

The Seventh Gate

A Novel of Berlin, Kabbalistic Prophecy, and Double Lives

Dedication

For my mother, Ruth G. Zimler, and our many relatives who perished in the death camps. Also, for my in-laws, Lucie Tiedtke (a Berliner!) and Aurelio Quintanilha, who had the good sense to get out of Berlin before it was too late.

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Author's Note

The narrator of the preface to *The Seventh Gate* is based on a reader who was kind enough to speak to me at great length about the destiny of a German branch of the Zarco family, whom I first wrote about in *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon*.

The Seventh Gate

A novel of Berlin, Prophecy, and Double Lives

Preface

Aunt Sophie is the hollow-cheeked stick figure in the stained hospital gown staring at me from her cot – pink eyes squinting – as if I’m an hallucination. A scarlet woolen scarf is coiled around her neck, and her tiny right hand has vanished inside a gigantic black glove that is cupped on her lap, the leather palm facing up, like a grafted gorilla hand.

Though Sophie will hunt through her sheets and pillows for the missing left glove over the next week, and though she will insist on my demanding its return from every nurse on the floor, it will remain forever lost in the undergrowth of University Hospital.

It’s a Friday morning in mid-December in Mineola, New York, eighteen miles due east of Manhattan. Sophie had a heart attack four days ago. Her husband Ben – my mother’s older brother – is long dead, and they never had children. Sophie’s closest blood relative, a nephew named Hans, lives in Berlin, but I’ve had no luck reaching him or his wife. So it’s pretty much up to me to help out, especially since my mother is in her eighties and no longer driving. I’ve just flown in from my home in Boston without telling my aunt I was coming. I own a garden center in Lowell and business is slow in the winter; I can stay through Christmas if need be.

“Is that really you?” she asks with disbelief when I reach her doorway.

I rush to her with the urgency of a boy who learned – while sitting in her lap – that rose blossoms could be picked from behind my ear. Every childhood needs a magician and Sophie was mine.

She doesn't open her arms. Not even a smile. I press my lips to her cool forehead. In the past, even trembling with a fever, she would have held me tight.

"*Ich bin...*" She speaks German.

"English," I tell her.

"Help me drink some orange juice. I'm dying of thirst." She points to the white styrofoam cup on her tray. Her skin is as pleated as crepe paper. She's down to ninety-six pounds, the head nurse told me on the phone. Apparently, she'd stopped eating a week before her heart attack, her appetite taken away by one of her depressions. "Not an ounce of fat on her," the nurse had added, as if she were describing the extra-lean turkey on a deli menu. "If she doesn't eat more..."

What will I do without her? I began thinking then, and I'm still thinking it now.

I hand Sophie the cup. She rocks back and forth to try to sit upright, but she hasn't enough force in her coat-hanger arms to make it. I wedge myself behind her, propping her up. She slurps through the straw. Her back presses into my chest, and it's a relief to have her weight – the history of a woman who has lived through so much – against me. It's like carrying a world. I want to say something heroic that is the measure of my love – *I will hold you up as long as you need me...* Instead, I comb my hands through her frazzled hair, which looks as if the ambulance medics set it on fire.

"You need a shampoo," I tell her.

"I need a lot of things," she replies, in that *oy vey* tone of hers.

I squeeze her bony shoulders and laugh; we've agreed many times before that a sense of humor in the hospital is essential. But amusement is not a rabbit she can pull from her hat right now. She makes a clucking noise and leans against me – my helpless 89-year-old child. In a minute, she is asleep and snoring, but with her hazel eyes wide open.

I wriggle gently out from behind her, but she sits up with a start and says harshly, "Why didn't you meet me?"

I ease her head and shoulders back to her pillow. The sun, freed from the low-hanging winter clouds, chooses the gray tile floor, the metal frame of her cot, her feet... "Meet you where?" I ask.

"I waited all morning at *Karls Keller*. You were supposed to be there."

Karl's Cellar? Her eyes are moist in a strange, unseeing way – as if filled with viscous glue. She's obviously deep inside her childhood in Berlin.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. I know by now – her fourth visit to the hospital in nine months – that her delusions are the result of what the physicians call hospital psychosis. My own theory is that her mind has retreated from a situation she finds unbearable. My best strategy is simply to find a place for myself inside her mad scenarios – to join Alice across the looking glass. But this Alice turns

out to be more of a Red Queen.

“You should be ashamed of yourself!” she snaps. “When you didn’t come, Isaac left.”

“Who’s Isaac?”

“He lives there.” She points a jutting finger toward the window and the brick building across the parking lot.

“Where’s he gone?”

She gives me a puzzled look. “I don’t know.”

“He’ll probably be back in a little while,” I say cheerfully.

“Don’t bet on it,” she retorts in a menacing tone. Then she talks German again.

In June, when Sophie had gastrointestinal bleeding caused by her blood thinner, she informed me she was staying in the White House. The only hitch was that Hillary Clinton had given her a maid’s room. Did Sophie add that indignity so she could complain about the uncomfortable bed and bland food? Perhaps our deepest emotional needs are the bricks and mortar of our delusions.

Mom and I visit Sophie the next day. While I’m holding open the hospital door, the harsh fluorescent lighting and the odor of disinfectant tempt us to race back to the car. We promise ourselves a nice lunch if we can stay with Sophie for two hours. The briberies of love.

“Be prepared for cuckooland again,” I tell my mother as we’re in the elevator riding up to the Coronary Care Unit.

“Good for Sophie!” she replies, hunting in her bag for her lip balm. Mom’s lips get chapped when she’s upset. “Who’d want to know they were staying in this dump!”

“It’s a nice place,” I reply.

“If you want to meet the Angel of Death over a bowl of cottage cheese.”

Lack of sleep makes my aunt’s psychosis worse over the next few days. She twists and turns on the cot as if she’s on a bed of rocks. She claims she never falls asleep at night.

“Not *efen* a *vink*,” she informs my mother in a distraught voice.

Sophie and Mom commiserate with flapping hands. My mother is wearing her fuchsia beret and black cardigan. Everybody’s cold but me. She takes a blue enamel butterfly from her bag and pins it on Sophie’s gown.

“Doesn’t your aunt look cute?”

I lower my magazine. The two of them are staring at me expectantly.

“Absolutely.”

Satisfied, Mom sits down again and moves on to George W. Bush. I love my mother for her unflagging energy in the face of all obstacles.

“I can’t understand how even an idiot could vote for that ignoramus!” she tells Sophie.

“Americans are as asleep as Germans when it comes to politics,” my aunt replies.

“They’re stupid *bulvans!*” meaning *peasants*, my mother bellows.

“So vat trouble is our Texan *Führer* making now?”

Mom laughs. Sophie doesn’t. Later that afternoon, she gives up on English. I decipher what I can and guess the rest. Mom sometimes translates. She assures me that Sophie’s Berliner German and her Yiddish are practically the same language, but I have my doubts.

My aunt never closes her eyelids in our presence. She swivels her head around and surveys the world with those gooey eyes like a refugee from a Beckett play.

Two days later, while I’m squatting next to her, untangling her catheter from around her leg, hoping I won’t accidentally pull it out – as I had the moist misfortune of doing the day before – she whispers in my ear. “I tried to kill him.”

Sophie says that in German, of course, but does me the favor of repeating it in English when I tell her I don’t know what she’s talking about.

“Who’d you try to kill?” I ask, not taking her seriously.

“Papa.”

She nods and holds her finger to her lips like a little girl. “Don’t tell anyone.”

I want to say, *An allied bomb dropped on your father*, but I keep my mouth shut and get back to the catheter because bringing up anything to do with the real *Führer* may only make her retreat further.

“Enough of that,” I say, “it’s time to take a nap.”

I lift her foot, swollen twice its normal size with the fluids that her heart isn’t strong enough to pump around her body, and pass it gently through the plastic lasso. Success.

“What are you doing?” she demands.

“Testing your reflexes,” I lie as I stand up; informing her she’d been tangled would only start her criticizing the nurses for not paying enough attention to her.

“Will you stay with me if I nap?” she asks.

“Of course.”

She looks around as if searching for something she’s lost. She holds up her gorilla-grafted hand.

“Have you seen the left glove?” she asks.

“Not that again, please!”

She manages to sit up after several tries, then slides her leg over the side of the bed.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m going to my bedroom to look for my glove,” she replies.

The security belt tied around her waist keeps her from getting to her feet. Stymied, she sits with her shoulders hunched, staring at the white ribbon as if it's from another dimension.

"Take this goddamn belt off of me!" she snarls.

I can feel my frustration as an ever-tightening knot in my chest. By now, it's as big as a billiard ball – the sinister-looking black one.

"I'm not allowed," I reply.

She glares at me. "You're a bastard!"

I'm obviously now part of the plot to keep her here against her will. "Why don't you close your eyes and get some sleep," I tell her.

"Can you....can you take me upstairs?" She tugs on her ear lobe. It's her gesture of terror; I've known it for years.

"There's only more hospital wards upstairs," I say gently.

She gazes down, forlorn. I go to the window. All the oak tree branches are bare and brittle-looking. New York turns into such a frigid wasteland in December. Maybe it's the similarity to Berlin's climate that takes Sophie's thoughts back to her childhood. When I turn around, she throws down her arms, livid with anger. "Vye von't you let me go up to my room?"

"You'll be fine here."

"But I'm not here!" she says despairingly. She scowls at me as if I don't understand her deepest needs and never will.

"If you're not here, then where are you?" I ask.

Stumped, she replies, "I don't know, but I'm not here."

This is the Zen-like declaration I will repeat to a dozen friends over the next few weeks. Now, it takes me a few seconds to think of a reply.

"Well, *wherever you are*," I emphasize, "you need to sleep, so close your eyes and nap."

She starts to speak, then looks at me as if she's forgotten her lines.

"Trust me," I tell her. "I'll keep a watch out for you. They won't get you."

There's no need to say who *they* are; there's only ever been one *they* in my conversations with Sophie about life in Germany in the 1930s.

Four days later, I drive Aunt Sophie to her house in my rental car. She lives in Roslyn, just a few miles from my mom. I've already moved one of the guest beds into the dining room, along with her night table, since she won't be able to navigate the stairs for a while. There's no bathroom on the ground floor, so I've also bought a commode. A twenty-nine year old Filipino nurse named Maria will spend the first two weeks with my aunt. Then we'll see how much home care she

needs.

Maria and my mother help Sophie get from the driveway to the front door. She teeters behind her walker, her stiff, nervous arms holding the metal rim too far from her body to have much balance. Maria is gripping the belt loop of her pants in case she starts to tumble.

“Step up!” my mother keeps prodding, patting the empty fabric where Sophie’s rear end used to be.

“I’m stepping, I’m stepping...”

Sophie’s mind returns that afternoon. I know that for sure when she tosses her gorilla glove into the garbage.

“Two points!” I cheer.

I’m in the dining room, eating strawberry ice cream out of the container. High fat foods help keep me from getting depressed.

When she looks at me the glue is gone from her eyes. “Sit,” she says, pounding the bed beside her. As I sink into the mattress, she kisses my cheek and gives me the big hug I’ve been needing. “You feel good,” she says.

“I’m glad you’re back,” I tell her.

“Thank you for coming.” She kisses me again. “And for moving a bed downstairs.”

“You’re welcome. Where’d you get that glove anyway?”

“It was Ben’s.”

I give her a spoon of ice cream. She feigns a swoon like a silent-movie actress. “Delicious,” she says.

She looks around at her makeshift bedroom: the wooden cabinet where she keeps her china, the dark stain in the ceiling made by the water that leaked last summer from her thirty-year-old, gasping-for-breath air conditioner, a bilingual edition of Rilke’s poetry that I’ve put on her night table, the Otto Dix drawing of a gentlemanly poet with spidery hands on the wall behind her. She ends up focusing on the small mountain of unopened letters on the dining table, probably thinking, *The same pile that would be there if I were dead...*

She refuses another spoonful of ice cream and leans against me. Making it back across the looking glass only to be exiled from your own bedroom and find two dozen unpaid bills isn’t easy, and I hold her while she cries.

“Who’s Isaac?” I ask Sophie that evening.

She’s got on her big black-rimmed glasses and is trying, unsuccessfully, to thread a needle so she

can sew the cuffs on my pants; a few minutes earlier, when I brought her a bowl of raspberry Jello she noticed that the stitching was coming undone.

Only when she's got the needle all ready and is satisfied with her length of thread do I repeat my question. She lowers her hands into her lap.

"I don't know what you mean," she replies.

"You mentioned an Isaac while you were in the hospital."

She shrugs. "What did I say about him?"

"You said he disappeared. You implied that he wasn't coming back any time soon."

She pulls my pants across her lap and huddles over them, daunted by the prospect of the task ahead. She looks like a rabbit planning strategies for a leaf of lettuce too big to fit in its mouth.

"Was he a family friend?" I ask.

"He was *my* friend. A neighbor in Berlin."

"Jewish?"

She nods.

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"More or less, but now isn't the right time to talk about it."

Once my pants are sewn and I've modeled them to Sophie's satisfaction, she heaves an exhausted sigh and tugs her shawl over her shoulders. "I can't seem to get warm."

"Put your beanie on."

"Then my head itches."

"That's from not shampooing your hair for ten days. I'll give you a shower later today. Put the hat on for now."

It's blue, with a white tassel. My mother dug it out from the nether regions of her closet. It looks like something a high school cheerleader would wear.

Sophie gazes around unhappily. "I must look ridiculous," she says.

"You look fine. You'll just have to forget about your career in high fashion for a while."

"Oh, honey, I'm not long for this world. This is it."

Turning away from emotional meltdown, my mind seizes on a plan: *if I can just fatten her up she'll be fine...*

"What do you want for dinner?" I ask her.

"What have we got?"

"I bought tuna steaks. And potatoes for baking."

She looks stymied. Maybe she's weighing the advantages and disadvantages of fish. *Protein and useful oils, but also mercury...*

“I could go buy a barbecue chicken if you like.”

At length, she replies, “Tuna with a baked potato would be perfect. Can you stay for dinner?”

“Only if you don’t talk about dying again.”

“How can I promise that?”

“It’s easy,” I tell her. “You say, ‘I promise to keep my *Schnauze* shut.’”

Sophie giggles. A minor victory.

Slumb’ring deep in everything, dreams a song as yet unheard, and the world begins to sing, if you find the magic word... Aunt Sophie recites this poem to me – translating from German – while I’m giving her a shower. “I learned those verses when I was fourteen,” she tells me with an amused smile. Then she asks, “Did you ever see *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*?”

“No.”

“See it sometime. It’s about a sleepwalker trained by a circus magician to commit murders. The movie is all shadows climbing up walls and irrational angles, and spaces that don’t make sense... a nightmare come to life. We Germans should have memorized every scene, but we didn’t have the courage.” She gives me a withering look. “Now, all your American films are comic books. The sleepwalkers have become little children.”

My aunt eats like a crocodile over the next few days – zucchini latkes, moussaka, salmon steaks, sweet potatoes, microwave popcorn, coffee yogurt... Her mouth opens and the food disappears. Her favorite meal becomes spaghetti with Buitoni tomato sauce, and the moment she licks the last traces of pasta from her plate, she looks up at me, my mother, and Maria with famished, hopeful eyes and asks what’s next. She’d make a good Oliver Twist in an old-age-home production. In between meals, she snacks. I joke that she’s set Cinnamon Crisp stock soaring on Wall Street.

“Well, I’m hungry,” she replies by way of explanation.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Maria is patient and cheerful. She makes wonderful *lumpia* – Filipino spring rolls. Maria grew up in Manila and worked for a wealthy banker in Saudi Arabia before moving to New York. She also takes over Jello preparation from me.

One afternoon, while Sophie and I are sipping tea on her bed, she hands me a folded scrap of paper. “Open it,” she says.

I find an Istanbul address for her nephew Hans.

“But Hans lives in Berlin,” I say. “Don’t you remember?”

“No, he lives in Istanbul.”

“But you used to go to Berlin every year to see him.”

“I would fly to Berlin for a few days and then go on to Turkey. I never told you or your mother. The address and phone you have is for his summer place.”

“Why all the secrecy?”

She puts her tea down and breaks off a square of her Ghirardelli chocolate bar. Dark chocolate has become her new obsession – an inheritance from her father, she has told me. “It would take days to explain all the reasons to you, and even then... You didn’t live through the war, you wouldn’t understand.” She nibbles at her square.

“I might understand if you try to explain. I’m not an idiot.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. The important thing is that if Hans doesn’t make it here in time, there are some things I’ll want you to tell him.”

“In time for what?” I demand, annoyed by her pessimism.

“You know what I mean. If...if something bad should happen.”

“All right, so what does Hans need to know?”

More nibbling. “I’m leaving three-quarters of what I have to him. The other quarter is for you and Ruthie.” Ruthie is my mother. “I’ve named you as the executor, and I want you to make it easy for Hans to collect his inheritance. Also, I’ve left a thousand dollars to take care of my brother’s grave. It’s all in my will – you’ll find it upstairs in Ben’s file cabinets.”

“Your brother? I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know.”

“When did he die?”

“A long time ago. My son was named after him.”

“Sophie, I think maybe you’re getting confused. You and Ben...you never had children.”

“A great deal happened before the war. Forget it.” She twirls her hand in the air as if explaining is useless.

Did Sophie really have a son and did he die during the war? “Talk to me,” I plead, an ache opening in my gut. “I’m worried about you.”

“I can’t – not now,” she replies. “Give me time.”

Sophie has put on nine pounds by Christmas and has the beginnings of a rear end again, which is good since she no longer has to use a cushion every time she sits down. But her feet are swollen like water balloons. She can hardly hobble around, even with her walker.

Maria coats my aunt’s feet with moisturizer at night to keep the reddened skin from tearing. Sophie wears my slippers, size ten and a half.

She has me sit with her one afternoon and asks, “What did I tell you in the hospital about before the war?”

“Mostly gibberish. You told me you tried to kill your father.”

“Odd.”

“Do you remember what you were thinking?”

“No.”

We sit in silence. On her request, I rub her back, which hurts constantly – the result of being permanently arched into a letter C.

“Oh, shit!” she suddenly says.

She’s peeing on herself, and not for the first time since she’s come home. She can’t control her bladder because of the double dose of diuretic she’s on – the cardiologist’s attempt to shrink the swelling in her feet. I help her hobble over to the commode, then get her pants and underwear down as quick as I can.

“I’m a mess,” she says, starting to cry. “I can’t take any more of this. This is not a life.”

I clean her up with paper towels. Maria helps her change her clothing. When she’s under the covers again, her beanie back on, I sit next to her.

“Sophie, you said *you* were friends with that neighbor of yours, Isaac, implying that maybe your parents didn’t like him.”

“They didn’t.”

“You haven’t ever told me much about your childhood, you know – just a few stories about your mother. I want to hear more.”

She rolls over away from me. “No, I think I’d better keep my *Schnauze* shut.”

I’ve coaxed Sophie out of the house for the first time since her return from the hospital and we’re sitting around the table in my mom’s kitchen, watching *The River of No Return*, a movie we haven’t seen in years. I’d forgotten completely that the doe-eyed boy in the film was Tommy Rettig, who later played the kid in the *Lassie* television series. This is the sort of trivial revelation that somehow helps me fight off despair.

Sophie’s wearing her shawl around her shoulders and eating her Cinnamon Crisp. After a while, Mom yawns. “I’m beat,” she tells us. “I’m going up to nap.” To Sophie, she adds, “You can lie down with me if you want – or take a snooze on the sofa.”

“Thanks, but I’m not sleepy.”

Once we hear Mom close her door, Sophie points the remote at the television and turns off Marilyn Monroe and Robert Mitchum being attacked by Hollywood Indians.

“I’m not Jewish,” she announces. “My parents were Christians.”

This confession bursts out of her. “Sophie, I think maybe you need to take a nap after all,” I reply. “You’re over tired.”

“Ben and I let your mother and everyone else think I was Jewish. After the war, it was easy to remake my identity. A bit...a bit like Andre now that I think about it. Though in his case he was able to become himself again once he fled left Germany. Not me.” She shakes her head bitterly. “I think a part of me died when I left Berlin.”

“Who’s Andre?” I ask.

“Someone I knew when I was young. And a character in an old silent movie, *The Student from Prague*. It’s about a sorcerer who brings a young man’s reflection to life.”

“You’re confusing me.”

“Sorry. I really only meant to apologize to you for lying about my father the other day.”

“Lying? You hardly said anything about him.”

“I said it was odd that I’d told you I tried to kill him, but it wasn’t odd at all.” She takes off her beanie and heaves it angrily at the television, as if it has been preventing her from thinking. She scratches her head with both hands, raising her hair into a tangled gray crest. “I’ve got a lot of things I need to tell you before I get any worse. The problem is that there’s just too much to say.” She leans toward me and knocks her fist on the tabletop between us, as if she’s just played her hand at poker and is waiting for my move.

“We can talk anytime you like,” I say.

“When do you have to get back home?”

“I should go in another few days.”

“Do you have a tape recorder?”

“Upstairs, in my old desk.”

“Come over to my house with it tomorrow.” She struggles to her feet and takes my hand. “Not a word of this to anyone for now!”

The First Gate

The First Gate appears as birth, and through its archway all other openings and levels come into view.

One is the point of a pyramid; Noah's ark; the language of paradise; and the horizon line between inside and outside. One is the mystery of the self and the union of Adam and Eve.

One is the first word of every story – including yours...

The one God is hidden, concealed, and transcendent. He may be known only by unlocking the gates. Gaze far across the Promised Land and you may see Him, waiting for you to take a first step toward yourself.

The first heaven is Vilon, the veil, which descends at dusk and rises at dawn. It is presided over by Joseph, who had the wisdom to listen to the dreams and men and women, and the courage to enter them.

There was a time when all the world spoke a single language and used the same words –
Genesis 11.

Berekiah Zarco, The Book of Birth

Chapter 1

It may take me fifteen minutes to thread a needle, but I have a hunter's vision for the past. So I can see the low sky of that frigid afternoon in February of 1932 as if the clouds were within my reach, and I am aware, too, my mother's troubled face pressed against our kitchen window, since she is anxious to shout out a warning to me in the courtyard below.

Regret, too, squeezes my heart; there was so much about Mama that I'd been too young to understand.

"It is very difficult to get rid of destiny once it has entered you, and you will need the grace of God to do so," Isaac Zarco once warned me with his hand of blessing resting on my head, and he was right. For the gray clouds of that day have never fully cleared. And my mother has never stopped gazing down at me.

I see Tonio, as well, sprawled on the ground, and Vera turning away from him. Do these images come to me because of their symmetry? After all, Vera and Tonio were destined to pull me in opposite directions.

Cloaked by the darkness of a December night in America, I can feel the rabbit-quick breathing of the eager fourteen-year-old girl that I was, and her depth of belief in herself – just as I can feel the absence of the same confidence inside the woman I would become. I am heading out with my best friend Tonio on another after-school adventure in a childhood built out of curiosity. Tonio, who has just turned fifteen, is small and lithe, with a sweet, thoughtful mouth and large chestnut eyes that often seem to show a suffering way beyond his years. They are an inheritance from his sad-natured Russian mother, and so there is an exotic appeal to him, as well – my chance to voyage far east of Germany.

He and I are stomping over the flagstones of our building's courtyard, talking excitedly, dressed in our heavy woolen coats and boots, vapor clouds puffing out of our mouths. Like most apartment houses in our neighborhood, the courtyard lies between a front building facing the street and a rear one that's hidden. My parents, my brother, and I live in front. Tonio and his parents live in back.

We are on our way to Straßburger Straße, where Tonio has heard that a broad linden tree has fallen, crushing a spiffy red American car. Small catastrophes like this etch tiny marks into our

childhood, and he and I also extract a sweet, secret joy from making our parents wonder if racing to the scene of fires, burst water mains, and tramway collisions isn't a sign that we aren't quite right in the head. In fact, fear for the safety of her excitable, wayward daughter is why my mother will not turn from the window. I don't waver, of course; I resent her lack of trust the way some kids resent not getting enough attention.

Before Tonio and I reach the door to the front building – intending to walk through the entranceway to the street – it opens and two tiny children step toward us, twins most likely, since they are wearing matching Carnival costumes; most parties and balls in Berlin are scheduled for this evening – Saturday the 6th.

“Hello there,” one of them says with an odd, adult-sounding voice.

We don't reply; their beautiful clothes leave us awe-struck – checkerboard jackets and pants in scarlet and black, and floppy yellow hats topped with tiny silver bells. Curiosity overwhelms us. And jealousy too. Why didn't *we* think of putting on our costumes?

Stepping forward in a waddling way, they pass us and walk toward the rear building. When the larger of the two – barely three feet tall – turns around to smile, the diffuse northern light catches his face and we see that he has whiskers on his cheeks.

“Dwarfs,” Tonio whispers to me.

They penguin-walk into the apartment house, and we follow them. Starting up the staircase, they talk in hushed voices – about the ill-bred children behind them, most likely. Up three flights they go, laboriously, each step a hurdle that makes them seem to throw their hips out of joint.

We pursue them only to the first floor landing, our rudeness finding a temporary height limit. “They're *unheimlich*,” Tonio says. *Unheimlich*, meaning weirdly sinister, is his favorite word.

Rushing back to the courtyard, we see lights go on in Mr. Zarco's sitting room. He lives alone on the third floor. Both his wife and son are long dead.

“Mr. Zarco must be having a party,” I tell Tonio.

“A *very small* party,” he replies, laughing at his wordplay.

I laugh too, but only to keep him company. Tonio is the first boy I've had a crush on, but I've recently had to admit to myself that we do not share the same sense of humor. I've also concluded that I'll have to hide that difference from him if our marriage is to have any chance of success.

“I wish I'd gotten a better look at them,” I say, casting my gaze up to my mother's now empty window. I resent that, too – that she nearly always misses out on the adventures that a mother and daughter should share.

The door to the courtyard opens again, and a couple in their twenties step out. The woman, slender, with short blond hair, wears a sequined blue snout over her nose. The man, dressed as a

bullfighter, has on a gold brocade vest and tights, and a tri-corn black hat. He is gaunt and pale, and handsome in a desperate way, like a starving student in a romantic novel. They say hello, but their voices are hard to understand; the consonants and vowels seem smudged. We return their greetings this time. The woman smiles at us and makes quick hand signals to the bullfighter. Then they, too, cross the courtyard, enter the rear building, and climb up the staircase to Mr. Zarco's apartment.

We're jittery with excitement by now, and we decide to wait to see who'll come next. Tonio lifts his nose and sniffs at the air, which smells of hops because we have a dozen breweries in the neighborhood. "Schultheis," he says, frowning.

He claims to be able to tell which brewery the scent is coming from and prefers the more pungent, stinging odor of Bötzwow. I don't drink beer. I prefer wine – just like Greta Garbo, I always tell people.

After a few minutes, a gigantic woman wearing a gargoyle mask enters – a jutting awning of forehead over a big blunt nose, protruding chin, and gaping caveman mouth. "Best costume so far," I whisper to Tonio, thinking that scary creatures may be in style this year.

"She looks just right for the Katakombe," he says. The Katakombe is an avant-garde Berlin cabaret we snuck into a few months earlier.

The woman is well over six feet tall. I look down at her legs expecting to see her standing on stilts. But I can't see her feet; she's cloaked head to toe in black, with a long white scarf around her neck.

Black and white – Vera will never wear any other colors, but I don't know that yet.

"My god!" Tonio suddenly exclaims, gulping for air.

"What's wrong?"

He races off to the side of the courtyard, toward the Munchenberg's apartment.

"Sophie!" he calls. When I turn, he is waving me over frantically.

By now, the woman is directly in front of me. I wonder what the fuss is; it's comforting to be so small beside her and yet still be the center of my own world.

"What's your name?" she asks me.

It's her distended, lopsided smile – as though her bloated bottom lip might just drop off – that gives the truth away. I do not scream, though I want to. I cover my mouth with my hands. My heart seems to burst out of my chest.

Tonio keeps calling me, but I can't move; the word *hingerissen*, meaning overwhelmed and entranced, gains meaning for me forever after.

"I'm Vera," she tells me. Leaning down, she reaches out her hand with formal grace. Would I

have taken it? I'll never know, because Tonio tugs me away.

"Get away from us!" he yells at the woman.

She tosses the end of her scarf over her shoulder and rushes past us, her head down.

"Monster!" Tonio calls after her.

Vera stops. When she turns, her eyes are hooded by rage. She marches back to us, each of her steps too long for a woman.

I can't prevent myself from staring at her; her mask-that-isn't-a-mask is something that should only exist in a nightmare, like blood oozing out of one's pillow. Who could turn away from such an impossibility?

My breathing seems to be deeper than ever before, and I know that I am right where I am meant to be. Years later, I will read the Greek myths and understand this feeling better; it is not often that one encounters a goddess, and even less frequently in the courtyard between two quiet, middle-class apartment houses. It was one of Isaac Zarco's ancestors who said that God appears to us in the form we can most appreciate, and maybe for me that form was Vera.

"You shouldn't talk to anyone so disrespectfully," the giant tells Tonio.

Her voice is gentle; the tone of a woman who has learned how to control herself in front of little creatures that sting.

"You're deformed!" he shrieks.

That may be true, but she is also quick and powerful; her open hand catches my friend on his shoulder, knocking him over. His cap tumbles off. By the time I've picked it up, Vera is entering the back building, tilting forward, as if carrying a leaden locket around her neck.

"Are you all right?" I ask Tonio.

Tears are caught in his lashes. "I'm fine!" he snaps. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

The boy is embarrassed about being knocked over, so we don't talk about it. We go to see the crushed red American luxury car, which turns out to be a small black Peugeot 201 Cabriolet and not nearly as flattened as we'd like.

"What a disappointment," he tells me. "I was really hoping it was a '32 Packard. They've got this hood ornament made of chrome-plated zinc that's called the Goddess of Speed. If the car had been really crushed, I'd have taken it. Imagine having one!"

"What's the ornament look like?"

"It's a winged angel holding up a tire."

A tire? The Goddess of Speed sounds ridiculous to me, but sparks of joy are in Tonio's eyes, so I tell him I'd love to see one. When Tonio is happy, he's irresistible.

A crowd of Berliners gathered around an accident will always include more than enough gaping

singularities to please our precocious sense of the grotesque, including double-chinned businessmen with pencil-thin mustaches, my personal favorite, but Tonio doesn't share my delight in faces. He's examining the crushed Peugeot. After a while, silence nestles itself deeply inside me. Suddenly frigid, I watch a group of unemployed men squatting on Metzger Straße by a fire they've made with planks of wood and rags. Behind them, seeming to guard our neighborhood with its protective strength, is my favorite local landmark, the water tower, a cylinder of dark brick rising a hundred feet into the air. I used to imagine a bearded sorcerer living at its pinnacle, and a terrified girl being held captive. Raising my gaze to its highest windows, I think about how much I'd like to talk to the gigantic woman who walloped Tonio, which leads me to consider how little the bent steel of a smashed Peugeot means compared to a face that frightens children.

Darkness falls in an instant during the Berlin winter, and by the time we reach Prenzlauer Allee, we're walking backwards to keep the searing wind off our faces. A tap on my shoulder makes me gasp and nearly tumble over.

"Scared you!"

"Raffi, you idiot! You almost gave me a heart-attack!"

Rafael Munchenberg, twenty-four years old, with flappy, elephant ears and the intense eyes of a chess master, faces me, then looks urgently down the street. He lives with his parents on the first floor of our building.

"*Was ist los?*" Tonio asks him. What's up?

"I need your help – both of you. I'm being followed."

"By who?" I ask, a flame of fear in my chest.

"A Nazi."

"Do you owe him some money?" Tonio asks. That question should tell you how little we know about politics.

"Of course, not," Raffi scoffs.

"You're not making this up, are you?" I ask, squinting and shifting my weight to appear insistent; this wouldn't be the first dirty trick he'd played on me.

"Soph, don't make trouble!" he says gruffly, and he snatches my hand. "Come on!"

He runs me down the street into the Immanuel Church, Tonio close on our heels.

Of late, Raffi has tried to change his image by wearing his thick black hair slicked back, so that he looks like a rakish jazz trumpeter. In real life, however, he's a good-as-gold doctoral student in Egyptology, and when he can get funding, which isn't all that often given Germany's ruined economy, he goes to Egypt for months at a time. He was my favorite baby-sitter of all time

because he'd read the scariest parts of *Emil and the Detective* to me as many times as I liked and even permit me to eat toast on his lap no matter how many crumbs I might spill. We also used to bathe Hansi together and get as soaked as sponges, and even my normally impassive brother would laugh. Tonio and Raffi also play cards every other Friday evening, though I don't join them. I learned the hard way – from Tonio's resentful looks – that boys need some time alone.

We burst into the church. Two sparrowish women are praying in the second pew – knots of blue-gray hair above thick gray coats. Raffi puts his stunning, black felt hat on Tonio's head, takes the boy's ratty cap, and exchanges jackets with him.

"You look like a clown!" I whisper to Tonio after he's got on Raffi's coat, since the sleeves swallow his hands. "Besides, swapping clothes is the oldest trick in the book! I've seen it in a dozen movies." A slight exaggeration, but I think my point is well taken.

Tonio shoos me away. "Shush, Sophie!" The idea of being a decoy is apparently more important than manners.

"Both of you keep quiet," Raffi snaps. He's holding Tonio's jacket, since there's little point in trying to get it on. "It's dark out, Soph, and by the time they notice that Tonio isn't me, I'll be long gone. Besides, we're going out the back exit. Hurry!"

The icy wind swirling through the back alley makes me pull my sweater neck over my mouth and nose, so that the rest of what happens between us has always been accompanied in my memory by the warm smell of wool. Raffi gives me a quick kiss, then shushes up my questions and takes a thick envelope and piece of paper folded into a tight square from his pocket. "Keep these for me," he says. He holds my shoulders tight, telling me with his desperate look that he really is in trouble. "Don't give them to anyone. You hear me?"

"I won't. I swear!"

"Hide them – hurry!"

I slip the envelope and the paper underneath my blouse. They're rough against my skin, and disquieting – like forbidden thoughts.

"I love you, Soph," he says, smiling fleetingly.

Before I can ask him why he's in such a fix, he shakes Tonio's hand with masculine graciousness – a professor and his star pupil. "Tonio, once he sees you aren't me, he'll stop following you. And if he questions you, tell him I've run off to the circus!"

He turns to me. "If I don't come back for what I've given you, then...then..." A creaking sound from inside the church makes Raffi jerk his head back. He looks like a thief awaiting a police siren...

"But Raffi, where are you..."

Before I can finish my sentence, he's running as fast as he can out of the alley and east down Immanuel-Kirche Straße toward the smokestacks of the Friedrichshain Brewery, his hand on his head to keep Tonio's cap from blowing off. We watch him in silence until he vanishes around the corner. Nobody steps out of the church or dashes past us. Tonio thinks Raffi must have seduced some Nazi's wife, since his mind is never further than one step from sex. Rubbing his frozen hands together, he says in an eager voice, "Good, now let's see what's in that envelope of his."

"We can't!"

"We have to, Sophie. What if he doesn't come back? You heard him."

"Someone might be watching us."

Tonio and I decide to head to Frau Koslowski's grocery. We keep looking behind us, but no one is on our trail. We hide around corners just to make sure, making believe we're secret agents. Tonio presses against me hard as he looks over my shoulder, which I adore.

Frau Koslowski has already closed her shop for the afternoon, so we slip into the Köln Beer Garden, just around the corner, which is frequented by Brewery workers and billiards players. The carpeting of the indoor restaurant stinks like a urinal and the air is filled with enough cigar smoke to choke the Kaiser's army. We rush to the women's bathroom – Tonio's idea – and lock ourselves in a stall.

Tonio, panting with excitement, rips open the envelope. "Wow!" he whispers, and he takes out a stack of English one-pound notes in two different colors, brown and green. The brown ones become my favorites. I call them my Two Georges, because they have a picture of a bearded, serious-looking King George on the right – in profile – and a handsome, bare-chested St. George killing a ferocious dragon on the left. We count the bills – fifty four. "What do you think they're worth?" I ask.

"A fortune!" Tonio spreads them like a fan. "Buckingham Palace here I come!"

"This must be enough money for Raffi to study in Egypt for several months," I say.

"Now hand over the paper," Tonio orders.

"No way." I unfold it myself and find slender rows of tiny, beautifully designed figures – mostly animals like snakes and falcons, but also feathers and scepters. "Hieroglyphics," I whisper.

Tonio's mouth falls open. "Maybe they're magic formulas! We'll be able to make gold out of thin air!"

"Don't be stupid," I reply, more harshly than I intended.

"Stop being mean!"

I explain that I'm worried about Raffi and hand Tonio the sheet of paper to make peace. We count twenty-four lines of writing. The first hieroglyphs in each line are surrounded by a frame,

and inside the first frame are a saucer-shape, a staff, two feathers, an eagle, and a triangle.

“This has been the most *unheimlich* afternoon ever!” he says with delight, and he grins as he spreads the notes on his head like a crown. “So what would you like me to buy you? A mink stole...?”

“Garbo and I prefer ermine,” I say coquettishly. “Now give them back.”

I put the money and the sheet of writing into the envelope, which I put back beneath my blouse. On the way home, I agree with Tonio that we’ve had a really strange afternoon – completely unpredictable. Of course, I have no idea that Isaac Zarco’s party and Raffi’s escape – and all those intricate little letter-shapes invented four thousand years ago – are all intimately related.

As soon as I get to my room, I hide Raffi’s envelope in my underwear drawer, where I keep my diary. Then I make Mama and myself tea while she prepares supper. I love the way the kettle hisses, and how my feet and hands tingle back to life, as if the warmth is making me a new person from the inside out. When my fingers are supple again, I go to my room, take out my sketchbook, and draw the hieroglyphics one by one, as careful as a spy copying secret war plans, because I suspect that Raffi will lie to me about what’s written here and I am determined to know the truth. Then I hide both the original and my copy in my drawer.

The kitchen is now filled with the smell of boiled onions, turnips, cabbage, potatoes, and carrots. Almost all the meals my mother prepares make use of the same five ingredients – or maybe rice and tomatoes if she’s feeling adventurous, and bratwurst or a slice of pork if we’ve managed to save for a treat, because meat is too expensive for us to eat regularly. The steam from her cooking can cloud up our windows for hours because – as northern European women have known for centuries – vegetables are only done when they lose all their color and taste, and fall apart on your fork. In fact, most every mother between Danzig and Munich is also coping the best she can on too small an income and too little inventiveness. Not that their economizing stops their thirty million children from praying for something more tasty on their plates, of course.

Once, for my twelfth birthday, Mama made moussaka with two purple eggplants she found at a Levantine grocery on Neue Friedrichstraße. My taste buds were in ecstasy but my little brother Hansi wouldn’t go near his plate. And that was when the curtain came down on culinary experimentation in our house.

Mama doesn’t ask me about the crushed car. Papa does. We sit together at the kitchen table. Its top is a gorgeous slab of cream-colored travertine marble that was a wedding gift from his parents. Sometimes when I’m alone, I run my hand over its cool, sensual smoothness. Mama is mixing the batter for *Reibekuchen*, fritters. Hansi is with us, too, peeling potatoes, which give off the damp,

earthy smell I love. I do not mention our adventure with Raffi, since the story of his escape might get back to his parents and earn him a lecture from his professor father. And I especially don't say anything about Vera. She's a gift I've given myself and might never share with anyone. I haven't decided yet.

I sip my tea through a lumpy sugar crystal, which means that the words of my story tumble out and go off on a sweet-flavored, zigzagging journey. Maybe my father knows I make up a lot of what I say, maybe he doesn't. It doesn't matter because he laughs in the right places, and he's always given me the right to tell him about my life any way I want.

After I finish my story, Papa gives Mama and me presents from Maria Gorman, a secretary at Communist Party headquarters with whom we've gone on picnics: two jars of raspberry jam, one with seeds for me, one without for Mama and Hansi. I'll notice their jar in the garbage that night, and when I rescue it my mother will explain that she tossed it away accidentally while washing the dishes. She's a bit scatterbrained, I think at the time.

My father soon slips away to the sitting room to read the newspaper. I ask Mama if I can go to Uncle Rainer's party as the vampire in *Nosferatu* instead of a Dutch skater. The two of us had shrieked with fright when we'd seen the movie a few months earlier.

"Oh, darling, it's too late," my mother replies. "I'm sorry."

"Please, we could use your face powder to make me look pale and sickly, and slick my hair down with some black shoe polish. We could cut me long fingernails out of paper. And..."

"Shoe polish!"

"I'll get Papa's."

"Don't move! We've got to be at your uncle's in two hours."

Though I know it's useless, or maybe precisely because of that, I jump up and tell her she's being unfair, which only makes her glare. My mother is pretty, with silky auburn hair that she's cut with bangs, just like her favorite actress, Claudette Colbert, and she has a sweet round face, but her green eyes open as big as murder when she's irritated.

"Sophie, your skating outfit is beautiful, and I spent hours sewing it," she warns me, the unspoken finish to her sentence being, *so don't push your luck!*

"But I don't want to be beautiful! I want to frighten people. I...I want to cause car accidents I'm so ugly. I want terrified men to chase me out of the Immanuel Church!"

She simply shrugs as though I fell into her life from a remote galaxy and goes back to whisking the lumps out of her precious batter. Instead of insisting further, I pounce on what she loves most in the world, my eight-year-old brother. He hasn't yet finished peeling a dozen potatoes, although he's been huddling over them like a worry-sick peahen for half an hour. Maybe it's only because

my parents don't trust him with a sharp knife, but it's also true that Hansi is a diffident boy who never tells what he's thinking, and just maybe his slowness is because his brain is too small to learn how to get to the underside of anything, even something as simple as a potato from Frau Koslowski's grocery. The two things he's good at are posing for my sketches and doing jigsaw puzzles. As far as I can determine, he's taken up permanent residence in his own hermetic world, which I've named the Hansi Universe.

"Go faster!" I tell him. "We'll eat supper in March at the rate you're going."

"Don't you have anything better to do than annoy your brother!" Mama snaps.

Hansi looks up at me with the great big look of astonishment he inherited from her and says in an earnest voice, "It has to be done right."

"I wish you'd do it wrong just for once."

I'm referring to a lot more than peeling potatoes, of course. If only I could learn what goes on in that mysterious head of his then I suppose I wouldn't resent him being the silent angel of the family.

"It probably just doesn't grow," I tell my mother.

"What doesn't?"

"Hansi's brain!"

"Sophie you are a nightmare!" she shouts.

My goal. Then she banishes me from the kitchen – also an achievement. I embrace my wickedness at such moments as if it's my Oscar award.

Exile pleases me because it gives me license to throw some coals on my rage. What really bothers me, however, is that I will have to go to the party at Uncle Rainer's house as a sixteenth-century skater. How could I have been such a dunce? I try to make my feeble choice of costumes my mother's fault, but the blame just won't stick to her.

I listen to Bing Crosby and other lovesick American crooners on the radio, sulking, sitting between my father's legs. He's reading the Communist Party's *Rote Fahne* newspaper, as he always does before supper. I try to decipher the words of the songs. It's how I learn English.

After a while I grow bored and put on my Marlene Dietrich records while studying my cigarette cards of movie stars. *Falling in love again...* I adore the whiskey-soaked gravel in her voice. When someone knocks on our front door, my father asks me to see who it is. To my surprise, I discover Mr. Zarco.

He has a gaunt, tender face, with sad blue-gray eyes, and thick and beautiful silver hair springing out in tufts, like the fur of a spooked cat. His large ears have been reddened by the chill. If he were an actor in a play, he'd be the forgetful uncle. Or maybe the fiendish murderer that no one

ever suspects because he looks like he lives on warm milk and pumpernickel rolls. I like that dramatic idea, and also the boyish eagerness in the way he gazes down at me, but I only offer him a feeble hello; my mother has warned me about talking to neighbors we don't know very well, and I try not to defy her over small matters so that I can win Papa's support for the bigger ones.

I back away to fetch my father, leaving Mr. Zarco standing in the doorway. Not because he's Jewish, I should add. For now, this is still a city where Jews are Germans. As we all now know, they will defy a great many laws of nature by changing into swine and even vermin a bit later.

Papa rushes to the door and shakes our guest's hand warmly.

"Come in, come in," he insists, taking our neighbor by the elbow. They stand in the foyer as men in Germany do – not quite sure where to put their hands and feet.

"Please excuse my unexpected visit, but a friend of mine wants to apologize to your daughter, and she's too embarrassed to come down herself," Mr. Zarco says nervously.

"Apologize for what?"

Our guest gestures toward me. "Sophie and Tonio...they were playing in the courtyard and a guest at my party got angry at them and did something she shouldn't have."

"What did she do?" Papa asks.

"She hit Tonio. Apparently, the boy had ridiculed her."

"Tonio is a handful," Papa says with a long, unfavorable sigh, since he's only too aware that I'm in love with an inveterate mischief-maker.

"My friend, Vera...she can be very excitable. I don't believe she hurt the boy. I'll go see his parents later this evening, when" – here, Mr. Zarco gazes up to heaven – "I can summon the courage."

Mama rushes in from the kitchen, a host of worries already scattering in her head. Amplifying troubles is one of her specialties, and the older I get the more I'll suspect it's her compensation for not having any real power.

"What's this about Tonio being injured?" she asks.

"Not injured, hit," Papa tells her. He turns to me. *Häschen*, you didn't mention any trouble. Tonio *is* all right, isn't he?"

Papa calls me Bunny Rabbit either when he's feeling especially affectionate or when he needs a favor from me. Now, what he wants is honesty. Given my nature that constitutes a favor.

"Tonio is fine." I reply. "Anyway, it was his fault," I add, and with that admission I feel a mix of terror and joy – the previously undreamed of possibility, in fact, of being able to tug my relationship with my friend in a more dangerous direction. He and I will have a quarrel when he finds out I've told on him, but maybe he will finally understand the depth of my love when I break

down and sob. With any luck, he'll insist on kissing me to make up.

"What do you mean?" Mama asks.

I begin my explanation. Three adults listening attentively. I'm gratified to be in the witness box without having to testify against myself.

When I get to Tonio calling Vera a monster, Papa gasps. "And what did you say?" he asks me.

"Nothing."

"Sophie...!" Mama glowers at me, certain I must have behaved even worse than Tonio.

"I didn't say a thing. I was *hingerissen*."

There's that word again that I now understand in my bones: entranced.

"*Hingerissen*?" my mother questions. "What do you mean?"

"I couldn't move. The woman was ugly. And tall...like she was standing on stilts."

"Sophie!" Papa snarls. "You mustn't talk like that."

"No, your daughter is right," Mr. Zarco says, laughing lightly, then looking at me as if we share an understanding. "Vera is uncommonly ugly."

"Really?" Mama asks, eager curiosity in her voice. She secretly adores gossip.

"Let's just say that she is not a sight easily reconciled with any notions of justice we might wish to have about our world."

Mama wipes her brow with her dishtowel. She sweats a great deal when she panics. "This is all so unexpected and...and upsetting," she sputters.

"Very," Mr. Zarco agrees. He stands very erect – the preamble to a request from a former staff sergeant in the Kaiser's army. "Dr. and Mrs. Riedesel, would you mind if I escorted your daughter over to my apartment for a few minutes? Vera would like to apologize to Sophie directly. I assure you she is normally harmless."

I like it that Mr. Zarco uses the word *escort*. It makes me sound grown up. He calls my father *doktor* because Papa has a degree in chemical engineering.

"Normally harmless?" Papa questions.

"When she's not provoked, I mean."

"Sophie would go to your...apartment and...and talk to this Vera?" Mama stammers.

Judging from her grimace, she's envisioning headhunters from Borneo hiding under Mr. Zarco's bed. *I'm not going to be cooked in a cauldron*, I want to shout. *But if I were, then at least someone would get some supper tonight!*

"I'll take good care of Sophie and have her back to you in fifteen minutes," our elderly neighbor assures her.

"No, it's impossible," Mama announces.

But Papa is raising up onto the balls of his feet, intrigued – the habit of a former gymnast. “I’ll go with Sophie,” he says eagerly.