

Waiting for Dovid

On Friday night Papa charged into the kitchen of the tiny mountain hotel where Mama worked summers, his fair wavy hair gone limp, sweating from the long train ride from New York. He let his duffel bag drop to the floor and shouted with almost deranged glee:

“Look Chaya, the letter from Paris! In July my *bruder* comes to us!”

Your *brother*, Papa, how long have you been a naturalized citizen, I did not say but thought. I did however up the ante on the joy scale. “Hallelujah, finally I get to have a genuine aunt and uncle, and two cousins!” Because we were just the three of us: Mama Bear, Papa Bear, and me.

“Mama, aren’t you excited to see Uncle Dovid?”

“Excitement ve have plenty,” said Mama. Exactly what excitement she meant I hadn’t the foggiest, as all she ever did was cook and clean. “Get me the sour cream,” Racheleh.” She mopped her brow with the kitchen towel and pushed back the stray wisps of hair that had escaped her head scarf. Although the sun had set and the mountain air begun to cool, inside the humidity wilted her otherwise wholesome, heart-shaped face.

And so went our summer routine, me Rachel, Mama’s kitchen slave and even at thirteen infantilized with the supposedly affectionate, nevertheless diminutive “eh” they slapped onto my name. Mama the chief cook going all out for Shabbat dinner in addition to daily cooking for the guests and the few workers, who were pretty much interchangeable. And Papa coming up weekends, plus summer vacations, from his job at the sweltering factory. They weren’t crazy about my three-bears nicknaming, but shouldn’t they have thought of that when they did their family planning? Or even before that, when they got married in Paris and left Papa’s two brothers and parents behind (Mama had no living

family), to come to America and produce one and only one child – *moi* – the extent of their ambitious dreams in the Land of Opportunity.

A breathless waiting shaped that summer of 1938, not only for me but all of us, since others were in the same boat, with parts of families left behind all over Europe's map. Finally Papa flipped the calendar page to July. Rain pounded the rooftop all day, that first Thursday. Papa, starting his vacation, would meet uncle Dovid's ship Friday morning so they would arrive before dinner. Mama was making pot roast for Thursday's dinner – a big enough *megillah* in itself – just to have the succulent leftover beef, always better the second day, for *kreplach* soup on Friday. As usual I got called away from my book to wash carrots and onions; by this time in summer, carrots sprouted from my ears. Friday we would mash up the tender leftovers, the mashing being my job, and stuff it into the fleshy dough, then pinch them into little half-moons. Sophie, Mama's best friend from the Paris years, assisted, but the dough was one hundred percent Mama's. All day long I sensed everyone's salivary glands frothing inside their lusting mouths as they poked their heads into the kitchen, intoxicated by the heady smells. They were the same bunch of repeat vacationers, union tailors, teachers, shoemakers and out of work intellectuals, all of whom knew the great rewards to come; for Mama's succulent beef dumplings floated like little buoys out in the river where I swam. Nor did I resent being interrupted from "Little Women" that day as I couldn't concentrate anyway, but instead kept sneaking looks at the photo album, gazing at Dovid's family, the new cousins nearly my age, and especially the gorgeous, Hollywood-quality Dovid. The anticipation was excruciating.

While peeling onions I asked: "Mama, don't Papa and Dovid look like twins? Except Uncle Dovid's handsomer."

Mama, who stood just over five feet in low heels, the only kind she ever wore when she went out of the house, reached on her toes for a bowl from the cupboard. Its bare wood, exposed through spottily peeling white paint, looked naked.

“Papa is one year older, for your ducky information.” When she slammed the cupboard door shut, the loud bang rousing Sophie and me from our counter work, she nicked her thumb on a splinter and instinctively put the finger to her mouth, catching a drop of blood with her tongue.

Sophie stopped chopping parsley and rushed to Mama, grabbing her hand and running it under the faucet. She ordered me to get the roll of gauze and hydrogen peroxide from the medicine chest. The rain would not let up, and despite the wheezing electric standing fan in the corner, with the oven at full blast we were all damp and overheated, our blouses and aprons stuck to our midriffs. Sophie attacked her blazing red hair with both hands and knotted it in back, where it stuck to beads of sweat lining the nape of her neck. As I left the kitchen she said to me, laughing but looking at Mama: “Dollink, you’re boy crazy. Better you should pull your head out of those books and go swimming with the nice boys your age.” Sophie’s lilting voice, which made me think of nightingales, even when scolding me never rose above the volume of best friends exchanging secrets at a corner table for two in a Fifth Avenue tea room.

Like sisters, they were, in spirit if not in looks. Mama’s slender frame, soft chestnut hair, eyes the color of black coffee, a mountain range apart from Sophie’s full orange mane and hazel eyes, her curvy figure hovering over Mama, but obviously ready at an instant’s notice to assist her in all imaginable matters.

The next morning I picked out my best outfit, a lime-colored skirt and white blouse with a lace collar. The day was lost to nervousness. As guests lounged on the front porch after breakfast on the hodge-podge assortment of metal chairs and wooden Adirondacks, I breezed past them and ran down the sloped emerald lawn to pick purple clover and black-eyed susans for the vase. I scanned the surroundings, scheming on which wooded path I would take them to pick blackberries. Our part of the Catskills were the gently rolling, lower mountains in the southern part of New York State, not the taller peaks to the north, far less – as someone from Austria claimed – the sky-stabbing Alps, which made our mountains look like ant hills. Yet I had grown so close to them that I took possession, as my personal corner of heaven. These were my mountains; my trails; my mushrooms.

Often I'd hike alone, and after knocking myself out on the trail would come stumbling up the lopsided stone steps to the broad porch and sink low down in the Adirondack chair to read, or write in my diary, interrupted only by the buzzing of insects. Mama and Papa nagged me to play with the other kids, but the truth was that I liked the company of both myself and the adults. We'd all mingle on the lawn or porch after dinner, slurping juicy peaches, often singing songs, always swatting flies. I got to know the songs too, not of the Bing Crosby variety but mostly union songs, and Yiddish songs they all brought over from the old country. For my parents and Sophie, the songs hailed from the old-old country, as they were immigrants twice over – from Russia and Poland to Paris to New York. From all the tongues at the hotel, you had to be quick to catch the sprinkling of foreign words snuck into their songs and speech. If it weren't for Yiddish, which was really my first language, I was convinced that the whole motley, far-flung bunch would be deaf and mute to one another.

At some point Friday morning Mama told me to get lost after seeing I was all butterfingers in the kitchen, dropping saucepans and silverware. So out I ran to the porch and took solace in my diary, which was, next to Sophie, the most forgiving soul in my life. Mama always repeated, Vot can happen that's so exciting for all dat writing? Papa would say, Maybe she writes for us a book, Chaya. I took that down too. If Papa's obsession was listening to words on the radio – news every hour on the hour, throughout his life – mine was listening to live words. Let the other kids throw horseshoes; my preferred pastime was spying on the world of grown-ups and getting it down in my secret shorthand. How else was I going to understand the craziness of the times, or my weirdly tiny family?

Because Mama and Papa told me practically nothing, *bupkis* we say in Yiddish, of family history. Many decades later, after Mama and Papa were gone I would discover, while cleaning out their Bronx apartment, a dusty and dented gray metal box at the back of a shelf in the bedroom closet. The box contained old letters in Yiddish. The discovery shocked me. My parents never wrote letters, so they said. But Dovid did.

Paris, 2 May 1938

Dear Avrum,

Thanks for the affidavits; an enormous help for the visas, which are forthcoming. Gerty and the girls can't wait to meet you and your sweet little Rachel. The girls continue to get taunted at school by anti-Semitic slurs, and not only by students, but teachers – it's officially sanctioned now! And you were right, of course: Manny will never budge from Paris despite the growing fascist climate. Our stubborn baby brother still harbors hope for Leon Blum's Popular Front. If it weren't for my family's safety, I might just stay and

continue helping him with the newspaper, which is nearly underground, so many Yiddish papers are shutting down. But don't fear, mon frère, I am ready for America!

Meanwhile, I dream of seeing my 'near twin' after some twenty long years, and of tasting Chaya's kreplach, whose sublime fragrance I inhale now in warm memory. My love to all.

Your Dovid

Uncle Dovid arrived at the front screen door with Papa in the late afternoon. He came right up and swooped me off the ground in a bear hug. "So, this is the young lady I sailed the Atlantic to meet!" My cheeks caught fire. He smelled of after shave and cigarette smoke, only a different flavor than Papa's Pall Malls. His gray jacket was badly wrinkled from the trip. Still, standing so near his tall presence felt like the Fourth of July. Maybe they were like twins in the pictures, but not so in person. Papa's blue eyes were a calm lake, whereas Dovid's eyes twinkled like the ocean on a bright day, when the sun makes sparkling diamonds that dance on the water's surface, the glistening gems protecting the darker waters below.

"Chaya, where are you!" Papa called in a voice louder than usual.

Mama came out in her pretty powder blue dress with the modestly ruffled bodice. Dark wavy hair draped her rosy cheeks and highlighted her doe-eyes. She caught her breath. "Hello, Dovid," she said in a rehearsed English. "Welcome to the Ketskills."

He took Mama's hands in his and held them there, then gave her a gentle hug.

“Aah, Chaya,” he said, “so many years! *Baruch hashem*, tell me I’m not dreaming. And the little lady here, she’s beautiful too.” He winked at me. I thought I would die on the spot.

Finally I focused on the empty space surrounding Dovid. Where was my aunt Gerty, my cousins Mindy and Bertha? Later, I learned that Dovid was holding out hope the visas for the rest of them would come through at the last minute. Papa had called from the station and told Mama, who said she was too busy all day to tell me. Everyone seemed, although disappointed, to take the news in stride. For a while I fought gravity as the corners of my mouth turned a downward trajectory and I struggled to right them; if I wanted to live in the adult world, acceptance was a skill I had to learn, and here was my on-the-job-training.

Shabbat dinner was sumptuous. Everyone promised to keep an eye out for a job for Dovid. Already he had some rudimentary English. He would shine shoes, anything he said, to live here. “Ay, Amerika!” he boomed over a second round of schnapps. Which was really just plain whisky. All eyes around the table were fixed on Dovid. What news of France? What about his wife and children? Don’t worry it’s just a delay they’ll come soon, the visas are imminent; like so many other immigrants, he’d come first to pave the way, save up for their passage. And what of old friends?

“You remember Max, from the Federation?”

“The button maker,” Papa said. “Remember when we first moved to Paris, and Mama – your great grandma, Racheleh – when we met Max and translated the name of his street, Rue des Enfants Rouge, Mama sniggered, The babies are red? – these Parisians are so immoral they even make their children winos!”

Dovid continued, in between chewing. “I joked that I’d move to that street and later when I got married we would dress our little tots in red coats and tell them the street was named for them.” Everyone laughed and Dovid turned to me: “The name comes from centuries ago, Rachel, when the children of an orphanage on that street wore red uniforms.”

I pondered that as I ate my soup. Then I said, “How nice – for Mindy and Bertha to remember the children who had no family.”

Mrs. Gershon, the loudmouth from Brooklyn whom I never much cared for, was still laughing at Dovid’s remarks, but stopped abruptly and shot me a frown: “Ay, Racheleh, always turning funny things into serious things.”

Dovid turned straight to me and said it was a lovely sentiment. I loved him for defending me, I loved him for ignoring the sourpuss Mrs. Gershon, I loved him for calling me by my right name. And those were only some of my reasons.

Then Dovid made his point about Max, who long ago had quit the Federation they all once belonged to. “It didn’t matter that he abandoned the socialist movement. Recently he was shot dead on the street outside the grocery on Rue Lamarck, in my neighborhood. Now they attack Jews wherever, random beatings, killings.” After a sobering pause, Papa asked about Max’s defection, remembering him as a staunch believer back in 1920. Dovid shrugged his shoulders: “A man marries, has four children, gets a promotion, and starts to view life differently.” Mama smiled sadly and mumbled almost to herself, “Love and politics, and so the world goes. Poor Max.” Sophie said the smart ones, like most of them at the table, had turned from the Party philosophy. Mr. Kaminsky from Jerome Avenue said it didn’t matter, Jews could be liberals or they could be conservatives who love eating ham and

butter on white bread. “When we’re not being blamed for inventing the Communist Party, we’re being blamed for killing Christ.”

What I wanted to know and asked was, “Why do Hitler and all those Nazis hate our people?” I got answers from everyone at once. Some acted like the world was coming to an end for Jews. Like another world war (G-d forbid!) would break out any day. Others poo-pooed them and insisted that lunatic Hitler would not get his left toe inside France; western Europe, Britain, America, all the strong and sane hearts and minds of the world would soon topple him. But still I could not make one inch of sense of the whole, crazy mad world.

All this time Mama was up and down from the table, feeding everyone. Dovid wolfed down whole kreplachs at a time; it looked like he hadn’t eaten in a month. The room fell quiet as katydids serenaded us through the open screened windows. The only other sound was Dovid’s faintly audible sipping of chicken soup in which Mama’s dumplings bobbed. Suddenly he looked up, stunned by the hush. Everyone was gazing intensely at him. They were looking at Dovid, but I came to think they were seeing their own brothers, husbands, fathers, cousins, whom they had left behind. One guest had the beginnings of tears in her eyes.

Dovid looked around the room. And all he could do was to spoon one last dumpling into his mouth and slowly chew it. Then he dabbed his full lips with a napkin and pronounced in a deep, commanding voice: “Such exquisite kreplach soup one cannot find in all of Paris since 1921. Since Chaya and my *bruder* left.” The brothers’ eyes met for a brief moment before Dovid glanced down into his empty bowl.

Like everyone else, Dovid fell under summer’s enchanting spell as the days passed. At the river one day, Papa and Dovid took a long swim. Others splashed about near the shore

or lay on the scratchy, army-green woolen blanket. I sat just off the blanket in the grass but within earshot, pulling up clumps of dirt and watching Papa and Dovid swim out to the raft and back. They raced feverishly. It was moving toward late afternoon but the brassy sun was still high. Everyone went back to the hotel except us. Papa and Dovid came back to the blanket and plopped themselves down, water droplets glistening on their sunburnt shoulders.

The brothers sat with their arms resting on their bent knees, lit up Pall Malls and gazed out at the river. Papa worried that the authorities could send them all back to Poland if the visas failed.

“The visas are promised. Anyway, we are French citizens.” Dovid took a long pull on his cigarette.

“You are *immigrant* citizens,” Papa shot back with an uncharacteristic brittleness. “You’ll never be a French Jew, name change and all.”

Dovid added quickly, “I notice they call you Abe here, Avrum – like Lincoln!”

“Dovid, David, call yourself what you want. Speak *haute francaise*, eat ham – which nearly gave Mama a heart attack. To the French you’re a foreign Jew – an undesirable.”

I was taking all this down in my diary, aghast at their childish bickering; bringing their mother into it, how low of Papa!

Dovid kept looking at the water and lit up another cigarette; my uncle smoked like Detroit at peak production. “We were kids when we moved to that stinking hovel on rue de Belleville with no plumbing, remember? Since what, 1912? Hey, remember sneaking into the Eldorado?” Suddenly he laughed. “The dancing girls kicking their naked legs in the air? Remember the girl who came up to us later, she thought we were twins and she—”

Papa shushed him and glanced around at me, where I sat looking seriously detached, writing furiously now. Dovid dropped his voice and swiveled his lowered head like a snake in the grass, toward me and back to Papa: "... and she proposed a *ménage a trois* and you said what's that, and then your eyes popped out? Remember?" They both cackled so hard their shoulders shook, like nervous boys telling smutty jokes in the schoolyard.

Then Dovid became serious. "I feel as French as I do Polish. Manny works around the clock on the paper for France, while we—"

"The French call it subversive literature."

"A legitimate Yiddish paper – you forget you rallied with us in the Place de Republique? – while we sit here in America, in comfort..." His eyes moved slowly across the postcard-perfect setting and there seemed to be a hint of pain in his face, mixed with amusement. "...Arguing in the mountains."

A silent stillness seeped through the trees, broken only when a fish jumped out of the water, causing a faint ripple. With the sun now partially blocked by the mountains, there was a chill in the air. We started folding the blankets.

Papa said, "Well, I guess you have to argue somewhere."

Feeling a little mopey next day, I declined when a few hotel kids, older teens, asked me to join them on a hike to pick berries. I had never heard my mild-mannered father talk in such tones, or seem angry one minute and laughing the next. Worse, I sensed a new tension in the air between the brothers, and those changes began to steal something away from my paradise.

As I sat on the porch struggling to focus on “Little Women,” Dovid strolled out, the Yiddish paper *Forverts* under his arm. We’d fallen into a routine of going through the *Forward* together, me giving him the English word for the Yiddish. But suddenly “berry picking!” popped into my head – and my mood miraculously restored, I asked if he would like to come along to see the woods. “Vunderful!” he said. I ran inside to get a pail, feeling suddenly optimistic about the berries, and we caught up to the others.

Dovid and I followed closely behind down the narrow dirt trail amid oak, poplar and pine trees. He kept stopping to rub leaves between his fingers, snapping twigs and sniffing loud and long, breathing the whole forest deep into his lungs. I marveled, because I always thought I was the only one who inhaled the woods, and even then demurely, as I thought befitting a girl, keeping my pleasure in the moist, earthy scents to myself. But here was my uncle, sniffing every living organism with no shame – the charming Parisian at our dinner table was now a camping dog.

He stopped by a tall, straight tree with compact leaves. “We have those trees too, in the Bois de Vincennes. In French we call them *hetre*. In English?”

One of the hikers, a bona-fide camper, turned and said it was a beech tree. Dovid’s eyebrows scrunched up. “Beech? But isn’t that like the Coney Island?”

The others giggled. “Shush!” I scolded. I informed him that’s spelled differently, I would write it down when we got back. Then I asked if he took his family to the beach in Paris.

“We don’t have a beach. Although once I jumped into the Seine on a dare by your Papa.” I could just see him taking the dare; my mind stretched to picture my father being so playful.

Farther on, still trailing the others, I took a short skip and reached for Dovid's hand as we hiked. His fingers enclosed mine briefly in a gentle squeeze, and I noticed then that I was no longer comparing him to Papa. His hand was the only hand.

"Tell me about Paris. Mama and Papa never talk about the old days. Did Papa and you and Manny fight?"

"Like the boxers in a ring, no. But cats and dogs, as you say. Manny liked one political party, your Papa liked the one in the middle, and me, I changed my mind sometimes. That's all. But all us brothers, we loved each other. That's what to remember, *ma cherie*." He smiled and with a flick of his fingers, fast as a magician, tickled my ear and pinched my cheek in one smooth movement.

"What's ma sheree?" I blurted out and took a skip.

"It's like dollink, a term of endearment like your Mama calls you."

"But only Mama calls me that, never Papa. You are so different but you look like twins!"

He laughed again, and butterflies swarmed my insides. Any future boyfriend, I decided right there and then, would be exactly like my uncle, only much younger of course. It was a secret pact I made with myself.

We walked in silence for a while. The sun kept flickering in my eyes through the branches. Suddenly Dovid stopped short: "Aha, look, scouts," he boomed. "Berries!"

I loved hiking the woods as much as swimming. Mountain woods offered up more than fun; they transported me. The air, its bonus gift of perfume, was damp even though you were dry. Even on a hot day you could feel cool. And strangely, while you could be tromping along with others, singing songs and laughing, you could also feel alone, and

sometimes that was a welcome feeling, and sometimes just lonely. I felt as if I knew the trees, like good friends, as if the forest were another sheltering home. And now, by my side, uncle Dovid identified trees as if he lived there too, instead of so far away in a once beautiful but now dangerous land. Of all those heavenly summers in the Catskills woods, there was never, ever another hike like the hikes we took that summer.

When Papa's vacation was over he took Dovid with him to the Bronx. I could have strangled him. That night I cried in bed. For the rest of the summer I lived for Fridays.

After breakfast Mama said don't worry, he'll be back soon. I hadn't even spoken, but my face was as long as the porch, and she seemed to know my heart.

"That's if they don't kill each other, Mama! You should've seen them at the river. Papa was so mad at uncle Dovid about Paris."

"Never mind about that. Come dollink, today ve go to the farm for chickens. Go find Sophie." Go fetch. I was the family dog we never had. But today this puppy kept yipping.

"Mama, wait. Papa said they could send the whole family back to Poland. Does that mean they might not come here?"

Mama clucked her tongue loudly. "Vot kind of talk is that, uncle Dovid shouldn't be saying those things to you."

"No, Mama!" I broke in sharply. "I said Papa. It was Papa saying that; you never listen to me!"

Mama stopped wiping the table and gave me a dead stare. She went to the back screen door, opened it, and shook out toast crumbs from the dishcloth into the fresh, floral scented air. She wore a blank expression I had never seen before.

An expression I had never seen later attached itself in my mind to a tone I had never heard. I was reading on the porch two weekends later, thankful for the quiet while everyone was at the river. Mama must have thought I had gone too. Suddenly I heard voices inside the screen door.

“Oh! I thought you went with the others.” Mama sounded startled.

“I had letters to write. To Gerty.”

“You never told us how you met.”

“It was the next Federation meeting, shortly after you left. I proposed to her the following week.”

“One week, you knew her? You fall in love easily—”

He broke in. “It didn’t matter anymore.”

“—and often!”

There was a pause then. I couldn’t figure if it was because I was outside and they inside, but when they next spoke, their voices sounded different, muffled.

“No, Chaya. I fell in love only once.”

I held my breath. There was silence, then their voices got lower. I heard a faint gasp.

“Please, Dovid.”

“All these years—”

“We are grownups, Dovid. We live with our choices. You made yours.” And then, softer, “Don’t forget that.”

“Oh, Chaya.” The words were like a whispered moan. “There never goes a day I don’t remember that.”

Mama's voice was shaky, it sounded on the verge of tears. Dovid's was husky and solemn. My heart thumped. The words on the page dissolved as I sat paralyzed, my stomach sinking in a strange roiling nausea; feeling remorse that I had not gone to the river with the others.

For the first time ever, I refused to help Mama in the kitchen that day. I disappeared to the bedroom that I shared with Sophie, and there I sulked. That night I got my first period. Mama and Sophie conducted the ministrations. Mama became emotional. "Now you are no longer a child, my *sheynah* young lady. My earlier anger melted. I collapsed into her arms and sobbed. *It's nothing to do with blood, Mama.*

Later, when Sophie was about to turn out the lights, I implored her: "Tanta Sophie" – she was the closest thing I had to an aunt in America – "What happened in Paris?" And so began my history lesson.

"So your Papa was the oldest of the three brothers. We just finished with the deadliest war in 1918, so bad it's called the War to End All Wars. After, we were even poorer. Manny got a job at a Yiddishe newspaper, writing articles about workers conditions, how to get better jobs and strengthen the unions, like they do here, dollink." She took the hairbrush from the dresser, sat by my side on the edge of my bed and brushed my hair. "Dovid and your Papa helped with distribution, even after long hours at the tailor shops.

"We all met at those political organization meetings, and at one of the socials one night Dovid asked your Mama to dance. They danced so gracefully, and although your Mama was shy, you could see her eyes alight. We were sitting chatting when suddenly Manny burst into the hall. There was great upheaval in those days, thousands of people so

poor and nervous that they were leaving their homelands for better conditions elsewhere, many like us emigrating twice. We lived in chaos; the Jewish groups were scared and fighting each other. Which leader you followed – we kept our eyes not only on France but Russia, because of the Revolution – who won, who lost, could touch you personally, where you'd live, what language you'd speak. Politics fractured families like a broken leg; sometimes siblings didn't speak to each other. Your uncles and their friends were passionate messengers for the community. Manny wanted to get a special bulletin out before dawn.”

Suddenly, Sophie laughed. “Poor Dovid was torn this way and that. Take an arm! he said – Manny pulling him to work, Avrum pulling him to stay and enjoy the social. But underlying that was a bigger tug of war. Manny was a committed idealist and believed in France. Avrum said the future was in America. And to make matters worse, their parents went back to Poland; sometimes I think they left because they couldn't stand the brothers fighting.”

“But what about Uncle Dovid!” I said.

“Ay-ay, Dovid. Caught in the middle. He loved both his brothers like mad. He was also falling hard for your Mama.” She smiled and winked at me. “And now, my curious *chat*, it's time for our beauty sleep.” She leaned over my bed and I kissed her goodnight, but not before making her promise to continue the story tomorrow.

Noises from outside the next morning after breakfast escalated. I bolted out and down the path to see what the big hullabaloo was about, squirreling my way to the front of a small crowd. There at one of the hotel's two open-air ping-pong tables Papa and Dovid were playing, faces burning red in the sun. Papa served. Dovid slammed the ball back in a killer

shot. Dovid served next, a deep frown on his brows, and did a tricky thing where he tossed the ball way high and delayed his serve to the last second. His timing thrown off, Papa made a wild swing and lost his balance. He stumbled and grabbed at the table but failed to break his fall. His chin hit the table's edge and the gash began to bleed. Such fierce games were not common for us. We all walked back to the porch to cool off, and I watched Papa and Dovid coming back slowly, talking animatedly and reading something that looked like a letter, which Dovid tucked into his shirt pocket before reaching the porch.

Gerty's letter circulated the porch after dinner. Dovid's family would not be coming to the mountains. They would not be coming to New York. They would not be coming to America. The visas were denied; preliminary approvals apparently were overturned. Everyone was shocked at first, but then heads gradually started to nod in acceptance, as though the news was inevitable. I was the only one who remained bewildered. My world was crumbling.

Moving on to the lawn later that night for a smoke and nightcap, the adults clustered their metal chairs tightly with Papa and Dovid and weighed in. The man would surely want to be with his family—that was a given. But then speculations took flight like jittery gnats after a downpour. Everyone spoke at once: You could wait it out with us. The Nazis will be crushed, Europe won't put up with such grotesque aggression. Then Gerty will come. Hey, it's not like they're in a repressive totalitarian state. It's not Germany but France, land of the Revolution – *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* – they emancipated the Jews for crissakes. That was two goddamn centuries ago, someone else griped. But they elected a Jewish prime minister in 1936! Look, you can return to Paris – just not now, with things so

uncertain. Manny with his connections, they'll protect Gerty and the girls. Then, exhausted of ideas, they fell silent. Only the crickets kept up their racket. But crickets go on gabbing night after night, and always will, apathetic to our troubles.

Mama told me it was way past my bedtime, but I insisted on helping wash the glasses. Did she think Dovid would stay here and wait for Gerty and my new cousins? In the kindest tone, she asked if I were his daughter, wouldn't I want my Papa to come home?

It was a trick question. An attack of meanness crept over me like poison ivy and I put my hand on my hip and sneered: "And if you were his wife and don't you wish you were, you'd want him home too."

Mama turned pale, stunned, wide-eyed. Seeing her like that, I became confused and erupted in tears, my lips quivering. "But Mama! He can wait here, they'll come over as soon as the Nazis go away, the news even said the Nazis will stop."

I was supposed to answer a simple Yes, I would want my father home. Mama never had use for tears; her back stiffened as she dried the glasses. She had an infuriating way of answering questions with Yiddish witticisms. Only this one she delivered as a somber pronouncement. "The Nazis leave? *Az di kats zol leygen eyer, volt zi geven a hun.*" If a cat laid eggs, she would be a hen.

I couldn't sleep that night. I sat up in bed biting my nails and waited for Sophie to finish the story.

"So being Saturday night, imagine, dollink, Manny wasn't getting many takers to help him with the paper distribution. He told Dovid, don't you let me down too. Avrum refused, but Dovid rarely denied Manny anything. He told Avrum keep the young, pretty

Chaya busy, dance with her till I get back he said, so at least nobody else horns in, but remember now, she's mine! One hour of his time and no more, that's what Dovid promised Manny. Avrum protested; he didn't dance, he didn't know the lady, he was shy whereas Dovid was quite the ladies man. Dovid laughed it off, said tell her you're me, we look like twins she'll never know the difference. Papa called him completely meshuggah. But he did it. The brothers, they were loyal to each other. Well, Chaya accepted the dance, we all watched, my beau and I laughing on the sidelines."

"Did she catch the switch?"

"Is your Mama stupid? One minute she's being swirled around the dance floor by a dashing charmer, and now she's having her feet nearly stepped on. Not to mention, these brilliant revolutionary brothers who were going to change the world never considered they were dressed differently?" Sophie slapped her thigh and we both giggled like little girls. I jumped up for my hairbrush and pins and Sophie started brushing and pinning up my hair on the bed.

"One thing led to another; she actually liked Avrum's gentle ways, his unadorned talking. Things got bollixed up after that. Dovid was so arrogant he figured he'd charmed the skirts off Chaya, you should pardon, and was shocked that his brother won a date with her. They came to blows over Chaya. Two brothers loving the same woman was worse than locking horns over politics. For a while they weren't speaking."

"So who did she go with?"

"She and Avrum started to formally 'keep company' as we used to call it. But Avrum worked long hours; he would arrange Saturday night rendez-vous. Meanwhile Dovid wiggled his way into her heart. He brought Chaya over to the newspaper, and she was so

impressed she volunteered to help out along with the brothers – they would distribute, run errands, on those small papers you did everything yourself. But Avrum being the oldest was working like a dog and contributing money to the household.”

“Oh no, didn’t that make Papa furious? Wooing Mama right under Papa’s nose!”

“Well, don’t feel too sorry for your Papa. After all, he won your Mama.”

“How did she finally choose?” I sat on my haunches and hugged the pillow to my chest as Sophie curled my hair. A mosquito buzzed overhead. Sophie got up to shut the crooked window since the screen had holes in it.

She paused and lowered her voice. “She didn’t. Don’t ever bring this up with your Mama. Finally Dovid thought he found a way to keep the family peace. He stayed in Paris to make Manny happy. He gave up Chaya to make Avrum happy. It killed him inside; but he had his activism, you see, whereas Avrum really just had Chaya. Avrum proposed to Chaya and started looking for a steamship to America. I already had family here, and we all made arrangements to leave. But believe you me, your Mama was in agony just like Dovid. It was like Chaya was Dovid’s farewell present to Avrum. It’s funny. Dovid was always the most generous. I actually saw that man skip meals to feed a friend.”

I couldn’t sleep that night, or the next. Loony dreams haunted me. In one, uncle Dovid turned into my father and took me to Coney Island for hot dogs and ice cream cones. Next minute he was both Dovid and Papa and we were in Hollywood, we were Astaire and Rogers dancing like clouds floating over the shiny dance floor, and everyone encircled us begging for autographs. Then I was shocked to see him sign the autographs, *Wait for me - Dovid*. During the day, I fantasized Dovid and me winning dance contests, and telling Mama

don't worry, now we can afford to bring the whole family over. I daydreamed my other uncle Manny and his cronies succeeded in turning all of France against Hitler and saving the country. Somewhere in this state of delirium that lasted days and nights, Uncle Dovid packed his bags.

~

I don't know exactly when I stopped badgering Mama and Papa about letters from Paris. I asked them after World War II broke out the next year, but after a while, being a teenager, my attention drifted elsewhere. For a long time I suffered from headaches and depression, which were blamed variously on school pressures, economic problems, later boyfriend miseries. Even choosing careers was conflicted. I wound up a reporter, which I think was hard for Mama and especially Papa to swallow; what with all the memories of Manny and his paper. Mama kept her mind and hands busy cooking, mending clothes, volunteering at the Workmen's Circle, but the warm light in her eyes had dimmed. Papa sat by the radio even in the post war years, through the Glenn Miller years and into the Ed Sullivan whom Mama called Ed Solomon years, oh yes she could crack jokes, but he serious, always serious, his head buried in the *Forward*, news on the hour, every hour, as though waiting for something. He never spoke of his brothers again. We all have two minds: one rational, fact-knowing, and the other inhabiting a world that does not exist. I know he was waiting, because I waited with him.

Maybe there had been letters, maybe not. As I said before, until I found the metal box, I never knew.

Paris, August, 1940

Dear Avrum,

I hope this reaches you, circuitously via someone I know who was going to Portugal and promised to mail it from there. I didn't join the mass exodus from Paris to the South. Don't listen to the news about no Jews left in Paris; we're not alone on our Montmartre hill. I begged Manny to come south with us, but he's anxious to work even harder. Some think we're crazy not to flee. Gerty seems to walk around in a fog at times, while the girls simply pray for some semblance of normalcy. Of course we'd be on foot like thousands of Parisians walking, bicycling alongside cars, families and little children carrying their possessions on their hunched backs. We wouldn't get far with Gerty's arthritis. I'm torn between going and staying. Which ambivalence sounds familiar, no? I remember the last time I was crippled by indecision. But decide I did, and I can't complain, as Gerty has been a wonderful wife and given me two lovely daughters; since they were born here, their citizenship should protect them.

I try to keep up my hopes and support Manny, working with a growing number of resisters. Risky, but they're out to destroy all Jews anyway, non-political, native born French, all of us. Not to fight back is unthinkable. Keep appealing to the immigration aid society on your end. If you're not successful, at least you tried. In any case, I got to see you and Chaya again and that joy alone sustains me – the thought and prayer that some day we may again toast schnapps in the Catskills. Give everyone a big hug for me.

Your Dovid

It all came out slowly, is still coming out, decades after the war. New laws spewed out with the speed of light that paved the diabolical path to the Final Solution: the increased

census-taking; the day Jews had to turn in their radios to the police station. (The press already censored, how would they get the news?) The day they turned in their telephones, and the day they were banned from using public phones. The day they turned in their bicycles. The day no Jew could cross the Champs Elysees. All of them – Dovid, Gerty, the girls, and Manny – rounded up in July, 1942 by the French police, along with nearly 13,000 other Jews from their homes and streets. Sent to Drancy and other camps to sleep on lice-ridden straw on the floor among rats, with no proper toilets, with starvation diets. And finally, deported to Auschwitz in cattle cars. Any news Mama and Papa got was never discussed during the year, everyone so busy following their normal routines. Mostly I heard snippets, hushed words in broken sentences among the numbed, unbelieving families, during summers in the mountains, fanning themselves in the Adirondack chairs, sitting low to the floor planks. As if the sympathetic porch, the sloping lawn, and the purple clover would absorb some of their incurable grief.

~

Love and politics make the world go round, that's what Mama used to say. One day in my Manhattan apartment, when they were well on in years, I asked Mama how she chose between Papa and Dovid, loving them both; because that was a given. As we all aged, Mama had mellowed and I gained more entrée into her heart. Perhaps I filled a void after Sophie passed some years prior. We were making dinner and I spoke in low tones; Papa was in the living room watching the 6:00 news. I spoke quickly, before the news ended when we would call him in for the ritual schnapps toast. I asked if it was the events of the times, and the promise of America, that drove her from France with Papa, more than love. Mama held the green ceramic bowl steady while I whisked olive oil briskly into the egg

yolks. She smiled ruefully into the bowl. “Find me the oil. Find me the eggs. You can’t; it’s already good, solid mayonnaise – you sweat and sweat, mixing and mixing, until you can’t separate them.” ~ ~