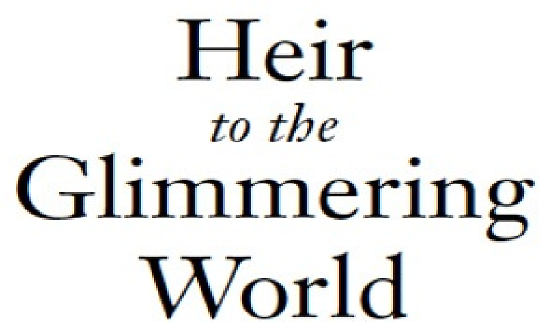

Heir to the Glimmering World

Cynthia Ozick

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Table of Contents

Title Page
Table of Contents
Copyright
Epigraph
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
Acknowledgments
About the Author

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The absence of imagination had
Itself to be imagined.

—Wallace Stevens,
“The Plain Sense of Things”

Yet the world is full of interpreters. . . .
So the question arises, why would we
rather interpret than not?

—Frank Kermode,
“The Man in the Macintosh”

1

In 1935, when I was just eighteen, I entered the household of Rudolf Mitwisser, the scholar of Karaism. “The scholar of Karaism”—at that time I had no idea what that meant, or why it should be “the” instead of “a,” or who Rudolf Mitwisser was. I understood only that he was the father of what seemed to be numerous children, and that he had come from Germany two years before. I knew these things from an advertisement in the Albany *Star:*

> Professor, arrived 1933 Berlin, children 3–14,
> requires assistant, relocate NYC. Respond
> Mitwisser, 22 Westerley.

It read like a telegram; Professor Mitwisser, I would soon learn, was parsimonious. The ad did not mention Elsa, his wife. Possibly he had forgotten about her.

In my letter of reply I said that I would be willing to go to New York, though it was not clear from the notice in the *Star* what sort of assistance was needed. Since the ad had included the age of a very young child, was it a nanny that was desired? I said I would be pleased to take on the job of nanny.

It was Elsa, not Mitwisser, who initiated the interview—though, as it turned out, she was not in charge of it. In that family she was in charge of little enough. I rode the bus to a corner populated by cluster of small shabby stores—grocery, shoemaker’s, dry cleaner’s, and under a tattered awning a dim coffee shop vomiting out odors of some foul stuff frying. The windows of all these establishmen were impenetrably dirty. Across the street a deserted gas station had long ago gone out of business: several large dogs scrabbled over the oil-blackened pavement and lifted their hind legs against the rusting pumps.

The address in the ad drew me along narrow old sidewalks fronting narrow old houses in what I ha come to think of as the Albany style: part Hudson Gothic, part Dutch settler. But mainly old. There were bow-shaped stained-glass insets over all the doors. The lamps in the rooms behind them, glowin violet and amber through the lead-bordered segments of colored panes, shut me out. I thought of underground creatures kept from the light. It was November, getting on to an early dusk.

Frau Mitwisser led me into a tiny parlor so dark that it took some time before her face, small and timid as a vole’s, glimmered into focus. “Forgive me,” she began, “Rudi wishes not the waste of electricity. We have not so much money. We cannot pay much. Food and a bed and not so many dollars.” She stopped; her eyelids looked swollen. “The tutor for my sons, it was you see . . . charity. Also the beds, the linens—”

She was all apology: the slope of her shoulders, her fidgety hands twittering around her mouth, or reaching into the air for a phantom rope to haul her out of sight. Helplessly but somehow also slyly, she was reversing our mutual obligation—she appealing for my sympathy, I with the power to withhold it. It was hard to take in those pursed umlauts sprinkled through her vowels, and the throaty burr of her voice was lanced by pricks so sharp that I pulled back a little. She saw this and instantly begged my pardon.

“Forgive me,” she said again. “It gives much difficulty with my accent. At my age to change the language is not so simple. You will see with my husband the very great difference. In his youth for four years he studies at Cambridge University in England, he becomes like an Englishman. You will see. But I . . . I do not have the—*wie nennt man das?*—the idiom.”

Her last word was shattered by an enormous thud above our heads. I looked up: was the ceiling about to fall in on us? A second thud. A third.

“The big ones,” Frau Mitwisser said. “They make a game, to jump from the top of the . . . *Kleiderschrank*, how you call this? I tell them every day no, but anyhow they jump.”

This gave me a chance to restore us to business. “And the littler ones?” I asked. “Do you need help with them?”

In the dimness I glimpsed her bewilderment; it was as if she was begging for eclipse.

“No, no, we go to New York so Rudi is close to the big library. Here is for him so little. The committee, it is so very kind that they give us this house, and also they make possible the work at the College, but now it is enough, Rudi must go to New York.”

A gargantuan crash overhead: a drizzle of plaster dust landed on my sleeve.

“Forgive me,” Frau Mitwisser said. “Better I go upstairs now, *nicht wahr?*”

She hurried out and left me alone in the dark. I buttoned up my coat; the interview, it seemed, was over. I had understood almost nothing. If they didn’t want a nanny here, what did they want? And if they had had a tutor, what had become of the tutor? Had they paid too little to keep him? On an angry impulse I switched on a lamp; the pale bulb cast a stingy yellow stain on a threadbare rug. From the condition of the sofa and an armchair, much abused, I gathered that “the big ones” were accustomed t assaulting the furniture downstairs as well as upstairs—or else what I was seeing was thrift-shop impoverishment. A woolen shawl covered a battered little side-table, and propped on it, in a flower-embossed heavy silver frame that contradicted all its surroundings, was a photograph—hand-tinted, gravely posed, redolent of some incomprehensible foreignness—of a dark-haired young woman in a high collar seated next to a very large plant. The plant’s leaves were spear-shaped, serrated, and painted what must once have been a natural enough green, faded to the color of mud. The plant grew out of a great stone urn, on which the face and wings of a cherub were carved in relief.

I turned off the lamp and headed for the front door with its stained-glass inset, and was almost at the sidewalk (by now it was fully night) when I heard someone call, “Fräulein! You there! Come back!”

The dark figure of a giant stood in the unlit doorway. Those alien syllables—“Fräulein,” yelled int the street like that—put me off. Already I disliked the foreignness of this house: Elsa Mitwisser’s difficult and resentful English, the elitist solemnity of the silver frame and its photo, the makeshift hand-me-down sitting room. These were refugees; everything about them was bound to be makeshift provisional, resentful. I would have gone home then and there, if there had been a home to go to, but was clear that my cousin Bertram was no longer happy to have me. I was a sort of refugee myself.

(Some weeks later, when I dared to say this to Anneliese—“I sometimes feel like a refugee myself”—she shot me a look of purest contempt.)

Like a dog that has been whistled for, I followed him back into the house.

“Now we have light,” he said, in a voice so authoritatively godlike that it might just as well have boomed “Let there be light” at the beginning of the world. He fingered the lamp. Once again the fain yellow stain appeared on the rug and seeped through the room. “To dispel the blackness, yes? Our circumstances have also been black. They are not so easeful. You have already seen my nervous Elsa So that is why she leaves it to me to finish the talk.”

He was as far from resembling an Englishman as I could imagine. In spite of the readier flow of language (a hundred times readier than his wife’s), he was German—densely, irrevocably German. My letter was in his hands: very large hands, with big flattened thumbs and coarse nails, strangely humped and striated—more a machinist’s hands than a scholar’s. In the niggardly light (twenty-five watts, I speculated) he seemed less gargantuan than the immense form in the doorway that had callec me back from the street. But I was conscious of a force, of a man accustomed to dictating his conditions.

“My first requirement,” Mitwisser said, “is your freedom to leave this place.”

“I can do that,” I said. “I’d like to.”

“~~It is what *I* would like that is at issue. And what I would like is a certain engagement with~~—I will not say ideas. But you must be able to understand what I ask of you.”

“I’ve done most of a year of college.”

“Less than *Gymnasium.* What is this nonsense you write here about a nanny? How is this responsive?”

“Well, your ad mentioned children, so I thought—”

“You thought mistakenly. You should know that my work has to do precisely with opposition to th arrogance of received interpretation. Received interpretation is often enough simply error. Why should I not speak everywhere of my children? There is no context or relation in which they do not have a part. That is why your obligations will on occasion include them—but your primary duty is to me. And you will try not to disturb my poor wife.”

It seemed, then, that I was hired—though I still did not know for what.

And it was not until a long time afterward that Anneliese confided that there had been (even in tha period of crisis unemployment) no other applicants.

2

IT WAS MY FATHER'S habit to tell people that my mother had died in childbirth: it had a nineteenth-century intimation of Tragic Loss. He said this to account for what he admitted was the shallowness o his paternal devotion. "The shallowness of my paternal devotion"—that was exactly how he put it. H cared (though not crucially) about the opinion of his colleagues and acquaintances, and would send o a stream of self-castigation in order, he hoped, to nip their condemnation in the bud. His intention wa to arrive at his own condemnation fast and first. It was a kind of exculpation.

No one condemned him; no one paid much attention. My father had, as far as I could see, no friends. I thought it was because he talked too much, elaborated and fabricated too much, and always took an exaggerated view of himself. He told so many stories that after a time he forgot the facts out of which his pessimistic romances sprang. It was even possible that he truly believed he had lost my mother the day I was born, though in reality I was almost three when she died of leukemia. I retain ar uncertain memory of her lying on a sofa, holding my rag doll—or it may only have been a handkerchief. Years later, Lena, one of our series of housekeepers, informed me of my mother's enduring illness.

Of course it was my father who would refer to "our series of housekeepers." They were mostly neighbor women who would come to fetch our dirty laundry, scrub it on washboards in their cellar basins, and hang it to dry on their own clotheslines. Or sometimes one of these women would bring i a meal of hot cooked food, and while my father and I sat eating our supper, would mop the bathroom floor or change the sheets. It was all haphazard and irregular. The women were paid little; my father preferred to barter. He taught algebra and geometry at the high school, and would offer to tutor a pup in exchange for a load of soiled clothing or two consecutive dinners. Disorder was our rule of life—disorder and my father's puffery. In the post office once, when a man buying stamps alongside my father struck up a conversation and asked what he did for a living, my father replied, "Professor of mathematics. Got my doctorate at Yale." He had no doctorate and had never set foot in New Haven; l liked to dream out loud. An invention of this sort was ordinarily harmless and evanescent, but the ma in the post office turned out to be the uncle of one of my father's pupils; they met again at a school event, and my father was exposed. I suffered from such chronic embarrassments, but nothing trouble me more than my father's negotiations with those women. No one else I knew lived with our disorganization and dependence. My father was incapable of washing his socks or baking a potato. When no one was available to help out—around Christmastime, for instance—we ate dry cereal for nearly a week.

Despite fits of shame or irritation, I was not sufficiently humiliated by this system—or lack of system—until the night before my eleventh birthday, when my father uncharacteristically announced that he was arranging for a treat. This was extraordinary: usually my birthday was the start of a long spurt of gloom. "On this day," my father would say, "eight years ago, Jenny left me." And the next year: "On this day, nine years ago," and so on. It had been the same all through my earlier childhood.

"It's eleven years tomorrow," he began that evening, "since I lost my Jenny."

But this time I was ready to argue.

"Lena told me she didn't die on account of me. It was afterward, from leukemia. Lena said leukemia's a cancer that gets into your blood."

"Lena told you this? When?"

"Last week. When she brought back the wash."

"You shouldn't listen to any of these women," my father said. "Especially not that one."

"I think I even remember her a little—my mother. She was lying down. I think I remember that.

Right over there,” I said.

~~“You remember my wife?” My father’s bald scalp reddened; he stared. “It’s not possible. She~~ was just giving birth. She gave birth on the sofa, before the doctor came. You shouldn’t pay attention to a silly witch. These are all dishonest people—I see it in their kids all the time. They believe in cutting corners, they’re brainless, and they’d bribe you blind. If I could afford it, I’d get off their goddamn street, I’d move out of this one-horse goddamn town.”

My father, even when I was included, almost never said “we.”

“I wish I could have a birthday party,” I complained. “Everyone else in my grade gets to have one.

It was then that my father said he would be sure to have some kind of treat for me, he couldn’t figure exactly when—but it depended on my carrying a packet of papers down the street that very evening to Lena’s house and letting her know it was my birthday.

“Tell her the stuff’ll help the kid with tomorrow’s test,” he said.

I hated going to Lena’s house—the rooms smelled of cat dung. Lena had two sons; the younger one wore corduroy knickers, and these too smelled of cat. Timmy, the older one, was in my father’s geometry class. He was drudging but sluggish. In payment for Lena’s tending to our laundry, my father now and then gave him private lessons.

A day or so later my treat arrived. “Treat”: it was an odd word for my father to have used; it settled between his teeth with an ironic click. The treat was a crumbling, lopsided cake with urine-yellow frosting. It leaned like a fallen-in shack, and the artificial lemon icing was so bitter it stung.

“Now that’s what I call cake cast upon the waters,” my father said. “Isn’t that fine? Lena made it f you, and Timmy brought it over before you were awake. Not that the kid was in much of a mood.”

“It’s not fine. It’s not a treat. It’s disgusting,” I said.

He told me then that the packet he had asked me to deliver was a complete midterm geometry exam: it contained all the questions and all the answers. But it was a discard. It was not the exam he had intended to give the following day; it belonged to the year before.

The cake was still squatting on the table when Lena came storming through our back door.

“You did that on purpose!” she shrieked. “You sent over the wrong test, and my boy put in four hours breaking his head over it, and all the time you knew it was the wrong test!”

“Now wait a minute,” my father said. “The wrong test, what are you talking about?”

“How could he pass it, if it wasn’t the one you gave them in class? You gave them a different one! You got my son all balled up! See this thing?” She thrust her finger into the soft downward flow of collapsing yellow cake. “Give your kid an idea of what you did to my kid.”

“Now wait a minute,” my father said again. Pedagogical repetition was his way; it was a type of cunning. “Practice with an old examination is eminently useful, it’s recommended. Practice makes perfect, yes?” A sly glint crept into his eye. “You didn’t expect me to dishonor myself and my profession, did you? You didn’t expect me to hand your son the contents of an examination in advance, did you?”

But I saw that she *had* expected it; she had assumed it, and my father had understood she would assume it. They were complicit: that was what lay in their agreement to barter—value for value. But my father had let down his side of the bargain. He had let it down in order to punish Lena for denying the hour of my mother’s death. And she, in throwing together that travesty of a cake, was punishing my father for his betrayal of her boy. Wasn’t he her son’s teacher and helper? Shouldn’t he have done what a man whose underwear she scrubbed, whose toilet bowl she cleaned, ought to do?

Lena had intended my cake to be ugly and bitter. And my father had intended to mislead her boy.

It was not strange that I could see all this: I knew my father. It came to me in a flood—the silliness and the malice, the pathos and the pettiness; a simple-minded vengeful woman, her inadequate son, my father’s tiny preposterous plots; and then our household, our sterile and constricted small cosmos

A formal feeling, palpable and gossamer, fell over me like a skein. It was as if I had been caught in a fisherman’s net and lifted out of a viscid sea. From then on I was able to resist my father at nearly every point.

My resistance took the form, at first, of a furious domesticity. I was old enough to do laundry and clean house, and every afternoon after school I taught myself a repertoire of easy meals. Because my father had long ago declared that we were vegetarians, I never had to touch meat. But I began to mak order; my object was to rid us of those women. I scraped an aged layer of annealed oil off the inside o the oven. I stood on a chair and painted all the kitchen shelves. I shopped cautiously and hoarded pennies. The greengrocer, who knew me by name and often gave me, gratis, a basketful of back-of-the-store vegetables that were still usable but not quite salable, one day called out, “You’re growing into a shrewd little thing, Rosie!”

I did not feel shrewd. I felt formal, even puritan. I had turned myself into a mad perfectionist. I lived by an inflexible schedule: school; homework; supper; and then, sometimes until midnight, ironing my father’s shirts. My father had little to say about this change in our way of life. When I asked for grocery money, he silently handed over his wallet and let me take what I needed.

This skin of formality covered over my mannerisms and the pitch of my voice, and even the march of my sentences. I took over my father’s typewriter and practiced typing with the help of a manual an became proficient—I was enamored of the methodical rows of letters. My speech was stilted. I had a that time been reading *Jane Eyre,* and admired the gravity and independence of a sad orphanhood. My own try at gravity and independence was a way of escaping the wilderness of my father’s imagination My goal was utter straightforwardness: it made me prim and smug. I fought chaos and sought symmetry, routine, propriety.

But it soon came clear that though I could make household order, I could not make order of my father’s mind. One winter evening, without so much as a warning, my father’s principal rang our doorbell and strode in, spraying snow.

“Now Jack,” he said, “what’s this about Euclid and the Hebrews?”

“We call the Mediterranean a sea,” my father said, “which makes it sound insuperable. Better to think of it as a pond, yes?” It was his most serenely teacherly tone. “In ancient days the old sailing ships went back and forth and across, year in and year out, carrying more than goods for trade—”

“What in God’s name,” the principal roared, “did you tell your eleven o’clock geometry class this morning?”

My father continued mild. “I told them it wasn’t merely goods that were traded. It was knowledge, information, education.”

“What you told them was that King Solomon invented geometry! You told them Euclid got it all from the Hebrews! From King Solomon!”

“It’s perfectly possible,” my father said. He was buoyant; he was thinking well of himself; he expected admiration if not confirmation. “All sorts of ideas traveled across the pond. Of course we can’t be precisely certain of the timing—”

“Stick to the textbook! Stick to the problems in the text! Stick to the Pythagorean theorem! I tell you, Jack, pull something like this again, and you’re out of a job.”

This colloquy was unfolding in what passed for my father’s “office”—his desk and chair in a corne of the foyer. I hid myself in the kitchen, huddled out of sight: I was in absolute fear. What if my fathe were really sent away? How would we survive? It seemed to me he was growing more and more reckless.

Three years later he was dismissed. King Solomon had nothing to do with it. I was then fourteen (“Fourteen years since my Jenny’s gone”), and had almost finished my sophomore term in high school; the ignominy descended on both of us. Our school—Thrace Central High—was small. It

served only our town, and a few students from the failed farms nearby, where old abandoned barns decayed on weedy miles of neglected land. Most of the farm people had long ago departed. Syracuse was to the north of us, Troy to the east, Carthage to the west. Our shabby Thrace, with its depressed Main Street, was the poorest of these nobly named upstate places. The others were more fortunate: Syracuse had its university, Troy its shirtmaking, Carthage its candy factory. Thrace had nothing of value—men out of work, or discouraged families on their way to Albany, looking for work. Most of the town boys tolerated no more than two years of high school; the girls went further. This annoyed my father. Girls, he said, though they were born to multiply, were incapable of doing mathematics; I was his prime example.

Thrace Central High employed only one other math teacher, a man who wore pocket handkerchiefs as if they were flags and flaunted three names: Austin Cockerill Doherty. He was unmarried and muc younger than my father. The principal was impressed with him and thought him a superior teacher; m father took this as a preference and a slight and smarted over it. "I've got twice the brains," he said. He had chosen Austin Cockerill Doherty for an enemy, and dubbed him "the Tricolor," because of th bright handkerchiefs and the three names; and also because Doherty had inherited money and every year summered in the south of France. "That fellow's free as a bird," my father would mutter.

For some reason—my father believed the principal was behind it—all the available boys were assigned to Doherty's classes, while my father was left with the girls. This meant that his "load," as h called it (though sometimes this was transmuted into "my toad," which led to "my frog," and then "my hog," and finally "my pigs"), was three times heavier than Doherty's, and also, he claimed, thre times stupider. His stupid pigs were all girls.

My father plotted his revenge and made me his accomplice. Now that I was in his school, we woul—too often—run into each other during the day, which embarrassed us both. Usually, when I spotted my father heading in my direction, I would instantly change course and dart away. I hated it that my classmates might think me overprivileged, dangerous, in the camp of the enemy, because my father was a teacher. As for my father, he simply did not like to see me there.

But on this occasion, when we happened to pass in the corridor—it was late June, the last day of th semester—he whipped me aside and put a hand on my shoulder. His grip was hard. "Rosie," he said, "do me a favor, will you? I've got a curriculum meeting late this afternoon—got to sit in the same pew with the goddamn Tricolor, can't be helped. What I need you to do is go into the office and pull out the grade sheets for Doherty's Algebra 2-B. You'll find 'em right there in the file."

"You mean after school? Go in the office after school? But nobody's there, by then they've all gon home, it's all locked up."

"I'll give you the key. Just go in and get the stuff and take it home for me."

"If you've got the key, can't you get it yourself?"

"It has to be done while I'm in the meeting. So I won't be held responsible. Look here, Rosie," my father said, "it's *important*."

That night my father sat at his desk for two hours, comparing lists: his girls and the Tricolor's boy

"You're not fiddling with Mr. Doherty's grades, are you?" I asked.

"Fiddling? What's fiddling? Of course I'm fiddling, can't you see? If those cretins in the office di what they're supposed to do, I wouldn't have to put in all this extra time, would I?"

"I mean tampering."

"Where'd you get an idea like that? I could get thrown out for that."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Improving my students, that's all. Giving the pigs their due."

It was my job to return Doherty's sheets to the file, again after the office staff had left; and then th term was over. Doherty sailed away for the summer, and I still did not know what my father had don

What he had done (I learned this long afterward) was a cheater’s dream. Whatever grades Doherty had set down for his boys, my father made sure his girls surpassed. He elevated every mark of every girl he taught. His aim was to mock the Tricolor and admonish the principal—to prove that a really fine teacher could take a roomful of sows’ ears and turn them into silk purses. Despite stealth and theft, it was a harmless scheme. It pleased the girls, who thought they had performed better than they knew, and my father was certain there was no way he could be found out.

He was not found out. His dismissal came about because he had given passing grades in algebra an geometry—both of them necessary for graduation—to a student who had never set foot in either clas

I was that student.

“You can’t go with the Tricolor,” my father had announced early on. “Not in his class, no siree. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. I’ve got a kid who can’t do math? None of his business. And it’s too goddamn awkward to have you in with me. Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll fix up the paperwork, no one’ll ever know the difference. I’ll slip you through the cracks, what d’you say?”

“But then I’ll never know how to do algebra. Or geometry either.”

“You’ll never know how to do ’em anyhow, I guarantee you,” my father said. “You can spend the time in study hall. You’re big on reading, so you can go read in study hall. Don’t worry about it. It’s all bureaucracy, it’s nothing but filling in the blanks. I’ll take care of it.” I must have looked wildly troubled—my whole head heated up—because he added, “I won’t have you in with Doherty, and I can’t have you in with me. So that’s that, you understand?”

In this way I came to the end of my sophomore semester with a hole in my education. As he had predicted, it was simple enough for my father’s deception to go undiscovered; and on my part, I was anyhow insulated from much of the life of the school. After classes, when the others went off to club or sports, I was on my way to the grocery store. I was mainly a watcher and a listener. No one invited me, and I invited no one. I felt apart; I felt the weight of the house and the mercurial weight of my father. For nearly two years, his fabricated records concerning my nonexistent math provoked no questions.

Yet finally he was brought down by an informer. It was my father’s conviction that the informer was Austin Cockerill Doherty. With the friendliest smile, Doherty, to whom I had never spoken a word—and he had certainly never before addressed me—approached one morning and asked, “Aren’ you one of those female math whizzes your dad manages to churn out?” My father took this to be a telling hint or a revengeful probe: it signaled that Doherty suspected I was not among my father’s students; and since I was not among Doherty’s, where could I be? But Doherty as informer seemed to me implausible. In my mind a more feasible candidate was Timmy’s younger brother, who had grow out of his corduroy knickers and into a football uniform. He was—nominally—in my history class, always late, always inattentive. Sometimes he would get up out of his seat and swagger around the room, and on one of these excursions he stopped at my desk and whispered, “Come on, Rosie, how’s about another birthday cake? I could get my ma to do you one in a minute.” I thought his conspiratorial sneer less horrible than Doherty’s ripened smile.

But these were speculations. We did not really know who had uncovered my father’s crime; or how The outcome was quick and not without mercy: my father was allowed to resign—but this, of course, was merely the language of dismissal. It was also the language of our humiliation. Soon afterward, m father sold our little house and moved us to Troy.

3

TROY IN 1930 was larger and more attractive than Thrace. It had earned its thimbleful of fame throug the manufacture of the detachable shirt collar; and because Ossip Gabrilowitsch, who was married to Mark Twain's daughter, had once conducted at the music hall, with Mark Twain himself in the audience. It was an excitable place, much given to religious stimulation: preachers came and went, sometimes performing miracles. A certain downtown street corner was admired as the site of an outdoor revival where, in 1903, a wooden pulpit had, all of its own accord, split in two, knocking the preacher unconscious. When he woke (according to the story, a fellow pietist spilled a bucket of ice water over his head), he claimed to have been "slain of the Lord," after which Troy had its portion of ecstatic fainters. The miraculously severed pulpit was kept on display in a local church.

Troy had its Jews, too—mainly immigrants who were brought straight from Castle Garden to wor in the shirt factory. Newcomers summoned other freshly arrived relations; an uncle drew a nephew, a sister a sister-in-law. My father and I found ourselves living on the top floor, converted into an apartment, of a frame house abutting a rundown little building in what appeared to be an immigrant neighborhood. The building next door was a makeshift synagogue; it had once been a store. On Saturday mornings I stood at the window and watched the thin parade of worshipers heading there, mostly worn-looking young men in gray fedoras. Sometimes I could hear the singing, in a language I took to be Hebrew. Though I knew my father could read a little Hebrew, falteringly, and (he once admitted) had even gone through the bar mitzvah rite, he was indifferent. "I don't hold with it," he said. "I've got bigger troubles than worrying about who runs the universe." He was a stubborn atheis

And by now I understood him to be a trickster. I saw that he was volatile and dangerously open to gratuitous impulse. He was, besides, innocent of cause and effect: he had believed that our move to a different town would mean an unblemished new beginning. Inevitably, the old events followed him. Because of his deception in Thrace, he was anathema in Troy. Teaching jobs were rare enough, and n principal would take him on. As for me, I was even more wretched in Troy than I had been in Thrace again and again I was made to explain why, starting the junior year of high school, I was ineligible fo trigonometry, having never been taught geometry. This led to a cumulative complication: while I wa catching up on math, I was missing out on French. Consequently I was a year or two behind in one course or another, and was tossed into classes with students younger than myself. To me they seeme like little children; they had no fears. I watched the laughter and the horseplay with a melancholy so ingrained that it crept downward into my hands: often my palms were damp. I was afraid day and night. My father had joined the terrifying company of the unemployed.

He appealed finally to the man he called "our cousin Bertram," a name I had never heard him spea Bertram, my father told me, was my mother's first cousin. He lived in Albany. He was a bachelor an a pharmacist; he worked in a hospital. Beyond these paltry items my father knew nothing about him; Bertram was a stranger. "But he might have some ideas," my father said, licking the stamp on his letter. "And he's a cousin, he owes it to me." I protested: how could a pharmacist get my father a job teaching math? As it turned out, Bertram knew a doctor in his hospital whose brother-in-law was the dean of Croft Hall, a boys' preparatory academy just outside Troy. It was nothing more than a privat high school run on British mimicry; it was set among green lawns, with an artificial castle at its center.

No one at Croft Hall cared about my father's old transgressions; no one asked; what was needed— and right away—was a math teacher to replace a malcontent who had fled in the middle of the term. Overnight my father became a "master." He was delighted with his new status. The pay was low, considerably less than his salary in Thrace, but the boys were rich. They had vast allowances and wer

accustomed to tip the masters; on weekends they went off to Saratoga to bet on the horses. They concentrated on the crease in their trousers and were particular about the shape of their collars. My father acquired a second-hand car and drove every day to the castle and its lawns; after a time he began to drive some of the younger boys to Saratoga on Saturday afternoons. One evening he came home jubilating, clutching a roll of bills. It was three hundred dollars; I assumed he had won it at the track. “Nah,” he said, “I got it off an upper-form kid. Wilson. A poker fiend, his mother’s married to that German, Von Something, some kind of baron.”

Bertram, our cousin in Albany, had saved us.

Toward the end of my last semester of high school—we had been in Troy nearly twenty-one month —my father divulged a new plan: “I’m getting out of this Yid place—just you watch me skedaddle.” The headmaster, he said, had ruled against masters who commuted: there was too much disorder, mo men were required to be on the spot, especially at night, to keep an eye out for mischief. There were rumors of boys gambling right on the property.

“Inviting the fox in to guard the chicken coop,” my father chuckled.

“You’d better be careful,” I said.

“It’s high society over there,” he said. “What do *you* know about it?”

In the fall my father was designated housemaster of Croft Hall’s third form, and went to live in the fake castle; and I departed for Albany, where I moved in with my cousin Bertram.

4

FOR A LONG WHILE it was not clear to me why Bertram had taken me in. Sometimes I thought my fathe had reverted to his old habits and had arranged for a barter: housekeeping in exchange for lodging. Unlike my father, though, Bertram was orderly and self-sufficient; he kept a handkerchief in his brea pocket and wore dandyish suspenders. He was almost too fastidious, and never left a dish on the table for more than five minutes before he got up to wash it. His shirts were picked up by a laundry van, ar the neighborhood storekeepers delivered bread and milk and vegetables and cheese. Bertram was skilled at making omelets. There was almost nothing for me to do, and if there was, Bertram would not allow me to do it.

“Go work on your Chaucer,” he would say. This was a bit of comradely mockery. Chaucer had no place in my misshapen little college; literature, except for the pedagogical kind, was hardly wanted there. I had dreamt of Gothic arches and the worn flagstones of old libraries—where such a grand yearning came from, I hardly knew. Unaccountably, my heart was set on Smith or Vassar or Bryn Mawr; I imagined afternoon teas, and white gloves, and burning lips (mine, perhaps) murmuring out of a book. But all that was wistfulness—there was no money for such romantic hopes, and my patchy record in high school, my father warned, would never have won me a scholarship. I was only an average girl from Thrace Central, what was I thinking of? The right spot for me, he said, if I expecte to earn my way, if he was ever going to get me off his hands, was Albany Teachers’ College. He couldn’t afford to keep me in the dorms, and anyhow they were famous for resembling dungeons. With luck he might manage to talk cousin Bertram into putting me up. “Makes sense, doesn’t it?” he said.

I hated that college. There were classes in pedagogy and psychology and “early childhood and adolescence”: these were taught like the tenets of a cult. I did not believe in any of them. I had no interest in becoming a teacher. I had observed enough of my father’s predicaments to want to flee an reminder of schools. What I cared about was reading novels.

Bertram lived on the ninth floor of a modern apartment building, with fire escapes jutting from the window ledges. I discovered that if I climbed out and stood on our own fire escape—a kind of lattice metal balcony—I could just see the roof of the State House. This was impressive; it was a glimpse of history, of law; there was gravity in it. Sometimes, when Bertram was away, I sat on the windowsill, with my legs stretched along the cool slats of the fire escape, and smelled the rain. Albany rain was different. It smelled of excitement.

Bertram was away much of the time. Hospital shifts went halfway around the clock, and pharmacy hours conformed. Often he came home when I was already asleep. And once I was not asleep—I lay dozing, vaguely dazed: how had I arrived in this bed, in this room, in Bertram’s big flat? I had a bedroom to myself, with a dressing alcove (Bertram had put a desk and a typewriter in there, and turned it into a tiny study), and my own bathroom. When my father forgot to pay my first quarter’s tuition, Bertram instantly sent a check to the college bursar. I was certain my father had not forgotten Saratoga, or poker with Wilson, had cleaned him out.

Bertram was quietly loitering at the partly open door of my room. I heard him breathing, and wondered whether he was listening for my own breathing. There was something maternal about his standing there, and I wanted to call out; I wanted to ask, out of the darkness, whether it was true that my mother had died in childbirth. But I held back. Bertram was my mother’s cousin, though not as m father had made me understand this: he was not a cousin by blood. Instead he was a cousin to my mother’s first cousin; it was a tenuous in-law connection. Laughing, Bertram had worked it out for m —he was the son of my mother’s aunt’s husband’s sister. He was not really a relation. He had never

known my mother. He had no stories to tell. But when, some days afterward, I confided my phantom memory—my mother lying on a couch and holding a rag doll—Bertram said, “That’s what you shoul trust.”

“My father says it’s a hallucination. A wish-dream.”

“That’s why you should trust it. The world doesn’t get better without wishes.”

“My father doesn’t care about the world.” I thought of him crouching behind a closed door at Crof Hall, clandestinely gambling with his pupils.

Bertram said mildly, “Well, maybe you’ll make up for him.”

It was not only his work at the hospital that occupied Bertram’s nights. He went to weekly meeting and occasionally to what he called “rallies,” after which he was hoarse for days; sometimes he stood on picket lines. He was thinking, he said, of joining the Party, but he was still unsure. “It takes your whole life,” he explained, “and I may not be able to give it the time. Got to pay the landlord. But they’re on the right track, those people.” I asked what the right track was; this made him smile. I had seen the half-turn of that smile before. It meant that he thought me as innocent as a savage.

“First we’re going to abolish rent,” he said, “and after that tuition. Shelter and education for everyone.” Again the twist of a smile: Bertram was not above self-parody. “To each according to his need. That’s how the poet puts it.”

At that instant I discovered why he had let me come and live with him. It was because of my need. Or, at any rate, my father’s.

Bertram was thirty-six. He had once been married, a dozen years ago, but she—he never said “my wife”—had left him after only two years. “She didn’t like me,” he told me; he never said her name. “ suppose I was too short.” I could not imagine not liking Bertram, or finding him unbeautiful. He was not much taller than I, but his head was large, with crescents of unshorn brown curls sticking up from around his neck and ears. “Got to get a haircut,” he would say. Or else: “Beginning to look like Karl Marx or Jesus Christ, take your pick.” Or else, when he was actually on his way to the barber shop, “Goddamn hospital rules. Bad enough they dress me up in a white coat, like a dogcatcher.”

Now and then he said, “Put the chain on the door, will you? Won’t be home at all tonight, got a date.”

I was seventeen and stabbed by jealousy. My jealousy felt literally like a stab: it resembled the quick pain I would sometimes feel in my groin on the left side, just before my period. Bertram did no hide from me that he had a sex life (his words). Toward me he was affectionate and perfectly chaste: his kiss touched my forehead or my cheek, or, comically, my nose. But he worried about appearances “Honor is the appearance of honor,” he recited. “I read that somewhere. So look, if anyone ever asks, you tell them you’re my little sister away from home to go to school. Half of it’s true anyhow. But don’t say cousins. Nobody believes cousins.”

When my father again neglected to send the money for my tuition on time, Bertram said, “There’s no point to it, your pa’s out of the picture, so never mind. From now on I’ll take care of it. A dollar goes a long way these days. Trouble is,” he added, “you’ve got to have the dollar.” In my eyes Bertra seemed rich. I marveled that his apartment had a dining room with a glass breakfront and a spacious square table covered by a lace cloth. There were six carved mahogany chairs with green leather seats All this heavy furniture, Bertram told me, had belonged to his mother. She had left him the dining se her wedding ring, and his father’s considerable life insurance. “I’ve got some leeway,” he said. “You could even say I’m in the money, so don’t worry about your pa’s not coming through. It’s hard times

Bertram often spoke of hard times. His two themes were the Depression and what he called “the reformation of society.” The hospital sweepers were agitating for a union, but more than half of them were afraid to strike. Bertram went out with the strikers. “Have a look at this,” he urged me one evening—he was heading for a rally—and handed me a copy of *The Communist Manifesto.* It was a

thin little thing, with a pale pink cover.

~~The next morning he asked me what I had made of it.~~

"It's like a hymn. A psalm."

"You could think of it as architecture. A blueprint."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. It was true that I did not know; what I knew was that I had been brough up to cynicism. I was not easily inspired or moved.

Bertram's head moved me—the brown ringlets rising straight out of his temples like a waterfall in reverse, the line of his nose with its gradual change of course, the virtuous motherly mouth. At times he caught me looking at him; this disconcerted him. "Hey, you're a kid," he would say. In my classes at the college I shut out the droning assault of lectures—Dewey, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Piaget, how to write a lesson plan—and filled the back pages of my notebook with Bertram's name, scrupulously inscribed over and over again. At night in my bed I shredded his name into mental anagrams, and the next day set them down: *at, am, are, ram, mar, tram, mart, tame, rate, mate, meat, eat, beat, rare, tea bear, mare, bet, bat, tab, rat, ream, beam, team, art, tar, rear, tare, brat, bare, tea, me, be, ear, term, berm.* It struck me that some magical syllable might be hidden among the letters—a hint, an illumination.

I wanted Bertram's kiss to land just once, even if unintentionally, on my lips.

"What's this?" he said. He had found the paper with the anagrams. I had left it on the dining room table. "Berm? Tare? Is this some sort of test? Something from your psych class?"

"It's everything that comes out of Bertram," I said. "All the words."

"How about that. Rosie, I told you, to me you're a kid."

After that he began bringing his girlfriends home to supper. Sometimes all three of us would walk over to a nearby movie house, I feeling sullen and stifled, Bertram with his arm around whoever his date happened to be. Later he and the woman would march me back, right to the door of Bertram's flat, where the two of them would leave me. Once again I was alone for the night. "Remember to put the chain on," Bertram would remind me. He had a fear of break-ins. It was hard times, he said, not human nature, that promoted thievery.

Bertram thought well of human nature. The women he brought home did not. These were always women he met at rallies, or on picket lines; they all had short black or brown hair and fiery tongues given to malice. Most wore thick lisle stockings stuffed, whatever the weather, into thonged sandals. One dangled long earrings made of shells that clattered; another had nearly identical earrings, but arrived in work shoes and men's trousers. They were like no women I had ever known. They were zealots; they argued and theorized and wept with enthusiasm. I did not understand their talk, wave after wave of Bukharin, Lenin, Trotsky, Budenny, Stalin, Ehrenburg. They disputed over skirmishes, kulaks, trials, solidarity, scabs. I could not tell one alien phrase from another. It was not how Bertram talked or thought. In his dreamy water-color way, Bertram spoke of poverty abolished, the lion lying down with the lamb, the hopes of mankind: it was like a painting on the wall. You could contemplate it or you could ignore it. But these fierce political women spoke of men, living men, whom they despised and would gladly have torn to pieces. Bertram admired their rages and excitements, but I wa afraid of them—of their clipped hair, the forwardness of their dress, their hot familiarity with far-away crises, their blurting passion. They were angry and omniscient. It seemed to me that they were i command of the age.

The woman who wore the shell earrings and dressed like a man (occasionally she turned up in overalls) was called Ninel. It was not her real name; it was a Party name, in honor of Lenin. "Just try spelling it backward," Bertram told me, grinning. Ninel enchanted him; the play of her name enchanted him, and I was stung: he had disliked my search for a secret signal in the letters of his own name. Yet Ninel had done the same, and it pleased him. Even Ninel's big work shoes and clumsy

worsted pants with the zipper in front pleased and amused him.

~~Ninel disapproved of Bertram’s flat. If she saw that I had already set the dishes out on the dini~~ng room table, it made no difference, we had to move back into the kitchen to eat. Bertram’s mother’s furniture sickened her: that china-closet thing with the glass doors, she said, whatever it had cost, could feed a famine. She asked Bertram how he could stand to live with it. With Ninel we never went to the movies. She was scornful of stories told by shadows. She maintained that movies were the new church, a diversion for the masses; she was too serious; she was combative. Whenever Ninel came, I ate quickly and ran to hide in my little study with my book: Emma and Mr. Knightly were soon to unite. “Don’t you see the *point*, Bert?” I would hear Ninel growl. I had chosen Bertram to be my own Mr. Knightly; instead he was being led away from his proper Emma by a woman who was conducting a revolution in his kitchen. “It’s all about exploitation, however you want to look at it.”

It turned out that they were arguing about Croft Hall. “You got the kid’s father a job at a place like that? What were you *thinking?*”

“The man was out of work, and I knew this fellow at the hospital who had a connection over there. It seemed the right thing. Her father’s a math teacher, where else could he go?”

“In this system he could go out and dig ditches, that’s what. A decent government would provide something.”

“Ninel, the fellow was in trouble, and he had the girl—”

“To keep a place like that in business! It’s just a contamination. Posh kids, offspring of the oligarchy. They’re being trained to exploit, that’s all. A cadet corps for the banks. Schools like that should be burned to the ground.”

Gradually the other women Bertram had been bringing home vanished. Now it was only Ninel. On night during our meal I asked her what her real name was. She hooked her thumbs into the loops of h woven-straw belt and blew out a sigh of disgust. “Miriam,” she told me, “but don’t you ever dare use it.” This was hardly likely; we rarely had anything to say to each other. Her eye went ferociously to my book. “Jane Austen, wouldn’t you know. Now that’s what I call a provocation. Do you realize,” sh demanded, “how the servants in those big houses *lived?* The hours they had to put in, the paltry wage they got? Chicken-feed! And where the money to keep up those mansions *came* from? From plantations in the Caribbean run on the broken backs of Negro slaves!” It was as if she was leading a meeting.

“Mr. Knightly doesn’t have a plantation,” I said.

“What do you think the British Empire is? The whole *thing’s* a plantation! The whole kit and caboodle!”

Bertram said quietly, “You should listen to Ninel, Rosie. She’s right about that.”

Ninel was angry at Jane Austen not only on account of the British Empire—she was angry at all novels. Novels, like movies, were pretend-shadows; they failed to diagnose the world as it was in reality. “Crutches,” she said, “distractions. And meanwhile the moneybags and the corporate dogs eat up the poor.” For Ninel, the only invention worse than novels and movies was religion. She hated her given name because it came out of the Bible. She railed against all varieties of worship. “If you want to get the real lowdown on, okay, let’s take Christianity,” she urged, “try this out. You’re a believing Christian of the twentieth century and you’re transported by time machine back into ancient Rome. You’re walking around the main squares and it’s all pretty impressive. Big marble cathedrals with columns. Huge statues all over the place, and folks crowding into the temples, genuflecting and bringing offerings. Plenty of priests and acolytes in fancy dress, the whole society rests on this spectacular stuff. And then you ask what’s behind it, what’s it all about. You sit down with a couple o these ancient Romans and they start telling you it’s Jupiter, the god who lives up in the sky and runs the world. And you think, Jupiter? Jupiter? What’s Jupiter? There isn’t any Jupiter, it’s all

imagination, it’s all some made-up idea. You know damn well that this sacred Jupiter that everyone’s so devoted to, that everyone’s dependent on, that everyone praises and carries on about, and writes epics and treatises and holy books about, and mutters prayers to . . . you know damn well that their Jupiter is air, their Jupiter is a phantom, there isn’t any Jupiter, no Jupiter of any kind, the whole religion’s a sham and a fake and a delusion, no matter how many poets and intellectuals adhere to it, no matter how many thrills and epiphanies people get out of it. Then you come back to the twentieth century, and what you’ve seen and understood doesn’t mean a thing, you’re blind as a bat, you figure you’ve got the goods on Jupiter but Jesus is different, Jesus is for real, Jupiter is a vast communal lie but Jesus is a vast transcendent truth. . . .”

Bertram was standing at the stove, heating up the kettle for tea. He gave a pleasurable little chirp and poured the water into our cups. “Well, now you’ve heard one of Ninel’s flights. You don’t run in talk like that every day, it doesn’t grow on trees.”

Bertram, I was beginning to see, was intending to marry Ninel.

In the morning he denied it. “Not possible.”

“But you want to,” I said.

“What I want doesn’t count. Ninel doesn’t believe in marriage. She’s against it on principle.”

Ninel was with us on a night in early March when Bertram opened the door to a seedy fellow in uniform and cap. Bertram gave him a quarter, and the man handed him a yellow envelope. It was a telegram from the dean at Croft Hall. My father had broken the rules: he had taken a group of four third-formers to Saratoga in his car. One boy sat in the front seat next to my father. The other three were in the rear. It was dusk when they headed back to school. A hard rain, propelled by a hard wind, hastened the dark and pelted the road. They drove through swiftly forming lakes, one of which concealed the heavy branch of a middle-sized fallen tree. The wheels, spinning through the black water, struck the branch; the car was brutally flung on its side. The windshield splashed out a fountain of glass splinters and two of the doors were crushed. The three boys in the back seat survived. My father and the boy nearest him were dead.

There was no funeral. My father was in posthumous disgrace; the dead child’s parents called him a murderer. Bertram arranged for the burial with an undertaker in Troy, and with no ceremony at all my father’s remains were dispatched. A week later the mail brought a package from Croft Hall: it was a box containing my father’s papers. In it I found my mother’s death certificate and a hospital bill dated February 15, 1921—they were folded into the pages of a ragged children’s book. Now there was proof my mother had not died in childbirth. She had succumbed to blood cancer when I was three years old. Lena’s disclosure, and my memory of the sofa and the rag doll, were vindicated.

I kept almost none of these papers. They were impersonal and faintly shaming—old grade books, wrinkled lottery tickets, racetrack stubs, a dirty pack of cards, two pairs of scratched dice. Not a single item hinted at my existence. I did not recognize the children’s book as mine, though I knew its fame; it was the first of a well-known series. A pair of nearly new shoes was in the box; I wondered when my father had acquired these. They were not the kind of shoes he usually wore. An inscription on the inside of the heel read HAND-MADE IN LONDON. I imagined something horrible: had he thrown dice for them, had he won them from one of the bigger boys, had he taken them in lieu of cash? I was relieved when Bertram carried them away and gave them to an orderly.

It was Bertram’s idea that I should compose a phrase or two for a headstone. On Bertram’s typewriter I wrote:

JACOB NEHEMIAH MEADOWS
1887–1935
LOVING FATHER

Words as conventionally sentimental as these ought to have scandalized me as I set them down, bu the irony of their falseness did not touch me. It seemed right to attribute plain virtue to a man whose miniature vices could no longer do harm. I thought of my father's small life, and of Lena and the birthday cake, and the Tricolor, and my father's gambling. Most of all I thought of his lies. His lies took aim but had no point; they seduced risk; they were theatrical, though enacted on a tiny stage for tiny audience. My father had been a kind of daylight robber. He robbed dailiness of predictability, so that my childhood's every breath hung on a contingency. Living with him had never felt safe.

In another three months my first year at the college would be over. In the classroom I sat self-enclosed, in a mist of indifference. Or else I recoiled. All those theories of pedagogy, I told myself, were no better than a shrine streaming with phantasmagoria. An alien faith, like Ninel's Jupiter. Its liturgy and rites were abhorrent, and whatever was declared to be truth was fakery. . . . But I knew I was only bored.

I was afraid to confide any of this in Bertram. My private wish was to abandon the college altogether. I had already seen Bertram send off my third quarter's tuition: I was obligated to him. I was, in a sense, his ward, as in those old English novels I was reading night after night, Dickens and Trollope and George Eliot, one after another.

Bertram picked up *Middlemarch* and opened to an illustration of Dorothea and Casaubon. Casaubo sat cramped with his candle, ringed by a heap of fly-specked books. Dorothea's finely molded neck arched backward. "Dorothea resists Casaubon," the caption read.

"Tell you what," Bertram began, "how would you like to move into the dorms for the rest of the term?"

"The dorms? You mean live at the college?"

"Sure. It's not that much extra, I can swing it. Then you wouldn't be alone so much of the time. You'd be with people your own age."

"My father said they're like dungeons."

"Oh come on," Ninel said, "from what Bert's told me your father never so much as set foot over there. He never even *saw* those dorms, he just didn't want to pay the fees."

Then I understood that Ninel meant to drive me out of Bertram's life.

This made me brazen. It made me rough. "Did you decide?" I asked Bertram. "About the Party, about joining?"

He twisted up his little smile; he hardly minded. But the smile was for Ninel. "Well, you can't han around Ninel and not end up committed."

"But Ninel isn't committed to *you*. She won't marry you."

"Oh for Pete's sake," Ninel said.

"It's only an empty figment, Rosie. A piece of paper."

"Mumbo jumbo," Ninel said.

"Look," Bertram said, "we've got to figure out some sort of new arrangement—"

"It's already figured out," Ninel broke in. "Bert's selling the furniture and moving in with me. It doesn't make sense these days to keep up a big place like this, all full of monstrosities."

That night I answered Professor Rudolf Mitwisser's advertisement in the Albany *Star*.

And that same night—as a reward, I thought, for my promised departure—Bertram came into my bedroom, put his knee on my bed, and kissed me, for the first time, fully on the mouth. The pressure on my lower lip was heavy, painful, voluptuous. I felt I was being bitten.

In this way I was expelled from Albany's obscure and diminutive radical pocket.

5

EVEN AFTER two entire weeks, my position in the Mitwisser household remained amorphous. I could not fathom what my obligations were, and if I attempted to ask, the answer was dissolved in chaos. “Just fill those boxes with papa’s books,” the oldest child ordered. Her name was Anneliese; she spok good English—she spoke it casually, familiarly—though with a distinct accent. Except for the youngest, all the children had been enrolled, for some months now, in the Albany public schools, and (so Mrs. Mitwisser had intimated that first day) they had had a tutor besides. They had already acquired a patina of the local vernacular. It was several days before I could arrive at exactly how ma Mitwisser children there were. They rushed around on this or that mission (the whole house was packing for the move to New York); it was like trying to identify the number of fish swimming in a pond. At first I counted six, then four—the actual total was five. Their names were so many bird-chirps whirling around me: Anneliese, Heinrich, Gerhardt, Wilhelm, Waltraut. Waltraut was the easiest to remember, a round-eyed, curly-haired girl of three, who would cling to whoever happened be passing by. Mrs. Mitwisser (I tried on occasion to call her Frau Mitwisser) was not often seen. Sh was hidden in a bedroom upstairs and appeared to have little to do with the fierce activity all around.

I could not distinguish Heinrich from Wilhelm, or Gerhardt from Heinrich. This was made all the more difficult because now and then they addressed one another as Hank, Bill, and Jerry, and then would rapidly switch back to Heinz, Willi, and Gert. “Papa doesn’t like it when they do that,” Anneliese instructed me. “Papa is a purist.” Anneliese was sixteen, and regal. It came to me that it could not have been Anneliese who had jumped from the *Kleiderschrank* and loosened the ceiling plaster down below. She was tall, an inheritance from her father, and like him she gave out a formal strictness. She was hardly like a child at all; her hair was wound in braids on either side of her head, revealing tidy pink ears. In each lobe a bright dot glittered. Braided and earringed, she looked authoritative and amazingly foreign. She was almost formidable, and the three boys seemed more afraid of her than of their mother. They obeyed Professor Mitwisser, and they obeyed Anneliese. But when Mrs. Mitwisser appealed to them—usually it was to beg them to take charge of Waltraut—they laughed and ran away. “American savages!” Professor Mitwisser roared at them. “*Rote Indianer!*”

I too was careful to obey Anneliese. I felt my fate was in her hands: she alone, so far, had troubled to acknowledge my status as more than an intruder. The three boys never spoke to me, nor I to them. They flew past me, heaving bundles into the vestibule, where a growing mound of objects awaited th movers. But my dependence on Anneliese went beyond her occasional command. She was the sole source of my understanding, incomplete as it was, of the annals of her family. I was startled to learn that timid Mrs. Mitwisser, whose eyelids were so red, and whose thin nostrils trembled like a rabbit’ had held a senior fellowship at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin.

“They threw her out,” Anneliese explained, “and they threw papa out of the University. The Quake brought us over, that’s why we’re here. Mama says they saved us. Papa says sometimes mama acts a if she doesn’t like being saved. But anyhow there was a mistake.”

The mistake was comical. In their good-hearted intent to rescue a family of refugees, the Board of the Hudson Valley Friends College had requested its provost to invite Professor Rudolf Mitwisser, th well-known German specialist in the history of religion, to teach several seminars on the Charismite a sixteenth-century mystical Christian sect, an offshoot of the Pneuma Brethren of northeastern Bavaria. The Board, businessmen mainly, had confused the Charismites—famous for their emphasis on the Spirit Within, akin to the Friends’ Inner Light—with the Karaites.

I asked Anneliese who the Karaites were.

“Oh, they’re just papa’s people. But it didn’t matter about the mistake, the Board got us out and

gave papa the job. He didn’t mind about the Charismites. And they rented this house for us. Here, look, I sent Gerhardt for the rope you’re going to need.”

She handed me a scissors and a rough hairy coil. I had been packing books all that day, as she had directed me to do. There were thirty-two boxes filled with Professor Mitwisser’s strange indecipherable volumes, and in order to cram as many books as possible into each container I had arranged them in rows and towers, meticulously, according to their sizes and shapes. The rope scorec and burned my palms as I tied the boxes shut.

Half an hour later Anneliese informed me that her father was not pleased, and after a moment he arrived to tell me so himself. His hands, with their great workman’s thumbs, were soot-blackened. H had been sorting papers stored in the coal bin, he said; his eyebrows stood up furiously, like a forest o sooty straws.

“Why am I interrupted by such nonsense? Anneliese! This is how an intelligent creature organizes scholarship? By how tall and how short?”

I protested, “I had to make the books fit in the boxes.”

“They must fit by idea, by logic. Ach, what cataclysm, what foolishness. You disrupt an entire library, Fräulein! And you, Anneliese, you permitted this?”

I was helpless: the books were in German and in what I supposed was Hebrew. There were other languages I could not recognize. I saw then that it would not always be safe to take orders from Anneliese; she was not above falling into error and disgrace.

“Anneliese,” Mitwisser growled, “you must undo the boxes and begin again. Give to Fräulein Meadows a simpler task, one that she will not make into a wilderness.”

This was how Waltraut came into my care; I was to be a nanny, after all. She was a compliant and affectionate child, and quickly grew attached to me. She chattered in her infantile German and seeme to think I comprehended; at the same time she showed signs of absorbing whatever I said to her. I ha little feeling for her, though I was captivated by the interplay of our two languages, both expressed i the most primitive argot. Waltraut had her small charms—her frequent smile disclosed tiny square teeth shining with baby-spittle, and if she ever refused any direction from me, she would squeal out a soprano “*Nein!*” with a teasing slanted look that signaled eventual consent. I spent my days—these were the few days left before the move to New York—feeding and entertaining her and putting her t bed at night. I took her for neighborhood walks, and discovered a nearby playground, long deserted, behind an abandoned garage. The metal swings were rusty and the slides were filthy and impassable, clogged with mud and leaves and, inexplicably, several pairs of badly torn men’s socks stiffened by weather. I assumed this place was a tramps’ lair; there was an iron barrel lying on its side, with scarred evidences of old fires. Waltraut scampered here and there, poking in the weeds with a stick and swatting at the creaky swings to set them going, while I suffered from the tedium of observing her. It was a familiar tedium: this was the “early childhood” knowledge promised by all those chapte on Pestalozzi and Montessori. Waltraut was the future I had run from—she was what the Albany Teachers’ College might have made of me. I was relieved to bring her home to her supper and her bath; but I dreaded the strained ritual of her mother’s bedroom.

Waltraut slept in a low crib several feet from Mrs. Mitwisser’s narrow couch. The crib would soon be hauled into a van, but the couch (it was not a bed) belonged to the house, like nearly all the furniture, and would remain behind. What I saw each evening when I carried Waltraut, already half asleep, into her crib, was Mrs. Mitwisser hunched on her couch, in the shape of a crescent, with a tray of partly eaten food on the floor beside her.

“Frau Mitwisser? Here’s Waltraut to say goodnight.”

She sucked in a wisp of breath, as if sipping some noxious fume, and raised a dismissive hand, drifting it like a curled leaf to a spot under her chin. Her gaze was inward. I thought she might be

looking into the past. And I wondered whether, when the move was accomplished and we were finally settled in New York, she would resume sleeping in her husband's bed.

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