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# After Talking, What?

October in Chicago, when tenants move to new apartments where they think they'll be happier. Resnyk is about to put out the "For Rent" sign when the doorbell rings. It's a girl who looks like she goes to high school, lots of orange hair, pale freckled face, no eyebrows, in an old plaid flannel shirt that hangs to her knees. "What?" he says, holding the doorknob.

"The coach house. In back? Someone at work turned me on to—"

She cocks her head and smiles, as if the thought is complete. As if she's used to having other people end her sentences for her and maybe buy her things (not that what she has on could have cost much). But her cheeks dip in the middle without baby fat, she's older than she looks. He sees her screwing around at the college her father was paying for—the picture opens out—with her pot or whatever, and her *mesbuga* boyfriend. It always comes to him like this, clear as still water, though his wife thinks his confidence is an act. His dead-sureness. No one knows as much as you think you know, she says, as if it's terrible. But act or no act, does it matter? If you act like you know, people think you know, which is what got him elected treasurer and then president of the Bakers Local. And maybe saved his life but that's another story.

He looks at the girl unhelpfully.

"It's just," she says, "I'm kind of freaked. I have this guy and he—"

He clears his throat.

"He does things I don't completely—"

He stares at her. What's it to him? This is someone else's crazy *tochter*.

"I don't have any pets or children. Actually, I plan to live like a—"

He still has no plans to fill in her blanks, and he can see the place after the first month, trash piling up while she wonders what she wants from life, even as it is waiting for her with arms extended. He's about to say the house is rented when she puts a knuckle in her mouth and smiles at him. It's not just her smile but her eyes wide open on his, like he's the only thing in the world—it's been a while since someone looked at him like that, if ever. Fatigue makes him gruff, "No parties, no overnight visitors," but he's taking the key out of his pocket and leading her around to the coach house. In the clear autumn sunlight she looks 28 or 30. She might remember to close the storm windows before the sash so Sipora won't have to scrape blistered paint from the window wells. The color of her hair curling down her back reminds him of Olla, and how her narrow back flares into wide, friendly-looking hips.

After the tour—upstairs, downstairs, basement (a shared space where he keeps his tools)—he relocks the front door and then sags back against it.

"Sir?" she asks. "Are you all right?"

He tries to straighten. Every so often his hip cramps up. "Do you want it?"

"It's perfect. So tucked away. How much is it?"

He quotes her what the last one paid, although with the rise in taxes he and Sipora had decided to ask an additional 20 dollars a month. Her gray eyes go moist. "That's so cheap," she murmurs.

"If you want, I can raise it."

She laughs with tears in her eyes. "Where do I sign? When can I move in?"

"You can move in today, *shene maidel*."

He gives her keys to the front and back doors, takes her check for the month's rent, declines her offer of a security deposit. "You stay as long as everyone is happy." Bending away from the light she seems to radiate. He walks down the back stairs to his apartment.

Sipora's reaction lies within the perimeter of his expectations. She sets the check on the table, picks up a bit of something from the floor at the base of the refrigerator. "You have that brain disease, what do they call it?" He tries to describe the girl's fragility that at first irritated him and then seemed to glow like an angel's. Sipora looks at the speck between her thumb and forefinger. She flicks it into the trash.

"We won't starve without 20 dollars," he says.

"Twenty each month."

Sipora speaks in Yiddish even though he have lived here more than 50 years. To his ears she has never spoken English, though he knows she knows it. She reads books in English with small, close-together lines of print that make his eyes water, about wealthy people who don't work for their wealth and who suffer from the small rudenesses of other such people; all day she can read one of these books. Until age 65 she cleaned houses, offices; she must say to her employers English words: *You maybe can buy some more of that window cleaner?* In his presence, though, besides pretending to speak no English, she doesn't laugh, as if she's still holding herself away from him. In Nowy Korczyn, Sipora, the rabbi's daughter, was five years older than he was, smarter, wealthier, beyond him in every way but his dreams. And even now she is out of his reach, always angry, although the American psychiatrists would say depressed (if she spoke to one, which she has not). He strokes the back of her head, one of the few gestures of endearment she'll tolerate. She has straight, short, steel-gray hair, thick as it was in Nowy Korczyn.

"She's a good girl. She will keep the place how you like. I think she is Jewish."

"What is her name?"

He never thought to ask her name but his

mouth opens and out comes, "Olla." Fast and sure of himself.

"She has your sister's name?"

He's confused for a moment. He picks up the rent check, holds it under the light. Number 1001, a new account, no printed name and address. The signature is illegible.

She gives him a look of scorn, which he is accustomed to.

In the first years of their marriage they made love on Friday nights, according to Torah. But at age 30, when she had not conceived, she moved herself, pillow and bedclothes, into the room that would have been the children's. Referring to the Giver of the Torah, she said, "I do for Him as He does for me." Resnyk asked her to see a doctor of women's problems. Begged her. American doctors were *chochem*, all the smart Jewish children become doctors, he said, and Sipora flashed her eyes of scorn. "The wrong is beyond even the smartest genius Jewish American doctor." And no more would she say, even if he were to ask, which he never did.

Ask, he did not, could not, even 50 years ago in the camp for displaced persons where after liberation he found her—this girl who in Nowy Korczyn he would stop to watch passing in the street, the waves of her black hair from beneath the hem of her scarf as distant from him as the waves of an ocean. To the questions of American soldiers and writers for magazines about Auschwitz, she said, *I was in Block 10*, to them and to him and even to those who survived like her the camps: I was in Block 10—like a prisoner of war speaking only name and military rank. He had heard of Block 10, where German so-called doctors performed on prisoners their medical experiments, and sometimes in his mind is a flicker of what to her has happened to her there, like a smell rising from a drain. Once, on her birthday, age 33, and she so beautiful he became hard sometimes watching her raise a cup to her lips, he gave her a necklace of December garnets and she kissed him and he returned her kiss, trembling with want. And then he made a mistake. He had received a photograph in the mail from the son of people he knew from Nowy Korczyn, Jews, the father and mother dead like everyone, but the son—a miracle—now lived in California with money enough to fly with his camera back in a plane and take a picture of the street where was his father's pharmacy, beside Resnyk's father's bakery (looking the same but for the sign with Polish words), this picture that he was so foolish to show to Sipora. Her hands began to shake and she left the room and for a week rose from her bed only for bathroom visits, till she was thin almost like from Auschwitz. And when, after maybe 10 days, she ate some breakfast cereal in the kitchen, she looked like she was walking in her sleep. He was afraid, and is still afraid, to wake her.

Although the new tenant lives only 15 steps across the courtyard, Resnyk has soon lost most of his interest in her. Her check clears, which is good. And she takes down the windows—storms and screens—and washes them with Windex and balls of newspaper, as Sipora did only one month ago. The glass shines. But she probably is not Jewish. Her name in the slot of her mailbox is I. Rumley. She is a waitress, he believes, in her small black apron leaving each day at three and returning very much later. When she sees him she waves and smiles, then goes back to what she is doing. Her glow of an angel turns on and off, like electricity, so what? From a tenant what is one to expect? Before her in the coach house was a couple with the last name Itmer, which sticks inside your throat. These Itmers were born in Germany after the War, but according to Sipora: "If they before the War were born do you know what in the War they are doing?" and although they were polite and clean and paid the rent promptly, who can say but that she was right? The MacAleavys, on his top floor 19 years, pay always late 10 or 15 days. Newlyweds when they moved in, they soon were screaming at each other, and when children came, their voices came down through the ceiling, Mrs. MacAleavy to her husband, to her two boys, "Wipe that shit-eating grin off your face!" and "You better fucking listen when I talk to you!" Sipora wants to evict them, and he too; he doesn't know why he has not. Because whoever comes after may be worse? Or he is kind in his heart, a nice guy landlord? It doesn't matter. However he is, tenants come and go like birds, like clouds.

All winter he gives no special thought to this girl I. Rumley. There is small fighting like always in Israel, and also in Iraq, every day two or three people blown to bits to decrease the price of gasoline. He watches the news and *60 Minutes* while Sipora reads her thick books and cleans what doesn't need to be cleaned. His hip is bad. Then March, and the sun begins to give warmth, unfreezing his joints. One late afternoon, sweeping dead winter leaves from the cement of the courtyard between his house and the coach house, he sees a light burning in I. Rumley's basement.

He swears to himself, a mild Yiddish curse, expressing annoyance; he despises waste the way Sipora despises slovenliness. He has keys to all his units, and he unlocks the door, which he wouldn't do but for the obvious infraction, and of course the girl is at work. Without trying to soften the heaviness of his tread he walks through her living room, which has for furniture only a rug and two large pillows. On the stairs to the basement he hears, *Hello young lovers whoever you are, I hope your troubles are few...* sung in the tremulous voice of an enthusiastic amateur. A thin, high female voice celebrating the easy pain of a girl whose very big problem is losing her boyfriend.

He thinks to halt his descent, but his body is locked in its former intention. He steps down onto the last of the green-painted wooden stairs and finds I. Rumley, singing in front of an easel on which rests a large, stretched, nearly blank canvas.

He freezes, unable to go down or back up. Nor can he stand where he is, gaping. His eye sockets feel dry, his heart pounding like he's about to have an attack, not that he has trouble in that department. His heart is strong as a 40-year-old's, more than one doctor has said, but his mind sees not the doctor but an image he has banished from daytime, which he must now expel. He coughs, a loud ugly sound that embarrasses him. The song halts. She drops her paintbrush. Her hand goes to her mouth.

"Please excuse me," he says.

He steps forward, an arm outstretched, but she moves back from him until her back hits the furnace. He stops, as before a scared wild animal, and explains his mistake but he can't make his voice sufficiently gentle. She takes a breath, holds the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. Shakes her head to settle things inside.

"My God."

"I have scared you?"

She picks up her brush. "I'm overreacting, I get that way." She tries to smile. "I'm sorry. For a second I didn't recognize you."

"Who do you think is coming to visit?"

Her cheeks flame. She swallows. On her nose is a smear of paint.

"What is your name?" he says. "The I is for Ida? Irene?"

"Isabel," she says, louder and clearer than she must. "Is it okay if I work down here? I don't want to mess the upstairs."

"Mess it, clean it, it's yours. Isabel?"

She stiffens, looks at him.

He shrugs. He wanted to make her feel easy but everything he says leaves her more worried. His hip begins to throb. He coughs, then heaves himself back up the stairs.

That night in his room beside Sipora's room, his dream is terrible. Two large men heave massive shoulders at the wooden door of the shop in which he crouches. He thinks it's a shop, but the door cracks like a branch, like the canes of a blackberry thicket into which his mother has thrust him. She lies on her side curled around him, squeezing him into stillness. He's a boy, of 11 years, maybe; he has bloody scratches on his arms and neck from the blackberry thorns. Gnats dive at his eyes and toward the warm holes of his nostrils. He wants to complain but he must breathe in time with the whirring gnats. Is this a dream? he asks amid the images of his dream. "Mama?" She puts a hand over his mouth. He licks her hand, tastes salt. He licks between her fingers. *Stop, foolish one!* She makes a sound like laughter, and he is full of the pleasure of his love for his mother whom he can make laugh

(what a powerful boy he is) to drown out the sound of boots in the autumn forest and bluster, hearty male voices like his uncles' rejoicing in their work. He is hungry, but at the same time so filled with joy he wants to say *Mama I love you*. His lips shape these words against her damp palm. Then his stomach growls, amplified through the bones of her hand. He presses himself into the ground, trying not to think of cooking meat, which the loud, happy voices of men bring to his mind. His mouth waters. He swallows and his mother's arm reaches up, her fingers bring something to his mouth. He opens, receives it, pressing the roof of his mouth upon his tongue. Sweet blackberry juice trickles down the back of his tongue to his throat. His molars grind the gritty seeds. Then, with a crack like thunder in his ears the darkness breaks open. A voice resounds with, it seems, the triumph of God:

"Here they are, the devils!"

His mother is holding him so hard his ribs hurt. She smells of pee.

He has dreamed this dream in one variety or other throughout his adult life, but usually at the beginning of the night, when it is the first of a number of dreams increasingly fragmented and commonplace; by morning the residue of terror is all but gone. But this morning his heart will not slow down. He thumps his chest with his fist but nothing changes. He lurches into Sipora's room, the first time in over 40 years that he has entered before the sun.

"Mendel?"

Her eyes are open as if all night she has been waiting for him. He sits down on the edge of her bed, his throat open with his gratitude. When she doesn't object, he lies down beside her. The bed is narrow, and to stay on the mattress he puts an arm and a heavy leg around her. Breathes her smell of sleep, hair oil and age.

She doesn't flinch when he puts a hand on her breast, and he is pleased to find through the nylon of her nightgown some firmness. His wife is not yet flaccid like an old woman. He runs his hand over her hip, the swell of her stomach. Under the hem of her gown. His heart beats strong and fast as is appropriate. But before he arrives at the warmth between her legs she pushes his hand away. "What?" he says.

Her eyes remain open but unfocused. He feels like a fool looking at her face that doesn't see his. "Are you not afraid," he murmurs, "that you may send me to another woman?" A joke, a half-joke, stupid, stupid even as it comes from his mouth. To depart her bed against the wall she must cross the mound of his body, a feat she accomplishes without touching him. He hears her slippers on the kitchen floor, the splash of water for their morning coffee.

For a moment he's angry with her. He has wasted his life with this woman who has no

love for him. Then he forgives her and tries to forgive himself. He rises and sets about his daily work.

Resnyk would not normally be called a happy man, but his nature has, from time to time, permitted him the pursuit of American happiness. In the long desert of touch since his wife's departure from his bedroom, he has had other women, some of whom loved him, they said, and one he almost loved. No one now, although it is, he believes, still possible. He has strength in his mind and body. If he was cursed to be Jewish in Poland in 1939, he was also blessed to survive what so very many did not survive. For this, Sipora has not full respect. You were in Kielce, she says, meaning you were not breathing the poison gas or the ashes of your family, and this is true. But in this labor camp, so-called, people died also, quickly if shot, or slowly from the coffee and thin soup on which you lose flesh and in three or six months fall down with the load that is in your arms. And he too, if he had not pretended to be able make close measurement rifle shells for the German army. "My father in the HASAG munitions factory has taught me, Sir. Please check if I am not speaking true." (The SS needed intelligent Jewish slaves and had no time to discover that his father, a baker, was shot dead in his shop before Rosh Hashanah.) So Resnyk made shells for the Germans, with kind Russians and Polish who gave him food. He was 12 years old, looked 15, could work like a man. Now in Chicago, Illinois, America, past the age of retirement, still he bakes bread two days or three every week, and when the machines break he mixes the dough with his strong, bare hands, which never failed him in Kielce. Sipora wants to move to Florida but he spits upon Florida, full of rich lazies. He'll take Lake Michigan over an ocean any day of the week. He likes a city that works—with chess at North Avenue Beach and the union guys who take him bowling on his birthday and pay for him. Not to mention his two properties that he owns free and clear, and his seven rent checks, which he enjoys cashing at the bank, where he can watch his balance accrue each month even without I. Rumley's 20 additional dollars. Unlike in Florida where he would sit, God forbid, watching the golf-balls fly with neighbors who don't remember the name of the U.S. president. In Florida he'd lose his marbles or else get into a fist fight with anyone who voted for Jeb and his idiot brother. He wouldn't last one year.

Besides, in Chicago, his new tenant, Isabel, is painting a picture in the basement of his little house. She copies from a magazine; still, the painting, he thinks, is good. Sometimes when she's at work, he gazes through the slot of her window at the developing image of a girl lying upon a blanket. The girl has large-

bare breasts that don't hang like real breasts, but he likes her face. The pointy chin looks like his sister Olla's chin, and the blur of green and brown in the background makes him think of the woods near Nowy Korczyn.

He doesn't like, however, that the young MacAleavys have also discovered the project. When they come home from school their skinny legs run to her ground-level window, their blond heads lean in. Their hair is the same yellow-white color, and though they're a year apart they're almost the same height; one Mike, the other Dale; he doesn't know who is who. Should they be peeping upon this nakedness? Should he tell their mother? Then Isabel shows him a note they left for her: *You are beautiful, I love you, from Mike & Dale.* "They're my boyfriends," she says, with amusement. She has few visitors, all of them female. She has beauty like a soap bubble, so fragile that a look, a breath almost, will dispel it.

Then the Tribune brings news of the torture pranks of foolish American soldiers. On page one, a picture of a hooded Iraqi prisoner standing upon a small box with wires attached, which Resnyk puts in the trash behind the garage away from Sipora. On May Day he and a few others will march again through the Loop with signs. Free speech, to no effect, but still—

The night before, he is near sleep when he hears knocking on an outside door. A fist bangs a window. A male voice, deeper than Harold MacAleavy's, "Vee? Viv? For Christ's sake, Vivian, I know you're in there!" The banging recommences, so loud Resnyk fears the glass will break. He pads to the back door. Hears the clank of the gate. Steps out in slippers and pajamas upon the cement courtyard, which is now utterly still. Even the rain has stopped. He gazes up at the second story window of the room he believes is Isabel's bedroom. The shade is down. Nothing moves in the crack between the shade and the sill. Maybe she is out, he thinks, although he remembers, or thinks he remembers, the click of her key in the lock, the opening and relocking. Maybe the man came to the wrong house. Already he seems a figment emerged from a dream.

On May 1, Resnyk marches from City Hall to the Federal Building against Bush's Get-Himself-Re-elected war. Afterward, he drinks beer with his cronies, who denounce with him the self-righteous, stupid greed of all Republicans and most Democrats, and he enjoys with them the usual comfort of shared opinions. Then, arriving home, he finds Isabel in the middle of the courtyard with her cell phone. It's almost midnight, the air is chilly, and she's wearing her restaurant apron. She looks happy to see him.

"Happy? You are locked from your house?"

He rummages for his key but she shakes her

head no. Her teeth are chattering. She went out the front today like every day, and now she can't budge the damn storm door, which locks only from inside! She jabs at the buttons of her phone. Shakes it. Glares at the lighted face. "I could go in the back but they could still—! Oh, this is so freaky!" She eyes the little house, which appears dark and still. "I have to call the police. Could I use your—?"

When at last Resnyk comprehends what has happened, he conducts her to the phone inside his apartment, quietly so as not to bother Sipora. "Stay here," he says, "and I will go to your back door. Perhaps your burglar has exited." His heart is beating powerfully. He wants to do something slightly heroic. He's on his way outside, quickly, though his flees have worked hard today, when Sipora appears.

"*Meshuga*, are you 30 years old to be fighting the enemy?"

She's in her robe, her hair sticking up from her head.

The argument has not concluded when the policemen arrive. Resnyk is pleased with their promptness in the city of Chicago that works. He also likes the patience with which they listen to Isabel's somewhat incoherent account. Less satisfactory is that he must wait inside with the women until all has been "secured." He watches the business through the window in the back door. One officer draws a gun, his partner pulls the latched storm door in vain, then both disappear around back.

When Isabel joins his vigil, a thought comes so sharp it's beyond his doubting. Is the man now inside her house the one who banged upon her window last night? Absolutely certain, Resnyk is seeking a way to speak without giving her more fear. Together they watch the silent house, the occasional flash of motion under a partially-drawn window shade. Then lights. The men return with part of a story: The intruder entered through a basement window, latched the front storm door and left out the back.

"These are very safe apartments," Resnyk says. "In 30 years, only once have we been robbed, by a boy wanting money for his drug addiction who is now in a hospital."

"You've been lucky," one of them says.

The policemen escort Isabel through her house to understand what has happened, Resnyk following upstairs and down. Actually it doesn't look bad. There are open drawers and cupboard doors. But from her jewelry box nothing is missing, and the cigar box on the kitchen table where she keeps her tips is full of bills. "You don't like banks?" says one of the officers. Isabel smiles at him. Nothing appears gone until they descend to the basement. Where the large canvas had been, the easel stands empty. Isabel looks all of a sudden like a girl who is sick. She whispers, "It's so fucking weird."

The two officers have different attitudes

toward the unusual theft. One is young, with muscles, the other fat and middle-aged. The latter, making out the report, reads aloud his list of stolen objects that contains one item only, a painting of a naked woman, approximately two feet by three feet. "Was it a Picasso maybe?" He looks to his partner for appreciation, "Do I know art or do I know art?" but the young man is dusting for fingerprints, leaving patches of black powder on the easel, on door knobs and the knobs of drawers. The older man turns to Isabel. "You got a high class housebreaker. A burglar with culture. Right, honey?"

When their duties conclude, the men sit down at the kitchen table and invite Isabel to join them. Resnyk takes the fourth chair, eager to answer their questions. He's not tired; in fact he enjoys seeing his words being written down. His mind is clear, his speech deliberate, describing what he heard in the courtyard last night. The man sounded angry, and maybe crazy. He turns to Isabel, who shrugs—"How would I know?"—and raises the possibility that it is one of her customers. At work she serves a lot of nuts. Resnyk looks for support to the older officer, but the man says, "You've been great, Sir. Really helpful." He makes a gesture of dismissal.

"Thanks, Mr. Resnyk, for everything," says Isabel.

The policeman adds, "Not to worry. She's in good hands."

The next day Resnyk tars the cracks in the cement between the house and the coach house. He varnishes a small table, waiting to speak to Isabel before she leaves. Working in the little garden under her kitchen window he hears her radio, smells the oily scent of her expensive coffee, which stays a while in your nose and mouth. In his mind is a picture of her from last night looking thin and small, as if her fear, or concealing her fear, has taken her flesh. He is dizzy thinking this way, and from working in the hot afternoon sun, but his tomatoes are growing fast and he must tie them to their stakes. Then one young MacAlevy steps outside with his skateboard. The boy rides it down the narrow walk between the garden and the coach house, turns at the garage and rolls back to where Resnyk is working. "Hey," he says.

Resnyk looks up. He's not used to communication of any sort from these boys, both of whom seem irreparably ignorant and bad-mannered.

"I need to show you something," says the boy.

"Say to me 'Sir.' Or 'Mr. Resnyk.'"

The boy looks toward his apartment, fearfully, it seems, then back at Resnyk.

"What?" says Resnyk. "Can't you see that I'm busy?"

The boy points back toward the garage. He

has just had a haircut, so short his scalp glows pink through his hair.

"Can you talk?" says Resnyk.

"I didn't do it," the boy says. "I told Dale not to. Please don't tell my mother."

"Do what? Tell what?"

The boy gives him a look of near panic, then picks up his board and runs back inside.

Resnyk finishes with the tomatoes, then walks down the alley and around to the front of the garage. Behind the row of garbage cans is Isabel's painting. With a small thrill of discovery he picks it up, then drops it quickly. From the woman's chest a rectangle has been cut, encompassing the span of her nipples breasts. Resnyk cracks the painting's stretchers over his knee, folds it in half and buries it in the can under the blue recycling bags. Then he rings Isabel's doorbell and tells her the identity of her art thief.

"It's weird," she says. "They look like angels!"

He shrugs. What is there to say?

"What did he do with it?"

"The painting? He sold it for money. Which he gave to me." He takes fifty dollars, all he has in his wallet, and gives it to Isabel.

She looks at him with a laugh in her eyes, then she steps down from the threshold and gives him a quick hug. "You're a very nice man." Her teeth are chattering. "Thank you."

All day, where Isabel's hands touched, the Askin buzzes like he is a boy who has never had a girl and brushes against one in the market. That night he enters Sipora's room without a knock, without asking permission, without pajama pants. It's almost morning. Resnyk is 70 years old, but still many days he wakes like a young man, and it seems now sad, wrong, shameful that his wife has denied him. He is an idiot, he is Gimpel the Fool. He kisses Sipora on the mouth, quickly, with no time to see whether or not she is wanting this. She makes no movement to say no, go away, and he feels happy and stupid, happy because this is happening at last, and stupid because why has he waited these many years? After his enjoyment is complete, he looks at her face. She lies on the bed with her eyes closed.

"Was that terrible?"

She grunts, turns over. "Go back now."

"Sipora. Siporele. Talk to me."

"What is to speak of?"

He takes her hand. It feels wrong not to sleep beside her, now that love has happened again between them. He is no longer tired. He wants to lie beside her and sleep and then wake and talk about all the sad and happy things they have shared. They did not have a child but they live here in America where they may hate President George Bush and his Vice President Cheney out loud and still live to become old people. They can attend synagogue in *tallit* and *tefillin* or not attend even

on Rosh Hashanah and no one comes for them. "Is this not good, my Sipora?"

Her silence chills him back to his own room.

In the morning Isabel is sitting on the landing with a cup of coffee, a book and a cigarette. "Since when," he asks, "have you begun to smoke?"

"Since today?" She giggles. "Don't worry, I won't do it in—" She gestures toward the house behind her.

Her white freckled hand is trembling slightly; his own is still and sure enough for surgery. Who is this girl? He wants to touch the back of her hand and instead folds his arms over his chest. "My sister has smoked. When she was younger than you."

"I didn't know you had a sister. Where does she live? I mean, oh God, sorry, is she still—?"

This question he himself has asked all his adult life, of people who might have known her in Auschwitz or a displaced persons camp. He has typed her name on the search engine of the computer in the library and found the names of the people murdered for keeping them, Maria and Roman Dmowski, on the roster of the Righteous Among the Nations. But the three Jews they sheltered are said to have escaped—escaped and not died, been shot—not just his mother and him but a third, Olla Resnyk, who remains in his mind's eye in her brown sleeping dress splattered with blood. Olla, her hair escaping from her blue scarf, running toward the woods, her eyes not looking back so that her brother and mother could remain in the small safety of the blackberries. Six months later the last deportation sent him to Kielce, his mother to Auschwitz. For his parents he says Kaddish. But his beautiful sister? That she may be somewhere alive—who is to say what is and is not possible?

To halt the train of this thought he speaks of a former tenant of the coach house, whose smoke filled the air between the houses.

"From hashish, which makes you forget what your mother has taught you."

She lifts her chin. "I don't do that stuff, Mr. Resnyk. Not anymore."

Tears stand in her eyes. What has he said? His face feels hot, though by this age he must have clogged the little capillaries that carry blood to his cheeks. He says, "Please excuse me."

"Why? You haven't said anything wrong."

All day despair presses down upon him. He knows who survived from Nowy Korczyn, a few shrewd or strong or lucky, very few. And also those who borrowed some small power from the Nazis to be Judenrat or Jewish police, Jews over Jews. Jews helping Nazis to more efficiently kill Jews. His father, strong from kneading bread, respected in Nowy Korczyn by Jews and gentiles, said no, he will not be among the Jewish police. Their street was to soon be inside the Jewish ghetto, but in

some things, his father must have thought, there was still choice.

On the day of the evening of Rosh Hashanah, coming from school he learned of SS inside his father's bakery. He ran and found there the smoke of burnt bread and behind the counter his father lying in blood. Now in Chicago, America, Resnyk sits at his kitchen table looking at the newspaper, which he doesn't read. The past, instead of receding, is spreading out in his mind into the world of the present, clearer than what is before his eyes. His father on his back on the wooden floor with his forehead gone and in his eyes, as the young McAlevys say, zero.

When Isabel leaves for work he lets himself inside her house, the first time he has violated the privacy of a tenant for a reason that did not feel right. Upstairs and downstairs he walks like an imbecile thief, absentmindedly opening and closing drawers. What is he looking for? Inside the cigar box on the table he finds, along with a mess of paper money, a copy of the police report. He scans it quickly, then finds underneath it another report with an earlier date. This he reads in the light from a window. Name: Aviva I. Kaplan-Cohen. Maiden name: Kaplan. Spouse: David Robert Cohen. This Cohen broke his wife's arm, says the report, and another time knocked her unconscious. Resnyk folds the sheet back into the box, sloppily, bunching it, hands shaking with his fury. But she is not his daughter, his sister. It is foolish to be angry.

That night in his dream he is crouched beside his mother among the blackberry canes, which grow not in the forest but beside the farmhouse of the good Dmowskis who have kept them in their attic these past months, who have given them bread and sweet milk. Brightness flickers through chinks in the branches, not from a searchlight but from flames inside the house, spilling out the opening door. First Roman, then Maria run from the house. Then Olla, 15, pale and slender, scarf falling from her shoulders, hair messy from sleep, holding to her chest the Dmowskis' cat, which curls up with her at night on her sleeping mat. An SS pulls the cat too fast from her arms; inside the bush Resnyk feels on the skin of his own arms the cat's sharp panicked nails before he hears his sister scream. There are words in German, and pistol shots. He must wrest the gun from the SS man and shoot him safely dead—the strength to do so surges through his back and arms. But his mother is stronger, her body enclosing him, her breath in his ear,

"Be still."

Now after 50 years in Chicago, Illinois, he awakes to loud voices.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find you?"

"Why should I care?"

He thinks it's the MacAlevys, although

they usually fight during daylight hours.

"I. Rumley. That's cute."

"Be quiet. People sleep around here."

It's Isabel. He sits straight up in bed. Tries to still his breath, his heart.

"So let me in. By the hair of my chinny chin chin!"

"No."

"Come on! I'll be nice."

"No."

"Give me a break, Vee. Please, with sugar on it?"

"I'm not supposed to have visitors at night."

"Who says? What, is this some kind of convent?"

There's the sound of a door closing, the twin clicks of a double locking. All of his units have two locks. Knocking starts, banging. Resnyk walks to his back door. From the second story Isabel peers down at a tall, slim man on her landing. "Go away, David!"

"You are so fucked up!"

"Well, that makes two of us."

"Vee, sweetheart, how could you leave that crappy note? Vee, I miss you. Please don't make me beg you."

"I'll call the police, I swear to God!"

Resnyk opens the door. The man stands with his head back, his gaze full on the upstairs window. "Vivian, I love you."

"You'll get over it."

The man laughs harshly. "You sound like a shrink. Are you seeing a shrink now? Are you on Prozac?"

The window shuts. The man pounds on the door. Kicks with a steel-toed boot. From the apartment above Resnyk, a window hefts up. Eva MacAlevy shrills, "Keep it down or I'll call the fucking cops!" Resnyk strides across the courtyard, climbs with no pain to the landing. He grabs the man's arm and yanks him down the four cement steps. "Get away from my house." He utters the foulest curse word in his Yiddish vocabulary. He's about to shove him out the gate when he becomes aware that the man is not fighting back. When Resnyk lets go, the man sinks to his knees.

The silence rings with aching, wanting. In the direction of the coach house but too softly to be heard by anyone but Resnyk, the man whispers, "I am dying inside."

When the man is gone, Resnyk knocks on Sipora's door. "No more," she says.

"Just talk. This once and never again." When he receives her assent he enters, pulls a chair toward the side of her bed. A light is on. Her book from the library lies face down on her covers: *The Age of Innocence*. "She is Jewish," he says.

"So? Is she then our sister? Our new daughter?"

"Please," he says. "She is the wife of an evil man."

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"You are an evil man. Why do you poke inside her secrets?"

"Her name is Kaplan. Aviva. Which in Hebrew means spring."

"Let her alone."

"You are like iron."

He looks at her without love. She seems old to him, older than he by far more than her five additional years. As if these 50 years with him she has been aging faster than can be seen, rotting from her secrets, which she keeps inside her mind as if she herself has done evil. To him she would not speak, nor to the good people who came for her story with tape recorders, so that a Shoah does not happen again in the world. "Inside you have rusted like old iron," he says. "A secret like a rotting wound." He takes her hand, squeezes it hard in his excitement.

"Pah! You are American now, with your wonderful talk."

"Talk is the beginning of changing. To feel not so weak and alone."

"Talk is the beginning of more talk. It is nothing. Less than nothing. You saw the Nazi officer take Olla and you know what would have happened if you'd talked, if you'd said one small word of a hero. Are you not glad you did not to him talk? Tell me, husband."

Her words beat at his brain. He closes his eyes. "What, glad? I feel shame so deep—"

"Ach."

He remembers emerging from the bushes beside the burning house, he and his mother. There were the bodies of the Dmowskis. And Olla's blue headscarf knotted on the ground. Their mother picked it up, pressed it to her face. To Sipora he says, "It is time now to speak."

"You are a little dreaming baby."

He goes on, despite the deep scorn in her voice. "To save the world. If we fail, we still must try. From this comes our power. If only a small power."

She looks at him for so long he has the sensation of falling. Then she reaches to the light and turns it off. Her voice comes to him out of the dark.

"Do you know what is power? With power, you may say to a girl who is starving and afraid, do this or you will die. You may submit to medical science for the glory of the German people or you may breathe the gas. No, I say with all the power of my speaking, Not either one do I wish, and for this power I am undressed and led toward the place of death, and then the one with the power that is real, he offers me once again my false choice, for which I must beg on my knees."

In the dark room her voice is small and flat, as if from the end of a tunnel. He reaches toward her, meets nothing, pulls his hand back.

"So this man, this so-called doctor, Clauberg, he put things inside my body, which

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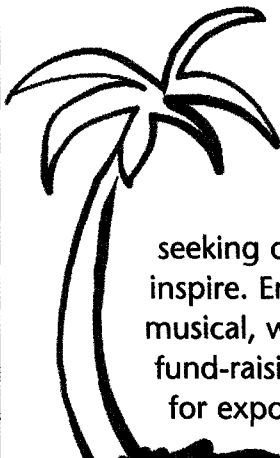
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was small and strong, and he wrote down results for the glory of the German people. I am his good little rat, he says, his good laboratory rat, do you know why? Because my small, strong body can endure pain in silence." She utters a sound between a laugh and a scream. "Do you want to know more?"

He shakes his head in the dark, unable, for once, to speak, though her story does not seem to him news. It has only awakened the pictures already in his mind.

She goes on, "For this reason I could not bear children."

He says, after a moment, "This I know, my Sipora."

She shrugs, snorts. "You know as usual everything."

"Should I say sorry to you?" He puts his arms around her. "I will kill this Clauberg."

She laughs but it is a sad and angry laugh. "Of course he died in jail many years ago."

The curtains on the pair of small bedroom windows are visible now, a paler darkness in the dark room. The sun is coming up. It is not Shabbat, but Resnyk stays with Sipora, this woman his wife, older than he but still slim in the waist, and under her lined skin the fine bones of her face that as a boy had made him weep with longing and impossibility. Now in America, in which all is considered possible, and where a man who gives up is zero, his wife turns her head away from him. He touches her neck, the side of her face, but not softly enough. She remains on her back, elbows out, arms crossed, barricading the lower half of her body. Then his hands, of which he retains full control, his hands of a surgeon though he didn't train for surgery, stroke the air over her body. They do not alight. A good inch over the powder blue nylon gown, they rise and fall over the flat of her chest, her still rounded breast. Up, over a nipple, and down. Around, under, into the heat of the tender underside. He begins to stir. And becomes even more patient, more gradual, his hand gliding, softer than water, along the landscape of her belly, dropping toward the top of her thighs that don't part for him. Fifty years and he hasn't prayed, but now he prays to God who parted the Red Sea and killed the slavemasters. From Sipora's mouth comes a small intake of breath. Aa-ah. "Do you feel this," he whispers, "what I am doing?"

"I don't know."

"You know, Sipora. Siporele."

"I feel nothing."

"I don't believe you."

In an effort to sustain his assurance, he lies down alongside her and scoops the whole light bundle of her up into his arms. He enfolds her, arms, legs, he is a cradle rocking her. She hisses like a snake, but he doesn't let her go. Back and forth he rocks her, they are rocking together. Siporele. Shene Sipora. She doesn't fight him or cry or move—her arms remain folded over herself—but he goes on rocking her. ❧

One who teaches another's child TORAH is regarded by the tradition as one who gave birth to the child.



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