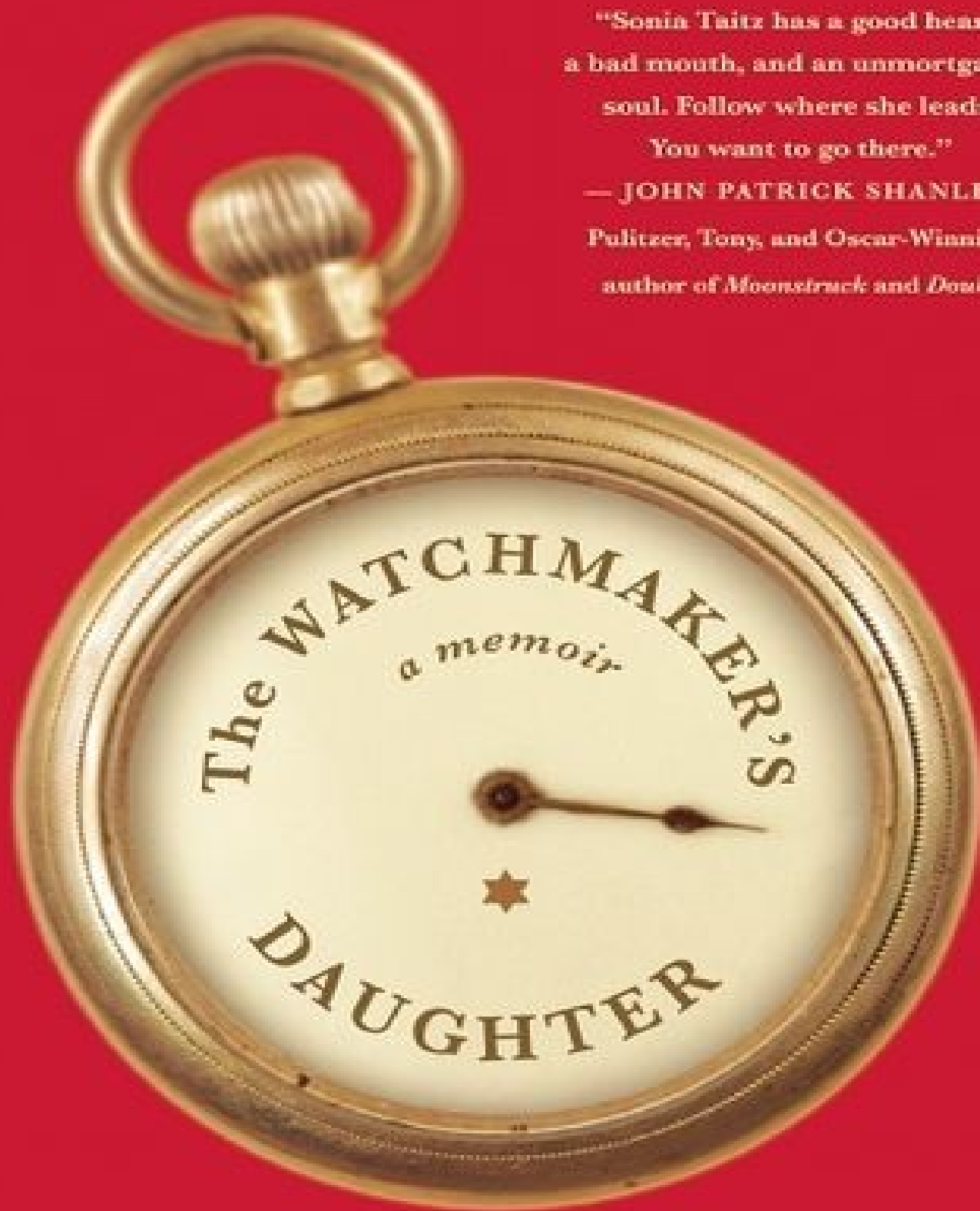


SONIA TAITZ

"Sonia Taitz has a good heart,
a bad mouth, and an unmortgaged
soul. Follow where she leads.
You want to go there."

— JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY,
Pulitzer, Tony, and Oscar-Winning
author of *Moonstruck* and *Doubt*



"Beguiling . . . Taitz keenly pinpoints the ways children filter
their parents' identities." — *The New York Times*



The WATCHMAKER'S DAUGHTER

Sonia Taitz



McWitty Press New York

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“A heartbreaking memoir of healing power and redeeming devotion, Sonia Taitz’s *The Watchmaker’s Daughter* has the dovish beauty and levitating spirit of a psalm. The suffering and endurance Taitz’s parents—Holocaust “death camp graduates” who met at the Lithuanian Jewish Survivors’ Ball in a New York hotel (imagine Steven Spielberg photographing that dance-floor tableau)—form the shadow-hung backdrop of a childhood in a high-octane, postwar America where history seemed weightless and tragedy a foreign import, a Hollywood paradise of perky blondes, Pepsodent smiles and innocent high-school hijinks where our author and heroine longs to fit in. Although the wondrous years that Taitz *scrupulously, tenderly, beautifully, often comically renders* aren’t that far removed from us, they and the Washington Heights she grew up in, *the shop where her father repaired watches like a physician tending to the sick tick of time itself*, the grand movie houses where the image Doris Day sunshined the giant screen, have acquired the ache and poignance of a lost, Kodachrome age. *A past is here reborn and tenderly restored with the love and absorption of a daughter with final duty to perform a last act of fidelity.*”

—James Wolcott, *vanity Fair* columnist and author of *Lucking O*

“Sonia Taitz’s memoir of growing up the daughter of a master watch repairman who survived the Holocaust is also a *haunting meditation on time itself*. Taitz writes with *a painter’s eye and a poet’s voice*.”

—Mark Whitaker, author of *My Long Trip Home*

“Sonia Taitz’s memoir of coming of age in postwar America is *unusually gentle, loving, and insightful*. This book’s understanding of family dynamics and the realities of the American Dream will resonate with us all.”

—Joshua Halberstam, author of *A Seat at the Table*

“*Sonia Taitz captures time in this deeply moving memoir* of a woman’s journey back to herself. *The Watchmaker’s Daughter* is written with a wise eye and a generous heart. Unforgettable!” —Christina Haag, author of *Come to the Edge*

Praise for *In the King’s Arms*

“Beguiling ... Taitz zigzags among her culturally disparate characters, zooming in on their foibles with elegance and astringency.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“In the province of gifted poets, playwrights and novelists.”

—*ForeWord Review*

“I thought often of Evelyn Waugh—the smart talk, the fey Brits, country houses, good clothes, lineage for centuries . . . Even the heavy moments have verve and wit.”

—Jesse Kornbluth, *vanity Fair* essayist and editor of HeadButler.com

“In her gloriously rendered novel, *In the King’s Arms*, Sonia Taitz writes passionately and wisely about outsiders, and what happens when worlds apart slam into each other.”

—Betsy Carter, author

The Puzzle King and Nothing to Fall Back On

Also by Sonia Taitz

FICTION

In the King's Arms

NONFICTION

Mothering Heights

PLAYS

Whispered Results

Couch Tandem

The Limbo Limbo

Darkroom

Domestics

Cut Paste Delete Restore

Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of
your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden
door!

EMMA LAZARUS

*Inscription at base of the Statue of Liberty,
New York Harbor*

*To the tempest-tossed,
and
to their children*

Prologue: The Man Who Fixed Time

YOU COULD SAY THAT my father was a watchmaker by trade, but that would be like saying that Nijinsky liked to dance. Fixing watches was not only his livelihood but his life. This skill had saved him when he had been imprisoned at the death camp of Dachau, during the Second World War, and he continued to fix watches until the day he died. Simon Taitz was nothing less than a restorer of time. And I was his daughter, born to continue in his lifework—restoration and repair.

The minutes in my childhood home went by slowly and deliberately. They were accounted for by an endless series of clocks. Like the burghers of some old village, they sat around me as I listened to their secrets. Some kept the true hour; others were broken, chiming irregularly with dings and false elaborate windups that led to weird silence. A few bombastically tolled the hours with notes that spread and reverberated. I was mesmerized by the whirly rotations within glass bell jars. I loved and feared the old cuckoos, with pendulums like overgrown Bavarian acorns. Clang and tick, pickaxe and wheel, a real hurly-burly.

My favorite was the one that sat on the breakfront in our apartment. Despite its size, this small mantel piece boomed throughout the house like an eight-foot grandfather clock. “Westminster chimes,” my father proudly explained as he wound it, a beautiful British diapason of notes, sometimes long, sometimes short, and ending with a hearty, chest-full *boom-boom-boom*. My father’s chest was large and round, his voice deep and resonant. I often thought that clock spoke for him and the dignified truth inside him. Time was company; it never left you. A look at a pleasant, numbered face and you’d practically hear it say: “Yes, I’m here. See? I’m still marking the minutes. You can count on me.”

When I think of my father’s face, I see the loupe, the watchmaker’s special magnifying glass. It was a small tube of black-painted metal worn on one eye, a mini-telescope that fit into the optical orbit though it were part of the skull. Through the glass, my father surveyed a microcosmic ward of ailing tickers. His domain opened up with the tiny click of a pocket-watch door, releasing a magical world in which minute gears spun clockwise, counterclockwise, and back and forth, each with its own rhythm. Daily, he sat at his wooden workbench, presiding over the internal secrets of clocks, each revealing its tiny pulse as he restored it to the natural, universal order.

I thought of my father as a magical man and was in awe of him.

“See what’s inside? Still alive,” he’d say, opening the back of a pocket watch. My father could reverse time; my father could reverse fate. He could fix a broken face, a cracked and faded lens, and make it clear and true again. He could make a dead heart beat.

Though the phrase *Arbeit macht frei* was the notorious banner welcoming doomed souls to slavery in Auschwitz, my father did, in fact, feel freed by his work. It relaxed him into a state of patient grace. By the time I was born, he had been fixing clocks and watches for nearly three decades. Simon had learned his trade back in Lithuania, apprenticing to a master as a boy of fourteen. His father had died when he was three, when Cossacks, rampaging through his village, shot the young miller, leaving behind a young widow and three helpless children. This story was my first narrative.

“Poor Bubbe Sonia!” I would say about my paternal grandmother, after whom I was named.

“‘Poor’ nothing,” my father would answer. “She was a special woman, strong and brave.”

This Sonia Taitz, the original one, buried her husband on their land, sold the millstones, and fled their riverside home, escaping into what my father called “deep Russia.” I always imagined a dark Slavic forest, and a young, Snow White—like woman, surrounded by menacing branches. Bright eyes in the night, sadists and murderers watching her and her three little children, my father, as in a fairy tale, the youngest. Her favorite.

The eldest, a bookish, lanky boy called Aaron, was sent away to wealthy relatives. They were not kind to him, and ultimately he ran away to Palestine and did manual labor with other raw immigrants. The middle child, Paula, was blue-eyed, dimpled, and flirtatious. After marrying hot and young, she and her husband were sent to Siberia by the Communists.

Simon was left alone to support his mother. A gifted athlete, he enjoyed the Lithuanian winter skating around Kovno (as the Jews called Kaunas), racing through woods and villages, flying forward into his manhood. Though he would rather have studied and become a doctor, he considered himself lucky to find that he loved his trade, and by his early twenties was a master himself, with a workshop and trained apprentices of his own. When inducted into the Lithuanian army, he enlisted with enthusiasm and loved the physicality of it, the discipline. On his return, flush with confidence, he opened a watch store, then another; he bought himself a Harley Davidson, top of the line. But when the Communists invaded, he was forced to “nationalize” his business, as well as the Harley. Still, he survived, he thrived; he supported his widowed mother. In the evenings, he danced at parties.

When, however, the Nazis invaded Lithuania, Simon began planning ways of escape. Good Christian friends had offered him documents, and he had considered booking passage to Australia with his mother. She, however, was frightened of starting her life again so far away. So he stayed behind with her.

“That’s why she died, right?” I was trying to figure out causes and avoidable, fixable mistakes. He had almost died as well; he was one of the very few Jews from his part of the world who had not.

“Who knows why she died?”

“No, Daddy, she had to keep moving. She got stuck!”

“I, too, my little Sonia. We all got stuck somewhere. But by a miracle, God heard my prayers, and we survived.”

My father considered himself lucky to have become a watchmaker. Lawyers, businessmen, and even doctors went to the gas chambers, but his humble, practical skill was needed. This portable trade saved his life. Simon had been assigned to fix the time for the Nazis, who prized punctuality. As he explained to me, Germans respected his ability, eventually giving him his own workshop within the camp. A part of him reveled in this odd esteem, even (or especially) coming from his enemies and captors.

“The Germans admired a well-functioning machine. They loved order and discipline and I gave them that. Their watches and clocks came in broken and came out ‘ticktock’ perfect. So in some ways we understood one another.”

The watchmaker’s trade was all that my father carried with him when he came to America in 1941, but again it was enough. After a few years of working in-house at Omega, the prestigious watch company, he began renting a little shop on the West Side of Manhattan, on Broadway and Sixty-third Street. Eventually, Lincoln Center would be built next door to this modest location, and he would befriend (and fix the watches of) great artists and impresarios; for now, he sat in his little jewelry shop in the middle of a tough neighborhood.

Hooting groups of teenagers ran by the store, hitting the windows with baseball bats. On a few occasions they smashed in the glass, shattering his storefront and grabbing watches by the trayful. My father chased them down the street, tackling the stragglers, grabbing back his treasures from their loosening fists. Carefully, he laid them back in their usual places in the trays, unafraid of anything but more degradation, more loss. He would truly rather die, now, than be bested by bullies and criminals. And he was not about to die. He installed heavy iron gates that at the beginning and the end of his long workday he slid over the windows with a long, loud set of clangs and a final bang. Then he installed a sensitive alarm system, so sensitive that any rattle of the gates would lead to an emergency call to the police, and another to our home. There was always a sense of potential disaster in that little West Side

store, and the gates themselves, fastened by an enormous lock, seemed more a shock than a comfort to me.

Interspersed with the drama of thugs and thieves came the peacefulness of my father's labor. Simon was, I suppose, used to functioning around crises, always able to restore himself to calm productivity as maelstroms faded. A laminated wooden OMEGA, written in large gold letters, hung over his head as he sat quietly at his workbench, attesting to his ranking as a master. Omega was my father's Yale and his Harvard. Around him lay a little store lined with glass showcases and mirrors that my mother endlessly polished. Within the showcase lay velveteen trays holding jewelry; my mother wiped these treasures daily with a chamois cloth to make them sparkle.

And work soothed his soul as nothing else could. With the loupe in his eye, my father seemed to see everything. Even when a customer came into the store, he might not look up, so immersed was he in the intricate mysteries of his timepieces. My mother, his assistant in the shop, would dash up to the counter and eagerly say, "Can I help you?" Sometimes they were there to look at a ring, or try bracelets on their arms, and she would get busy and pull out some velveteen trays. Most often, however, they had heard of my father, and wanted a bit of his time.

"I'm waiting for the watchmaker," they would say.

A glass separated him from his customers, the way a curtain might separate the holy from the Holy of Holies. Only when it was time, only when an issue was settled in his mind, would my father lay down his work, pop out his loupe, and look up. Then he would say, with utter seriousness, each word seeming to take on its fullest meaning:

"How may I be of service to you?"

From deep within pockets, purses, bags, and briefcases would emerge a beloved old wristwatch, an antique pocket watch, or a large, priceless antique clock. Unwrapping, exposing, handing treasures over to my father's side of the glass, they would part with their heirlooms. He would look at the timepiece, first without the loupe, and then with it—opening the back with tiny tools as the customer stood back, scarcely breathing. Sometimes he would admire the secret paintings within secret doors (pastorals, portraits) or a clever repeater, a special toll, or ticking capability.

"Yes, I think I can make this repair," he would finally say. "When you come back, your treasure will be beating."

Naming Ceremony

I TOOK MY FIRST BREATH less than a decade after the flames of the Holocaust had ended. Embers glittered in the ashes, and the last plumes of smoke still hung in the air. Notwithstanding the busily ticking timepieces, the atmosphere at home was thick with the past. I cannot remember being born into my own world, my own time frame. I was born into my parents' world, the world of refugees, immigrants, survivors.

It was dark in my apartment in Washington Heights, a leafy uptown enclave of immigrants perched on the Hudson. We lived in tenements with fire escapes, railroad flats where only the front room caught a breeze. Still, we were happy to come inside, climb the staircases, lock the heavy front door to our apartments, and be safe and unbothered.

When we peeped out the front windows, the world outside was lively with screaming children playing stickball, hopscotching, or simply bouncing their balls against the sooty courtyard walls. Segregated by mere streets, we lived among hearty Irish handymen, ponytailed Puerto Rican girls who attended the Mother Cabrini convent school up the block, and the contained, devout German Jews who had lived in the neighborhood for decades. My parents were part of the most recent arrivals—Yiddish-speaking Polish and Lithuanian Jews who'd been spat out of Europe by a blast from Hades.

The fact that my older brother and I were alive, new Jews born after Hitler had promised to annihilate all the undesirables on the planet, was to my parents a sign and a miracle. My father and mother were both concentration camp survivors. Not victims—survivors, people who had looked death in the face and rebuffed it. They had been slaves, with razor-nicked heads and skeletal bodies; they had scrounged for rotten potato peels and woken up alongside corpses; they had pleaded for their lives and run from guns and gasses, pits and ovens. They had prayed and promised and sensed, in my father's case particularly, the answering voice of God. Their belief, they felt, had saved them, and so unlike many others, they kept on believing. I never thought of them as weak, but as God-like warriors themselves, however wounded.

At the time of my birth, an unruffled state of mind was, theoretically, available to most Americans. Here was a world of conspiratorially bland, amusing entertainment, a corny embrace of normalcy. Still, the healing banality, the soothing crackle of black-and-white television, gray flannel suits, and blank-faced furniture was not peace to my folks, but hypocrisy. They felt a certain contempt for those vapid, idle Americans who didn't appreciate the true magnitude, the nightmarish depth, of existence. They who persisted in focusing on what my parents called *narishkeit* (foolishness)—with their golf and their martinis, their beehive or Brylcreem hairdos and hulking two-car garages.

Me, at first I loved *narishkeit*. Until I started school, my best friend was the television. I ruthlessly daydreamed about a "Dad" who smoked a pipe while sitting in a lounge, offering bemused yet well-considered advice. I wanted a slim-hipped "Mom" who wore heels in the house, a ruffle-edged apron tied about her trim waistline. My father sported thin, white, sleeveless undershirts, with fringed prayer garments above, the latter in observance of the biblical law to wear just such a garment. The outfit was completed by the bottom half of a suit, neatly creased and belted. He had no concept of leisure except for the Sabbath day, on which he prayed and tried to rest. Hence, no baseball caps, no sneakers, no tennis sweaters—it was either the whole suit, with a tie, and tie pin—or this undershirt-based ensemble.

With the upper body of a circus strongman and a bald head, my father looked like Yul Brynner as the despot of Siam in *The King and I*. He had a similar dangerous accent and charismatic aura. His posture was military; his carriage, aristocratic. Even his vocal timbre was the same, Slavic and deep. When I called him "Dad," he'd mimic darkly.

“Dad? *Dad?*”

In his voice, it sounded like “Ded? *Ded?*”

He would roar, “You want me to be DEAD?” He seemed ready to deal with that threat, as he had to many times before.

So “Daddy” would do just fine.

My mother, estrogen to his androgen, wore busily floral “housedresses,” which closed with snaps or one long zipper from neck to knees. In the kitchen, she and her mother, who had also survived, stirred pots together. On her small feet she wore pink calfskin slippers called *shlurkes*. While my grandmother sat, emitting a sense of sepulchral gloom, her daughter scurried around, mopping, dusting, spraying polish on the heavy mahogany furniture, shining away with assorted rags. As she cleaned, she wore a permanent, almost ecstatic sheen of perspiration and would sometimes stand by an open window and let breezes blow on her face, eyes closed as gauzy white curtains danced in the air.

“Oy, a mechayeh!” she would say. Oh, this makes me live.

In our home, the language was Yiddish. I did not then know that this German/Hebrew blend I spoke as my first language and mother tongue, was dying, spoken as it was primarily by survivors of the Holocaust in Europe. It was only when the dark wooden doors of our television set were opened like an ark, the set clicked on to slowly reveal another world, that I realized our family spoke one language, but the rest of America spoke another. English was cleaner and clackier; it was more sensible and far less tender. People who spoke English were lucky and immune. They really knew what they were doing.

Every morning, I ran into the living room and swung open the TV doors to search for paradise. I turned on the set to watch a show called *Romper Room*, then waited as the TV’s inner light began to glow, expanding. There she was: a calm, smiling lady, holding up a magic glass to her face. The goddess of children. Through it, she could see every kid in America. The lady would say:

“I see Bobby and Nancy and Anne-Marie. I see Richie and Stevie and Mary-Lou. I see Jeffrey and Billy and Susie and Chris. I see . . .”

“YOU SEE ME! I’M RIGHT HERE!”

I stood before her, jumping up and down on our frayed green carpet. This was how I watched television: standing on my spot, swaying, praying, desperate to contact the world outside my world. (The area where I stood was growing threadbare; I could see the beginnings of a dun mesh below the crushed nap.) I hopped on one foot for Captain Kangaroo. I showed my frilly panties to suave Sandi Becker. I twirled in tribute to the flickering cathode ray image of Ricky Ricardo, Lucy’s Latino, an accented immigrant like my parents.

I was besotted by the fact that Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz had married each other, so in love that their show began and ended with a gleaming satin pillow on which was scripted their blended name—“Desilu.” They had crossed a great divide and met in the middle, like a fairy-tale kiss that broke all curses born of cultural distance.

“I see Kevin and Linda . . .”

“Call my name, lady! Call ‘Sonia’!”

For that, of course, was my name. In Yiddish it was Shayna.

Sonia, much less Shayna, wasn’t on the list of possibilities, unless the magic mirror lady could take a U-turn into a vat of savory schmaltz and say, with a thick, Semitic catch in her throat:

“Oy! Wait a minute! Now I see Ruchel and Dvora and Selma and Yizkhak and Menny’shu. Gevalt! I see Maxie, Irving, Irwin, Perel’le and Yaccchhhhim!!!”

Romper Room lady couldn’t take that U-turn. It was I who had to.

“Hey, I know what you can call me in American!” I exclaimed to my parents with can-do optimism, as though I were teaching them to do the peppermint twist (which I myself was then learning from

show called *American Bandstand*). Often, they asked me how to say something in English, which they never completely mastered.

They were especially shocked by colloquialisms like “Get out of here!”

“This is polite to say?” my father would ask wonderingly. (He was also puzzled by the violent expression “son of a gun.”)

“Sure, you say it when you don’t believe someone. Like, someone tells you that they are gonna be on a TV show. And you can’t believe it, so you say, ‘No! Get out of here!’”

“Get out of here,” said my father.

“Get out of there,” said my mother.

My grandmother was silent. Finally, she muttered, in Yiddish:

“We already got out. What they want from us??”

“So what do you tell us about your name, now, Sonialeh?” asked my mother, lightly dipping a Swee-Touch-Nee teabag into a handled glass of boiling water. We were sitting down to breakfast in the kitchen. Pigeons flapped on the windowsill, and on our round, oilcloth-covered table sat butter, sour cream, rye and black breads, hunks of farmer cheese, and cut-glass dishes of preserves.

“You can call me ‘Susie’ now!” I blared. The sound of my high, ridiculous voice hung in the air.

“Huh, that’s dumb,” said my brother, who often sensed that his little sister was off.

My father stared at me for a moment, biding his time. He spread a thin layer of blueberry jam on his toast. It rasped like the weekend bristles on his chin, which, when in a good mood, he let me scratch with my fingertips. And then, he intoned, in his basso profundo, with dignity, slowly:

“Sonia, be proud of your name. My mother, she should rest in peace, who you are named for, died by the hands of those Nazis, murderers, may their names be erased from the world.”

The Susies and Nancies were not named for the victims of psychopaths whom one was never allowed to forget. They skipped down the street, pigtailed bouncing. They giggled, teased, and wrinkled their noses. Their parents found them adorable, “spoiled them rotten”; they braided their hair and pinned satin ribbons in it.

To my father’s last comment my mother would not fail to respond.

“At least she lived her life, your mother. She grew up, she married, she had children. My poor little brothers died young, teenagers! Shot like animals! They had no life at all! What did they do to deserve it? Why did they have to die?”

Three years older, my brother tended to escape these inquisitions, and now, grabbing half a rye bread, cucumber, and butter sandwich, ran off to his room. Auburn-haired, freckle-faced, Manny was a whirlwind of activity with a pocketful of bottle caps and marbles. Sitting him down was a challenge much less posing to him the Greatest Hits of Moral Philosophy. But me, I was a brooder. From the time I had begun asking “Why?” they had begun to respond, “Yes, why? What do you think?” And I had attempted to answer.

At night, after everyone fell asleep, I would get up, run to my brother’s room next door, and grab the flashlight out of his bedside drawer. Back in bed, lemur eyes and flashlight to the page (so I would not wake my grandmother, with whom I shared a room), I’d open my picture book of Genesis, worrying myself. The sacrifice of Isaac was a special concern.

Why does Abraham try to hurt his own child? I’d creep out again, fretting to myself, running in the dark corridor past Manny’s room, the bathroom, the kitchen, the living room, and then, at last, bursting through the French doors, into the sanctuary of my parents’ bedroom.

“What do you mean, Sonia? He was obeying God,” my father might say, stirring, turning to face me. My father’s side of the bed was the one near the window. In the night, it would be lit by the passing cars, and he would wake up to my voice with kind concern, eyes coming alive in the flickering light. Being called in the middle of the night to discuss the sacrifice of Isaac was an actual pleasure.

for the man. He'd pat my head affectionately.

"What a smart little girlie," he'd murmur. "With her good questions."

"Do you think it was easy for Abraham?" my mother would add, still lying down. "He suffered too." She, too, could talk about suffering in her sleep.

"Yes, but—don't you think maybe Abraham should have talked with God a little? For his kid's sake?"

"You think talking to God is enough?" said my mother, raising her head to look at me. "If only ..."

"Yes, it can be enough sometimes," my father demurred. He was sure his prayers had saved him from the war.

"Maybe someone could find the right exact sentences!" I'd persist. I didn't think my father's prayers had done that much good. He and my mother still seemed so upset. God had let bad people hurt them.

"Maybe you can find them, then, the words we are all looking for," my father added. "But now, go back to sleep so you have the strength to look for them."

And now, at the breakfast table, my mother was asking me her own stumper of the day. She turned to me and pleaded: "Why did my brothers have to die? Why? They were fine, good boys!"

My grandmother glared at me. As well as I knew the English language, and good as I was at school, I did not have the answers to all questions, theirs or mine.

My middle name, Judith, was in honor of these two brothers, my grandmother's lost children. She wished it were Jane.

"All right, fine, so this one you don't know, I don't know, no one knows," said my mother, sweeping up the table crumbs with one cuffed hand. "But remember them, *mein kind*," she added, her other hand now full of collected scraps. After a minute, she stepped on the garbage can lid and tossed the scraps away with a *tsk*.

In telling me their stories, my parents felt that they were nourishing my character as a Jewish daughter. The last thing either of them wanted me to be was flighty, or free of history. To them, telling me about the Holocaust was like telling me about the secrets of the cosmos. I just wasn't clear about what it all meant—that the universe, God included, was a big bully? I could never agree to that. Inwardly, I fought that. Their little soldier was a double agent, half in love with hope.

"OK, Mommy," I said, wriggling away from the folding wooden stepstool that served as my kitchen chair. "I'll remember your brothers."

But first I want to see another commercial for Patty Playpal.

"Do you want more to eat something, Sonialeh?"

"Zie hat gantz nit gegessen," muttered my grandmother. "Gornisht."

"I did eat! I want to go watch TV."

Life was not monstrous in that box, nor, I suspected, in the America it portrayed. In America, God was a big ray of sunshine on a neatly mown lawn. He was the smile on happy parents' faces, beaming joy on their children.

The living room was adjacent to the kitchen. I was about to turn on the TV again when I heard my father's raised voice.

"Wait, Gita. Did you say *shot*? Your brothers, they were shot? On my mother, they didn't want to waste a bullet. They shoved them all, naked, into the showers. And what sprays out? Not water, gas. Suffocated. A horrible death. It makes me sick to talk about it."

There was a moment of silence. And then my mother, rebounding:

"But at least she had a life!"

That was part of the competition—my life was worse than yours. It was part of the great theme. The Jews suffered more. You don't know from suffering. You didn't have a potato peel? I didn't have

teeth. You didn't have teeth? You were lucky—from me, they pulled out all my teeth, one by one . . .

~~“All right, Gita, my mother Sonia, she should rest in peace, had a life, once. And I am glad of it.”~~

I wanted a life, too, I thought, turning on the television that made happy faces come glowingly to life. And there she was, the Romper Room lady. The show was not over, and soon she would take up her mirror.

One day, I knew, she would see me. My mother would see me; my father would take out his loup and really see me. The Sonia who was not *her* dead brothers or *his* dead mother, but a real live girl.

Arpeggios and Arpège

MY MOTHER, Gita, was seven years younger than Simon in age, and lighter, more pastel in temperament. Most people, including myself, found her fragrant, pretty, cuddly, cute. She possessed a certain ineradicable *joie de vivre* that fate had not taken from her. She was stubborn in her happiness; she could hum through her frustrations, and a good apple or orange could change her day entirely.

“Oy,” she would say, the *oy* in this case meaning something positive: “Oy, is this good!” And she would be talking about a bite of McIntosh apple (her favorite), or the simple act of coming home in a warm house in the winter, or a cool house in the summer. The windows open, no air conditioning (a little stuffy), and still she would say, “Oy, a mechayeh!”

Gita’s childhood and early teen years had been brought to an abrupt halt by politics; from the time of the Nazis she had stayed hip-close to her mother. Thus, she remained something of a child, a good girl who causes no trouble and asks no questions. As a condition of marriage, her only request was that her mother, Liba, who had survived the concentration camps with her, be allowed to live with them. My father, in turn, requested that his wife be a helpmate, working in his store. (Liba would take care of the children.) Gita had agreed—and spent the rest of her life catering tirelessly to him until the day he died.

A piano virtuoso, her conservatory career had been ruined by the war. She had had to leave her piano behind to go to the ghetto (and later, the concentration camp); she had even lost her music books and practice notebooks. Gita was not used to mopping floors, cooking endless meals, or helping out at a watchmaker’s store. Nor had she anticipated the suddenness and severity of her new husband’s wild temper. Since becoming his wife, she had learned about a merciless demon deep inside him. It was a kind of cuckoo, I sometimes thought, something that popped out of the works and then popped back.

“GITA!!” he’d roar. “Are you really bad or just plain stupid?” If an argument occurred during a meal—which it often did, as meals forced closeness—he’d slam his plate, food and all, to the floor and she wept, as much over the wasted food as the shards of broken china.

This cuckoo-man had no pity for a child-bride who cried easily and who wanted nothing more than to be romanced, as in a dream that had been interrupted when the Nazis had stomped in. Debussy, Czerny, and especially Chopin, she said, had led her to great visions of love. Now, she raced about his house urgently, like a child trying to please but fearing she wouldn’t, rising early each morning to cook and pack her husband’s lunch (fried flounder in a buttered roll, a tomato, an apple) and fill a tartan patterned thermos full of coffee (Nescafe, instant). Simon would leave early, descending into the subway when it was still dark outside. In his late thirties, it was up to him to climb out of poverty once again, with no family but a twittering wife and her sullen, traumatized mother.

When Gita came to work, she would be sent on errands to find gears and springs and watch straps or told to straighten the showcases and arrange the jewelry neatly. Regardless of how much polishing she did, the place always seemed to smell of dusty smother to me—a feeling of gray in the air, a rim of whiteness on the black velveteen trays. The steel light fixtures seemed dull, too, the fluorescent rods within them colorless and dead. Cold chrome was everywhere—on the lamps, on the edges of the glass, in the heavy-based mirrors that stood on every table so that customers could see themselves.

I loved smoothing the honey-colored wood panels in the back of the showcases. They seemed warmer and more alive. With the twist of a tiny key they opened, sliding apart as I’d help my mother reach a tray to bring up to the counter. My father’s workbench, too, was of a worn, tawny wood. My parents were selling jewelry as well as watches, so Gita busied herself with wrapping boxes for paramours buying modest rings and bracelets (these young men made her smile), or dowagers buying large “cocktail rings” with semiprecious stones. Her equipment was a roll of silver paper,

monumental, weighted tape dispenser, and cherry-red velveteen bows, which she tied with meticulous care. ~~My mother hummed as she worked; she was born happy; she had had almost eighteen happy years; and now she would always revert to joy by nature.~~

Yet there was a precarious quality to her happiness; when, unpredictably, its vague borders were touched, she would weep, or close down in disdainful rejection. She never told her mother how her husband's shouting and insults hurt her, but she did, very early, tell me, in her own special locution:

"He is trying to make from me a Nothing." Even the Nazis had not done that, she would bitterly observe. He was as strong and strict as any German, and proud of it.

He, in turn, would confide to me that he was baffled to have married such a silly woman. He found her "moods" ridiculous. His mother had never shown moods, not even when she had had to bury her husband and run with her three children into "deep Russia." My mother would respond, under her breath but in my earshot, that his mother sounded like she literally did wear army boots.

"Oy," she'd say, smiling mischievously, "I would run from such a sourpot!"

"And that is why he's such a strict officer," she would conclude, dousing herself before bedtime with Arpege, her pastel nightgowns silky and cool to the touch. "And now he orders me."

The hierarchy was not always clear. She would stop at nothing to bait him, incessantly nagging and chattering, kissing his neck or hand, asking the same question over and over, like Tevye to his wife:

"Do you love me?"

And he would say, "Gita. You know that words are meaningless to me. 'I love you, I love you, I love you'—pah! So cheap and stupid!"

When he raised his voice and got annoyed, she'd smile a little. His raised voice told her she'd made contact. Impact.

"Sourpot," she'd whisper to me, and wink.

I was torn between their points of view. No matter how cruel the arguments, my mother seemed, on some level, to enjoy herself even as my father's face turned so red I was worried he'd die on the spot. It exhausted me, having to choose between his passionate, patriarchal sense of being wronged, and her easygoing, but slightly sadistic, resistance and feigned bafflement.

Yet every Sabbath, for all the arguments, they would sit at the head of a candlelit table like a royal couple. After lunch each Saturday, they would eventually take a long stroll together through the neighborhood, hand in hand in the late afternoon. They loved this walk, always ending it in the leafy groves of Fort Tryon Park, strolling by the flower beds. Other leisurely walkers tipped their hats and greeted them, standing in the dancing shade of plane trees to chat about their children and grandchildren.

It would take my parents nearly their entire lives to realize how well suited they were. Both were industrious, innocent, generous, and honest; both had seen the same world disappear. Both had left everything behind, and would never—could never—return. There was nothing to return to; the culture, what was left of it, was simply transported, bruised as it was, to America and Israel. On these strange New York City streets, stumbling with the language, scraping to reinvent themselves, they were each other's only harbor.

Running Like a Crazy

UNLIKE HER HUSBAND, my mother had not lost everything in the war; she had saved her own mother, whom she worshipped. In the ghetto, she had hidden Liba in the “eggbox,” she told me, sitting on it as the guards tromped around looking for helpless old people to kill. Later, during “selection” the entire Jewish populace had had to line up and have Nazis decide which ones were to live and which to die. Her mother had been sent to the bad line (meaning incapable of labor, marked for immediate death); my mother, to the good. She had, however, in a panic, run from her line to join her mother.

“I wanted only to be with my Mamaleh,” she said, sometimes with a meaningful, slightly resentful glance in my direction. Already, she could see (rightly) that I would not carry on the symbiosis of mother-daughter to the death. For a start, I was always restless by her side, especially in the kitchen. Not a good eater. Not interested in pots and pans and bubbling stews. My father’s daughter, intense and always cogitating.

“So I ran like a crazy, not thinking; they could have shot me! And then, in a minute, I was with my mother. And then I did her work, and I kept her warm, and I begged her to keep trying to live. And together, thanks God, we survived.”

Her mother, Liba, had welcomed death. She had watched her sons leaving the ghetto, ostensibly on a work detail, only to find out that they had been shot along with dozens of other hale young men. She had seen her husband sent away to be gassed in the Dachau concentration camp. Her daughter was all that was left to her, and this child would not abandon her—even if it meant her own death. They lived through the liberation together, and through the Displaced Persons camps, and they came together in America. Gita was just out of her teens when these events had begun to unfold.

Now, like her husband, she tried to master English. It would be their sixth language. They already knew Yiddish, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Russian, and—due to four postwar years in Deutschland—German. Before the war, her family had had cooks and laundresses and cleaning ladies. Now, Gita did her best, learning to cook and clean the apartment—both in a generous, copious, and imperfect fashion. She learned to hurtle downtown on the subway to run a business with her driven, ultra-serious husband.

Although he frightened her, she respected him. “At least he is not a runner, a liar, a drinker, a gambler—he is a good, honest, Jewish man.” She sometimes added, “and he has a beautiful soul—like a poet.” His violent outbursts of rage only confirmed this image. There was something prophetic and passionate in him—something almost inexpressible. Like most people, she found him fascinating and charismatic. He had a real aura, haunting and deep.

Once, when I was about eleven and accompanying my parents on the subway to Radio City Music Hall, my mother, happy to be on a jaunt, wiggled her feet near the edge of the subway platform. It was warm outside. I remember that she wore a flowery summer dress with delicate shoes, like ball slippers. In the center of these shoes, on top of her toes, was a little straw bouquet of fruit, complete with two small, shiny wooden cherries. I was staring at the pretty cherries as one of my mother’s shoes fell off and landed in the tracks. These tracks were deep, dark, and dangerous.

Not hesitating, my father leaped down into the darkness. In a second, he held the shoe in his hand. I can still see him look up at us, smiling; I can see the cherries, shining like new hope. From far away, I began to hear the rumble of an oncoming train. My father, trying to climb back onto the platform, struggled through a few efforts, then, with a powerful leap, at last joined us. As I caught my breath, he placed the shoe on my mother’s small foot. No question, her husband was a hero, a leader, someone to reckon with. You could be safe with him.

Each day together, she ran “like a crazy” to make his life easier—running to the store to work

home to cook, to the hospital when he was dying. From the day he met her, he was never alone; she was his constant helpmate.

In his heart of hearts, my father did love her. She had a beauty and lovability that he saw immediately, and he continued to see it until his dying day. This held their lives together, and bound her to him.

Eine Kleine Schwarzkopf

My BIG BROTHER and I were left at home in the care of my elderly grandmother Liba. This figure so beloved to my own mother, so precious that she would risk her own life to save her, was a puzzle to me. “Bubbe” was proud by nature, and scarcely resembled the woman in a picture that sat on the wall in my parents’ bedroom. There, she was elegant, her hands inside a luxurious, dark fur muff, surrounded by three lovely children (my mother in long braids, her younger brothers in shining buttoned shoes) and a distinguished husband with a gentleman’s neatly groomed moustache. Liba had had cooks and maids; she had loved singing; she had gloriously driven her own horse and carriage around town—all this I was told by my mother, who idolized her. But the Bubbe I met was exhausted, extinguished, and favored sitting in the darkest corner, by a window where pigeons flapped dustily in the airshaft. Knees apart under a heavy dark dress, she emitted an aura of bitter knowledge, which she did not wish to share. She spoke to me in brief, short bursts of Yiddish: “Zetz.” “Ess.” “Herr opp.” “Schweig.” (Sit. Eat. Stop it. Be quiet.)

Thick-haired, long-limbed, busy, and mischievous, Manny loved to tease me. I was pleased that he paid any attention to me at all; I existed mostly in a dense fog of boredom. Sometimes he’d pick up a mirror and, catching the sunlight in it, tell me to “chase the spot.” I amused myself by obeying him, darting like a kitten after circles of light on the wall. He’d display my hilarious stupidity to his friends, and I’d willingly repeat the kitten-chase. It pleased me to humor him. Sometimes, as a special treat, he’d take me up and down the black-painted stairs of our small apartment building, looking for “treasure” in the garbage cans. I fully believed in his abilities as loot-finder when we found a fully intact roulette wheel, impressive in its weight and heft. It gave my brother pleasure to see me spin and spin it, not caring that the chips were gone, not to mention the all-important ball that determined one’s luck.

He nicknamed me “José”—a reference to my blue-black hair, a rarity among European Jews. It was meant as an obliterating (if witty) put-down, and it made my brother giggle until tears fell from his eyes: the Puerto Ricans who lived on the other side of Upper Broadway were even poorer than we—and he had dubbed me a Puerto Rican *boy*. I couldn’t even imagine myself to be one of the girls who attended Mother Cabrini, the convent school across the street from my house that seemed a holy bastion of white knee socks, plaid skirts, and general dark sexiness. My own dampened appeal was my mother’s doing; she chopped my hair herself, uneven bangs and all, and kept it short for convenience. I looked not so much like a José but like a good Chinese child (of indistinct gender), glum in the rice fields.

My brother’s presence, even his teasing, represented a life force to me, and I looked up to him. When he started school, I took comfort in the blessed television set, missing and envying others his company. I believe my brother was sent to school a year early because he was active and rambunctious. With him away for several hours a day, my grandmother could settle into a less eventful life with just one child. It was thought that as a girl I would be easier to take care of.

Neither my mother nor grandmother fully trusted my coal-tar mop of hair, which hinted, at the same time, of wildness and vulnerability. It came from my father’s side of the family, the poorer side, the side that apprenticed fatherless boys to be watchmakers, and was therefore *déclassé*. It was furthermore, dangerous to look as ... as “exotic” as I did. There was a word for me (did the Nazis invent this?)—I was a *Schwarzkopf*—a black-head. From the beginning, my mother and Bubbe hinted that my inky hair was excessive. It was too intense, like a tambourine-shaking gypsy running barefoot down the street. (They didn’t actually use those exact words—but they did call me a “*tzigane*.”) The little girls they openly admired had infantile, softly curled blonde hair—ironically, the Christian ideal.

of a cherub. “Oh, how beautiful,” they’d say, looking at a child with flaxen ringlets. “Oy, vi shein.”

It did not help that hair-color commercials kept blaring on the television:

IS IT TRUE BLONDES HAVE MORE FUN???

WHY NOT BE A BLONDE AND SEE?

And, more hauntingly:

IF I’VE ONLY ONE LIFE, LET ME LIVE IT AS A BLONDE!!!

These insistent pieces of advice made me anxious—what was I to do about this problem? For a few years, I would take the flax out of our boxes of *etrogs*—lemony citrons, imported from Israel, which we bought each year at Sukkot, the autumn harvest holiday. I’d wear this beige-yellow packing material on my head.

“Do I look like a beautiful blondie now?” I’d ask hopefully.

“Not exactly,” my mother would answer, laughing and plopping some flax on her head as well.

On the television set, blonde girls seemed to be the true darlings. They played with their toys and dolls in a perfect world of loveliness. Their mothers knew how to be pretty, too, and used Clairol, after which they would run across fields in such a lovely way, to a beautiful embrace. Whenever I mentioned these important American, transformative purchases to my parents—this wondrous do-it-all that versatile Silly Putty, a bottle of dye—they would ignore me. Both had to work all day, with little to show for it. Our carpet was increasingly threadbare, the sofa lumpy and worn (my mother had taken to throwing fringed covers on it). They had other things to think about. I however, tended to focus on one thing at a time, about which I would fixate with great dedication and readiness to act.

IS IT TRUE BLONDES HAVE MORE FUN?

If it was, where did that leave me? The un-fun black-haired child who faced me in the mirror, I had been told, would have immediately been spotted as a *Jude* and killed by the Nazis. “A blonde you could sometimes hide,” went the brutally honest kitchen-table wisdom in my home. (So, I thought blondes *did* have more fun—they could live to see another day!) They’d be peeling potatoes together with my mother and grandmother, comfortable with their expertise in the race-logic of maniacs.

“But you could not save *such* a black-hair.”

“Nothing could be done.”

“And the big, dark eyes.”

“Gornisht vilt ihr helfen.” Nothing will help her.

Potatoes boiling in bubbling water; peels tossed into the garbage can with a guillotine’s thunk of the lid. The matriarchs had spoken.

I’d run from their words. All the rooms in the apartment followed a narrow corridor. All but one faced a dark and sooty alleyway, gray-pocked as a moonscape. I’d gravitate to any source of optical novelty, staring with fascination at the linoleum flooring in my and Manny’s bedrooms: pixilated and sparkly, pink with *tromp l’oeil* ice cubes in mine, beige with sparkling red, blue, and green pick-up sticks in his. All the walls were mute with beige, even in the children’s rooms—no paintings, no drawings, not even a calendar. There was an Indian headdress in my brother’s room, with long multicolored feathers, and a cap gun that smelled marvelous when shot, which he treasured; he also had a splendid velvet bag full of marbles. These were, to me, the gardens of Giverny and the Temple Mahal, and I stared into these orbs and the twirly helix-suspensions inside them as often as I could. I looked for stars, fairies, and sparkles everywhere.

My parents’ front windows faced the street, bringing in the sky, ringing sounds of children laughing, and the comforting adult burble of people who sat in lawn chairs, below, in the warm weather. Here is where my mother would stand, window open, to remind herself that she was young and alive and not a “Nothing.” Those wonderful front windows let light—sunshine—into my parents’ bedroom, illuminating their large wooden bed. Here, the sun caught motes of dust in a beam—

floating epiphany of shining, sunlit matter, which seemed to carry messages of hope. My brother told me they were “atoms” and I embraced his vision. I asked him if the pavements near our house, which had something shiny embedded in them, contained diamonds. He told me: “Of course they do!” The diamonds and magical atoms enlivened hundreds of my earliest hours.

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