unlike her, everything between them was heated, polemical, impassioned, implacable, whereas on his own, he had a tender attitude toward the world and the daughter he had raised and wanted to protect.

He had said casually, he thought, that Marsha was overloading her, with her grandmother in the hospital, the upcoming flight, what she really needed was to be in her home, in her bed, in her school, and between bites, Marsha had said, "I think she's tougher than you believe, and this might be the last time she sees her grandmother alive."

"I think she's not as tough as *you* believe," he replied. Margarita had gone to the bathroom, she must have had the smallest bladder in the world, she had already stood up and almost run off fifteen minutes earlier, or was she having a bad period, maybe he should ask? Or was that Marsha's task now that she was having her fifteen minutes of fame, should she be the one to talk to Margarita about her menstrual flow and condoms and dental dams, all open-minded and cool?

"I'm being serious, Marsha," he said, "she's got her entire life ahead of her to go to Vad Yashem. Why right now?"

"For a Jewish perspective, obviously, do you not get it anymore? You're the Israeli here, my goodness, she only knows the German perspective, the eternal defensiveness!"

"We live a Jewish life! She goes to a Jewish school!"

“Being frum is the opposite of education, Avi, you know that yourself. And how many people at this school are actually converts full of guilt because their grandparents were in the SS, hm?”

“What you’re saying is unfair. You know perfectly well that music matters to me more than the halakha. I didn’t bat an eye when she sprinkled parmesan on her spaghetti, that’s her choice. And at the school they have a strong focus on Jewish philosophy, Jewish history, liturgy…”

“Yeah, but they’re still German, right? My goodness, there’s a lot I haven’t held onto, but I’ll never forget that *Jude* is a curse word in Germany, they won’t even allow themselves to utter it aloud, you yourself used to always say that.”

“Germany, Germany, Germany,” Avi mimicked her. “It’s an obsession with you.”

By now, Margarita had returned.

“With me? Who’s the one who insisted on going to live there? You just had to take the job in Hannover, you swore we’d be back after two years, but no, you had to send applications to Berlin, if anyone has an obsession, it’s you!”

“It’s terrible what happened,” he said, “and I won’t try to make light of it, all I wanted to say was that with Yad Vashem tomorrow, we’re asking too much of her.”

“Oh, but the Israeli teenagers have to deal with it, because they’re supposed to be the victims?”

“That’s completely irrational. It was a tragedy, we agree about that, but it remains the case that it will still be there next year, we could come back…”

Now Margarita laughed aloud. “I hope we never have to come back,” she said. The hatred in her voice frightened her. For a moment, he and Marsha looked at their daughter, who was now once more busy with her phone.

“A tragedy,” Marsha said. “It wasn’t a tragedy, it was a genocide. Germany wasn’t struck by lightning, there was an entire society backing the Nazis, and everything is still there, nothing’s been worked through, for crying out loud, why do I have to be the one to explain this to you?”

“You don’t have to be,” he said, wanting to go on, but she interrupted him: “Avi, it wasn’t your beloved God that punished the Jews, it was the Germans, and they murdered them! Your obsession with the Germans makes me sick, with their efficiency and cleanliness and rigor. No God made them evil, no God wanted to kill us, they were the ones who wanted to kill us.”

“Why are you so emotional?” he asked, since nothing better occurred to him.

“I’m emotional? You’re the one who’s acting like we’re going to traumatize Margarita just because I want to take her to Yad Vashem.”

“I simply don’t understand why it’s so important to you.”

“Because it’s our responsibility, Avi. It was a part of my plans for our trip.”

“It was also your responsibility to make sure she didn’t run away.”

“Not that again,” Marsha said. “I just have the feeling she barely understands the significance of the ground she’s standing on here.”

“Marsha, you romanticize everything, you know perfectly well this isn’t the Israel of fifty years ago, and what are we supposed to tell her, yeah, the Germans are evil, evil, evil, even though she’s one of them? We can’t confuse her like that. I feel a strong Jewish identity is resistance enough!”

“You talk like you’re reading off a teleprompter. A strong Jewish identity, what does that mean for a person who can’t even deal with the Holocaust?”

“Please stop,” Margarita said.

“Sweetie,” Marsha said, “You have to deal with this. Jews get into fights all the time.”

“Sorry, Motek,” Avi said. “You want dessert?”

Margarita ordered a tiramisu, clutching her phone, typing hectically.

“Where were we?” Avi asked. “Were you wanting to talk down to me more?”

“Yeah, of course, once again I’m the overemotional one and you’re the poor single father who just happened to end up in Germany because it was the only place he could fulfill his dream of living on his crooning and putting aside a little pocket change for his housewife.”

That had hit where it hurt. “You left, Marsha, you shoved off right before the move!”

“You could simply have come along.”

“You were trying to extort me.”

“You were, too, with your Germany, in America at least we could have had a family, and I could have earned money, but no, you wanted *me* to live *your* dream and be a housewife and go on birthing children like the queen of the Hasids!”

Margarita cupped her hands over her ears.

“Marsha,” he said reproachfully, but Marsha had started to cry, and again he felt she was extorting him, constantly extorting him, the stubborn Markovitz women, grandmother, mother, and daughter, with their sobbing and their tears.

She hissed, “My mother’s life is in the balance, what’s the point of this goddamn argument,” and he went pale, it was true, there were more important things.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m sorry,” and sat there, resourceless, as though his outer shell had slipped away, as though everything had just spilled out onto the table, “I’m sorry,” but Marsha kept crying harder and harder. The waitress brought over napkins.

“All this guilt,” she burbled, “all this fucking guilt, and the pain, and the missing, and it was just to prove our points,” what a debacle, someone laughed in the restaurant, Schumann’s

Träumerei played over the speakers, maybe it was a sign that this was a nightmare, not real, but it was real. Shit.

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