

Prologue



My father is wearing a heavy tweed overcoat and a brown wool suit, his best, as he boards the train. Brown tweed cap flecked with green, striped tie. He's smoking his pipe, a narrow tin of tobacco in his breast pocket: Prince Albert in a can. His white apron he's taken off and hung on the peg by the back door of the delicatessen. He's packed two small suitcases – white shirts, clean socks, long underwear.

The train hisses and snorts at the platform. Thirty people to see him off: neighbours, comrades, friends. I'm not yet nine years old. Winnipeg, February 1935. The station is splendid; I've never been in a room this big. I tip my head back and my mouth holds itself open, the vault of my palate repeating the vault above. But when my father moves towards the train, something shifts. I've been everywhere in the room but now I snap into myself. *Say goodbye*, my mother instructs. No. I won't let him go. *Poppa!* I'm taken up and smoke from his pipe wreathes my head. I nuzzle my face into the scratchy wool. There. That's what I want. But he puts me down, tries to settle me back onto the platform. My poppa – who has always found a way to fix things, has always found room for what I need – will not be moved.

I have to go, he says, his hands smoothing my hair back from my forehead. *You're a big girl now*. And he releases me, turns to the comrades, friends. No. The black body of the train shifts beside me. No. I concentrate. Somewhere above me, my mother is speaking, but I don't hear. In one slight movement I slip by, step up onto the train, over the frightening gap between the platform and the shifting metal body of the train, which will stir at any moment, which will move and sigh and take my father away.

I'm up over the gap, I'm in the strange air of the train. In the flurry of goodbyes, no one has noticed I'm gone. I'll find my poppa's seat. I want something of him – a last trace, a last place, a scent – before the train takes him. I slip along the aisles and spot his name on a paper tag. The car is empty; no one sees as I fit myself beneath his seat, between the two rows of back-to-back benches. It feels good. On the platform they've noticed that I've gone. I hear voices calling me. It doesn't matter. My heart is bumping inside me. It doesn't matter; I won't give up. *Make a wish*. All my body wants to keep my father home, and I will. It's with my body that I'll keep the train from leaving, from taking him away. The voices go by. I'm crouched against the rough fabric at the back of the bench. If they don't find me, the train won't go. My breath is scratchy in my chest, but it doesn't matter. My knees are dirty now from the floor of the train car. I think about dirt and bugs, brush my red plaid pleated skirt. Run my fingers, twisted, up and down, up and down the edges of my red suspenders, my heart getting quieter. There are more voices, but I'm concentrating; I concentrate, shrink into myself so that even I can't find me. Now it's my thumb that runs itself up and down the stiff elastic edge of the suspenders. The shuddering stops. The smoke from the stack diminishes, dies.

Chapter One



Speak when illuminated. Good advice, even if it does come from a sign above a speaker on an elevator. I was taking it from the one level of the subway to the next, bent on some little chore. I doubt much of my mind was illuminated. I don't like the subway particularly; I walk whenever I can, but one knee was a bit stiff. When the doors opened to the platform, I saw that every surface – floor, stairs, columns, even the trash bins – was covered with words. At that moment, I went dark. I can't say I knew where I was, who I was. I didn't know why I had come into this forest of words and I couldn't understand any of them, couldn't understand the letters they were written in, as if it were some foreign alphabet. A stranger put his hand under my elbow – I must have looked as startled as I felt – and asked me if I was all right. With that touch at my coat sleeve, I understood. They were ads. The station had been papered in words that were intended to make us feel how empty we were so that we would want something. Is this the surface we've become, defaced, an illegible scrawl over everything? That solicitous stranger asking me if I was all right – I don't know.

I got myself home. Got past the beige cardboard packing cases that seem to be taking over my life bit by bit these days, snapped on the television. I do that a lot – leave the set on for company with the volume on mute. Let the images stutter by peripherally as I make dinner or tidy up. Usually I don't pay any mind to it, but this stopped me: their faces, again. As if they were in the very middle of inventing the world, standing on the edge of Eden. Such earnestness as they waved their resolute placards and chanted their chants, sang their songs. *No Blood for Oil*. Children, I thought. You are children. You believe in the world and you don't know what's waiting for you. You don't know what gate will swing shut on you, standing there hoping for Eden. I wasn't sure if I was cursing or blessing them.

So what could I do then but turn up the volume and sit on my bed and listen? Those bright faces, hope cupped in each one, they were ready to give up everything they didn't know they had – just as we had been when we were that ignorant, had that much hope. I say “we” when I shouldn't. I don't think I ever did hope that purely; maybe for myself, but not for the world. I was always standing at the edge of that heaven on earth holding myself back from it. I doubt I ever believed the way Vladimir did, or my parents.

I turned the television off. The room had gone dark, so I switched on the lights and I did what I do at the end of every working day – I went into the kitchen, turned on the radio and started making dinner. You have to eat. And you have to be glad to eat, to stand in your very own kitchen, in a light that's there when you touch a switch, and you've got food in the cupboards, in the refrigerator, and you can eat. I started slicing the beautiful brown mushrooms that I'd bought at the market just that day, but then the news came on the radio,

and their voices, so fresh, and their faces came back to me. I told myself dinner could wait, even though the mushrooms were already loading the air with their fragrance.

I try not to be a coward more often than necessary. All I had to do was pick one more empty box, go into the spare room, open a drawer and take out the papers.

They were in crisp blue file folders, labelled, in order. My tidy daughter has taken care of that. My girl – my grown girl. They have a historical value, she tells me. I have to look after them, even if I can't stand to look *at* them. Some day her almost-grown son, my grandson, will want them. All right then, my dear. I will look after them. They'll go with me to the new apartment, to my new home where the snow will be shovelled by someone else and there will be no icy stairs for me to slip on. A crack in one little bone. It wasn't even a proper fracture, just a hairline crack in one minor ankle bone – I was out of the cast two weeks ahead of schedule! But that was the last straw. For her. For me too, I guess. Because of course she was right, as she usually is, though I'm not particularly fond of admitting it. Life will be a bit more simple for these bones, a bit easier, once I've left this house and am in the apartment. Once I've moved. This is the hard part. It's always been the hard part for the likes of me, the move from one thing to another, but then I get used to it. I always do.

So I took those folders in my hands. How could they hurt me, pieces of paper? I was about to put them in the box but then some of the pages slipped out from their crisp blue cage and words slipped out and I couldn't stop myself from reading them. Lecture notes from school, a newspaper article. A thin blue envelope with a square Canadian stamp, a sheet of paper in Manya's elegant hand, one in Lev's. And

then an official document with its seals and signatures, its words and numbers. Article 58-1a. I stand accused.

I've kept myself busy, for years, for decades, so I won't have to stand accused. My mother wouldn't credit it, but I'm a practical person now, content as long as I'm at work. For the longest time work has been what's given me to myself. And what's kept me away from myself, I suppose. Maybe the only way to go on was not to look back. Or maybe the only way not to look back was to go on. Whichever was the case, that was how I managed.

It's not so foolish, not *so* cowardly, really, being afraid to go back. I know people, some of them dear friends, who live there. They're the faithful ones. They hold on and don't forsake the past, but I've watched what I think of as their real lives wane, their real children diminish, while they live amid ghosts or near-ghosts. I have a grown, healthy daughter to admonish me. A grandson who's almost grown. What good are memories? I've worked so hard for so long at not remembering. It has been a lot of work; it has been labour, keeping myself from the past. Hard work, not remembering. Somebody told me that once, in a dark room, the war just years, not decades, behind us. Somebody told me that, once, in a cold room.

But what yanked me into the past? Pieces of paper. Suddenly there I was, in the spare room. Kneeling, my heart yammering away in my chest. On my knees in the spare room, praying at the altar of my cardboard box, shovelling folders into it as if to keep some demon at bay. And remembering. I couldn't stop myself. Remembering, and wondering what got me here, to a house with a kitchen and light and food. What's getting me ready to leave.

We're in the kitchen. Poppa boosts me up onto a chair so I can reach, hands me an orange. "Here," he says. "Look, I'll start and then you can peel it yourself." His thumb gouges into the thick peel, then he hands it over, big and orange and not quite round, like a picture in a book. It smells like summer, smells bright even though it's almost always winter and dark. I put my small thumb in where Poppa's big thumb made a beginning, work the thick peel loose until it's all gone, every last nick of orange. Then with sharp little nails I peel off every scrap of white. The orange is still there, but it's different. I pile the peel and white in a little heap on the table, put both thumbs into the centre and break the orange apart. And now it's gone, no longer itself. Poppa's taken off his white apron; he's reading the newspaper. I can't think of what to say, don't want to spoil this present. I poke at a little segment with a finger, shiver. What was whole is broken. I don't know what to do.

I'm leaning my elbows on the table, leaning my whole body towards the bowl. I can smell the cocoa my mother has stirred into the flour, specks of it swimming in the air, a rich, steamy smell, the kitchen warm from the oven. In another bowl – heavy cream-coloured china – after the butter and sugar, go eggs. One tough rap as her fingers break the eggshell in two and the yellow spills out, the clear stuff around it. Five, six, seven eggs – seven eggs! A king's ransom, precious. Seven eggs are going into this cake because it's my brother Ben's birthday. Now the whoosh as she beats air into the eggs and the sugary, buttery pulp with the old wooden spoon, working round and round the bowl till everything is all of a piece. What was once eggs and sugar and vanilla and butter now are something altogether

different, something rich and strange. The mix of flour and cocoa and salt goes in and stops being flour and cocoa and salt and becomes batter, which will become cake – but only if I remember not to slam doors, not to shout and wreck it all. My mother pours the batter from the big bowl into the cake tins, nudging each last lazy bit of batter out, to be sure that both tins are exactly the same. Then the best part happens. She takes the spoon and cleans the bowl, each round carefully overlapping until every last chocolate lick is cleaned off into the tins. Every last lick. Nothing precious is wasted.

That's why the work of memory is so perilous, why it hurts to do it. It gives you back what you had and with it what you've lost: my parents, my brother. Vladimir. I know them dead, now. Know them as I never knew them when they were alive, their lives complete, completed. Change is over; possibility's over. It's done. My father will never grow older; my mother will never soften. They never saw a grandchild, never knew my daughter or her son. What do I really know of them, with my child's perspective, afraid of who they were, what they meant to me, what I mean because of them? The day my aunt Manya told me the facts of life – I was thirteen and my mother had told me nothing – when she told me, I started to cry. Manya sat beside me on the bed, massaging a dab of lavender-scented cream into my palm, her small fingers tugging at each of mine, a firm pull, as she rubbed circles into each joint, the pink nails, white quarter moons at each base. My hands are just like Poppa's deft, compact hands. My mother's hands were narrow, the fingers long, elegant. When Manya was finished explaining, the calm, clear words of explanation – mother, father, egg,

sperm – I took my hands back, chewed on a thumbnail, the tears starting in my eyes. Why, my aunt asked. Because until then, I didn't know I was my father's too. I thought I was just my mother's child, but with those words, for the first time, I knew I was half Poppa too.

Whose daughter am I? Why do I still need to know? If I am to remember properly, I should start where I started, in the apartment on Main Street near Selkirk Avenue, in Winnipeg, above the delicatessen. When I hear my parents' stories, I hear them told by others' voices. This is how children learn about their parents' mysterious lives before they were born: sitting under the table, at the foot of the stairs, listening while the grown-ups talk. We need to imagine our parents' lives before ours because we believe – foolishly, utterly – that they were born only to give birth to us. And maybe they were. Maybe our parents' lives came into being to generate ours, and ours for our children's.

I do know that I was the last, least, child Anne Gershon bore, the one she didn't want. I wonder if I ever had a home in my mother, who told everyone who would listen how she ran up and down the stairs in that first month of pregnancy, not caring if something bad happened? And then the child she didn't want turned out to be a girl.

What good is a girl? I have a fine son already.

The neighbour women don't like my mother should talk this way. *Pooh, pooh*, they spit, to keep away the evil eye. Not that anyone is superstitious, religious – *the opiate of the masses*.

The women know everyone and everything. They knew my father in the Old Country, grew up in the same courtyard in Simferopol. And they like to talk.

Avram Gershon came to Canada, they say, after his first wife walked out on him. Yes, he was married before: a wife and son he left in Russia. The first wife was a beauty – she was a seamstress maybe, maybe a nurse. One story is that she was a medical student, and the man she ran off with was the boarder they took on while she was in medical school. Though if you were to ask Anne, she'd tell you the first wife was nothing but a whore. So poor Avram, his heart was broken. The child was just a toddler when the wife ran away.

So Avram sells everything he has, buys a third-class ticket to Winnipeg. He steps out of the train station, 1914, the middle of nowhere! He could have gone to Chicago, or Buenos Aires, but he buys the ticket for Winnipeg. Doesn't know a single living soul in all of America, except for Sarah Katz, Hershel's wife. It's not that Avram and Sarah were sweethearts; she was married already to Hershel. Avram and Sarah weren't sweethearts, but they were like family: they grew up in the same courtyard in Simferopol. Sarah Katz. You won't find a better woman than Sarah Katz. All Avram had was a postcard with her address on it, and that was how he found her. Just walked into her kitchen. She had no idea. She's down on her knees, washing the linoleum. She hears someone at the door, and she thinks it's her husband come home early from work. There's Avram in the doorway, fresh off the boat. *Oy, Avram*, she says. Can't find another word in her mouth. *Oy, Avram*. She had no idea.

Poor Avram, his heart was broken.

The story is that when my mother and father met in Winnipeg, each had a story. Because my mother had a story too, another love story.

You want to know Anne's story? the women ask. Anne Gershon came from Odessa, one of four sisters, big-city girls. Odessa, it's all she'd talk about: the cherry orchards, the fountains, the beaches, the opera house. *Odessa*. She'd say it sweet like candy. *My city is the most beautiful city in the world*. That's what she'd say. *I never meant to leave*.

But she did leave, in 1914, just before the Great War. It all happened because, in Odessa, Anne had a boyfriend, a certain Lev Zvarensky. A fine-looking man: broad shoulders, more than six feet tall he was. Everybody said, now there's a match for Anne; *there's* a man who can handle her. They were talking marriage, Anne and Lev, when suddenly he falls for Manya, the little one, the youngest of Anne's sisters. Big brown eyes and a waist like a china doll. Suddenly it's Manya and Lev who are getting married.

What's the song about sisters? *A sister to hit you, and a sister to kiss you, and a sister to steal your love*. So for Anne, the taste of Odessa goes sour in her mouth. And she leaves, *for a little while*, she says. For a little while, till the taste improves.

And why doesn't she go back? Because of the war, and because she meets Avram. No, no, Sarah Katz didn't introduce them. Anne just went into Avram's store. She walks into the store like a queen, points to a can of tomatoes. Those green eyes, so proud she barely speaks a word to him. And Avram is smitten. He talks to her in his soft voice, trying to make her notice him. And meanwhile already she's decided he's the one.

Because Avram Gershon was a catch. You should have seen him in 1914: handsome, kind as could be. Such manners, such a gentle voice – one of those handlebar moustaches! Some people said he was no match for a woman like Anne, but Anne was the one he wanted. And *she* wanted *him*: a man

she could handle. A man who had taught himself English by reading the newspapers, who was doing well enough with the store to send money home. It was not only that he was a handsome man and a capable man: it was politics too. Because they were both believers. You think *Avram* is a believer? Anne Gershon can talk politics till you're blue in the face. *Listen to me*, Yossel Zalinsky, the one with the store that sells artificial limbs, says to her one day, *the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is no paradise. The Soviet Union is not a democracy*, he says. *It's been six whole years since the civil war there ended and still there hasn't been an election, not in the whole of the Soviet Union.* Anne takes a look at him. *Democracy?* Anne says. She tells him: *I'll tell you about democracy.* So Anne folds up her copy of the *Vestnik*; you'd think she was going to give him a good smack with it! *In the democratic United States of America*, she tells him, *they waited thirteen years after the War of Independence before they had elections!* And she looks round the room with those green eyes of hers. *Why should the Russian people jump right into a democracy?* she asks. *They've got better things to do*, she says. And you know there's no arguing with Anne Gershon. A real Bolshevik – she once threw a Menshevik right out of the apartment!

So it's a match. The neighbours warn her that Avram's a married man, but Anne says, *never mind, he'll divorce her.* And – that's the end of the story! He divorces the first wife. Don't think it was easy, but he does. And he marries Anne.

My parents' marriage was a marriage of believers. Like those young faces on the television, my father believed in possibility, in the future. *Make a wish.* He wanted his children with Anne to be born into a new world, a place where they'd have a chance to get an education. *For me it wasn't like*

that, he'd say. It's an old story, he'd say. And we'd say, tell us, tell, and he would.

*When I was ten years old, he'd say, my father died. We owed money, and because I was the oldest son it was my job to pay the debts. My mother had no choice: she apprenticed me to a shopkeeper. Twelve hours a day. Not much to eat. No shoes to wear either. The shopkeeper gave me cheap rubber boots that didn't fit. And so my feet got sores from them. No bed to sleep on either. I'd fold a blanket and sleep under the counter in the store. I was just a kid. Can you imagine? That was before the Revolution; that was the days of the tsar. My mother I'd see only for a few hours every week, when the shopkeeper could spare me and when my mother could get away from her own work. One night, I'm fast asleep under the counter at the shop but all of a sudden I open my eyes. Maybe I heard something or maybe it was just that I could feel someone in the room. I open my eyes and see my mother's face. She used to wear these long brown braids that she would twist around her head like a crown. I wake up and I see her face like that, with a crown of brown hair, and at first I think, *I'm dreaming, this is a dream.* But it isn't. She's really there. Not saying anything, just looking at me sleeping. And she's crying. Why is she crying? Because my father's dead and I'm sleeping under the counter and I have no shoes. Because she had to walk a mile in the dark in the middle of the night to see her child.*

That's enough stories today, he'd say. For you, things will be better.

The stories come like fairy tales – my mother with her broken heart, my father with his, how they left and why and

what they had and didn't. They preside over my birth. And there are other presences too: my brother Ben, standing over my crib. And on the bureau in our parents' bedroom, the photograph of my father in Russia wearing old-fashioned clothes. With him there's a very young boy, little more than a baby, a frilly lace collar around his neck. The boy is standing on a chair so that he and my father can shake hands: they're saying goodbye.

There should be two brothers standing over me like fairy godmothers in a story, watching the blanket rise and fall with each breath.

But it's Ben who watches over me, Ben who stares and stares at the photograph on the bureau. And he wants to ask, though he knows he never can, he wants to ask who the boy is.

The photo is gone. There was a day my mother tore it up, because it was unbearable to her, that other life my father had before her, any love that wasn't hers. She wanted him to have one life, his life with her, to have always been what he was to her. The one true love, the one true self. *Non sum qualis eram*: I am not who I was. When I first read Horace's *Odes*, just after the war, that line shook me; it seemed so true and terrifying. *All change is loss*. I read that in another poem once. Life changes us; we have no choice but to change. And sometimes we turn into a distorted version of what we could have been, what we were.

Much as I like to deny it, I'm an old woman. And I still don't know about love. My parents' story was a love story, but look what love did to my father. He let my mother drive him, take his life from him. The stories, films, the songs say *complete me with your love*. But maybe it's not that we're partial and looking to be whole. Maybe it's that we want to stay

partial. We don't want to grow up, own our lives. So we hand over the keys of our lives, relinquish them to something that's not real . . . Poppa loved that first son just as much as he loved Ben and me. But he gave him up.

My father is standing in the kitchen, talking quietly to my mother. He's come up the stairs at the end of a day at the till, bone-tired, left the white apron on its hook. Later the farm girl who helps out in the store will take it away and scrub the heavy cotton clean. My mother sets a roast chicken, potato knishes, carrots on the table. Pumpnickel so dark it's almost black, her homemade dill pickles. *He's here*, she says. *That one, the boy*. Three months before, the family had written. My father's first wife was dead. My father's mother had also written to say that no matter what had happened between Poppa and his first wife, he should take his son in. Blood was blood. My father had sent the fare. And now the boy's here and Poppa has to make my mother believe that the little *mamser*, whose mother was a whore, shouldn't be left to sleep in the street.

We'll give the boy a chance, Poppa is saying. *We need an extra pair of hands. You have yours full with the little one*. His voice is soft, because there's no arguing with my mother. His voice is soft when he explains that it's not for himself that he's asking. He has his own son, a fine boy, and now the little one. Yes, the boy's a stranger to them, and at thirteen he's almost a man. All right so he's an orphan; we're all orphans someday and here he is, a stranger in a strange land. But it's not the boy who needs anything and it's not Poppa. It's my mother who needs the help. Work – the boy will learn to be a worker, not a hooligan, not an idle bourgeois. An extra pair of hands for my mother. Poppa's voice is soft,

no arguing, so in the end my mother decides: they'll give the boy a chance. He'll work; he'll pay his way. And if he doesn't, he's out in the street.

And the boy is allowed to come into the house with his parcels, stand awkwardly in the room, the image of his father, though there's something different about the eyes.

He stands in the room as though rooms were alien to him. At eight, his mother already ill, he'd run away from home. In the chaos of those early years of the Revolution, the Civil War, there were gangs of street urchins, *besprizorny*. He'd gotten into trouble with the police, come into the custody of child welfare, been sent to a reformatory for street kids. Now he's in his father's house.

My mother tells him he's to share the room with Ben, who's been led to believe that the boy's a cousin, or adopted. The boy can go to Argyle School on Monday. Meanwhile, he can have some supper if he's hungry.

On Monday at Argyle School they put him in with the grade three class, so he can learn English. Small for his age at thirteen, he's still ridiculous. He says little, does what he's told. He tries out his new words of English on the customers at the store, twisting the sounds around his tongue. And he sweeps out the backroom, picks me up when nobody's looking, sings songs to me in Yiddish, plays peekaboo. I smile to see him, because he's there and because I am.

Annette, he says, giving me my name. The family calls me Baby or Monkey, but the boy gives me my name. It's the name my mother chose, a name that's almost hers. You don't name a child after a living person; it's bad luck. *I'll call her whatever I feel like calling her*, my mother says when the women shake their heads. *I don't believe in superstition*. My mother and Poppa don't believe in all that mumbo-jumbo,

never go to shul. She'll call her daughter whatever she wants to call her. No arguing with my mother.

The boy doesn't argue; he keeps out of my mother's way. He knows a good thing when he sees it. In his first month in the apartment above the delicatessen on Main Street, he grows an inch, my mother setting the plates hard in front of him. Nobody's going to be able to say that Anne Gershon let a child, not even a *mamses* like him, go hungry from her table.

He sticks it out as best he can, listens, makes himself useful, fixes the wheels on Ben's wooden dog. Sings, on the sly, to me. He doesn't make any trouble. But even so, he doesn't last more than eight months in Anne Gershon's house.

When did the knife sharpener first come to me? I have to think back as far as memory goes, to the apartment on Main Street, to the crib whose wooden slats I believe I can remember. In this memory, the crib is empty. I've been taken from the apartment to the quarantine ward at King George Hospital with scarlet fever. Ben wants to know what happened, where Baby is. *She got sick from eating dirty things*. He goes into the bedroom where the crib is. Dull sunlight comes through the tall, narrow window. He'll be sick too. He runs his finger along the baseboards, puts it in his mouth, eats the dust. Nothing happens. It doesn't work. Only his sister is sick, gone.

The room is glowing a dark pink, as though a fire were burning at some distance. In hospital I turn and turn my head but the pillow is harsh against my cheek. Over and over again a sound sways in my head, two beats, light and then heavy. The first time I hear it. It won't let go. Something that's waiting for me, something that wants me, inevitable. I want

to fight against it; I want to give in. That sound that is outside me, nothing of myself, and that is me. I want my mother but she isn't there. Someone takes my hand, puts something cold against my forehead. I have nothing but the sound and what it's telling me. Give up; don't give up. I want to fight against it; I want to give in. Something dark comes down on me and I close my eyes to everything. I have nothing but the swaying in my head, two beats, light and then heavy. I want it gone.

And then the sound does go away, and I'm better. I want my mother. The gown I'm wearing is too big, white, loose around the collar. But it's worn, clean; it's soft. The nurses take me to the window, hold me up against the glass. Far away in the hospital courtyard, I see my mother, dressed in black. Ben is waving with one hand, holding my mother's hand with the other. And far from the family, on the opposite side of the courtyard, I see the big boy. Just standing, not waving, but smiling up at me.

Ben's hand is hot in mine and he's tugging; my feet aren't fast enough. I'm eating an ice cream cone, but not fast enough, I can't keep up and pink cream is dripping onto the crook between my thumb and finger. I lick carefully, then I hear it again, the *dah-dong* of it. Two beats – light, then heavy. He's there, half-way down the block, bent over. One hand drags the grinding wheel while the other swings in an arc, and the sound sings out from his hand, two beats. My hand holding Ben's tenses, squeezes.

"Watcha doing?" Ben grimaces, working at the chocolate drips. "Let go!" He shakes his hand loose, then offers it. "Don't squeeze."

I nod, but I can't look at him, the sound puffed up tight

inside me. Something bad is going to happen. Fight it; give up. Be good and it'll go away.

"Be good. Eat your ice cream."

The sound comes in, fills me up. Something I should know, but don't. I start to cry. Ben yanks at my hand. "You stop it! Be good. Don't be a big dummy." I start to wail, the big balloon of sound filling my mouth letting go. On the sidewalk people turn to look at me. Ben's mouth goes hard. "Didn't Momma tell you to be good? Didn't she? Stop it." I can't. He leans over, whispers in my ear, "You stop it right now. Right this minute. If you don't, I'll tell the knife sharpener on you. He'll get you. If you're bad." He yanks at my hand again. "You shut up! Be good!"

I close my mouth. I'm bad. The bad man out there. I'm little and I can't do anything. Ben takes a handkerchief out of his pocket, spits on it, wipes my face. "C'mon. I'll take you home."

I was up visiting friends in the country last weekend, and I decided to go for a walk. It's one of the things that drives my daughter crazy, taking it into my head to go for a walk by myself along a country road at dawn. It was beautiful though, one of those narrow two-lane roads with tall firs on either side. Not much traffic. The mist was lifting off the paving as the sun touched it. I was walking along the edge on the left side of the highway, the way my father taught me, so I'd be facing the oncoming traffic. I was at a point where the road was quite narrow, no shoulders to speak of and rather steep ditches on either side. A large pickup was coming towards me, and he slowed, because there was no room for error, and I stopped. When he passed, there were two feet of air between us – two solemn feet between me

and what would end me. Perfectly safe. I've known for a long time about that distance, that closeness.

"There," my mother says, straightening the frame. "See how nice that looks?"

My mother's bed has a fancy gold bedspread she pulls tight over the covers, and a mahogany headboard with little diamonds made out of lighter-coloured wood. Above the bed she's put a picture of an old-fashioned lady who's wearing a dress striped black with white. My mother cut it out of a magazine, and now she's put it into a frame she found for a nickel at the five-and-dime.

"She's watching the opera," my mother says. The lady in the dress has gold opera glasses in her hand, just like the ones my mother brought from Russia. My mother lets me hold them sometimes, though I have to be very careful not to break them because they're precious. Gold and a shiny glimmery something on the handle. Mother-of-pearl, she says. I don't understand how pearl can have a mother. You hold them up in front of your eyes and everything changes. Everything is closer to you or farther away. My mother used to work at the opera, in her country. In Odessa, where they don't need a wireless to listen to music, where there's real music on every corner. Where it's warm. Where my mother will go, if Poppa talks back to her. She'll start packing and go home to Odessa where it's warm. Farther and farther away.

I stand in front of the picture a long time, looking at the fancy lady. Closer and closer. She has pink on her cheeks. She has the opera glasses lazy in her gloved hand. Her dress is made out of something fancy, shiny. She doesn't lift her head, but I know she's looking at me. I think she wants

something. My mother calls me for lunch, but I keep thinking about the lady, about what she wants, and I have to keep going back to the bedroom to look at her.

“You like the picture, Monkey?” Poppa rests his hands on my shoulders. “It looks nice above your mamma’s bed, no?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

That evening at dinner I’m still wondering what I’m supposed to do. I’m supposed to do something for the lady, so that everything will be all right. If I don’t do things the way she wants me to do them, something bad is going to happen. Everything will be wrecked. And then I figure it out. I have to sip my milk a special way, so it’s not wrecked. I put my lips against the glass and take three sips and then wait, three sips and then wait. It slips down my throat fine. I finish the whole glass that way and I’m happy. Everything is good. When I go to bed that night I can feel the lady watching, but it’s all right. I can’t tell anyone: not Ben, he’d just make fun of me. And not Poppa and not my mother, because they’d just say *don’t be silly*.

Poppa’s smoking his pipe and reading the newspaper in the easy chair in the front room. I can only see the top of his head. “Be a good girl,” he says, “and get me my slippers from the bedroom.”

I want to be a good girl, but I don’t want to go into the bedroom where the lady is. “I don’t want to,” I say.

“Annette,” Poppa says, “be nice now and go and get me my slippers. Listen to your poppa. They’re under the bed.”

I go into the bedroom but I watch the floor all the way in and all the way out and I don’t look up. There, I did it.

“That wasn’t so hard,” Poppa says, when I bring them to him. It was hard.

At dinner that night, I sip my milk the right way. I have to eat all my peas first and then my mashed potatoes. I can't eat my chicken until everything else is done, even the milk. Every last pea. My mother wants to know why I'm not eating my chicken but it's all right, I've finished the peas and the mashed potatoes so I swallow down every bite of chicken before she has to ask me again. Then everything's fine. It's all fine and when I go to bed I can feel that the lady's happy with me.

I keep thinking up better and better things to do. I put my clothes on from the bottom to the top one day – socks, underpants, skirt, undershirt, blouse – and from the top to the bottom – undershirt, blouse, skirt, underpants, socks – the next. When I feel the lady get mad at me, I think of something more to do. For a little while everything's good; nothing bad happens. But it gets harder and harder. I have to walk around the block three times one day. The next day I have to do it five times. Poppa doesn't like me going to the end of the block by myself. And I don't ever want to go into the big bedroom. Then no matter how carefully I drink my milk and eat my dinner, no matter how many dandelions I sink in a circle in the mud puddle, nothing seems to work any more, nothing's good enough. The lady's never pleased with me. I want it to stop.

Poppa comes out on the back porch and finds me playing with Blackie, my doll.

"Annette," he says, "your momma says you're all the time quiet. She thinks you're worrying about something."

I look up at him but he's so far away. The lady can see me wherever I go. She knows everything. Poppa picks me up and sits me on his lap. He pushes my hair back from my face. My poppa.

"I'm scared," I say and I can't help it; I start crying a little bit.

"Don't be scared," he says. "There's nothing to be scared about."

"I'm scared of the lady in the picture. In your room."

My mother comes in. "What's wrong with her?" my mother asks. "Why is she crying?"

"She's scared of the picture in the bedroom."

"Scared of a picture? Why should she be scared of a picture?"

It comes out; I have to let it out. "The lady makes me do things. I have to do things for her." I said it. Now what happens?

"Come here," my mother says, taking me by the hand. "Show me the picture."

We go into the bedroom. "That one. The lady."

"All right," my mother says, and she sits me on the bed. "This is what we'll do." And she goes over to the wall, takes it down, puts it face down in the bureau drawer. "There," she says. "It's gone. You don't have to do anything any more. You don't have to be scared."

I am not who I was. I was someone defined by what I obeyed, my mother and the laws that governed her, my sense of the world as ungovernable, my certainty of my own helplessness and its power. Didn't my mother, even then, offer me something else? Didn't she always offer me something else? One night in the apartment on Main Street the lights went out just after dinner. I reached for Poppa's hand in the darkness, felt it warm and solid in mine. But in the moment before I took his hand, that first moment of darkness, I called out *Momma*. I thought then,

why is it Momma I call when it's Poppa I love? He was wearing the green sweater; even in the dark I could see it green. I pulled closer and we sat quietly together until the lights came on. When those days come back to me, the very earliest days I can remember, they're fixed, the family its own immutable constellation. My life was of a piece and then, when my father stepped onto that train, what was whole came to be broken and I fell into these fragmentary selves, this collection of beings. Sometimes I wonder who the girl on Main Street was. I was reading an article in the newspaper just the other day. It said that the self – which we have but animals don't – resides behind the right eye, a spot in the brain which, removed, or damaged, removes or damages who we are. And that who we are is defined by our memory of our life, but not by memory alone: by memory as it is imbued with emotion. Who we are. So if I remember your hand, Vladimir, but not the love that accompanied it, I am not who I was. I'm not. I have this other life now, the life that's not my old life. I've turned the corner from that old life, the one I won't talk about. Turning my back on the past, I haven't allowed myself to be that girl on Main Street any more, haven't even let myself remember all the separate people I've inhabited. And yet. Does *not who I was* mean *less than I was*? Could it not mean *other*, couldn't *different from* mean *more than*, mean gain, not just loss?

There he is, in the doorway of the delicatessen, the boy who's not supposed to be there. He's stopped in the doorway, watching his father. Avram looks up. "Come in, come in," Avram says. "It's good to see you. Have a bite to eat." He touches the boy's arm, then wipes his hands on the immaculate cotton of the apron, even though his hands are

clean. The boy seats himself on one of the red stools at the counter, whirls slowly around once or twice. Avram's hands are quick making the sandwich, piling two inches of corned beef on the rye. He sets the plate down, sets himself down beside the boy, watches as he eats. "It's good?" he asks in Yiddish.

"Talk English, Pa," the boy says, his mouth full. "We should talk English."

"You talk good already." Avram pushes a plate of coleslaw towards him. "Anybody would think you were born right here in Canada."

"I need to practise. So how's by you, Pa?"

"You know, the usual," Avram says. "If I didn't have to give so much credit, we'd be sitting pretty. And you, *tateleh*? Is Sarah Katz looking after you? Still making those famous poppyseed cookies?"

The boy smiles. "I moved. I'm boarding with the Posens now; I've got enough cash for room and board. Bought myself a bicycle."

"Here," Avram says, "take a pickle with it."

"What's this you're reading, Pa?" the boy asks, picking up a thick hardcover.

"I got it out of the library, just published. About the Five Year Plan, what it's going to do for the Russian people."

The boy puts the book down.

"Listen to what they say here," Avram says, reading the English carefully aloud:

In the societies of the West the evolution of institutions proceeds for the most part without plan or design, as a sort of by-product of the selfish competition of individuals, groups and enterprises for private gain. In Russia, on the

other hand, the Soviet government has sought to promote the rational and orderly development of the entire social economy. In the great Five Year Plan of Construction, which was launched in October of 1928, and which will run to October of 1933, a whole civilization is harnessing its energies and is on the march towards consciously determined goals.

“This is interesting,” Avram says. “This I make time to read.”

“A lot of big words, Pa.”

“And you,” Avram gently closes the book, “how is your school?”

“I’m not going to school,” the boy answers. “I got these odd jobs, and coming up in a month I got an apprenticeship with Cohen’s Electric.”

Avram sets his hands along the counter, runs his fingertips along the ribbed edge. “I wanted for you an education,” he says.

“Tell me, Pa,” the boy’s voice goes sour, “what’s the point, someone like me getting an education? I have no head for it.”

“That’s not true . . .” Avram says.

“I want to earn a living and pay for my keep,” the boy says. “Don’t offer me money, Pa.” Avram’s hands are on the till. “You know I won’t take it. She’ll say I stole it,” he says. And before Avram can say anything more, he’s gone.

The boy is as good with his hands as he is with his head, can make anything electrical work. *The electrician*, my mother calls him. Never uses his name. *Joseph*.

Joseph could fix anything. Every time he'd visit he would bring me a little treat: coloured pencils or a new eraser. And he'd help me draw: trees and suns, flowers. I could spend hours drawing, trying to put down on paper something that made a pattern, that had colour in it, a shape. When Joseph visited, we'd talk English to each other. He'd learned to speak good English, not my-country English like Poppa and my mother. He took me to see the fireworks once, gave me a piggyback ride all the way there. I wasn't scared because I was with Joseph. When the fireworks started, the sky was full of coloured bits of light, red and green and sparkly blue, some like flowers, some like pinwheels. And noises: pops like bubbles bursting for the little lights and a shaky boom for the bigger ones. Then a noise came that was so loud the ground shuddered and I shuddered with it and a big flower of light bloomed right on top of my head. It got bigger and bigger in the sky, came closer and closer till I felt the sky come down to touch me, till I felt the light inside my chest, breathed in light till I was full with it.

My mother is at the sink, washing dishes. "The *electrician* was here. He fixed the wireless," she says. Poppa is adding a column of numbers that's as long as the page. He can keep every one of those numbers in his head all the way down the line. He puts his pencil down.

"His name is Joseph."

The cat and I watch my mother's hands making circles with a soapy rag.

"I know his name," she says.

It's easy to read my mother's back. I always know when something bad is going to happen, like the day she tore up that old picture of the little boy shaking hands with Poppa.

When she gets mad, Poppa talks in his quiet voice. *There-there*, his voice says.

Poppa gets up, turns on the radio. “It’s working good,” he says, and goes downstairs.

My mother turns the radio off. “In Odessa, we didn’t need a wireless. Every evening we could go to the park and listen to the orchestra in the bandstand.”

They worked under the ground, my mother’s family, in the mines, like ants. The whole city of Odessa sits on top of stone, she told me, limestone, and for hundreds of years my mother’s family mined it. Hundreds of years and hundreds of miles of tunnels, a honeycomb of limestone tunnels. Maybe they’re bees, not ants, my mother’s family. A hive of relatives, her sisters and their families, still living in my mother’s city, her country.

It’s funny that Joseph has the same country as my mother – she wouldn’t want to share anything with him.

I don’t have a country. Or my country doesn’t have a name. Maybe my country is the delicatessen: Poppa’s white apron at night, the way it shines in the darkness hanging from its peg.

I’ve always lived in a forest of words, in a foreign language. On the first day of grade one at Aberdeen School on Selkirk Avenue, we walked to school, Poppa and me, his hand warm and quiet in mine. When we got to the doorway of the classroom, he said, *Come look and don’t be scared. This is where all the little girls dance.* Aberdeen School was where I learned to be good. Reading the faces of the teachers was easy, and so was making my own face show them what they wanted to see: a serious little girl, a smiling little girl, a girl who does what she’s told. And Aberdeen School was where I was told

to speak only English: not Yiddish, which I spoke to my father, and not Russian, which I spoke to my mother. "We must all learn," Miss MacLeod explained, "to speak English so that everyone understands everyone else. Now if you speak Russian, and Darya speaks Ukrainian, and Nadya speaks Hungarian, how will we get by?" And though I knew the teacher was always right, I couldn't help thinking that I did understand Ukrainian, as much by the look on Darya's face as the sounds she made. And when Johannes, the little boy with the dull blond hair cut straight across in bangs, spoke Polish, it wasn't so hard either, especially if he had the ball in his hands and you knew he must mean ball. When I opened my mouth I didn't always know which language I was speaking, didn't know, really, that there *were* different languages, just different, familiar ways of settling into sound. Poppa had already taught me to read English. He read English just fine, though for my mother it was hard. *Russian is the only language worth knowing*. But I still had to sit and listen to the other children read *The Little Red Hen* and it would make me itchy, make me want to twist my toes and snap them against each other. Aberdeen School was where I learned to be good, but I knew I wasn't really good, that underneath being good was a bad girl. Poppa used to sing me the rhyme in English: *There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead. And when she was good she was very very good, and when she was bad she was horrid*. The bad girl who can't sit still, who twists her toes and snaps them. The girl who wants what she wants. Who boxed Ben's ears once, because she was mad, even though he was bigger, even though he'd done nothing. Because she didn't get what she wanted, and she wants what she wants. She's horrid.

Miss MacLeod has told us to put our heads down because we were too noisy. I run my fingers along the smooth groove in the top of the desk where my pencil goes, round the opening for the inkwell. Bottles of ink are dangerous. Pupils are not allowed to use ink until grade three.

“All right,” Miss MacLeod says, “time for Spelling.”

I sit up straight and fold my hands in front of me on my desk, feet flat on the floor and knees together: Position One. It’s so hard. And I don’t want to, but I do.

“Now class,” Miss MacLeod is saying, “what do you write in the right-hand corner of the page?” She turns to the blackboard and her black gabardine skirt swirls as she turns. “This is today’s date,” Miss MacLeod says, and she writes *October 18, 1932* on the board in her beautiful, clear printing.

I hold the pencil the way I’ve been taught, cradled against the second finger of my right hand. I’m getting a bump there from the pencil rubbing, my finger taking on the shape of what I do. *October 18, 1932*. It makes me shiver. I’ve never written the date before, never pencilled myself into time, but this is how time enters my life.

Time. I can stand in the spare room or I can walk back into my darkened kitchen and say, *it’s Tuesday, it’s six o’clock, it’s time for dinner*. But time is slippery. If we let go that thread of the present, we’re released into what gave us this moment, the darkness in it or the light. My father was a believer, a dreamer. His daylight dreams took him to what he thought of as his future in Canada, and then they made him get on that train. But he had nightmares too. Just like me. Sometimes I think even now I’m still dreaming his dreams. *Make a wish*. I want to remember.

In the dream of summer I used to play at my friend Cassie's house, a two-storey, white stucco with a picket gate painted green in the carragana hedge. *Picket, picket*. I liked that word. Cassie's mother fed us cinnamon buns hot from the oven. Her backyard was big and open: no trees or apartment buildings to make the sky small. They had a vegetable garden that took up most of it. Laundry flapped on the neighbour's line: sheets and pillowcases white against the blue sky. Once Cassie and I got to dig a new patch of garden. She showed me how to put my whole weight on the spade, and while we dug it was as if the soil got looser, deeper, as we worked it, sun hot on our shoulders. We were workers. The screen door squeaked. Good times.

But it wasn't good times; it was hard times. Kids came to school wearing clothes that were too big or too small, jackets made over from coats, patches on patches. Half the neighbours were on Relief. Because it was hard times, my mother would let me invite a friend over for lunch once a week, sometimes twice. *Nobody can say I let anyone go hungry from my table*, she'd say, setting the dishes down on the table, potatoes fried in lots of oil, salami sliced thick. *They can't say that about me. I'm not stingy like some people*.

Plenty did go hungry. Mrs. Goldbaum down the street's husband was a travelling salesman, no good, a gambler. Three kids to feed and nothing to feed them with. Poppa would leave bags of groceries on the back step and my mother wouldn't say not to. *They won't go calling me stingy*.

The boy from across the street showed off the new boots he got on Relief – soles *that* thick – and my brother Ben was jealous. But my mother made a face when he told her. *People should work*.

Some wouldn't take Relief, like Mr. Spratt, the lodger on the third floor above the store. He was thin, quiet. His footsteps overhead hardly made any noise.

The flowered apron covers my mother's knees. She's shelling peas.

"I'm worried about Mr. Spratt." Poppa sets his *Tribune* on the kitchen table.

"Worry about yourself, Avram." Each pod is unzipped, the peas stripped click click click into the enamel bowl. I want to eat one, just one.

"He's thinner every day." Poppa's hands rest on the newspaper.

"He dresses fancy, always in that dark grey suit, a white shirt, black shoes polished up. If he's under the weather again you can bring him a bowl of my chicken soup."

"God knows how the man lives."

"He gets odd jobs. He may have a bit of savings tucked away somewhere."

"Thirty-seven, and he looks like an old man. Look at the prices I'm charging here: fifty-two cents for a twenty-four-pound bag of flour. The farmers are getting nothing. Peanut butter nineteen cents a pound. He'd be better off."

"Better off how?"

"On Relief. If he was working for Relief at least he'd get a food voucher."

"People have no shame."

"Anne . . ."

"*No shame.*"

"Anne, people are hungry."

"They're lazy."

"Anne . . ."

"Just lazy."

“Hello there, Princess.” Mr. Spratt comes down the stairs in his dark grey suit, white shirt and black shoes. He calls me Princess because I was born in the same year as Princess Elizabeth. “How are you?” His voice is softer even than Poppa’s.

“Fine thank you, Mr. Spratt. And how are you?” Mr. Spratt talks so nice he makes me feel like I’m wearing little white gloves, all prim and proper.

“Dandy.” He sits down beside me on the second from the bottom step, wipes his forehead with a very white handkerchief. The cat comes up and rubs against the dark wool of his pant leg.

“Mr. Spratt, how come you’re wearing your suit on such a hot day?”

Mr. Spratt smiles a big smile. I hardly ever see him smile that big. Mostly his smile is quiet, like he doesn’t want to bother anyone with it. He smiles big, and then the smile stops. “That’s a good question. That’s a question I should ask myself, I guess.” He thinks a minute. “I like this suit.”

“It’s a nice suit.”

“Thank you. But you make me wonder, Princess. It is an awfully hot day for a suit when you’re not going anywhere special.”

We’re quiet for a moment.

“Did you used to work in a bank, Mr. Spratt?”

“No, I didn’t work in a bank, Princess.”

“Where did you work?”

Mr. Spratt takes his time before answering me. “In a big office. I had my own desk, a nice oak desk. And a secretary. There was a big fan on the ceiling that kept me cool. You would have liked that.”

“Oh.” I start to poke at a scab on my knee, then remember that I shouldn’t.

“Did you read that book you borrowed from me about glaciers?”

“I’m about half-way through, Mr. Spratt. There are some big words.”

“Just ask your poppa if there’s anything you don’t understand.”

“Poppa doesn’t always know the big words in English.”

“Well, of course you’re right. But your poppa will know how to look them up.”

“All right.” I start at my knee again, stop. “Mr. Spratt, can I ask you something? Do you ever hear something, like a bad sound?”

Mr. Spratt frowns. “What kind of sound do you mean?”

“I sometimes hear him,” I whisper. “The old guy. Ringing the bell.”

“You mean the knife sharpener, that old fellow? You don’t have to be afraid of him, Princess.”

I shiver. “But sometimes I hear that sound even when he’s not there.”

“When he’s not there?”

“It’s like the sound’s inside me.”

Mr. Spratt smoothes the crease in his trousers, wipes his forehead again. “Sometimes I think we’re more afraid of what’s inside us than what’s outside us, Princess. Or maybe we’re afraid that what’s inside us isn’t strong enough to fight what’s outside us. Maybe that’s why we hear something inside us that scares us. But don’t be afraid of the knife sharpener. He’s just an old man trying to make a living like everybody else. How about I take you to the library tomorrow, if it’s all right with your poppa? We can ask him today.”

“I’d like that a lot, Mr. Spratt.”

“All right then. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go meet someone.”

“Is that why you’re wearing your suit?”

“Guess so. See you later, Princess.”

Princess. That was what he called me, Mr. Spratt. He always spoke to me as if I deserved some dignity, as though, given a little encouragement, I could think things through. But though he called me Princess, I knew I couldn’t ever be a princess because the world was divided into kings and commoners, bosses and workers, fancy and plain, gentiles and Jews, and I always knew on which side I fell. *One person is just as good as another and workers are the best.* My family had always been working class: farmers and shopkeepers and tailors, they’d all made an honest living. My mother’s family were miners in the limestone quarries in Odessa, nothing like the bosses, tycoons in shiny top hats who took money from honest people. Nor were they kings and queens shouting *off with their heads!* Nor soldiers; they’d never killed anybody, had never done anything bad. Never being able to do anything bad – that was what it meant to be good.

But I couldn’t ever be a princess anyway because I didn’t look like a princess, wasn’t *the fairest of them all.* I was plain. I didn’t even need to look in the mirror. All I had to do was look at my mother’s face, her scowl when she said, *here, comb your hair already.* I couldn’t even pretend to be a princess.

Except, when Mr. Spratt talked to me, that was how I felt.

Because of the heat wave, my mother wouldn’t let us outside, not even to run down the street to Levin’s store. She took a clean bedsheet and soaked it in cold water in the

tub, then hung the damp, cool cloth against the window to keep the sunlight out. You're supposed to be afraid of sunstroke, heat prostration, but I was still afraid of other things: my mother, the artificial arms and legs hanging in the shop window of Zalinsky's store. The kids told stories about boys who hopped freight trains, about how, when they fell, they'd lose a leg or worse. But it was still my mother who scared me the most.

The air outside on Main Street was thick with smoke. They'd burn smudge fires of lilac branches in oil drums on the street corners to keep away the mosquitoes. The sidewalks were covered with empty sunflower seed shells that crackled when you walked. The trick was to stuff a handful of seeds into your mouth and one by one spit out the shells: *look ma, no hands*. The hulls crunched under people's feet, thousands and thousands crunching like the grasshoppers that came in July. Night didn't cool things any, but people still went out. Evenings were crowded with folks out for a walk, whole families on parade up and down the sidewalks on Main Street. Some even went out Old Country fashion in pyjamas and slippers; nobody said anything about it. Whole families out on the sidewalks, looking for a breeze, looking for a breath. The men would stroke their chins, talking, the way they did when they came out of synagogue. As though they were solving all the world's problems. The women talked too, one hand on a hip, but the kids stayed restless because it was hot; it was hot right through the night.

Ben wants a nickel for the movies, wants Poppa to ring in No Sale and take out a nickel for him and a nickel for me, but he won't – for a nickel, you can buy a loaf of bread.

My mother comes in, puts on her apron, tells Avram to

have his dinner break. He takes off the tired old apron, puts it on its peg and goes upstairs. Nine-thirty, and the sun still hasn't set. Light slants in the kitchen windows. My father sits at the table, spreads the newspaper out in front of him. *Cashier Robbed in Daring Daylight Holdup: \$1,400 Stolen from Coca-Cola Company Clerk. Grace Church sermon on Sunday by the Reverend J. R. Mutchmore: "Can Capitalism Come Back?"*

Here's what he's looking for, another article about C. R. Cummings's trip to Soviet Russia. Must be a sharp fellow, this Cummings. He isn't taken in by all the anti-Soviet propaganda, that nonsense about labour camps, famines. Even in the *Winnipeg Tribune* sometimes they have to tell the Soviet side of the story. Cummings talked with a real worker there: *Here we produce cheaply because we have collectivized production. All the workers are working for themselves and not for employers and thus they have every inducement to keep down costs. It is true that we have a lower standard of living than in other countries, but it is still better now than it was before the Revolution.* A planned economy. And here, nothing but waste – farmers pouring milk into ditches to protest that the price is less than the cost. Here they waste everything.

It's hot in the kitchen. *The Grasshopper Armada: The Balance of Nature Must Be Restored.* These plagues of grasshoppers, dust storms, drought.

William Spratt comes down the stairs. Dark grey suit, white shirt, black shoes.

"How're you keeping, Mr. Spratt?"

"Fine, thank you," he answers, "and yourself?"

"Not so bad." My father shrugs, raises his eyebrows.

"And the news, Mr. Gershon?"

Avram shakes his head. "No good, no good. I keep thinking it can't get worse."

Spratt sighs. “That’s what you’d think. People have to hope.”

Avram looks up at him. “Have a seat, Mr. Spratt. Have a bite to eat.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got an appointment. Tell Princess I said hello.”

Something about the man’s back as he walks off worries Avram. A man like Spratt out of work – it’s not right that people should be denied an honest day’s work. Anne’s voice rises from downstairs. She’s talking with Spratt. Maybe if business picks up a little Avram can talk her into taking the children to the beach on Sunday, taking the Moonlight Special home. He can manage by himself at the store.

He wants to telephone Joseph at his rooming house but the phone is downstairs and Anne gets upset. It’s weeks since Joseph came by with his new girl, Daisy. Such a lovely child, such a silly name. A name for a flower, not a person. Joseph’s not twenty years old – too young to be thinking about getting married. He’s still struggling to make a living, still hasn’t been able to go back to school. *The electrician*. He should get an education, a boy like that, with brains. Spending his days pedalling through the city on his bicycle, a ladder attached to one side, tool kit to the other, repairing light fixtures and radios, changing bulbs, for heaven’s sakes, for the ones who are still afraid of electricity. Milk in the ditches and society types are still paying \$189.00 for a radio-phonograph. It’s right here in the paper – \$189.00 for a Victor Radio Phonograph Combination. He’ll call Joseph tomorrow.

That evening Avram is out on the back porch. Spratt comes quietly out. “I’m not disturbing you, Mr. Gershon? Annette’s asleep?”

“Sit yourself down, Mr. Spratt. It’s cooler out here. We were having a little talk but I put her to bed a minute ago.”

Spratt laughs. “She’s quite the conversationalist.”

“She’s shy, usually, Mr. Spratt. But with you she’s a little chatterbox. With strangers she hardly says a word. Family is different. Me she has to ask about everything. Why hasn’t Mrs. Andrychuk come to the store with the new baby. Why won’t Ben let her ride his bicycle. How come Momma wouldn’t let her friend Cassie stay for dinner. She got herself worked up into quite a state, wouldn’t eat her food, because Cassie couldn’t come. Tired her right out.”

“I see Mrs. Gershon has a candle lit,” Spratt says. “Is that for the Sabbath?”

“We don’t light candles on Friday, Mr. Spratt,” Avram tells him.

“I thought it was a Jewish tradition.”

“It is for a lot of families. Annette’s friend Cassie, they light candles every Friday night, say the blessing on them in Hebrew, the whole *schlimazel*. That one’s a *yohrzheit* candle, in memory of Mrs. Gershon’s mother’s death. It has to burn all day and all night on the anniversary; you can’t blow it out. Anya puts it in the sink overnight so the house shouldn’t burn down.”

“So you observe this tradition but you don’t observe the Sabbath?”

“We just try to make ourselves comfortable without belief. Call it ‘kitchen Judaism.’”

“Then you have dietary restrictions. I see Mrs. Gershon shops at the kosher butcher.”

“Waldman’s is the best butcher in town. We wouldn’t eat pork chops, but we don’t keep kosher, not according to anyone who’s orthodox, that’s for sure! All kinds of

different Jews in this town, Mr. Spratt. And one half isn't talking to the other half because of it!" They laugh.

"I should check on Annette in a minute or so. I was telling her a story. *Tell me a story.* Every night I have to tell for her a story. *Tell me about the Old Country,* she says. And I have to tell her again about how my cousin was struck by lightning and for three days we had him buried in the ground till he came round. And I have to tell her again how after my father died they found for me a job with a shop-keeper, how I slept under the counter in the store . . . Everything for her is a story. . . "

"— I wonder sometimes what stories they'll tell about these times . . ."

Avram runs a hand over his bald pate. "Are you having any luck, Mr. Spratt?" he asks.

Spratt swallows. "I don't know if luck has anything to do with it, Mr. Gershon."

"You're right, Mr. Spratt. It's the government. Those people in Ottawa, the big shots, they don't care about the ordinary working man. And the bosses, the bosses only care about their profits . . ."

"You think so?"

"The breadlines, the soup kitchens — it's the government's fault. And the capitalists."

"Sometimes I think . . . I think it's just a question of character. A question of giving up or not giving up . . ."

"You've got a point there, Mr. Spratt. We have to keep trying, right?"

"I suppose we do."

"A bit cooler now that the sun's gone down, d'you think?"

"Not much of a breeze. I think I'll try a stroll down Main Street."

“Goodnight, Mr. Spratt.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Gershon.”

It's too hot to sleep, though Anne is fast asleep in her bed, exhausted. The bedroom is tense with heat. Avram tries not to toss and turn too much. It must be three o'clock in the morning when he hears someone walking quietly up the stairs. “Spratt?” he whispers.

“It's all right,” Spratt whispers back. “It's just me.” His footsteps go softly up to the third floor.

Next morning Avram's at the counter, wrapping up a package of corned beef for Mrs. Andrychuk. A man not from Selkirk Avenue walks into the delicatessen.

“A Mr. Spratt live here?” he asks, a powerful man, a wrestler's shoulders, the French accent strong in this throat: St. Boniface.

“Upstairs,” Avram says. “Third floor.”

“I leave this for him,” the man answers, putting a crumpled suit jacket, dark grey, on the counter, and walking out.

Avram takes the jacket upstairs. “Mr. Spratt,” he calls softly. “Mr. Spratt? A man left this for you.”

The room is dark, but Avram sees a figure on the bed. The heat is already pushing down on the building, the third floor unbearable. Spratt seems to take a deep breath, then sits up as though the whole weight of the heat, the day, bore down on him. He gets up, walks to the door in shirt sleeves, in stocking feet. The first time Avram has seen him without the dark grey suit jacket, black shoes.

“Thank you, Mr. Gershon. I'm sorry to trouble you.”

Avram hands him the jacket, doesn't leave.

He looks at Avram, and smiles, a thin smile. “I must have left it on shore. I went for a swim.” He smiles again.

Andrychuk comes in. Avram looks up, smiles quietly. They must owe him close to \$40.00.

“Mr. Andrychuk, how are you?”

“Mr. Gershon, I’ve been working two weeks now in Eaton’s warehouse.”

“That’s good to hear, Mr. Andrychuk. It was three months you were looking, no?”

“Almost four. This is permanent. I got paid today. I’d like to settle something on my account.”

“There’s no hurry. Your credit is good.”

“Please, Mr. Gershon.” He puts two five-dollar bills down on the counter. Avram gets out the ledger. Andrychuk settles the cap on his head, adjusts his trousers.

“Can I get you anything?”

“The wife’ll be in later in the week.”

“Well, this is good news. It’s good to hear good news.”

“Mr. Gershon.” The bell above the door jingles as he leaves.

Avram puts the two fives into the till. Almost everyone is paying on credit; business is thin. It’s too hot to move. He can hear the children’s voices upstairs in the bedroom, arguing and playing. They have to stay indoors. Anne won’t let them outside in the heat. Today he will telephone Joseph. He won’t let it wait any longer. Avram hears Spratt’s gentle tones. The man has such patience for children. . . . Maybe Ben can take everyone to Pritchard Pool. It’ll be cooler beside the water. Such a shame Spratt doesn’t have his own family, children.

Avram makes himself a salami sandwich, slices the rye thick. Heaps coleslaw into an oval dish. He hates to get the bread soggy with dressing. For dessert he’ll have a taste of Anne’s raspberry cordial. Nothing like it. He sits himself down on the red stool and opens the paper out on the

counter, sets the funnies aside for the children. Ben loves *Buck Rogers*. *Two Dead, Scores Hurt in Political Riots in Berlin*. *Chinese Dies of Injuries in Traffic Mishap*. *Man Is Rescued After Jumping Into River*.

William Spratt, 390 Main Street, jumped from the Provencher Bridge. He was seen to strip off his coat and then jump by two bystanders who paddled out to save him. It was only after a struggle that they succeeded in bringing him to shore. Spratt was taken to the General Hospital by police ambulance.

Avram sets the paper down, runs back up both sets of stairs like a much younger man. "Spratt?" he calls. "Mr. Spratt?" The children are playing on the stairs, but he runs right past.

William Spratt is bent over a piece of paper, creasing it into intricate folds. Somehow, his suit jacket has been pressed. Dark grey suit, white shirt, black shoes. Spratt looks up, shows Avram a little paper object folded like a sailor hat bent double.

"Annette asked me to make her and little Cassie one of these paper fortune tellers, Mr. Gershon." He slips his fingers into the folds, flips it idly back and forth.

"Thank you, Mr. Spratt; I'll give it to them. Mr. Spratt, maybe you would like to join us for dinner?" He's trying to look William Spratt in the eye, but Spratt's bent over another sheet of paper.

"Thank you," he says, head down, "but I've already got an invitation."

Avram jams his fists in his pockets, looks down at his shoes and then up again. "Are you sure?"

Spratt looks up from the paper, looks directly into Avram's face.

“Thank you so much. Perhaps tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow would be fine.”

Avram stands in the doorway for a minute, then goes downstairs.

The next day Spratt is gone.

“You’re worrying for nothing,” Anne says. “He’s hiding somewhere. It was in the papers; he was ashamed.”

“Nobody knew him but us!” Avram answers. “Why should he be ashamed? He said he was coming for dinner . . .”

“He owed rent on the room,” Anne says. “Our landlady told me. Almost two months already. She was going to throw him out, but he’s such a nice quiet type. He kept trying to pay, a dollar here, a dollar there.” She touches Avram’s shoulder. “He was ashamed; he owed money. He ran away. Tomorrow’s Sunday. Take the children to the beach for the afternoon. You need a rest. I’ll mind the store. I’m not interested in swimming. Go. Take the Moonlight Special home. Listen to me.”

“I’m going to visit Joseph,” Avram says. “I’m going to spend tomorrow with Joseph.”

She stands up and walks to the bedroom.

When Avram comes home Sunday evening, Anne won’t talk to him. Monday it’s busy. The Relief money is in and customers come into the delicatessen to pay something of what they owe. Anne still isn’t talking; she keeps herself busy in the kitchen.

Avram puts two cheese blintzes on a plate and takes it out back, where he might be able to catch a breeze. He opens the paper. *Lux soap, 7¢ a bar. Jobless Conference Held in Edmonton. Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle.*

*Unidentified Man Found Floating in Red River.
Approximately forty years old, 130 pounds, five feet, ten
inches. Dark grey suit, white shirt, black shoes.*

He puts the paper down, picks it up. *Farmers' Army Gathers in Ottawa. Flit Kills Mosquitoes. Whose Problem Is It? Demoralizing dole-supported idleness. And the Society page: Printed Voile Frocks. White Softee Hats. Paris Falls for Five O'Clock Teas. Society.* He puts his head down on the paper, the cool newsprint against his cheek, the words pressing into him, the lies.

Hard times, hard winter. But walking down the street in Winnipeg, I don't think, *Winnipeg*, don't set myself in a particular place because in my life there is only one place, *here*. Five o'clock and it's already dark, the sky gone from royal blue to a velvety purple to black and the snow so white it seems to glow. Yesterday there was just a bit of snow and the snowbanks are still white, new with it. No wind tonight, so there's an extra stillness added onto the layer of stillness the snow seems to give.

A car is hunched at the traffic light and someone's inside, the person inside thinking his own thoughts just the way I'm thinking mine. We're each alone, looking out from behind our faces, seeing just the edges of cheek, nose, ridge of skin around the eyes, a kind of wavering shadow if I try to look down at my own face, but I don't like doing that, it's too scary. Though I do sometimes like the feeling of being alone, especially outside like this on the dark, familiar streets, the cold air against my face so that I feel the edges of myself, my skin, know where I end.

Winnipeg. Are there really other places? In the middle of

winter, in Winnipeg, it doesn't seem there are even other seasons. In school I've learned about the tropics – Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn – but they sound frightening, not real: beasts, diseases. My school books say that in other places there is no winter. *No winter*. They can't put that one over on me. It can't be true. Nobody gets away without winter. The snow just comes and goes there, the cold not quite as cold. The snow, heavier, warmer, bends the feathery leaves of the palm trees till they almost touch the frozen sand. I like drawing palm trees, the sawtooth leaves, criss-cross of the trunks. Miss MacLeod says I'm the best drawer in the class.

It must get so cold in those thin grass huts. Here we have wooden houses, solid walls. I don't like the story about the three little pigs because nobody here uses brick for their houses. And wooden houses don't fall down, not in Winnipeg, no matter how hard the wind blows. Though lots of people are cold, even inside. And what about animals? I'm still not sure how animals get by in winter. Well, Nature takes care of everything, the balance of nature, Miss MacLeod called it. Mother Nature takes care of everything. Or maybe God. But Poppa and my mother don't believe in God. *Superstitious mumbo-jumbo*. It's Mother Nature who looks after the animals. Mother Nature and Poppa.

Poppa doesn't cut the bread under his arm, sawing away and letting the crumbs fall onto the kitchen floor, like my mother does. He sets the loaves on the counter and slices carefully. Then with the stiff flat edge of his hand he sweeps every single crumb into his other hand and then from his hand into a chipped bowl he keeps beside the sink. And when the bowl gets full enough, I'll wake up one morning and he'll be in his robe and slippers on the back porch,

standing still as anything, his palms turned out and up, like a kind of a prayer. I wait without breathing, and then they come, the sparrows, and land on his shoulders, fingers, his head. They're not scared. What would it be like to be a sparrow? Or Poppa, who's nothing but good? *Make a wish*. I wish there was no stubborn knot of meanness to twist inside me. I wish I could be like Poppa.

Most days after school I go skating, even though it's dark by the time I get to the rink, and cold. My mother tells me how crazy I am to go skating in this cold but I want to; I don't listen. Fine, she says and she says I can't blame her if I get frost-bite. I have to get out, so I sling my hand-me-down white figure skates over my shoulder by the laces. They're all scratched and a bit bulgy-looking at the ankles, but they fit if I wear two pairs of socks. When it's forty below, you can't even sit down in a snowbank to put on your skates – the snow pulls the heat right out of you. You have to keep skating, move. It doesn't matter how tired you get. If you stop, it won't take long for the cold to get you. The cold will climb inside you and then you won't be yourself any more. What will you be? *Something rich and strange*. Joseph read me the poem. Something rich and strange. No, you'd be dead. Dead, not yourself. That's the way it is. Even the air can be dangerous; not much between you and what wants to end you. Nothing's easy, not even dying.

I know about Mr. Spratt, the wreck, the waste.

I'm not supposed to know, but I do. What has he changed into now, Mr. Spratt, the grey, muddy water filling up his mouth?

We all go to the wedding, Ben all dressed up in his new suit, me in a brand-new party dress. Poppa makes even my mother

go. But then, a few months later, Joseph stops coming by as often. It's because Joseph and Poppa have an argument about the Soviet Union, Poppa's trip. Poppa is planning to visit the Soviet Union to see our grandmother. Joseph says, *go, good. You need to see your mother.* That isn't what they argue about. What makes Joseph so mad is Poppa's plan to take us to Russia. He wants to see if he can get permission for all of us to go there. I've never heard Joseph talk to Poppa like that. *It's plain stupid; no, worse than stupid, criminal.* And Poppa says, *don't talk to your father like that.*

But I know why Poppa wants to take us to the Soviet Union. Because of Mr. Spratt, what happened to him. And because of what happens all over the capitalist world to ordinary workers who are just trying to make a decent life for themselves. And because Poppa is tired of the store, tired of giving kids loaves of bread when my mother isn't looking so they won't go hungry. And because of the future he wants for me and Ben. *In the capitalist world, there is no future.* No jobs, no chance of an education. That's why he wants us to leave.

I can't understand what's possessing you, why you'd even consider leaving! Joseph sounds so mad. And he keeps trying to tell Poppa what it's like in the Soviet Union, how things have changed since Poppa left twenty years ago.

Joseph doesn't understand, but my mother does. She wants her country back.

My father is upstairs in the bedroom, stretched out on his bed. The letter came yesterday. The room's warm, stuffy, the curtains closed. Anne's bed beside his is empty, the bed carefully made, the heavy gold bedspread pulled tight over the blankets. One hand holds the letter, the other lightly touches the nubby surface of the spread, gold, matching.

For eight months he's been planning, finding the money, arranging the paperwork, getting a good price on his ticket. Letters have been sent to offices in Ottawa and Moscow, to the family in Simferopol and in Odessa. Everything was falling into place. And now this letter.

With heavy hearts, we must write to tell you that your beloved mother, Sarah Chava Gershon, passed away November 15, 1934. She died quietly in her sleep. May she rest in peace.

He's too late. He's missed his chance.

Anne comes quietly into the room, lays a hand on his arm. "Avram? You were sleeping?"

He shakes his head.

"Avram, listen to me. I've been thinking. The way things turned out, this maybe isn't the right thing for us. So much trouble to see your mother – *alevasholem*, may she rest in peace – and now everything is over and done with. Maybe, with your mother gone, we shouldn't bother . . ."

"Anya –"

"Listen to me, Avram: it's too much work for you. Why do we need to go and change everything? It's not like we're not eating, like we don't have work."

He sits up on the bed. "Anya, I've got the ticket. I'm going. We can't sit here and wait for the Messiah. Or Roosevelt, or Bennett."

She pats his hand. "See if you can sleep."

He turns over, closes his eyes. And then he's asleep, dreaming his mother's face, brown braids in a crown. Every night for the next ten weeks he dreams her face. Night after night he's the boy sleeping beneath the counter, the boy sleeping inconsolably beneath the counter.

Winnipeg, February 1935. My father wore his heavy tweed overcoat and brown wool suit when he boarded the train. I'd never been in a room that big. I tipped my head back to take it all in, my mouth holding itself open, the vault of my palate repeating the vault above. *Say goodbye*, my mother told me. *I have to go*, my father said. *You're a big girl now*. The black body of the train shifting beside me. I wouldn't let him go. In one slight movement I stepped up onto the train, slipping along the aisles until I spotted his name on a paper tag. I fit myself beneath his seat, between the two rows of back-to-back benches. *Make a wish*. All my body wanted to keep my father home. I thought with my body I could keep him from leaving.

And so the smoke diminished and died and the train stopped. I stopped the train because I want what I want. But after twenty minutes, the conductor swearing, the train delayed, they found me, and my father lifted me up, lifted me high and looked in my face, not saying anything. He held me hard against the tobacco-smelling jacket and then he set me down, where I kicked and screamed, almost nine years old, and my mother took me by the arm and onto the streetcar, and the train left, carrying my father away.

The train I failed to stop lifted my father out of his life, out of what had been, for me at least, a whole, and carried him east, from the Prairies to the Maritimes, Winnipeg to Halifax. In Halifax he boarded the *SS Montcalm*, which crossed the Atlantic to land in Liverpool. By train from Liverpool to Dover, by ferry to Calais and then on the long train to Moscow, my father was carried backwards from the New World to the Old, his life wound backwards into a possible future, into the country, the life he'd left.

All through the winter months I waited: for spring, for

Poppa to come back. All winter I walked the blocks to school in my heavy overshoes, in my heavy coat and double mittens, crunching the packed snow under my boots, watching the clean white snow dirty and then the dirt hide under a new layer of snow. What I wanted was my father, but what I had was my mother, who sat me down in a kitchen chair, got the tortoiseshell brush from the dressing table:

Sit still if you want me to fix your hair. Such a fidgety thing. I don't want you sulking all the time just because your poppa's not here to fuss over you. Hold your head still. When I worked in the orphanage in Odessa those orphans sat just so when we did their hair – no squirming and crying. All that work to do. Not that I was with the children often. I'll do anything but look after children. My job was in the dining room, laying the table, washing dishes. Hard work. You've never known that kind of work. And if I have anything to say about it you never will. That's why I don't like you hanging around my kitchen all the time. I'm not teaching you to be anyone's servant. Catch yourself a rich husband instead. Fourteen I was when I started with the job in the orphanage. Six days a week there and then three evenings a week at the opera house – during the season – as soon as I turned sixteen. We all had to find jobs; that was it. At the orphanage sometimes, after the dinner dishes were done, they'd ask me to check in on the dormitory. Those children were like wild animals, jumping, yelling, if you didn't know how to handle them. But they didn't dare act up with me. Stop crying, I'd say, and they'd stop, and without me laying a finger on them. These were orphans. You could have done anything with them. But I never needed to smack any child. Not like my mother, a hard woman.

She'd use her fists, the broomstick, whatever came to hand. And I always got the worst of it, even though my big sisters tried to keep her away from me. It was because I stood up to her. When I was twelve I got my arm broken. I still remember how it sounded when it broke, like a twig on a tree. And I remember my mother's face, like she knew she was doing just the right thing. No arguing with her. Nobody can say I ever laid a hand on any child, not even the electrician. Not me. Hold still. When I was your age, in Odessa, I had hair down to my waist. Every day I'd come home and one of my sisters would sit me down in front of the stove and brush my hair, a hundred strokes. And we'd walk, all us girls, along Nikolayevsky Boulevard, taking our time, and the boys would call out to me: hey, green eyes. I never even looked at a boy. My sisters taught me to respect myself. Here, we're almost done. I'm making you pigtails. So it pulled a little. Don't make a big to-do about every little thing. The orphanage was hard, but the opera I loved. That building – more beautiful than the opera in Paris, that's what they said. I worked out front, I told you, a cashier. Sure I watched! I never got to see the first act, but I saw the rest. *Che gelida manina*. Puccini, Verdi, Wagner. All the fancy big shots with their velvet evening cloaks and long white gloves. With my wages I bought those gold opera glasses trimmed in mother-of-pearl. If you're a good girl I'll let you play with them. Mother-of-pearl. Nobody was going to look down on me. Leave your hair alone already; it's done. Go. Go now and play.

It's spring. I'm tired of waiting for Poppa. I want what I want and I want Poppa, but I can't have him. There's nothing to do. I want to dig, but there's nothing to dig. I'm itchy from