

The Light at the End of the Day

ELEANOR WASSERBERG

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*This book is dedicated to Ignace,
to Jerzy (George) and to Mark Stefan*

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There is a gold light in certain old paintings
That represents a diffusion of sunlight.
It is like happiness, when we are happy.
It comes from everywhere and from nowhere at once,
 this light . . .

The world is very dusty, uncle. Let us work.
One day the sickness shall pass from the earth for good.
The orchard will bloom; someone will play the guitar.
Our work will be seen as strong and clean and good.
 And all that we suffered through having existed
 Shall be forgotten as though it had never existed.

‘There is a gold light in certain old paintings’

DONALD JUSTICE



Kraków, 1939



I

THE ODERFELDT APARTMENT was the last building on the grand Ulica Bernardyńska, its final, corner jewel. One side looked out over the river, but it was the sight from the dining room the neighbours envied: a perfect view of Wawel Castle. The red brick walls of the Wawel jutted out into the street, as though reaching for their neighbour, and a turret sat exactly opposite the window of the main drawing room, as though they had been designed to mirror each other. Dining in that drawing room under the gaze of portrait faces in golden frames, many imagined they were at the Wawel itself, some state occasion, looking out over the terraces and turrets, the flash of green lawn. Adam Oderfeldt liked to smoke his pipe on the apartment terrace with his artist friends, and watch the sky darken over the green-tinged tower tops. On summer evenings the family threw open the windows and invited neighbours and friends for parties in the shadow of the heart of Poland.

Janina Kardas was navigating her way towards the Oderfeldt apartment, in the strangely cheerful sunshine of early afternoon. She wore her best clothes: a fur hat and a heavy winter coat, beautifully tailored with a matching ermine trim. The coat and hat were too warm for early September in the city, but she wished to display herself today as a woman of obvious good breeding. She remembered snatches of German

refugee tales, how people were stopped in the street. She imagined herself seized, accosted, jostled, until the attacker, in some kind of uniform, noticed her coat, her hat, and looked then into her delicately lined face, not young or pretty enough to be in danger, she comforted herself, but somehow authoritative. He would step back, uneasy, for surely she knew people, surely her husband was someone of importance? And Janina's imaginary self sneered a little, tugged her clothing back into place, patted her hat back onto its perch, and strode away.

Janina passed the shuttered bakery. Two weeks ago the baker had been holding forth yet again, lectures that war was coming. It had been the same for weeks, pastries and doom, and she was irritated by it. The shelves and displays had all been empty that day, and upstairs, heavy footsteps had dragged heavier furniture.

'You're leaving?'

'It will happen soon,' he'd said, chewing the thin lips on his lean face, so wrong for a baker, who really ought to be fat, adding, 'I'm going to Lwów, I'm not sticking around.'

'But my rolls and doughnuts,' she had replied.

The baker had rolled his thin lips in and out then leaned in so she could smell the ginger on his breath. 'You are crazy,' he whispered. '*You* should get out of Kraków. You and all your . . . set.' He nodded slowly as though passing on a secret code.

'What a lot of hysteria!' she said. She lowered her voice. 'I'm not some poor Jew in Germany. And so what about my pastries? Am I to starve because of your paranoia?' The baker shrugged, dismissing her, and she swept out past a group of poorer women who had caught the idea 'war' in the room and were worrying about it. Only a week or so later, Janina thought the word 'war' had become so familiar it had lost its

sting, until the radio spoke it, and she could have folded in on herself like an earwig in terror.

Now she tried to ignore the crowd, who were muttering phrases that frightened her. A woman holding a boy's hand, wearing an ugly green shawl, was saying to an old man, 'But we have surrendered, haven't we? The radio . . .' and as she passed a couple pulling suitcases, the woman's hair all in disarray, pins sticking out like a sewing cushion doll, Janina heard the man muttering, 'They say the army is decimated, just utterly decimated.' As she hurried down Bernardyńska, Janina yelped as people brushed against her, even jostled her without apology, crushing the fur on the edge of her coat. She heard snatches of conversations that made her head pound. They became a rhythm with her feet on the pavement: *no, it is a matter of days, it is a matter of hours, it is now, we must leave, we must leave.*

By the time she reached the Oderfeldt apartment, shameful sweat coated her lower back and her temples. Janina rang three times, holding the bell longer than was polite, before a servant finally came. It wasn't one she remembered, but the girl did an awkward little bob, flustered, and said, 'Oh, another one, are you come to see from the windows too? They are all upstairs—' and then she ran off before Janina could reply.

She was left to walk up the stairs alone, and the strangeness of it made her feel shy: no servant to announce her, no invitation, but then nothing was as it should be these days. She was reassured by the gleam of the banister and the thickness of the rug she could feel through her boots. From the main drawing room came muffled sounds of voices, sounding quite relaxed; she determined to dismiss the servant's alarm, and find comfort in her kind of sensible people.

Entering the room, Janina noticed first the elegant buttoned back of Anna Oderfeldt's dress. She smoothed down her own coat, feeling dowdy as always in comparison to Anna. Along the windows, a row of backs: scarves obscuring hair and faces, hats on inside, people craning and on tiptoe. A drone of low, shaking voices. The Oderfeldt daughters were there, Alicia with her face pressed to the glass, her hands splayed out, smudging the pane. She always behaved like a baby, this one; she must be thirteen or so now, but indulged into endless infancy. Her older sister Karolina paced, wearing boots inside. She looked purposeful, grown up, as though she were to announce a plan soon. Perhaps they were about to leave. Janina tried to catch Karolina's eye, but she was unseeing, moving her lips a little as though rehearsing a speech, or praying. Unsure what to do, Janina cleared her throat quietly, then loudly. Adam Oderfeldt turned and gave her a tight-lipped smile.

'Ah! Another neighbour come for the view. Come, Mrs Kardas. Janina.'

She smiled her approval. At least Adam was behaving like a gentleman, observing the formalities.

'Would you like a drink?' Adam offered. He gestured to the sideboard, where vodka and *nalewki* sat in shining decanters. Anna turned too, pale as milk, but her gaze slid to Karolina, still walking behind Janina, before she was drawn back to the window.

'No, thank you, Mr Oderfeldt. I just wanted to . . . I wondered if . . .'

Others turned then, just for a moment. The same pale faces, pinched with confusion. She recognised acquaintances from her son's school, lawyers and their wives who had come to dinner, doctors like her husband, Adam's friend Stefan from

the university, the Hartmanns, David Schultz and his ugly bride of only a year, or was it two? Janina and her husband Laurie had gone to the wedding, before he died, and given them a generous gift of Meissen china. Had they ever received a thank-you note? Janina didn't think so, and returned the wife's weak smile with a cold blankness.

'Yes, come and see. There's nothing clear, but come look at her if you like,' Adam replied.

She joined the others, craning and peering. The castle looked empty and serene – immovable. It seemed to promise that everything would be all, all right. The red brick glowed in the early autumn sunlight, cheerful against the bright blue sky. Janina remembered telling her son Aleks the story of a dragon who lived in a cave beneath the castle, fire-breathing and strong, its heart beating for the city. He'd listened and then solemnly lectured her that this was just a story, and that real dragons were called dinosaurs. That was when Laurie was still alive; she'd gone straight to tell him, that already their baby said no more stories, and she'd cried on his shoulder like a fool. It's all right, he said to her. It's all, all right.

For a stomach-dropping moment, Janina thought she saw a soldier on the lawns around the castle, a man running, but then he was gone; perhaps she'd imagined it. Below them, in the street, the pool of people she had waded through had become a flood.

'Are you leaving?' she murmured to Anna, at her side.

'It seems so calm,' Anna whispered.

'You know the Friels already left? Two days ago. They've left everything behind. It's all just sitting in their house,' Janina said, unsure if she was soothed or alarmed by Anna's show of nonchalance.

‘They’ve probably just gone to visit family,’ Anna replied, in the same low tone, but on quickening breath that told her irritation, or perhaps her fear.

Down the line of watchers, the same murmur rose, *maybe we should leave too, just for a while . . .*

‘Ben Friel wore a *kippah* every day, not just for special occasions,’ Anna added.

‘Yes, and they had a mezuzah on their doorframe,’ Janina readily added, before dropping her gaze to the street once more. She remembered her mother’s marble mezuzah, packed up in the attic along with all her things from the old house. She had meant to nail it outside their own apartment door, imagined the comfort in passing the old talisman as she came and went, a relic of childhood. Instead it had remained in its box all these years. It was the first time she had thought of it for so long. Would someone search the house, find it? She wanted to ask Anna, but was stalled by her neighbour’s slow movements, her cool sipping of the glass in her hands. It was childish to worry. It was vulgar to panic.

Janina caught sight of a group of Polish soldiers, heading away from the city, heads bowed, leaving their mothers behind. *You should be ashamed*, she thought. She wondered if her boy was safe.

‘Do you think if you did decide to leave, I could come with you?’ she murmured again to Anna, feeling a hot blush across her neck and chest.

But Anna had moved away, hadn’t heard her; she was kissing the cheeks of the Hartmanns, first the wife and then the husband. The wife, Miriam, had an old spat with Janina that went back to the girl wearing too much make-up, and walking out with Aleks when they were too young. Janina had called the girl a slut. The optician, Miriam’s father, had refused to

treat Janina after that, and she had to travel across the city into the old district, back to her childhood doctor. Now, Miriam's heavy mascara streamed down her cheeks, collected in ugly clumps in the creases of her eyes. Her eyes slipped over Janina, who wanted, suddenly, to apologise to her, to take her hand, but instead she stood mute. She turned back to the window to hide her awkwardness there.

'There must have been another radio announcement,' she said. 'Look how many people there are out in the streets now.'

'They can't be in the Wawel already, you don't think?' Stefan Lis said, his voice muffled by glass as he pressed his face once more against the window.

'No new flag there, as you see,' Adam replied, pouring another vodka. His hand played a tune between decanter and glass. 'It will be all right,' he added.

It will all be all, all right. Janina caught herself in the windows, nodding as though to ritual prayer or radio music.

'Look at them all leaving,' Miriam said to her husband, and he raised his voice in return, breaking the hush of the room: 'But where will they all go? Why make ourselves homeless, stateless, when we don't even know—'

'They'll go to the border, Tomas, and then see from there,' Miriam replied, her voice suddenly full of disdain. Everyone smiled and nodded *goodbyes* and *good lucks* at them even as Tomas continued to insist, 'We're not going to leave, at least not just yet . . . Adam, we'll be here for dinner tomorrow . . .' and the discussion continued out of the room and down the stairs.

'And Mrs Kardas, where are you going?' Adam called.

'Oh! Home. Such a lot of nonsense and hysteria.'

2

ANNA ODERFELDT watched her widowed neighbour disappear down the stairs in her old-fashioned hat and coat. A mean relief rose in her; if Adam had overheard Janina, it would have been hopeless, but he was too distracted, enjoying, as always, the way their home was the hub of the street. She had hoped Janina would be too embarrassed to ask again to join them, had banked on her stuffy ways. If Anna were to dwell on it, past the gaping fear, she would find how guilty she felt, how wrong it was to let the old woman drift away like that. How vulnerable and small old Janina had seemed, almost tiptoeing down the stairs. Instead she stood as still as possible, tensed her muscles, deepened her breathing. *Harden yourself*, she thought, *be wood, be ice, be steel. Are you going to let an old woman slow you down, while you get your daughters to safety, their smooth, pale skin, their soft bodies that a bullet will tear through like silk?*

Soon the drawing room was quiet, emptied of its guests. Karolina had slipped away, probably to use the telephone, or send a final letter, Anna thought, and she found space among the tides of her thoughts to pity her heartbroken daughter, even as she envied her the simple distraction of such a clean, sharp emotion. Alicia had slipped behind the drawing-room curtains, still fixed on the view of the city below. Those

curtains had been a wedding gift from her brother-in-law: thick pink damask lined with silk.

‘I’ll tell Janie to take down the curtains,’ Anna said.

‘They have curtains in Lwów,’ Adam replied, with a smile.

‘We could . . . sell them, or use them for something else. I’ve heard refugees can—’

‘Aneczka, we are not refugees! We are going to stay with family until things calm down.’

Alicia unwrapped herself from the curtain, her face flushed and hot, just as Janie, her face also blotched red, came into the drawing room without knocking.

‘Madam,’ she said, ‘please select which clothes you would like us to pack in the girls’ rooms.’

‘I want my painting, Janie,’ Alicia instructed.

‘Are you going to wear your painting?’ Anna snapped. ‘Are you going to eat it?’

‘Are we going to eat and wear the curtains?’ Alicia replied.

‘Now, now,’ Adam said, as though hushing a baby. ‘Of course we should take the things we love, just in case.’

Janie and Dorothea rolled and pressed, clicked shut trunks of fabric and books. In Karolina’s room, Alicia and Karolina pulled on layer upon layer, buttoned into fur coats so they sweated as they pulled on their boots.

‘What else do you want to take?’ Karolina asked, cupping her sister’s face in her hands.

‘My sketches. Are you taking your poems?’

‘Some of the books, but I can’t take all of them . . . and my letters . . .’

Alicia studied her sister’s face. ‘How many are there?’

‘Lots. He writes every day.’

‘Too many to take.’

‘Probably,’ Karolina said, her voice breaking.

Alicia silently took her by the hand and led her to her own room, full of piles of unpacked clothes and shoes. She crouched down at a corner under a never-used desk.

‘What are you doing?’

Alicia ignored her. She felt along the skirting board for the loose panel, pressing on it until it gave way. She held out a hand from beneath the desk.

‘What’s in there?’

‘Just sketches and things.’ She felt into the dusty space, where diaries, translations and sketch after sketch were hidden.

Karolina ran to her bookshelf and returned with a stash of letters, which she kissed before handing them to Alicia to tuck behind the walls.

As the hour ticked by, Karolina went down again and again to check for messages, to ask if the telephone had rung. Each time Janie shook her head, kissed Karolina on her hand or her cheek, and each time Karolina said, ‘Well, there’s still time,’ and Janie replied, ‘Perhaps he is on his way, in person.’

By early evening, the house had taken on the strange echo of a stripped building. In the main hallway, their Persian rugs had been rolled into thick, red sausages, lumped where diamonds were sewn into the backs. Silk dresses, fur coats, pairs of Parisian gloves with pearl edging, books, papers: they were all layered against the walls, some in leather cases, others in boxes and even baskets from the kitchen. The radio drifted between static and news of the new, almost bloodless occupation, in Polish and German words. Adam rushed back to the dining-room window, but the Wawel looked just the same. Across the city, people did the same thing, expecting the sky, the colour of buildings, even their own faces reflected in the windows, to have changed. Rushing to gather together their

possessions, to keep the servants and their daughters calm, Adam and Anna passed on the stairs, stopped, held hands, pressed their foreheads together.

‘I can’t believe it,’ Anna whispered.

‘Perhaps it isn’t true.’

‘The radio.’

‘Yes, all right. We’re leaving soon.’

Janie, and even the cook, Dorothea, began to load up the beeswax-scented cars.

‘Where is Robert?’ asked Adam. ‘I want to talk to him about the route.’

‘Robert left early, sir,’ Dorothea called to him as she leaned all her weight into a pile of material that would not fit into a case. Adam recognised the drawing-room curtains.

‘Leave those, Dorota,’ he said. ‘Left where?’

‘Well, out of the city of course, sir.’

The family stood in mute shock at this.

‘Robert’s gone?’ Karolina said.

‘But he was supposed to drive us – that can’t be right,’ Anna said, strangely close to laughing. ‘Has he really gone?’

The servant women were frowning, whether at Robert’s sedition or the family’s response, it was impossible to tell.

‘He has family,’ Dorothea said, as though this explained everything. Adam stared at her. ‘He’s a Jew,’ she added, in a tone close to snapping.

‘Hysteria, just hysteria,’ Adam muttered, but he himself began to stack random objects in the hallway, and the family followed him, began to help packing. To Alicia it was like playing upstairs when she was small, carrying piles of laundry and sighing in an imitation of Janie. She used to imagine how strong and capable she looked, and how the flush of exercise might make her cheeks glow in a pretty way.

Adam carried his paintings, slid in like secrets among the layers in the cars: Adam's own face in paint with his red hair and smiling eyes. Alicia's wild four-year-old face with her fringe, unfinished in its beautiful frame. Alicia's pretty brown-eyed stare, her red dress billowing confidence in its rich, lush folds.

In the hallway, the family stood in the new echoing space, with so many rugs and paintings gone. Both servants were sweating, and Janie was crying.

'Well,' Anna said, 'we'll be back before long.'

Janie pulled Karolina and then Alicia into her, kissing their heads. Alicia was stiff and shocked but Karolina clung to Janie's neck. They shook hands and Dorothea even kissed Anna's cheek.

'Good luck,' Janie said, and then she melted back into the house, wiping her face.

'We will be leaving too, sir, very soon, so we'll lock up the house,' Dorothea said.

'Papa, what about Mimi and Cece?' Alicia asked. 'Will they come with us or with the servants?'

Adam didn't answer.

'I'll leave the dogs some water and food,' Dorothea said, smiling down at Alicia.

Then she too was gone, her shoes sounding loud and hurried on the naked stairs down to the kitchen.

'Go and use the toilet,' Karolina instructed her sister. Alicia blushed and stared: only Janie spoke to her of such things.

'Yes, go,' Anna joined in. 'Who knows when we will stop.'

As Alicia obeyed, her sister turned to her parents.

'Papa. Mama. I—'

'Darling Karolcia, I know what you're going to say and it's impossible,' Adam said.

Karolina shifted her feet. 'I can't leave him. I won't.'

Anna could have shaken her, made her teeth rattle. She tried to keep her voice level. 'Karolina, the whole country is under attack. They're saying Kraków is Germany now. Do you understand? We have to leave.' Karolina met her with dreamy silence, her eyes brimming. 'You're enjoying this,' Anna snapped, as Adam tutted at her harsh tone. 'This isn't some romantic drama.'

But Karolina wouldn't pick up Anna's bait, instead looked to her father.

Her parents shared a glance, in which a long-practised battle of wills was settled in Adam's favour. Anna sighed out her frustration. As she left she considered holding Karolina's face in hers, in apologetic admiration of the stubborn set of her daughter's jaw. Instead she vented at Janie as she went down the stairs, 'Perhaps you might move a little more slowly? I'm not sure the entire German army will have time to come and steal quite *all* of our things!' Her voice faded as she stepped out into the street, lit a cigarette, her hands shaking a little.

Father and daughter faced each other. Karolina began. 'I know you think I'm asking permission but I'm not. I'm just informing you that I'm staying. You can write to me at his address, if you stay out of Kraków for a long while.'

This wrong-footed Adam, who had been braced for a stormy passionate speech, not this calm informative one. He aimed to set Karolina off-balance in turn.

'I see. Are you in trouble?'

Karolina's cheeks flooded red and she stammered out a *No*. Adam pushed his guilt away.

'Then there is simply no need to be reckless.'

'I can't leave him here.'

‘You’ve told him we’re leaving?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s written?’

‘No.’

‘Telephoned, spoken to your mother, spoken to me?’

Karolina glared at him. ‘It’s chaos,’ Robert said. ‘The message might not have got through.’

Adam took Karolina’s hands in his. His own elegant, soft fingers folded over her chewed nails and torn cuticles. He saw in them his daughter’s hours of innocent fretting over her lover, while her parents felt the very ground lurch under their feet.

‘May I suggest a compromise, my Karolcia?’

She nodded.

‘His apartment is on our way out of the city. We’ll stop there, and you can speak to him. Tell him he must come with us, because, no, listen—’ for Karolina had begun to withdraw her hands, shaking her head. ‘Because it is as impossible for us to leave you behind as it is for you to leave him. If he loves you as he says, he will come, we’ll take him. And you can marry in Lwów if you like, from your uncle’s house. If he will not, his love is not enough and so you must make your farewells and recover.’

‘He will come,’ Karolina said.

‘Well then, everyone is happy.’ He kissed her hands, one and then the other, feeling the rough edge of her torn skin under his lip.

Without Robert they had only one driver, so everything had been moved into the larger car, and the sisters perched on top of their possessions, their necks twisted against the roof. As the car pulled away, Alicia imagined the dogs scampering

around the empty rooms, enjoying freedom, scratching the walls, sleeping in Papa's bed, on the satin sheets. She imagined them greeting the soldiers as they came in with excited whines and yelps, and being shot between their watery brown eyes.

Karolina buried her elation as deep as she could. She knew it was indecent to be so happy. The war had decided things for them after waiting for so long. Within a month they could be married. She felt a surge of joy and squashed it by focusing on the familiar street, telling herself she might never see it again; she found she could not care.

Sun glinted on shop front windows. It was as though they were leaving for a late summer holiday in the mountains or to meet a train with a visitor from Berlin or Paris, Anna thought. As they continued onto the main roads out of the city, she saw lives carried in baskets and on backs, pushed in carts and prams.

Alicia saw a boy with a half-eaten apple, his mouth full, cheeks puffed out like a mouse, as though he must eat all of the food at once, before it was too late.

'Papa,' Alicia said, 'we didn't bring any food or anything to drink.'

A long silence, in which the crowd they crawled through called out to itself: *Let me through, for God's sake, let me through. Did you hear that?* Their own panicked stupidity hung over the car, and Anna felt the terrible impulse to laugh again.

'We'll hold on until Lwów,' Adam replied. 'Your uncle will have a whole table of treats for us. You are going to have to learn,' Adam said, raising his voice, 'to be hungry and to be patient.'

His knuckles on the steering wheel were pushing against the skin, a ripple running through his hands. Alicia shifted, the hidden rug-diamonds pushing at her muscles.

An hour later they were still in the city. The roads were clogged. Waves of panic struck the crowd when rumours of planes began, though the sky was clear and silent. Some cowered next to the car, which shivered with the weight of their bodies pressed against it. A man gripped the door handle on Anna's side, sheltering under his jacket. She shrieked, kicked out as though to shoo the man away.

'Just drive, Adam,' she pleaded. 'They will move.'

But the carts and the throng and the horses made an impassable ocean. Adam nudged and blew the car horn and each time the car shuddered to a halt the mounds of beautiful things tottered. Little thuds in the earth, against the car, among the crowd, turned Karolina's mind to her book, forgotten on her bed. The god Poseidon shaking his trident, whipping up the winds, the earth, the oceans. The thuds grew: a fight had broken out. Shouts of wordless rage. The crowd surged one way, then another. The car rocked and Karolina let out a squeal. Alicia clamped her hand over her own mouth as she saw the source of the disturbance: two German soldiers, their rifles gleaming, walked towards the car. *They are here.* The crowd parted around them as a shoal of fish.

Adam's knuckles working, their grind and roll, was the only movement in the car. Breaths held, the family became a painting, locked in place. Alicia wanted to look at her mother but instead she saw only the bright white fur of her collar from the corner of her eye, the very tip of her mother's chin, and the slow pace of the soldiers, one bending down, graceful as he touched the side of the car. He turned to his colleague and gave a low whistle of appreciation.

The first soldier rapped politely on Papa's car window. *Tap-tap-tap*. Quick, businesslike. His companion shielded his eyes and peered into the car, nodding at Anna when he caught her

eye, and at this courtesy Anna allowed her lungs to empty, slowly, without any kind of release, but it was something. The first soldier stood back, waiting.

‘Adam,’ Anna said.

Adam opened the door and the soldier pulled him out, without malice, without any moment of eyeball-to-eyeball triumph, and he didn’t throw him to the ground, and there were no gunshots or heavy blows to Adam’s head, he was not pushed to his knees, nor his coat dragged from him, he was not spat at. All of the horrors of Adam’s humiliation, all of the imaginary moments of terror Alicia had dreamed awake for a long time: they did not happen. There was no blood. And yet Alicia screamed all the same, because her Papa was touched by a German soldier, and he was out of the car, and they were inside it.

‘Stop, Alicia,’ her mother whispered. The white panic of her eyes killed Alicia’s scream in her throat.

Adam’s head was bowed, his fists clenched but his face turned to the floor like a servant. They were demanding something, and Adam opened his hands. He flicked his gaze to Anna, and as she met his eyes she saw urgent terror. Anna could only nod and show her husband a second of raw horror of her own, a look of love and apology and anger all at once. She threw open her passenger door, and rushed to the back of the car, pulling out first Alicia, and then Karolina, with skin-breaking force, dragging them over the piles of their possessions. They tumbled out on a layer of detritus, instantly dusted and muddied by the fall, scrambled up and away from the car, away from Adam. The crowd swallowed them, hid them, Anna clutching her children to her hips.

‘Mama, our things,’ Alicia gasped. ‘All our things. Mama, my painting.’



Kraków, 1937–1938



3

ALICIA'S FATHER led her by the hand through the damp, misty streets towards the Glowny. Her breath billowed like smoke. Warm lights were beginning to glow in the windows of the bakeries; their cinnamon sugar doughnuts sat fluffy, piping out scent and heat. She slowed, pulling Adam back, to look at a tower of pastries. She shook his wrist, meaning *Papa, I want*. It was usually enough. But Adam had other plans, and pulled her mittened hand back into a stroll. She trotted along, confused, but a bloom of excitement tempered her instinct to stamp and pout.

Mama had said it would be a surprise. 'I'm not coming,' she'd said, 'only your Papa and you. A special birthday treat.' Her mother had smiled and smoothed down the red satin of Alicia's new dress; it had been too thin for the wintry air but the seamstress had lined it for warmth that week. When Alicia and Papa left, her sister Karolina hadn't said goodbye.

Alicia pulled the fur closer around her, used the edge of it to stroke her cheek. It smelled of her mother's heady perfume: lilies and something like cake. The Glowny rose before them, the horses clopping around the cobblestones, the Cloth Hall standing in the centre, warm and inviting. Alicia wasn't allowed to wander in there, where cheap curios were sold: her places were the boutiques and sweet shops of the boulevards off the square, like the Ulica Floriańska, the street Mama said

could be Paris. It was coming to the hour, and so the bugler would be playing his thin wail soon. Adam slowed, stamped his booted feet in the cold, and enveloped Alicia in his arms to listen. He was always respectful of the bugler.

‘Think how cold he is up there, Alicia,’ he said. ‘Lucky us in our coats and furs.’

A small crowd gathered under the church spire to listen. Alicia admired their velvet capes and fur-lined hats, some in mink like hers. The women wore pearls over their coats and the men’s boots were shiny like Papa’s. Some of the men wore their small *kippah* at the back of their heads, white cotton or silk and decorated with coloured threads. Adam’s was slightly different, in a dark blue, with a white threaded design. It looked like a drawing of an ocean, with his red hair around it the sand of a volcanic beach. Alicia looked around at the gathered people and wondered what their servants were like, and if they were as ugly and kind as her Janie. Adam grinned down at her and danced with her clumsily to the tune as others around them hummed softly and applauded when the glint of gold from the bugle disappeared.

‘Happy Birthday, my Ala,’ he said. Was that it? A trip to Glowny to see the bugler? For her last birthday she had received a music box and a doll, handmade in Prague and dressed in silk. She’d felt too old for the doll, but propped it against the sill with the others.

‘Come,’ her father said, ‘I am taking you to dinner like a proper little princess!’

‘Dinner? Not at home?’

She thought of the silver platters, and her new puppy on her lap, Karolina ignoring her.

Her Papa beamed at her. ‘You shall sit and dine and you shall even drink wine. You are going to the best restaurant in

town, as is fitting for a lady such as yourself. You are twelve now, no longer my little one.'

He made a little bow, stiff in his thick coat, and Alicia laughed as he darted a kiss onto her nose as he came close.

'Come.'

Adam led her across the square, past couples laughing and leaning their way to restaurants, and past the horses, the man playing a violin with a hat for change, the last shoppers with their arms full of boxes.

The Wentzl stood proudly at the edge of the Glowny, its windows aglow. Piano notes and the tinkle of cutlery and conversation floated across the square. Adam stepped back to let Alicia go in pride of place. The waiter, a penguin with a full beard like her father's, beamed down at Alicia in her satin and fur. She stood up straighter, and gave an imperious nod copied from her mother, eyes sliding away, neck turned just so.

They were ushered upstairs with an air of hurry, but Alicia moved slowly, her hand on the polished banister, feeling truly like a lady of a huge house, feeling like Mama, and enjoying the power of making everyone wait. Adam indulged her, and a waiter hovered with Adam's great overcoat, heavy and slipping in his hands.

The room was as grand as home. The walls were buttercup yellow, so the wintry weather dissolved into a summer light, as though they had stumbled into a fairy land in a snowy wood. The Glowny stretched below, framed by plush golden curtains that Alicia itched to roll up in. The table was set with flowers and shining silver. The waiter danced with elaborate precision to place her napkin around her throat. Adam kissed her hand as she sat. 'Happy Birthday,' he said.

Alicia was in heaven: her father all to herself, her sister at home, an adult treat just for her, and to be admired by Adam

and the room, who she felt certain was gazing at her pretty face and curled hair. This was perhaps all she ever wanted, as well as the occasional treat and sweet and pretty dress. The deep wells in her, the unsatisfied untapped springs of her heart, stilled and were silent.

Adam ordered for her while she pulled at her white undergloves, noticed with horror a hangnail, and slipped them back on, glancing around to check no one had noticed. She caught the eye of a lady in an old-fashioned dress who seemed to be looking at her with disgust. The woman sniffed, an ugly look distorting her face. She must have noticed the hangnail, Alicia realised, and flushed. She put her hands into her lap as the woman turned away.

Alicia was distracted from this by the arrival of cheese and bread, plates of butter, pickles, glistening beef in a sticky glaze. It was not so different from the food at home, but prettily arranged on gold-edged plates, and with sweet red wine that she sipped as elegantly as she could. Adam tested her on German and French verbs, asked what she was reading; she told him about the swallowed, stolen ruby of Agrapur, cut from the thief's belly by the Maharajah.

'Your sister shouldn't give you such things to read,' he said, but smiling and, she thought, impressed.

'Thank you, Papa,' she said, when she remembered to.

'You are welcome, my little Ala,' he replied. 'But this is not all,' he said, leaning back in his chair and opening his arms wide. 'There is another gift, but, really, it's for me so you must indulge your Papa.'

'Not a doll, Papa, please, I have so many . . . I'd like . . .' she cast about, caught off guard by the unexpected opportunity; she rarely ever had to ask for anything at all, 'a fur like this one of Mama's, or for her to give this one to me, will you ask her?'

She stroked the fur against her cheek again. That wasn't right, it wasn't what she wanted at all, but since she didn't know *what* she wanted, the white fur would do as well.

Adam laughed. 'I'm sure you can have it, but what else? Let's see if we thought the same.' He smiled, seeming delighted with this idea.

Alicia tried again. 'Lessons.'

'Lessons? In what? You want your governess back? Poor Miss Paula, I'm not sure she would have *us* again!'

She faltered. 'I don't know.'

'Piano? Riding?'

'Yes, riding,' she said, swallowing something.

'All right, we'll arrange it tomorrow.' Adam drained his glass. 'But you haven't guessed! Because it's a trick! It is something wonderful but also something that you will *not* like.'

His mouth twitched and Alicia understood. She slumped in her chair.

'This is something for your Mama and me. So we have something to remember how pretty you are. It is a treat for us. You will do it for us? And you will not . . . *sabotage*?'

Now she laughed. She'd been five years old, already the favourite. The young genius her Papa had paid to paint her was irritated by her fidgeting. He made her stand for long, silent, still minutes in the natural light, and she wanted to play with her sister. That night she grabbed a pair of scissors from the sewing kit in Janie's room and chopped off her hair in a jagged, spiteful line. Her parents had almost laughed themselves sick over her stubbornness, and paid the artist double when he said he would abandon the painting. Still it was left unfinished, her wild hair in wisps around a ghost-like chalky face. It hung in Papa's study, where he often liked to point it out to visitors and tell the story.

And now he wanted another.

‘Is it the same man?’ she asked.

Adam laughed again. ‘No, darling Ala. I want to ask my friend Jozef Pienta. You’ll like him! He is a great artist, and you know, quite poor.’

Alicia wrinkled her nose.

‘He will then have the money to make even more beautiful things, and I will have another picture with your hair all shiny and long.’

Sweets arrived, pastries glazed with sugar syrup, creamy gelatinous pudding, ginger biscuits. Alicia tried to finish her wine, but its sharpness hurt her throat.

‘Here,’ Papa said. He came around to her side and dunked a biscuit into the wine, ate it.

‘Papa!’ she shrieked, deliciously outraged. ‘Manners!’ He laughed deeply, held out his arms to encompass the golden shining room, so people turned to look. Alicia’s awareness of the woman in the corner, the hangnail, came back to her, and she wished he would sit down again.

‘Why, isn’t this my city, my table? My biscuit, my wine?’ He laughed again, deep and mellow, and Alicia poured her wine over her dessert like a syrup, ate until her stomach swelled and her head swam.

Later, she’d return again and again to this night. The sharp sweetness of the wine and cream. The waiters crowding plates among the candles so the food caught some of the golden flame, and the whole room in gold, as the sun went down, so all was warm and full and her father laughing and laughing. Sometimes she’d hear again that woman’s angry sniff, try to remember the set of the woman’s mouth, and whether it was in fact the whole room that turned away after her father’s joking speech, or if that was only her mind playing tricks.

*

Stepping out, rewrapped like a present, Alicia was grateful for the warm fullness of her belly and glanced back at the gleaming rooms.

‘When can we come back?’ But Adam didn’t hear, stamping and re-knotting his scarf around his throat. The wind had dropped, an icy stillness descended, and glittering ice crystals had grown on the stones of the square. As they came further away from the Wentzl, the dark and cold seemed to leach away Alicia’s pleasure. Adam held out his hand for a cab, but none stopped. Pinched faces hurried past.

‘Let’s walk home, then,’ Adam said. ‘It will be fun.’

A couple were sitting on the steps of the old town hall, leaning against one of the lazy stone lions. The woman’s legs were bare, Alicia noticed with a small thrill of shock. Her Papa hurried her along, then dropped her hand to rub his own together inside his gloves, and in the moments he stopped, Alicia took greedy sips of the strange sight on the steps, the urgency of the man’s hands, the small sounds of distress of the woman. The back of the man’s head was pressing, pressing, and the woman was shrinking back. When the man shot his hand up the woman’s skirt, exposing a shock of white flesh, Alicia gasped, and tugged Adam’s hand. Her Papa looked at her in indulgent expectation, before catching sight of the couple behind her.

He took an instinctive step forward, then stopped, his head slightly cocked, as though trying to see clearly.

‘Hello,’ he called. To Alicia his voice sounded soft, almost comforting. She had stopped watching the couple, and saw only her father’s form, striding forwards.

‘Hello, hello, stop,’ he said, much more strongly now, his familiar voice. Alicia felt her blood quicken, watching him

pace, his long coat billowing behind him, towards the man with the urgent hands. Adam flicked his gaze back to her. 'Stay here,' he barked, and she ignored him, trotting after him just as the couple responded to the approach.

The man had stopped crushing the woman against the stone lion, and was smiling, biting his thumb and looking down. Alicia recognised the look as one of her own, when she was disciplined by someone she didn't respect. He had long girlish eyelashes and he seemed small, much smaller than Papa. But the hands, his thumb in his teeth, were large and dirty. He wasn't wearing gloves in the cold, which made Alicia think he must be very poor. She sneered, emboldened by this realisation, and the bulk of Papa beside her. The woman shrank even further into the stone, pulling down her skirt, her face blank. *You should say thank you*, Alicia thought savagely. Her mother's voice came to her, the cadence of overheard gossip in the house, unguarded chatter in the kitchen. *Having your legs out like that*. Instead the woman looked at her shoes.

'Hello,' Adam repeated. He hesitated, glanced back at Alicia. 'It's cold and late. Is everything well?'

Alicia glared at the woman, who still hadn't said thank you or taken the chance to run away. She had a sudden, unbidden image of the woman from the restaurant, her pursed lips and stony face, the angry straightness of her back.

The man continued to nod and bite his thumb, smiling, on the cusp of laughter even. Perhaps he isn't poor at all, but mad, Alicia thought, and that's why he doesn't feel the cold. Perhaps he will be taken to the mountains to lie in a room painted white and with starched clean bedsheets. The man, slow and unsteady, lurching to hold onto a lion's mane, pulled himself to stand. The woman at his feet hissed something. Adam settled into his feet, crossed his arms as the man belched

smoke into the cold air between them, brought his face level to Adam. He had to get on tiptoe to do it, and swayed dangerously.

‘Go fuck yourself,’ he said.

Alicia’s shock made a laugh fall from her mouth before she could cram it back into her chest. The man narrowed his eyes at her, and Adam began to back away.

‘Come,’ he said to her, soft. When he took her hand, she felt his fingers inside his mittens were trembling. Then they were wrenched from her, there was the dull sound of something hard on flesh, and her Papa was on the ground. The stranger kicked him as he lay there, silent and only curled up with his hands around his face. Once, twice. Adam was silent. Alicia cried out, an animal sound. The man looked her up and down, taking in her rich clothes, the glint of red silk.

‘What’s that, little bitch?’

‘Don’t,’ Adam said, pulling himself up.

A small crowd had formed, almost a circle. Alicia looked around at them. ‘He kicked my Papa.’ She tried to scream it, but it came out very small. Some were shaking their heads, others were sneering. Disorientated, Alicia watched Adam slowly pull himself to his feet, a bloom of red near his temple. His hands shook as he removed his *kippah*, knocked askew, and put it in his pocket. He faced the man, so much taller and stronger. *Kill him, Papa. Throw him to the ground, make his blood splash across the ice.* Adam followed Alicia’s gaze and looked out at the gathering crowd too.

The woman on the steps called out. ‘It’s cold. I want to go home.’ The man ignored her, staring at Adam with a disgusting look of triumph on his face. Adam’s fists were clenched and he’d moved in front of Alicia.

‘I want to go home,’ the woman said again. The man gave

a mock bow to Alicia, blew her a kiss, and strutted back to the steps.

‘We’re going home,’ Adam said. As he pulled her to him, the small crowd began sliding away. Alicia heard the woman on the steps hiss something again. Some in the crowd laughed.

As they retraced their steps down Bernardyńska, Adam’s grip firm and his stride quick, they didn’t speak. Alicia was lost in fantasies in which she murdered the couple on the steps. The man she scalped, making him kneel and apologise first, or had him hung from a lamppost. The woman’s face she ripped off with her nails. She kept at the edge of her thoughts her burning shame at her father’s humiliation, unable to look at its full white heat. Instead she imagined slipping out of bed later, returning to the steps with a gun. She tried scraps of different dialogue, indulged in the man gibbering at her feet, panicked spit trailing from his mouth, his hopeless, pink, squirming sobs.

As they reached the comforting block of home, Adam stopped and crouched down so that his long coat trailed on the pavement. He put his hands on Alicia’s shoulders and she began to pitch forward into the comfort of his arms, but he held her stiffly away from him, shook her a little.

‘Say nothing to Mama and Karolina. Or Janie or to anyone. Do you understand?’

She nodded, but her eyes were fixed on the bright red, striking as a midsummer flower, plastered across his temple and down his cheeks.

‘They’ll see,’ she said, in answer to his questioning gaze, and pointed at the wound.

‘Well, I slipped on the ice. Yes?’

She nodded.

‘It will be difficult for you to lie because you are a good girl, but it is because I ask you to. Yes?’

She didn't reply that lying came to her as naturally as breathing.

Never had home seemed so solid and warm. Alicia wanted to scream at Robert to close the door, lock it, to shout that there were bad people all around, but instead she let him take her gloves as he asked, 'And how is the birthday princess? Did you enjoy your dinner?' Then, when he caught sight of Adam, he melted into silence. Alicia saw her father bow his head briefly; close his eyes as though in standing sleep.

Robert shut the huge double front doors, locking them in place.

'Papa slipped on the ice,' Alicia said. Robert nodded at her.

Some of the cold, set faces from outside, their harshness, had crept into the house with them. The pinched look of the woman in the restaurant, the woman on the steps, the crow of the man as he weaved back to her.

'Karolina was sent to bed a few hours ago, and Mrs Oderfeldt is in the drawing room, with the radio,' Robert said, in answer to a silent question.

Karolina slept with a book in her hand, another rising and falling with her belly's breath, a journal filled with her scrawl. Alicia tried to make out the words, looked for her name, but the room was too gloomy. Karolina's brown hair was bushy like Alicia's but unlike her sister she had always resisted Janie's attempts to tame it with oil and irons, and so it grew rather wild. Alicia studied her for a moment, wondering if she would look like Karolina in five long years, when she was seventeen too, or if she might be prettier. She jerked Karolina by the foot.

Karolina jumped and her book smacked on the floorboards. 'If you had a nightmare get in with Janie, for God's sake,' she mumbled.

Alicia crawled over her sister's body and sat cross-legged beside her.

'Come to crow? Go on,' Karolina said, sitting up. 'You know Papa never took me to dinner at the Wentzl. Was it very beautiful?'

'Yes. It was like a painting. Yellow. It glowed.'

Karolina nodded and dozed again as Alicia described the room, the food, the wine and their Papa's rumbling laughter, the square behind the windows dipping into night. In her mind's eye, she erased the sour-faced woman at the nearby table like a bad sketch, and then lightly said, 'But it was icy on the way home and I slipped, and Papa slipped too trying to catch me and cut his temple and bled a little.' As she said it she realised she would need to give this extra detail to Papa. 'Oh, and he said he will take you to the Wentzl too, for your next birthday.' In the weak window light Karolina snorted and rubbed her eyes.

'Really.'

'Yes, and also another painter is coming.'

'Oh! Another portrait of Princess Alicia! The last one makes you look like an ugly ghost.' Karolina followed this with a gentle push of dismissal.

Alicia settled on the stairs for a while before going back to bed. From the study, the radio rose and fell, punctuated with static. Only the odd word floated up, muffled by the thick carpets. She heard her name, and her Mama's voice calm and steady. So, the lie was holding.

That night she dreamed of being drowned and trapped in paint like an unlucky fly. At her back, the canvas was cold and through the gloop of the sharp-smelling paint she saw her parents and Karolina, huddled in a cold place like the woman on the steps, watching her.

4

THE GIRLS ATE SEPARATELY from their parents, in the smaller room that had been their nursery, now piled with books and clothes, a desk for Karolina in the corner. Janie and Dotty came in and out with platters, the glint of sunlight on silver. Karolina was at her most animated at breakfast, telling Alicia of a new poem or story she had dreamed or sketched out that morning. The dogs, Mimi and Cece, both Alicia's, weaved between everyone's legs, causing Janie to shriek and curse on the stairs when she thought she was out of earshot.

Alicia, weary after her broken sleep, almost feverish still with rage, had slept late. She came in blind to the unexpected stillness, so consumed by the earthquake in her little life that it took minutes for her to identify that the squirming tension was not inside her own body, but in the room.

'Karolcia?'

Her sister looked only confused, half shrugged with a nod to the two servant women. Janie stood at the windows, her hands clasped, head slightly bowed. As Alicia looked at her, she gave her a watery smile. Dorothea was serving up fruit, but gone was her chatter: *I hope you like this, this is your favourite, I saw these at the market yesterday, look at that lovely colour in it, look at that shine!* Instead the clink of china made a tuneless song.

'Karolcia?' Alicia said again.

Papa had told, or had failed in the lie, and they all knew, saw, as she had, how they were all laid low, something had been ripped away from them.

‘I don’t know,’ Karolina mouthed. ‘They’ve been like this all morning.’

‘Janie, is it about Papa?’ Alicia felt she should cry too, match Dorothea’s blotched cheeks, but felt only the deep stirrings of anger again.

Alicia moved to sit by her sister’s side. She started to say, ‘It was a man, with huge hands, and a boy’s face, and he was only so short, but somehow he hit Papa.’ She only got as far as ‘It was . . .’ and Karolina began whispering over her, ‘Someone is dead, I know it, it must be Papa or Mama, one of them has died in the night.’

Alicia chewed some fruit, let the juice drip onto the tablecloth. The other words, pressured in her throat like a blocked pipe, she swallowed too, trying to explain: it wasn’t just the blood and the strike and the shock of their tall, solid Papa on the ground, it was the way the air changed, the laughter of the crowd, the sneer on that woman’s face, her hiss, and the woman back at the restaurant, something in the set of her lips, her scowl at Alicia as though she didn’t belong. All this she swallowed, thinking on her secret, before she could allow Karolina’s words in. Karolina though was pressing on, her continued whispering, asking, ‘But which? It must be one of them, no one else is so close, it can’t be Uncle Schmuell or a cousin or something like that, who would they weep for?’ And Alicia found the question facing her easy to the point of shame. *It must be Mama*, she thought. *It must be Mama, because if it is Papa I won’t live anymore.* Karolina kept on whispering, until Dorothea banged a serving spoon on the table, ‘Enough!’ and they all jumped.

‘Go up to your Mama and Papa now. Karolina, your hysteria is ridiculous.’

Alicia’s mouth was full, and she burst some of the peach on her tongue, feeling its sticky juice as an outpouring of relief.

The dogs were in the upstairs dining room, lying in the weak sunbeams. Alicia scooped Mimi up as they approached their parents, who sat, formal, as though posing for portraits, in the high-backed chairs under the bookcase. Her Mama had her hands folded in her lap as they entered, but now held out her arms. There was an awkward moment as both girls hesitated, Alicia with Mimi squirming against her chest, Karolina looking at her mother in abject surprise.

‘Come,’ Anna said, an edge of annoyance in her voice.

Karolina went to her. Too tall for a full embrace, she felt her mother’s shoulder dig into the flesh around her own collarbone. Alicia put down the dog.

‘Girls, we are changing some plans. Karolina, you won’t be going to Zakopane with the Hartmanns. You’ll stay here for the season. Alicia, you’re also to stay inside over the winter, so there will be no riding lessons.’

‘Papa!’ Alicia cried; though she didn’t care about the riding lessons, she was unused to things promised to her being taken away again.

‘Is there an epidemic?’ Karolina asked, who loved to read about gruesome plagues sweeping through cities.

‘Yes,’ Anna answered Karolina, after a quiet had descended, and Adam had gone to move newspapers around on his desk. ‘Your father was reading about a disease in the morning papers, and we’d like you to stay inside as much as possible. We’ll take some walks together, of course,’ she said, softening at the sight of her elder daughter’s dismay.

‘There may be some difficulties, but we are surrounded by friends and our city, and all will be well.’ Their Papa spoke slowly, as though giving a ceremonial speech, or a toast at one of their long, late dinner parties.

‘I thought it must be,’ Alicia caught her Papa’s eye and he reddened further, shifted in his chair. ‘We thought it must be family who had died,’ she went on, ‘or something terrible.’

‘Well,’ their Mama said. She seemed at a loss and looked at her husband. ‘Go, go to your rooms.’

They stayed in their own sets of rooms for the rest of the day. Karolina wanted to go to the Jagiellonian, to visit their Uncle Stefan, but Adam, in a message from Janie, forbade it.

‘Besides, the university will be closed, out of respect,’ she added. ‘Your Uncle and the others will all be at home, as we are.’

‘Yes,’ Karolina said. ‘Of course,’ in such a good impression of her mother’s clipped tones that Janie gave her a tiny head tilt of deference. As she left Karolina made a face at Alicia, who buried her own in a throw rug, fearful of laughing.

‘Out of respect for *who?*’ Alicia almost whispered. She could feel the lie, the way it had got tangled between the servants and her parents, knotted into the wrong words.

Karolina shrugged, went to her desk and brought a small, leather-bound book to Alicia.

‘Shall I tell you the next part of the story?’

‘Have you translated the next part yet?’

‘No, silly. I only translate little bits. I have the translation here in Polish. One of Uncle Stefan’s friends did it.’

Alicia sat up, looked again at the pages. One side was full of the Greek symbols in beautiful shapes, their ink tails flicked like tiny tadpoles.

‘Why don’t you just learn the Polish off by heart, and then you can pretend to translate it, just changing a few words? Then you wouldn’t need to study so much.’

‘But I like the translation part. Besides, I think learning thousands of lines off by heart would be a little difficult, no?’ Karolina laughed.

Alicia was silent. This was a rare day of warmth between them, and she wouldn’t spoil it by saying how she didn’t understand this; in fact, she had committed the poetry Karolina had read to her so far to memory with ease.

‘I might study with Uncle Stefan too when I’m older,’ she said instead.

Karolina gave her a small smile, which Alicia translated with disappointment. ‘I think you will marry a nice rich man, Ala, and live with lots of beautiful things, like Mama.’

‘But Uncle Stefan—’

‘Remember how you tortured all your governesses, and Papa drew you out of school?’

Alicia laughed. ‘But that’s not the same! That wasn’t . . . I don’t need to learn all the names of the capital cities—’

‘Exactly. That’s not for you.’ Karolina pulled her hair lightly, and Alicia saw her sister believed she was kind to her, like Janie when she flicked flies out of the window instead of crushing them against the window pane. Her secret swelled, *I know something, I know something true and real that changes everything, more important than your book. It isn’t a disease at all, it’s what happened to Papa last night.*

‘Where were we up to?’

Alicia considered reciting the poetry. She’d become a new kind of ally to her sister then. But she felt instinctively that Karolina would be threatened, would feel something had been taken away from her, when Alicia had so much already.

‘Odysseus has just been blown back, all the way back far from home,’ she told Karolina. ‘He could see the Ithacans tending their fires and he was nearly home but then they opened the bag of winds.’

Karolina took her stubby pencil and mimed driving it into her heart, making Alicia snort. It was just like Papa at the Wentzl. They were often the same, but only when her sister was alone with her did she seem like Papa.

‘Ah!’ she cried. ‘How could I forget? It’s so heartbreaking! Close enough to see the fires!’

Alicia shrugged. ‘It was his own fault. He’s always lying to his men. Easy to warn them and explain.’

‘I thought you would like him, the liar,’ Karolina said, without malice.

Alicia went still.

‘I mean, he’s slippery and clever. You can be like that.’

‘Can I?’ *Do you know I’m clever? Do you know the lie about last night?*

‘Of course! You lied about that dress you stained. No one even guessed.’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes,’ Karolina nodded, dragging out the word. ‘All right, back to Odysseus.’

The afternoon was an unusual one: obeying their parents, they stayed in their part of the apartment, curled up on the small, soft nursery chairs, the sound of the doorbell and hushed voices, occasional louder voices, interrupting Karolina as she read. Alicia committed the translated poetry to memory, played its tune with her fingers along her dress, saw phrases in gold, how they looped back to each other, the same refrains. She saw the azure blue of the sea and the oil glistening in the hair of the heroes, and felt the heat of the sands as though on

scorched bare feet. Since her father's fall, her whole body had been tense. Now, no adults to make her sit up or keep her fingers still or to pet her, she sank further and further into her chair, in the cool room, her sister's voice spinning the story for her, and felt that if this was a sad day, she wanted all days to be sad days, of stillness and quiet.

5

THE DAYS TURNED still colder and bleaker, so the apartment was full of the smell of tapers and burning kindle. The haven-day of reading was long over; the sisters were summoned back to the family rooms, told to welcome and be polite to many guests. Neighbours drifted in and out, ate little, left teacups brimming. Adam began to gather up the newspapers and take them with him to his office, instead of leaving them around for Karolina to read. Anna stayed in more than usual, and Alicia could hear her pacing in the upstairs rooms, stopping at windows, turning, pacing again. The radio was always crackling through the house. One of these dull mornings Janie told them to be ready in the big dining room downstairs early: their Uncle Stefan was to visit.

Uncle Stefan wasn't their Papa's brother, who lived far away; he was his oldest friend, but Alicia always felt he looked like a brother to him. His face was an echo of Papa's in the way her own was an echo of Karolina's: the same thin, sharp bones, the crooked smile and a merriment in the brown eyes. He was tall and thin like Papa, even more so, and often had a bruise on his forehead, or his arm, from bumping into the low beams and narrow doorways of the university. He and Adam spoke in almost their own language when they were together, half-sentences which were caught up by the other, and left to drift into laughter or nostalgic silence. Unlike the rest of the

house, Uncle Stefan seemed unchanged by the great plague, which made Alicia love him even more.

‘Sad times,’ Adam greeted him with a clutch on the arm.

Stefan peered into his friend’s face. ‘Yes, yes,’ he said, as though acknowledging the existence of an academic argument he was about to dismantle. ‘What happened to you?’ he gestured to his own temple, mirroring the welt on Adam’s face.

‘He slipped on the ice,’ Anna said.

‘Ah, is that what we call it these days?’

‘Call what?’ Adam said sharply.

Stefan glanced at Anna, confused. ‘Adam, I was only joking. I know you don’t drink so much anymore.’

‘I was with Alicia,’ Adam muttered.

‘Come on, I have books for Karolina, and here is Anna so beautiful . . .’ – he kissed her hand and she laughed – ‘and come on, Adam, it was far away. It won’t happen here.’

‘Not so far.’

‘Far away? So I *can* go to Zakopane?’ Karolina asked her mother.

‘The Hartmanns wrote to say they’ve cancelled,’ Anna replied. ‘As a precaution. We told the girls about the epidemic,’ she said to Stefan, who raised his eyebrows in response.

‘Come on now,’ he said, in such gentle rebuke that both Anna and Adam looked away for a moment. Taking their silence as permission, he gestured for Karolina and Alicia to come closer and began, ‘There isn’t an epidemic, except of . . . unpleasantness.’

‘There *is* a measles outbreak, it said so in the newspaper,’ Anna said, flushing.

‘Some windows were smashed in Germany and some people were hurt,’ Adam picked up Stefan’s thread, left Anna’s

dangling. She retreated to her sofa, furious. It had been Adam's idea not to tell their daughters in the first place.

'It's far away and nothing to worry about here,' Stefan added, aiming what he hoped was a conciliatory smile at Anna, but her face was closed, and he would need to flatter her all evening.

'Why were people hurt?' Karolina asked, as Alicia thought about the man on the steps and the way his back curled as he kicked her Papa. Perhaps he had come from Germany to smash windows too.

'Well.' Stefan gave an elaborate shrug. 'This is the fate the gods have—'

'Don't!' Adam held up a hand, but laughing. 'Don't start quoting at us, it's ten o'clock in the morning and too early for epic!'

Stefan mirrored Adam's gesture, and matched his laughter too.

'Come, Karolina,' he called. Alicia watched as he pulled more of the green-covered books out of a leather satchel. The two of them stood slightly apart, Karolina smoothing her hands over the pages.

'Did you bring me anything?' Alicia called to him, as the family drifted towards the table where tea was being served. 'It was my birthday last month, and we haven't seen you since then.'

'Ah, and how was the Wentzl?' Stefan directed his question to both Alicia and Adam, who dropped his gaze for a moment. Alicia tried to summon the night again, its nauseating mix of the rich, warm room and the images of blood on the ice.

'It was wonderful,' she said. 'It was a lovely treat from Papa. Only I slipped on the ice on the way back.'

‘Oh yes, getting cold now,’ Stefan replied politely, with a small smile of amusement at her grown-up tone.

‘We haven’t been into the centre since,’ Adam said. ‘The news came through the next morning.’

‘But you can’t lock yourselves away,’ Stefan said. He’d spoken mildly, but Adam reddened.

‘You think we’re afraid?’

Stefan sat back, his thin face becoming thoughtful. ‘No, only . . . sad. Too sad, I think.’

‘Don’t you feel anything? Did you read the reports? They made people . . .’

He broke off, noticing how his daughters had become still.

‘Of course, of course. It’s terrible,’ Stefan said, without fire. ‘But remember ’35. We all worried, and what happened? Nothing. Only you have more German Jews on your payroll, and I have more in my classes, and very welcome they are too.’

‘I know,’ Adam said, picking up his tea. ‘I’m sorry,’ he added. He eyed his friend, noted he was wearing, unusually, his *kippah*. Adam had put his own away after Alicia’s birthday, folded it away with a twinge of regret at how it had been his father’s, given to him with a rare emotion from the old man, his eyes moist. Adam had worn it not as a believer at all but as a mark of respect, love, even, for his father, for the memory of his proud face when Adam had first put it on. He wore it for weddings, holidays, days he wished to mark with respect, such as Alicia’s birthday. Now it was gently pressed between handkerchiefs in his bedroom as though just another piece of cloth.

Stefan followed his friend’s eyes. ‘What? I’m going to my mother’s for dinner.’

Adam lowered his voice. ‘It hasn’t given you any trouble?’

‘None at all.’ Stefan heard the untold things in Adam’s question; saw how he held himself in his chair. An image

of his friend being beaten made his stomach shrink, and he reached for Adam's arm even as he dismissed the idea: Adam would have told him.

A silence descended, the rattle of the tea things, the crack of a broken book spine from where Karolina sat.

Alicia leaned over to Stefan. 'My present,' she whispered, but it carried, and they all laughed at her.

'All right,' Stefan said. 'I confess my crime, I forgot the birthday girl.'

'Oh, Stefan! How could you? You held her in your arms when she was born!' Adam cried. 'You are no longer my brother!' and the two men collapsed in childish laughter. A look passed between Anna and Dorothea, who was pouring Stefan's tea, and Anna's anger ebbed away. She settled more comfortably on the sofa, her head tilted as though to hear better her husband's newly cheerful voice.

'All right,' Stefan said, wiping his eyes. He turned to Alicia. 'What would you like? Here, I'll give you a choice. A doll, or a globe.'

'A globe?'

'Yes, a globe of the world. You know, when I was your age, turning, what are you, eight?'

There was more laughter at this from the parents.

'She's twelve! A crocodile is a better Uncle than you are, Stefan. A snake would do a better job,' Adam said.

Stefan laughed, waved this away. 'When I was your age, I wanted a globe more than anything. So I could see the whole world, understand my place in it' – he started to make his teaching gestures, slicing the air – 'so I could travel to far-away places by tracing my finger over the surface. Do you remember that one my father had, Adam? In his office.'

'I never saw it, but you talked about it often enough.'

‘Well, it’s in *my* office now.’

‘Did you ever get your own, when you were younger?’ Karolina asked.

Adam started to shake his head.

‘No!’ Stefan threw up his hands dramatically, making them laugh again. ‘I asked, and asked, and I was very patient, and then my parents bought me a book of maps, which wasn’t what I wanted at all!’

‘Well, Alicia will want the doll,’ Anna said, smiling. ‘She’s not a twelve-year-old boy with an obsession.’

‘I’ll have a globe, Uncle Stefan, please.’

Adam laughed. ‘Your uncle is only teasing you. He will buy you a doll or a pretty thing.’

‘With the sea a dark blue colour,’ Alicia said. ‘And a star where we live, so I can see the whole world, understand my place in it.’

‘Of course,’ Stefan said. ‘But you know, I was only telling a story about myself. Really you can have any pretty thing you like.’

‘We’re having a new portrait of her done,’ Adam said. ‘It’s her birthday gift to ourselves.’

Her parents began talking about the painting, her Papa gesturing to the windows, where she’d probably have to stand. Karolina was busy with her books, reading some of the spines, looking up occasionally to shoot a look of puzzlement or thanks to her uncle.

Stefan turned to Alicia. ‘Another portrait, Ala? So, you’ll be famous!’

‘Will I?’

‘Oh, yes. Your parents, you know, they only hire the very best. You will be like the *Mona Lisa*.’

She looked blank, so he added, ‘Maybe one day you will

hang in a gallery, and there will be a little card' – he held up his hands as though making a frame – 'that says, "Alicia Oderfeldt, famous."' He smiled down at her, then checked his smile at her solemn face. 'Ala?'

She took a moment to speak. 'Please, the globe. Won't you get me one?'

Stefan took her hand and kissed it, his face alight with amusement at her serious expression. 'As you wish.'