The Demon of Riverside Drive

Jennifer Anne Moses

Ah! How bitter Zosia was! So bitter it was as if she'd been born bitter, but she hadn't been born bitter: what child is born anything other than innocent? But now she was almost seventy and her life had been swallowed up by black bile, by regret, by fury and rage and most of all, deep and bitter resentment: at her ex-husband for having turned out to be a drunk; at a favorite lover for having turned out to be a snob; at Hitler for killing the aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins she never knew; at her mother for having gotten out of Warsaw only to meet and marry her father, also a refugee, who raged and stormed at the upending of his musical career before dying of an untreated heart ailment. At both of them for raising her and her two little sisters in a terrible, cramped apartment in Sheepshead Bay; and at the next of her two sisters for being a violinist of such renown that in classical music circles her name was as magic.

She was angry at her other sister for committing suicide before she reached the age of twenty; and at her two nephews, the children of her famous sister, for never having written thank-you notes to her for the many birthday and Hanukkah presents she'd given them in their childhoods and, later, for having little to do with her once they became adults. She was angry at the rabbi at the progressive synagogue she once attended, who insisted on doing the entire Amidah both silently and spoken while at the same time reinterpreting certain passages in Leviticus to prove that there was no such as a biblical prohibition against homosexual acts. She was furious with her landlord, who'd stopped answering her telephone calls; her friend Shirley, who kept insisting that she get out more; and at her doctor, who said that if she didn't give up smoking she'd die of either cancer or pneumonia, not that it mattered. Except it did.

Not because she was afraid of death; nor because she loved life so much either. But because she couldn't die until she'd finished writing her book, the grand memoir, the story of her life, that was at last going to make her as famous as her famous sister, if not more so.

Her famous sister's name was Yetta Blinkerstein, but when she'd married, she'd changed it to Yael Sapher, taking up her husband's surname while wedding it to a name she'd pulled out of a hat. It was exotic sounding, the name of a deeply tanned and tawny girl picking lemons on a kibbutz in Israel. But her sister was no Zionist. She'd never even been to Israel. Whereas Zosia, who hadn't changed her name and thought that people who did so were frivolous nincompoops, had been not once but twice, and had even attempted to learn a bit of Hebrew, so that when she got there, she might order a cup of coffee or buy a book without sounding like most American Jews, which is to say: dumb.

Zosia was not dumb. If there was one thing she wasn't, it was dumb. So she hadn't gone to Julliard, or even to City College? It was her fault that City College was so far from Sheepshead Bay? It didn't matter. She was a good student, smart by any standards, and in those days, with desperate immigrant Jews crawling out of the woodwork, even at Brooklyn College you could get yourself a first-class education, which she did, double-majoring in sociology and, because her mother insisted, accounting.

She became a writer instead, writing first for the women's pages before moving on to a job at *Ladies Home Journal* and writing a novel. But the job was boring, so she quit, and with the money she'd saved up combined with her advance, went to London. There she hoped to meet either Kingsley Amis or Anthony Powell, because she knew that it would only take a single meeting to garner their attentions. Men were smitten by her. Not because she was pretty. She wasn't. She was too raw-boned and tall to be considered conventionally pretty. Her mouth was too wide, her forehead too tall, her stride too long. It didn't matter. Men adored her for her earthy personality and sex appeal. She smoked cigarettes Her hair was cut at her jawline, so dark that it had glints of blue. She used the word "fuck" to indicate the sexual act.

She met neither Kingsley Amis nor Anthony Powell, but instead took up with a veteran who had had to have his leg amputated after it got shot up in the war. Sex with him was ferocious. They went at it at all hours. She even loved him, a little. But he made it clear that he could never marry her, not with his aristocratic background, his family estate in the Yorkshire dales. She was an American, a Jew, the daughter of refugees. Who said she wanted to marry him? She told him to fuck off and went to Paris, where she met another man, a rich Jew from Baltimore who'd come to Paris to work for the Marshall Plan. He was lovely but dull. She returned to the States, got a job at another magazine, and was courted by a much older man who claimed he'd fallen for her from the author photo on her book jacket (her novel, *Don't Look Back*, had by now been brought out). He called at all hours, begged her to marry him, and claimed he was in the process of divorcing his wife, that in fact she was in Nevada already. He lived in an enormous apartment on Fifth Avenue, filled with porcelain and European antiques. But Zosia didn't love him. His age—those gray-brown spots, the scattering of cherries along his back and abdomen, the scarce hair on his chest—revolted her. He took her to Miami Beach, and they swam in the bright blue waves and drank dry Martinis, but she still didn't love him. She told him not to divorce his wife, but he did anyway.

Meantime her middle sister gave birth to two sons and made her first recording: it was called "Bach; Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin." In interviews, Zosia's sister said she was inspired by the memory of her late father whose entire life had been made of music before the Nazis had deprived him of his avocation, his passion, his dignity, and his livelihood, leaving him a broken man, lost in a new world he never wanted to be a part of. Zosia tried to be happy for her sister but felt nothing but black rage. In one of the photos of her that appeared

in the newspapers, she sat in her book-lined study holding a baby in one arm and a violin in the other. The caption read: “Is there anything Yael Sapher can’t do?”

Later that year, when Zosia became pregnant by the wispy red-headed writer she’d taken up with against her better instincts, she had it aborted. He knew and didn’t care. Though he’d immigrated from some bone-and-rag heap near Odessa when he was a teenager, he still spoke with a Yiddish accent. He was more than a decade older than she, depressive, skinny, nervous, and burdened by his strict cheder education. Now and again, in the act of lovemaking, he’d cry out in one of the Talmud’s languages, *sin is sweet!* Or: *infidelity, murder, and Sabbath desecration.* Later he’d translate for her, or not, depending on his mood or whether he remembered the substance of his utterances. How weird he was, and how ugly. But she was insatiable, she couldn’t get enough of him. He had a good job at the Yiddish paper writing a column of miscellany but couldn’t keep a penny in his pocket and was too cheap to go out except for coffee and cake at a cafeteria.

After her abortion, Zosia remained so crazed with lust for her red-headed lover that she could focus on nothing other than their next assignation, but when the younger of Zosia’s two younger sisters threw herself off the Coney Island pier and drowned, everything changed. Her grief was unstoppable; unsalvageable; without end. When she and her lover made love, her tears wet the pillow. His name was Nachman Levi Gershenzon, but he signed his columns “N.L. Gershenzon,” and his friends called him “Nate.”

At length he said: “As for your sister, I envy her. I myself lack the courage to kill myself.”

After that, they argued bitterly, and she stomped out. A man without a heart is what he was! A man so wrapped up in his own phantasmagoria, the dybbuk and golems and nightmare visions of his long-ago childhood that he could barely breathe and as a result didn’t seem to have enough breath in him to seize life in a place where no one would set upon him for his Jewishness. His furnished room was disgusting: broiling in the summer; freezing in the winter; crawling with vermin. Day by day his hair thinned, and his chin grew sharper.

Two years later, she married an ex-priest and because it made more sense to her, thought about becoming Catholic. They moved to the suburbs, because he preferred quiet, and in time she grew to like the quiet too. She read deeply in Catholicism—Aquinas, Augustine, C.S. Lewis and of course the New Testament—fell in love with Jesus, and even accompanied her husband to Mass, but in the end she remained stubbornly if agnostically Jewish.

Because being Jewish was a complication if not an outright burden, there was backstory to Zosia’s decision to remain who she was. After Zosia’s father died, her mother, believing that when she came to America she’d left God behind, and that God, keeping track, was punishing her, rededicated herself to everything she’d previously renounced: she lit the Sabbath lights; kept a scrupulously kosher kitchen; spat to keep the evil eye

at bay. Her mother, who'd once been a promising pianist, a teacher of music—and now all she could do was pray. Zosia considered it all nonsense. She even found herself thinking that if it weren't for her mother's superstitious clinging to the backward beliefs of the Jews in anti-Semitic Europe, the youngest of her two younger sisters wouldn't have thrown herself into the icy waters of Jamaica Bay. Unfortunately for her unfortunate sister, she too had believed in all that stuff: the strict separation of milk and meat, that God had personally dictated the ten commandments to Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai; and of course it went without saying that her sister believed that there was such a place on earth as Mt. Sinai, and that great miracles had happened there. She believed in Chosenness. She believed also in the resurrection of the dead. Maybe that's why she was so casual about her departure. Maybe she was convinced that only by being dead would she be reunited with her dead father and murdered grandparents. Who knew? It had been sudden; unexpected. She didn't leave a note. It was a sorrow that Zosia simply had to bear. There was no other choice.

So she pushed on, and two years into her marriage, she published a second book, a novel called *How to Breathe*.

"Chateaubriand!"

That was the first word of the first chapter, when her narrator, seeking to impress a date, orders a bottle of chateaubriand only to be told by the waiter that chateaubriand is steak.

She knew her husband drank when she married him, but in their fourth year of marriage things took a turn. He was never violent with her, God forbid, or verbally assaultive, but his surliness and despair leaked into every inch of the house, filling it with gloom. When she could no longer stand it, she divorced him and moved back to the city. There she supported herself on a combination of freelance editing and freelance bookkeeping, with money enough to rent a sunny one bedroom on Amsterdam Avenue, have breakfast at the coffee shop on the corner, and go to the theater and the symphony. It was during this time that she decided to write her memoirs. After all, she reasoned, her own life had been as dramatic, and in some ways as glamourous, as anyone's. Her sister wasn't the only one in the family with artistic gifts.

Her memoir consumed her. It grew, it shrunk. It grew again—now into hundreds of pages—before she pruned it back again, casting out both the overgrowth and the weeds. There was no denying it: time was running out. As her body lost radiance and agility, her youth was as distant as the parting of the Red Sea. No matter: she would not--she refused!--to wither away without first making her mark.

And so, her life unfolded, quietly and without incident, with sun and warmth, books and companionship. She wasn't happy, but she didn't expect to be. There were things that gave her pleasure, and mostly that was enough.

On sunny days she liked to take long walks, often going as far as the campus of Columbia University, where she liked to sit on a bench and watch the passing parade. It was on one of these walks that she ran into Nachman Gershenzon. He had become completely bald, and his nose and chin had grown even longer and sharper. His skin-and-bone skinniness had given way to a solidity, a certain thickness of the trunk and neck. Gone too was his threadbare suit. Instead he was dressed richly in an expensive black woolen overcoat, kid gloves, a red woolen scarf tied around his neck, an old-fashioned black fedora perched atop his naked pate. It was a brilliant December day, cold, the air sharp, the sun glinting off the white porticos of the university's neo-Grecian library.

"This building," he said, approaching her where she sat on a bench in the sun. "A temple of learning, of books. Yet with such strong echoes of Stalinist grandiosity."

"Do I know you?"

"You haven't changed a bit I see. Not a bit. Including the look of bewildered invincibility on your face. Zosia—" and here he took one of her gloved hands in his—"it is I, Nachman."

"You've become rather stout. What are you doing here?"

"Ha! So like Zosia! Direct! Direct and also to the point! I teach here. Also, I live nearby. On Riverside Drive, or as I like to think of it, the Jerusalem of America."

"Expensive," she said.

He shrugged. Something about the gesture—its insouciance—annoyed the hell out of her. Also, she didn't believe him.

"You teach---*here*?"

"Hebrew," he said. "Twice a week. Also Yiddish. I am what they call an adjunct professor of the Jewish tongues."

"What do you do the rest of the time?"

"The rest of the time, I try to write something that might be of some literary value."

"And have you?" she said.

"Have I what?"

"Written anything?"

“I like to think I have,” he said. “And yet, as we all know, even Shakespeare died. As did the biblical prophets. As did the Buddha, the Baal Shem, Balzac, Bialik, Pasternak and Pushkin. Books don’t confer holiness, let alone immortality, any more than plumbing does. Even so, there are those whose faith and worship is centered on and revolves around what is considered to be the spiritual and even the divine nature of the work that such luminaries produced, the little traceries of their minds and imaginations that they left behind. But all of it—bah! And am I telling you any of this? You have always seen the world as the dung heap that it is. *I am dust and ashes.* This is what I shall ask to have inscribed on my tombstone.”

“But what of your own work, Nate?” She called him by his old name, the name he was called by his friends and intimates during the months of their affair. “What have you written?”

“You do not know?”

“Why should I know? What should I know? I haven’t heard from you, or a word about you, since 11th Street.”

“Are you married?”

“Divorced. You?”

“For many years. We have no children, preferring the quiet. I must confess, my wife has cats that she treats like babies. I am indifferent to them but as they keep her happy, I am happy to comply. She is an architect.”

“Who is?”

“My wife. My wife, Sarah.”

“Ah. You married within the faith.”

“There are many gentiles also named Sarah. My wife is American.”

“You married a *shiksa*?”

“No, she is Jewish, but like me, she no longer believes.”

During all this time he’d been skating around and not answering the one question she was determined to get an answer for. “Tell me what you’ve written,” she said again.

He tilted his head. “Perhaps it is best after all,” he murmured. “That you do not know.”

“What don’t I know?”

“I write under the name Levi Ha-Levi. You truly didn’t know?”

“You and my sister, two peas in a pod!” she cried out. “Changing your name to suit some absurd idea of artistry. Why do such a silly thing! Who are you trying to fool?”

“Only my dead parents,” he said, and with that he tipped his hat and walked on.

It turned out---how could she have missed it?—that Levi Ha-Levi had written several books already, all of them fiction, and all in Yiddish, which were then translated almost instantaneously into English, because after all it seemed that there was a market—that was the only word for it—for the kind of sentimental claptrap he wrote. From what she understood, his work came complete with vicious Polish landlords and innocent Jewish maidens seduced and then abandoned in Warsaw, Vienna, Odessa. He peopled his purple prose with Communists and Socialists, Stalinists and Christian Scientists, all of them scrambling for hegemony as they clung to their socialist or religious saviors even as the world around turned dark with war and strife.

Actually, she did know: she read *The New York Review, Commentary, The New York Times,* and *The New Yorker.* She just hadn’t paid any attention to what the critics said about his books, and that’s because: why would she? All of it, his whole lousy genre, added up to no more than sentimental banality.

The man hadn’t escaped the horrors of Europe. He’d merely brought his prison with him. No wonder she’d broken things off with him. She was forward-thinking, a modernist, in her own way a student of Joyce and Eliot, Lionel Trilling, F.R. Leavis. Despite all her neuroses and broken bits, she refused to be pulled back to the gloom of Sheepshead Bay. She was modern. She looked to the future. And also, who but a few thousand people in New York and Jerusalem knew Yiddish? Hitler had done away with all that, and what he didn’t achieve time and the Angel of Death would.

Still, it annoyed her. It did more than annoy her: it drove her half-crazy, what the former Nacham Gershenzon had done, how after clinging so faithfully to his own weak nature he’d achieved such success—and with such claptrap! “The maestro of Yiddish” they called him. Good God, how sickening! Never mind, she didn’t read more than a handful of his short stories, and those she read in a book she checked out from the library. The novels were also there, but she’d barely dipped into them. The first two or three pages had been enough to convince her not to waste her time. Even their titles repelled her: *The Golem of 19th Street; The Rabbit; Oh, Odessa! The Messiah of Minsk.* So in the end she checked out the one volume of short stories only, and sat at home in her favorite chair, reading them with a mixture of disgust and anguish. But it wasn’t until she turned the page to a story called “How Cold the Black Water!” that the waves of revulsion that had been threatening to crash over her head completely overcame her, such that it was she herself—rather than the story’s young protagonist—who was drowning. The *gonif*!

She rushed to the library, pulled his books off the shelf, and in one sitting devoured what she could of his pages until, at last, she found what she knew she would. A neurotic and clinging giantess in thrall to herself; a fantasist; a woman whose ideas of her own stature didn't collate, and whose romantic adventures—with one-armed veterans and sheepish millionaires—were pathetic rather than funny or sad.

How many other women had he eaten alive, keeping the savory parts for himself and spitting out the bones? How many people knew that the so-called maestro of Yiddish was no more than a thief?

When she'd read her fill, she went to the phone booth, and located his telephone number and address in the Manhattan White Pages. He hadn't been lying. His address was on Riverside Drive. She slipped in a quarter and dialed.

His wife answered.

"This is Zosia Blinkerstein, your husband and I are acquainted. May I speak to him?"

The wife put down the phone. There were footsteps, the sounds of voices, more footsteps, then the wife was back on the phone. "I'm afraid he's terribly busy," she said. "May I take a message?"

"Yes, you can tell him that I have now read it and know exactly what he did."

"Is there a telephone number where he might reach you?"

Zosia gave it.

He called the next day. "That wasn't a very nice thing to say to my wife," he said. "I would expect better of you, Zosia. You weren't like that when I knew you."

"Maybe you didn't know me. Maybe you only thought you knew me."

He was unfailingly polite. "Why is it that you called?"

"I called to demand that you return my stories to me."

"Up to your old tricks again, are you!" He switched to Yiddish: "Next thing you are going to start decrying the brutalization of civilization by the era of mass marketing. What Hitler could not achieve, Madison Avenue has."

She switched to Yiddish as well. The two of them may as well have been the last Yiddish speakers in all of New York. The language sealed them in. "Why do I bother waking up alive? You know full well what I'm referring to. My sister, may her soul be at rest: how I came to you after her suicide. My confidences to you. I was young then."

“I remember.”

“That’s all you can say? You remember? Let me tell you what I remember! I remember that I poured my heart out to you, that you drank in every word. After I left that hovel that you called home, that terrible place, how you could stand it even now I can’t say! It was as if you were punishing yourself for having gotten out of Europe alive, inflicting poverty and starvation on yourself as if that would help anyone anywhere! And how I begged you, Nate, how I remonstrated with you to honor your talent, to move to better rooms. Why condemn yourself to live in such a prison, an oven in the summer, an ice box in the winter, crawling with bedbugs and roaches! And you were punishing yourself for what? For getting out, that’s what. For not waiting around for that murderer to murder your entire family before your eyes! Or was it that you’d renounced Judaism, rejecting the religion of your pious ancestors, that you wanted to live while you were still alive that you felt so bad about. Because you didn’t live. You refused to live. I *begged* you to pick up your pen and write something other than the drivel you dribbled out for the Yiddish papers, and if, true, it paid the rent, then what? You were wasting away, letting your own life waste away in that terrible stinking rat hole, it was only that I’m a woman cursed with pity that I took up with you. Always the men who were attracted to me could smell that on me, that sense I’ve carried with me from early in my youth, that cursed pity of mine! My poor mother, she was also cursed this way. Do you know that even with her degree as a teacher of piano the best job she could get in America was at a factory?”

“Yes,” he said. Then: “Zosia. What do you want from me?”

“A cup of coffee would be nice.”

Since speaking to him on the phone, she’d had a revelation. It was that he would help her with her memoir. But he was late for their meeting, and she ordered coffee without him. When she finished he still hadn’t arrived. She began to gather her things to leave when she saw the top of his hat flash by on the sidewalk.

“I was about to leave,” she said.

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Are you?”

He glanced at her empty cup. “Would you like another? Or perhaps a slice of cake?”

“At this time of day, I limit myself to one cup.”

“I see. So no cake?”

“Why’d you do it?” she said.

“I do what every writer does, as you well know. I understand that you yourself have penned a novel.”

“Two novels,” she said.

“I must read them.”

“I’m writing one now.”

“Another novel?”

“A series of recollections,” she said.

“A memoir.”

“Yes, but more impressionistic, more to give the flavor of the thing, the fleetingness of it all, combined with the bite.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

He waved the waiter over. “I would like a cup of tea and two pancakes.”

She decided to wait until he’d had his pancakes to broach the subject she wanted to talk about. How slowly he ate though. With the gestures of a parrot, he picked at his food. She didn’t know how his wife could stand him.

“I want you to do something for me, please.”

“And that would be?”

“Read my manuscript.”

“Do you not have a literary agent who does this for you?”

She did, or rather, she *had.* But soon after the publication of her second novel, her agent retired, and since then, Zosia had not bothered to find another. “No longer.”

“Perhaps you will find someone then.”

“I have,” she said. “I’ve found you.”

He looked pained. “I myself am neck deep in my own work and would therefore not be paying the attention to your manuscript that it deserves.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass, Nate, or whatever your name is now. You fucked me for two years. Then you fucked me for the next three decades. You owe this to me.”

“I owe you nothing.”

“Does Sarah know?” she said.

“Does she know what?”

“What a hideous narcissist you are?”

“Such a way with words you have,” he said, tipping his long nose downwards. “And just for that, yes.”

“Yes?”

“I will look at your manuscript. But that will be the end of the matter.”

She didn’t think so. In fact, she was sure of it: he would gobble up her pages, revel in her prose, travel with her to the deepest reaches of her soul, and from there to other lands, other continents. Her appreciation for Jesus on the Cross. Her admiration for Paul’s Epistles. And then—

She was tired of living in obscurity, in the in-between of what-once-was. She was tired of her loneliness, the modesty of her surrounds, her independent streak. Most of all she was tired of being in her sister’s shadow. In both sisters’ shadows, because the truth was that when her youngest younger sister threw herself off the Coney Island pier, she seared herself into the greater consciousness as no amount of her living on would have. Both of them: how much space they took up! How their mother had praised the one and mourned for the other! How in the process nothing that smart, independent, feisty Zosia could do or say amounted to a hill of cow dung.

She delivered a copy of her manuscript in a brown wrapper to the doorman of the building where Nate and his wife lived, with strict instructions to hand it over to Mr. Ha-Levi only. The doorman nodded. “Not to worry!”

But she did worry. She worried that Mrs. Ha-Levi--Sarah—might have gotten a hold of it anyway, if not from the doorman than simply by finding it on her husband’s desk. And if that were the case, the two of them might discuss Zosia’s book together, or worse, discuss those parts that had to do with her sex life. And then what? *Tell me what she was really like in bed.* But no, she wouldn’t say that, and in any event, why would a husband talk in anything but the most general terms about a long-ago affair?

She put her worries out of her mind but when the weeks passed without a word, she began to worry anew. Had he not even bothered to read it? Had he merely been placating her? Had he put it aside only to forget its existence? She resolved that if she didn't hear by the end of the month, she'd telephone again.

May arrived, and with it came bright green leaves dancing on the trees on the Broadway median. She cracked open her windows, bought a new dress. Enough was enough. She telephoned.

Again it was the wife who answered. "This is Zosia Blinkerstein," she said. "May I speak with your husband please?"

"I'll see if he can talk."

Again, the sound of footsteps followed by the sounds of talking followed by more footsteps. But this time it was Nachman—Nate—who picked up. "Yes? What is it? I'm working."

"I too am working," she said. "That's why I called. To ask you what you think of my memoir. Assuming, that is, that you've read it."

"I have read it," he said. "I read it soon after you delivered it."

"But that was weeks ago. Why on earth didn't you get back to me?"

"I don't want you to commit suicide, to throw yourself in the Atlantic ocean, like your sister did. Or some other dreary and dramatic nonsense. If you want to know the truth, that's why."

"I have no intention of doing any such thing," Zosia answered. She hardly knew what to think. Who was this monster of arrogance, this demon in the guise of a little old man?

"Tell me anyway."

Without pause, he answered. "I think you should burn it."

"You are lying."

"You may do whatever you wish with it. But I would not attempt to publish it."

"We'll see," she said, and then she hung up.

When she reread her pages she understood immediately. A man who dwelled inside a murdered world was not capable of assessing her own word. It was that simple. His vision was twisted; he required corrective lenses. Still as she parsed her pages, she did see that there was too much of the thing. Also, an overabundance of gravitas. She would cut it back and rewrite again. But it pained her that she wouldn't be able to count on her

former lover's help getting it into the right hands, perhaps even into the hands of his own agent and editor, which is what she'd been secretly thinking in the secret drawer at the back of her mind that she herself didn't have access to.

Her friend Shirley called, proposing that they take a walk together. "It's such a beautiful time of year! We can go to Grant's Tomb. Maybe the tulips will be out."

"I'm not in the mood," Zosia said.

"It would be good for you. You need to get out more. Let the sun shine on your face."

"May I remind you that it is my habit to walk daily?"

"Well then, today on your walk you can spend time with your old friend."

Shirley was an old friend, but her buoyancy and optimism got on Zosia's nerves. Especially now when things had gone so differently than she'd expected. "I'm in a funk," she said. "This manuscript—"

"Oh, enough of you and your book of memories!"

"It's not a scrapbook," Zosia said. "It's a work of memoir. Of poetic recollection. Of history."

"Whatever it is, it wouldn't kill you to take a break from it."

Zosia knew differently, though. The work—the grand work—was precisely what was keeping her alive. She made her excuses and hung up.

Even so, Shirley's call had stirred something in Zosia. She grew restless, pulled on a sweater, and went out. She walked and walked, acknowledging without enjoying the crystalline beauty of the day, the sun glinting off upper windows making the green of the trees shine like hard candies. Her brain felt too heavy, and she feared her neck wasn't up to the job of keeping her head above it. When she got back to her apartment, she looked around and saw that it could use a good cleaning: she hadn't done anything even remotely resembling the deep, compulsive spring cleaning her own mother had done every year during the lead-up to Passover, when she went around the small apartment wiping every surface and corner clean, mopping, dusting, vacuuming, sweeping—and only then doing it again, this time in order to eject even the tiniest particle of *chametz* out of the house. On her part, Zosia had never eaten much in the way of bread or cake, preferring fresh vegetables and fruits with lean meats: chicken breast, fish, the occasional lamb chop. But why is she thinking of her mother's frantic efforts to rid the house of every last crumb or dot of flour? How she'd flapped around, her head wrapped in some *shmata* or another, the back of her neck glistening with sweat and her knees raw from

scrubbing the floors. “You will do better,” she’d told her eldest child. “You will be an accountant, and always have enough money to live comfortably, with or without a husband.”

But after Zosia’s youngest sister murdered herself, Zosia’s mother slowly deflated, becoming skinnier and more brittle by the year, her hair going from still-lustrous black to a dull brown to the washed-out yellow-white of a Halloween ghost. It was as if the only thing that kept her going was listening to the other one—the famous middle sister—play the violin. That, and the two little boys her sister had produced, doughy-faced lads with dimpled cheeks and big black eyes who tiptoed around their grandmother’s small, over-stuffed apartment as if afraid it might close in on them. She died anyway, dying of nothing and everything—high blood pressure, low muscle tone, tubercular scarring left over from childhood, thinning bones, headaches, near-sightedness, arthritis. Suddenly Zosia wanted nothing more than to have her mother back. Not her dead sister or dead father. Not her own youth, or hopes, or sense of destiny, and certainly not any of the men she’d once loved. Her mother. Just that.

She fell on her knees, thinking she might even pray, but when her knees began to hurt she sat on the sofa instead and, in a whisper directed at the God she didn’t believe in, said: “Please.”

When no one answered or made itself felt, she went back to her manuscript.

Though I no longer believed the way I had in childhood, I went up to the large looming synagogue at the other end of the neighborhood. It was Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, and Mother, suffering from one of her migraines, lay still in her darkened bedroom, the curtains drawn, a cold compress on her head, as my two younger sisters—themselves dissolved in grief over the recent passing of our father—took turns tending to her. Thus it was that I alone approached the mighty fortress—such is how I thought of it—built of rough-hewn pearly-white stone blocks, and approached by a long series of steps, as if, instead of leading to a house of worship, one were ascending to the thrown of an Emperor or King. Alas, I hadn’t thought to purchase a ticket—after all, I myself was only a slip of a girl, fifteen and skinny and scared—so when the two gray-faced men stopped me to ask me for some proof that I could come inside, I didn’t know what to say. Emboldened by their coldness, I cried out: “I only want to say Kaddish for my father! Is that such a crime!” They looked at me with pity mixed with annoyance, and told me that without a ticket, I couldn’t come in. And with that, what little feeling or affection I had for the faith of my fathers began to wane.

Was it really at that moment that Judaism—the whole messy mess of it—began to die in her? She shook off the thought. Who needed it?

It was during my second year of college, surrounded by boys and girls whose parents, like mine, had escaped the ravages of Europe only to feel the dislocation and alienation of a deracinated life in the hurly-burly of New

York, that I realized, for the first time, that I had a calling—some sense of the ineffable—that was mine alone, a holy destiny, if you will, a rare and magnificent…

She looked out the window. There were birds tracing the sky. Again she put on her sweater and went out. This time she marched all the way across Central Park to her sister's building, on East 83rd Street. She hadn't been there since the year their mother died.

She announced herself to the doorman, who called upstairs, and then reported. "I'm afraid it's only the housekeeper at home, and she said she'd be leaving shortly."

"But I'm her sister," said Zosia, so hideously disappointed that it took the breath out of her. Directing the doorman to ring up a second time, she summonsed the elevator, stepped into it, and ascended to the seventh floor, where at the very end of the ornate, marble hall, was the door to her sister's apartment.

The housekeeper, a youngish woman with beautiful skin the color of almonds, let her in.

"You look like her," she said.

"Is that so?" said Zosia, as the housekeeper led her down the hall.

The enormous, pink-and-yellow living room was lit up with bales of sunshine, with French windows opening to a balcony. Ah, but her sister had achieved Zosia's dream, and had done so, seemingly, without suffering, angst, or even much in the way of effort. This last Zosia knew to be untrue, though. To be a musician of her sister's rank required endless hours of practice, of hard dedication, of choosing this at the expense of that. And yet! The endless photographs of her sister with other musicians of her rank, the framed tributes, the album covers. It turned her stomach, all this glory, all this self-regard. But she could no more resist them than she could resist the lure of her own soul, and so, despite herself, she looked: and there she was—there they all were—her mother and father, her dead sister, and there among them, was Zosia herself, over and over again, Zosia young, Zosia as a bride, Zosia and Zosia again. It was too much to take in. No! She couldn't! She flatly refused! All this love, all this hope!

She pulled open the French windows, intending to hurl herself off it, but remembering what she'd told Nachman, decided against it. Instead she returned to the living room—all those pretty things, all those photographs. How lovely she had been.