

Lea Goldberg

AND THIS
IS THE LIGHT

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Chapter One

The Train Returns Home

At the second stop after the border, a Jew got into the compartment where Nora was sitting. He was about fifty-five years old, had a big grayish beard, and wore a squashed hat with a narrow brim. He was of average height, and his potbelly poked out between the sides of his long, threadbare coat. His smug expression marked him as one of those small traders who does lots of deals in the little towns on the German border, and this time he'd had a good season, but he didn't intend to flaunt his success. He put his small, worn-out valise under the bench, sighed a short polite sigh, sat down, at first on the edge of the seat, surveyed the rest of the passengers in the compartment with the fluency of a man of experience, and when he had convinced himself that they weren't really dangerous, he sat back comfortably and easily, sucked his fat lips flickering between the mustache and the beard, and spat a lush gob of saliva onto the floor.

I'm back in my native land. At home. A thought of derision went through Nora's heart, whose bitterness wasn't yet mature. Nora was twenty years old.

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And as if to confirm her thoughts, the international train started creeping slowly on the tracks, as if it too admitted: I'm home, in my native land, no rush!

Through the half-open window, which bore the tremors of the electric light inside the compartment and the shadows of the trees outside it, rose the smell of the Lithuanian forests – a dank, mossy, peaty smell, and the distant fragrance of pine; a smell of damp fallen leaves of red-leaved box trees and the golden oak – and here, very close, the heartbreakingly thin white trunks raced by the train, the trunks of a birch grove in the dark of a starry August night.

Home, Nora dozed off in a hesitant warmth.

Her neck, long and tilted and very white, moved a little in the sweater's warm gray collar.

The Swedish doctor sitting opposite her leaned his elbow on the little shelf under the window, smiled at her and looked back and forth between her face and her reflection shaking in the black window pane. He smiled at her tilted neck and at the tiny embarrassed movement of her thin shoulders, and at that great seriousness and that extreme resolve that was for some reason in her brown eyes and which are so touching in the faces of the weak and very young.

And Nora suddenly felt the stare of her temporary companion – as if she had been touched – who stopped his conversation a moment; inadvertently, she felt embarrassed and wanted to shield her eyes from him, and as she did, her look wandered to the bearded Jew, now leaning back, with his jutting belly, rolling and crushing a thin cigarette in his nicotine-stained fingers.

He cleared his throat, proclaiming his existence in the compartment, and addressed Nora as if to demonstrate his awareness of her presence alone and thoroughly dismissing the “goy” sitting across from her.

“Ah, excuse me, where are you going?”

Casually and not strictly following the rules of courtesy, Nora dropped the name of the capital and addressed the Swede. “In another hour and a half, hour and a quarter, we'll be there.”

He hadn't yet wiped the smile off his face, but there was now something pleasant, free, that made the conversation simple and very nice. "Impatient, aren't you?"

"My mother's waiting for me," answered Nora, and blushed. For some reason, she thought she had to explain and apologize. "She's busy all year long. And now they extended her vacation. She teaches handicrafts."

The image of the mother now hovered, especially soft, in her mind's eye. In the window pane her face appeared bending above her, from her childhood, standing over her bed to wish her good night.

"An only child?" the Swede smiled from a great distance of maturity.

"And where are you coming from?" the bearded man suddenly blurted out.

"Berlin," answered Nora, who didn't feel she had to tell him that, when the school year ended, she had spent two weeks in a small fishing village in western Prussia.

"Berlin?" the Jew repeated and sucked on his cigarette. "And what were you doing in Berlin?"

"Studying."

"Ach," the bearded man dismissed her. "Why do they, girls, study there, of all places? You don't have high schools and universities here?"

Nora shrugged, both amused and annoyed. There was something too close and known in that comic mask, asking questions.

"When I was your age," the Swede wanted to continue the conversation, "and just like you, returning home for vacation, and the train approached the big forest near our village..."

But here the Jew sliced through vigorously. "And what's your name?"

God almighty! Nora sighed to herself and said aloud, "Krieger."

"Krieger, Krieger," the Jew chewed her answer. "So, Krieger..." And he sank deep into thought.

From now on, there was no escape. The interrogation had clearly begun.

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Something upset Nora's equilibrium, and the little bit of humor that had been in her so far gave out. It was all, as she had guessed from the start, because the bearded man leaned his head to one shoulder, shut his left eye halfway, and asked shrewdly, "Which Kriegers?"

"You certainly don't know my family," Nora muttered with a trace of hope.

"Ach," he stuck out his bottom lip. "I know all the Kriegers, every one of them!"

"But my family isn't from here," Nora defended herself.

"Doesn't matter," scoffed the Jew. "So, where are they from? Africa? All the Kriegers come from one place. To me she tells tales. Krieger from the owners of the brewery, eh?"

"No. I told you, you don't know them!" Nora shifted impatiently in her seat and her hand began nervously unraveling the tail end of some thread in her dress.

"So?" He didn't relent. "So, the dentist Krieger! He's not your father? Or some relative? Really, not a relative?"

"Really," said Nora almost weeping. "I don't have any relatives."

"But attorney Krieger must be your brother, eh? I know him, attorney Krieger, the only Jewish officer in the army? He had a little sister, of course he did! You never saw him? He's not in your family either? So, what Kriegers are you from?"

Nora didn't answer and turned back to the Swede. And he, who apparently grasped the content of the bearded man's questions, since they were said in slightly Germanized Yiddish, smiled at Nora compassionately, and in his narrow gray eyes behind the heavy glasses, twinkled a tiny, unambiguous glimmer. And Nora smiled back with perfect understanding. And at that moment, she was seared by that deep and burning shame, a strong shame for all three of them. And it was as if she stood on display naked before the two of them: the Jew and the Gentile. Damn them, why can't I just be me, me without being affiliated with one of those two strangers?

Helplessly, she lowered her head, and she didn't think she could raise it again ever.

“Will you allow me to lower the window completely?” said the Swede, who didn’t sense her shame. “Or might you be afraid of the wind? There’s a smell of water coming from there. I’m willing to swear there’s a river here among the trees, or a pond. How forested this country is!”

And since the Swede talked again, so did the Jew. “Well, I don’t know your relatives, you said. But I must know your parents.” And crushing the cigarette butt with a yellow shoe, he said, “What does your father do? What business is he in? Exporting geese, eh?”

Nora was silent.

“Krieger and Company,” the bearded man went on. “Exporter of geese. A fine Jew. An honest Jew. I know him well, eh?”

One more question and he’d know, thought Nora. Know the truth!

In a rage, she turned back to the Jew, and before her brain could choose what came out of her mouth, she blurted out, “I don’t have a father! My father’s dead! You hear, dead!”

Her voice was choked. Across from her, the face of the pesky Jew twisted in amazement and fear, and he shut up all at once, offended, submissive, in great pity. And from a great distance, from the foreign eyes of the Swede – blurred and shocked – a wise and mature look, a look of polite compassion, flickered at her. But it didn’t matter.

What did I do? What did I do? Good God, what did I do? She kept thinking those same words. She no longer hid from herself that that lie, an accidental lie as it were, that escaped from her mouth inadvertently out of shame and anger, had something murderous in it. Out of the *hidden wish* in her heart, something she had never been willing to admit even to herself, and now, since the words had been said, she could no longer ignore it: that damned desire for freedom! And the horror was in another awareness, an incidental awareness, as it were, telling her that, indeed, the lie contained a refuge and a way out and great convenience for the future: the words that slipped out of her mouth now couldn’t be futile and anomalous. She knew she

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would go on using them, taking advantage of them, enjoying them, as a person enjoys a stolen fortune not to be given back.

The rattle of the tracks shattered the silence. She was cold. Papa! She pictured a festive street in her hometown. A crowd. Joyous masses at display windows and Christmas trees. Masses, joyous and dangerous masses. The father ties her hood tight. Holds her up to the window. She's a little ashamed. She's eight years old. You don't carry big girls. Cold. Silver and gold birds in the branches of the fir tree. And the father's blue eyes laughing. What to buy you, little girl?

(Not to think, not to think. That stranger, the Swede, he's a doctor. Our foolish attitude toward mental illnesses. What's he looking at, for God's sake? No. He's not looking at all. Never mind.)

In the room, there was a green carpet. The one that's now upstairs, in Mama's room. Cold. It was cold then, too. I was doing homework. Suddenly the door opens and he stands on the threshold. At the moment not really expected from the sanitarium in Switzerland. Melted snow in his yellowish beard. His hair wasn't gray yet. His face was so fresh, and his lips were laughing: I'm right on time, my little girl's home!

Now of all times I remembered all that, God almighty! I had forgotten all the good. Rightfully, rightfully, rightfully. I wanted to hate. I believed that hatred frees. I remembered, I remembered that night. In the gigantic, unheated apartment. Waking with a start. A stranger's voice. The little girl is scared. A knife bared above her head. A scream. Or perhaps it was a razor, or some sharp kitchen utensil. Fear and other days. Long white corridors of a mental hospital. A man's hysterical weeping, and the broken mother...and the playground and the children: Krieger's father from third grade! He's crazy! Don't think. That Swede. And I, what did I say?

Nora's temple was leaning on the cold black window pane. (The Swede didn't pull it down and it was cold even so.) The beating of her heart and the clatter of the tracks came together in one, inseparable beat. She thought to the rhythm of the hurtling of the wheels, maybe, maybe I'll see him in the very next days. The train is returning home.

She thought, but I resolved to be different, to be quiet, to be quiet, to be free, to be different. I resolved.

How much time had passed? How much time? Why are they silent? Why? Here, the bearded man's back. He got up and stood at the door. What does he care. A broad back, and nevertheless, like a cripple. The train creeps slowly –

And she didn't know and didn't understand how and why – maybe it was the smell of the trees that came from outside? – but all of a sudden she remembered yesterday morning with a sense of relief. I walked on a forest path, in a bathing suit, to the sea, among young pines. The rain was warm and fell on my shoulders and my neck. And I was free.

And from the distance, from another time, Aunt Lisa's voice rang in her ears. "She can't think of anything but herself." And the mother's pleading voice: "She's young!"

When was that? Yesterday it rained. A doe ran toward me in the forest. I settled my account with the past. I'm free.

She felt a little relief. The dark forests hummed behind the window. The light bulb moved in the glass. A distant, fragrant, autumn land, a soaked, black land was there, behind the traveling, dark window pane. Everything goes backward there.

The silence in the compartment probably didn't suit the pesky Jew; he stayed in the doorway for a while and went out into the corridor.

The Swede watched him with a long, meaningful look. Then he nodded slowly and said apologetically, "That's how it is with pesky people." He held out an open silver case to Nora. Nora hesitated slightly and then took a cigarette. As he lit the match and put it to her lips, the Swede said as if to himself, "My father died when I was four years old. I don't remember his face."

Nora knew those words had a special generosity and that she didn't deserve it. To her amazement, she felt tears forming in her eyes.

"The smoke," she wanted to explain. "The smoke always gets in my eyes. I'm not used to smoking. I started only this year."

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“Your mother won’t be too happy about that new learning you’ve gotten at the university!” laughed the Swede. “I started smoking when I was eleven. My uncle found me one day hiding, in the well-known place...”

He told about the childhood experience, his furious uncle, his punishment, and Nora listened with half an ear, happy as he was at the quick flow of his speech, and already saw herself in a different light in her hometown –

Tomorrow, I’ll walk in the streets, the main boulevard. Who’s that walking there? Across the street? Why, that’s Nora Krieger. Is it really Nora Krieger? I haven’t seen her for a year. Of course, of course, she’s studying abroad. Look at her, she got so beautiful, even her walk is different – Nora Krieger. Who? Who’s she? That girl who got a prize for some scientific essay? A seminar paper. Something about ancient Egypt. So young! And Lucy Kurtz will come and Hannah Milner, and Mama and Lisa. They’re waiting, of course, and getting excited and going out of the railroad station – and in the street, someone will be standing, and will ask: Who’s that walking on the boulevard? Nora Krieger. I seem to have heard the name. Nora Krieger.

And once again the tracks were humming, and the express train passed by small stations, and the tracks sang: “No-ra Krie-ger, No-ra Krie-ger.” And the cigarette smoke twined and stuck to the window pane, until a great light was seen, striking the windows of the train straight on. The Swede glanced at his watch. “I think you’ve arrived. Shall I take down your suitcase?”

He stood up and took down her things and she got up and muttered thanks, and looked up to his big hands, easily holding her heavy suitcase.

The bearded Jew came back into the compartment, took the worn-out suitcase, sighed, and said, not to Nora and not to the Swede, but to a third person, who was invisible, “Well, we’re here.”

Among the tracks, on the broad asphalt in the dim electric light, a few figures scurried about. They grabbed suitcases. They called por-

ters, they waved handkerchiefs, moved around more than necessary, preened excitedly, as if they wanted to hide behind exaggerated activity.

A railroad station at night – young people bustling, tears rising in the throat, the nocturnal smile on the chapped lips and a long interrupted yearning, and a world beyond the tracks.

Those lost figures. The faces of the two women were lifted to the standing train – with hope, desire, supplication and fear – as if she might not come. They were the most lost of all here, more helpless than anyone, those two female figures. They were the only ones there who didn't run, didn't carry suitcases, didn't wave handkerchiefs, and desired only with their eyes, only by *standing*. From that lost standing, Nora recognized them from afar, and her head began moving toward them in the train window. In its pallor, its satisfied smile, her mother's face beamed, and the slightly stooped narrow shoulders of Aunt Lisa, her father's sister, the shoulders that expressed a constant willingness to accept a yoke, to sacrifice herself, were miserable, as always, and for some reason, stirred pity and affection and a touch of anger.

At last they saw her, and with a strange movement of joy, timidity and helplessness, the two of them lifted their arms to her, as if they immediately wanted to pull through the window – her, her suitcase, and all her words and stories about her year, a year away from home.

It wasn't long before she was standing next to them. On her face, fresh from the night's chill, the warmth of their kisses rained down. Both of them spoke all at once, brief, fragmentary, cracked words, empty of content and full of joy. And she gave them hasty, impetuous, unthinking answers.

“Mama, it's so late, and you're–”

But when she tried to look directly into the mother's brown eyes, something strange suddenly went through them, a kind of fear and worry and shame all together, and the mother lowered her eyes.

“What happened?” asked Nora, bothered by the evasive look.

The mother was apprehensive and smiled.

“Why are we standing here? Why are we standing here? It's late, isn't it, she's tired, isn't she!” murmured Aunt Lisa and turned her back

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to them. And her ringing voice, the voice of a girl, which didn't suit her long, miserable, ageless face, rang out through the railroad station.

"Porter! Taxi! Taxi!"

And in the sound of her hasty, small steps on the emptying pavement there was something desperate and ridiculous.

"I traveled in a compartment with a Swedish doctor," said Nora to the mother, and looked with a sudden longing to where the train had just stood. "He was very nice..." she tried to go on and broke off.

"You've gotten older and thinner," answered the mother irrelevantly.

It was soon clear that there were no more cabs in the railroad station and the porter lifted the suitcases onto a broad, comfortable carriage harnessed to a gray horse. The three women landed on the soft seat. The small suitcase rocked at their feet.

"How was the trip?" asked the mother for the third time since they met.

Nora told about the trip, about the examination of her belongings at the border station and mentioned again the Swede who had happened to share the compartment with her, and didn't mention the Jew.

"And I forgot to tell you," the mother cut through in the middle of the paragraph, and Aunt Lisa jumped ahead on the soft seat, her lips moving like the lips of a prompter worried that the actor will forget his lines.

"I forgot to tell you that you can't sleep at home tonight. They're painting the apartment. A mess. You'll have to sleep at the Bergmans tonight. Yes. There."

"And tomorrow," whispered Lisa's voice.

"Tomorrow," the mother continued, "we'll go to the forest, to a summer cottage, for two weeks. I'm off work now. I did write you. And it won't hurt you either. Yes. Home, in any event, is...a mess."

Her voice, straining to be joyous, dropped. And if Nora weren't so steeped at that time in the rustlings of her own heart and her homecoming, she would have recognized immediately how forced and artificial the cheer was in that beloved voice.

She replied politely and affectionately that she didn't care at all, that it didn't matter to her, and that she'd sleep "soundly" anywhere after such a trip. Only seeing the Bergmans – but she didn't finish, not wanting to offend the mother. And they, the two of them, sighed with relief and fell silent, and she didn't sense that silence at all.

How small the houses had become during that year! And the trees had grown marvelously tall. And that starry sky above. Real nights still exist in small towns. And it's good. That street is good, too. Because I'm only a guest. Because I'll leave here again. And everything that was – was.

For a brief moment, she lifted her head and chose, as in her childhood, one star to accompany her on the way. But she took her mind off it and the star was lost among the hosts of others.

And even though she always considered her soul and feelings carefully, there was now a special magic to that connection between the place and memories, something that gave her both importance and maturity, and sweet was the knowledge that here – in this place, on this road – when we were children, we used to go down to the valley behind the railroad station. How we walked here, a big gang of "Indians," armed with bows and twigs, with black bread and bottles of lemonade for the road, the boys and girls bringing up the rear. How long ago that was! The carriage rocked like a cradle. And here's the big rickety building. Papa built it before the war. Somewhere is a sign saying: "Architect. Krieger." When I was little, I thought it was beautiful; God almighty, how ugly it is! It used to be a theater. Here we'd hold the "traditional" Hanukkah parties of the Gymnasium. December evenings, chilly December evenings, and deep snow. And the eternal danger that always lay in wait for me in those days, catching the flu, was also "traditional." Please don't let the mercury rise in the thermometer! I can get over a sore throat in one night –

And the next day, a strange racket in her ears and the fever rising. The soft fluff a little heavy on her neck. And Mama's sad voice: "I said they don't take care of the children! If only they had at least heated the auditorium!" And that pleasure-pain of an illness that isn't

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dangerous and is exhausting. And a book, the thick book of Dickens, its pages yellow and worn from so much reading, and the names of the chapters in it so long and comforting, unlike the exciting plot. How good when the mercury rose to thirty-nine! And the memory of the small offenses from the party that vanished and the hardships of David Copperfield became one episode. Dickens's thick, beloved books are now resting on the bookshelves of the public library – once upon a time there was a little girl, as in a fairy tale – good God, where did that leap come from? And her father built that building, too. They're like scattered tombstones here in the city, those buildings. And they're not beautiful. I don't like that style from the turn of the century. I don't want to think about those buildings.

And that alley goes up to the mountainous park and the hills around it. Here, on that hill, she'd help Olia graze the goat. She was nine years old. The goat would consume the grass of the hill. The little girls lay stretched out on their backs among the high, lush stalks. The summer sky overhead, and the clouds above them moving slowly. When she was five years old, her father taught her to love those clouds. He told her about them as though they were strange and beautiful creatures from the Scriptures: Jethro's flock. And the light sinking on the treetop – the burning bush that isn't consumed. She always remembered those words, and her soul was elegiac in the bosom of nature even in her childhood. Sometimes, she'd think she was also a very marvelous creature, big and wise and knowing the secret of the grass and the trees.

“Listen, Olia, I hear the grass growing.”

Olia twisted her mouth in scorn, just like a grown-up, and declared, “That's impressive.”

Childhood street. Night. Why are the two of them silent? The carriage driver yawns. He's tired, too. I want to sleep.

The carriage turns left. Her street.

“Mama, are all the people asleep already in our capital city?”

The mother laughs. “Look at her, that night owl from the big city!”

And the leaves of the glorious chestnut tree across from the painted fence of the pleasant and quiet courtyard hadn't started falling yet.

In the Bergman house, they were expecting Nora. Everything there was as it had always been, even though supper was so late, and despite the year that had passed since she had last been there.

As always, fat old Bergman met her and her mother with his usual words, probably from all his life: "Good evening, ladies, come into my arms." And as always, after an answer that didn't come, he concluded, "You don't want to, no need. I'll find someone nicer than you."

And he laughed a laugh of fat pleasure, and withdrew to his armchair and sank into it, and would doze off and not open his eyes until food entered his mouth.

And Shoshanna Bergman, his wife, also chubby and short, her very black hair surrounding her round and aging face just like a wig, kissed Nora on both cheeks and hugged her for a long time in her warm arms. A tear even sparkled in her eyes: she always cried easily.

On the table, as always, a big copper samovar hummed and sputtered, called by the members of the household "papouchka," because it had a potbelly like the head of the family. And as on every day, so this evening, too, Shoshanna Bergman would pour tea into tall glasses and keep filling Nora's plate with pastries, and would take care to blurt out from time to time, "Eat, eat." And suddenly she would look at her in a different way, and would sigh and ask with great concern, "You *really* study there?" For, from the experience of her two sons who had been sent abroad to study, she knew you didn't "really" study there, and those studies were nothing but a delusion. And looking for a long time at Nora, who as usual blushed to tears and tried to mutter "yes," she suddenly nodded and drawled out in a voice melting with pleasure, "Well, yes, you're studious here too." And Mrs. Krieger, who sat wearily, and leaned her head on the back of her big beautiful hand with her own special grace, glanced gratefully

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at Shoshanna Bergman and smiled at Nora. And Lisa chewed a hard apple and didn't say a word.

And as always, so this evening too, the presence of the two Bergman sons was indicated only by a photograph, that enlarged photograph, hanging on the wall between two plaster bowls crowned with the cheap, colored reproductions of Raphael's angels, and everybody tried not to look at the photograph since the older one, Boris, a handsome fellow, clever and jolly, had been in prison for two years for communism; the younger one, Marek, a degenerate Tarzan, was probably playing cards at some "club" in town. The two well-groomed boys looked out of the photograph very calmly, riding next to one another on rocking horses.

The conversation ebbed. Sometimes, Shoshanna Bergman would glance into Mrs. Krieger's face with compassionate curiosity. Until finally, she nodded and said, "No, no!"

"What no?" asked Nora with the indifference of the slumber that descended on her and not noticing at all that no one answered.

And at that very moment, the door opened and Marek, the lost son, returned home.

"Ah, Nora!" he said and smiled, like someone recalling a very funny tale, and concluding in his father's voice – "Come into my arms!" – he tossed his coat into his mother's arms as she stood next to him and waited for that, just like a coat-check girl, and without paying any attention to her, he came to Nora, grabbed her like an older brother and said in his mother's voice, although apparently not meaning to imitate her, "You're *really* studying there? Eh?" And with a wink, "Or have you finally found something more interesting?"

"Idiot!" said Nora and thrust out her lower lip with disgust, and that too was as in the past.

"Nora!" scolded the mother.

"Children!" pleaded Shoshanna Bergman, who had meanwhile managed to give her son's coat to the servant.

"I want to sleep," said Nora. "It's late."

“Well?” the elder Bergman suddenly stirred from his doze. “If *that one’s* arrived,” and he pointed at Marek, “it means it’s very late.”

The mother and Lisa got up to go.

“I’ll be here tomorrow morning,” said the mother, and they went, leaving her alone among those antiques in the Bergman house.

That night, a childhood nightmare returned to her. The same dream, without any change at all, just as she had dreamed it four times, always after an interval of many years. The first time, it came when she was still a baby, at the end of the first year of the Great War.

Things were clear and took place in the light of day. A clean and very spacious yard in their house in one of the cities where they wandered during the war. Antonina, the maid, goes out to bring wood for heating. She goes to the woodshed, chooses a few pieces, and among that wood is a dumpy Russian beggar woman. A small dark kerchief is on her head, and her arms and legs are amputated. She’s short and smooth as a thick log. Nora, the four-year-old, walks behind Antonina and shouts, “Let go of the woman, Antonina, let go of the woman!” But Antonina’s steps are even and calm. She goes inside. In the big living room she unloads the bundle of wood with the woman rolled up in it, then she calmly feeds it into the gaping maw of the stove. Her coarse, calm hands reach for matches in the big pocket of her apron. “Don’t light it, don’t light it!” Nora pleads. “Don’t you see, that’s the woman sitting in the little cart at the corner! She begs for alms ‘for Jesus the Savior!’” And the little woman among the wood slowly nods her wrinkled head and her thin black mouth stretches into a smile of mute agreement, pitiful to the point of tears. The tears choke Nora. She feels her legs die beneath her. Then Antonina puts the lighted match to the dry wood, and it all goes up in flames.

At that moment in the dream, Nora awoke this time too, as in all previous times. Her heart was cold with absurd and endless terror; her legs seemed to be separated from her body, as if they were completely

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paralyzed. As soon as she woke up, it still seemed, as in childhood, that that wasn't a dream, but a *memory*, and that that whole incident was a reality from back then, but she couldn't remember when.

Afterward, her thoughts cleared up a little and she was amazed at the strange recurrence of the dream. But the silly physical fear still lived in her, fear of the cold heart, the cowardice of the paralyzed legs, the tried remedy against bad dreams, the known remedy from childhood that could be effective this time too: with every effort of the will to turn over onto the other side, and that – she believed – couldn't let the dream continue.

Her eyes got accustomed to the dark. Now the face of the little mirror hanging on the opposite wall would emerge.

In the dark of the narrow little room, the smooth surface of the mirror gleamed, magician and foe, and there was no refuge from it. Nor was there any refuge from this wakefulness in the middle of the night, just as there had been no refuge from the dream before.

That miserable room in the Bergman house, after the train ride, persisted in not wanting to be a room like any other. Nora felt the narrow bed under her body, the dents in it, the wrinkles in the sheet – that was just how she lay in that place, in that bed, in those days, when she had the German measles. That was –

The year nineteen hundred nineteen. We were a convoy of refugees coming back to the homeland. Through fire and cold and lice.

The first isolation in childhood. That silly event: the border guard of the small country, ignorant peasants in army uniforms, staring at the father's yellow shoes. They said they were a clear sign, those shoes, that he was a Bolshevik spy. Then they locked him up in an empty barn. And day after day, for ten straight days, they executed him, as it were. For ten days in a row, that game went on. And the man was broken, then, for the first time, Nora heard him weeping in a thin, female, sobbing voice. And the desperate pleas in the mother's voice: "For the child's sake, I beg you, for the child's sake..." And some strange woman, who knew how to preserve a polished appearance even in that shabby and exhausted convoy: "Isn't he ashamed, a

man crying!” and a scornful laugh – and when they came back, they put him in prison. From there, the only road was to that hospital.

A two-week trip – it is strange, but beautiful fields were also engraved forever in memories. Blue flowers in the high corn, and that dull golden light of early September. And a tiny green frog sitting on the well one morning, after a rain, and the sky was gray and soft, and the greenery was glowing and deep.

They say they were hungry on the trip. She remembers, too: she didn’t eat for whole days. But the hunger wasn’t oppressive. There was water to drink, and for some reason, she made do with that. She still remembered only the first encounter with white bread and the happiness about it. There was nothing offensive about it. It was good in that warm, whitewashed peasant hut. The yellow straw on the floor, and the pink immortal flowers on the yellow fluff between the two window panes. And the clean white walls, no chill and no lice. The white bread was the first harbinger of real peace, of that “after the war” that had been promised her throughout her childhood. The peasants smiled goodheartedly. People didn’t scare her anymore. That was the first time they weren’t awful, after two weeks of wandering on the road.

And there was everything that very evening: the mother went to try something with the sentries guarding the father in the barn, with that clear-eyed, pink-cheeked officer who told with pleasant innocence how he had executed ten officers and soldiers of the Red Army: “One shot, Ma’am, and he falls like a bag of straw!” Nora remained alone at the crossroads among fields – to watch the pile of belongings. She sat on the bundles. Alone. In the field. At the crossroads. It grew dark. It was cold. Her hands and legs were frozen. Armed soldiers passed by. They didn’t touch her. Hours passed. It was absolutely clear: never would her parents come back. She would freeze here at night. And a little self-pity: she was only eight years old, too young to die! But fear froze everything.

And only when the mother returned did a cracked, brief weeping burst out of her mouth. But afterward, there was the warm nice hut and the white bread.

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When they returned to their hometown, it was night. The father was in prison; the mother's friend, the fat Shoshanna Bergman, was nice to people, smiled and wept and hugged her with warm arms. Afterward, they put her in this bed. The flowers on the wall-paper turned into wild animals, swooped down on her at night. From the little mirror on the wall, pale and contorted faces burst out, and her father's voice pleading in her ears, "Let go of her, let go of her, don't you see, the child is a pile of nerves!" Then she fell asleep and dreamed of the beggar woman burned in the oven. Here she dreamed, in this bed. The next morning the doctor came and diagnosed German measles.

When she recovered from the illness, thin and pale, all her dresses were too short; it was clear to her at long last that this was that "after the war" she had been promised for five years. But they didn't buy her the big doll. They wanted to reward her with an orange. The shining beautiful fruit, which had also become legendary during the war, was placed on the heavy, brown buffet in the dining room of that apartment. "Eat, eat," Shoshanna Bergman coaxed her. She grabbed the orange in both hands and sank her teeth in its peel. They, the grown-ups, looked at her and laughed. "She doesn't know how to eat an orange!" laughed Marek. Even Mama laughed. Nora put the orange back on the buffet and refused to eat it. Shook her head without a word, lest she burst into tears in front of them. Only the next day, when there were no people in the room, did she eat it. And by then she didn't care what it tasted like. That was the beginning of life "after the war." And that was how everything that came after was: school, that city, life at home.

Very slowly, Nora pictured to herself the years that had passed since the last time she had dreamed that dream. And suddenly she was afraid that her year, too, the year abroad, which she had fled to with the mighty desire for freedom in her, that year too, would end up wiped out and canceled because of those memories.

Suddenly, she pictured the strong, square image of that clean-shaven Prussian professor of history, who would sometimes show a

dry excitement and prove the “deep logic of human history.” Deep logic! Her face twisted with hatred. Deep logic, when a man’s fate is determined because of yellow shoes. If that’s the logic of life, go believe in the logic of history!

But suddenly, she sat up in bed and whispered, “I’ll be very happy, just to spite them!”

And she unconsciously shook her head slowly, as if denying her own words.

Afterward, she lay down again. Her head was heavy. She leaned on her elbow. A wet pre-dawn light flowed in through the crack in the shutters, and the little mirror on the wall returned a chilled silver to it. Nora’s head landed on the pillow, and she slept.

A few minutes before eight in the morning, Mrs. Krieger entered Nora’s room and stood near the door. Nora was asleep. The light from the dining room next door and a leap of day that burst through the crack in the shutter crossed over the sleeping girl’s bed, illuminating her light fair hair scattered over the pillow, half her forehead and part of her face. The end of her nose gleamed, and her lips were opened and a little puffed. That made her face look like a little girl’s, and she was calm and relaxed.

The mother stood hesitantly. Then she turned her back on the sleeping girl and tiptoed out very carefully. She still tiptoed in the dining room and didn’t dare walk freely until she came to the kitchen. There, Shoshanna Bergman, her hair wispy and gleaming from the heat of the stove, wearing a fuzzy red housedress, was frying black bread in butter in a big skillet – Nora’s favorite breakfast.

“Well?” she said to Mrs. Krieger, who stood aside, embarrassed and helpless.

“She’s still sleeping,” she said, and remembering Nora’s sleeping face, she added apparently irrelevantly, “She’s so young!”

“We all were young!” sighed Shoshanna Bergman and turned the bread in the skillet with the end of a long kitchen knife.

And since Mrs. Krieger didn’t answer and went on standing

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hesitantly, Shoshanna Bergman turned her full face to her and said reproachfully, "You spoil her too much, Esther. Think how that will end."

"And your Marek?" Esther had a fleeting malicious thought, but she repressed it along with the sigh connected with the thought, and without a word, she tiptoed back to Nora's room.

At that time, probably by order of her mistress, the maid began opening the shutters of that room from outside. The light streamed in all at once, struck Nora's eyelids, and she woke up.

When she opened her eyes, she immediately saw the mother standing near the door, and immediately smelled the toasted bread. Everything was for her sake: mother and bread. A good awakening, as in her childhood after a long illness.

"Good morning," said the mother in a slightly emotional voice, as she approached the bed and sat down in the Viennese chair next to it.

They smiled at one another.

"How did you sleep?" asked the mother and somewhat nervously straightened the blanket on Nora's bed.

"Excellent. Thanks."

And at that moment, Nora really didn't remember her dream or being awake at night. But suddenly something moved in the mother's face. Nora saw a little bit of gray in her short, fashionably cut hair, over her very white temple with its thin blue veins. She's getting old, she thought with a slight pain. But no, that's not it. Not that. And suddenly she remembered her dream, and she saw precisely some strange line, going down from the mother's soft lips to her chin, a kind of bitter wrinkle cutting the face with a cut that wasn't in it before. And it was absolutely clear to her that something had happened. Why didn't I see anything yesterday?

"I was afraid to wake you," said the mother. "You were so tired last night."

There was already something strange in her voice, as if she said those words to postpone other things.

“No, I slept enough,” answered Nora. “In general, the trip was so good. A Swedish doctor shared my compartment on the train.”

“Yes, you told me that last night,” said the mother.

And they fell silent. Words suddenly ran out and Nora didn't know where to find other ones, since she did have to find some, because only conversation could put off, or even wipe out, wipe out completely, the thing that had happened. And now there wasn't a shadow of a doubt that something had indeed happened.

Her eyes left the mother's face and ran over the big bookshelf opposite the bed (next to that mirror) and for the twelfth time they read the gold title on the backs of the dozen volumes of Brahm's *Lives of Animals*, *Lives of Animals* –

“I wanted to tell you,” she suddenly heard the mother's voice and her eyes returned to her face. The face was pale, announcing both a decision and an apology. And both of them, mother and daughter, knew at that moment that nothing would help and that what was said couldn't be taken back. There was a pause after the opening words. The mother shifted, almost gluing the chair to the bed. She smiled nervously and then pursed her lips a lot, and her face became severe, as if she were about to scold.

“When you weren't here, some things happened with us.”

“Papa?” asked Nora in a frightened whisper.

The mother confirmed it only with her eyes. And silence once again. And Nora had to ask, “What? He came back? And the attacks?”

She wanted to add something, to say what she had prepared to say, about that perverse attitude to mental illness. The barbaric, stupid attitude, as that doctor in Berlin had said to her, “It's really like a chronic abdominal illness and there's no difference.” Yes, that's what the doctor had said, and she would also say so. But the mother slowly shook her head and her face suddenly became alien and cold.

“That, too,” she said in an opaque voice. “But I don't know your attitude to me. I couldn't tell you before. In writing? I couldn't. So, yes, I separated from...I divorced him.”

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The mother's face was tense. A chill lay on it like a rind over great suffering. It was almost dead.

"You did well!" Nora blurted out with sudden confidence, and since no other word came to her. "Very well."

"Thank God!" burst out of the mother's mouth. A damp flash sparkled in her eyes. And both of them were relieved.

"And now?"

"Nothing. Understand, he's still here. At home. That's why you slept here last night, even though he's very quiet now. You know, quiet and sober, and full of understanding and humor, as he is on such days," she said with restrained bitterness, and Nora slowly nodded, knowingly. "But if you came...and so you came back to us, and here you are – surprises."

Shuffling house slippers were heard, and old Bergman stood in the door, wrapped in a worn-out, wrinkled dressing gown, "that had known better days."

"Good morning, ladies, come into my arms!" And just like last night, he concluded to himself in a lush voice, "You don't want to, you don't have to, I'll find someone nicer than you."

"Well, come on, come on, old fool! Don't bother them!" His wife's voice was heard from the kitchen, and despite the nickname "old fool," there was an ineradicable trace of submissive admiration in that voice.

All those were conventions, but in addition to those conventions, Nora felt – even though she was a bit stunned from the conversation with the mother – that Shoshanna Bergman certainly knew what was being said here at this moment, and that if she had free time now, she was probably standing and listening behind the door. And it was bitter for her that she was once again being put, in spite of herself, into the loathsome common pot of their life.

Between one thing and another, the time wasn't right for such soul-searching. Bergman obeyed and took off. Once again, they were left alone, facing one another. She and her mother. But the foolish old man's outburst broke the mood of closeness and understanding

between them. They couldn't go on from where they had stopped. Nora lay and listened to the Bergmans' big apartment waking up. In the dining room, certainly not far from the table, the paddling of the old man's soft shoes, the rustling of a newspaper. Far from that, Marek was walking around. He was also in house slippers, pushing some objects on his way and whistling some popular tune. In the kitchen, the maid was chopping meat or grating vegetables, and that even and muted sound disturbed and prevailed over all the other sounds in the house.

"What time is it?" asked Nora to break the silence.

"Eight-twenty," answered the mother, and some vague fear was in her voice; Nora felt that the question about the time wasn't proper and that, no matter what, she had to talk about "that issue," otherwise there was no point and no value to those encouraging words she had said. She sat up in bed and touched the mother's hand with one finger.

"And there, up there," she said at last, and the two of them understood that she meant their apartment on the second floor in that courtyard. "With him? Lisa's there?"

"Yes."

"And she?"

"She helped me, she gave me extraordinary help. I don't know what I would have done without her."

And those words, the mother's words, were steeped in gratitude, and yet behind them flickered something like a restraint about a vague insult.

Nora imagined all the details of the situation. Lisa was *his sister*, and no doubt: with her unbounded goodheartedness, her objectivity, as it were, to both sides, she did everything she could to help her sister-in-law. And she does everything wholeheartedly, but – as always – perhaps too wholeheartedly. Somewhere, behind her good deeds, truly good, lurked the feeling of pleasure at self-sacrifice, of being a sacrificial lamb, somewhere that strange desire would surface to both emphasize and blur the fact that she sacrificed her life for others, and that the debt of the others grew larger from one day to

the next, and would never be paid, and she gave up repayment in advance – gave it up lovingly, submissively, almost appreciatively. All that Nora knew, and she said aloud, “Sacrifice and Christian ethics?” She couldn’t repress the bit of a sneer.

The mother glanced at her in surprise, almost amazed. “You’ve grown up during the year.” But her voice was immediately serious and scolding. “You mustn’t say such things.”

“But Mama,” Nora was embarrassed. And she said, almost pleading, “You yourself said I’ve grown up. And I see everything. I also love Lisa. But I’m not a baby anymore.”

For a moment, a smile lighted up the mother’s lips and made her face very soft. But she sighed immediately and admitted, “Yes. Sometimes it’s hard to be with a person who’s immeasurably better than us.”

“I don’t like saints,” decreed Nora unreservedly, and didn’t feel how she contradicted her earlier declaration of love for Lisa.

The mother didn’t respond, and Nora said, “And how is he now?”

“I told you, quite good. After months of dread, you know, of course...now he agreed to move to an apartment out of town. There’s a Christian family there. Nice, honest people. Very honest. Yes, wonderful people. And the house is lovely. In a garden. And there are pear trees there. Really. A very lovely house,” the mother exaggerated her praise of the place as if she were asking forgiveness. “And I had no other way. It wasn’t about the apartment. In general. You know it’s beyond a person’s strength. And if I didn’t do that, he wanted to go on living at home...yes, at home.”

Nora knew and understood. And that wasn’t the right time to preach morality about the attitude to that illness. At any rate, she, who said what she said yesterday on the train, she wasn’t authorized to judge others harshly anymore.

“You did well,” she repeated her earlier words, unable to find other words with any weight. And after a brief hesitation and blushing, she added, “If you had asked me, I would have advised you to

do that. In fact, nothing has changed, and no one has to bear the burden of life and take on more than necessary.”

She was talking about herself. She wanted expiation for herself. She knew that was the situation. But maybe, maybe this was the other way out, the way to liberation.

“Get dressed!” said the mother. “We have to travel today.”

Nora got up, thrust her feet into dark blue slippers, and wrapped herself in a dressing gown without putting her arms in the sleeves. She picked up a towel.

When she turned back to the mother, Mrs. Krieger was weeping. Silently. Unmoving. But big tears flowed from her eyes nonstop, and she didn't cover her face.