Praise for Our Little Histories

Our Little Histories is historical fiction at its finest and most original. Like the very best and most engaging books, this one is always on the move, full of surprising and stunning twists in tone and storytelling, each chapter revealing new remarkable characters and profound thoughts, ones that will reshape and enrich your understanding of Jewish history. Through intimate, innovative, and absorbing prose, Weizman steadily and brilliantly guides the reader backward through modern Jewish history, prompting the reader to consider how the family stories most hidden from us are ultimately the ones that prove most impactful in shaping our own little histories.

– Avner Landes, author of *Meiselman: The Lean Years*

Our Little Histories will leave you breathless. Intriguing, moving, formally inventive, and gorgeously written, this sweeping novel, which traces a fractured branch of a Jewish family, comes together like a jigsaw puzzle, one riveting piece following another. When the last piece snaps into place, the reader is left with a heartbreaking picture of what it means to be human – that is, to play a small, often unknown, role in a tremendous story.

– Jessamyn Hope, author of *Safekeeping*

In *Our Little Histories*, Janice Weizman ingeniously spans 165 years in the life of a single extended family through individual stories that are funny and sad, moving, and eloquent, all brilliantly told. From Chicago to Tel Aviv, Vilna to Belarus, *Our Little Histories* is a masterful sweep through Jewish time that entertains and enlightens without ever losing sight of its heart. A wonderful novel of love and loss and the enduring ties that bind.

– Joan Leegant, author of *An Hour in Paradise*
and *Wherever You Go*

Our Little Histories

Janice Weizman

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The Toby Press

Our Little Histories

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For my parents, who gave me my past,
for my children – the future,
and for the murdered millions
and their lost histories and futures

There is no history of mankind, there is only an indefinite number of histories…

– Karl Popper

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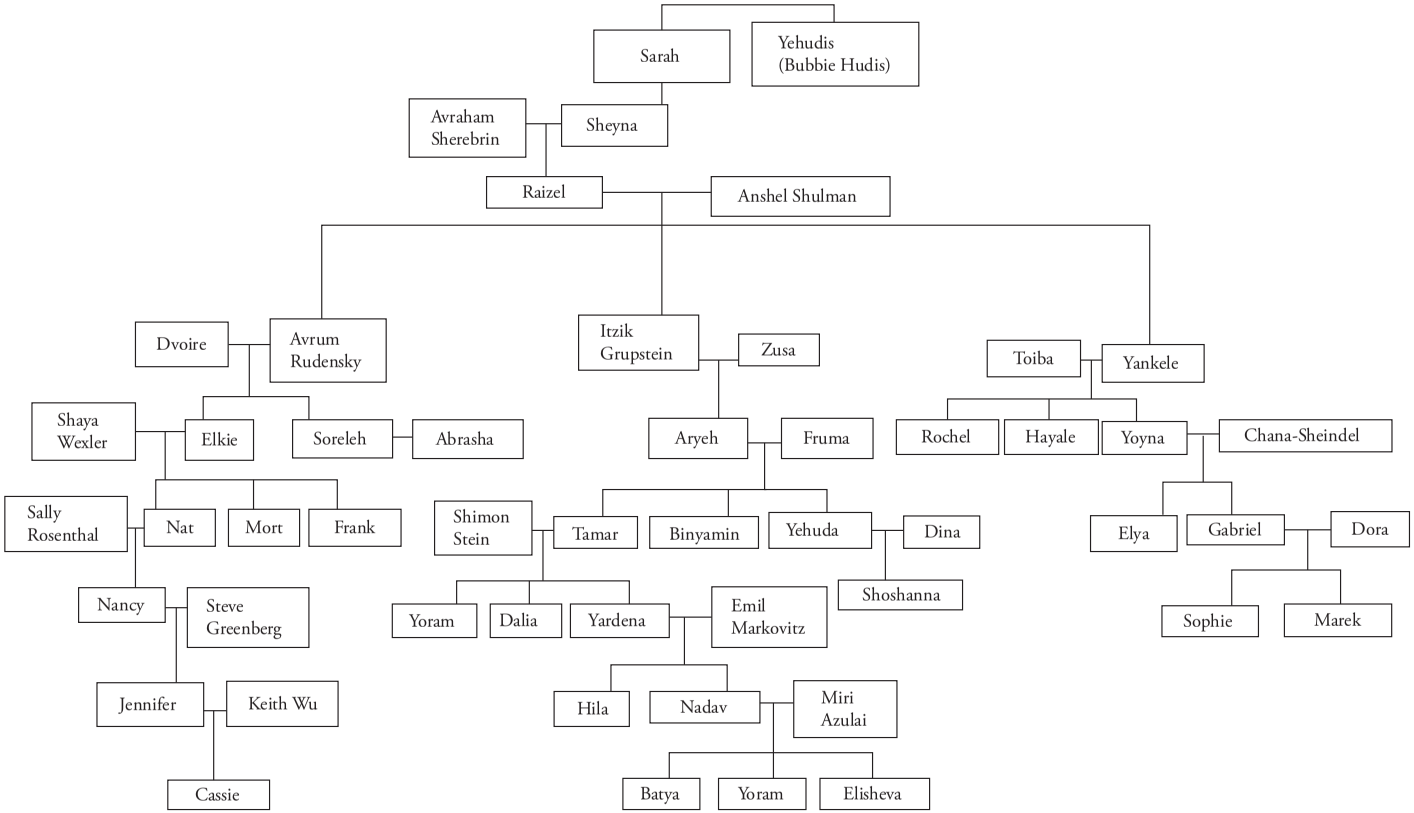
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Reality

(Jennifer – Chicago, 2015)

"You're wearing *that*? On the plane?" My mother stands in the doorway of my bedroom staring aghast at Cassie, my daughter, her granddaughter. We're packing for our midnight flight to Minsk and Cassie is decked out in her Goth Girl attire: plaid miniskirt, Alien Sex Fiend T-shirt over a white blouse, and on her feet, her cherished combat boots. A heavy streak of dark eyeliner and a tiny metallic ball over her right eyebrow complete the look, but that's old news. I know that if anything has given my mother pause, it's the oversized wooden crucifix around Cassie's neck.

"It means nothing," I say, looking up from the pile of socks I'm counting on the bed. "It's just a fashion accessory."

"Well, you certainly look dressed to kill," Mom remarks jauntily, and stares into Cassie's face. "I see you have a new eyebrow thingy."

"My friend Marcy took me to this studio – it's all totally hygienic. Do you like it, Grandma?"

I have to smile at the poetic justice – Nancy Wexler forced to reimagine teenage rebellion in the form of her fifteen-year-old granddaughter's jewelry. *The* Nancy Wexler – renowned feminist,

puppeteer, art teacher, protest journalist, and activist. Though twice married, she'll always be Ms. Nancy Wexler, revered among academic and grassroots feminists alike for her polemical writing on the Pill and female empowerment.

She's come over at this late hour to say goodbye, wish me luck with the project, and to show me "a surprise." I watch as she opens the used Walmart bag she's brought and gingerly draws out a faded blue booklet. Its cover sports a crudely drawn picture of a sun rising over a horizon, set under a bold-font title in Hebrew letters. The only intelligible thing is the year, 1914, which appears to be the date of its publication. As I stare at its stiff dusty cover, I get this weird feeling that I've seen it before. In fact, I'm positive; the art-deco logo of a sun rising over the hills is not something I would easily forget. "Where have I seen this?" I ask aloud.

"You haven't. It's been sitting in my basement with Grandpa's old LIFE magazines for half a century. After Grandma Sally died, I couldn't bring myself to throw them away, so I rescued the whole pile from the trash heap." She gazes wistfully at the journal. "I actually remember my dad showing this to me when I was kid, a few years after the war. He told me it was from the old country, and that there's a poem in here that was written by a relative of his mother. It's in Yiddish, you know. The letters are Hebrew, but it's Yiddish. Since you're going to the place it came from, I thought it would be neat to show it to you."

But I barely hear what she's saying because I'm under a spell of déjà vu. Those letters. That funky picture of the sun. Something about those frail, hundred-year-old pages intrigues me. I ask my mother if she'll let me take it to Slawharad, and when she agrees I pack it carefully with my files.

Later that night at the airport Keith hugs us in turn, me affectionately, Cassie anxiously. This is her first trip abroad, and neither of us is at all sure that it's going to be a success. Her original summer plans, the ones avidly arranged months earlier, involved a stint as a counselor-in-training at a small arts camp in Upstate New York, but last week crisis struck; the director was charged with molesting young boys, the camp was shut down, and Cassie was left in the lurch with not a plan B in sight.

Cassie Greenberg-Wu. Gorgeous sui generis, fortune-kissed daughter of not one but two weighty civilizations. Jewish Mom. A dad born in Hong Kong. Survivors of the fates. Like her grandma Rose Wu, she knows how to smooth-talk destiny. Like her grandma Nancy Wexler, her instincts are her spirit guides. But most of all she's a searcher. She wouldn't put it that way, but Keith and I know how much she yearns to belong to something. Keith, being an anthropology professor and having some authority on the matter, claims that the issue is only natural for a mixed-racer: too much history, too many roots, as he puts it. It's a conundrum that lurks under the surface of everything she does; Asian plus Jewish equals…what? No matter how much we insist that the only thing she needs to be is her own charming self, the equation is always waiting for an answer.

She's a great kid, always has been. The only thing that gives us cause for concern is that her Halloween-style clothing has come with a new group of friends. As far as we can tell from the little that Cassie has let on, the "Goth Girls" are into soft drugs, suicide-themed music, and casual nihilism. Ever since Cassie admitted that one of the posse was caught self-harming in the school bathroom, we've taken to casually monitoring her every move.

For the first few days after getting the bad news about the camp, she moped around the house in a depressive funk. "Why does stuff like this always happen?" she despaired to her friends on the phone. "I'll probably kill myself out of boredom!" Keith and I surmised that in the absence of concrete plans, Cassie would be spending her summer moping and doping with the Goth Girls. There were basically two choices: she could either stay at home with Keith and look for a job – an unlikely proposition at this late stage – leaving her to spend long days in the company of her loser friends, or she could come with me on my gig to Belarus. I was actually relieved when Cassie unhappily opted for the trip. The insanity of taking a spoiled fifteen-year-old to the wilds of Eastern Europe doesn't escape me, but this whole Slawharad project is so insane anyway that I'm hoping, somewhat optimistically, that the two insanities will cancel each other out and this trip will do all of us some good.

Once we're settled in our seats Cassie inflates her neck pillow and falls asleep immediately. But I put on the headphones, find the classical music channel, set the seat back, and replay, like a surrealist film, the curious accretion of events set in motion last winter that have brought me to this moment.

They began, as most things do these days, with an email.

Dear Mrs. Jennifer Greenberg-Wu,

Hello from Minsk. My name is Maxim Pranovitch, owner and CEO of Belarus Mineral, from the country of Belarus. I have written this email with the help of my lawyer, Mr. Pavel Drozd, because his English is very good.

Some days ago, I was visiting Chicago and my guide took me to your "Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians" show at the Museum of Ethnology. He explained that you call this show a Living Installation. I liked it very much. I stayed for a very long time to watch the woman in the white tunic playing the harp like in the ancient drawings, and also the priest making a sacrifice to the gods, and also the two little boys writing on papyrus. For me it was like a play in the theater. Ever since I was a young child and my mother read to me the Bible stories about the pyramids and the temples, I have wanted to see the things that the people do in that show.

I want to tell you that this show has put an idea in my head, and I want to make to you a very special proposal. I have made a research about your professional reputation. I see that you have worked as a museum curator in many places and that you are now a freelancing woman, and that you possess a solid name in the field of Living Installations. This is all excellent. And now I will tell you my idea. It is my dream that you will put on a Living Installation in the town where I was born. It is a very small place, very very humble, called Slawharad. But this show will not be about Belarusian people. It will be about Jewish people.

The reason I want to do this is an amazing story. You see, Mrs. Jennifer, a few years ago my grandmother shared with me a secret that one of her own grandfathers was Jewish! You would not believe my surprise when I heard this thing. He died when my grandmother was a child, and we know very little about him. However, because of his Jewish blood that is in me, I feel that I am also in a small way part of the

Jews. It is a very strong thing that I feel about everything that has a connection to Jewish people.

Do you know the television show, Big Brother*? I'm sure that you do. It is where a group of strangers all move into a house to live together with no leaving allowed. Here in Belarus everyone loves the show. My idea is that I want to build one of your Living Installations, but where Jewish people will be the stars. It will be just like the people in* Big Brother. *We will find a Jewish family, real Jews, not actors, and they will be living like my ancestors in a traditional Russian cabin, which we call an* izba*, but this* izba *will have a glass wall so that everyone will be able to see what is happening inside. They do not have to do anything special. They will be in their Jewish lives, and visitors will come to observe how they make their life with all of their special behaviors and habits.*

Though I myself am living in Minsk, I want to make this izba *installation in Slawharad, the home of my grandmother's family, in honor of my Jewish great-great-grandfather. I would like for Belarus people to be able to watch the family and see how Jewish people make their religion, and so they will know about the Jews who used to live right here, in the town and all over the country of Belarus.*

Mrs. Jennifer, I want to invite you to come to Slawharad and curate this living Jewish installation. I am a very busy man but if you can give to this project a mere two weeks in the coming July, I will make myself available. As for financing and your own fee, I will say that I am a man who has worked hard all his life, and I know to pay very nicely for the things I want, and also to show my gratitude to people who help me to achieve my goals.

If this project interests you, please answer to Pavel, his address you will find in the cc.

With very much respect,

Maxim Pranovitch

The first thing I did was google Maxim Pranovitch. A slew of links came up, most from the financial pages of international newspapers. The headline, "Belarusian Mineral – Maxim Pranovitch's Golden Ticket" was the first, followed by several more about the sale of a percentage of Belarus Mineral to an "unnamed Russian investment group." There was also a video tour of Maxim Pranovitch's luxury

yacht, and a lively excerpt from what appeared to be an appearance on a talk show.

A Jewish reality installation! What a joke. But still! It was preposterous, yes, but it also, I had to admit, worked perfectly with the concept behind "Living Installations," the format I had been staging in museums for the past five years. The concept is simple: rather than tell, show; offer people the chance to witness cultural customs and practices, enacted before them in real time. Before the Ancient Egyptians show that had so inspired Pranovitch, I had curated and staged the goings-on at a Greek temple, a Roman senate, an Inca court, and even, my most successful show, a Native American prayer ceremony, co-curated with representatives of Illinois tribes.

Given that Living Installation formats involve real people performing authentic acts of cultural affiliation and tradition, wasn't a *real* family of religious Jews living out their day-to-day life a logical next move? Portrayed in the right way, it could be bold, challenging, powerful – an amalgamation of both performance and ownership, the most real that reality could be. I could feel the nebulous core of it starting to take shape. To invite people into a space where the distinction between illusion and reality is blurred, enacting the indisputable fact that what is unfolding before them is, in the simplest sense of the word, true. Done right, it could be nothing less than thrilling.

But when I told Keith about it, he failed to share my enthusiasm. "Living their Jewish lives?" he said, making a face. "That's pretty patronizing. The whole idea sounds ridiculous."

"I know," I agreed, "but in a good way. Imagine it – like a reality show, but with actual religious content. It's not reality, its hyperreality! It's…it's a simulacrum! It's the imitation that becomes an actualization. It's edgier than edgy. It's state-of-the-art fabrication of the real."

"You do see the irony," he said dryly.

"What irony?"

"Well, you're not exactly a model Jewess."

"Don't you Jewess me, you banana."

"You're not even a model Jew."

"He doesn't only want me for my ethnicity."

"How do you know? He's probably under the illusion that you actually know something about the subject."

"I know enough."

"You may have a handle on the basics, but hard-core Orthodox Judaism? Admit it, Jen, you'll have to do as much research for this as you did for the Egyptian show."

Deep down, I had to admit that he had a point. My mom's family was never into religion, and my stepdad isn't even Jewish. Religion was just never a thing for us.

"OK, I'm an atheist," I conceded, "but a Jewish atheist."

"Are you going to tell that to your Belarusian tycoon who thinks you're the real deal?"

"Not a problem," I had replied breezily. "I can educate myself if need be."

Or that's what I thought then. But now, when Pranovitch's dream is about to unfold in real time, a small voice in my head is whispering, like a brutally honest friend, *"What if Keith was right?"* His skepticism which, truth be told, was not misplaced, is now pitted against the months of research I've put into creating this show. What if I've somehow forgotten some essential detail, or made some inexcusable mistake? What if something in this outrageous show is going to screw up badly? What if I've gotten myself, and the teenager sleeping beside me, into something I may live to regret?

It's already afternoon when, one connecting flight later, we touch down in Minsk. Cassie and I stumble inelegantly into the arrival lounge where a driver is holding a sign with large black letters that says *Mrs. Greenberg-Wu*. "Hi," I greet him with an outstretched hand. "I'm Jennifer Greenberg. You're taking us to Slawharad, right?"

"No English," the driver replies as he grimly shakes my hand and takes our suitcases. Hoping for the best, we follow him out to his black BMW. The highway landscape is dull and unremarkable with its endless stretches of fields and forest. I'm keenly aware that this place, Belarus, is the land my great-grandparents left for America

over one hundred years ago, yet the drama of encountering it now doesn't excite me. I feel little connection to these forests, these endless miles of fields. Though I've slept for most of the flight, I soon doze off, waking only when the driver taps me on the shoulder and wakes me with the words, "Madam, Slawharad."

I blink open my eyes. A security guard is waving us into the parking lot of the warehouse which houses the set, a place I'm very familiar with, having seen it hundreds of times on Skype. Pranovitch in person is somehow better looking than he appeared on my computer screen: part oligarch part indie-film director, in an expensive leather coat and black jeans, with wavy longish hair and a sharp little goatee. "Mrs. Jennifer!" he exclaims. "You are here! Welcome. Welcome to Belarus. Welcome to our Slawharad."

He embraces me, and over his shoulder I see two familiar figures approaching – Vlad, the burly, cheerful construction engineer hired to build the set, and Polina, Pranovitch's sweet, quick-witted niece, just out of design college, who has been acting as my assistant. We greet each other warmly, as if we're old friends, which we sort of are. Over the past several months we've become an intercontinental creative team, using Skype, Dropbox, and Instagram as our mediums of choice. Vlad and I have spent many an evening (for him, many a morning) hammering out the final sketches for the *izba*, while Polina has been invaluable in furnishing it as authentically as possible. With the help of her cell phone screen, we've scrounged together through local flea markets, secondhand furniture shops, and even homes of recently deceased old-timers, where I've watched her bargain with bereft relatives over the perfect wooden bench, an embroidered tablecloth, a handmade bookshelf.

"And this must be your daughter," Pranovitch says as Cassie slides, a little dazed, out of the car. He extends his hand and she shakes it limply. He points to a large Winnebago camper van standing at the far end of the parking lot. "This is where you and your daughter will stay. I have acquired for you a beautiful trailer. Brand new. I apologize that it is not a hotel. A hotel would be better, but there are no hotels in Slawharad. I hope you will be very comfortable. If you need something, you will tell Polina and she will bring it for you."

"No hotels?" Cassie says, incredulous.

"Come," Pranovitch says, gallantly ignoring my daughter and leading the way into the warehouse through a sliding metal door with Russian writing on it. "It says, *Stay Out. Private Property*," Polina translates.

I couldn't have thought of an edgier effect if I tried. "Fantastic!" I exclaim, invigorated by all the excitement.

We step into a black entry hall lit with small bright spotlights. A ticket counter with an electric marquee runs a banner in Belarusian. "This will show the prices," Pranovitch says. "Not very expensive, but we are not going to offer the entertainment for free." A flat screen hangs on the wall behind the counter, displaying what appears to be the interior of the cabin.

"This will show what is happening in the *izba*," Polina explains, "but it will just be a taste. To see it properly the people will have to buy a ticket. Now come. You must be very much wanting to see how your plans came out." They lead me down a corridor, also black and brightly lit, to a second door which opens onto something that resembles a makeshift theater. On our left, men are assembling aluminum bleachers that face a giant glass wall, behind which is an authentically furnished nineteenth-century one-room peasant home. "There is place for 150 people, fifteen in each row," Vlad reiterates the details. I follow them around the back of the stage to a small entryway, then up a narrow staircase and through a sliding glass door.

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Everything is in the details. Get them right and the spectators will find themselves transported into a foreign environment as surely as Martians stepping off a spacecraft. To create the set for the show I examined hundreds of documents and photographs from what is known as The Pale of Settlement, a region of unstable borders in which, from 1791 until 1917, all Jewish inhabitants of the Russian empire were forced to live. Most of the rural population lived in one-room cabins made of wooden planks with thatched straw roofs and small windows. The winters were long and brutal, and heat was

a constant challenge. The central feature of a home, if the family was lucky, was a huge wood-burning oven called a *pechka*.

As I pored over the material, the phrase *nasty, brutish, and short* often came to mind. The miserable towns, with their ramshackle wooden buildings and muddy market squares, were bleak and depressing. Hardship was etched into the faces of the people and obvious in their scruffy and ill-fitting clothing. The men, with their thick beards and shabby caps, appeared weary. The women wore long dresses, heavy shawls, and kerchiefs on their heads. The children were scrawny with big eyes and patched coats. Nobody looked particularly cheerful.

I drafted plans for a one-room *izba* cabin with a large *pechka* set in the middle, a roughly hewn wooden table with two long benches, and some beds pushed together on one side. Due to the absence of plumbing there would normally have been an outhouse in the yard, but in a concession to modern comforts I added a bathroom behind the stove before sending the final version off to Vlad.

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I've viewed this space from every possible angle on my computer screen, but now, stepping into the actual creation, I'm delighted with how authentic it all feels. Here is the main room, with its worn wooden floors and small windows hung with lace curtains. Here is the giant brick *pechka* oven with the flat top and open fireplace, built specially for the set by a master stove builder whose family has been in the business for generations. Here is the kitchen table, complete with water stains and scratches, which Polina's sharp eyes picked out in the home of her sister-in-law's great-grandmother who had passed away two months earlier. Here are the wooden benches, bought from a secondhand furniture dealer in Mogilev. With satisfaction I survey the roughly cut shelves, the iron pots and pans, the chipped dishes, the crudely-made ceramic cups. On the opposite side of the cabin four beds, three singles and one double, are made up with thick woolen blankets. Between them, parallel to the wall, a large antique clothes cupboard borrowed from

Polina's uncle provides a small space, blocked from the spectators' view, where the family can change clothes.

"I think it came out very nice," Vlad says proudly. "Just like in the pictures you sent, yes? I bring my grandfather here, and he can't believe it. He says to me, 'Vlad, this is just like my grandfather's cabin that I used to visit when I was a boy before the war. Exactly the same!' Do you see this stove? My grandfather loved this stove. It almost made him cry. I think that all of the people will cry when they see this house. It is a house from our past."

"And now," Pranovitch says, "you must see the secret places. They are very special." Polina leads us behind the stove where a crawl space has been made comfortable with purple carpeting and colorful stuffed pillows. On the wall hangs a 34-inch screen which is hooked up to a computer. A brand-new keyboard sits on a low table. This space was a last-minute addition, built after it dawned on me that we could not put three kids in a fake cabin without some sort of access to screen time. Cassie plops down on a pillow. "This is so, so awesome. Mom, can I live here too?" I shake my head sharply, hoping no one else has heard her.

"And look," Polina says, opening a small fridge in the corner. It's been stocked with a carton of milk, a pack of processed yellow cheese with Hebrew writing on the label, and other kosher foods for clandestine snacking. "Yum. Is that hummus?" Cassie asks.

Polina smiles with satisfaction. "I ordered this food from a special supermarket in Minsk."

"And that's the bathroom, right?" I say, peeking through a narrow door in the wall. I poke open the door and see a prefab toilet, sink, and shower.

"In there," Vlad chuckles, "it is the twenty-first century."

Pranovitch shows me down the hallway outside the set to a series of small offices – one for me, one for himself, and one for Polina and Vlad. Mine is fitted with a desk, two chairs, a lamp, a stand with an electric kettle, coffee, tea and sugar, and a small fridge. I take a look out the window, which offers an uninspiring but clear view of the neighborhood. Polina murmurs something to Pranovitch, and then suggests that we head out to the parking lot to check out our Winnebago.

It's in pristine condition, right out of the factory. Cassie gets over her initial disappointment and actually seems satisfied. She tries out the adaptor I bought for our phone charger and tries to get Wi-Fi. I take a quick shower and then head back to the warehouse where I set up my computer, plug in my cell, and boil the kettle for a quick cup of the Taster's Choice coffee I take wherever I go. As I sift through some last-minute notes I made on the plane, I come across the old Yiddish journal that Mom gave me the night we left. I show it to Polina and she suggests that we place it on the shelf beside the holy books. I stay to help her and Vlad, who are trying to light a fire in the *pechka*. Just when we manage to get a flame going, a workman appears and announces something in Russian. Polina clasps my hands excitedly. "They are here!"

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Finding candidates to participate in Living Installations is actually harder than it sounds. The whole concept dictates that they can't be actors. They have to be "normal" – agreeable, easy to get along with, willing to follow instructions, and uninhibited about appearing in public as a version of themselves. It's rare to find candidates who fit this bill, and I've learned that it's best, whenever possible, to work with people whom I know personally. But this project presented a special challenge. I needed an actual family, all of whose members would be OK with being under the scrutiny of spectators. Though Pranovitch was willing to compensate generously, I had to find the *right* people.

It isn't like I don't know any Jews; I know plenty, except they aren't the types whom anyone would actually pay to see on display. Could I actually call up, say, Alexa Lifshitz, a badass girl when we were in college but now a corporate lawyer, married with two preschoolers, and ask her if she'd like to dress up in long skirts and pretend that she believes in God? Or send off an email to Carrie Feldman, my Pilates instructor, to feel out if she and her family might want to fly to Belarus to take part in a fun reality experiment involving traditional religious Jewish practice? Even Keith's tennis partner, Jay

Litwin, a sensitive soul who flirted with Jewish observance in grad school, was not going to be right for this. I drew up a mental list of every Jewish person I knew and rejected all of them. But then, just when I was thinking that I might have to give up the whole project, I remembered my Israeli "cousins," Nadav and his younger sister Hila, relatives so distant that I wasn't sure exactly how we were related.

I first met Nadav Markovitz twenty years ago when I made a detour south from my summer trip to Europe, and at my mother's urging visited his mom, Yardena, in Tel Aviv and his grandmother, Tamar, on her kibbutz. Hila had been travelling at the time, so I literally knew her in name only, but over the years Nadav and I had kept loosely in touch. For a while we wrote occasional letters, but our correspondence never made the switch to email, and all I knew of him now was what my mother passed on, isolated tidbits of information that I only barely registered. He had married his girlfriend, Miri. Together they had become religiously observant. They had three kids. He had been teaching physics and computer science for years at a local college.

It was as though the forces of the universe had somehow aligned. I wrote to Nadav, and in spite of our having lost touch he was happy to hear from me. Over a series of Skype conversations in which we caught up and held photos of our respective families to the camera, he warmed to the idea, admitting that the innovative and experimental nature of the project appealed to him. Serendipitously, and more to the point, he had long dreamed of leaving his job to open a startup, and the money Pranovitch was offering could finally make that happen. Miri was initially skeptical, but after Nadav agreed to the idea of a family trip to Scandinavia following the show, she changed her tune. The younger kids, ten-year-old Batya and twelve-year-old Yoram (named, Nadav explained, for an uncle who was killed in the Yom Kippur War), were on board from the start, jubilant about the idea of starring in a reality show. Only his older daughter Elisheva dissented, calling the idea "totally idiotic," but after a few family discussions in which she found herself outnumbered, she grudgingly agreed to go along with it.

Pranovitch was elated. We drafted a contract, fine-tuning the terms. Only kosher food would be provided. Miri asked for a

small yoga studio on the premises. Yoram and Batya requested that the site include an outdoor basketball court. Nadav mentioned that Yoram's bar mitzva was coming up in the fall, and they'd like to use the time on the set to practice his Torah reading. When I explained this to Pranovitch he gave me a big smile and a thumbs-up. During a three-way Skype conversation, Miri asked about sightseeing in the area. "Ah yes," Pranovitch said, frowning. "Well, it is a very small place, a quiet place. There are a few monuments for the soldiers who fell in the Patriotic War, yes. But it is a place mostly for simple, serious people. It is not Paris. It is not New York."

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We head down to the parking lot where the Markovitz family is emerging from a large black van. Pranovitch is welcoming them as the driver hoists out their luggage. "Jennifer!" Nadav exclaims, setting down the knapsack he's carrying and opening his arms for a hug. After months of talking over Skype, it's strange to see him now in person; the skinny guy with a head of curly rust-colored hair whom I met twenty years ago is now balding and middle aged. Only his eyes haven't changed. They're bright, alert, taking everything in. "I've always hoped we'd have a chance to meet up again," he tells me, "although I didn't think it would happen exactly like this."

"I know. It's…a little bizarre. Thanks so much for doing this."

He grins and shrugs. "I'm looking forward to it."

I turn to Miri, short and plumpy, already looking the part in a long polyester skirt, her hair covered, *Fiddler on the Roof* style, in a kerchief. We hug and she reintroduces me to Batya, also in a polyester skirt, Yoram, a fidgety, wide-eyed preteen, and Elisheva, a pretty but sullen-looking teenager whom I notice is wearing fashionable, faded jeans.

"It's so great that you're finally here," I tell them. "Everything is all set up and ready for you. The cabin is like a real peasant house. You're going to love it."

"We are very happy to be here," Miri says. "And we are also very excited about our trip to Scandinavia."

Elisheva murmurs something in Hebrew in a grumpy tone that reminds me of Cassie on a bad day. "Is everything OK?" I ask.

"She's going through a stage. She doesn't want to be religious anymore," Nadav explains apologetically. "She refuses to wear skirts."

Pranovitch seems, or at least behaves, as though he is unaware that anyone is anything less than thrilled to be here. He picks up two of the knapsacks and leads the entire party inside. We all pause in front of the bleachers and I watch their mixed expressions as they stare through the glass wall at the set. "It's one-way glass," I explain. "The spectators will be able to see you but you won't be able to see them." Yoram says something that sounds like he thinks it's cool. Elisheva gives him a swat.

Single file, we climb the stairs behind the stage and enter the cabin through the sliding door. At first they just gaze around the set, taking in the giant *pechka*, the wooden table and benches, the beds, and the dark wall of one-way glass. They've all seen this on Skype so it's not exactly a shock. "Incredible," Nadav says. "It's right out of the *shtetl*. We might even forget who we really are! We're going to need psychological treatment afterward."

"Psychiatric," Miri corrects him.

"So, you are the person who got my parents to come to this crazy place." I turn around and see Elisheva. I'm surprised by her fluency in English, and make a note to ask Nadav about it later.

"Yup. I'm to blame," I reply, trying to sound jocular. "I think your dad really likes the idea."

"My dad likes anything that is weird."

"He mentioned that you've been having doubts about being religious," I say, trying to feel out whether this could affect the show.

"Isn't it obvious?" She glances defiantly at her jeans.

"So you'll just be acting when the show opens."

"Show!" she snorts. "I can't believe anyone would pay just to watch us."

"Why not? People are really interested in learning about the lives of others."

"Well, I told my father that I will pretend for this crazy thing, but after that I'm leaving."

"You're leaving…home?"

"I'm leaving religion. I am going to be a *ĥiloni*."

"What's that?"

"Not religious. A free life."

It's a sentiment I can get behind, and I give her a thumbs-up. We show them the yoga studio at the end of the hallway of offices, and as we gaze out the studio's large window that overlooks the parking lot, Pranovitch points out the regulation basketball court he's put in on the side of the building, complete with new nets and white lines on the pavement. Yoram complains that he's hungry, and I tell them that we've arranged for some kosher meals to be brought in from Chabad in Minsk, and that we'll all meet up again in the bleachers after they have a chance to eat and freshen up.

I'm back in my office when Polina comes in with a pile of printed booklets sporting a big Star of David on the cover. "This is the Russian translation of your guidebook," she says and opens one to show me. I glance at the cryptic Cyrillic script and nod approvingly, trying to conceal the fresh wave of anxiety they've brought on. Researching the project, I've become aware that not only has Judaism accumulated centuries of rituals and traditions, but there is often dissent about how to perform them. I decided early on to follow what mainstream Orthodox Judaism dictates, but even that, I've seen, is open to debate.

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"I'm putting together a guidebook to explain to the spectators what they're seeing on the set," I told Nadav during one of our Skype conversations. "Would you mind taking a look at it when it's done, just to make sure that we're all on the same page?"

I can still see Nadav's expression, frankly amused, as though he has come upon a dirty little secret. "You don't actually know very much about Judaism, do you?"

"Well, I'm not a practicing Jew, but I've been doing a lot of research. That's always a big part of any project." I didn't share my feeling that my lack of first-hand experience was actually turning out

to be helpful, enabling me to write the guide from the viewpoint of a novice.

"I get that," he replied, "but are you only learning this stuff now?" It felt like a trick question, as though he was suggesting that I was some sort of imposter.

"I didn't exactly grow up with it, if that's what you mean," I replied, a little defensively, "but whatever I did or didn't grow up with is irrelevant. Anthropological research is part of my job. All that matters is that I learn it and present it in an artistic context."

"True," he conceded. "It can be learned. Look at me. I spent my childhood in a socialist commune. I also didn't grow up with it."

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An hour later, Pranovitch and I hold an orientation in the bleachers with Polina, Vlad, and the Markovitz family, the adults seating themselves on the lowest row and the kids climbing higher up until Pranovitch invites them to come down for a talk. After the preliminary welcomes and a little speech about how glad he is that the project is finally opening, he asks them, "Do you know why I have dreamed of this show? It is because I found out that I am a little bit Jewish."

Nadav and Miri exchange a glance, which Pranovitch catches. "It is true," he insists. "One-sixteenth percent Jewish, from my great-great-grandfather. This is a big reason why I am making this whole show. The older people remember a time when there were many Jews here. Today we miss the Jewish people. We think about the times that they lived here and we are sad."

"Except for the anti-Semites," Elisheva mutters, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

"What kind of people will be coming to the show?" Miri asks warily.

"Well, I suppose it will mainly be made up of the local population," I say, not sure how to describe the sullen-faced Slawharad Belarusians I observed from my office window, returning from the

small supermarket down the street, or smoking in the clean but uninspiring yards that surround the Soviet-style apartment blocks. "People who know nothing about Judaism and are perhaps coming with some preconceived ideas."

"They are not anti-Semitic. Not at all," Pranovitch says, a touch insulted. "OK, maybe a few of the old-timers, or some crazy people and idiots, but most do not hate anyone except for the fascists who murdered so many of our people. But this show is not about sad things in the past. It is about remembering the good things that we have forgotten. People know that Jews used to live here, and they are very curious. They want to know all about the Jewish religion." He glances at me and I can see that the subject has made him uneasy. "OK. Right now we must talk about the show. Please, Mrs. Jennifer, explain how it will be." I take a deep breath and open my tablet to where I've made a list of the daily events to be enacted on the set.

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"So, let's run through the schedule together. Basically, the first spectator period will be from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 in the afternoon. After that you'll have a break until 4:00 and then the second period will run from 4:00 till 8:30 p.m., except on Friday and Saturday nights, when the day will run longer so that the spectators will be able to watch the Shabbat and *Havdala* ceremonies.

So, each morning after you get up, wash, dress, etc. Nadav will put on *tefillin* and recite the morning prayers with Yoram. Miri and the girls will say private prayers. The more observant viewers may notice what they're doing, and in any case there's a note explaining about women's prayer in the guidebook. There's also a blessing to be said before eating breakfast, right?"

They stare at me, perhaps a little overwhelmed, but Nadav gives me an encouraging nod and I continue. "Now after breakfast, since we're trying to show a very traditional sort of Judaism, Nadav and Yoram will open the holy books and do their studying or preparation for Yoram's bar mitzva – it's up to you. And Miri and the girls

will start to prepare the midday meal – there's a recipe section in the guidebook that will help the viewers to follow along. If there is extra time, it can be spent doing typical traditional activities: knitting, sewing, cleaning, whatever. Then at 12:30 you do lunch – with blessings before and after, and then you," I say, pointing to Nadav, "do your midday prayers. At two in the afternoon everyone leaves and you get some free time. You can hang out on the set, use the computer space, watch some TV, go outside for some basketball, do yoga, aerobics, whatever. Then at 4:00 you all come back in. More studying for Yoram and Nadav while you guys," I turn to Miri, "are in the kitchen cooking the evening meal. After that there will be dinner with all the accompanying blessings etc., then evening prayers, and at 8:30 the spectators leave and that's it until tomorrow. Now, Friday nights, that is, Shabbat evenings, are going to be the real highlight, and we'll allow spectators for an extra hour at night – till 9:30. People are going to want to see all the prayers, rituals, singing, the blessings after the meal; whatever you do, it's all good. And…" I glance over my notes, "I think that's about it." I face them all brightly. "Any questions?"

"Beautiful!" Pranovitch exclaims. "You have done a wonderful work! Hasn't she? But you must tell her if she has left something out."

A tense, perplexed silence hangs in the air. "It is very strange to hear it in this way," Miri says finally, "but everything you have said sounds OK."

"Great!" I say, and even though all of this has been discussed and confirmed weeks ago, I feel a surge of relief. "Now, if you need to tell us something while you're on the set, all you need to do is go into the bathroom and text me or Polina. Our phones will be on 24/7 so whenever you have to get in touch, send us a message."

"Sveta, my PR lady, has publicized the show everywhere, internet, newspapers, radio too," Pranovitch tells them. "Many people will come, but we will only allow 150 people at a time, and only for a period of thirty minutes. After that they will have to leave and a new group of 150 people will come in. I believe that there will be some people who come not only once, but many times."

The next day, Pranovitch and I, as well as Cassie, who has ambled in, watch from the bleachers as Polina outfits the Markovitz family. Batya emerges from behind the cupboard dressed in brown boots that lace up, thick wool stockings, and a smock dress. Yoram has traded his sandals and shorts for pants that end just past his knees and a boy's tunic shirt, belted at the waist. Miri steps out, grinning playfully in a floor-length grey skirt and a peasant blouse, but the best is Nadav, dressed in a long-sleeved undershirt topped by a vest and baggy work trousers. The four knotted fringes of his traditional *tzitzis* undergarment, which he normally tucks into his pants, now descend visibly from his shirt. Both he and Yoram have exchanged their crocheted skullcaps for small black caps. Elisheva appears last, sour-faced, yet nonetheless fetching in a long skirt and fitted blouse with small buttons down the back.

Cassie stares admiringly at the set. "Elisheva looks amazing."

"You should tell her. She's not too happy about doing this."

"Why? It's like she gets to act out this whole other character – like in a movie."

"Tell her that too. We tried, but it sounds much better coming from you."

Final preparations. A mezuza nailed to the doorway. Silver candlesticks, a cup for the *Kiddush*, a *Havdala* candle, and a very old set of holy books, all on loan from the Markovitzes, are set out on the shelves. Polina shows Miri how to boil water. Vlad helps the kids navigate the Belarusian internet. That night the Markovitz family sleeps on the set.

We open at 6:00 p.m. on a Thursday evening. There's been a lot of local curiosity about the installation, and all the tickets for the first few days have been sold online but nonetheless, by midday a queue of hopefuls has formed outside the warehouse, policed by hefty bouncers hired by Pranovitch, who apparently knows his people. He's also hired a few locals to man the ticket booth, show people to their seats, and hand out the guidebooks. Cassie and I are up in the bleachers, watching people's reactions as they file in.

It's been decided that when the spectators first enter, the lights on the set will be dimmed, so that nothing can be seen through the

glass wall. Pranovitch addresses the inaugural audience with a speech. Though I don't understand a word, it's an emotional moment for all. I can feel the anticipation radiating from the spectators, who applaud as Pranovitch steps down. And then the lights come on over the cabin and there are the Markovitzes, sitting down to their evening meal of boiled potatoes with herring and black bread. When they're done eating they chant the prayer after meals, and I see the audience consult their guidebooks. Miri clears the dishes and washes them in a wooden basin with water provided earlier by Polina. Nadav and Yoram take up their prayer books and recite the evening prayers.

When the half-hour time slot is up, the staff gently urges the audience onto their feet and shepherds them out so that the next group can take their place. The bleachers remain filled until closing time, with group after group filing through as the Markovitzes, oblivious to the fascination their activities elicit, go about their business. I run back and forth between the ticket booth, Pranovitch, and Polina who is kept busy attending to last-minute logistics, but through it all I notice that Cassie remains in her seat, following the action and reading the guidebook.

After the last spectator is gone, I go up to the *izba* to check in. The kids have settled down to watch a movie in the computer room. "You guys were fantastic," I tell Nadav. "You looked so realistic!"

Nadav rolls his eyes and unbuttons his vest which, I see now, is a bit too tight for him. "I'm not even sure what that means anymore."

Miri comes out from behind the clothes cupboard wearing bright pink lycra pants and a matching top. It takes me a few seconds to realize who she is. "It was a little strange, but also sort of fun, like performing your own life in a play," she muses, and then asks if I want to join her for some yoga. I want to say yes, but Polina has asked to go over some last-minute logistical issues, and I decline.

Sveta posts a schedule of the day's "events" on our Facebook page, and when the ticket booth reopens at 7:00 the next morning, early risers are lined up to watch Nadav don his *tefillin* and perform the morning prayers with Yoram. Eager to begin the day, I'm up before the audience enters. I dress quickly and drink a fast coffee, trying not to make noise, but just as I open the door of the Winnebago, I hear

Cassie murmur, "Wait, Mom. Are you going to watch the Markovitzes? I'm coming with you." She throws on a pair of jeans and an old Phish T-shirt and we head out together.

In light of the burgeoning interest in the show, Pranovitch has told Vlad to add an extra row of seats. The crowd, still bleary eyed, files in quietly. For the first time, I observe them carefully, not just as spectators at the show, but out of curiosity about who these people are. They have a look about them, a homogeneity that one can't miss. Tall bulky builds. Wide round faces. Smallish eyes. The same palette of hair shades. Cassie and I, not to mention the Markovitzes, deviate strongly from the prototype.

Nadav is already up and dressed. The spectators watch as he taps Yoram lightly, rousing him awake. He slips behind the cupboard to change from the nightdress that Polina found in a vintage store in Minsk into his *tzitzis,* peasant shirt, and knee pants and then tiptoes to the kitchen table. The audience watches, mesmerized, as Nadav takes the little black boxes with the leather straps from their pouch. A few soft gasps are heard as he rolls up the sleeve of his shirt and begins winding them around his bare arm, and then fixes the second box on his forehead. The audience is confused, captivated, fascinated. "Look, Mom," Cassie whispers, pointing to Miri, who has in the meantime risen from her bed, dressed in a floor length skirt and blouse and, prayer book in hand, is swaying in a corner of the kitchen. "Why doesn't she put on the…" Cassie consults her guidebook, "*tefillin*?"

"Religion's a man's game, honey," I tell her. "Male-only rituals are integral to the patriarchy."

Prayers out of the way, Miri lights a fire in the stove and hoists a pot filled with water, set out last night after closing time by Polina, on a hook over the flames. After the Markovitzes eat their breakfast of cooked oats, the spectators, who are awaiting the blessing after meals, seem disappointed to find that rather than chanting it aloud, each family member mumbles a few quick, unintelligible words. *All blessings should be recited aloud clearly*, I type into my tablet, along with all the other things I need to remind them.

Nadav and Yoram sit down at the kitchen table with a large leather-bound volume. Nadav reads out a line and says something

to Yoram, who responds in Hebrew, clearly in disagreement. In the meantime, Miri and the girls begin preparing the Shabbat evening meal. I watch along with the crowd as Miri pours copious amounts of salt over a raw chicken. Polina has arranged to have chicken brought in from a kosher butcher in Kiev, but we've agreed that Miri will go through the motions in order to show what a *shtetl* housewife would have had to do. The rest of the menu we've planned – gefilte fish, roast potatoes, apple compote, and of course homemade challah – is of great interest, not only as characteristic of Jewish culinary tradition, but also as an authentic demonstration of pre-industrial cooking.

During their afternoon break, the Markovitz kids organize a basketball game, the three of them against Cassie, Polina, and Vlad. I stop to watch them for a moment, pleased that my daughter has disengaged from her smartphone. Later in the day a reporter from *Zviazda* comes to write up the show and a camera crew from *BeIT* asks to film a few minutes from the bleachers. "It is wonderful," Pranovitch enthuses. "People all over Belorussia are talking about this. They're coming from Mogilev, Vitebsk, Minsk. There is even a bus coming in from Kiev!"

But not all of the attention is positive. Later in the day Polina informs me that two groups of protestors have gathered outside the lot. One of them, a group of right-wing neo-Nazis, are protesting against "Jews taking over our history," and the second, a small but vocal crowd of left-wing activists, are urging people to boycott "Zionist colonialist cultural appropriation." "But don't worry," she reassures me. "My uncle has made a phone call to the Regional Chief of Police. They'll take care of everything." I'm not sure which of these reports is more disturbing, but I suppress my concerns and resolve to ignore them both.

Nonetheless, the coverage of the show is overwhelmingly favorable. The Shabbat dinner is touted the next day in the local press as "a cultural experience of the highest degree," a description that's sure to bring in good crowds for the Saturday night *Havdala* ceremony. According to the Jewish lunar calendar *Havdala* must take place after sunset, which, given the fact that its summer and that we're in the northern latitudes of Belarus, will be around 11:00 p.m. The late

hour only adds to the exotic aura of the rituals, and I can sense the excitement of the crowd even before the ceremony begins. Cassie and I observe, as engrossed as the spectators, while Nadav chants the blessings over the braided candle, the exotic-looking spice box, the hallowed cup of wine. "It's so cool, Mom," Cassie whispers. "They want to make a clear separation between Shabbat time and regular time. Sacred and profane."

"*Kodesh ve'hol*," I murmur the Hebrew words I've learned from writing the guidebook.

"It's like there's this whole other world."

The next few days pass like a fevered dream. I'm needed anywhere and everywhere. Polina consults me about discreetly slipping a Hebrew cookbook onto the set with recipes for borscht, kasha, and *tzimmes* so that Miri can expand her repertoire. Vlad wants to upgrade the lighting. Pranovitch suspects an error in the guidebook. Miri burns a *kugel* in the *pechka*. Batya can't get her favorite series online. Elisheva has promised to teach Batya to knit a scarf and is asking for some wool. Miri has spilled some oil on one of her dresses, which is now draped over the chair in my office. And Nadav despairs about forgetting to bring a particular medieval text that he wants to consult with Yoram. When, one morning, Batya practices a religious hymn to be sung at Yoram's bar mitzva, I get word from Polina that the audience wants to see a translation. Nadav slips into my office and takes up the task. *I will compose songs and weave poems, for it is you that my soul desires,* the first line reads. It sounds good, and so I trust that the rest is OK as well, and hurriedly give it to Polina to render into Belarusian.

Through it all I keep an eye on Cassie, who spends most of her time in the bleachers, following the Markovitz family with the enthusiasm of a devoted soap opera fan. Pranovitch reports that scalpers are selling tickets at double the price. I suggest telling the police, but Pranovitch just smiles and pats me paternally on the shoulder. Once a day, Polina and I meet with Nadav or Miri in my office for a quick rundown of problems on the set. "The toilet is clogging up," they complain. "The kids are asking for more hummus." "We need to do laundry."

One evening into the second week of the show, Nadav knocks on my door, the Yiddish journal in hand. "Where did you get this?" he asks, incredulous, and I too do a double take, as I've completely forgotten about it.

I explain how my mother showed it to me before I left, saying that it was her father's. And then something strange happens. I take it in hand and stare again at the sun logo, and all at once I remember where I've seen it before. It was twenty years ago, when I was in Israel, staying with Nadav's grandmother Tamar, on her kibbutz.

Everything comes back to me: her small house, the darkness outside, the dim glow of the lamp that cast a warm light over her simple room. I had asked her a question – something about the family she had left behind in Europe, and instead of replying she brought out the journal from a file in her bookshelf. I remember her saying that a cousin in Lithuania had sent it to her before the war, but that he and his family were all murdered in the Holocaust, shot in the forest outside the city where they lived – Vilna, I think she said. That would be the Yiddish word for Vilnius, which I know is just over the border from here.

"This is incredible," Nadav is saying. "It's exactly the same journal that my grandmother showed us when you visited her. Do you remember?"

I shake myself out of the trance that has come over me. "I didn't at first," I murmur, "but I remember now. This must be another copy. When my mom showed it to me I thought it would fit in on the set, and it felt sort of appropriate. Like closing a circle."

Nadav still looks puzzled. "But how did your grandfather get it?"

"That's what's so amazing. According to my mom, this copy was also sent by a cousin in Lithuania. It must have been the same person. She had no idea who he was, but obviously my grandfather had been in touch with him too. Where is your grandmother's copy now?" I ask.

"Who knows. I don't think I ever saw it after that. It's possible that my mother has it. Or my aunt Dalia."

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't. "So this is maybe the last copy in existence."

"I guess."

"It's sad to think about it that way."

He shrugs. "Not really. Nothing lasts forever."

It's not the kind of platitude that you can really argue with, yet something about his attitude upsets me. Maybe it has to do with the doomed, forgotten Lithuanian relative of ours and his family, shot dead in the forest somewhere that's probably not too far from here. I'm about to say something to that effect when my phone rings. It's Polina, letting me know, ironically enough, that there's a delegation from Vilnius that wants to meet me. Nadav leaves the journal on my desk and heads back to the set.

The next morning Miri texts me saying that she's found a recipe online for potato knishes and she's going to try it out. As I sit in the bleachers watching her knead dough with the girls, something seems very different about Elisheva. I observe her closely, and soon perceive that the girl dressed in Elisheva's long skirt and blouse, with hair done up in two long braids, is not Elisheva. She fumbles with the dough, as though she's a little scared of it. I try to get a look at her face but she's looking down, giving the task her full concentration. When she finally looks up a soft yelp escapes me. It's Cassie. But how is that possible? Is my Goth Girl actually dressing up as a religious nineteenth-century Jew?

I manage a calm front as I rush through the narrow door and up the stairs. At the rear of the set I motion to Yoram, who has just emerged from the bathroom. "Can you tell your dad to come out a sec?" I whisper, and half a minute later Nadav strolls out from behind the curtain. "Cassie's in there making knishes," I tell him, trying to keep my voice down. "We've got to get her out of there."

His grin infuriates me. "No, we don't. She's doing fine."

"She has no idea what – " I hiss loudly, and then catch myself. "She has no idea about being a religious Jew. She'll make a mistake."

"Relax. They're just baking."

"She isn't supposed to be there. It says 'a family of five' in the program. Everyone will know that something's wrong."

"Who's everyone? The locals who stopped by on their way home from the pub?"

"Cassie doesn't fit in there! She doesn't know anything about being religious. She's not even fully Jewish."

At this point Pranovitch appears looking perturbed. "Mrs. Jennifer. Have you seen what your daughter is doing? Enough with the games. I ask you, please remove her from the cabin."

"I was just telling Nadav that he needs to – "

"Wait," Nadav cuts me off. "Why does she have to be removed?"

"Have you seen her eyes, Mr. Nadav? They are very special, but they are not Jewish eyes." He has spoken, of course, of what everyone can plainly see. Cassie's very identity plays out in her eyes – the same hazel shade as mine but with a subtle slant, like her father's. "Everyone will know that she is not a real Jew," Pranovitch is saying. "They will think we have brought in an actress. And the whole point of this show is that – "

"Cassie is a Jew because her mother is a Jew. That's all there is to it," Nadav interrupts again, flashing me an indignant glance. "Jennifer, you of all people should know that."

"Well Jew or not, she could seriously mess things up."

"No, she won't. We'll help her. She'll be fine," he insists, and then turns his attention to Pranovitch. "Mr. Pranovitch, Judaism recognizes any person who has a Jewish mother to be a Jew. Today, there are many who accept even those who only have a Jewish father. There are blond Jews because we accept the children of Jewish women who were raped by peasants and Cossacks; there are black Jews because there are blacks who took on the Jewish faith. And there are Asian Jews," he winks at me, "whose mothers fell in love with Asian men. It's that simple. By having Cassie on the set with us, you are affirming the principles of Judaism, not negating them. And isn't this exhibit about teaching people what Judaism is, and not just acting out stereotypes?"

Pranovitch appears to be considering this point, but I hardly notice. For Nadav's words, spoken almost offhandedly, have moved me. It dawns on me that this whole time I have harbored the suspicion that he and Miri do not accept my child as a member of their tribe. Of my tribe. But here he has clearly declared that they do. She is as much a part of these customs and these blessings and this history as

they are. As I am. "OK," I agree. "But make sure she doesn't make any mistakes."

Nadav nods and his reassuring gaze tells me that he has read my thoughts. "Of course," he says. I look to Pranovitch. He seems confounded, as if the debate has gone far beyond his scope. "You say that her daughter is a Jew?" he asks, and then without waiting for an answer, shrugs in resignation. "I don't understand about such things," he says. "Do what you think is best."

From then on, Cassie makes appearances on the set and I'm impressed and puzzled by how seamlessly she blends into the Markovitzes' daily activities. Keith and I have always tried to make our home unreservedly atheist, free of the prejudices and dead weight of religious narratives. Is this thirst for rules and stricture what constitutes teenage rebellion in the face of absolute freedom? I want to talk with her about what this all means, but that conversation will have to wait.

The truth is that I am tired. I try to deny this as I run around the warehouse all day. But each night, when I finally crawl into my bed in the trailer, sleep evades me. Even when I close my eyes I see the set: Nadav listening to Yoram chant his bar mitzva portion, the girls knitting by the *pechka*, Miri stirring a pot over the fire. I see the lines of spectators that file through every half hour, eager to experience the foreignness and mystery of stepping briefly into the lives of others. More and more, I question what they're seeing.

Whatever it is, I'm haunted by a growing suspicion that it bears little resemblance to the lives of the people who stare out of the old photos on my laptop. I couldn't see this before but I see it now, because I can feel their presence in these restless silent hours. I see, in stark vividness, the pale faces with their somber gazes. And I can only wonder: what was it that compelled them to uphold their ancient customs and cling to their faith as they lived out their days in these dreary villages, among people who hated them, ultimately enough to murder them?

As I gaze out the trailer window into the dark sky, I see in my mind's eye a row of frail houses, endless snow-covered fields, muddy roads in spring. I see thick-bearded men as they emerge from the

synagogue, women in long skirts, sleeves rolled up, hanging laundry in the shade of leafy trees. Children posing gravely for the camera, as if they've seen an intimation of the future and it does not bode well. A sliver of moon comes into view, casting a thin light across the wall, and I'm overcome with a sadness so searing that I want to cry. What I have created here is not a work of entertainment or edification. It's a study in tragedy. Why did I not see that? Why, as I researched and studied and constructed this world, did I not notice how sad it is?

Perhaps it is that sadness that makes me think again of the Yiddish journal which lay in my grandfather's basement for seventy years, sent to him by a relative from the city of Vilna. That relative would have been around my grandparent's age. His children would be just a little older than my mother. Instead, they were all shot in a forest outside the city. Murdered. In a place scarcely four hundred kilometers away. I slide out of bed, grab a sweater, pull it over my pajamas, and step out into the chilly night air.

I wave to the security guard in the booth as I slip into the warehouse. Passing the bleachers I glance at the darkened glass wall and then tiptoe up the stairs to my office, close the door, and switch on the light. I pick up the faded blue journal and sit down to examine its dry pages, searching for the poem written who knows when, who knows why, by my unknown, forgotten ancestor. But the pages, with their typed Yiddish script, all look the same. The impenetrable words stare back at me, mute, and I cannot read a single one. Why is that so? How did it happen that this language, which once gave form to the world for so many, can now only be deciphered by so few? How did it happen that it became a language for museums?

A light rap on the door startles me. It opens and I see Nadav, looking all too authentic in his nineteenth-century peasant nightshirt, a ghost of distant times coming back to speak from the grave. "Why can't we understand this?" I ask him, as though we are in the midst of an ongoing conversation. "They all spoke Yiddish, didn't they? It wasn't that long ago, just our parents' parents' parents."

He shrugs. "It pretty much died along with most of the people who spoke it. The Nazis killed it. Stalin killed it. And the people who remained, our own grandparents, they killed it too."

"What do you mean?"

"The majority of Jews didn't want to speak it any more. My grandparents, all the old-timers on the kibbutz, they just refused. And in America, the Jews wanted to speak English."

"That's true," I muse. "My grandfather understood Yiddish, but he never spoke it. Unless it was to tell a joke."

"They wanted to forget it. Just like they wanted to forget their lives here."

"And now it's dead."

"Not entirely. Some ultra-orthodox Jews still speak it."

"I rest my case."

"Yes. Jews like you speak English. Jews like me speak Hebrew." He gives me a little smile. "I think it's been a good trade-off for everyone, wouldn't you say?"

"For everyone except the people who actually spoke it, like for example, the folks you're pretending to be on the set."

Nadav looks at me quizzically. "Are you OK?"

"Show me the poem," I tell him. "I know I won't understand it but…could you just show me which one it is?"

He opens the journal, turns through the frail pages, and deciphers the titles until he stops at one and hands it to me. "It's this."

I stare at the unfathomable letters and fold down the top corner of the page, to mark it. "What's it called?" He studies it and shakes his head. "I don't know. I mean, I can read it, but I don't know what it means."

"And what about this?" I point to the letters over the rising sun logo.

"What?"

"The name of the journal. What do the words mean?"

He glances at the Hebrew letters and grins. "My grandmother once told me, and I still remember because it's kind of…ironic. It's called *New Yiddish Horizons*."

The project's two-week run has passed in a blur. On the last day preparations are underway for Sabbath eve, which will be a sort of grand finale. I hold a staff meeting, delegating tasks to make sure all the logistics are taken care of. Pranovitch proudly tells us that the spectators this week have been not only Belarusians, but also Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, and even Germans. A TV station from Berlin has asked for permission to film a five-minute segment and interview me, as well as Nadav and Miri.

The installation has been written up in the Belarusian press as an important historical statement, proof that the country has undergone a "deep change" in its attitude toward "those who once lived among us." Pranovitch is being hailed as a man of vision and a cultural innovator. The Markovitzes are preparing for their trip to Scandinavia. Early Sunday morning Pranovitch's driver will take them to Minsk, where they'll fly to Copenhagen. Polina has received two job offers. Vlad is a local hero.

Normally all of this would give me a tremendous buzz, but what I'm really feeling, at the bottom of my heart, is a sense of melancholy. I pick up *New Yiddish Horizons* and open it to the page I folded down. As I stare at its archaic words, typeset in a world that no longer exists, the poem seems to give off something that I've been blind to, something I couldn't see – not twenty years ago when Nadav's grandmother pulled it from her bookshelf to show us, not a few weeks ago when my mother gave me this copy, forgotten in her father's basement, and not even yesterday, when Nadav and I pondered its journey to us.

The thing that I see now, on this grey afternoon here in Slawharad, is that all that the Markovitzes have been doing, all that I planned for them to do, is a lie. And the only thing that's true are the words set down on the pages of this journal, this remnant of the world as it appeared to those who lived in it.

And I know this: a daughter of this bleak place, my ancestor, recorded in the only language she knew some lines that gave her thoughts shape and form. But I, encountering those very lines, will never fathom them, not even if I could translate every word.

A peculiar sorrow, sobering and dark, descends upon me. I miss Keith. I miss home. I miss my life. I miss reality.

Someone is knocking on the door. It opens a little and I hear Nadav say, "Can I come in?" I stare at him quizzically. "Everyone's looking for you. Cassie said you weren't in the bleachers and Pranovitch wants you to meet his brother-in-law. And there's a reporter from Moscow who wants to interview you."

I put my head in my hands and groan. "I don't know what's with me today. It's sort of like I'm done."

"What do you mean *done*?" He gives me an amused, sardonic grin. "You're a star."

He's laughing at me, my charming, straight-shooting Israeli tenth cousin, or whatever he is. "Shut up," I say. "It's been an insane few weeks."

"Too much fun and games?"

"You know what's really weird? It's like, if you really think about it, this project, it's not a success. It's a failure. I mean, what can we ever really know about the lives of the Jews who lived here? This show is nothing but a failure of my puny imagination."

Nadav is staring at me with a sympathy reserved for those who have lost it. I'm not sure if he even understands what I'm saying. "No," he says kindly, "the show is many things, but it isn't a failure." He holds out his hand. "Hey. Come with me."

"Come where?"

"For months now you've been telling me what to do. Now do what I tell you. Let's go. Get up." Like a child I give him my hand and he leads me out to the corridor and onto the threshold of the set. "No. No way," I pull back. "I'm not going in there. Forget it."

"Come on. It's the last night."

"I can't. I'll ruin everything. I'm not dressed properly."

He glances around and picks up the dress with the oil stain, still draped over the chair, and hands it to me. "So put this on. Just come."

They're sitting around the table, laid with a white tablecloth and adorned with the objects of ceremony and ritual. The warm light of the candles gives the scene a sort of enchantment, and I feel a strange pull of something calling me to join them, to take up my place at this table, which is both a simulacrum of countless other

Sabbath tables and, I see this now, an actual Sabbath table. "But I have no idea what to do," I whisper to Nadav.

He squeezes my hand. "That's exactly what will make it a little bit real." I follow him into the cabin. Elisheva and Yoram make room for me between them on the bench. Across the table, Cassie is gazing at me.

There is nothing accidental in this scene, for I have planned its every detail: the tablecloth, the chipped crockery, the orange flames in the silver candlesticks, the wine cup, the challah loaves baked by Miri and wrapped in an embroidered cloth. A family, gathered together on wooden benches around a table. The scene is so familiar, yet I've never truly known it.

Everyone rises and even Cassie, who seems to have learned the Hebrew words, begins to sing the song that welcomes in the Sabbath. I close my eyes and listen to the melody, to the rise and fall of the enduring lyrics. The spectators behind the glass wall, the town of Slawharad, the country of Belarus, the continent of Europe, the entire world, have all disappeared and all that's left is this. Nadav raises the wine cup and chants the ancient words that bless the wine. I gaze around the table and for a moment, I am comforted.