Part II

EXILE

We are in Montreal, in an echoing, dark train station, and we are huddled on a bench waiting for someone to give us some guidance. Timidly, I walk a few steps away from my parents to explore this terra incognita, and I come back with snippets of amazing news. There is this young girl, maybe my age, in high-heeled shoes and lipstick! She looks so vulgar, I complain. Or maybe this is just some sort of costume? There is also a black man at whom I stare for a while; he's as handsome as Harry Belafonte, the only black man whose face I know from pictures in Polish magazines, except here he is, big as life. Are all black men this handsome, I wonder?

Eventually, a man speaking broken Polish approaches us, takes us to the ticket window, and then helps us board our train. And so begins yet another segment of this longest journey—all the longer because we don't exactly know when it will end, when we'll reach our destination. We only know that Vancouver is very far away.

The people on the train look at us askance, and avoid sitting close to us. This may be because we've brought suitcases full of dried cake, canned sardines, and sausages, which would keep during the long transatlantic journey. We don't know about dining cars, and when we discover that this train has such a thing, we can hardly afford to go there once a day on the few dollars that my father has brought with him. Two dollars could buy a bicycle, or several pairs of shoes in Poland. It seems like a great deal to pay for four bowls of soup.

The train cuts through endless expanses of terrain, most of it flat and monotonous, and it seems to me that the relentless rhythm of the wheels is like scissors cutting a three-thousand-mile rip through my life. From now on, my life will be divided into two parts, with the line drawn by that train. After a while, I subside into a silent indifference, and I don't want to look at the landscape anymore; these are not the friendly fields, the farmyards of Polish countryside; this is vast, dull, and formless. By the time we reach the Rockies, my parents try to pull me out of my stupor and make me look at the spectacular landscapes we're passing by. But I don't want to. These peaks and ravines, these mountain streams and enormous boulders hurt my eyes—they hurt my soul. They're too big, too forbidding, and I can't imagine feeling that I'm part of them, that I'm in them. I recede into sleep; I sleep through the day and the night, and my parents can't shake me out of it. My sister, perhaps recoiling even more deeply from all this strangeness, is in a state of feverish illness and can hardly raise her head.

On the second day, we briefly meet a passenger who speaks Yiddish. My father enters into an animated conversation with him and learns some thrilling tales. For example, there's the story of a Polish Jew who came to Canada and made a fortune—he's now a millionaire!—on producing Polish pickles. Pickles! If one can make a fortune on that, well—it shouldn't be hard to get rich in this country. My father is energized, excited by this story, but I subside into an even more determined sullenness. "Millionaire" is one of those fairy-tale words that has no meaning to me whatsoever—a word like "emigration" or "Canada." In spite of my parents' protestations, I go back to sleep, and I miss some of the most prized sights on the North American continent.

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By the time we've reached Vancouver, there are very few people left on the train. My mother has dressed my sister and me in our best outfits—identical navy blue dresses with sailor collars and gray coats handmade of good gabardine. My parents' faces reflect anticipation and anxiety. "Get off the train on the right foot," my mother tells us. "For luck in the new life."

I look out of the train window with a heavy heart. Where have I been brought to? As the train approaches the station, I see what is indeed a bit of nowhere. It's a drizzly day, and the platform is nearly empty. Everything is the color of slate. From this bleakness, two figures approach us—a nondescript middle-aged man and woman—and after making sure that we are the right people, the arrivals from the other side of the world, they hug us; but I don't feel much warmth in their half-embarrassed embrace. "You should kneel down and kiss the ground," the man tells my parents. "You're lucky to be here." My parents' faces fill with a kind of naïve hope. Perhaps everything will be well after all. They need signs, portents, at this hour.

Then we all get into an enormous car—yes, this is America—and drive into the city that is to be our home.

The Rosenbergs' house is a matter of utter bafflement to me. This one-story structure surrounded by a large garden surely doesn't belong in a city—but neither can it be imagined in the country. The garden itself is of such pruned and trimmed neatness that I'm half afraid to walk in it. Its lawn is improbably smooth and velvety (Ah, the time and worry spent on the shaving of these lawns! But I will only learn of that later), and the rows of marigolds, the circles of geraniums seem almost artificial in their perfect symmetries, in their subordination to orderliness.

Still, I much prefer sitting out here in the sun to being inside. The house is larger than any apartment I have seen in Poland, with enormous "picture" windows, a separate room for every member of the family and soft pastel-colored rugs covering all the floors. These are all features that, I know, are intended to signify good taste and wealth—but there's an incongruity between the message I'm supposed to get and my secret perceptions of these surroundings. To me, these interiors seem oddly flat, devoid of imagination, ingenuous. The spaces are so plain, low-ceilinged, obvious; there are no curves, niches, odd angles, nooks or crannies—nothing that gathers a house into itself, giving it a sense of privacy, or of depth—of interiority. There's no solid wood here, no accretion either of age or dust. There is only the open sincerity of the simple spaces, open right out to the street. (No peering out the window here, to catch glimpses of exchanges on the street; the picture windows are designed to give everyone full view of everyone else, to declare there's no mystery, nothing to hide. Not true, of course, but that's the statement.) There is also the disingenuousness of the furniture, all of it whitish with gold trimming. The whole thing is too revealing of an aspiration to good taste, but the unintended effect is thin and insubstantial—as if it was planned and put up just yesterday, and could just as well be dismantled tomorrow. The only rooms that really impress me are the bathroom and the kitchen—both of them so shiny, polished, and full of unfamiliar, fabulously functional appliances that they remind me of interiors which we occasionally glimpsed in French or American movies, and which, in our bedraggled Poland, we couldn't distinguish from fantasy. "Do you think people really live like this?" we would ask after one of these films, neglecting all the drama of the plot for the interest of these incidental features. Here is something worth describing to my friends in Cracow, down to such mind-boggling details as a shaggy rug in the bathroom and toilet paper that comes in different colors.

For the few days we stay at the Rosenbergs', we are relegated to the basement, where there's an extra apartment usually rented out to lodgers. My father looks up to Mr. Rosenberg with the respect, even a touch of awe due to someone who is a certified millionaire. Mr. Rosenberg is a big man in the small Duddy Kravitz community of Polish Jews, most of whom came to Canada shortly after the war, and most of whom have made good in junk peddling and real estate—but none as good as he. Mr. Rosenberg, who is now almost seventy, had the combined chutzpah and good luck to

ride on Vancouver's real-estate boom—and now he's the richest of them all. This hardly makes him the most popular, but it automatically makes him the wisest. People from the community come to him for business advice, which he dispenses, in Yiddish, as if it were precious currency given away for free only through his grandiose generosity.

In the uncompromising vehemence of adolescence and injured pride, I begin to see Mr. Rosenberg not as our benefactor but as a Dickensian figure of personal tyranny, and my feeling toward him quickly rises to something that can only be called hate. He has made stinginess into principle; I feel it as a nonhuman hardness, a conversion of flesh and feeling into stone. His face never lights up with humor or affection or wit. But then, he takes himself very seriously; to him too his wealth is the proof of his righteousness. In accordance with his principles, he demands money for our train tickets from Montreal as soon as we arrive. I never forgive him. We've brought gifts we thought handsome, but in addition, my father gives him all the dollars he accumulated in Poland—something that would start us off in Canada, we thought, but is now all gone. We'll have to scratch out our living somehow, starting from zero: my father begins to pinch the flesh of his arms nervously.

Mrs. Rosenberg, a worn-faced, nearly inarticulate, diffident woman, would probably show us more generosity were she not so intimidated by her husband. As it is, she and her daughter, Diane, feed us white bread with sliced cheese and bologna for lunch, and laugh at our incredulity at the mushy textures, the plastic wrapping, the presliced convenience of the various items. Privately, we comment that this is not real food: it has no taste, it smells of plastic. The two women also give us clothing they can no longer use. I can't imagine a state of affairs in which one would want to discard the delicate, transparent bathrobes and the angora sweaters they pass on to us, but luscious though these items seem—beyond anything I ever hoped to own—the show of gratitude required from me on receiving them sours the pleasure of new ownership. "Say thank you," my mother prompts me in preparation for receiving a batch of clothing. "People like to be appreciated." I coo and murmur ingratiatingly; I'm beginning to master the trick of saying thank you with just the right turn of the head, just the right balance between modesty and obsequiousness. In the next few years, this is a skill I'll have to use often. But in my heart I feel no real gratitude at being the recipient of so much mercy.

On about the third night at the Rosenbergs' house, I have a nightmare in which I'm drowning in the ocean while my mother and father swim farther and farther away from me. I know, in this dream, what it is to be cast adrift in incomprehensible space; I know what it is to lose one's mooring. I wake up in the middle of a prolonged scream. The fear is stronger than anything I've ever known. My parents wake up and hush me up quickly; they don't want the Rosenbergs to hear this disturbing sound. I try to calm myself and go back to sleep, but I feel as though I've stepped through a door into a dark place. Psychoanalysts talk about "mutative insights," through which the patient gains an entirely new perspective and discards some part of a cherished neurosis. The primal scream of my birth into the New World is a mutative insight of a negative kind—and I know that I can never lose the knowledge it brings me. The black, bituminous terror of the dream solders itself to the chemical base of my being—and from then on, fragments of the fear lodge themselves in my consciousness, thorns and pinpricks of anxiety, loose electricity floating in a psyche that has been forcibly pried from its structures. Eventually, I become accustomed to it; I know that it comes, and that it also goes; but when it hits with full force, in its pure form, I call it the Big Fear.

After about a week of lodging us in his house, Mr. Rosenberg decides that he has done enough for us, and, using some acquired American wisdom, explains that it isn't good for us to be dependent on his charity: there is of course no question of kindness. There is no question, either, of Mrs. Rosenberg intervening on our behalf, as she might like to do. We have no place to go, no way to pay for a meal. And so we begin.

"Shut up, shuddup," the children around us are shouting, and it's the first word in English that I understand from its dramatic context.

My sister and I stand in the schoolyard clutching each other, while kids all around us are running about, pummeling each other, and screaming like whirling dervishes. Both the boys and the girls look sharp and aggressive to me—the girls all have bright lipstick on, their hair sticks up and out like witches' fury, and their skirts are held up and out by stiff, wiry crinolines. I can't imagine wanting to talk their harsh-sounding language.

We've been brought to this school by Mr. Rosenberg, who, two days after our arrival, tells us he'll take us to classes that are provided by the government to teach English to newcomers. This morning, in the rinky-dink wooden barracks where the classes are held, we've acquired new names. All it takes is a brief conference between Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher, a kindly looking woman who tries to give us reassuring glances, but who has seen too many people come and go to get sentimental about a name. Mine—"Ewa"—is easy to change into its near equivalent in English, "Eva." My sister's name—"Alina"—poses more of a problem, but after a moment's thought, Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher decide that "Elaine" is close enough. My sister and I hang our heads wordlessly under this careless baptism. The teacher then introduces us to the class, mispronouncing our last name—"Wydra"—in a way we've never heard before. We make our way to a bench at the back of the room; nothing much has happened, except a small, seismic mental shift. The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us—but it's a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves.

When the school day is over, the teacher hands us a file card on which she has written, "I'm a newcomer. I'm lost. I live at 1785 Granville Street. Will you kindly show me how to get there? Thank you." We wander the streets for several hours, zigzagging back and forth through seemingly identical suburban avenues, showing this deaf-mute sign to the few people we see, until we eventually recognize the Rosenbergs' house. We're greeted by our quietly hysterical mother and Mrs. Rosenberg, who, in a ritual she has probably learned from television, puts out two glasses of milk on her red Formica counter. The milk, homogenized, and too cold from the fridge, bears little resemblance to the liquid we used to drink called by the same name.

Every day I learn new words, new expressions. I pick them up from school exercises, from conversations, from the books I take out of Vancouver's well-lit, cheerful public library. There are some turns of phrase to which I develop strange allergies. "You're welcome," for example, strikes me as a gaucherie, and I can hardly bring myself to say it—I suppose because it implies that there's something to be thanked for, which in Polish would be impolite. The very places where language is at its most conventional, where it should be most taken for granted, are the places where I feel the prick of artifice.

Then there are words to which I take an equally irrational liking, for their sound, or just because I'm pleased to have deduced their meaning. Mainly they're words I learn from books, like "enigmatic" or "insolent"—words that have only a literary value, that exist only as signs on the page.

But mostly, the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. "River" in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. "River" in English is cold—a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke.

The process, alas, works in reverse as well. When I see a river now, it is not shaped, assimilated by the word that accommodates it to the psyche—a word that makes a body of water a river rather than an uncontained element. The river before me remains a thing, absolutely other, absolutely unbending to the grasp of my mind.

When my friend Penny tells me that she's envious, or happy, or disappointed, I try laboriously to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, to the feeling from which it springs. Already, in that moment of strain, spontaneity of response is lost. And anyway, the translation doesn't work. I don't know how Penny feels when she talks about envy. The word hangs in a Platonic stratosphere, a vague prototype of all envy, so large, so all-encompassing that it might crush me—as might disappointment or happiness.

I am becoming a living avatar of structuralist wisdom; I cannot help knowing that words are just themselves. But it's a terrible knowledge, without any of the consolations that wisdom usually brings. It does not mean that I'm free to play with words at my wont; anyway, words in their naked state are surely among the least satisfactory play objects. No, this radical disjoining between word and thing is a desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of its colors, striations, nuances—its very existence. It is the loss of a living connection.

The worst losses come at night. As I lie down in a strange bed in a strange house—my mother is a sort of housekeeper here, to the aging Jewish man who has taken us in in return for her services—I wait for that spontaneous flow of inner language which used to be my nighttime talk with myself, my way of informing the ego where the id had been. Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness. Its words don't apply to my new experiences; they're not coeval with any of the objects, or faces, or the very air I breathe in the daytime. In English, words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private conversation could proceed. This interval before sleep used to be the time when my mind became both receptive and alert, when images and words rose up to consciousness, reiterating what had happened during the day, adding the day's experiences to those already stored there, spinning out the thread of my personal story.

Now, this picture-and-word show is gone; the thread has been snapped. I have no interior language, and without it, interior images—those images through which we assimilate the external world, through which we take it in, love it, make it our own—become blurred too. My mother and I met a Canadian family who live down the block today. They were working in their garden and engaged us in a conversation of the "Nice weather we're having, isn't it?" variety, which culminated in their inviting us into their house. They sat stiffly on their couch, smiled in the long pauses between the conversation, and seemed at a loss for what to ask. Now my mind gropes for some description of them, but nothing fits. They're a different species from anyone I've met in Poland, and Polish words slip off of them without sticking. English words don't hook on to anything. I try, deliberately, to come up with a few. Are these people pleasant or dull? Kindly or silly? The words float in an uncertain space. They come up from a part of my brain in which labels may be manufactured but which has no connection to my instincts, quick reactions, knowledge. Even the simplest adjectives sow confusion in my mind; English kindliness has a whole system of morality behind it, a system that makes "kindness" an entirely positive virtue. Polish kindness has the tiniest element of irony. Besides, I'm beginning to feel the tug of prohibition, in English, against uncharitable words. In Polish, you can call someone an idiot without particularly harsh feelings and with the zest of a strong judgment. Yes, in Polish these people might tend toward "silly" and "dull"—but I force myself toward "kindly" and "pleasant." The cultural unconscious is beginning to exercise its subliminal influence.

The verbal blur covers these people's faces, their gestures with a sort of fog. I can't translate them into my mind's eye. The small event, instead of being added to the mosaic of consciousness and memory, falls through some black hole, and I fall with it. What has happened to me in this new world? I don't know. I don't see what I've seen, don't comprehend what's in front of me. I'm not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don't really exist.

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Mrs. Lieberman, in the bathroom of her house, is shaving my armpits. She has taken me there at the end of her dinner party, and now, with a kind decisiveness, she lifts my arms and performs this foreign ablution on the tufts of hair that have never been objectionable to anyone before. She hasn't asked me whether I would like her to do it; she has simply taken it upon herself to teach me how things are done here.

Mrs. Lieberman is among several Polish ladies who have been in Canada long enough to consider themselves well versed in native ways, and who seem to find me deficient in some quite fundamental respects. Since in Poland I was considered a pretty young girl, this requires a basic revision of my self-image. But there's no doubt about it; after the passage across the Atlantic, I've emerged as less attractive, less graceful, less desirable. In fact, I can see in these women's eyes that I'm a somewhat pitiful specimen—pale, with thick eyebrows, and without any bounce in my hair, dressed in clothes that have nothing to do with the current fashion. And so they energetically set out to rectify these flaws. One of them spends a day with me, plucking my eyebrows and trying various shades of lipstick on my face. "If you were my daughter, you'd soon look like a princess," she says, thus implying an added deficiency in my mother. Another counselor takes me into her house for an evening, to initiate me into the mysteries of using shampoos and hair lotions, and putting my hair up in curlers; yet another outfits me with a crinoline and tells me that actually, I have a perfectly good figure—I just need to bring it out in the right ways. And several of them look at my breasts meaningfully, suggesting to my mother in an undertone that really, it's time I started wearing a bra. My mother obeys.

I obey too, passively, mulishly, but I feel less agile and self-confident with every transformation. I hold my head rigidly, so that my precarious bouffant doesn't fall down, and I smile often, the way I see other girls do, though I'm careful not to open my lips too wide or bite them, so my lipstick won't get smudged. I don't know how to move easily in the high-heeled shoes somebody gave me.

Inside its elaborate packaging, my body is stiff, sulky, wary. When I'm with my peers, who come by crinolines, lipstick, cars, and self-confidence naturally, my gestures show that I'm here provisionally, by their grace, that I don't rightfully belong. My shoulders stoop, I nod frantically to indicate my agreement with others, I smile sweetly at people to show I mean well, and my chest recedes inward so that I don't take up too much space—mannerisms of a marginal, off-centered person who wants both to be taken in and to fend off the threatening others.

About a year after our arrival in Vancouver, someone takes a photograph of my family in their backyard, and looking at it, I reject the image it gives of myself categorically. This clumsy looking creature, with legs oddly turned in their high-heeled pumps, shoulders bent with the strain of resentment and ingratiation, is not myself. Alienation is beginning to be inscribed in my flesh and face.

I'm sitting at the Steiners' kitchen table, surrounded by sounds of family jokes and laughter. I laugh along gamely, though half the time I don't understand what's going on.

Mrs. Steiner, who is Polish, has semiadopted me, and I spend whole days and weekends in her house, where I'm half exiled princess, half Cinderella. Half princess, because I'm musically talented and, who knows, I may become a famous pianist one day. Mrs. Steiner was an aspiring pianist herself in her youth, and she takes pleasure in supervising my musical progress: she has found a piano teacher for me, and often listens to me play. However, the Steiners are fabulously rich, and I am, at this point in my life, quite fabulously poor—and those basic facts condition everything; they are as palpable as a tilted beam that indicates the incline between us, never letting me forget the basic asymmetry of the relationship.

The Steiners' wealth is quite beyond the Rosenbergs', and quite beyond my conception of actual human lives. It exists on some step of the social ladder that jumps clear out of my head, and I can't domesticate its owners to ordinary personhood. Surely, the rich must be different. If I feel like a fairy-tale character near them, it's because they live in the realm of fable. Rosa Steiner is a stepmother

with the power to change my destiny for good or evil. Mr. Steiner simply rules over his dominion, quietly, calmly, and remotely. I wouldn't dream of revealing myself to him, of making an imposition on his attention.

This is, of course, only one part of the story, though it is the part of which I am painfully conscious. Stefan Steiner accepts my presence in his domestic life graciously. And as for Rosa, she is, aside from everything else, a friend who understands where I come from—metaphorically and literally—better than anyone else I know in Vancouver. In turn, there is something in her I recognize and trust. She is a vivacious, energetic woman in her forties, beautiful in a high-cheekboned, Eastern European way, with a deep, hoarse voice and with a great certainty of her own opinions, judgments, and preferences. She reminds me of the authoritative women I knew in Poland, who did not seem as inhibited, as insistently "feminine" as the women I meet here. Her views are utterly commonsensical: she believes that people should try to get as much pleasure, approval, money, achievement, and good looks as they can. She has no use for eccentricity, ambivalence, or self-doubt. Her own task and destiny is carrying on the tradition of ordinary life—and she goes about it with great vigor and style. Except for the all-important disparate income, her inner world is not so different, after all, from my parents'. The disparity means that she's the fulfilled bourgeoise, while they've been relegated to aspiration and failure. It is her fulfillment, I suppose—yes, our feelings can be cruel—that reassures me. When I'm near her, I feel that satisfaction and contentment are surely possible—more, that they're everyone's inalienable right—possibly even mine.

Mrs. Steiner's snobberies are as resolute as everything else about her. She too believes there are "better people"—people who are successful, smart, and, most of all, cultured. She envisions her house as a kind of salon, to which she invites groups of Vancouver's elect; sometimes, on these occasions, I'm recruited to raise the tone of the proceedings and perhaps advance my own fortunes by playing some Beethoven or Chopin. The Steiners' house, which overlooks both the sea and the mountains of Vancouver's harbor, is surrounded by large expanses of grounds and garden; inside, there are contemporary paintings, grand pianos, and enormous pieces of Eskimo sculpture. I don't know whether I like any of this unfamiliar art, but I know that's quite beside the point.

Mrs. Steiner takes me to her house often, and I'm happiest there when I'm with her alone. Then we talk for hours on end, mostly about my problems and my life. I'm a little ashamed to reveal how hard things are for my family—how bitterly my parents quarrel, how much my mother cries, how frightened I am by our helplessness, and by the burden of feeling that it is my duty to take charge, to get us out of this quagmire. But I can't help myself, it's too much of a relief to talk to somebody who is curious and sensitive to my concerns. Although her sensitivity has its limits: she cannot always make the leap of empathy across our differences. My mother's voice on the telephone ("She always sounds as if there's something wrong. Sometimes she speaks so softly I have to tell her to speak up.") bothers her. And when my father quits his job at a lumber mill, Rosa is full of disapproval; he has a family to support, she tells me; isn't this a bit irresponsible? Suddenly, I feel the full bitterness of our situation. My father is no longer very young, I tell her; the job was the hardest in the mill. He had to lift heavy logs all day—and he has a bad back, the legacy of the war. He was in pain every day. Rosa is abashed by my sudden eruption, and she retreats. She didn't know all this, she says; of course, I may be right. But there is added irony in this exchange, which isn't lost on either of us: the Steiners own a lumber mill. In the Steiner kitchen, I've heard mention of the problems they've sometimes had with their workers.

Still, I can speak to Rosa frankly; we can hash this sort of thing out. But some of the ease of our exchange vanishes when other members of the family enter the scene. Mrs. Steiner is fiercely devoted to her daughters, and in her eyes they are princesses pure and simple. I believe her; what else can I do? I'm both too shy and too removed from their lives to check out what I think of them for myself. Elisabeth, the older one, has just started going to a small, elite college—a place of which I can only gather that there are extremely interesting young people there, most of them near geniuses, and that Elisabeth has occasionally taken to wearing odd garments, like Mexican skirts and black stockings. Elisabeth talks without fully opening her mouth and swallows the endings of her words—so that I can understand her even less than most people, and I find myself saying "I beg your pardon" so often, that finally it becomes more polite to pretend I know what she's saying than to keep repeating the question.

Laurie is only two years older than myself, and she tries to befriend me. She often comes to our house—I invariably fight embarrassment at its stripped-down bareness—to drive me to the Steiners', and on the way there she talks about herself. Much of the time, it takes an enormous effort on my part to follow her fast chatter and to keep saying yes and no in the right places, to attempt to respond. I try to cover up this virtual idiocy by looking as intelligent as I can. But I do gather from these conversations that Laurie has just been at some international camp in Austria, that she will travel in Europe the following summer, that her parents differ from others in giving her affection and care—she has many friends whose parents try to compensate with money for their basic indifference. Isn't that terrible? I try, at this point, to look properly sympathetic, but the scale of problems she describes is so vastly different from what I know, and our mutual incapacity to penetrate each other's experience is so evident to me, that I harden myself against her. If I were really to enter her world, if I were really to imagine its difficulties, I would be condemned to an envy so burning that it would turn to hate. My only defense against the indignity of such emotion is to avoid rigorously the thought of wanting what she has—to keep her at a long, safe distance.

In the evening, we sit down to a family dinner and its jokey banter—an American ritual meant to sharpen the young women's edges for their encounters with the world and to affirm their superiority in that world. The Steiners, led by Laurie, who is clever and quick, are teasing each other, each bit of witty attack a verbal glove challenging the others to up the ante. I feel miserably out of it, laughing too loud, but knowing that I can't enter the teasing circle.

After all, Cinderella can't get snarky with her half sisters, can she? I can only approve; I can't even implicitly criticize—and this seems almost as basic a definition of my position as the lack of money. Razzing can only happen between equals or else it's a deliberate presumption, which brings attention to inferior status. But I'm too proud to engage in this latter kind.

I've had a nice day in the Steiner household; Rosa and I took a long, brisk walk, we ate an excellent lunch, I played the piano for her and she made some comments, and now I'm sitting at their kitchen table, to all appearances almost a family member. When I get home, I'm terribly depressed. There's a yellow light in the downstairs room where my mother is waiting for me; my father, I know, will have fallen asleep in a stupor of disorientation and fatigue. But when my mother asks me about my day with a curiosity that pains me—she almost never gets invited to the Steiners'—I only tell her what a wonderful time I had.

In later years, I'll come to sit at the Steiners' table often, and look back on the polite and rankled girl I was then and flinch a little at the narrowing of sympathies I felt in my narrow straits. I'll come to know that Laurie might have been jealous of me, might have feared, even, that I would displace her in her mother's affections—but I could not imagine then that I could rouse jealousy in anyone. I'll see how much time and attention and goodwill the Steiners lavished on me, more than in our busy and overfilled lives people can give to each other nowadays. Really, they thought about me more seriously than I thought about myself. Who was I, after all? Eva's ghost, perhaps, a specter that tried not to occupy too much space. They were more generous toward me than I was toward them; but then, a sense of disadvantage and inferiority is not a position from which one can feel the largeheartedness of true generosity.

In *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov makes the poetic, or the playful, speculation that Russian children before the Revolution—and his exile—were blessed with a surfeit of sensual impressions to compensate them for what was to come. Of course, fate doesn't play

such premonitory games, but memory can perform retrospective maneuvers to compensate for fate. Loss is a magical preservative. Time stops at the point of severance, and no subsequent impressions muddy the picture you have in mind. The house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them. Nostalgia—that most lyrical of feelings—crystallizes around these images like amber. Arrested within it, the house, the past, is clear, vivid, made more beautiful by the medium in which it is held and by its stillness.

Nostalgia is a source of poetry, and a form of fidelity. It is also a species of melancholia, which used to be thought of as an illness. As I walk the streets of Vancouver, I am pregnant with the images of Poland, pregnant and sick. *Tęsknota* throws a film over everything around me, and directs my vision inward. The largest presence within me is the welling up of absence, of what I have lost. This pregnancy is also a phantom pain.

I don't know what to do with this private heaviness, this pregnancy without the possibility of birth. "She's so loyal," Mrs. Steiner says when I tell her that Mrs. Witeszczak was a wonderful piano teacher. There is a hint of criticism in the supposed compliment; the methods of piano teaching are after all more advanced here, Mrs. Steiner suggests, and I should not cling to the ways of the past. That makes me want to defend Mrs. Witeszczak even more. Not everything there is old-fashioned, not everything here better! But everyone encourages me to forget what I left behind. It wasn't any good back there, our Jewish acquaintances say, why would you even want to visit, they didn't want you anyway. I hang my head stubbornly under the lash of this wisdom. Can I really extract what I've been from myself so easily? Can I jump continents as if skipping rope?

In our highly ideological times, even nostalgia has its politics. The conservatives of the sentiments believe that recovering their own forgotten history is an antidote to shallowness. The ideologues of the future see attachment to the past as that most awful of all monsters, the agent of reaction. It is to be extracted from the human soul with no quarter or self-pity, for it obstructs the inevitable march of events into the next Utopia. Only certain Eastern European writers, forced to march into the future too often, know the regressive dangers of both forgetfulness and clinging to the past. But then, they are among our world's experts of mourning, having lost not an archaeological but a living history. And so, they praise the virtues of a true memory. Nabokov unashamedly reinvokes and revives his childhood in the glorious colors of *tęsknota*. Milan Kundera knows that a person who forgets easily is a Don Juan of experience, promiscuous and repetitive, suffering from the unbearable lightness of being. Czeslaw Milosz remembers the people and places of his youth with the special tenderness reserved for objects of love that are no longer cherished by others.

"Dear Basia," I write, "I am sitting at a window looking out on a garden in which there is a cherry tree, an apple tree, and bushes of roses now in bloom. The roses are smaller and wilder here, but imagine! All this in the middle of a city. And tomorrow I am going to a party. There are parties here all the time, and my social life is, you might say, blooming." I am repeating a ritual performed by countless immigrants who have sent letters back home meant to impress and convince their friends and relatives—and probably even themselves—that their lives have changed for the better. I am lying. But I am also trying to fend off my nostalgia. I couldn't repudiate the past even if I wanted to, but what can I do with it here, where it doesn't exist? After a while, I begin to push the images of memory down, away from consciousness, below emotion. Relegated to an internal darkness, they increase the area of darkness within me, and they return in the dark, in my dreams. I dream of Cracow perpetually, winding my way through familiar-unfamiliar streets, looking for a way home. I almost get there, repeatedly; almost, but not quite, and I wake up with the city so close that I can breathe it in.

I can't afford to look back, and I can't figure out how to look forward. In both directions, I may see a Medusa, and I already feel the danger of being turned into stone. Betwixt and between, I am stuck and time is stuck within me. Time used to open out, serene, shimmering with promise. If I wanted to hold a moment still, it was because I wanted to expand it, to get its fill. Now, time has no dimension, no extension backward or forward. I arrest the past, and I hold myself stiffly against the future; I want to stop the flow. As a punishment, I exist in the stasis of a perpetual present, that other side of "living in the present," which is not eternity but a prison. I can't throw a bridge between the present and the past, and therefore I can't make time move.

The car is full of my new friends, or at least the crowd that has more or less accepted me as one of their own, the odd "greener" tagalong. They're as lively as a group of puppies, jostling each other with sharp elbows, crawling over each other to change seats, and expressing their well-being and amiability by trying to outshout each other. It's Saturday night, or rather Saturday Night, and party spirits are obligatory. We're on our way to the local White Spot, an early Canadian version of McDonald's, where we'll engage in the barbarous—as far as I'm concerned—rite of the "drive-in." This activity of sitting in your car in a large parking lot, and having sloppy, big hamburgers brought to you on a tray, accompanied by greasy french fries bounding out of their cardboard containers, mustard, spilly catsup, and sickly smelling relish, seems to fill these peers of mine with warm, monkeyish, groupy comfort. It fills me with a finicky distaste. I feel my lips tighten into an unaccustomed thinness—which, in turn, fills me with a small dislike for myself.

"Come on, foreign student, cheer up," one of the boys sporting a flowery Hawaiian shirt and a crew cut tells me, poking me in the ribs good-naturedly. "What's the matter, don't you like it here?" So as the car caroms off, I try to get in the mood. I try to giggle coyly as the girls exchange insinuating glances—though usually my titter comes a telling second too late. I try to join in the general hilarity, as somebody tells the latest elephant joke. Then—it's always a mistake to try too hard—I decide to show my goodwill by telling a joke myself. Finding some interruption in which to insert my uncertain voice, I launch into a translation of some slightly off-color anecdote I'd heard my father tell in Polish, no doubt hoping to get points for being risqué as well as a good sport. But as I hear my choked-up voice straining to assert itself, as I hear myself missing every beat and rhythm that would say "funny" and "punch line," I feel a hot flush of embarrassment. I come to a lame ending. There's a silence. "I suppose that's supposed to be funny," somebody says. I recede into the car seat.

Ah, the humiliation, the misery of failing to amuse! The incident is as rankling to my amour propre as being told I'm graceless or ugly. Telling a joke is like doing a linguistic pirouette. If you fall flat, it means not only that you don't have the wherewithal to do it well but also that you have misjudged your own skill, that you are fool enough to undertake something you can't finish—and that lack of self-control or self-knowledge is a lack of grace.

But these days, it takes all my will to impose any control on the words that emerge from me. I have to form entire sentences before uttering them; otherwise, I too easily get lost in the middle. My speech, I sense, sounds monotonous, deliberate, heavy—an aural mask that doesn't become me or express me at all. This willed self-control is the opposite of real mastery, which comes from a trust in your own verbal powers and allows for a free streaming of speech, for those bursts of spontaneity, the quickness of response that can rise into pleasure and overflow in humor. Laughter is the lightning rod of play, the eroticism of conversation; for now, I've lost the ability to make the sparks fly.

I've never been prim before, but that's how I am seen by my new peers. I don't try to tell jokes too often, I don't know the slang, I have no cool repartee. I love language too much to maul its beats, and my pride is too quick to risk the incomprehension that greets such forays. I become a very serious young person, missing the registers of wit and irony in my speech, though my mind sees ironies everywhere.

If primness is a small recoil of distaste at things that give others simple and hearty pleasure, then prim is what I'm really becoming. Although I'm not brave enough or hermit enough to stay home by myself every night, I'm a pretend teenager among the real stuff. There's too much in this car I don't like; I don't like the blue eye shadow on Cindy's eyelids, or the grease on Chuck's hair, or the way the car zooms off with a screech and then slows down as

everyone plays we're-afraid-of-the-policeman. I don't like the way they laugh. I don't care for their "ugly" jokes, or their five-hundred-pound canary jokes, or their pickle jokes, or their elephant jokes either. And most of all, I hate having to pretend.

Perhaps the extra knot that strangles my voice is rage. I am enraged at the false persona I'm being stuffed into, as into some clumsy and overblown astronaut suit. I'm enraged at my adolescent friends because they can't see through the guise, can't recognize the light-footed dancer I really am. They only see this elephantine creature who too often sounds as if she's making pronouncements.

It will take years before I pick and choose, from the Babel of American language, the style of wit that fits. It will take years of practice before its nuances and patterns snap smartly into the synapses of my brain so they can generate verbal electricity. It will take years of observing the discreet sufferings of the corporate classes before I understand the equally discreet charm of *New Yorker* cartoons.

For now, when I come across a *New Yorker* issue, I stare at the drawings of well-heeled people expressing some dissatisfaction with their condition as yet another demonstration of the weirdness all around me. "What's funny about that?" my mother asks in puzzlement. "I don't know," I answer, and we both shrug and shake our heads. And, as the car veers through Vancouver's neatly shrubberied and sparsely populated streets, I know that, among my other faculties, I've lost my sense of humor. I am not about to convert my adolescent friends to anti-Russian jokes. I swallow my injury, and giggle falsely at the five-hundred-pound canary.

Happy as larks, we lurch toward the White Spot.

If you had stayed there, your hair would have been straight, and you would have worn a barrette on one side.

But maybe by now you would have grown it into a ponytail? Like the ones you saw on those sexy faces in the magazine you used to read?

I don't know. You would have been fifteen by now. Different from thirteen.

You would be going to the movies with Zbyszek, and maybe to a café after, where you would meet a group of friends and talk late into the night.

But maybe you would be having problems with Mother and Father. They wouldn't like your staying out late.

That would have been fun. Normal. Oh God, to be a young person trying to get away from her parents.

But you can't do that. You have to take care of them. Besides, with whom would you go out here? One of these churlish boys who play spin the bottle? You've become more serious than you used to be.

What jokes are your friends in Cracow exchanging? I can't imagine. What's Basia doing? Maybe she's beginning to act. Doing exactly what she wanted. She must be having fun.

But you might have become more serious even there.

Possible.

But you would have been different, very different.

No question.

And you prefer her, the Cracow Ewa.

Yes, I prefer her. But I can't be her. I'm losing track of her. In a few years, I'll have no idea what her hairdo would have been like.

But she's more real, anyway.

Yes, she's the real one.

For my birthday, Penny gives me a diary, complete with a little lock and key to keep what I write from the eyes of all intruders. It is that little lock—the visible symbol of the privacy in which the diary is meant to exist—that creates my dilemma. If I am indeed to write something entirely for myself, in what language do I write? Several times, I open the diary and close it again. I can't decide. Writing in Polish at this point would be a little like resorting to Latin or ancient Greek—an eccentric thing to do in a diary, in which you're supposed to set down your most immediate experiences and unpremeditated thoughts in the most unmediated language. Polish is becoming a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past.

But writing for nobody's eyes in English? That's like doing a school exercise, or performing in front of yourself, a slightly perverse act of self-voyeurism.

Because I have to choose something, I finally choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self. As a result, the diary becomes surely one of the more impersonal exercises of that sort produced by an adolescent girl. These are no sentimental effusions of rejected love, eruptions of familial anger, or consoling broodings about death. English is not the language of such emotions. Instead, I set down my reflections on the ugliness of wrestling; on the elegance of Mozart, and on how Dostoyevsky puts me in mind of El Greco. I write down Thoughts. I Write.

There is a certain pathos to this naïve snobbery, for the diary is an earnest attempt to create a part of my persona that I imagine I would have grown into in Polish. In the solitude of this most private act, I write, in my public language, in order to update what might have been my other self. The diary is about me and not about me at all. But on one level, it allows me to make the first jump. I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self. Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self—my English self—becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives. It exists more easily in the abstract sphere of thoughts and observations than in the world. For a while, this impersonal self, this cultural negative capability, becomes the truest thing about me. When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing—an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. This language is beginning to invent another me. However, I discover something odd. It seems that when I write (or, for that matter, think) in English, I am unable to use the word "I." I do not go as far as the schizophrenic "she"—but I am driven, as by a compulsion, to the double, the Siamese-twin "you."

My voice is doing funny things. It does not seem to emerge from the same parts of my body as before. It comes out from somewhere in my throat, tight, thin, and mat—a voice without the modulations, dips, and rises that it had before, when it went from my stomach all the way through my head. There is, of course, the constraint and the self-consciousness of an accent that I hear but cannot control. Some of my high school peers accuse me of putting it on in order to appear more "interesting." In fact, I'd do anything to get rid of it, and when I'm alone, I practice sounds for which my speech organs have no intuitions, such as "th" (I do this by putting my tongue between my teeth) and "a," which is longer and more open in Polish (by shaping my mouth into a sort of arrested grin). It is simple words like "cat" or "tap" that give me the most trouble, because they have no context of other syllables, and so people often misunderstand them. Whenever I can, I do awkward little swerves to avoid them, or pause and try to say them very clearly. Still, when people—like salesladies—hear me speak without being prepared to listen carefully, they often don't understand me the first time around. "Girls' shoes," I say, and the "girls' " comes out as a sort of scramble. "Girls' shoes," I repeat, willing the syllable to form itself properly, and the saleslady usually smiles nicely, and sends my mother and me to the right part of the store. I say "Thank you" with a sweet smile, feeling as if I'm both claiming an unfair special privilege and being unfairly patronized.

It's as important to me to speak well as to play a piece of music without mistakes. Hearing English distorted grates on me like chalk screeching on a blackboard, like all things botched and badly done, like all forms of gracelessness. The odd thing is that I know what is correct, fluent, good, long before I can execute it. The English spoken by our Polish acquaintances strikes me as jagged and thick, and I know that I shouldn't imitate it. I'm turned off by the intonations I hear on the TV sitcoms—by the expectation of laughter, like a dog's tail wagging in supplication, built into the actors' pauses, and by the curtailed, cutoff rhythms. I like the way Penny speaks, with an easy flow and a pleasure in giving words a fleshly fullness; I like what I hear in some movies; and once the Old Vic comes to Vancouver to perform *Macbeth,* and though I can hardly understand the particular words, I am riveted by the tones of sureness and command that mold the actors' speech into such majestic periods.

Sociolinguists might say that I receive these language messages as class signals, that I associate the sounds of correctness with the social status of the speaker. In part, this is undoubtedly true. The class-linked notion that I transfer wholesale from Poland is that belonging to a "better" class of people is absolutely dependent on speaking a "better" language. And in my situation especially, I know that language will be a crucial instrument, that I can overcome the stigma of my marginality, the weight of presumption against me, only if the reassuringly right sounds come out of my mouth.

Yes, speech is a class signifier. But I think that in hearing these varieties of speech around me, I'm sensitized to something else as well—something that is a matter of aesthetics, and even of psychological health. Apparently, skilled chefs can tell whether a dish from some foreign cuisine is well cooked even if they have never tasted it and don't know the genre of cooking it belongs to. There seem to be some deep-structure qualities—consistency, proportions of ingredients, smoothness of blending—that indicate culinary achievement to these educated eaters' taste buds. So each language has its own distinctive music, and even if one doesn't know its separate components, one can pretty quickly recognize the propriety of the patterns in which the components are put together, their harmonies and discords. Perhaps the crucial element that strikes the ear in listening to living speech is the degree of the speaker's self-assurance and control.

As I listen to people speaking that foreign tongue, English, I can hear when they stumble or repeat the same phrases too many times, when their sentences trail off aimlessly—or, on the contrary, when their phrases have vigor and roundness, when they have the space and the breath to give a flourish at the end of a sentence, or make just the right pause before coming to a dramatic point. I can tell, in other words, the degree of their ease or disease, the extent of authority that shapes the rhythms of their speech. That authority—in whatever dialect, in whatever variant of the mainstream language—seems to me to be something we all desire. It's not that we all want to speak the King's English, but whether we speak Appalachian or Harlem English, or Cockney, or Jamaican Creole, we want to be at home in our tongue. We want to be able to give voice accurately and fully to ourselves and our sense of the world. John Fowles, in one of his stories in *The Ebony Tower,* has a young man cruelly violate an elderly writer and his manuscripts because the legacy of language has not been passed on to the youthful vandal properly. This seems to me an entirely credible premise. Linguistic dispossession is a sufficient motive for violence, for it is close to the dispossession of one's self. Blind rage, helpless rage is rage that has no words—rage that overwhelms one with darkness. And if one is perpetually without words, if one exists in the entropy of inarticulateness, that condition itself is bound to be an enraging frustration. In my New York apartment, I listen almost nightly to fights that erupt like brushfire on the street below—and in their escalating fury of repetitious phrases ("Don't do this to me, man, you fucking bastard, I'll fucking kill you"), I hear not the pleasures of macho toughness but an infuriated beating against wordlessness, against the incapacity to make oneself understood, seen. Anger can be borne—it can even be satisfying—if it can gather into words and explode in a storm, or a rapier-sharp attack. But without this means of ventilation, it only turns back inward, building and swirling like a head of steam—building to an impotent, murderous rage. If all therapy is speaking therapy—a talking cure—then perhaps all neurosis is a speech dis-ease.

My parents, sister, and I have formed ourselves into an assembly line leading from the back alley through the garden and into our basement, where we are depositing an odd collection of items. There is a ratty couch with its stuffing half pulled out, a vacuum cleaner, a stained mattress, some heavy pieces of metal whose provenance is unclear. The objects are dusty, awkward, heavy; but worst of all, they bring with them the onus and burden of demotion. Having to lug such stuff is not a nice, middle-class occupation.

My parents have managed to gather a down payment on a "small stucco house," as it was advertised in the paper—I've combed through such ads repeatedly, trying to decode the nuances of wood and old English manses, and, yes, stucco—and we are now installed in this minimally furnished cell of the American Dream, which also functions as the location of a rudimentary business. Rudimentary, but laden with hope. Lots of the people we've met started out just this way—peddling junk. The very name of this occupation chafes me with its bare roughness. But in the community in which we've found ourselves, "junk" has come to acquire a certain compelling ring. For some people, scrap metal has literally turned to gold, and then into spacious homes with thick wall-to-wall rugs. Mr. Landauer still owns a big junkyard from which he draws fat profits. Besides, if, like my father, you have no money, no language, and no accredited profession, what exactly do you turn your hand to? This basic form of exchange in which the Great Chain of Business begins and ends is a logical way to start out for an immigrant who is starting out with nothing. So my father has acquired a small truck—a rickety, much-used vehicle whose shaking and rattling are an inescapable accompaniment to our first immigrant years, and on which I'll later learn how to drive—and in this noisy contraption, he goes off for the day to unknown destinations from which he brings home this medley discard of suburban life. These items, in our version of free enterprise, then get carried into our basement, from where we try to sell them for sums less small than what my father paid for them.

The whole thing is indeed basic, so much so that I keep looking for a hidden trick. In fact, the transaction is stunningly simple, but its every step is, for my parents, fraught with tension for the stunningly simple reason that our survival quite literally depends on it. We have come to Canada at an odd time—between waves of emigration, when there seem to be no support systems to ease the "newcomers' " first steps. We are on our own, and the most obvious elements of every exchange present themselves as hurdles to be deciphered and mastered. There is, for example, the matter of placing an ad in the paper. For me, this is an entirely new idea.

Advertising in Poland was as impermissible as the private enterprise it implies, and, given the dismal trickle of noncompetitive goods, beside the point. For a while, I am as puzzled by the long pages of ads in Vancouver's newspapers as I am by the NO TRESPASSING signs that stop me short of entering forest paths or parts of land that look like they should belong to nobody but nature's gods. In front of these signs, struck by the weirdness of untamed landscape being claimed as private property, I recognize how deeply political doctrine seeps into our perceptions.

My parents have, of course, seen systems come and go. But still, they are uncertain about what one says in an ad here, or how one responds to the phone calls that come in after the ad has been placed. "It's a very good couch," my father assures someone on the other end of the line. "What color?" He looks to my mother for help. "Gray. No, no, green." His voice grows peremptorily, impatiently resolute. "The only way to know if you like it is if you come over and see it," he informs the person on the other end.

Sometimes, people do come and descend into the basement to look over the motley goods and negotiate the price. But negotiation is a slightly wrong word for what then transpires—for the mode my parents are used to is something closer to bargaining. This highly formulaic dance accompanied all extraofficial purchases in Poland, and it entailed a number of dramatic and commonly understood gestures—pretending to take offense at the ridiculously high price being suggested, or, on the seller's part, the absurdly low price being offered, raising your voice at the indignity of being taken for a fool, appearing to be on the verge of walking away, and so on. I can hear these gestures in my parents' voices—tricks and foxiness are, after all, the essence of business—and I can hear the misfit between these arias of cajoling and the plain, unbending Canadian voices responding to them. Sometimes—often enough to keep us going—they reach an agreement, and in these early days, every completed transaction is celebrated as a triumph; every one that fails is a minor catastrophe, followed by a spell of depression and self-reproach.

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After a year or so of doing business from our house, my parents rent a store from which they'll now sell the goods my father brings in his truck. This is a big step up, and my parents are nervous and excited. But it doesn't turn out to be the beginning of a fabulous success story; my father won't build a furniture empire, won't be a real-estate baron, won't buy fancy new cars every year. Now, both of them spend most of their time in a dark, dusty space filled with old pieces of furniture arranged pell-mell, stacks of mattresses leaning against the wall, some nondescript kitchen utensils, stoves, refrigerators, tools, some used books—a space out of Malamud's *The Assistant,* a space in which you wait for salvation. My mother, as always, is readier to accept whatever situation comes to her, and to find some enjoyment in it. She persuades "clients" to come into the store, soothes, bargains, persuades. By the subdued Vancouver standards, my father cuts a rough figure, with abrupt, unqualified statements and overly resolute movements. He gets angry at stubborn customers and sometimes gets into fights with them—perhaps to re-create some of the old excitement and action of his entrepreneurial-hustling days. In the long intervals when nobody comes in, he reads—at first, with an English-Polish dictionary. For some reason, he begins with a thick novel by Faulkner, which he gets through only by consulting the dictionary on every second sentence. Faulkner seems like the most inconvenient writer on whom to learn English, but by this laborious method, my father acquires a large, if heavily accented vocabulary. My mother, who throughout her life has absorbed languages by quick osmosis, and who through the sheer vicissitudes of history has accreted not only Hebrew and Yiddish but also German and Russian and Ukrainian, picks up English from books, conversation, and the general air, and soon she too speaks with an easy fluency.

But while he learns the language, my father never really catches on to how different the rules are here, to the genteel and rational methods of doing business in Vancouver. It is as if his force, having nothing to pit itself against, turns inward on himself, festering in those quiet, drizzly streets and among people who confront him with such unfailing, unpierceable politeness.

My mother reminds herself and us that my father is the man whose resourcefulness has never failed him, who has never been in a situation he couldn't get out of. But for the first time, he can't find his nerve; he becomes anxious about making small decisions, and anxious that he has made the wrong ones. What has him so afraid, he who was apparently fearless in the face of literally deadly danger? It is, I think, the lack of danger. Without an enemy whom he can outsmart, without a hokum law at which he can thumb his nose, he is left at a loss. The structure of the space within which he moves has changed. It has no obstacles he can daringly jump over, no closed doors he can cleverly open. Everything seems to be open, but where is the point of entry? How do you maneuver when there seems to be nothing to maneuver around? How do you fight when there seems to be no particular opponent confronting you? My father is used to battling fate; here, he is faced with seemingly unresistant amorphousness, a soft medium in which hard punches are lost. He needs more of a T'ai Chi technique, something in which you manage and control your own force, because there is no one else to do it for you. He needs to read about Zen on Wall Street.

Instead, he sinks into a despair that is like lead, like the Dead Sea. "For what is the purpose?" he says when somebody asks him to go to a movie or for a walk. "Why are you torturing yourself like that?" I shout. "What do you want?" The answer is astonishing to me. "I want my peace of mind back," he says. "I've always had peace of mind."

Yes, I think, that's probably true. Through the war, the death of his close ones, through the remaking of his life in Poland, my father had never lost his basic, animal composure, which was made up of an unquestioned will to live and enough vitality to know that the will, one way or another, would prevail. And now, he has been confounded by this amiable Vancouver, by its civility and its shaved lawns. What is it, exactly, that prevents him from becoming rich and successful? It doesn't help to know that we've come to inhospitable

conditions, and that my parents aren't exactly starting out the race even, with the odds fair and square. So many people have made good; if you don't, it appears that you have only yourself to blame. This—this corrosive logic—is the other side of the New World dream, the seemingly self-inflicted nightmare in which you toss and turn in gut-eating guilt.

And by what odd quirk of history, I wonder, has it come about that from age thirteen on I have not known what peace of mind feels like, that it strikes me as a phrase from another world. Is it that I come from the war, while my parents were born before it? Is it that I have only struggled with specters—their specters among others—while they have battered themselves against hard realities? Somehow, they retained their reserves of strength as long as the conditions of their existence—even at their most terrible—had to be responded to rather than questioned. It is only the worm of self-doubt that undermines their basic certitude.

"That's really sexy," Penny says appreciatively, as Sharon tries on her slinky, long slip. "You really think so?" Sharon wonders as she inspects herself carefully in the mirror. We've gathered in Penny's bedroom, and we're getting ready for a party—girls acting kittenish for each other, in order to test their appeal to boys. The slips and nylon stockings are followed by lengthy applications of makeup, with serious consultations on the colors of eye shadow, mascara, and lipstick.

I'm flattered at being invited to this intimate, insider gathering, but as usual, I'm sitting at a slightly oblique angle to the proceedings. I don't have a silk slip, don't like to put on makeup, and these elaborate preparations are somehow disturbing to me, as if we were in a harem and remodeling ourselves into a special species—"girls"—so that we can appeal to that other, alien species, boys. They are supposed to come and get us, of course, but only after we have made ourselves into these appetizing and slightly garish bonbons. In the conspiratorial giggles in the room, there is the murmur of an unspoken agreement: we're not going to show them who we are, we're going to show them what they want.

The party itself takes place in the basement "playroom" of somebody's house, and it is a nervous affair. Adolescent boys and girls drift around the room in separate groups, glancing at each other uneasily. There is more suppressed giggling among the girls, who are trying to pretend they're not paying attention to the boys, who, in their little clusters, are doing a more brash, bravado version of the giggle in the form of rattling their beer cans and talking too loudly. Why is there so much giggling and exaggeration and nervousness at this party?

The record player starts to croon Frankie Avalon's sticky-sweet melodies, whose charm I helplessly succumb to, and the nature of the tension shifts. The boys, who now know what to do, begin to cross the room. Somebody asks me to dance, and as the lights go out—more giggling—he rocks me from side to side with careful and exaggerated movements. "He held you very close," one of the girls informs me when the dance is over and I'm returned to my own gender. Her tone puts me on the alert. Did I violate some rule of decorum here? I now look at a pair dancing on the floor more carefully and see that they're engaged in a little tug-of-war, with the girl resisting the boy's full embrace.

I'd like to give myself up to the music; I'd like to dance with that boy again, even though I have no idea how to talk to him, and he doesn't seem to have anything to say to me. I want so much to throw myself into sex, into pleasure. But instead, I feel that small movement of prim disapproval. This is "unnatural," I decide—a new word of opprobrium in my vocabulary, and one that I find myself applying to any number of situations I encounter. So much of the behavior around me seems "unnatural"—strained and overcautious despite the cheekiness. Of course, I'm looking at it from my askew angle—a sure recipe for perceiving the artifice in the seemingly spontaneous. But my own primness is a reaction to a discomfort in the air, a lack of ease between the boys and girls, in which this early sexuality is converted not into friendliness but into coy sexiness. The kids at this party are afraid of making the wrong move. The only exception is slinky Sharon, whose smile and movements carry a hint of provocation, as if in response to the mingled

aura of envy and suspicion around her. But Sharon pays a price for her knowledge of her own sexuality; if she's this sexy, then she must be "fast" too, and she has a bit of a "reputation." She'll have a hard time marrying, is the common wisdom.

By the time the party devolves into spin the bottle, I think that I've found myself among a strange tribe of adolescents—in Poland, a relatively unidentified species—and that this is a sad comedown from Marek and the packs of boys and girls I ran with in Cracow. It's certainly a comedown from my fantasies of an adventurous feminine destiny, which usually involved lush romances followed by a "civilized" marriage—meaning one in which it would be understood that both I and my husband could have lovers. I don't know where I got such decadent ideas, especially since they were accompanied by wholly unrealistic images of spacious and elegant apartments in which "civilized" marital arrangements could be carried on. Whatever their genesis, however, spin the bottle is not what I had in mind. As the evening continues, I recede further and begin watching the proceedings as if I were an anthropologist of the highly detached nonparticipant variety. I decide that my role in life is to be an "observer"—making a poor virtue out of the reality that I feel so very out of it.

"Communism is a political philosophy based on the idea that there is no private property and everything should be shared equally between everybody," the teacher tells the class of ninth-graders.

"But isn't Communism evil?" somebody asks. "Don't they kill people over there?"

Mr. Jones—he has a kindly, square face and a crew cut that looks like it's made of horsehair—then has an inspiration. He turns to me and asks me to describe what life in a Communist country is really like.

Really like? Really, I've never seen Communism walking down the street. Really, there is life there, water, colors, even happiness. Yes, even happiness. People live their lives. How to explain? In my classmates' minds I sense a vision of a dark, Plutonian realm in which a spectral citizenry walks bent under the yoke of oppression. The very word "Communism" seems to send a frisson up their spines, as if they were in a horror movie; it's the demonic unknown. Doesn't everyone there walk bent under the yoke of oppression? There is no freedom there!

Yes, there is, I tell them, becoming vehement in my frustration. More so than here, maybe. Politics is one thing, but what good is freedom if you behave like a conformist, if you don't laugh or cry when you want to? My outburst is greeted with stares not so much of hostility as of incomprehension. What odd ideas this foreign student has! The teacher, who is obviously delighted by what I say—he has found an ally in his battle against provincial priggishness—attempts to get some discussion going. Then he interrupts himself and asks whether everyone in the class knows where Poland is. There are negative shakes of the head. No, not everyone does. He points it out on the map, to which the students turn with a dutiful indifference. Obviously, most of them will forget this small square on the map, wedged in between larger blocks of other colors, by tomorrow. "Is Poland a part of Russia?" some especially inquisitive soul asks. Ah—now I understand. There is no point in my getting so excited. Of course, I will not convince these teenagers in this Vancouver classroom that Poland is the center of the universe rather than a gray patch of land inhabited by ghosts. It is I who will have to learn how to live with a double vision. Until now, Poland has covered an area in my head coeval with the dimensions of reality, and all other places on the globe have been measured by their distance from it. Now, simultaneously, I see it as my classmates do—a distant spot, somewhere on the peripheries of the imagination, crowded together with countless other hard to remember places of equal insignificance. The reference points inside my head are beginning to do a flickering dance. I suppose this is the most palpable meaning of displacement. I have been dislocated from my own center of the world, and that world has been shifted away from my center. There is no longer a straight axis anchoring my imagination; it begins to oscillate, and I rotate around it unsteadily.

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But being "an immigrant," I begin to learn, is considered a sort of location in itself—and sometimes a highly advantageous one at that. In uneventful Vancouver, I'm enough of a curiosity that I too enjoy the fifteen minutes of fame so often accorded to Eastern European exotics before they are replaced by a new batch. The local newspaper takes me up as a sort of pet, printing my picture when I give a concert at the Jewish Community Center and soliciting my views when I come back from a bus trip to the United Nations, on which I've been sent after winning a speech contest. They want to know my opinions of the various cities I've been in, and I have no hesitation about offering them. "New York is the real capital of the United States," I readily opine. "Washington just has the government. It doesn't have the excitement." I take such attention blithely for granted, so I'm not too bowled over when a local radio pontificator, after meeting me in a group of high school students, tells me he would like to hear my opinion on anything at all; for this purpose, he'll lend me one of the fifteen-minute spots that bring him fame with weekly regularity. At this point in my initiation into the English language, I have an active vocabulary of about six hundred words, but it doesn't occur to me that I should mince any of them. I want to tell Canadians about how boring they are. "Canada is the dullest country in the world," I write in the notes for my speech, "because it is the most conformist." People may pretend to have liberal beliefs, I go on, but really they are an unadventurous lot who never dare to sidestep bourgeois conventions. With the hauteur that can only spring from fourteen-year-old innocence, I take these observations to be self-evident, because they are mine. And it doesn't occur to me, of course, that my audience might be offended at being read such stern lessons; after all, I'm simply telling the truth.

I never hear myself in this performance, because I don't know how to find the radio station on which this bit of cultural commentary is being broadcast. But I'm told by someone who hears the program that my host had some very flattering things to say about my little diatribe. Apparently, Vancouverites, as most people, like to see themselves held up in an askew mirror—perhaps any mirror, for that matter. As for me, it is my first lesson in the advantages of an oblique vision—and in the sharp pleasure of turning anger into argument.

Once we find our way back from school, my sister and I begin to dawdle home slowly, looking at window displays on the way. Our walk takes us up Main Street, a ramshackle, low-built part of town that seems a no place, thrown up randomly, without particular order or purpose. There are sprawling parking lots, patches of narrow, wooden houses, and nameless one-story cement structures, which look as haphazard as if the city itself has turned into a junkyard here. But there are also some window displays—which I'll later recognize for the poor, wrong-side-of-town affairs that they are but which now have the power to mesmerize us with their unfamiliar objects. At this stage of our acquaintance with Western life-styles, Alinka and I can spend several minutes discussing a Tupperware casserole dish, or a blouse with a fetching embroidered collar.

Vancouver's Board of Commerce reputation, boasted of by its citizens frequently, is that it is the second most beautiful city in the world after Rio de Janeiro. This is because Vancouver too combines the usually incompatible elements of ocean and mountains in a picturesque juxtaposition. The craggy Rockies come to the end here and, from some angles of vision, seem to plunge dramatically right into the watery expanse. It is the prevailing opinion of humankind that this is beautiful, breathtaking. But my soul does not go out to these spectacular sights, which reject me, because I reject them. I want my landscapes human sized and penetrable; these mountains look like a picture postcard to me, something you look at rather than enter, and on the many cloudy days they enclose Vancouver like gloomy walls. Within this forbidding natural frame, Vancouver circa 1960 is a raw town, not much older than the century, and with an outpost flavor still clinging to it. Downtown

consists of a cluster of low buildings, with some neon displays flashing in the daytime, which hurt my head because I'm so unaccustomed to them. There are few people in the commercial area, and even fewer on the endless net of residential streets that crisscross each other in eerie quietness.

I walk through those streets not seeing anything clearly, as if a screen has fallen before my eyes, a screen that obscures and blurs everything in my field of my vision. I miss the signals that say "city" to me: the varying densities that pull people toward a common center of gravity, the strata of human, as opposed to geological age. The pulse of life seems to beat at low pressure here. The city's unfocused sprawl, its inchoate spread of one-family houses, doesn't fall into any grid of mental imagery, and therefore it is a strain to see what is before me. A few years later, when I am taken to my first football game, I have the same experience of my sight going awry. Since I don't know the rules of the game, and don't know what to look for, I can never see where the ball is. You can only keep your eye on the ball, it seems, if you have a rough a priori idea of its trajectory. Even on those days when the sun comes out in full blaze and the air has the special transparency of the north, Vancouver is a dim world to my eyes, and I walk around it in the static of visual confusion.

It is when we go into the larger repositories of consumerism—the army and navy store, or the neighborhood supermarket—that my vision becomes most entropic. Confronted with ten varieties of soap or toothpaste, I stand paralyzed, my capillaries tightening into a panicky headache. Just how am I to know which is the real thing, the Platonic toothpaste? Slowly, though, we try to unravel the new hierarchy and order of things. We look at ads on TV carefully, hoping to gather clues as to whether Colgate or Crest is better. We receive the message that more dentists recommend Colgate with full seriousness, and from then on are loyally committed to this brand.

As we gather confidence, even though it's not accompanied by money, my mother, Alinka, and I begin to enter more fashionable department stores, through which we drift as through the circles of Limbo. The profusion of objects at Hudson's Bay—Vancouver's shopping mecca—throws me into a yearning and revulsion that are simultaneous and correlative with each other: perhaps this is what used to be called a state of lust, or more generally, sin. Ah, to have money to buy these leather purses, these rayon blouses, these sweetish perfumes! We spend useless hours trying on dresses in wrong sizes, just to see how they look. When some item goes on sale, we get excited: perhaps we can afford it. We rarely can. Nevertheless, we finger and look, trying to distinguish leatherette from leather, costume jewelry from real silver. But the things threaten to crush me with their thinghood, with their inorganic proliferation, with their meaninglessness. I get headaches at Hudson's Bay; I come out pale and depleted.

After battering myself again and again on the horns of lust and disgust, I begin to retreat from both. I decide to stop wanting. For me, this is a strange turn: my appetites are strong, and I never had any ambitions to mortify them by asceticism. But this new resolution is built into the logic of my situation. Since I can't have anything, if I were to continue wanting, there would be no end to my deprivation. It would be constant, like a never-ending low-level toothache. I can't afford such a toothache; I can't afford to want. Like some sybarite turned monk who proves his mettle by placing himself in seductive situations, I can now walk between taffeta dresses and silk lingerie without feeling a shred of temptation. I've become immune to desire; I snip the danger of wanting in the bud.

By the same sleight of consciousness, I'm becoming immune to envy. If I were to give vent to envying, there would be no end to that either. I would have to envy everybody, every moment of the day. But with my new detachment, I can gaze at what my friends have as if they lived in a different world. In this spatial warp in which I have situated myself, it doesn't make any difference that they live in big houses with large yards and swimming pools, and cars and many skirts and blouses and pairs of shoes. This way, I can be nice to my friends; I can smile pleasantly at their pleasures and sympathize with their problems of the good life. I can do so, because I've made myself untouchable. Of course, they might be upset if they guessed the extent of my indifference; but they don't.

There is something I can have though, with no cash or down payments, or being to the manner born: I can have internal goods. Well, I've always wanted those, but never as much as now. If I can't possess experience in actuality, maybe I can encompass it in the spirit. If I know everything, if I understand everything, then even though I can't have a house with a patio opening out onto a swimming pool, or a boyfriend whom I like, in some other way I can have the entire world. Like Thomas Wolfe, I dream of reading everything in the library, starting from letter *A.* And like Ben Franklin, whose name I've never heard, I start devising programs of self-improvement. On my daily walk to school I plunge into grandiose plans for perfecting myself. I decide—and this neat schema gives me deep satisfaction—that there are four parts to a human being: physical, intellectual, spiritual, and creative. If I devote two hours a day to developing each part, then eventually I can become what will later be called "a fully realized being." My creative development, I decide, is taken care of by playing the piano; then, for two hours a day I'll read important books on everything—religion, literature, science; my physical well-being—well, perhaps that can be taken care of by the gym class; and as for spiritual exercises, I don't know what they'll consist of, though I have a vague notion that they should involve contemplation of what is essential in human life. I have every intention of figuring out what that is.

When, by accident, I come across some books on Zen, I feel as though I've found a confirmation of my own resolve. Yes, of course, detachment is the thing to strive for. What do these illusionary experiences I'm going through matter? As I read D. T. Suzuki on a crowded bus, and look around at the faces that seem so bland and inexpressive to me, I feel a sense of triumph. I can overcome all this; I can almost make it go away.

I wish I could tell Marek about these experiments. But there is nobody I can talk to like that; that's why I have to resort to them in the first place. Penny would surely think I'm crazy. "Philosophy is a crutch I'll throw away when I'm happy again," I write in one of the highly unconcrete poems that are beginning to win me prizes in my high school.

Oddly enough, the "philosophy" I am so earnestly improvising bears some very American features; but then, I'm struggling with some very American problems. In Cracow, I'd have been experiencing my youth by going to cellar-cafés and, in the hot intimacy of flushed faces and animated conversation, discussing politics and music and modern poetry. I'd have suffered from close surveillance by vigilantly gossipy friends, and no private place to go with my boyfriend, and the frustration that comes from daily powerlessness. I'd have developed ideas about power and justice, and favorite observations about love and heartbreak. In my lush Western Sahara, I'm confronting a tantalizing abundance that doesn't fill, and a loneliness that carves out a scoop of dizzying emptiness inside. My answer is a kind of spiritual individualism. Since I don't have the ordinary pleasures of sociability, of play, I turn inward with a vengeance. The only self that matters, I decide, is a sort of universal, pure, quintessential self that can hover above all the actual, daily events like a bird suspended in midair. I hover very successfully; the only thing is that I begin to suffer from a kind of high-altitude sickness, and the intensity of my self-suppression transforms itself into a spaced-out, unreal exaltation. There is a thinness in my head, and sometimes I feel faint with the will it takes to rise above myself.

Two decades later, when the Eastern religions vogue hits the counterculture, I think I understand the all-American despair that drives the new converts to chant their mantras in ashrams from San Francisco to Manhattan's Upper West Side. The gospel of detachment is as well suited to a culture of excess as it is to a society of radical poverty. It thrives in circumstances in which one's wants are dangerous because they are surely going to be deprived—or because they are pulled in so many directions that they pose a threat to the integrity, the unity of one's self. Of course, wanting too much, wanting the wrong thing, wanting what you can't have is one definition of the human condition; we all have to learn how to make some livable compromise between the always insatiable self and the always insufficient reality principle. But America is the land of yearning, and perhaps nowhere else are one's desires so wantonly stimulated; nowhere else is the compromise so difficult to achieve. Under the constant assaults of plenitude, it is difficult to agree to being just one person, and in order to achieve that simple identity, one may be driven to extreme paths. One path is to give in completely, to play the game for all it's worth; another is to renounce desire completely—a solution my peers try for a while with such sincere and ineffective zeal. A third is to do both at the same time—to play the game and know that it's maya. This is what many of the same peers try after they fail at material monkishness. Perhaps Money, in America, is a force so extreme as to become a religious force, a confusing deity, which demands either idolatry or a spiritual education.

For a long time, confronting the dangers both of self-division and of deprivation, I cultivate a rigorous renunciation. I suppose it serves me well. Like some visiting Indian swami, I learn to measure myself against no one and to feel at home everywhere. Not envying is the condition of my dignity, and I protect that dignity with my life. In a sense, it is my life—the only base I have to stand on. If I sometimes have to go around with a run in my stockings when I am in college, if I can't afford the long trek home during Christmas recess, it doesn't matter. I have my essential humanity, that essential humanity which I learned to believe in as a Jewish girl in Poland, and which I've now salvaged with the help of withdrawal and indifference. "Sometimes I see you with a steel rod running down the middle of your back," a friend once tells me. He sees more than most.

My detachment would serve me even better if it were entirely genuine. It isn't. Underneath my carefully trained serenity, there is a caldron of seething lost loves and a rage at the loss. And there is—for all that—a longing for a less strenuous way to maintain my identity and my pride. I want to gather experience with both my hands, not only with my soul. Essential humanity is all very well, but we need the colors of our time and the shelter of a specific place. I cannot always be out on the heath—we exist in actual houses, in communities, in clothes—and occasionally, at some garden party amidst meaningless chat, or in my nearly empty dorm during a holiday break, I forget my ascetic techniques, and the desire for the comfort of being a recognizable somebody placed on a recognizable social map breaks in on me with such anguishing force that it scalds my spirit and beats it back into its hiding place.

It is midafternoon on a drizzly spring afternoon, and about a half-dozen cars are parked in the Leitners' driveway. My family has come in our truck, which now joins several long-finned cars parked in front of a classic fifties suburban house; architectural style, nondescript; color, light pink. We approach this structure respectfully. The Leitners are among the pillars of the little Polish-Jewish community in which we've found ourselves, and Mrs. Leitner is one of its leading hostesses. No one cooks as well as she, or serves the food so elegantly. By the time we come in, the living room is filled with guests—all of them familiar from the continuous string of coffees, dinners, and get-togethers that this group produces in carefully revolving order. They stand among the plush wine-colored sofas and deep, velvet-covered chairs, talking somewhat uneasily. Aside from their language—a jigsaw medley of Polish, Yiddish, and English—their provenance, to a casual onlooker, would be very unclear.

The women, having come from their perfectly idle days of shopping and putting their outfits together, now look, in the manner of the period, a bit as though they have had the services of a taxidermist: meticulously made up, sheathed in stiff dresses and totally matching accessories, smiling carefully. The men are wearing suits and ties and are talking, as always, business. After a while, several people go to the den to watch "The Lawrence Welk Show" or "The Ed Sullivan Show" on television—programs to which they bring a sincere appreciation. I sincerely try to appreciate them too. I sit in front of the large set, trying to penetrate the charm of the Andrews Sisters and of Dinah Shore—this group's great favorite—but they seem so eerily low-key that instead of being cheered up,

as I know I'm supposed to be, I feel a sort of mopeyness, a lowering of my own pulse, coming upon me in response.

The dining-room table is laden with heaps of cakes, all homemade, delicious, and set out on elaborate platters. This is conspicuous consumption in its most literal form; it says, We, who have either gone hungry or were in danger of it, can now indulge ourselves to our heart's content, and we can do it with some refinement. One of the purposes of these parties is to give the hostess something to do, to gather her skills and activities to some point, and Mrs. Leitner, a small, jolly woman with a humorous twinkle in her eyes, bustles between the kitchen and the living room quite happily. No, she can't give out the recipe for her three-layered torte, it's a secret. As for that delicate French pastry, well, several women in this room have tried to make it, but it didn't come out the same way . . .

This could be mistaken for an ordinary suburban party—but not quite. What is out of sync here? Perhaps it is the contrast between the carefully polite manners and the occasional slap on the back, or a loud laugh that breaks through. The people in this room are behaving properly, as if for someone else's benefit. But who is watching? A Canadian superego, I think—some allegorical notion of what is correct here, and what is vulgar and "green." And so, a layer of boredom falls over the proceedings as people exchange compliments on each other's dresses and comment on the garden and the weather. This is an imitation of Canadian conversation—polite, constrained, bland. It's also conversation without a context. Although this small group is practicing an earnest attempt at assimilation, they have hardly entered into the web of Canadian life. They would all say that they love their adopted country; they've made good here, after all, they have more wealth and peace than they could have dreamed of in Poland. But their love is oddly isolationist: they are not interested in Canadian politics, or the local culture, or even their neighbors, with whom, they'd be the first to say, they have nothing in common.

In fact, while the men go to their businesses, most of the women in this room have mighty little connection with the world outside their houses. None of them thinks about taking a job; leisure—something different from rest, which comes after labor—is the apotheosis toward which they have always striven, an important sign of having made it, and their husbands' ambitions, not to speak of their own, wouldn't allow them to work for a salary. Their husbands' ambitions, however, do not always extend to making their wives happy, and stories of marital meanness are passed on regularly. One woman's husband specializes in insulting her publicly and apparently does not refrain from hitting her when in private; another is so jealous that he won't let his wife visit her women friends alone, and once, in a fit of truly delusional rage—she hardly goes out of the house—he fires a bullet into her arm and wounds her badly. Neither of these women does anything to defend herself: they're not used to crossing their husbands, and they're hardly surprised by outbursts of male temper. That's how men are, and, of course, they've never even glimpsed ideas of ideological self-reformation or "working on a relationship." Still, in Poland they might have had the pressures of neighborly gossip and censure on their side; here, for all their fancy dresses, they are more helpless, more alone with their troubles. They live too far apart from each other to maintain an unashamed ease of daily intercourse, and without being fully incorporated into a different system of social rules, they do not get the benefit of the local code of civility.

I often find myself with them in the stuffy big bubbles of their cars, crisscrossing Vancouver's relentlessly symmetrical roads, from home to shopping center to an endless round of liquorless parties—women who have gotten everything they have wanted, and who have so little to stave off boredom or private grief, so little to sustain them. They have attained within a few years what it took their Jewish predecessors on the Lower East Side at least two generations to achieve, and on the whole they consider themselves contented, satisfied. But they confuse me, in their perfect propriety. They're a version of what I might become, and even a temptation for what I might want to be: a woman who has the comfort of living within

the perfectly knowable orderliness of middle-class convention. "Pretty soon, you should find a nice husband, a smart, talented girl like you," they tell me. Indeed, why should I have the arrogance to have different aspirations? And what, exactly, should my aspirations be? Theirs is an immigrant success story, and that's the story of their own lives that they accept. But perhaps, if they had the words to say just what they feel, something different might pour out, an elusive complaint of an elusive ailment. For insofar as meaning is interhuman and comes from the thickness of human connections and how richly you are known, these successful immigrants have lost some of their meaning. In their separateness and silence, their wisdom—what they used to know in an intimate way, on their skin—is stifled and it dries up a little. Probably, in their phase of immigrant life, full assimilation is impossible, and in trying to take on the trappings of their new environment, they've achieved an almost perfect deracination instead: they move in a weirdly temperate zone, where the valence of cultural vitality is close to neutral. Sitting upright in their cars, in their immaculately pressed dresses, keeping their houses more spotlessly neat than the natives, they say to each other, "I'm fine, everything is fine," and they almost believe that they are.

My sister, who is now eleven, has taken to shaving her legs, surrounding her eyes with large amounts of makeup, and putting on lipstick. When she first shows us her mascaraed eyelashes and depilated calves, my mother cries. What is our Alinka turning into? In our circles in Poland, only loose girls might have done this; in fact, nobody Alinka's age did. I'm also unnerved by my sister's swift metamorphosis. What is she turning into?

Some sort of beatnik, it appears, though in most parts of the continent it's a late day for that. She takes to wearing black clothes and going on the streets barefoot. This last is a blow to the entire family. How can she behave like that?

Altogether, Alinka seems to be striving for a normal American adolescence. The only trouble is that none of us knows what that's supposed to be, and my sister pains us with her capacity for change, with becoming so different from what she was. She is leaving us abruptly, leaving us to find her own pleasures. My mother worries about her younger daughter's friends. Are they proper children, from good families? But the categories don't seem to translate. The kids that Alinka occasionally brings home live in well-appointed houses, and they're certainly respectable. But they aren't like the "better" children we knew in Cracow: these girls are both shy and rowdy, and they observe few rules of mannerliness; when they manage to speak to adults, they hang their heads and revert to defensive monosyllables. They are not children who might sit on the couch, discussing some book they've lately read and shaking hands politely with everyone before leaving. "They're so badly brought up," my mother says wonderingly. "They don't greet anyone, they don't say thank you after they eat. . . . What a strange country."

Alinka is also becoming educated in Jewishness, more rigorously than I ever will be. My parents have sent her to a Hebrew school—ironically, a gesture of assimilation—and for a while she agitates for making our household kosher and debates the merits of letting non-Jews into Vancouver's new Jewish Community Center. My mother has no intention of going back to the kosher kitchen of her girlhood, but I'm not amused by this paradoxical turn of events. I have no knowledge yet of the complex historical arguments that fuel the ideas Alinka has brought home, but her embrace of ethnic exclusivity rubs against the equation I've somehow developed between Jewishness and a kind of secular humanism. To be Jewish, in my mind, is to stand against distinctions, to uphold everyone's equal personhood, pure and simple. "But you're not religious!" I shout at her, quite certain that no sister of mine is going to be born again. "And if you're not, you shouldn't act as if you are! And what do you mean, you shouldn't let non-Jews into the center? That's discrimination! It's supposed to be a community center, don't forget!" "But it's our community center," Alinka answers uncertainly; she is visibly torn between the moral precepts she's been introduced to in a place as respectable as school and the sisterly fury unleashed on her—and suddenly I feel sorry for her and for myself. Everything is getting all mixed up here, and my convictions, of which I've been so certain, can actually hurt my sister.

As for me, I have begun to refuse even the minimal observance of my childhood. This is because Vancouver's conservative synagogue—the house of prayer my parents have judged most appropriate, now that they have a choice of different ways to be Jewish—fills me with a discomfiting sense that a concentrate of feeling, the feeling of mystery, has been diffused and flattened out in its interior. The synagogue is housed in a white, neat building that echoes the perfectly prosy architecture all around it. In the building's basement, there is a hallway and public rooms, which look exactly like my high school's corridors and which, on high holidays, fill up with overdressed children and adolescents. The prayer room is crowded with women who carefully observe each other's hats and suits and men slapping each other affably on the back, much as they do at parties. I know that they have all paid for their seats and that everyone is conscious of who can afford what. But it is the blond wood of the benches and the floors and the daylight streaming freely into the cheery amphitheater that makes this, to me, a secular space.

And so I escape, and my parents don't insist. They don't try to exercise much influence over me anymore. "In Poland, I would have known how to bring you up, I would have known what to do," my mother says wistfully, but here, she has lost her sureness, her authority. She doesn't know how hard to scold Alinka when she comes home at late hours; she can only worry over her daughter's vague evening activities. She has always been gentle with us, and she doesn't want, doesn't know how, to tighten the reins. But familial bonds seem so dangerously loose here!

Truth to tell, I don't want the fabric of loyalty and affection, and even obligation, to unravel either. I don't want my parents to lose us, I don't want to betray our common life. I want to defend our dignity because it is so fragile, so beleaguered. There is only the tiny cluster, the four of us, to know, to preserve whatever fund of human experience we may represent. And so I feel a kind of ferociousness about protecting it. I don't want us to turn into perpetually cheerful suburbanites, with hygienic smiles and equally hygienic feelings. I want to keep even our sadness, the great sadness from which my parents have come.

I adjure my sister to treat my parents well; I don't want her to challenge my mother's authority, because it is so easily challenged. It is they who seem more defenseless to me than Alinka, and I want her to protect them. Alinka fights me like a forest animal in danger of being trapped; she too wants to roam through the thickets and meadows. She too wants to be free.

My mother says I'm becoming "English." This hurts me, because I know she means I'm becoming cold. I'm no colder than I've ever been, but I'm learning to be less demonstrative. I learn this from a teacher who, after contemplating the gesticulations with which I help myself describe the digestive system of a frog, tells me to "sit on my hands and then try talking." I learn my new reserve from people who take a step back when we talk, because I'm standing too close, crowding them. Cultural distances are different, I later learn in a sociology class, but I know it already. I learn restraint from Penny, who looks offended when I shake her by the arm in excitement, as if my gesture had been one of aggression instead of friendliness. I learn it from a girl who pulls away when I hook my arm through hers as we walk down the street—this movement of friendly intimacy is an embarrassment to her.

I learn also that certain kinds of truth are impolite. One shouldn't criticize the person one is with, at least not directly. You shouldn't say, "You are wrong about that"—though you may say, "On the other hand, there is that to consider." You shouldn't say, "This doesn't look good on you," though you may say, "I like you better in that other outfit." I learn to tone down my sharpness, to do a more careful conversational minuet.

Perhaps my mother is right, after all; perhaps I'm becoming colder. After a while, emotion follows action, response grows warmer or cooler according to gesture. I'm more careful about what I say, how loud I laugh, whether I give vent to grief. The

storminess of emotion prevailing in our family is in excess of the normal here, and the unwritten rules for the normal have their osmotic effect.

Because I'm not heard, I feel I'm not seen. My words often seem to baffle others. They are inappropriate, or forced, or just plain incomprehensible. People look at me with puzzlement; they mumble something in response—something that doesn't hit home. Anyway, the back and forth of conversation is different here. People often don't answer each other. But the mat look in their eyes as they listen to me cancels my face, flattens my features. The mobility of my face comes from the mobility of the words coming to the surface and the feelings that drive them. Its vividness is sparked by the locking of an answering gaze, by the quickness of understanding. But now I can't feel how my face lights up from inside; I don't receive from others the reflected movement of its expressions, its living speech. People look past me as we speak. What do I look like, here? Imperceptible, I think; impalpable, neutral, faceless.

"When I think of love, I think of running with someone through a sunny meadow, holding hands," Penny says dreamily, rolling over on her bed.

"Sunny?" I say, surprised. "When I think of love, I think of a dark forest that you go into by a narrow path." What I really think about, of course, is Marek, but that's too delicate a matter to talk about with this new friend. Penny and I are lying on two single beds in her pink-and-white bedroom, where I've come for an overnight visit—that luxurious benefit of big houses and private rooms. We're dressed in our nighties, and are talking in that pleasant dozy, irresponsible state in which you can speak slowly and utter your deepest thoughts.

"You know what Larry said to me today?" Penny says, now sounding a little kittenish.

"What?"

"He said, 'Kid, you'd be good on a desert island.' "

"Oh yeah?" I say, interested. "Does that mean that he was giving you a line?"

"Oh God," Penny sighs with mock exasperation. "Sometimes I think you're hopeless. That wasn't a line. I think he likes me."

"Oh," I say humbly. "Do you think you'll go out with him?"

"God, I hope so," Penny sighs, now in earnest. "He's so cute. Don't you think?"

"I guess so," I say uncertainly. The standards for cuteness around here are very different from what I'm used to, and most boys I meet seem to me too round or too gangly, or too splayed in their movements. There are a few at my high school who are hard shaped and as large boned and handsome as cigarette ads, but their faces are impossible to look into, and they usually turn out to be athletes, and those apparently are absolutely off-limits.

I trust Penny to explain some of these things to me. She is a happy, bouncy young person, curly haired and ruddy cheeked, and she is the smart girl in class, the one who always gets the best grades. Penny is a native Vancouverite, and Vancouver, as far as she is concerned, is the best place on earth, though I, of course, know that it is Cracow. We like each other quite well, though I'm not sure that what is between us is "friendship"—a word which in Polish has connotations of strong loyalty and attachment bordering on love. At first, I try to preserve the distinction between "friends" and "acquaintances" scrupulously, because it feels like a small lie to say "friend" when you don't really mean it, but after a while, I give it up. "Friend," in English, is such a good-natured, easygoing sort of term, covering all kinds of territory, and "acquaintance" is something an uptight, snobbish kind of person might say. My parents, however, never divest themselves of the habit, and with an admirable resistance to linguistic looseness, continue to call most people they know "my acquaintance"—or, as they put it early on, "mine acquaintance."

As the word is used here, Penny is certainly a friend, and we spend many hours together, gossiping about our classmates and teachers and futures. And, of course, about dates. Dating, to Penny, is the acme of desire, the focus toward which much of her thought

and activity is directed. She spends quite a bit of time applying various brands of makeup to her face, contemplating which one will give her "it"—"it" being, at this time, what every girl wants to have. She analyzes minutely the signs of boys' favor and interest: what does it mean that Tommy looked at her in the hallway, or that Larry kicked her locker?

Dating is an unknown ritual to me, unknown among my Cracow peers, who, aside from lacking certain of its requisite accessories—cars, private rooms, a bit of money—ran around in boy-girl packs and didn't have a ceremonial set of rules for how to act toward the other sex. A date, by contrast, seems to be an occasion whose semiotics are highly standardized and in which every step has a highly determinate meaning and therefore has to be carefully calibrated. I've pored over some articles about it, searching for clues, and have seen some examples on television, and I'm not at all sure that I could pull it off correctly. I know several of the rules: First, you should never let the boy honk for you from the outside; he should come in from his car, so you can introduce him to your parents, with whom he can make small talk for a few minutes. This is the first serious stumble in my imagination. It is very unlikely that I could get my parents to behave with the mixture of white-toothed cheerfulness and offhand casualness that I've seen in American parents on TV, or that they could produce small talk of the "Nice to see you, young man," or "Now be sure to bring my daughter back on time," variety. Then there are the tense moments of getting into the car and negotiating the evening's activity—followed by what is presented as the extremely tricky challenge of making conversation. By this, what is apparently meant is that the girl is supposed to make the boy comfortable enough to get something out of him—an article in *Seventeen* goes so far as to suggest that you bone up on an athletic event, since all of Them are bound to be interested in sports. If there's an uncomfortable silence, you can always break it by reverting to the one unfailing subject—himself.

I don't get the impression from this that an ideal date would be fun for either party. In fact, it seems vaguely scary to me. I never thought that talking to a boy was an enterprise hedged with special difficulty, or requiring special preparation. How can one feel the fresh wind of camaraderie or freedom under such shackled circumstances? On the few occasions when I do go out on a "date," I'm so aware of the many faux pas I might commit, and so little interested in my companion, that in my discomfort I might as well be wearing a tight Victorian corset with high and prickly stays. And the rules and constraints of sexual behavior, as Penny begins to initiate me into them, are even more complicated. I vow to myself never to go through such undignified and "immature" motions. Nevertheless, getting dates is what girls around me seem most to want—especially those Saturday night dates, which are the ultimate proof of a girl's popularity, personality, and presumably her future marriageability. For marriage, of course, is what this is leading up to. Penny's life, in her mind, opens out like a well-kept, sunny road. She will be married; she will have a job of some kind, maybe; she will have children. She will be as cheerful and sensible as she is now—bafflingly cheerful and sensible as far as I'm concerned. Where are her moods, her intensities, the invisible, shadowy part of her personality? I can't penetrate all that transparency; it doesn't give me enough crags and surprises to hook on to.

But that is only because I don't know yet where the surprises in a life such as hers lie, where the painful things are hidden. On one of my overnight visits, our conversation takes an entirely different turn. When the lights are out and I am about to go to sleep, she begins crying softly.

"What is it?" I ask her.

After a long pause, Penny begins to tell me, in a small and pained voice, about her older sister, Janet, who had tried to kill herself, to end her own life.

"But why?" I ask, disbelieving. This comfortable house, this atmosphere of prosy, daily concerns, seems like an utterly incongruous setting for a young girl's attempted suicide.

"Oh," Penny says, "it's my mother. She doesn't really like her. They have fights all the time. Janet has a terrible inferiority complex. I mean, my mother is a good egg, but she is so horrible to Janet . . ."

"That's terrible," I say, utterly at a loss for anything more. A good egg? But she has driven her daughter to this, by not treating her well enough? It doesn't add up, not in my cosmos, and it is only after I come across many more gothic secrets, smoldering in the sensible interiors of these intact suburban households, that I begin to get inklings of what may ail their inhabitants, of the strangled suffering that can be bred within them. For now, I haven't yet learned how to read the surfaces either of Penny's face or of lives like hers well enough to see what's behind them, to discern the paradoxes inherent in their very smoothness.

I'm visiting from New York and sitting on a high, rocky promontory in one of Vancouver's wilder parks. The ocean is beating against the stony shore with white, furiously scattering waves, alternately shadowed by clouds and illumined by the sun. I breathe in this austere beauty deeply and remember how, many years ago, I sat here in a cloud of unhappiness and unknowing, and felt only the terror of this scene and its emptiness. It's enough to make a Berkeleyan of you, this mercurial changeability of all reality under the pressure of the soul. Or a Wittgensteinian, for it is impossible to perceive the meaning of any one thing without knowing the pattern of the surrounding things. Without the color spectrum, there is no yellow or blue, and without seeing its colors, how can one be touched by the beauty of the world?

Vancouver will never be the place I most love, for it was here that I fell out of the net of meaning into the weightlessness of chaos. But now I have eyes to see its flower-filled gardens, and hear small kindnesses under the flat Canadian accents. I discern, in the stories of the people I used to meet at the Leitners' parties, the movements of ordinary struggles and ordinary pleasures. Their lives have the content of change and grief and comfort. I know better now that emptiness is not so easy to achieve, and that assuredly it exists most purely in the soul.

Almost as soon as we come to Vancouver, the search for a music teacher begins. After checking out several pedagogues who strike me as bored, perfunctory, or incompetent, I become convinced that I've indeed found myself in the "cultural desert" that I read about in Cracow's *Cross Section.* It's then that Mrs. Steiner takes me to meet the man who will be my new musical guide. Piotr Ostropov is about seventy when I am introduced to him; he is Russian by origin and accent, and he looks like an Artist—a romantic, nineteenth-century version of one: his head features a large pink bald spot, surrounded by a circle of white hair, sticking impressively upward. His eyes light up with a bright, impish glint, and he strews tobacco from his pipe carelessly all around. I play a Scarlatti sonata for him and a Chopin nocturne, and he confers with Mrs. Steiner animatedly. "More life!" he shouts at me, and I want to shout back that there used to be more life, but I'm much too timid, and anyway, why should he believe me? "Ah, that's very nice," he says at some other point. "You have a nice feeling. Now let me show you what you can do on the piano, even with a simple exercise, mmhm?" And Mr. Ostropov sits down at the piano to demonstrate what he means by "life" with some Czerny exercises. He lowers his large, shapely hands to the keyboard as if he were both a wizard and a snake charmer about to make water spring from a tree branch and transfix his listeners with his power. Then he strikes the rod: he begins with a piece that is nothing more than an arrangement of scales, but as he runs his fingers over the keys, with an insinuating curl to each scale, he makes the rows of notes glitter and shine like some merry brook. His eyes twinkle, and he looks up at me like a magician who has just accomplished the naughtiest, most amusing trick. I give him the best *jeune-fille* smile in my repertory, and our friendship is sealed. "See?" he shouts at me as he gets up, picks up his pipe, and spills some tobacco on my sweater. "See what I mean? Life, life! But you have a nice smile," he adds, looking at me carefully. "You understand a lot, don't you? You're just shy."

It seems that my real friends in Vancouver are fated to be several generations older; but then, in terms of the historical time from which we derive, they are my truer contemporaries. After Mr. Ostropov decides to take me on as a student, we begin a tempestuous musical relationship that borders on purest love. Every week,

a large Cadillac arrives in front of our house, and the Ostropovs' chauffeur delivers me at a large Victorian mansion, where Mr. Ostropov meets me at the door and leads me through a succession of beautiful rooms into a studio filled with English antiques, rugs, old paintings, and a handsome baby grand Steinway.

Usually, he cannot resist sitting down at the piano first; he does so on the pretext of demonstrating some new point of technique, or interpretation. He shows me how to move the thumb as if it were a detachable part, or how to get a smooth legato effect by some unusual fingering. Then, he launches into an entire piece—a movement of a Beethoven sonata, or one of his favorite Chopin mazurkas. When he does something that particularly pleases him—an ornament that he accomplishes with a filigree grace, or a sequence of octaves he gets through by sheer bravura (technique and accuracy are not his strong points)—he looks up at me with leprechaun satisfaction and says "Ah? Ah?" and I nod with as much appreciation as one can pack into a shake of the head. Then he jumps up, and shouting "Ah! You see?" indicates that it's my turn. But I barely begin to play when he impatiently stops my hand, saying, "Like this! You have to love every note!" Sometimes he places his hand over mine, guiding and molding it to the swoop or the decline, or the delicate inner oscillations of a lyrical passage. Or he kneads my arm expressively, humming along in an unmelodious, creaky voice to encourage me into more dramatic crescendos, diminuendos, or rubatos.

Although these sessions can last for as long as three hours—Mr. Ostropov is not a watch-compulsive pedagogue—sometimes he calls me during the week to tell me he has just had a "revolutionary" idea that he wants to show me immediately. Then, he comes to our house and takes the living room over. He paces up and down, flails his arms around, shouts, cajoles, spills his pipe. Usually, the revolutionary idea has to do with some new way of distributing the weight of the arm, or positioning your fingers—sometimes very straight, sometimes curved and clawlike. I try to adjust to these epiphanies as best I can, but there is more passion than method to Mr. Ostropov's art.

The quirky journey that landed Mr. Ostropov in Vancouver—an unlikely place for a person of his ilk—was launched by a real revolution, the Russian Revolution of 1905. Sometimes, he tells me a bit about what happened after that event: about giving concerts with his two brothers—together, they formed the Ostropov Trio—throughout the British Empire; about riding in a buggy on muddy roads in Australia; about courting a girl who turned out to be a Canadian nickel heiress in a French lycée; about pianistic giants he knew—Teodor Leszetycki, Ignaz Friedman, Josef Hofmann—and the ease, the "humanness" of their playing.

All of this is interspersed with mini-lectures on the morality of playing and the art of life—which, for Mr. Ostropov, are quite inseparable. Being a great musician is achieved by being human, and being human is . . . Well, actually, Mr. Ostropov is fairly precise about that. "What is a human being?" he asks me rhetorically during one of our lessons, and then, wordlessly, his index finger delicately extended, he points, in a three-beat rhythm, to his head, his heart, and—after the tiniest syncopated pause—his crotch. Then he looks at me impishly. I smile at him demurely and, I hope, knowingly. "Go on," he says, "the Ballade!"

But what being human is really about is having fire, flair, a holy spark of inspiration. That energy, in Mr. Ostropov's view, should instill not only your playing but your every gesture; it should make all your movements forceful, artful, musical. "When you do anything—put a box of matches down, pick it up—you shouldn't just do it. You have to do it with temperament. When you walk into a room, I want you to walk in so that everyone looks up, and is quiet for a moment." He shows me how I should walk to achieve this feat, raising his head and giving his face a gloomy, proud expression. This appeals to every megalomaniacal and romantic vein in my body. If I could only live by inner fire alone! If I could have enough magnetism to stop a conversation dead when I come into a room! I don't quite see, though, where these flights of *polot*—for this is what he is talking about, the *polot* of my childhood—are to take place in Vancouver, or that they would go over very well in Sharon's basement playroom parties.

I only half-tell myself—to me, he is a formidable personality—that Mr. Ostropov's panache is partly bravado, that not all his hopes have been fulfilled. He hasn't entered the pantheon of the greats he so admires, and he is an odd fish to be swimming in Vancouver's ponds. Because he is so out of his natural habitat, and because there aren't others like him around, with whom he could have easy conviviality and shout and exchange sparks of fire late into the night, because he has been dislocated from his center, he has become that recognizable species of an émigré eccentric—a lovable, temperamental, slightly mad Russian artist.

Mr. Ostropov partly accepts this persona, and plays his inventions upon it: he appears at concerts in a dashing velvet jacket, he grabs people by the shoulder and fixes them with his elfish eyes, he drives his car off without noticing that a tray with a tea service is perched on the trunk lid. Still, I don't think he is eccentric, or quaint. His teaching is not systematic or disciplined; nor do his contortions of the hand do much for my technique. But he grapples with the piano as if it were both his demon and his muse; and as I catch some of his obsession, I too want to strike the rod with more beauty and force. "You have to love every note," he says, "love it. The piano is a machine, and that's the only way to make it human." "There are no straight lines in nature," he once tells me, "and there are no straight lines in music." Somehow, I know what he means by this bit of pantheistic mysticism, and I look for the life of music in the arcs, swerves, and tilts of its lines—the parabolas that delineate the rises and falls of our own inner life, and perhaps the drama of yearning of all organic forms.

Although Mr. Ostropov takes me under his wing, and takes me to concerts where he shows me off proudly as his talented student, he doesn't ask me much about how I am, and I don't talk much to him; it's hard to get a word in edgewise, and anyway, he wouldn't exactly listen. But he does listen to me play—carefully—and, in his irrational and sometimes disorderly utterances, I catch messages that resonate like a clear bell. And so, sitting bent over a piano, with this seventy-year-old man who sometimes scares me and sometimes makes me bite my lip with impatience, I nevertheless feel that we are talking a language that really matters. Besides, Mr. Ostropov is one of the few people around who can see through the occlusions of my unhappiness and depression and withdrawal to something he has faith in. "You'll see," he says to Mrs. Steiner, "she'll grow up to be a bombshell! She's beginning to look like Beethoven!" He too thinks I should choose a practical profession, but he keeps something in me awake, alive.

"The synonyms for 'strong' are mighty, vigorous, puissant, stout, hardy," I read. This string of words is followed by sentences from which I can infer the exact shading of these adjectives, and, on another form, different sentences with spaces left blank for the requisite mot juste. I fill them in quickly, and then turn to my history lesson. This requires more concentration, because of the strange names cropping up all the time—Lake Champlain, Frontenac, Diefenbaker—and because tableaux of frontier towns and of western explorations don't have the same pattern of conflict, war, rhetoric, and costume that I used to know as history. Where are the great personages, the grand battles, the patina of age? These tales of skirmishes in small townships, of people making their way across the inimical woods and the freezing northern expanses of the continent, move horizontally across space rather than vertically through time. They summon images of tiny dots on an enormous landscape, huddles of humanity clotting and then making barely visible ink lines across the map, and I find it hard to conceptualize them as events, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Right now, though, it is summer, and the sun rays cut right through the clear air down to the blanket in our narrow backyard, where I am doing the correspondence courses I've signed up for so I can get through high school in three years rather than four and catch up with students my own age after being placed a year behind because I am a newcomer.

I don't mind these form lessons or the games they ask me to play, as I don't mind anything that I know I can master easily. But there is another motive driving me as well, an extra edge to my ambition—an edge that wasn't there before, and that comes from

a version of the Big Fear. I know how unprotected my family has become; I know I'd better do very well—or else. The "or else" takes many forms in my mind—vague images of helplessness and restriction and always being poor. "The Bowery," I come to call this congeries of anxieties. The Bowery is where I'll end up if I don't do everything exactly right. I have to make myself a steel breastplate of achievement and good grades, so that I'll be able to get out—and get in, so that I can gain entry into the social system from where I stand, on a precarious ledge. I am pervaded by a new knowledge that I have to fend for myself, and it pushes me on with something besides my old curiosity, or even simple competitiveness.

Immigrant energy, admirable name though it has gained for itself, does not seem a wholly joyful phenomenon to me. I understand the desperado drive that fuels it. But I also understand how it happens that so many immigrant Horatio Algers overshoot themselves so unexpectedly as they move on their sped-up trajectories through several strata of society all the way to the top. From the perspective outside, everything inside looks equally impenetrable, from below everything above equally forbidding. It takes the same bullish will to gain a foothold in some modest spot as to insist on entering some sacred inner sanctum, and that insistence, and ignorance, and obliviousness of the rules and social distinctions—not to speak of "your own place"—can land you anywhere at all. As a radically marginal person, you have two choices: to be intimidated by every situation, every social stratum, or to confront all of them with the same leveling vision, the same brash and stubborn spunk.

I too am goaded on by the forked whip of ambition and fear, and I derive a strange strength—a ferocity, a puissance—from the sense of my responsibility, the sense that survival is in my own hands. I don't feel much like a child anymore, and I am both weighted down and concentrated by the seriousness of my—our—situation. I know that I can do anything I have to do. I could jump out of that second-story window the way my father did, or escape out that door. The sense of necessity—that famously ambiguous master—relieves me from small trepidations, the Big Fear supplants small ones of adolescence. I harden myself for whatever battles await me, though it turns out that no battle will ever be as hard as this imaginary one I wage with the dangers in my head. I too suffer from the classic immigrant misconception, and I can't distinguish between the normal and the strenuous road in life, between moderate and high achievement. Becoming a lawyer seems as difficult to me as becoming a chief justice, a teacher of freshman English is as august a personage in my world as a college president. I don't envision that I can get to any of these exalted positions by an ordinary sequence of steps, by putting one foot in front of the other. I have to drive myself, to be constantly on the alert.

The only catch is that I have lost the sense of what, driven as I have become, I am driving toward. The patterns of my life have been so disrupted that I cannot find straight lines amid the disarray. Gradual change within one context, one diagram, is one thing; scrambling all the coordinates is another. "Being a pianist," for example, means something entirely different in my new cultural matrix. It is no longer the height of glamour or the heart of beauty. "What a nice tune," my friends say when I play a Beethoven sonata for them, but I see that they don't care. Moreover, Mrs. Steiner and others inform me, it's not a solid profession, and it will hardly assure my ability to support myself. "Where are you going to get the money for music lessons in New York?" somebody asks me. "A person in your position has to think practically." "You're too intelligent to become a musician," others tell me. But there is nothing in the world that takes a more incandescent intelligence, the intelligence of your whole being! I want to reply.

Still, I begin to see that my "destiny" is no longer going to pull me toward itself as if I were sitting in a chariot driven by the gods. Even the design and thrust of our passions is in large part written by where and when we happen to live, and mine are not yet molded so firmly that the shape of the wax can't be changed, though they are powerful enough so that the remolding will hurt. The unity, the seemingly organic growth of my desires is becoming fragmented, torn. That wholeness came from the simplicity—perhaps given to us only in childhood—of my wants. But now I don't know what to

want, or how to want, any longer. Polish romanticism, in whatever naïve version it has infiltrated my imagination, doesn't superprint easily on the commonsensical pragmatism required of me here. During my solitary walks, I hold long debates with myself about how much I owe to God, and how much to Caesar. Is it right that I should neglect the demands of my emotions, which tell me that music is the medium of my self? No, a voice within me says—but it's a voice I try to silence. It may, by now, be a false siren; purely personal needs, it turns out, are a luxury affordable only by those who have some measure of security, of safety—at least of the internal kind. I'm beginning to respect the force of circumstance—though I am ornery enough that I won't give in to it completely. "Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled world . . ." I begin the valedictory speech I've been asked to deliver on graduating from Eric Hamber High School. Plunge into life, I tell my classmates with considerable passion, try to taste as much of it, to understand as much of human nature—experience—as you can. For this moment, I let my desires speak, and I feel a wild, clean urge to take flight.

But where to? I have no map of experience before me, not even the usual adolescent kind. Aside from the endless varieties of apparel, and swimming pools and cars, I don't know what goods this continent has to offer. I don't know what one can love here, what one can take into oneself as home—and later, when the dams of envy burst open again, I am most jealous of those who, in America, have had a sense of place.

I have an absurd fit of envy, for example, when I read *The Education of Henry Adams*—that idiosyncratic work so unlike anything else I've come across in American literature courses. So this is what it means to be a real American! All along, I've been taught about misfits and outsiders, about alienation and transcendence—which, I suspect, really come to the same thing. But for Henry Adams—and for a few others—America has been a fitting habitation for the mind rather than just a complex of ideas, a field for significant action rather than a launching pad for individual ambition, for making it. A fellow student at Harvard—for this is where this mini-epiphany takes place—is understandably incredulous. He points out that I might as well envy the king of Siam; he points out Henry Adams's horrendous sense of failure. It doesn't matter. In Henry Adams, for all the tortuous involutions of his psyche, I encounter a sense of belonging and of natural inheritance. And this, it turns out, from my displacement, is what I long for—the comfort that comes from being cradled by continuity, the freedom from insignificance. The more I come to know about America, the more I have the dizzying sensation that I'm a quantum particle trying to locate myself within a swirl of atoms. How much time and energy I'll have to spend just claiming an ordinary place for myself! And how much more figuring out what that place might be, where on earth I might find a stable spot that feels like it's mine, and from which I can calmly observe the world. "There are no such places anymore," my fellow student informs me. "This is a society in which you are who you think you are. Nobody gives you your identity here, you have to reinvent yourself every day." He is right, I suspect, but I can't figure out how this is done. You just say what you are and everyone believes you? That seems like a confidence trick to me, and not one I think I can pull off. Still, somehow, invent myself I must. But how do I choose from identity options available all around me? I feel, once again, as I did when facing those ten brands of toothpaste—faint from excess, paralyzed by choice.

And later still, when I see that it is through reading and writing that I'll have my adventures, I come to envy those New York Jewish intellectuals, like Alfred Kazin or Norman Podhoretz, who had the slight leg up of being born here, and who were therefore quicker to understand where they wanted to travel, the parabolas of their ambitions. Their journeys from the outer boroughs to Manhattan felt long and arduous to them, but at least they knew where the center was, they felt the compelling lure of its glittering lights. Their dreams were American dreams; their desires were inscribed in the American idiom. My desires, when freed from their protective covering, are forceful, and they are as unchanneled as an infant's id. I'll have to find new rivulets for them. For a long time, I'll thrash around like a fish thrown from sweet into salty ocean waters.

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We're driving to the airport and we are all made serious by the gravity of the occasion. I am going away to college, in Houston, Texas. "You've done so well, you must be so proud, your parents must be so proud of you"—I've heard this often in the last few months. After all, Rice University, which I'm going to attend, is reputed to have very high academic standards—a phrase that at this point strikes awe into my heart—and it has had the kindness to shower me with enough money to make my going there possible. When I begin to receive a succession of letters informing me of the various scholarships I've been awarded, I hold them delicately between my fingers as if they might be pieces of air, or as if my good luck might break under the slightest pressure.

I've looked up Houston on the map, and I see that it's far. Such images of the Wild West as I possess have been overlaid by photographs in *Time* magazine showing tall buildings, oil rigs, and other signs of an economic boom. I've been told it's very hot there.

As I am about to go through the gate to board my first plane ever, my sister embraces me with a fierceness that recalls her silent appeal when she was small and very unhappy—and I feel again that perhaps, in this departure which might take me much further away than the airplane, there is some betrayal. It is hard to pull myself away from Alinka, hard to look at her suddenly pleading face. I try to remember what Mrs. Steiner—who with her daughters has guided me toward this step—said about living my own life. It is not so simple for me to accept this idea, to extricate myself from the mesh of family need and love, to believe in the merits of a separate life. I've hesitated, but there is no resisting this call. I think of vistas of knowledge, steps ascending to the temple of intellect. In my application, I said I wanted to gain genuine understanding of human nature, and I meant it.

On the plane, I strike up a conversation with a tall, tanned man beside me, and an hour or so into the flight he suggests that I descend with him in San Francisco and spend a few days in his house. Being a free woman now, I pretend to consider this proposal carefully, but decide that I shouldn't miss the first days of classes.

The man tries to laugh this off and persuade me that a few days won't make any difference, and he could really show me around San Francisco. He is very handsome, but I remain firm, and with a queenly graciousness decline the offer.

There is, of course, no real decision to make here, and after the man gets off, I start thinking about what lies ahead. I hardly know, but I feel the tingling of anticipation. I am traveling toward Experience.

Among the many immigrant tales I've come across, there is one for which I feel a particular affection. This story was written at the beginning of the century, by a young woman named Mary Antin, and in certain details it so closely resembles my own, that its author seems to be some amusing poltergeist, come to show me that whatever belief in my own singularity I may possess is nothing more than a comical vanity. But this ancestress also makes me see how much, even in my apparent maladaptations, I am a creature of my time—as she, in her adaptations, was a creature of hers.

Mary Antin was born in the 1880s, in a town within the Russian Pale, and came to America with her mother and younger brother—her father had gone ahead some years earlier—when she was fourteen, during one of those enormous movements that washed whole Jewish populations across the ocean on crowded, typhoid-infected ships. The family, once they remet in Boston (why they landed there, rather than anywhere else, is never explained) went through about a decade of grinding, hopeless, near-starvation poverty—poverty of a kind that immigrants in our own, in some ways more benign, times almost never fall into. But Mary had several things going for her—first and foremost, that she was a smart little girl. She had a bit of a talent for language and a curious, lively mind—her writing has an unaffected, sweet freshness, she is an irreverent observer, and her recollections of her childhood are suffused with lyrical detail. In America, she quickly became a star student. She wrote essays and poems, of an inspirational kind, about George Washington's heroism, and the virtues of the American Republic. And she had enough spunk to walk right into the editorial offices of her local newspaper to see if her poems could get published. Soon, she was being singled out and sought by important people; she was invited into their homes, treated kindly, and petted by them. Then, her success as a student took her to Boston Latin High School, and for a while her life was divided between trying to gather some pennies that would enable her family to pay the rent, and mingling with Boston's best.

Ah, how I recognize Mary Antin's youthful chutzpah, her desire to be happy and her troubles, her combination of adolescent shyness and a precocious maturity forced on her by her circumstances! But once she diverges from telling the tale and gives us her views of it, all similarities between us end. For, despite the hardships that leap out from the pages, Mary insists on seeing her life as a fable of pure success: success for herself, for the idea of assimilation, for the great American experiment. She ends her autobiography, entitled *The Promised Land,* as she is about to enter college and pursue her vocation as a natural scientist—and she gives us to understand that everything worked out wondrously well from then on.

There is only one hint that there is another side to the story, and it comes in the preface. "Happening when it did," Mary writes, "the emigration became of the most vital importance to me personally. All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul. I felt the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy of it. I can never forget, for I bear the scars. But I want to forget—sometimes I long to forget. . . . It is painful to be consciously of two worlds. The Wandering Jew in me seeks forgetfulness. I am not afraid to live on and on, if only I do not have to remember too much."

Being a close reader of such remarks, I can find volumes of implied meaning in them. But it is exactly the kind of meaning that Mary Antin was not encouraged to expand upon. And so there it is, a trace she never follows up on: a trace of the other story behind the story of triumphant progress.

Perhaps Mary Antin was more genetically predisposed toward optimism than I am, but I doubt it. It's just that she, like I, was affected by the sentiments of her time, and those sentiments made an inveterate positive thinker of her. The America of her time gave her certain categories within which to see herself—a belief in self-improvement, in perfectability of the species, in moral uplift—and those categories led her to foreground certain parts of her own experience, and to throw whole chunks of it into the barely visible background.

And what is the shape of my story, the story my time tells me to tell? Perhaps it is the avoidance of a single shape that tells the tale. A hundred years ago, I might have written a success story, without much self-doubt or equivocation. A hundred years ago, I might have felt the benefits of a steady, self-assured ego, the sturdy energy of forward movement, and the excitement of being swept up into a greater national purpose. But I have come to a different America, and instead of a central ethos, I have been given the blessings and the terrors of multiplicity. Once I step off that airplane in Houston, I step into a culture that splinters, fragments, and re-forms itself as if it were a jigsaw puzzle dancing in a quantum space. If I want to assimilate into my generation, my time, I have to assimilate the multiple perspectives and their constant shifting. Who, among my peers, is sure of what is success and what failure? Who would want to be sure? Who is sure of purposes, meanings, national goals? We slip between definitions with such acrobatic ease that straight narrative becomes impossible. I cannot conceive of my story as one of simple progress, or simple woe. Any confidently thrusting story line would be a sentimentality, an excess, an exaggeration, an untruth. Perhaps it is my intolerance of those, my cherishing of uncertainty as the only truth that is, after all, the best measure of my assimilation; perhaps it is in my misfittings that I fit. Perhaps a successful immigrant is an exaggerated version of the native. From now on, I'll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments—and my consciousness of them. It is only in that observing consciousness that I remain, after all, an immigrant.

Part III

THE NEW WORLD