

## THE WEDDING OF ANNA F.



*Mylène Dressler*

THE INTERVIEWER IS COMING today. So. Here is the simple part: choosing what to wear. I've told my little assistant buzzing downstairs—no, that isn't fair of me, she isn't little, she looms over my life, in fact, and she's more than an assistant, she's almost a kind of nurse, at times—I've told Maia to leave me alone for a bit, to let me be quiet, so I can get ready for my time with him, and then for my birthday celebration to follow; because I need a rest after having spent the whole morning in my study, organizing my documents and letters, the private papers that will sum me up, in my eighty-third year—work that has been the easier part of this day, now that I think of it, at least compared to what's going to come later on, compared to what is coming on now.

I hope I can manage it all. I don't tire easily, thank goodness. For my age I'm still fairly sound—apart, that is, from the slight deafness in my left ear, the result of being left lying in the mud at Belsen. Of course, no one knows

I've ever been there. But this much is true: I've never needed or wanted much rest, since then.

I've kept moving fairly well into my so-called golden years. I think I could have been an athlete, given the chance. An Olympic swimmer. That would have been lovely! Or an ice skater. But I would have to lose weight . . . Recently, I've had a terrible feeling I've been carrying too much fat on me. I hate it. Extra pounds. Those horrible millstones of age. I don't hunch, though. I'm no beauty, and never have been, but there's one thing I have to be proud of and that's my hair, which yesterday in the village I had dyed a dark, soft brown and shaped into a rounded, helmeted style, like the Queen of England's. For several weeks now this will need very little attention, thanks to twenty-first-century chemicals. It's a good thing. There will be a great deal of media attention, soon.

No, I don't need much outward preparation, really, for being judged by a doctoral student. I don't have to worry about looking any older than I should, and if I ever did, that was a long time ago. I have my clothes picked out from the closet and lying on their cushioned hangers on the bed: the white silken blouse and matching skirt, and the red-slashed scarf, all in one ensemble. Like a bride. And I will say one other thing for me: Once I know something is going to happen, I do try to see it through. And I am going to see this through. Even though it's going to be hard, perhaps even nearly impossible. To make this Scottish boy believe I am who I say I am.

On my dresser are the matching pearls and earrings, and on the chintz-covered chair are my pantyhose, at their ghostly feet the deep, wine-red pumps. It's important to be prepared. It's important to stay quick and alert, especially as one gets older. Although, when I was still very young, right after the war, I did get into some trouble, and made other people anxious and unhappy, by not seeming to be quick and alert enough. Instead, I would wander around the kibbutz in a daze, with a mop pail over my head, pretending to myself I was lying at the bottom of the ocean, the metal tub over my ears making for both a real and imagined pressure, and the hollowness underneath leaving me quivering all over, but silent, as though I were a piece of twine knocking against a bell. Hidden under my hot, shiny helmet I would walk round and round in the dirt, circling the chicken coops and the vegetable gardens and the trampled goat yard, in complete silence, watching my untied shoe laces drag over the flat, whitened stones. That part I have always remembered, if not understood. It is the rest of my memory that has come as a surprise, and that is going to be hard for others to understand. Because there have been so many people pretending to be Annes or Annas or Anastasias across history. A certain lack of trust has developed around the name. If you tramp to a well too many times, it becomes a ditch. That is understandable.

My parents could only tell you—or they could if they were still alive—that I was an orphan girl. A mystery girl. That they found me in Palestine and brought me back

with them to the United States, to New York State, where they came from and where they believed I would grow up healthy and strong. And that's how I ended up here, in front of this big bay window, in June, on this fine, warm day upstate, as opposed to down in the mud. I'll never forget my first glimpse of the fields outside this house. The wheat stretching on for miles and miles in waves, all these golden heads bowing and straightening, welcoming, generous, sweet smelling as a larder.

Away from the window, I'm more critical. I look halfway decent if I turn sideways in the mirror, or at least I can make better sense of my pear shape, not head-on, but if I turn slightly to one side, like a bulging pitcher with my lower lip turned out for a spout. Now, off with these loose linen pants. Off with my smock—it's June, after all!—until I stand in nothing but my puffy brassiere and the white sail of my underwear, my thin skin pooling over the elastic banding here and there. Where the sun has never touched me, at least not for years, not much, in truth, since that beach south of Haifa, I'm almost lilac colored. Where it has, I'm all dotted and liver spotted, irregular as the *mare* of the moon. Higher up, my loose cheeks run over the hemline of my jaw. And why? Because I've been a talker most of my life. An inveterate talker, other, that is, than during the months I spent in a kibbutz hiding under a bucket. Other than during that confused, shadowy, early time, and during a childhood I can no longer remember (although *The Diary of a Young Girl* at least fills me in on

some of that and confirms some of what I'm about to say), I believe I've always been good at words and at talking my way into and out of things. So it's no wonder my mouth is a bit saggy, with little pockets at the sides, as if each has been stuffed by Black Peter, Dutch-style, with a lump of coal.

When I first came to the United States, though, I would stand in front of this very mirror for hours, in front of its oval frame and brass pivots, and stretch my mouth this way and that, practicing my English. Then later on it became my job, as a law student and then as a practicing attorney, to drill and debate and depose people. I have not only been a good talker: I have been very good at getting other people to talk. This has been tremendously helpful, not only as a way to earn my keep, but because, I found, the better you were at getting other people to talk about themselves, the less you had to talk about yourself.

Years ago, I used to sleep with a man (I have slept with a few in my time, though not many), and I remember I liked to have him face away from me whenever we were intimate. If we were going to take a bath together, for instance. I would go into the bathroom first and slide into the tub. Then I refused to let him climb in and sit behind me with his legs wrapping around me, the way some men want to do. I hate the feeling of someone folding me in, seeing me without my seeing. Better to make my lover squat in front of me, so that his back would be turned, and no wriggle room left in front of or behind him; plus,

I liked being able to pinch and pull and examine all the spots he couldn't see, the moles and the freckles, the hairs sprouting with no rhyme or reason, the crease along his granite shoulder from our wrinkled sheets. Among the letters and postcards I was sorting through in my study this morning were letters from him. No one knows a thing about those letters, or the relationship we had. But now that I'm about to be revealed, everything will be subject to scrutiny, and important. And that is why I have been busy getting *organized*.

The first thing I thought, when I was brought to this house at seventeen (scrubbed clean and transported), was that this bedroom, with all its canopy and perfect white lace, couldn't possibly be mine. Not these linens. Not this dresser. Not these books. Not this cedar-lined closet. What on earth had I done to deserve a closet? Once a week, I was expected to take my very best clothes out (amazed that I owned them) and get smartly dressed, and then my adoptive father, whose last name was now mine, drove me to Manhattan, where I was ushered up a short flight of stairs and into a darkened suite that smelled of cigarettes and encyclopaediae, to lie down on a couch and talk a great deal. This, let me be clear, was the only period of my life when I was sent to see a psychiatrist.

He smiled and made notes on a short pad I couldn't see. He was very patient, and very easy to make happy.

“So, you do feel you're ready for school, Hannah?”

“Oh, absolutely,” I said in my perfecting English. “I feel

very certain. Is it wrong to feel so wonderfully good and happy and certain about things, doctor?"

"No, not at all." He was obviously impressed with me. "We should very much want you to catch up to other young people your age, shouldn't we? We want you to study, and to *become*."

"Do you think I could become anything I like?"

"I'll have to discuss it with your parents. But of course I'm going to advise against anything overly introspective. It will be much better for you, Hannah, if you learn to serve others, your family, your new community here . . . concentrating on your future. That, you know, is what Jewish girls your age are concentrating on these days. The war is over. Much has been sacrificed. And because of your trauma, your memories may never return to you. But you can build new memories. And I am positive, with a husband, with children, and in peace and in good health . . . But yes, of course, yes, your education, first. It will do you no harm, and I'm certain it will do you much good."

Doctors, even Jewish psychiatrists, weren't so terribly clever at exploring the unbucketed heads of young girls in those days. Or maybe he thought it was better I remained a blank. Maybe he knew there are some things better left unremembered. Or else I am sure he would have pushed me harder, and I would have recovered who I am much sooner than a mere three weeks ago. I would have taken my proper place in history when I was a young woman, and not, breathlessly, at eighty-three.



JUDGING FROM HOW QUIET it is downstairs, Maia must have finished moving the buffet table the way I asked her to and is done getting it covered with the lace runner and ready for the caterers, who will arrive this afternoon. And now she is either talking on her slim little telephone, or having a coffee in the kitchen, or reading a book, or all three at the same time, as young people do these days.

I hear a good-bye, some light laughter, a snap, and then a creaking on the stairs. Which means that she is coming up to find me. Something must need to be discussed, something worth climbing up the two landings for. I know she finds the staircase awfully annoying. Maia is a plump girl and not fond of exercise. Yet she has been with me for three years now and hasn't decided to leave.

This girl who opens my door is my favorite assistant in a dozen years: a pretty, stout Pakistani with long, loose hair. She wears it thrown over her shoulder, as if she's ever ready to fling it out a window and escape if I become too obnoxious, too demanding. She's the most efficient of all the young women I've ever hired, handling all the little details of my life that have become too much for me, but without my having to ask; she anticipates me, yet she's never cruel or judgmental, always smiling and nodding with the same kind of relaxed *you are taking this all too seriously* smile that I could never coax out of that lover I used to take baths with long ago. But then, he was Irish, and nosy.



“So the student from NYU called to say he’s running late and apologizes,” she says from the doorway, folding her heavy arms with their braided bracelets. “He’s having a hard time finding us.”

“Doesn’t he have a GPS?”

“Who knows. Men have to want to go where they’re told.”

“Well, it’s all right. I’m running a bit late, too.” I’d thrown a bathrobe on before opening the door to her, but now I can’t help but feel what little progress I’ve made.

“Your new shower cap’s in the bathroom,” she points before I can open my mouth again. “Now listen, Hannah, you’re not going to do this à la Hugh Hefner, are you? You know what this *is*, right?” She seems a little anxious. “You are going to be part of his *thesis*. You know, like the one I’m working on.”

I haven’t, you see, told Maia exactly why this young man who ran an advertisement in the *Times* is coming. She thinks he’s doing research on women pioneers in the legal profession. Which I suppose, in a way, he will be doing . . .

“Would you like me to do anything else upstairs here? I’ve already taken the new storage boxes you wanted out to the barn. There’s room now to bring him up to your study, if you want. If he doesn’t mind the rest of the boxes still lying around.”

“No, no, let’s just keep him downstairs at first.” And wait to see how he reacts, if he is faithful enough to be invited into my upper story.

“And don’t forget you have a few people coming over for your birthday later.” Again, the note of anxiousness.

“I haven’t forgotten, Maia. I’m not that far gone. Is everything set downstairs? Will you be all right handling the rest alone?”

“Everything looks good. The flowers have come. No worries. You’d better shower and get dressed, though. Be careful about your hair.”

“How does it look?”

“Impenetrable. Darth Vader. I would still use the cap, though.”

I send her away and tuck my perm into the wrinkled plastic. I take one more look in the bathroom mirror; it seems to be all right. I turn the water on and step in and let it glaze my stomach and then my chest, and now I duck under and let it thrum my face and fall off the end of my nose, then edge around and run against me in a pounding fist. When I’m done and out and wiping the steam away from the glass, I pull the clinical-looking cap off. I don’t like the way it’s suddenly making me look like a patient, like someone who’s sick. Now there is nothing left to do but throw a little face powder on, a brush of pencil and a dab of lipstick, and knock into the fresh blouse and skirt and my pretty, red-slashed scarf.

Another rap at the door. Maia and her heavy arm again.

“Okay, Hannah. He’s here. Downstairs.”

“How does he look?”

“I don’t know. Like one of my brothers.”

“I’m not exactly sure what that means.”

“Too much hair. Good-looking in an annoying way. What do you want me doing while he’s here?”

I stare down at my red pumps. There was a movie, once, about a ballet dancer whose shoes took over her feet, whose shoes made her dance, dance, dance . . . It was the first film I saw when I came to the US in 1948. Sometimes, once a thing has begun, no matter how unlikely, you can’t stop it going forward.

“Is there something you’d like me to do?” Maia repeats, nervous.

“Just take a break for a little while. Go into the village and have yourself a nice lunch. Take the afternoon off.”

“What?” Her arched eyebrows shoot up. “Are you sure you don’t want me around? Why not?”

“Because you’ve been here since the crack of dawn and you deserve some time for your own studies.” Maia is writing some sort of dissertation on a South African writer, one of the famous ones, and I know she is having trouble with it, because she’s been with me for three years, and she used to talk about it all the time and now she talks about it less and less. “Because you’ve done enough already today.”

“But I’m telling you, you’ve never done one of these research interviewy-type things. They can go on and on. Are you sure you don’t want me around? To get rid of him if he makes you tired?”

“I think I can handle it. I used to be an attorney, you

know.” I throw my scarf over my shoulder and push out my spout of a lower lip and act mildly insulted.

“Well, you do look as if you could handle anything today,” she admits. “You look . . . regal.”

“Oh, get out of here.”

“At least promise to call me on my cell if you find you suddenly need anything. And be sure not to wear yourself out. I don’t know why you agreed to do this today. On your birthday of all days. You’re too good.”

“A birthday is a good day to be good.” To be honest. Revealed. To be born again. “All right, Maia, no more hovering. Go on.”

“You’re the boss.”

I FIND HIM STANDING in silhouette against the living room curtains, the deep green folds that have knuckled to the floor there since my mother’s day. And Maia is absolutely right: so good-looking, so svelte he is! I hadn’t expected that. My heart beats a little faster, in spite of itself. So modern and sleek. Such smooth, curling hair above a sculpted, olive profile. Bardawil. That is his name. But he doesn’t look Scottish. Polished fingers on that hand being held out to me to shake, the nails manicured in the way so many young men take the trouble to have done these days. The schools of New York are filled with beautiful young people, still.

I smile my warmest smile and step forward, welcoming

him, taking his hand in mine. What a beautiful handshake. Like running my fingers along a silken tie and then having, sadly, to let go.

He nods his thick head of hair and smiles at me, professionally. He says a few polite things about the house—that it's such a surprise, the way it seems to rise, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, out of the fields. He reassures me he doesn't want to keep me waiting; but by the fidgeting of his fingers on the handle of his satchel I can tell he's the one impatient to get going. He asks me where we'd be comfortable sitting down.

I smile. "That's usually my question," I say, and toss my scarf a little farther over my shoulder. "Why don't we sit right here?" I point to a pair of deep wing chairs in good light near the living room window, turning so that he'll settle down on the side of my good ear. A few things I learned, as an attorney: one, that you always want to give your clients good light; two, that you will want them to be comfortable, but not so comfortable that they feel free to walk away; three, that you ask and answer questions both as though nothing about them and everything about them potentially meant everything and nothing; and four, that you offer them a drink, but perhaps not right away, not until they've grown warm and thirsty and, in some ways, to depend on you.

This nice young doctoral student appears so cool and independent, however, setting his stylish leather bag at his feet, crossing his legs in his black jeans, that it's hard

to imagine him depending on anything or anyone but himself. Again, it's not what I expected. Most young people, most students—and I've had several as my assistants over the years—are like Maia: hungry, jobless, their nails bitten to the quick. This cool person is however (I have to remind myself) the one that I have invited into my home, to whom I've chosen to tell my story. So I must make do. If I had chosen to, I could have talked to any newspaper reporter. But reporters aren't scholars (I know from having slept with one). Reporters think only of the moment, of what's in front of them. A scholar reaches back, sees history. And so I sit here, in my winged chair mirroring this young man's, and face his formal pair of eyes and his long, narrow nose, and I inhale and think, ah, I hope you will see, yes? And I wonder: Why must it be that in spite of all the gadgets people have these days it still isn't possible to travel back in time? To make things more clear? Why must it still be that the only thing we ever have to move through, in any direction, is each other?

HE SITS BACK AND rests his notepad on his lap. His voice crosses the short distance between us with an easy, confident lilt. Bardawil. When I read it I thought it sounded like *bide-a-while*. But he is not Scottish. No, not that.

“Your assistant just told me it's your birthday.” He smiles and gestures to the flowers and the cards on the mantel. “Congratulations. And thank you for having me out today.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Bardawil. Absolutely. I wanted you to be here. It’s a funny thing, though, isn’t it? To say congratulations on a birthday, I mean. It’s not as though we generally accomplish anything on the day.” Although on this one I would try to.

“Except to go on breathing.” He smiles.

“True enough.”

“But I do need to thank you again for helping me with my project. Your assistant mentioned that you sometimes have trouble . . . Ah, you do understand why I’m here?”

“Yes. Of course. You want to get into contact with people who believe they have been reincarnated. But as I told you in my e-mail, I do not believe I have been reincarnated. I believe I have simply rediscovered myself.”

“Yes. And has anyone come to visit you before about this ‘discovery’ that you have made? Have you talked to anyone about your recovered past life?”

“No, as I mentioned in my e-mail. They couldn’t. I only discovered myself a few weeks ago.”

“I see. Do you mind if I start recording now?” He takes something slim as a cigarette lighter out of his jacket pocket. Another one of those modern phones.

“Oh.” I make a show of leaning forward, over my glasses, for a better look. “Please do.” Let us start. Remake history. Ignite.

“If you’re ready and comfortable then, why don’t we begin, since your assistant explained you have a party to host later on. Lots of people coming?” he asks easily,

adjusting the phone on the table between us. “Do you have lots of family?”

He pulls a mechanical pencil out of his breast pocket. How nice, I think, that they still use both the pencil and the recorder. Just as my reporter-lover used to do. Because they are afraid, afraid that they won’t remember properly. Or that something will happen to the words.

“No. I have no immediate family, Mr. Bardawil. Not living, in any case.”

“You were adopted, as you told me in your e-mail.”

“Yes.”

“I was able to do a bit of background work on you before I came today. I pulled a bit about you from the *Times* archives. You were once very well known, the only survivor of a major disaster. As someone very, very lucky. And now you believe you have been born again.”

“No. Not exactly. Not born again. After all these years, my memory has finally returned to me, from before that time, before that disaster. And when you find your memory, you see, you want to share it. You want to produce evidence of it. I was a lawyer.” A believer in evidence.

“You said you suffered trauma during the Second World War. You were found after it was over, in a refugee camp, with no memory.”

“You are almost right. Not a refugee camp. A kibbutz. There were many refugees there, however.” I fold my hands in my lap and tip my good ear to him, giving him



my warm-the-jury nod. We need to become good friends, and quickly. If he is going to work for me. If he is going to be my advocate, out there. “Even then, though, I—it—wasn’t all a blank. I remember my birthday, for instance. The date and year, June 12, 1929. Like a little drumbeat, pounding in my head. And I knew my first language. Dutch. An identity is like spit, you see. Once you have it, you can’t get rid of it. You’re tasting it all the time, even if you don’t know you’re tasting it; you can’t feel it. But once you do know, you can’t ignore it. That’s what’s happened to me. Three weeks ago.”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Yes. My memories came back, or at least some of them, right out of the blue.”

“Do you mean nothing precipitated this belief? This . . . discovery?”

“Well, there was something. A moment. A feeling. Of illumination. I was lighting a candle at the time.”

“And why were you doing that?”

“I mean, it *was* Shavuot, but my family was never observant, so it wasn’t really that. It’s just a candle is a lovely thing.”

“So you were lighting a candle. And perhaps looking into its flame.” He makes some quick notes.

“Yes, exactly! I was looking into its flame, and then suddenly after all these years I remembered who I was. How I made it. How I got away from Belsen. How I landed on that beach.” I watch him, scribbling, while I

roll my tongue around in my mouth. Oh, that salty beach. The smell of char, of burned rubber, mixed together with the stink of fish and cooked flesh. My cheek lodged in sand, my deaf ear clogged with it. My head hidden under a woven basket. My first sight of that beach, when the screen was lifted off, was pieces of blue sky crowded with the heads of men carrying guns.

Time to turn and swim back to my interviewer.

I smile at his bowed, curled head. “You take notes like a newspaperman. I used to know a newspaperman very well.” I wait while his wrist—he’s left-handed, how interesting—undulates around a shorthand I don’t recognize. I wonder if he’s writing down more than I’m saying. Perhaps he’s jotting down what I look like, sitting in this chair, with my skirt ballooned over my knees and my scarf draped over my shoulder and my hair so composed. To be seen is to be captured. But to speak, to speak is to move.

“Palestine is where you were found and adopted by your Jewish parents.”

“Yes. But my mother and father didn’t really take to being pioneers, kibbutzniks. They were too much city people. Have you been to Palestine, Mr. Bardawil?”

He looks up. “I am Palestinian, as it happens.”

“Oh. What a coincidence.” I adjust my red scarf, a little embarrassed to have been so wrong about his name. “Then you will understand! Do you remember the air?”

“No. I’ve never lived there.”

So white and hot, I remember, suddenly, intensely—the

air around that kibbutz. Around the small, clean houses, and the chicken coops knitted with staring eyes, and the vegetable gardens, and the lean-to goat sheds. A little damp inside the communal kitchen, where they let me eat anything I wanted, where they brought me back to life, gave me a home. But maybe it isn't the right time to say so just now.

"I didn't feel myself to be really there, though. I mean, I didn't *belong*, Mr. Bardawil. No one knew what to do with me, you see. I was a complete mystery to them. I spoke several languages. I couldn't remember what town or city I came from. I was all the time walking around with a bucket on my head. Then my parents adopted me and took me in."

He considers me with those young, critical, student-ish eyes. The left hand isn't moving now. Only the finger stroking the pen.

Bardawil. Bide a while.

"I was a little mad, then," I explain. "But I soon stopped behaving that way. Mostly, to be honest, to please my new parents. They had been through so much even before they started to help me, Mr. Bardawil. They didn't expect the hardships of kibbutz life to be so—well, hard. They were city people, and they wanted to be good after the war, they wanted to help build—but in the end, the life didn't suit them. And my father, who was a lawyer, didn't like it that if they adopted me there as a refugee child, they'd have to share me in common with the kibbutz. Which was a

normal practice at that time. So they decided I needed quiet and cool air, and a good Jewish doctor, and my own home and bedroom. And my father worked things out quietly so that they could bring me here.”

I flew. In an airplane. I saw. Opening my eyes very wide, over the white wing. At my cheek the leather seat smelled of coffee. The covered pillow at my back was embroidered in a fine thread, pale blue mixed with darker. I remember the ocean, even bigger than the one the rifle-toting soldiers said had tried to drown me, far down below, outside the little oval of my window, shaking, a harmless carpet. And then, then oh, how big the coast of America was! And when I stepped out of the plane and was placed in a car—how long its roads! And how white the house in the country, and how perfect the bedroom of an American teenager. With a record player and a lace canopy and a mirrored vanity. You will have everything you want and deserve, these new people had looked at me lovingly and pityingly and said. You will go to college, you will get married, you will have your own family, and health and happiness and prosperity forever and ever. Don’t worry. This is America. This is your house.

“My parents were very good and kind people,” I explain. “I want that recorded, for posterity. But they were under a great deal of pressure. They were criticized—well, they were more than criticized—for taking me away from the Yishuv. Even though they were doing it for me, and for the best of reasons. They were never anything but

practical people. My father was a secular man, a caring man, a man of high hopes, Mr. Bardawil. I wanted to be just like him. And my mother was a kind, reserved, patient, understanding woman. They couldn't have any children, so they took me in instead. To me that has always been a small miracle." Along with this beautiful house, this land of milk and honey. And in the city, unbelievably, yet another home, an apartment with gleaming, wood-paneled walls, and another fitted bedroom, plush with stuffed animals. Although it would be much better, the doctors had all agreed and decided, to keep me in the country at first for an extended period of time. Away from *overstimulation*. From *overdramatization*. And so I lived for months on the farm, as my new family called this place, and I studied English and got my American high school diploma via correspondence course. Father stayed in the city at his practice, but made the drive to be with us twice a week. Mother's face lit up whenever he walked in a room. It was amazing to see—like watching a match striking against solid stone—the way these two married people fell together, as though in this world their love was its only intended consequence.

Once a week, I was driven back to the city. I wore my best clothes, rehearsed what I would say to the psychiatrist, and marveled at Park Avenue, its buildings gold in the sun, charms strung along a bracelet. After my sessions Father, for a treat, would take me to Zabar's or to the automat, which I couldn't comprehend at first. How could it be

possible that one minute you could be starving and the next standing in front of an entire bank of windows that only needed a coin and a button pressed for you to grab at whatever you wanted? People imagine Heaven as a wide, expansive place; I've always imagined it full of tiny slots.

I went running back so many times the other customers laughed, charmed. Meanwhile, Father, spotting a hungry man out on the street, took a handful of coins and pulled a sandwich and a piece of fruit from behind the glass. Then he took the wrapped food outside, and through the picture window I watched that beggar take the lunch in his hands and lift the sandwich and apple, astonished, as though he were looking at the sun and the moon. That was how I felt, too.

Like the astronauts who later flew by stages, I learned to do things very slowly. And did them later than other girls my age. I eventually learned how to ride the subway to Columbus Circle, and to use taxis. I sometimes stopped by my father's office on the way home from my studies at Columbia, so that I could read in his quiet, totem-lined waiting area while the housekeeper cleaned our city apartment. I avoided the library and most of the other university students because they gave me strange looks; I was certain they thought I talked too much, or thought I was showing off, me, a girl, for the male professors, when all I was doing was raising my hand at every opportunity because I wanted to seem quick and alert and awake and smart enough so that I wouldn't be sent back to that shy

beach, to that heavy bucket . . .

My interviewer turns the sheet on his notepad. I hope he's been able to keep up with me. I wonder if we're going to go through quite a few sheets today. I hope so. I have so much weight to shed.

“So you were brought to this country as an amnesiac and never recovered any of your memory prior to 1946. But you managed to attend school and create a coherent narrative,” he reviews, formally. “And after you completed your undergraduate work, you went to law school. You constructed an identity, aided of course by racial and cultural narratives and by your family's class status.” He bends and makes more notes. He seems to be speaking to himself. As if he doesn't need me. As I've seen other students do. “But now this narrative has been altered, and a past identity recovered. Thanks to possible autohypnosis,” he notes and adds under his breath.

This is the way Maia talks too, or at least used to, about her thesis. Scholar-speak. So interesting. As though what is dust, gossamer, can be recast as blocks of concrete.

“But why the law?” He looks up.

“I became a lawyer in part because I wanted to do good the way my father did. Also, I wanted to do something . . . difficult. I always wanted . . . I always needed to do things that kept me very focused. Allowed me to forget that I didn't remember things, my past. The law is all about *memory*, Mr. Bardawil. Precedent. It's a story that depends on all the stories that have come before, but that at some

point had to begin with a story invented out of thin air. ‘This is right while this is wrong.’ If you go far enough back, there is *only* invention. Do you see? Anyway,” I lean back in my chair, “as it happens, women had an easier time breaking into certain kinds of jobs, certain kinds of law, in those days. It was thought we were all natural do-gooders. And my father worked on civil liberties cases. He helped people jailed for being Communists. People punished for speaking, or not speaking. So that was an obvious path for me to take, too. I became a defense attorney. I was good at it. But I wasn’t so brave as some.”

I look down at this young man’s satchel, so like the cases the young lawyers used to carry to Alabama. I had wanted to be good, to be brave; but I was afraid of what might happen to me. That I might disappear again. Be the wrong person in the wrong place, yet again.

“At that point in my life,” is all I say, “what I most wanted was to make the people who had taken me in decently proud of me.”

“And did your parents help you in this? Did they help you construct the narrative you needed to construct?”

What a strange way to speak about living, or about trying to! I look, puzzled, into the corner of the living room at the nailed-leather chair where my father used to sit and smoke his pipe and read his journals, at the ottoman where my mother used to sit and rub his feet. Their love was helpful, so generous, yes. Yet it sometimes excluded me. My heart was grateful—but sometimes it excluded them.



“Yes, Mr. Bardawil. But adopted children aren’t always easy to raise, I’m bound to say. It wasn’t always easy for us. The doctors say that the bonding doesn’t always . . . And my parents were fairly old when they adopted me. But they were very, very kind people, and once they’d chosen a path they didn’t veer from it.” And in the end the same bright sun had shone on the mornings of both their funerals, crawling across a wintry sky. So many people at my father’s funeral, the first one, standing everywhere, you couldn’t see the grass. Mother holding herself apart from all of them, the spade in her hand. Two months later she was gone, and it was my turn. And then I was an orphan again. You can have, it turns out, too much practice at some things.

After sitting shiva in the family apartment, I went back to my own and sank into a hot bath. And lay there, holding my breath, longing for my nosy Irish newspaperman. It had been months since we were last together on the bed in the next room, sweating because my air conditioner had been on the fritz; months since our last fight, when, hapless non-Jew that he was, and a hapless lapsed Catholic too, and always, always unstopably the reporter, he’d gone on and on and on with his serious questions, always wanting to know something more about me. He’d wanted to know my relationship to my faith, to my watchful God. I’d told him I wasn’t religious, but I liked the line from the Torah that said: surely God would ransom our soul from the grave.

He’d exhaled his Tareyton smoke, careful not to pull

the sheet away from my body because he knew I didn't like it. "Really? But Jesus, just listen to it, Hannah: 'surely.' It sounds so tentative. It's a question. As if each time the old man has to barter with an abductor to get his own creation back. That doesn't sound like a God you can take much comfort in."

"I don't need comfort. Just the hope of it. And anyway, you're projecting things from how you feel about your own God."

"I don't feel anything at all about him, point of fact. Mine's a total wash."

The view from my bedroom window back then was of a crack of sky and the corner of a brick building. If I hold very still I can also remember other conversations about God, pieces of debate, my adopted father asking my adopted mother, in his loving but pointed way, if it weren't better for her to stop believing in God entirely, given all that had happened and was still happening in the world; that it would be better if there were no God at all, because then we would all know we had no one else to take care of us, only each other to rely on, and this would make us feel small, and grasping, and middling, and cold, and willing to huddle together.

My young interviewer is looking at me now, under those dark brows, a bit like my father's; and for a moment I wonder if that's sympathy for an orphan I see in his eyes. But I'm not sure. Maybe it's only sympathy of the researcher's variety? Or is it the kind I used to practice

so often, the sympathy of the lawyer who wants to know everything only so there will be no surprises?

Before I can stop myself, I'm reaching my hand out across to him, hopefully, generously, touching his knee without meaning to. But then, I'm an old woman, so he shouldn't take anything amiss.

I say: "I wonder, Mr. Bardawil, would you do me a small kindness? Would you come away with me for a moment? I'd like to show you something. But it's on the other side of the hall in my mother's music room. I think you'll find it helpful to understanding me. And who I was."

He stands professionally, scooping up his phone. "Of course."

We pass through the dining room where the silver chafing dishes are already set out, waiting to be filled. The flowers are a bit overdone in the centerpiece. Maia will have to do something about that. The china and crystal gleam.

"So, you're having a good-sized party this evening."

"No," I say, distracted. "Actually a fairly small one. Just a few special people. Old legal colleagues, mostly. But I suppose there are enough of them."

"Because you worked for many years as an attorney?"

"Yes, until I was seventy. Then I sold what I had in the city and retreated. Because I thought I had earned some quiet. Here."

I show him into the music room with its view, through the multi-paned windows, of grain silos in the distance,

stuck into an otherwise empty sky. In the corner is Mother's grand piano, covered with gilded frames, her collection of photos. I stroke its side. "My mother used to play, though not often. She felt it was too showy, drew too much attention to her. She was a very modest, proper woman. So this piano became more of a gallery, over time. These were the pictures she liked to keep out. For herself and for company."

I pull one frame in particular toward him.

"This is me. At sixteen. In the kibbutz."

He pulls away with what looks like shock.

"I know, I know. A hundred years old I look, don't I? Older than I do now. This is the one they never, never used in the papers, in the stories about my being found after the sinking of the ship called the *Kostas*. You can see why, can't you? They preferred getting a picture of me petting the goats, or pumping water at the well, or doing something . . . healthy. Probably like what you found in the *Times* archive. Because just standing there, you see, with my bucket beside me, I look like a phantom. I hardly even recognize myself. I'm sure no one else did." That used to trouble me so. Why, with my picture in so many papers around the world, did no one recognize me? No one claim me? Help me find my memory? But now I know. Because a father had been told his daughter was dead. Even though the person who'd told him this had said only that Anna Frank had come down with typhus and disappeared from her bunk.

I allow this young, vigorous man some time to take in my chin hanging like a brick inside my jaw, my legs like pins, the black circles under my eyes.

“When was this taken?”

“Nineteen forty-six. Imagine what I must have looked like the year before! I think, you know, we never really looked the way we *might* have looked, if the war had never happened. I think we girls, especially, were altered beyond recognition. I did like that checked dress, though. For so long I never could believe in the idea of my own clothing.” I sigh and touch my skirt.

He’s holding the silver frame in his smooth palm, balancing it. Now he looks at me. “When you look at this picture now, what do you see? *Who* do you see? Do you believe you are looking at one of the most famous girls who has ever lived?”

“Before we start up again, Mr. Bardawil, do you mind if I make a suggestion?” I pull my scarf off because suddenly it feels too hot in this old, closed room. “What say we move outside for a little while, so we can get some fresh air and keep ourselves comfortable as we go forward? Wouldn’t that be nice? Don’t you think the inside is feeling a bit stuffy? It will be cooler outdoors by now. Oh, and I’ve just realized: I’ve never even offered you anything to drink! What a terrible hostess. Would you like something before we go on?”

He sets my picture down, carefully. “I’m fine, thank you.”

“Really?” I smile and shake my head. “But I’m not.

Come. This way.” And I lead him into the hall, where I drop my scarf on the padded bench, thankfully. “I’m going to pour myself my first glass of wine for the day. It’s my birthday, after all! Are you sure you won’t join me? In just a little something? No? How about soda with a bit of lime and ice? Good! And while I’m getting that ready,” I say before he can say anything else, “why don’t you carry your things out through those French doors there, and make yourself comfortable in one of the Adirondacks? Move anything around you like. Please. Make yourself right at home,” I say as I leave him, so that he’ll feel, as I do, the release, the momentary pause in things that is necessary when you still have so far to go, so much to cover.



HE’S SETTLED INTO THE stiff incline of one of the chairs and moved the cushion at his back. He’s taking in the view to the east, the red-capped silos jutting like meat thermometers.

I hand him his drink.

“So. Are you enjoying your doctoral studies in psychology?”

“Yes. Very much. Thank you.”

He takes the soda from me, staring through it, analyzing it.

“Do you know, I think that’s something I might like to have studied myself. But now it’s too late. Where did you do your undergraduate work?”

“In Cairo.”

“Really! I had a very good friend who was on the foreign desk in Cairo for a while. As an editor. He was a reporter before that. He worked for the *Times*. An old Irish friend of mine. This was probably before you were born.”

“Let me turn on my recorder again.” He rests the phone on the wide-planked arm of the Adirondack.

“Oh. Of course,” I say. A bit disappointed. Such a hard worker this serious young man is. He doesn’t want to give either one of us a break at all.

“SO YOU BELIEVE YOU are Anne Frank,” he prompts me. “Or were. That you have recovered her life, as a past life. I’m sorry, but I have to ask you this: are you aware that most people who recover a past life believe they are someone famous?”

I smile and stare down into the open mouth of my wine glass. Its comforting red bowl. I adjust the cushion at my own back.

“But I was already famous, Mr. Bardawil, you have to remember. Famous as the only survivor of a famous sinking, at a famous time. And I was miserable. So you can’t think I’m hungry for celebrity. What you have to

grasp is that I now know I was famous for the wrong reason. Back then. For the wrong *me*. Reporters used to hunt that girl down and shove their microphones out—which were these horrible, awful, soft clubs in those days—and they would say, *Oh please can you tell us again about your remarkable salvation . . .* And when I couldn't bring myself to say anything remarkable—because I didn't remember anything about the ship called the *Kostas*, about the sinking, although they said I swam away from her and survived—away they went, almost angry.”

Back then, back then, so tense around reporters I was. And later, around my reporter lover, too. Though I thought sleeping with him would help. Maybe a kind of revenge on them all. I used to slink under his sheets, sink down behind the pipes of his big brass bed, the one that dominated his Chelsea studio in 1960, when good girls, professional women, weren't supposed to sleep with men they weren't married to, and when I'd finished him off he would lie on his back and I would watch his thick red chest heave up and down and say nothing. Entire afternoons lost in this way. Empty, beautiful afternoons, autumn and spring and winter and summer, leaves then snow flying against the cracked window panes. When I couldn't stand my own blankness next to his fullness, I took the train to New Haven and sat in a coffee shop near the station and pretended I was a housewife taking a break from my school-aged children. Smoking was so nice in those days, before I gave it up; it made my lungs match the



burning in my head.

I imagined being the perfect American woman, a perfect American wife, sitting there in my lunch booth. Calmly, smoothly managing all around me, making sure everyone was happy and at ease, with a modern home where I swept around during a cocktail party in a glittering, wide, petticoated dress, opening myself to everyone like a fan. Not the woman that I became, defensive, known for winning over a jury with all my talking, through a clenched jaw.

“BUT COULD YOU HAVE gotten away from Belsen?” he prompts me again. “That was impossible.”

Well. He wants to know. So I will say it then.

What I see, I tell him, is what I saw in that white flame, that candle, that night, and it was me, the real me, bright white against the dark mud, dark mud funneling between two sharp, white shoulder blades. Mud so watery, at last, that I floated away from the pile near the fence I had been placed against; I floated away in that flood, away from the others, like an unshelled snail. Now, why didn't anyone, the Kapos, notice my being flushed out? Because they didn't. That's all. That is all there is to it.

It was very cold and stormy, and I floated away, without trying, I believe. I closed my eyes while I drained away through that hole the storm had cut under the fence, through a channel under the wires, and it wasn't until I

was sloughed as a rag out through to the other side that I opened my eyes and saw where I was. Flung out with the trash. Nothing but trash.

I couldn't move, roll on my side, or call out. I could only keep my head turned in one direction, to my right, my left ear drowning in the mud, my nose barely out of the water. I could only blink one eye, and wait to die. There is no real difference, when you come down to it, between dying alone or lumped with everyone else. It is cold, and miserable, and expected.

I HAVE TO STOP for a minute and sip my wine. Surely this young man will see all as clearly as I do now? Surely there can be no question. But if there is, I will go on. I go on, as if writing in my diary:

*And from the mud a wailing, maddened farmer lifted me up and carried me across a stinking field, lit by lightning, for a long, long time, until we reached a barn and he ducked both our heads under the door, and lay me down in a wheelbarrow full of straw and leaves and left me there to sleep or die. In the morning he picked the handles up with his crooked arms and pushed me around the yard, past an overflowing dam and a duck pond, so that I could see the birds, and the sun shining on the water. He said I was his wife and that he loved me . . .*

My interviewer is looking at me oddly. He's adjusted his breath, like an athlete who suddenly sees that a race is going to be much longer and more strange than he'd guessed.

I rest, taking a moment to enjoy this small step forward toward being known. I lean back in my Adirondack, exhaling. The thin clouds over the horizon at the edge of the wheat fields are knotted and bunched; they haven't unraveled and flattened the way they will by dusk. The wind is light but cool. Maybe, in a moment, I'll ask this boy the question that's bothered me these last three weeks; I will ask him why he thinks it is that everyone, everyone, researchers and historians and scholars, students trained, like him, to be rigorous—even the reporter-editor I once loved—have always been so willing, all these years, to believe a person like her, like Anne, I mean like me, could simply disappear? Could simply go down without a trace? Is it because it is easier to accept evil than to imagine winning over it? Is it because they only want to see what is obviously there? Reporters, reporters especially are so keen on that. And they care only for the worst, and find it. That is the news. They fight to find the worst of a story, and go into dark alleys, and are tough, and impolite, and unreasonable, and ingratiating, calling and calling and calling, Irish stubbornness it was, always fishing for more. He'd waited for my father one day outside the courthouse where we'd been called for an arraignment:

“Sir! Sir! Tell us anything about that woman, your client?”

My father called out, before lunging into a taxi: “I will tell you she is telling the truth!” I had followed him into the cab but looked back quickly at the man from the *Times*

everyone said could get at the truth faster than anyone else, as though he were an athlete and the news was a race and the ribbon always fresh.

“But she’s accusing a politician’s son—a war hero!”

“You’re only a hero,” my father shouted out the window, “until you understand that no one is.”

The man who became my lover followed me a few months after this into a bookstore on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, where I used to go to find histories of what had happened during the war.

“Congratulations,” he said, peering at me over the bunkers of the shelves. “Your side won.”

“Thank you. It wasn’t us. It was justice.”

“Couldn’t agree more. Care to have a drink to celebrate?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Trial’s over. I don’t want anything. I promise.” He grinned, a little crookedly.

“No.” I already was seeing someone, a dull boy from my building who worked in advertising and didn’t ask questions and sat wherever I told him to.

The Irishman leaned over a table stacked with books, his hair tousled, his chin stubbled. Such a rumpled thing he was, a caricature of a newsman. But he didn’t seem to know it.

“You look exhausted,” he said abruptly.

“Do I?”

“You were the one, you know, I kept watching in the courtroom. Feeding your father whatever he needed

whenever he needed it. Your father is an amazing man, by the way. But you. There was never anyone more behind the scenes who seemed more up front, to me.”

“I’m tired. You’re right.” I started trying to get rid of him.

He rubbed his hand over the fence of his beard. “I’m tired too. Always am, when a big thing’s done and turned in. Then I don’t know what to do with myself. For a while, I’m completely lost.”

I nodded without meaning to. Because I understood that. How, when a thing was finished, you didn’t know how to keep the loud hum going in your ears.

“There’s the bar around the corner,” he beckoned.

“You never give up, do you.”

“An objective truth.”

English. Such a wonderful language. You can say things like that and get away with it. Say the same thing twice, just for effect. Objective truth. A language for boasting. For wheedling.

“What about dinner?”

“You think I’m going to change my mind?”

“Why not? You could without any worry, you know, because I can assure you I won’t try to cajole information or anything else out of you. Nothing immoral.”

“There’s always the next big case.”

“Another objective truth. But . . . ” Here he held the door of the shop open for me, and we stepped into the daily parade of coats and hats. “I’m thinking of taking a

break from it all for a little while. A kind of vacation. To do some thinking. About what I can really do with my typewriter. If I should do more, see more. Don't you ever need a vacation, now and then? Time to rethink yourself?"

"I keep busy. Or try to."

"Then let me keep you busy having dinner."

"No, not tonight."

"Then tomorrow night."

I looked into his green, slightly sagging eyes and tried to figure out if I would like to have them pressed against my forehead.

"I'm not sure I want to have anything to do with you," I said honestly.

"Well, if you're not sure then you should have dinner with me so you can *decide* whether or not you want to have anything to do with me. Okay? Because how is there any other way to know, really? Plus I find it's always best to assess another human being when you're wildly hungry. It sharpens all the instincts. Skip lunch tomorrow. Have dinner with me."

I could spend time with the dull boy in advertising, I thought. Or this not dull one.

"I have one stipulation. I want to choose the restaurant."

"Choose."

I picked the Italian close to my building, so I could leave and walk home if I wanted to, if I didn't want to rub foreheads. No need to hail a cab, even. I made sure to be the first to arrive and took the table I always took, close to

the kitchen. I preferred sitting at the back, and told him so after he'd sat down and loosened his tie.

"It's a bit noisy, though?"

"It's warmer."

We started on a dish of beans in garlic.

"So tell me why, Hannah, that waiter is making a point of treating me like dead fish? He's giving me the eye."

"That's Antonio. He's being protective of me."

"You come in here with louses, generally."

"It's that I helped his cousin with an immigration problem once."

"So that tells me something about you."

"What?"

"You're softer than you look. That being the case, I feel safer blabbing something to you. I don't want to start out by lying to you, Hannah, so I want you to know I know more about you today than I did the day before." He reached for a cigarette. "I searched the *Times* morgue for your name. You're the mystery child from the *Kostas*. Sorry. Old habit. You have a spot of linguini sauce on your collar, by the way."

"You have one on your neck." Like a bloody cut.

"I see that when you're angry, your right eyebrow goes a bit higher than your left."

"Your teeth are too straight. Like every American's."

"I don't want you to be angry with me."

"You spied on me. But I'm not," I lied, and started plotting my revenge. I would sleep with him and then be

cold. Hot and cold. “Do you take coffee? Dessert?”

“I don’t like dessert. But I like the time it takes, Hannah. To be with you.”

AFTERWARD WE STEPPED OUT into the night air and started walking along a cordon of hollow-mouthed garbage cans.

“Do you feel like going a ways?” he asked. “Or do you have a car?”

“No, I don’t have a car.”

“You don’t drive?”

“I can drive. My family has a farm upstate. My father taught me.”

“Nice folks, your folks?”

“You spied. You should know.”

“I only know they adopted you. I don’t know if they’re nice.”

“Fine. They’re nice, then. They’re old—older than parents usually are. And tired. They adopted me out of bravery and hope. Did your morgue show that?”

“I know you have no memory of who you were, Hannah. Of your childhood. Of what happened to you. I can’t imagine.” He said this simply, as though he were reading a piece of verse on a very small piece of paper. “It makes me feel very . . . helpless.”

“Oh.” I felt myself shiver, surprised.

I blinked up at the few leaves still hooked on the elms. It was dark and cold. We each had our hands buried in our



separate pockets. But the gap between us wasn't that wide. We kept walking.

"Eventually, you know, I'll have to ask you more," he admitted. "I can't help myself."

"Why do you have to?"

"Because I want to understand you. I want to know you."

"I don't want to be one of your stories."

"You won't be. If you were a story of mine, I wouldn't apologize to you first."

Someone darted from the shadows.

Mugger. Why now?

"Please!" the stooped, shadowy figure begged.

My date's hand reached over the skin of my stomach. Protecting me. In the streetlight the stooped shape resolved and became an old man. His face was grizzled, his eyes wet, his clothes crumpled but clean.

"I'm lost," he pleaded with us. "Please, please help me, I'm lost!"

"It's all right," said the voice of the man I now knew would be my lover, hot or cold. "Where are you going, friend?"

"S-s-somewhere. But I don't know where, exactly." And he waved his empty, mottled hands in the air.

"Take it easy now. Take a step back from the lady. I mean it. Right *now*."

"But so afraid, so afraid in the dark—I'm sorry—"

"It's all right. Take a breath. Or we're moving on. Got it?"

"No, no, please!"

“Where do you belong?”

At this the old man closed his stammering mouth but still waved one of his shaking hands, as though reaching for an invisible rail in the air.

“He hasn’t been out long,” I whispered. “Look. Someone’s dressed him. His shoes are tied. And expensive.”

“So listen. Can you give us an address, friend?”

“Don’t know, so afraid, don’t know, don’t know!”

“We can take you to the police? Or call them out for you? There’s a telephone box on the next corner. Why don’t you walk a little ways with us?”

“Afraid, so afraid to be alone.”

“You won’t be if you come with us. Come.”

And so the old man fell in between us, holding his hands away from his sides as though they were damp.

“Maybe you have an apartment near here?”

“Afraid, don’t know, don’t know!”

“Is anything familiar around here? Can you tell us anything about yourself? Your name?”

“I can tell you the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

“No, it seems you do.”

We walked through webs of light from dirty windows. We skirted mounds of garbage. We came at last to the phone booth.

“You stay put here while the lady and I make the call.”

I stepped with the man who would be my lover inside the glass, so close we must have looked like one object from the outside.



“ARE YOU SAYING,” Mr. Bardawil calls me back a long ways, “you didn’t die at Belsen, but were taken in by a . . . a farmer?”

“Yes,” I nod, dreamy. “A German farmer who lived near the camp. A Christian. Stopped. Old. He didn’t recognize me for what I was when he found me lying outside the fence. He thought I was his wife . . . He’d been wandering around in his grief, in his madness . . . Such a lonely old man . . . His wife had been taken away when she came down with typhus. Like me. There was so much typhus, and that’s what happened, you see, the Germans were so careful, they took people away before they could infect anyone else. You can read about it in any history book. This mad old man didn’t know if she was alive or dead. But when he found me out in the field, he thought I was her. And I let him. I admit that. I let a man believe I was someone other than who I was. And he healed, and I got better, but then he died, right at the end of the war. So I . . . I wandered away from the farm until I saw a soldier passing on the road—an Italian soldier, headed to a Displaced Persons camp. You can read about those, too. There were such camps all over the place. And I made it to one of those, and in those camps there was the whisper of Palestine.”

Of a chalky sky, at sunrise, that turned wafer pink. A sky that was so thin and light it seemed detached, rolling over the land. Where a single crow looked like a roll of dead

skin sliding off the back of something large and unseen. And then, as the sun rose, the sky turned yellow, and the hills heated—those hills that each day were like bread being heated up, over and over and over again, so that living there was something you could ask, that you had to ask, of the same loaf over and over again.

And in the desert, the whisper went, everything that was green stood out twice, once for itself and once for the empty space next to it. Fires in the distance smoked white. Thin slices of white rock lay around on the ground, sharp enough to cut, in the shade of low tree branches that were twisted and lightly haired, like the hair of goats. Everything looked smaller than it might have been somewhere else. But not weak. No, not that. In the gaps between everything that stood were the spaces where whatever was weak would have been standing.

MY LOVER OPENED HIS apartment door, kissed me, let me go inside. We studied each other's moods, as the years passed. We tested habits.

“Drink, Hannah?”

“Please.”

“Anything?”

“Vodka.”

“Hard morning in court? You look tired.”

“I'm always tired.”

“And you're always telling me you can't stop working.”

“Just the drink, please.”

Later on, in his bed, I said to him, “All right. Why don’t we move to Connecticut.”

“Really?”

“We could settle down. Raise a family.”

He rose onto one elbow. “Really? But what is it you’ve been saying to me all these years? ‘Given what we both know about the world . . . no children . . .’”

“Really.”

“You’ll marry me?” He laughed and rolled me onto my back, his arms around my neck and shoulders. “Imagine that. I’ll have a wife to come home to. But a smart, savvy, city wife, please. Even in Connecticut. Don’t turn into one of those cabbages of the suburbs.”

“All right.”

“Promise? We’ll do it?”

“Promise,” I lied, uncertain again.

He was so happy.

WHEN I WAS STRONG enough, I ran away from the Displaced Persons camp. It was too much like a prison, in the end, and I wanted to find freedom, a new life, a different life. I ran through the night, looking for the secret groups who were traveling toward Palestine. Sounds. Unfamiliar smells. A tank burning in a field. The dry wind driving flecks into my mouth. In the moonlight, a shoelace at the edge of a ditch. A small piece of butcher

paper. A metal hairpin lying in the road. I remember. I remember all these things, now.

I THINK I NEED to rest again.

“I don’t feel so well, Mr. Bardawil.”

“I’m sorry. Are you all right?” He puts his pencil down and leans forward in his Adirondack.

I can feel my eyelids fluttering a bit. Hot. “I think I need to take just a moment. It’s only been three weeks. I’m not used to all these memories crowding in. Sometimes—sometimes it is too much. Too soon. Too quickly.” And then Maia finds me tottering in the hallway and helps me to sit down. Where is Maia? “Maybe you should talk for a little while?” This idea strikes me, suddenly—that I might take shelter for a little while in a voice not my own, the way I used to in the old days when I listened to clients, people who needed help more than I, outwardly, did. “Maybe you could tell me something about yourself? A story? Can you tell me, Mr. Bardawil, have you ever run away in the way I’ve just described, have you ever been lost, lost, lost, with no place to rest, no place to call home?”

He blinks at me.

“I’m Palestinian. I told you.”

“You’re offended. I’m sorry.” He does look it, but I’ve noticed it too late, and I’m tired, and he doesn’t seem quite so young as he did a while ago. It’s strange, how anger withers us in common. My lover’s brow, when he

got angry or impatient with me, looked just the same way.

“Were you born there?”

“No. I was born in Jordan.”

“I see. And . . . how did you come to be . . . in Cairo, for university, you said?”

“My father is a businessman. I’ve traveled widely ever since I was a child. That’s not unusual for my people. We’re not comfortable with the idea of rooting anywhere. It feels like a betrayal. So it was Cairo, then NYU.”

“I’m feeling a little parched again,” I say nervously. “Maybe we should go inside. Would you like that? Would you like to come back into the kitchen with me, and we’ll have some coffee? There’s nothing like an afternoon cup. And I know it’s hard work, listening, asking questions. At least it is for an attorney, so I imagine it must be for you, too.”

He seems to hesitate. Then gets up.

“Yes. Coffee would be nice.”

In the kitchen everything is ready for the party, too. The counters are cleared, the wine brought out, the copper pots, dusted and gleaming, hang suspended over our heads. It’s all for show. I never was much of a cook. My Irish lover didn’t care for dining in, though he did buy us, once, on the occasion of the five-year anniversary of our first dinner together, a set of four dining table candlesticks, silver, because he could afford them after he was promoted to editor of the Foreign Desk, and he’d said at the time that since I kept postponing our marriage, we might as

well at least spring ahead and do the second part, the gifts. And so he kept two candlesticks and gave me two. And there they are, like two spears, balanced on the counter, waiting.

Maia has left some coffee on, so I pour two cups, then have to hunt for the sugar bowl, hidden behind a mass of roses sent by a circuit judge.

“Have you,” Bardawil asks me suddenly, reaching up and touching the beaten copper pots, “ever been to Zimbabwe?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Ever been to Africa?”

“No. I mean, I don’t like to travel. I haven’t left this country since I arrived here.”

“I saw pots like this there. You asked about being lost. I was in Livingstone. A group of friends and I were traveling together before we began our graduate studies. We wanted to see Victoria Falls.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Do you know what I saw instead? Blindness. There were blind beggars everywhere. Alone. Or sometimes in couples. A blind person paired with someone sighted. I saw a very old man leading a young child, and a young woman being led by a boy. Tied together. The sighted beggar dependent on the blind beggar for her weakness, and the blind beggar dependent on the seeing one for his strength.”

I nod, confused, while I hand him his coffee.



He frowns, looking into his cream.

“And I was a tourist on holiday there. It made me feel terrible. So I did what I could. I handed out money. But then that wasn’t enough. I ended up going into a grocery store to buy food so I could give it away.”

“My father used to do that.”

“There was hardly anything to buy. Rows of empty shelves. People scrambling for bread when it came out of a narrow slot. I walked away with everything I could carry, cookies, noodles. I wanted in particular to go back to the woman and boy I’d seen on the street in front of my hotel, tied together; but when I got there, they were already off in the distance, the boy leading the woman. So I hurried after them down a wide street—but then a convoy of trucks got in my way and I lost them. And then I got lost in a maze of alleys, trying to find them again.”

Yes. A maze. You can get lost.

“I finally gave the groceries to a fly-ridden family sitting outside a corrugated hut. It seemed shameful to be passing people by. Then one of the family’s sons, a small boy, guided me back to my hotel. Which I couldn’t have found without him. It smelled of the rice cooking in the restaurant below and of air-conditioning.”

“That was good of you.” I smile gratefully. “I feel much more rested now. Thank you.”

“You do?”

“You gave my mind a rest. You made me forget myself. I so appreciate that. Now I’m ready to go on. To be your

most exceptional case study. I can help you, you know, as you can help me. Just like in Africa. You can help me tell the world, and I can help you become famous. Will you like that?"

He blinks, his coffee paused in the air.

Since the birthday caterers might be arriving soon with all their noisiness and their foil pans, I suggest that we go upstairs to my study. I pick up my red scarf left on the bench along the way and wrap it around my neck. The afternoon is fading, falling fast. Outside, through the windows, the old barn is gray, a dense cube catching the sun. The gravel driveway is still empty. No sign of Maia, who should be coming back at any moment now. In fact, shouldn't she already be here?

"Forgive me for lingering, Mr. Bardawil, but I'm looking for my assistant. We've had so much to do, recently, that I've given her a break in town. I've been organizing my papers into an archive, and she's been carrying the boxes to the barn. Now that it's going to be clear who I was, or who I am, I feel the need to get organized, because everything that I have, all my records, are going to be important. For the future. But it's starting to feel like a task that will never get done. I'm sure Maia feels that way too."

"Yes," he says politely.

"There are so many letters, for instance. I hardly know what to do with them all. It seems vanity to keep each one. And yet I have to do it, don't I? Because they will be important. And because sometimes cleaning house doesn't

mean getting rid of things, but gathering them in.” I take one more look out the window. Where, where is that girl? I feel suddenly anxious without her. “The trouble for me,” I say, distracted, “has been to decide, really, how much space to take up in a library. Because I’m sure that’s what will be wanted.”

The letters. Files. The bulk of me. Of what happened to me, after. In boxes stored in the barn. And in cabinets, the business correspondence from my practice. And in my study and other rooms, personal letters, which have been harder to read and go over, because sometimes it takes a while for each one to make sense without having a copy of the letters I sent that prompted them. In one he wrote to me:

*Yes, I've received yours. It is difficult for me, very difficult for me to understand why you still don't understand that while my work means a great deal to me, it is not everything to me as yours seems to be to you. It seems odd, in a woman. I need to go where I can do and be of some use, yes, of course, that's true. My work here in the Middle East is of some use to the world, I hope. But what is the use of doing anything productive, anything draining, if we don't have a place of rest, a cup of companionship that we can drink from again and again? I'm sorry, my work here isn't letting me write much, but I think it only right to remind you as I already have so many times that it's no sin if two human beings decide to make themselves a point of each other's consideration. I don't know what it is that makes it impossible for you to come*

*and be with me. There are times that I feel I'm done trying to wring myself inside out trying to figure it out. We're both getting older. You keep stringing me on. We have to come to terms. If you have something to add to this please send it through the bureau, with all my love . . .*

In another:

*I'm beginning to think we should really leave things just as they are, and not as this constant exchange of words. You say you're anxious when we're apart but you grow stiff and strained when we're together. Do you remember that day when we were walking in the Park, and I asked you what I had done that kept you pushing me away. I asked you, had I committed a murder, or taken another lover, or what was this imaginary crime that I'd committed? And you turned red and looked at the ground and you didn't answer. I had hoped you were testing your feelings just then. Coming to your senses, seeing how far you would let them go. But no, you looked up and you said something, laughing, you said that you just needed more time to get used to my smells, and I needed more time to get used to yours . . . And I didn't believe for one minute you were telling me the truth . . . And then it struck me—and it's never left me since—that in spite of everything I've tried to reveal to you about myself, and my honesty with you, you doubt my own sense of self-knowledge. That I really do love you just as you are. Missing pieces and all. It doesn't, it shouldn't matter. We should just soldier on and see what happens . . . but then I wonder, will we ever cover more*

*ground than we've already covered?*

Another:

*Just a quick card to let you know I've received yours but I'm headed to Buenos Aires in a few hours and don't have time to respond at length the way I'd like to. We can talk when I get back, all right, let's have dinner the way normal middle-aged friends tend to do with drinks before and after and all that, all right? Much love.*

And:

*I hope this finds you well. I found this postcard at a stall in front of the Duomo. Not far from the coast. I love the Italians. Be well. Much love.*

And:

*Yes, I find it interesting, too, the slow evolution, or rather devolution, of our bodies. I guess we'll have to discuss it at length, one of these days. Maybe next time I'm in the city. It is good to be alive, though, don't you think? I do. Time is the honor of being overlooked by the devil. Since you ask, Haifa was hot, crowded, and commercialized. I'm sitting here sweating at a café table, so unbecoming. Next stop Tel Aviv. No, don't worry, it's dangerous everywhere. Be well. Love.*



*DO YOU REMEMBER THAT time, years ago, when we drove out to Cape Cod and window-shopped for houses? When you finally said you would marry me? And we looked at that tiny cottage with the deck overlooking the bay. We seemed perfectly able, didn't we, to agree on something, finally. I still remember how we had that agent drive us out and take us up and stand with us on the balcony looking out, and had her open all the doors on the appliances for us, and go boringly on about all the plumbing work and electrical business, and let her compliment us on our happiness, like we were newlyweds—and all the while, let's face it, we were fooling her. My mind drifts back, sometimes, to that shingled, lost house. And then I wonder—what if? But no. We fobbed her off, that realtor. And then we were having dinner after, and whatever crab you were having was covered in sauce, and you had it all over your face and hands, and you were calling the waiter for another steamed towel, but I didn't wait, I put my hands on both sides of your face and kissed you, rubbing us both in it, and we were all alone in that dark booth, and I started to slide my hand down your neck, just a little, and I said, God, I think I'll just throw you over the side of this table and drown you in butter, you need to be drowned with my love, but you pulled away from me and said, You would never say that to HER, and I said who? and you said, the kind of woman you should be living with, a woman from Connecticut. And I still have absolutely no idea what you meant, and I've never understood it, and I will never understand what you meant, who you were talking about, and why you got so angry . . . What is even harder to remember, but what I don't fear to remember, because it's us, such as we are,*

*or such as we were, is that in the parking lot, you pushed me away again with your words, though I wanted nothing but to take you back to the hotel, and you said, I am not a story, I am not a patient, you have no right to me, and then you swore . . . I know you don't like to be reminded of such coarseness, but if you are going to ask why I haven't written lately, Hannah, it seems only fair and honest to remind you. There is only so much grease in the fire a man can take.*

*I don't know if I could find that lost, shingled house again on my own, but if I do I think I'll go back to that restaurant, sometime, when I'm back on the coast, if I get the chance, and see if by dint of effort I can locate again that hole in the universe that allowed us to imagine something peaceful, for a moment. I will write again when I get back from Lebanon. Yes, it is a bit dangerous. No, don't worry. Be well, old girl. Love.*

I'M STILL LOOKING OUT at the dry bone of the barn. But what luck, here comes Maia, pulling in across the gravel drive in her bright blue compact car. She is, without question, a responsible, fine, sturdy, upstanding woman. One you can trust. The kind of person who can always be counted on to do the right thing. No need for me to ever have worried or even to have imagined for an instant that she was going to be late.

“Mr. Bardawil,” I gesture toward the banister, “would you go up while I take just a moment to catch up with my assistant? You can make yourself comfortable up there. My

study is the first door to the right when you reach the top landing. Have a look around, at anything you like. There are pictures and placards and things on the walls, things that might help you.”

“All right, but—”

A brief exchange of looks between the two of them as Maia comes in. A blunt, sexual sizing up. Ah, the young. He turns away.

When he’s gone, I ask her:

“Did you have a nice break, Maia? Are you feeling rested?”

“I did and do.” She opens the hall closet and tosses her bag in, as she always does. “I had some lunch and checked your e-mail while I was there. Also I checked the weather for you. It’s shaping up to be a nice evening. Your friends are going to have a beautiful drive up from the city. Oh, and what else, let’s see. More birthday snail mail in your P.O. box.” She holds out a packet. “Do you want it now?”

“Later is fine.” No more letters. No.

She lifts her heavy chin, pointing upstairs. “I thought he’d be long done by now. What have you two been talking about all this time?”

“Oh, legal matters. You know. And he’s been telling me about his travels,” I say, breezy. “Can you take care of everything down here if we’re not finished by the time my first guest arrives?”

“I don’t like the sound of that, Hannah. You shouldn’t be going on for so long, and you know it. You’ll wear yourself



out. You know how you forget things when that happens, how you start thinking things that are a little . . . Don't make me get all worried about you, now, okay?"

Big-hearted thing. I've missed her. "I'll be fine, Maia. I like the boy. I even thought we should invite him to the party. It might be exactly the right thing to do." And maybe, I can admit it now, what I've been planning all along. So we can announce my true identity together. To the surprise and delight of my friends.

"Just don't let him suck the life out of you, is all I'm saying. ABDs can do that."

"Oh, I can keep going as long as I need to."

"Mm-hmm. That's like saying the tree can keep going while you chop some firewood."

I turn my deaf ear to her.

CLIMBING UP THE POLISHED stairway is harder for me in the afternoons than it is in the mornings. I have to pull the banister toward me in a slow tug-of-war. Then have to wait for a minute on the first landing to catch my breath. From here I can look up and see half of him inside my study, not in silhouette, as when he first came, but sharply defined and slightly wrinkled at the back from already having sat so long with me. A handsome angel looking over my bookshelves. My diplomas. The various tributes for my charity work. When I sold the family properties I had, I gave most of the money away. I have always wanted

to do good in this world.

I feel my heart thumping at the sudden change in level. I wait a moment at the top landing. Take another breath. All right. Ready to go.

“Finding anything good?” I smile and walk in.

“You’ve got some very fine history books here.” He turns to me. “About the war period and after.”

“Yes. Some of those were my father’s. The books in Yiddish were my mother’s.”

“But no copy of the—ah—diary?”

“Not here. I keep it beside my bed.” That’s where diaries belong. *The sun is shining, the sky is deep blue, there is a lovely breeze and I’m longing—so longing—for everything . . .*

I go behind my desk because that’s where I’m most comfortable in this room. I gesture. “Have a seat. I was obsessed with history and the law for a long time, as you can see. I wanted to understand the relationship between time and the law, between history and what is legal, what is allowed. Those are some of my books from my student days, over there. You have to treasure your student days. There’s nothing like them.” That infant time long before you know all you will ever know.

He slides his hips into the leather chair in front of me. Of course Maia wouldn’t like him; he’s not meaty enough for her. I move the birthday flowers, the wild lilies and delphiniums some of my old clients have sent me, so that they don’t block my view of him. The light from the curtained window behind me slants, hitting him on the

chest.

He pushes his recording phone forward again.

“So we were up to where, you say, you left the Displaced Persons camp.”

“Yes. And I was making my way through Allied-occupied Germany. The summer of 1945. And there I joined the *Berihah* movement. *Berihah*. You might not be familiar with the word? It means ‘organized escape.’”

“I am familiar with it.”

“Oh.”

I wish I had a cigarette, suddenly, like in the old days. I really do wish, all at once, that he was Scottish, the way I’d thought he’d be. *Bide a while with me*. He might not like what I’m going to have to say. He might become offended again, or even hostile, and then he might not want to believe me and will try to class me with others, the Anastasias, or maybe the Shirley MacLaines. But it shouldn’t matter. *Bardawil*. Not if he’s a just soul. The truth is only what happened. There is no turning back from it. The truth is an unchanging future, made in the past.

I FOUND MY WAY into a German field, and there, at dusk, I dug myself into a haystack, out of the cold. I pulled my weight in after me, closing the hay behind me, but also leaving it partly open so I could breathe and look out, if I needed to, to see the first, glistening stars. The color of the sky was the color of an iris fading . . .

No wind or breeze. Not even a cricket stirred. The haystack seemed fresh, but after a while, it stank. Just like our hayfields here upstate.

I was tired, so very tired, and so I started to sleep, in spite of the smell. My shoes sinking like coffins at the ends of my legs. My arms pricked by needles.

A vivid dream. I still have it sometimes. Of people sitting around a dinner table, laughing. And I know every face. I know and could have crawled inside each one and looked out through their eyes. *What's to be done about her?* they ask, as I turn my good ear away from them. The table is set, there is plenty of food, the pots are all big and hot. I make a well in the middle of my potatoes and kale, to hold my gravy. The arguing still going on. Almost whispered now. *What's to be done about her? What's to be done about Anna?* The gravy is dark with bits of meat in it. The potatoes are reedy with cabbage. A clock ticks. A cat winds its tail around my legs. I need to get up and use the WC, but I'm too comfortable. Moonlight spoons in from a window, and I'm being lifted out into an armful of light.

Now a new smell: a burning cigarette. *What should we do about her?* A torch, a flashlight, is burning through my eyelashes. A flashlight is shining in my eyes bright enough so that I turn the inside of my arm, my forearm, over my face, showing my number. Hay falling from under my armpit. Then I hear, in Hebrew:

“She’s one of us. Put that gun down.”



“MEMBERS OF THE MOSSAD. Former resistance fighters. Tough looking, armed, and *very* serious. The Berihah.” I pull my sleeve down over my wrist, so that Bardawil will not go on looking at it. “The beam of light fell and turned into a circle shining on a soldier’s boot. I saw cigarette tips moving and glowing in the night, and eyes shimmering like leaves. And shoulders hunched, because they were all carrying heavy military packs. Like the soldiers who found me later on the beach. There were about ten of them who came to sleep that night in that field. They picked up more refugees, like me, as they went on. Men and women. Old and young. But mostly young.” So cold it was, some mornings. Waking in a field. Like getting up inside an unlit stove. I remember that so clearly now. All of us carrying weight.

“So you are saying you traveled out of Germany with the Berihah movement.”

“Exactly. If a group grew too large, they broke up into smaller groups. I was assigned, that first week, to a group of six. No one was allowed to move without papers or organization, and the role of the Berihah was to obtain false papers, to smuggle us around, even though the borders were closed. There were passports waiting for us at key places, false names for us, given up by legal immigrants to Palestine who were already across the sea, who had sent them.”

I look at him, anxiously.

“I can’t help,” my young biographer leans forward across

my desk, “but notice something as you speak, Hannah.”

“Anna. Please.”

“I can’t help but notice that at a crucial moment in your adolescence you were forced to develop a false identity. That must have been very difficult for you, during what was already a very traumatic time.”

I tap my fingernail on the wood of my desk. “Look at that thing, Mr. Bardawil.” I point to his phone. “So small. Just a sliver. You don’t see how it can hold everything inside it. And yet, of course, it was designed to, so it does. It does. It manages. Do you see?”

He nods, makes notes.

“We made it to Vienna. We were kept inside there for weeks. It was terrible. All I wanted to do was go out, take a walk, do the things that other, normal people did. At night I’d curl up on a pallet next to other women in a room that had been a child’s room, a nursery, with a window shaped like a slice of bread.” *How I’m longing—so longing—for everything . . .* “I can see it all so clearly again. I remember I tried to get up before the others in the mornings. To give myself a minute to stand at that window and look down into the street. Alone. A kind of freedom. A chance to see everything. Nothing stirring. The streetlamps still glowing. The houses and shops still standing behind their closed shutters, the stars falling against the roofs.” I shivered in my new socks, in my borrowed nightgown. At first I thought it was ash obscuring the stars. Then I realized it was only snow. The chimneys started to smoke. A cat curled around

a wrought-iron gate. Late flowers in a window pot wilted in the cold. Like in Connecticut. In Connecticut the snow is different than in the city; it falls in flakes like pastry dough, or sometimes in soft balls. I might have married a man and lived in Connecticut.

“Finally we were given more false papers and train tickets and we were carried to Italy. Where the *Kostas* was waiting. From the Greek, meaning the stable, the steady.”

I find my hands fidgeting, feeling for my red scarf. I don't like that I've had to remember this part. That boat. Waiting for days to board it. While narrow bunks were being built below decks, harder, narrower even than in the concentration camps. But I have to remember, to say everything. To prove myself. Prove who I am. To build my case. “In Italy we had *pastaciotti*,” I say to lighten the moment. “I used to have them on Grand Street with my adoptive parents, many years later, and never understood why I liked them so much, until now. In any case, we stayed in that safe house, an Italian villa, pink as a bow. It had two balconies supported by metal grates. At first all I wanted to do was stand and stare from that balcony. I could have hung there for hours, mooning at the Mediterranean.”

At night, the village harbor lit up in a half circle. The moon rose thin and sharp, like an envelope balanced on its edge, and the air turned sweet with night flowers and it didn't seem like winter anymore, though it was. The waves in the dark sounded like an avalanche falling over and over again. In the dimly lit streets women carried woven

shopping bags and men walked under black hats, and the children all looked healthy.

“And then one day, Mr. Bardawil, a girl with a baby arrived in the house. And her name was Hannah.”

He lifts his head to me.

“Hannah?”

“Yes. It’s a common name among us. Of course, it’s also the name they found on me, on the false passport I was wearing around my neck when they discovered me on the beach at Haifa. I remember when Hannah came to the villa. The women were upstairs stitching a new flag together out of scraps and rags.” And they said about her:

*Oh no. Look at that. All you have to do is look at the way she carries that child around.*

*Not good, not good.*

*There is definitely something there. A story.*

*I’ll say.*

*Why won’t she speak?*

*Perhaps she’ll speak of it when she’s ready?*

*The group she came with on the train says she doesn’t speak.*

*Who of us does, really?*

*Which hellmaker was she in?*

*Belsen.*

*No ovens there.*

*Because they didn’t need them.*

*That baby of hers is so young, so young.*

*Almost a newborn.*

*Both so young.*



*But not both blond.*

*No.*

*Oh no.*

*Only the baby blond.*

“We became friends. Neither one of us liked gossips, you see. And I got to know Hannah very well, Mr. Bardawil. But such a terrible, hollow thing she was. No amount of cooked potatoes seemed to fill her out.” White dice for knees. Gray glass for teeth. Black shells under the eyes. “But then we all looked the same, that year. She usually ducked away from people, preferring to sit and rock with her baby on her cot on the women’s floor.” Not a gentle motion. An agitated rocking. After a while, she grew calmer. The rocking helped, the scraping over and over again at the same inch, feeling it wear away. Her body was so small it was hard to imagine a baby having come out of it. A baby who looked nothing like her. Blond. Fat. Piercing blue eyes. The women of the villa tried to say that babies sometimes started out with blue eyes and blond hair and then settled into something more . . . familiar. But they didn’t believe what they spoke. Sometimes Hannah would settle him in his basket and then forget all about him, leaving him to go off to stare from the balcony, looking down into the street at the people passing.

By then it was December and we had to put light sweaters on to walk in the village. Word had gotten around that our ship would be ready soon, even if it was terrible, a floating ghetto; but who cared whether, like a doctor, a

ship was good-looking or not? All you cared about was what it could do for you.

The other women whispered excitedly, before they fell asleep in their cots, that the time was almost at hand, while Hannah rolled over the baby to quiet him, covering him with a soft sound, like doves wrestling.

“I THINK THE CATERERS have arrived!” I interrupt myself. “I can hear them coming in downstairs. Maia must be seeing to them.”

“Wait, don’t stop.” My interviewer frowns. “Go on, go on. You were telling me about Hannah. Hannah, yes? Not Anna?”

“Oh. Yes. Well. About Hannah.” I sit back, knowing that Maia can handle everything. “She finally opened up to me one day, you see, is what happened. And she told me that in the infirmary at Belsen a doctor had done . . . things to her, terrible things, before he ran away with the rest of the Germans once they were certain the Russians were coming . . . And the baby was born while she was in the Displaced Persons camp I told you about. Seven hours of labor, of torture. But then, a baby doesn’t know where it’s come from, or how much it hurts. Babies don’t know anything. They don’t belong to themselves.” When a baby is born it is slimed, like a handkerchief someone has already blown into.

“I don’t think the caterers will be too noisy.” I smile

reassuringly. “I predict only a little clattering and distraction and muss. If it’s more, I’m sorry, Mr. Bardawill! We’ll just have to talk our way over and around this business. If it gets too bad, I’ll step out onto the stair landing and talk to Maia about it.” A stair landing. A stair landing. Another memory floods in. Of someone panting at the top of the villa’s stairs, out of breath from having run up from the courtyard.

*We set sail in a matter of hours!*

*The time has come!*

*I can’t believe it!*

*Now, truly?*

*We must pack! We must go! Move!*

*I don’t think I can move quickly enough!*

*What about her?*

*She hasn’t moved for hours. She hasn’t spoken.*

*Come on, girl!*

*Come now, gelibte! This is no time for silence. For slowness. Get going! Show your son how happy you are! See how he watches you! He may already be making a memory of this moment. Show him what this historic moment means to you, to all of us! Who knows how young we are when we begin to remember our lives?*

ABOARD THE SHIP NOW. So high over the water, we didn’t know what to do with ourselves at first. When it finally moved I didn’t know that it wouldn’t be just the ship that

would unmoor, but the entire continent of Europe. I didn't expect the world to fall backward and away from me, the fingers of the docks letting go, the bare white knuckles of those clean houses against the hills. Going. Going. Gone.

I tried not to sleep during the day but I had to stay up at night, because Hannah's baby was always seasick. The bunks were so narrow and hard. During the day I moved around dazed, feet tangling, trying to keep my balance. I sat where I could find a place, and watched others pace up and down the deck, rubbing their heads, picking the peeling skin from their noses, nervous, smugglers being smuggled, who stopped each other and the sailors to ask the same questions over and over again: *Do you think we're making good time? How long do you think until we see the coast of Palestine? How will we get through the British blockade? Has there been any news about the British, or can we guess it's bad? Could we outrun anything in this tub, can that young captain be trusted, do we really know how much experience he has?*

I draped a wet sock over my neck and shoulder to keep the sun from baking me and the baby. The older women wore shawls and played cards and sang and prayed in corners. What few shady spots there were, everyone coveted. This one, for example, between the two compartments holding the life vests, next to the crates holding the munitions. We were not supposed to sit on the crates that held the guns and grenades, or smoke near them. But if you got up, another sweaty girl would take your place almost instantly.

"Do you think they'll let us go to school?"

“I don’t know. We have no records. They won’t know what form to put us in.”

“Of course they will. They’ll have to.”

“I don’t even remember my maths.”

“Me either.”

“But I won’t let the war make me stupid. Dumb.”

“Me either.”

“Are you afraid?”

“A little. Yes.”

“I’m afraid of this awful ship. Have you seen all the wood and hammers they’ve been carrying down below? What are they repairing?”

“I don’t know. We break things, I suppose.”

“There are too many of us. Even though we are too few.”

“Let’s not think about it right now. Close your eyes. Everything goes faster when you close your eyes.”

“Good idea.”

The air so still one evening. The ragged trio of musicians came out, as they always did at night, and the music began. The crates were arranged in a half circle, as the men plucked and readied themselves, leaning their red ears into the wood. Over the ship’s rail, behind their heads, lightning snaked across the horizon, the puzzle of the clouds suddenly fusing together. I didn’t want to move, ever again. I wanted to stay suspended, somehow. Listening to the music. Rocking. Rocking calmly to the melody. But when the first raindrops hit the deck, the violinists

hurried to case their instruments.

A sailor came up to me, slick haired, one of the American Jews, a volunteer all in black rubber ready for his watch, and he said to me:

“You two had better go down, Miss.”

But I wanted to be up here where I could breathe. I didn't want to go down into the staleness and narrowness. And so, in spite of the calls from the sailors that it was time to move and from the women that we would catch our deaths, we stayed, we delayed. Just a moment longer, please. In that cool, electric air. I was hunching my back to shield Hannah's baby from the thickening drops when I heard what sounded like a lightning bolt—only it wasn't. It was too close. I felt my left cheek strike the wooden deck, heat filling my ear, and I felt something break underneath me. I struggled to my knees and cried out and saw a bloody thing that looked freshly born, slimed again, and I didn't know what to do with it. The slick-haired American fell down beside me, screaming, his arm missing. The rain sizzled as it hit the deck and the ship leaned and made a shrieking sound, as if it were stretching to hold a note it couldn't keep. I tried to find something to grab onto with my hands. But there was nothing. I couldn't hold anything with one hand. I had to toss the slimed thing overboard. A hiss. Another explosion.

All sound drew out of the world, like water down a drain.



I WAS IN THE water. My feet were bare and half my clothes were torn from me. My scalp felt loose and something warm leaked into my eyes. The rain, the heat pounded. I knew somehow to swim away from the metal landing all around me, away from the screaming, smoking, sinking ship. Hannah and her baby had vanished. All the sailors. The gossips. The musicians. My heart swam, lost; there was nothing I could do. I couldn't even understand how or why I had been blown clear. A long streak of lightning cut across the sky. I saw the tattered sail of a small boat a few meters away and screamed at it. I saw two silhouetted figures frantically hurling buckets of water over its side—another flash and I saw a small, terrified Bedouin boy holding up a lantern over me. The boat's sail, full of holes, had been hit. I screamed to him for help. The two men didn't see me rising and falling in the swells; they were too busy shouting at each other while they bailed the water from their tiny boat. They screamed in a language I didn't understand and the boy held the lantern higher and then with his free hand hurtled something over the side, flinging something toward me, then again he hurtled, fresh fish hitting me in the face and leaping away.

*Shater! Shater!*

Still the men didn't see, though I screamed, and the boy, his white cap glued to his head, kept throwing fishing baskets over the side. I was able to grab just one as a bolt lit up its woven stays, and the boat plunged and heaved away. The rain came so fast then I couldn't keep my eyes

open. I could only drop my head, clutching, riding the hard hump of that overturned basket, like a turtle's back. I floated for what seemed like a long time, forever toward a pale crescent in the darkness. Eventually, foot by foot, I heard the sea stomping underneath me, kicking me onto an empty beach.

WHEN I OPENED MY eyes, the soldiers were lifting the basket from where it lay covering me, and dropping to their knees. One took his shirt off and wrapped it around my naked shoulders. I was wearing only my underwear and the rubber pouch around my neck with the passport, the false, borrowed name on it. I could remember nothing of what had happened. All was a great darkness, terrifying, soundless, like a bell shoved to the bottom of the sea.

ONE OF THE SOLDIERS opened a medical box and pressed something white and cool across my scalp. I closed my eyes.

“We have to move her, quickly.”

“I smell an ambush if we stay.”

“Bring the truck.”

“How is she?”

“In bad shape.”

“Can she hear us?”

“I think so.”



“We have to get moving.”

“Let me finish dressing her head.”

“I don’t like sitting here in the open like this. We could be picked off.”

“The Bedouin have nowhere to take a good position. Be calm.”

“A date leaf gives them position! Can’t you hurry?”

“We have to keep this scalp wound clean.”

“We’ll be cut off if we don’t move.”

“Almost done. Oh God. Oh my God.”

The medic began to cry. He picked me up in his arms. Tears rolled down into his beard.

“We have to be careful with her. She must speak, she must speak for all the others. She is a miracle. A miracle child. She is precious.”

Through the gauze draping over my eye, I saw nothing.

I AM ANNA FRANK, who rode a basket, as in a fairytale, to safety.

“This is your story then,” he says quietly. No longer writing.

“Yes. It is.”

“I noticed that you said Anna Frank. Not Anne. Why?”

“Because that’s the correct pronunciation, the Dutch one,” I assure him. I know.

“Not because it’s so close to Hannah?”

“No.”

“And the name on the passport around your neck was . . . ?”

“Hannah, of course.”

“And who is—was—Hannah, then?” He watches me.

“That poor survivor of Belsen. She died. With the baby a so-called doctor left her with. When the ship exploded. I told you. Along with all of them. All of them gone, to the bottom of the sea.” And me left behind. Me confused. Wandering around the kibbutz with a bucket on my head.

“And was it ever discovered what caused the explosion and the sinking?”

“No. That was never determined. You can read about it in the history books. Some think the *Kostas* went down after lightning hit the munitions being smuggled to Palestine. Some believe it was the British. Some the Bedouin. But I have no suspicions of the Bedouin. Because of that Arab boy who saved me.”

I beam, suddenly, at Mr. Bardawil. I had no idea, when the day began, it would end so well, so perfectly.

But my interviewer is looking puzzled, fatigued. I suppose it's understandable. I've given him so much to take in, to transcribe, this day, haven't I?

“So you think that Palestinian boy was trying to help you?”

“He threw the fishing basket toward me.”

“What you said was—something was being thrown ‘toward’ you. And fish”—he looks at his notes—“were ‘hitting you in the face.’”

“Because they were.” It's only if you look at a thing for

too long that it blurs. As I did, three weeks ago, during Shavuot, when I learned that my old Irish lover had died, because one of his children sent me a message, and so I lit a candle in his honor, in one of the pair of silver candlesticks he'd given me so long ago. But I looked at it for too long and lost the flame and saw only the terrible hole at its center, a place so close to the wick, to the source of the burning, that it becomes nothingness, invisible. I cried out, and in my breathlessness I caused the flame to stretch and in a single glimpse finally saw everything, all at once, and how it must have been, and who I was, who only ever wanted to be good, the one who said the wonderful words, *In spite of everything, I still believe*, because it must always be possible to believe, to believe in a human being, and to be forgiven, and if so, then I could not be the emptiness next to the wick, could I . . . could I?

“You don't think the Palestinian boy was trying to drown you.”

Why so fixated on this? When we were so close, so close.

“No!”

He studies me with his tired calm. And now I wonder: Maybe it isn't always possible to know whether one person means to cause harm to another person or not. To help them out . . . or not.

The air goes very quiet in my study. I hear a churning of wheels as a car leaves the farm road, finds my drive.

I stand, uncertainly.

“I think the first of my birthday guests are arriving, Mr.

Bardawil.”

He nods and reaches for his phone. “Our time is up then.”

“No! I mean—it doesn’t have to be. I was still hoping . . .”

He tilts his head at me and he stays where he is, waiting for me to say something more.

“I wanted to invite you to stay, Mr. Bardawil. For my party. To help me. Perhaps help me explain to my guests, my, my situation . . . as I’m sure you’re going to do, as I of course want you to do, to the whole world, in your book, in your thesis . . .”

“I’m sorry?”

“Please, Mr. Bardawil. Let’s be honest. Haven’t I been helpful to you? Don’t you have a great deal of material now? Astounding, attention-getting material?”

He flushes at that. For an instant.

“I hope, Hannah, we’ve both tried to be honest with each other today. I told you I’m collecting stories of people who believe they have been other people.”

“But I *am* her. As I’ve explained to you. So that you can understand. My name is Frank. It *means* honest.” I lean my hand onto my desk as I come around it, putting all of my weight on it, for support. “A name matters, in the end. A good name matters. What does Bardawil mean?”

“My family name? It comes from a lake in Egypt. A lake in the desert.”

Water in the desert. Water cut off from the sea. I fidget with my skirt, suddenly nervous. So many wheels turning, so many car doors slamming. So many people, more than

I remembered. “If we could just . . . I don’t know, how should we do this? Perhaps I should introduce you? Or maybe you should announce, introduce me?”

He starts up, a concerned look on his face. “You’ve been so helpful today, Hannah. I’m really grateful, but I really think I shouldn’t take any more of your—”

I touch his arm, impulsively, putting him on my good side.

“Can’t we just go down together now?” Because it’s time. I can hear Maia welcoming my old friends below, none of whom have ever really known me. But this person has. My interviewer. My reporter. My new, old friend. “I feel a bit weak-kneed, all of a sudden. But then again, who wouldn’t, at a moment like this?” I try a laugh.

He hesitates, and looks away. Considering, as today’s young do, their endless, marvelous options.

“Okay. Let me get you down the stairs.”

He picks up his satchel and holds out his elbow to me and allows me to hook my arm around it.

“Thank you!”

It does feel so good to lean into a man again. Linked, we go through the door, like a happy couple, he in his dark jeans, me in my silk and my bright red scarf.

My escort takes hold of the banister firmly, and I hold onto him, with no distance between us at all, and we begin taking the steps carefully, one by one. At the second landing we pause and peer down and I see that almost all of my guests have arrived and that Maia has taken their

wrapped gifts away from them and put them on the hall table and handed them flutes of champagne—such a clever, thoughtful girl she is. How lucky am I, childless all my life, to have such fine young people to help me, here at this late date. We begin moving down the stairs again. Smiles of surprise are lifted, along with the glasses—no, they hadn't expected such a grand entrance from such an old girl—and I can only press my lips together, thinking of what else they do not yet suspect. The wonder, the amazement in store for all of us. The hope.

I adjust my scarf and pat my helmet of hair hiding the scar at my scalp. He balances me at the bottom, waiting for some cue, some hint of what to do. I turn to see his profile in time to notice, up close, for the first time, the boyish pores stippled with late afternoon whiskers, the downy hair dressing his earlobe, the brow gouged with a tiny scar at the outer corner, like an anchor, a sickle . . . I've never been close enough to see this before . . . He's so young, so much younger than that other reporter, whose freckled skin I stroked in the bathwater. I see him take a breath and frown, slightly, seriously, his lips parting, and I know that he is about to speak, to say something—and my heart seizes. From a great distance, hidden, in my closed ear, I hear a girlish voice:

*“Wat zegt de visser?”*

*What says the fisherman?*

But I must not be afraid, I must not be, though I feel nothing but lightness, my body arcing through the air. ☺☞☺



MYLÈNE DRESSLER is a novelist whose work has been praised by the *New York Times* as “splendid” and by the *Christian Science Monitor* as “haunting” and “perfect.” A former professional ballet dancer who wrote her first book while a doctoral student at Rice University, she is the author of *The Medusa Tree*, *The Deadwood Beetle*, and *The Floodmakers*. She has held numerous writing residencies, including a Fulbright Fellowship, the Paisano Fellowship, and the Carson McCullers Fellowship, and is the current Visiting Writer at Guilford College. She lives and writes in North Carolina and in the canyon country of southern Utah.