



THE
LOST
WIFE




Alyson Richman



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland, 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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PRINTING HISTORY

Berkley trade paperback edition: September 2011

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Richman, Alyson.

p. cm.

ISBN : 978-1-101-55254-4

I. Title.

PS3568.I3447L67 2011

813'.54—dc22

2010054206

<http://us.penguin.com>

Version_4

*To Charlotte, Zachary, Stephen,
and my parents with love.*

With special thanks to the Book Revue.

I am my beloved and my beloved is mine

SONG OF SOLOMON 6:3

CHAPTER 1

New York City 2000

He dressed deliberately for the occasion, his suit pressed and his shoes shined. While shaving, he turned each cheek carefully to the mirror to ensure he hadn't missed a single whisker. Earlier that afternoon, he had even bought a lemon-scented pomade to smooth his few remaining curls.

He had only one grandson, one grandchild for that matter, and had been looking forward to this wedding for months now. And although he had met the bride only a few times, he liked her from the first. She was bright and charming, quick to laugh, and possessed a certain old-world elegance. He hadn't realized what a rare quality that was until he sat there now staring at her, his grandson clasping her hand.

Even now, as he walked into the restaurant for the rehearsal dinner, he felt as though, seeing the young girl, he had been swept back into another time. He watched as some of the other guests unconsciously touched their throats because the girl's neck, stretching out from her velvet dress, was so beautiful and long that she looked like she had been cut out from a Klimt painting. Her hair was swept up into a loose chignon, and two little jeweled butterflies with sparkling antennae rested right above her left ear, giving the appearance that these winged creatures had just landed on her red hair.

His grandson had inherited his dark, unruly curls. A study in contrast to his bride-to-be, he fidgeted nervously, while she seemed to glide into the room. He looked like he would be more comfortable with a book between his hands than holding a flute of champagne. But there was an ease that flowed between them, a balance that made them appear perfectly suited for each other. Both of them were smart, highly educated second-generation Americans. Their voices lacked even the faintest traces of the accents that had laced their grandparents' English. The *New York Times* wedding announcement that Sunday morning would read:

Eleanor Tanz married Jason Baum last night at the Rainbow Room in Manhattan. The rabbi Stephen Schwartz officiated. The bride, 26, graduated from Amherst College and is currently employed in the decorative arts department of Christie's, the auction house. The bride's father, Dr. Jeremy Tanz, is an oncologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering hospital in Manhattan. Her mother, Elisa Tanz, works as an occupational therapist with the New York City public schools. The groom, 28, a graduate of Brown University and Yale Law School, is currently an associate at Cahill Gordon & Reindel LLP. His father Benjamin Baum, was until recently an attorney at Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP in New York City. The groom's mother, Rebekkah Baum, is a retired schoolteacher. The couple was introduced by mutual friends.

At the head table, the lone living grandparent from each side was introduced to each other for the first time. Again, the groom's grandfather felt himself being swept away by the image of the woman before him. She was decades older than her granddaughter, but there was something familiar about her. He felt it immediately, from the moment he first saw her eyes.

"I know you from somewhere," he finally managed to say, although he felt as though he were now speaking to a ghost, not a woman he had just met. His body was responding in some visceral manner

that he didn't quite understand. He regretted drinking that second glass of wine. His stomach was turning over on itself. He could hardly breathe.

"You must be mistaken," she said politely. She did not want to appear rude, but she, too, had been looking forward to her granddaughter's wedding for months and didn't want to be distracted from the evening's festivities. As she saw the girl navigating the crowd, the many cheeks turning to her to be kissed and the envelopes being pressed into her and Jason's hands, she had to pinch herself to make sure that she really was still alive to witness it all.

But this old man next to her would not give up.

"I definitely think I know you from somewhere," he repeated.

She turned and now showed her face even more clearly to him. The feathered skin. Her silver hair. Her ice-blue eyes.

But it was the shadow of something dark blue beneath the transparent material of her sleeve that caused shivers to run through his old veins.

"Your sleeve . . ." His finger was shaking as it reached to touch the silk.

Her face twitched as he touched her wrist, her discomfort registering over her face.

"Your sleeve, may I?" He knew he was being rude.

She looked straight at him.

"May I see your arm?" he said again. "Please." This time his voice sounded almost desperate.

She was now staring at him, her eyes now locked to his. As if in a trance, she pushed up her sleeve. There on her forearm, next to a small brown birthmark, were six tattooed numbers.

"Do you remember me now?" he asked, trembling.

She looked at him again, as if giving weight and bone to a ghost.

"Lenka, it's me," he said. "Josef. Your husband."

CHAPTER 2

New York City 2000

She had slid the painting out of its cardboard tube the night before, flattening it like an old map. For over sixty years she had taken it with her wherever she went. First hidden in an old suitcase, then rolled into a metal cylinder and buried under floorboards, eventually pushed behind several boxes in a crowded closet.

The painting was created with thin black and red strokes. A kinetic energy shone through each line, the artist working to capture the scene as quickly as possible.

She had always felt it too sacred to be displayed, as if the mere exposure to light and air or, perhaps worse, the stares of visitors would be too much for its delicate skin. So it remained in an airtight box, locked away like Lenka's thoughts. Weeks before, while lying in bed, she decided that the painting would be her wedding gift to her granddaughter and her groom.

LENKA

When the Vltava freezes, it turns the color of an oyster shell. As a child, I watched men rescue swans trapped within its frozen current, cutting them out with ice picks to free their webbed feet.

I was born Lenka Josefina Maizel, the eldest daughter of a glass dealer in Prague. We lived on the Smetanovo nábřeží embankment, in a rambling apartment with a wall of windows overlooking the river and bridge. There were red velvet walls and gilded mirrors, a parlor with carved furniture, and a beautiful mother who smelled like lily of the valley all year long. I still return to my childhood like it was a dream. Palačinka served with apricot jam, cups of hot cocoa, and ice skating on the Vltava. My hair piled underneath a fox hat when it snowed.

We saw our reflections everywhere: in the mirrors, the windows, the river down below, and in the transparent curve of Father's glasswares. Mother had a special closet lined with glasses for every occasion. There were champagne flutes that had been etched with delicate flowers, special wine goblets with gilded rims and frosted stems, even rubycolor water glasses that reflected pink light when held up to the sun.

My father was a man who loved beauty and beautiful things, and believed his profession created both using a chemistry of perfect proportions. One needed more than sand and quartz to create glass. One needed fire and breath as well. "A glassblower is both a lover and a life giver," he once told a room filled with dinner guests. He lifted one of the water glasses from our dinner table. "Next time you drink from one of your goblets, think of the lips that created the subtle, elegant shape which you now sip from, and how many mistakes were shattered and recycled to make a perfect set of twelve."

He would have every guest enraptured as he twisted the goblet to the light. But he had not meant to be a salesman or a spectacle that evening. He truly loved how an artisan could create an object that

was simultaneously strong and fragile, transparent, yet capable of reflecting color. He believed there was beauty in both the flattest surface of glass and those rippled with soft waves.

His business took him all over Europe, but he always walked through our front door the same way he left. His shirt white and crisp, his neck smelling of cedar and clove.

“*Milačku,*” he would say in Czech as he grasped Mother’s waist between two thick hands. “Love.”

“*Lasko Moje,*” she would answer as their lips touched. “My love.”

Even after a decade of marriage, Father remained beguiled by her. Many times, he returned home with presents bought solely because they reminded him of her. A miniature cloisonné bird with intricately enameled feathers might appear by her wineglass, or a small locket with seed pearls in a velvet box might be placed on her pillow. My favorite was a wooden radio with a brilliant sunburst design radiating from its center that he surprised Mother with after a trip to Vienna.

If I were to close my eyes during the first five years of my life, I could see Father’s hand on that radio dial. The wisps of black hair on his fingers as they adjusted the tuner to find one of the few stations that featured jazz, an exotic and invigorating sound that was just beginning to be broadcast over our airwaves in 1924.

I can see his head turning to smile at us, his arm extending to my mother and me. I can feel the warmth of his cheek as he lifts me and brings my legs around his waist, his other free hand turning mother into a spin.

I can smell the scent of spiced wine wafting from delicate cups on a cold January night. Outside, the tall windows of our apartment are covered in frost, but inside it is warm as toast. Long fingers of orange candlelight flicker across the faces of men and women who have crowded into the parlor to hear a string quartet Father has invited to play for the evening. There is the sight of mother in the center, her long white arms reaching for a small canapé. A new bracelet at her wrist. A kiss from Father. And me peering from my bedroom, a voyeur to their glamour and ease.

There are quiet nights, too. The three of us nestled around a small card table. Chopin on the record player. Mother fanning her cards so only I can see. A smile curled at her lips. Father feigning a frown as he allows my mother to win.

At night, I am tucked in by a mother who tells me to close my eyes. “Imagine the color of water,” she whispers into my ear. Other nights, she suggests the color of ice. On another, the color of snow. I fall asleep to the thoughts of those shades shifting and turning in the light. I teach myself to imagine the varying degrees of blue, the delicate threads of lavender, or the palest dust of white. And in doing so, my dreams are seeded in the mystery of change.

LENKA

Lucie arrived one morning holding a letter. She held the envelope out to Father, and he read it aloud to my mother. *The girl has no previous experience as a nanny, his colleague had written. But she has natural talent with children and she is beyond trustworthy.*

My first memory of Lucie is that she looked far younger than her eighteen years. Almost childlike her body seemed lost in her long coat and dress. But when she first knelt down to greet me, I was immediately struck by the warmth flowing through her outstretched hand. Every morning when she arrived at our door, she brought with her the faint scent of cinnamon and nutmeg, as if she had been

baked freshly that morning and delivered warm and fragrant—a delectable package that was impossible to turn away.

Lucie was no great beauty. She was like an architect's straight edge, all lines and angles. Her hard cheekbones looked as though they had been hammered with a chisel; her eyes were large and black, her lips tiny and thin. But like a dark forest nymph stolen from the pages of an old-fashioned fairy tale, Lucie possessed her own unique magic. After only a few days of working for my family, we all became enchanted by her. When she told a story, her fingers worked the air, like a harpist plucking imaginary strings. When there were chores to be done, she hummed songs that she had heard her own mother sing.

Lucie was treated not as a servant by my parents, but as a member of our extended family. She took all her meals with us, sitting around the large dining-room table that always had too much food. And although we did not keep kosher, we still never drank milk when we ate a dish that had meat. Lucie made the mistake her first week of work of pouring me a glass of milk with my beef goulash, and Mother must have told her afterward that we didn't mix the two, for I never remember her making the mistake again.

My world became less sheltered and certainly more fun after Lucie's arrival. She taught me things like how to trap a tree frog or how to fish from one of the bridges off the Vltava. She was a master storyteller, creating a cast of characters from the various people we'd meet during our day. The man who sold us ice cream by the clock in Old Town Square might appear that night at bedtime as a wizard. A woman, from whom we bought apples at the market, might later emerge as an aging princess who had never recovered from a broken heart.

I have often wondered if it was Lucie or my mother who first discovered that I had a talent for drawing. In my memory, it is Mother handing me my first set of colored pencils and it is Lucie, later on, who buys me my first set of paints.

I know it was Lucie who first began taking me to the park with my sketchpad and tin of pencils. She would stretch out a blanket near the little pond where boys sailed their paper boats, and lie on her back and watch the clouds as I drew page after page.

In the beginning, I drew little animals. Rabbits. Squirrels. A redbreasted bird. But soon I was attempting to draw Lucie, then a man reading a newspaper. Later on I began more ambitious subjects like a mother pushing a pram. None of these first sketches were any good. But just like any young child who is first learning to draw, I taught myself by doing it over and over again. My observations eventually began to connect with my hand.

After hours outside of drawing, Lucie would roll up my sketches and bring them home to our apartment. Mother would ask how we had spent our day and Lucie would take the sketches she loved best and tack them up on the kitchen wall. My mother would carefully look at my work and then wrap me in her arms. I must have been close to six the first time I heard her say: "Lenka, you know I was the same way at your age—I always had a pencil and piece of paper in my hands." That was the first time I ever heard my mother draw a comparison between us, and I can tell you, as a child, whose dark hair and pale eyes resembled more her father than her elegant mother, the thrill of the two of us sharing something struck me straight to my heart.



That first winter Lucie was with us, Mother wanted to come up with a gift that showed her gratitude. I remember her discussing it with Father. “Do what you think is best, *Milačka*,” he had said—absentmindedly while reading the newspaper. He always gave her free rein when giving gifts, but she always felt she needed to ask permission before she did anything. In the end, she had a beautiful capelet made for Lucie in blue wool with velvet trim. I can still see Lucie’s face when she first opened the package—she was hesitant to accept it at first—almost embarrassed by the extravagance.

“Lenka has one coming, too,” Mother said gently. “What a handsome pair you’ll make skating on the Vltava.”

That evening, Mother caught me watching Lucie from my window as she walked off in the direction of the tram.

“I suppose I will have to order a cape for you tomorrow,” she said, touching my shoulder.

We both smiled, watching Lucie, her body seeming inches taller, as she stepped elegantly into the night.



Although our home was always filled with the melody of clinking glasses and the colors of my drawings, there was also a quiet but palpable sadness within our walls. When Lucie left each evening and the cook packed up her bag, our spacious apartment seemed too large for our little threesome. The extra room next to mine became filled with packages, baskets, and stacks of old books. Even my old crib and pram were silently pushed into a corner, draped with a long white sheet, like two old ghosts, forgotten and misplaced.

There were stretches of days, whole patches of time, when I remember seeing only Lucie. My mother would take almost all of her meals in her bedroom and, when she did appear, she would look bloated and puffy. Her face showed clear signs that she’d been crying. My father would come home and quietly ask the maid about her. He would glance at the tray outside of her room with the plate of untouched food—the cup and saucer with the tea that had grown cold—and look desperate to bring the light back into his darkened house.

I remember Lucie instructing me not to question these episodes. She’d arrive earlier than usual in the morning and would try to distract me with a few things she had brought from home. Some days she’d pull from her basket a photograph of herself when she was six years old, beside a pony. Other times she’d bring a string of glass beads and braid it into my hair like a garland of twisted ivy. She’d tie a sash of blue silk around my dress and we’d imagine I was a princess who ruled over a kingdom where everyone had to whisper. The only sound we allowed ourselves was the rustle of our skirts as we twirled around the room.

At night, there would be visits from the family doctor, who’d gently close the door of Mother’s room and rest his hand on Father’s shoulder, talking to him in hushed tones. I would watch them, failing to discern what ailment my mother could possibly have that would prevent her from appearing during the day.

As I grew older, it became clearer that these shadows in my childhood were my parents’ difficulties in conceiving another child. We tiptoed around conversations of families where there were many children and I learned not to ask for a brother or sister, for on those few times I did, it had only brought my mother to tears.

Something in our household changed after my seventh birthday. Mother spent weeks with what seemed like a touch of a stomach ailment and then, suddenly, the color in her cheeks returned. In the weeks that followed, she stopped wearing the slim-fitting skirts and jackets that were in vogue, opting for ones that were more loose and flowing. She grew peaceful and her movements became slower and more cautious. But it wasn't until her belly became gently rounder that she and Papa announced they were to have another baby.

One would have thought that Mother and Father would, after all these years, have celebrated at the announcement that I was to have a baby brother or sister. But they treaded upon the subject with great caution, fearing that any display of excitement or joy could undermine the health of the pregnancy.

This, of course, was a Jewish custom, the fear of bringing a curse on one's good fortune. Lucie was confused by this at first. Every time she tried to bring up the subject of the pregnancy, my mother would not answer her directly.

"How beautiful and healthy you look," she'd say to Mother.

To which Mother would just smile and nod her head.

"They say if you crave cheese, you're having a girl," said Lucie. "And if you crave meat, it will be a boy."

Again, only a smile and a nod from Mother.

Lucie even offered to help prepare the nursery in advance, to which my mother finally had to explain her hesitation to do anything until the baby actually arrived.

"We appreciate all your good wishes and offers to help," Mother explained, gently. "But we don't want to bring any attention to the baby's birth, just yet."

Lucie's face seemed to immediately register what Mother was saying.

"There are people who believe the same thing in the countryside," she said, as if suddenly Mother's behavior finally made sense.

Still, Lucie tried ways to express her joy at my parents' good news without directly mentioning it. When the lilacs were in bloom that spring, she'd arrive with fistfuls of the fragrant branches, the stems carefully wrapped in strips of wet muslin, and arrange them in vases around the apartment. I remember watching Mother, with her increasingly rounded stomach, walking between each room smiling, as if their perfume had put her into a trance.

Sometimes Lucie would come with a basketful of dark bread that her mother had baked and leave it on the kitchen counter with a jar of homemade honey.

But it wasn't until the baby was born that her most beautiful gift appeared.

My sister Marta was born at sundown. The doctor came into the living room where Father and I sat on the sofa, and Lucie on one of the red velvet tufted chairs.

"You have another beautiful daughter," he said to my father.

Father clasped his hands and rushed toward the bedroom. Lucie took his place on the sofa and took my hand.

"So you have a sister now," she said quietly. "What a gift."

We waited until Papa said I could come in and see them.

He came back a few minutes later and told us we could both come and see the two of them.

"Lenka, come meet your baby sister."

Lucie gave me a little push, an unnecessary gesture, as I could have leaped from my chair. All I wanted to do was run into my mother's room and kiss both her and the new baby.

"Lenka"—my mother looked up from the bundle in her arms and smiled at me in the doorway—"come." She patted her hand on the bed with one free hand while holding the tightly swaddled baby.

in her other arm.

I was in awe of the sight of them, but I remember a little pang of jealousy striking my heart when I leaned in and saw the tufts of red hair on my sister's infant head.

"Congratulations!" Lucie said as she came in and kissed Mother on both her cheeks.

A few minutes later she returned, carrying a stack of embroidered linens. The edges were trimmed in a scallop of looping pink thread.

"I had hidden them in the closet," Lucie said. "I embroidered one set in pink, and one in blue, just in case."

My mother laughed. "You think of everything, Lucie," she said as Lucie set the linens on the night table.

"I'll let you and Lenka have a few moments with the baby." She smiled and gave me a pat on my head.

I gazed at my new sister. She was Mother in miniature form. The small rounded chin, the milky green eyes, and the same hair.

My reaction, however, was not what I had anticipated. Tears filled my eyes. I felt a tightening in my throat. Even my heart felt as though someone had thrust their hand inside my chest and was gripping with all their strength. All I could think of was that I was to be replaced—forgotten—and that all of my parents' attention would now be directed at this little creature with its angelic face and tiny, reaching hands.

Of course this was not the reality, but the fear still gripped me. And I suppose that is why in the first few months of Marta's life, I clung so closely to Lucie.

Slowly, I grew to see that Marta's arrival did not mean I would be replaced. I was soon holding her in my arms. I read her my favorite books and sang her the same songs that had lulled me to sleep.

I also discovered my new sister was the perfect model for my ambitious attempts at portraiture. I used Marta's first milestones as my inspiration. I started with her sleeping in her pram, and then moved on to her crawling at the beach during summertime. I loved to draw her in pastel. The soft blending of the pigments made it easy to create the roundness of her cheeks, and the length of her growing limbs.

I loved to paint her as well. Marta's skin was the opaque white of heavy cream, and her hair the deep red of paprika. Those features, which had presented themselves at birth, grew even more pronounced as her baby fat melted away. Marta had the same high forehead as Mother—along with her small straight nose and upturned mouth. As I watched Marta grow before me, it was almost as if I was able to witness my mother's own transformation from infancy into girlhood.

Marta became more independent with each passing day. Lucie no longer had to get on bended knees to help her with her shoes or constantly change her because she had stained her dress. Her once-chubby body grew long, and her desire to express her own opinion grew as well.

But as Marta grew older, our relationship began to change. She was no longer a little doll that I could dress and pretend to be in charge of. We were rivals not just for my parents' attention, but also for Lucie's. And even though there were more than seven years between us, we still would bicker and Marta would often throw tantrums when she did not get her own way.

Still, once Marta turned eight, there was one thing that we had in common that we both loved to discuss more than anything else: Lucie's love life. After we returned from school, we could spend hours trying to find out if she had a boyfriend. I would pry into who had given her the small gold necklace that suddenly appeared around her neck, or the new silk scarf she tucked underneath the collar of her capelet. And Marta would ask if he was handsome and rich, before bursting into tears and

begging Lucie to promise that no matter what—she'd never leave us.

CHAPTER 3

LENKA

In the autumn of 1934, Lucie announced that she was getting married to a young man by the name of Petr whom she had known since childhood and who now had a job as a clerk at a pharmacy near her parents' house in Kalin. Mother took the news as if it was her own daughter announcing her engagement.

When Lucie arrived for work the next day, Mother and the seamstress, Gizela, were already waiting for her with a dozen bolts of white silk propped against the walls.

"We're making you a wedding dress," Mother announced. "I will hear no words of refusal."

"Get undressed, down to your slip and corset," Gizela ordered.

She withdrew three pins from her pincushion and began wrapping the measuring tape, first around Lucie's bustline, then her waist, and finally her hips.

Lucie trembled as she stood silently in her underclothes.

"Really, this isn't necessary at all. I'll wear the dress my sisters wore. Petr doesn't care if it's worn or stained!"

"We will not hear of such a thing!" my mother said, shaking her head. She walked over to Lucie, who was quickly getting dressed. Her kiss reminded me of the way she kissed Marta and me.



Lucie wore her family's lace veil, a simple covering that fell just to her collarbone. Her garland was made from daisies and wild roses. Her bouquet was a mixture of asters and yellow leaves. She walked down the aisle on her father's arm, the black ringlets of her hair artfully arranged beneath her headpiece, her gaze looking firmly ahead.

We all wept when they exchanged their vows. Petr was as young as Lucie, no more than twenty-five, and I felt giddy for both of them. There was a beauty in how physically opposite they were. He was so much taller than she, with broad, flat features and a head full of blond hair. I noticed how large his hands were when they reached out to lift Lucie's veil, and how tiny her face was when he lifted her chin. His kiss was light and thoughtful, so quiet and gentle. I saw Mother take Papa's hand in hers and smile at him as if remembering their wedding day.

They left the church for the reception at her parents' home. It was a rustic farmhouse with exposed beams and a red tile roof. There were crooked apple trees and fragrant pear trees already in bloom in the garden. A white tent had been erected, the poles wrapped with thick yellow ribbon. On a small, makeshift stand, four men sat playing the polka.

It was the first time I had been to Lucie's childhood home. She had been with my family for years, yet I knew little of her life outside of the one she shared with us. We were united as tightly as a family, but it was always within our apartment or the city of Prague as the backdrop. Now, for the first

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