

**Melanie Levensohn**

## **A Whole Life Between Us**

**404 pp., Paperback**  
**to be published August 22, 2018**  
**FTV**

**Inspired by a true story**

**Three women, separated by more than half a century, bound together by a promise**

*Paris, 1940:* The City of Lights under German occupation. Christian, the son of a bank director, falls in love with Judith, a Jewish girl. The young couple secretly plans to flee, but suddenly Judith disappears. Christian begins a frantic search.

*Montreal, 1982:* Shortly before his death, Lica Grunberg confesses to his daughter, Jacobina, that she has an older half-sister, Judith. Lica escaped the Nazis but lost all contact with his first-born daughter. Jacobina must promise the old man that she will find the sister she never knew. It takes her twenty years to begin her search, assisted by her much younger friend, Béatrice, a French diplomat, who is going through a painful midlife crisis. At the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., they meet Grégoire. Not only does he turn Beatrice's head, he also uncovers clues to Judith's whereabouts.

Soon the two women discover a dark family secret, stretching over two continents and six decades. It will change their lives forever.

When **Melanie Levensohn** took on her husband's last name at their wedding, she became the namesake of his French second cousin who was killed in Auschwitz. Her tragic story inspired this novel. Melanie Levensohn lives on a vineyard in Napa Valley in California together with her family. She was born in 1970 near Frankfurt, studied political sciences and literature in France and Chile and later worked as a press aide for the World Health Organisation in Geneva and for the World Bank in Washington D.C.

*Translated by Melanie Levensohn*

## *Chapter 1*

*Montreal, 1982.*

"Blood ...," whispered the old man, breathing heavily through his mouth. "Blood ..."

His voice pierced the silence, like a sharp pair of scissors cutting through paper — his first word in two days. Jacobina, who was huddled up in the small chair next to his bed, jumped up and looked at him. His eyes were half open, little pieces of flesh struggled to hang onto his lips. She'd been sitting at his bedside for hours in this overheated room, watching him sleep. He'd lain there motionless and fetal, with the corners of his mouth drawn down, and the only sign of life the slight up-and-down movement of his chest.

Jacobina had dozed off a few times herself. The silence was interrupted only intermittently by the muffled ringing of a bell in a church tower, dutifully reminding everyone that another quarter hour had passed. Then she would glance at her wristwatch to check *which* quarter hour it was. Was it already three thirty? Or just two thirty?

A nurse looked in on him four times a day. In the morning a quiet blonde woman showed up to take his temperature and measure his blood pressure. She handled the instruments quickly and confidently, gently placing the sleeve on the patient's arm. Jacobina listened, first to the pumping of the squeeze bulb, then to the hissing of the escaping air. The blonde took some notes, and disappeared. In the afternoon, it was the red-haired nurse who came with her squeaking rubber soles. "You should go home now," she said each time in her broad, *Québécois* French accent, while changing the drip bottle or emptying the urine bag. "He's very tired." Jacobina always just shook her head. The sharp sounds of the redhead's *Québécois* rang in her ears.

But eventually she did leave to spend the night in a small guesthouse, not an especially well-kept one, but a cheap one with brown curtains and a sagging mattress, which was located next to the hospital. Here, too, she heard the church bells every quarter hour. Her head was humming. Images of her father whirled around in it. She found it impossible to sleep.



"Blood," the man spluttered more loudly than before. Then his voice failed. He pressed his lips together and tried to swallow, which required a lot of effort. Jacobina sat up and looked expectantly at the old man.

"Father," she asked softly, "can you hear me?" She had a hollow feeling in her stomach — a mixture of relief and uncertainty. Should she sit down on his bed, take his hand, and wake him up?" *No*, she thought. *It's better to give him some time. He has to come around on his own.*

The old man took his arm out from under the covers, and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. His movements were shaky and halting, and he seemed not to notice Jacobina as he stared at the wall on the other side of the room from his bed, focusing intently on the fading but recognizable picture of the Eiffel Tower at twilight. It was positioned a little too low on the wall, no doubt to add a little color to the stark hospital room. One of those cheap reproductions of Impressionist painters, Jacobina had assumed when she first entered. But it wasn't one of the typical Monet prints found on calendars. She'd never seen the image before. In her endless hours of waiting, she had studied it for a long time, not because she particularly cared for it, quite the opposite, in fact, but because it was the only thing in the hospital room that didn't make her think about death and the expectations it would place on her when it occurred — *if* it occurred.

Would she be able to cry? Would she experience the grief expected of her when her father died? And how would it feel? Like the emptiness within her when she was at the office, performing purely routine work, without any possibility of a promotion, without any successes or defeats? Or would it be like the malaise that always overcame her when she was sitting alone in a restaurant and the waiter arrived to clear the second place setting? She was familiar with this kind of loneliness and over the years had learned to endure it.

Or, perhaps she wouldn't feel anything at all? Because her father's death wouldn't change anything. She had already lost him more than two decades ago, when she was barely twenty-one and left home. He'd never forgiven her.

Her mother's death, now *that* had been hard. It had taken Jacobina years to accept the ultimate silence of her mother, who had always been so talkative. Jacobina felt the loss at all times. Her mother's short phone calls, sometimes daily, which always came at a bad time. Insignificant chatter.

"Jackie Dear, are you all right?"

"Mom, I'm in the office. I can't talk now."

"I just want to know if everything is OK."

"Why shouldn't it be OK?"

Mother's unwanted packages of dark chocolate and bagels from the Saint Viateur Bakery, her letters with the scrawled handwriting that Jacobina could recognize a



mile away. She wrote that the winter was too long and that her health was not good. Jacobina rarely answered. Every year at Passover, Mother sent more Matzah bread than Jacobina would ever be able to eat. When Jacobina complained, Mother was offended. Eventually the daughter gave up. In New York there were more kosher shops than in Montreal, but Mother would have none of it. Back then, her mother's solicitousness had bothered her. But now, years later, Jacobina still missed it and yearned for her phone calls. *If only I'd been more attentive to her*, she thought. That would have been the least she could have done. It was too late when she finally understood that Mother had been her only home.

Father, however, was something else. Jacobina's eyes turned back to the hospital bed. She would not miss his coldness for a moment. Even so, she had come to say good-bye to him. He had had a hard life and shouldn't have to die alone. She felt a sense of duty as an only child.

Suddenly, the old man began coughing so hard that his head jerked forward, and once again he tried to speak. "Blood ...," he gasped, pausing briefly, then struggling to continue, "is thicker ... than water." He groaned and closed his eyes as if it had taken all his strength to speak those words. Jacobina was startled. It sounded so like Lica ... That blood was thicker than water. How often had she heard her father say those words? That was always his explanation for everything — for war and peace, loyalty or betrayal.

Was he talking to her, or was he just delirious? "A sudden weak spell," is what the doctor said when he called her, and asked her to come over right away. That could mean almost anything. "His time is almost up," he added. No further questions.

She hadn't been able to learn much since she arrived in Montreal. The doctor was busy and had spent just a few minutes with her. Good that she was there, he said, a brief handshake; her father was very unstable; we can only wait.

Jacobina didn't know much about her father's condition. He'd never talked about it. Sure, he'd lost a lot of his mobility in recent years, and he'd been suffering from insomnia for a long time. Normal signs of old age. "Getting old is horrible," he'd often said, "nothing is fun anymore. All your bones ache." But exactly what his condition was — high blood pressure, diabetes, perhaps a cancer growing somewhere inside him — or why he always took those little blue pills, she had no idea. And she never cared to know.

A cleaning woman had been through more than an hour ago, but the strong odor of disinfectant still hung in the air. Jacobina looked out the double-paned windows that were permanently sealed. Only muffled sounds could be heard from the street below. Life out there remained far away, unreal.

Although it was only four in the afternoon, the streetlights were already on. It had begun to snow again, and the thick flakes tumbled sideways toward the ground.



*These damned Canadian winters!* How she had always hated them — endless darkness, freezing red hands. She'd hated almost everything here. Why had no one understood that?

Jacobina was about to turn on the lamp on the night table, was feeling for the switch, but then she stopped and pulled her hand back. Her father loved dusk, she remembered, with a sudden gentle feeling of fondness, this twilight that slowly announced the evening and ushered in a time of rest. At home, he'd often sat alone in the creeping darkness. The little wall lamp that the nurse had turned on a few hours ago was still burning, casting a dim light on Lica's right cheek.

The old man cleared his throat and opened his eyes again. Jacobina picked up a glass from the table, filled it with water from the carafe that the blonde nurse had brought in the morning, and silently handed it to him. But he didn't take it. He just kept staring, as though in a trance, at the picture of the Eiffel Tower. Now his face looked even more drawn than in daylight. Broad, black folds creased his forehead, and his few remaining strands of hair stuck to the top of his head. *My God, how old he looks. He was old. 82.* Although she'd been looking at him constantly for the past two days, the haggard old man with the grey cheeks seemed like a stranger, not like the cheerful and plump Papa Lica who, when she was a child, had held her tight in his arms, then swung her through the air. That Papa would press his scratchy cheek against hers while whispering something funny in her ear. She remembered the smell of his aftershave. Everything about him radiated love and caring. But that was then, she was eight, and the world was still in order.

*Wild Lica* everyone had called him. Yes, he'd been wild and loud, demanding a lot from life, not respectful of anyone or anything, except the holy ritual of the Sabbath, when he lit the candles with great reverence, poured himself a large glass of wine, and blessed his family. Jacobina had fond childhood memories of these Friday evenings. The house was tidied up, financial and other worries put off to the side until later, and the aroma of challah, the braided white bread that Mother took out of the oven and sprinkled with salt, perfumed the air. How long ago that was! Mother was still alive, and Lica had not yet become the eccentric cynic he evolved into after her death. Jacobina tried in vain to tune out the other, less pleasant memories: the many quarrels, the accusations, the silence. In the end, the silence would remain. His death wouldn't change anything.

"Paris," Lica said suddenly, shattering the silence just as unexpectedly as before. His voice still sounded a bit raw, but firm, and the coughing had stopped.

"Judith ... my child." He took a deep breath, then was silent again.

Jacobina looked at him. Who was he talking about? Was he delirious? "Father, it's me, Jacobina."



"Paris," he repeated, in a soft, nostalgic voice, without taking his eyes off the Eiffel Tower picture.

"Father, how are you feeling?"

Lica didn't answer. Jacobina leaned forward and touched his hand. Why didn't he look at her? He had to know she was there. There was a wistful expression on his face, as if he'd been overcome by some sad memory. Then he turned slowly toward Jacobina and stared straight at her. Or, rather, through her, as if he was in some other place.

"How could I do that to you, Judith?" He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Jacobina stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

At that moment the door swung open, and the ceiling light went on, bathing the room in a white fluorescent light. Jacobina blinked. The red-haired nurse with the squeaky rubber soles came charging in, walked over to the foot of the bed, and waved at Lica.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Grunberg. Did you have a good sleep?" she asked in a shrill voice, winking at him. Then she turned to Jacobina. "How long has your father been awake?" But before Jacobina could reply, he interrupted. "Water."

"Perhaps five minutes," Jacobina mumbled, and got up. She was about to hold the full glass to his lips, but Lica grabbed it with trembling hands, and pushed her arm aside. *Typical*, thought Jacobina. He was holding the glass in both hands and drank in small, eager sips.

The redhead bustled around the room, adjusted the flow of the drip bottle, and closed the curtains. Lica's head fell back on the pillow, and he loosened his grip. The half-full glass rolled across the sheet, fell to the floor, and smashed.

"Can't you be a little more careful, Madame?" the nurse said sharply. Then, ignoring the glass on the floor, she took Lica's flabby arm and felt his pulse. Jacobina bent down and gathered up the broken pieces. Her legs ached from sitting still for so long.

"44," said the nurse, "quite low." She put Lica's arm back on the sheet and wrote the number down. "Make sure he eats something," she said. She pressed the bell for the nurse's room. "Supper for room 54," she ordered, and then she left.

Jacobina took a deep breath and searched for a handkerchief to gather the last few shards of glass from the floor. *Don't make trouble*, she told herself, *no nasty words. There's no point in criticizing the nurse.*



A young orderly brought in a tray of food and a pot of tea, and placed it on Lica's nightstand. He smiled shyly and wished Jacobina a good night. She glanced at the plate containing a small cheese sandwich garnished with dried-out sliced pickles.

"Crappy hospital food," Lica grumbled once they were alone again. Jacobina smiled. The same old guy. *Maybe the doctor's fears are premature.* She brushed a few strands of hair from her face, turned off the ceiling light, and moved her chair closer to the bed.

"Would you like some tea?"

"I've got to talk to you," he replied, without looking at her. His voice was soft, but he sounded very determined now. Jacobina pricked up her ears. So, he *was* aware she was sitting here, after all. *It's just like him.*

"Life is complicated, Jackie," he whispered. "We're the only two left."

*If he'd realized that ten years ago, it would have spared me a lot of trouble.* Anger was welling up inside her. Now that things were going badly for him, he was trying to make amends with a few meaningless words. *We're the only two left* echoed in her head. But it wasn't quite as simple as that. It was too late. Much too late. She took a deep breath as her eyes wandered restlessly around the room. *No nasty remarks,* she admonished herself. She mustn't lose her temper.

"How shall I put it?" Lica continued, trying to brush the water spot off the bedcovers with his trembling hand. "I ... I've made some mistakes."

*Some!* Jacobina was about to let out a bitter laugh. *Everything had been a mistake!* But she pulled herself together and remained silent, remembering their terrible argument the last time she visited him, when she'd sworn she'd never see him again. They'd always fought when they were together. Hard and bitterly. That is, *he* started haranguing *her* as soon as she gave him a cup of coffee and the superficial chitchat was over. About her life. About the fact that she'd never finished school, that she was happy with just being a typist, even though she had a lot upstairs, as he used to say, that she'd left Montreal to go to the USA.

"You should have gotten married to Louis," he would say before they got through dinner at the kitchen table. Warmed-up stew from a tin can, the only thing he'd eat in those days. "He made something out of himself. Then you'd have had a good life." Louis, her first crush. She never really loved him and had no regrets about leaving him and the boring life she would have had with him.

"I *have* a good life." Nice try.

"In your shoebox?" One of his nasty references to her tiny studio apartment in Manhattan. "Don't make me laugh."



There was never any point in arguing with him. What did he know about her and her life, her longings and fears, the emptiness of her relationships, the unfulfilled promises of New York, the city of her dreams, her feeling of giddiness on looking down from her window on the 57<sup>th</sup> floor? Nothing. Her mother's death had driven them apart completely.

When did it all begin? Jacobina couldn't remember the last time she'd had a calm conversation with her father. It had happened sometime in the years just after Mother had passed away. He'd talked less, seldom answered the phone, withdrew increasingly. Eventually, he didn't even wave to the neighbors anymore, just sat in front of the TV all day. Jacobina worried about her father, and drove up to see him on long weekends. Awkward days. He kept the shutters closed and barely touched the food on his plate. He always wore the same grey corduroy pants, and he stopped shaving. The house was stuffy and the garden neglected. And whenever he spoke to her, he was critical. This mood of his, this darkness — Jacobina started to hate her parents' house.

As time passed, she was troubled by a gnawing feeling of guilt that she couldn't shake off. Every six months, she forced herself to take the Greyhound bus hundreds of miles over the border to Montreal to look in on her lonely father. She would stay a night, two at most. They couldn't stand each other any longer than that.

"He shouldn't be living alone," said Iris, once her mother's best friend. She would look in on Lica from time to time and then report back to Jacobina by phone. "Try to understand him." But Jacobina couldn't and wouldn't do that.

On her last visit he'd been especially harsh, so harsh that for more than a year she didn't call him. "Someday you'll get your comeuppance," he shouted after her, as she rushed out of the house in a rage. "Then you'll be sitting in your apartment, old and sick, and you will regret your wasted life." That was a few years ago, and she hadn't seen him since then. Why this anger? Why was he so angry with *her*? she often wondered. She hadn't done anything to him. Sure, she had disappointed him, and hadn't taken a husband, nor given him a grandchild to hold in his arms. But that's how it is with children — they follow their own star.

And now he wanted to beg forgiveness for all that? Would she be able to accept it? After all the rejection? No. It was too late. She crossed her legs and nervously rocked her right foot up and down.

Lica was staring at the Eiffel Tower again. "Paris", he said, "That's where it all began." Surprised, Jacobina looked at him and was about to say something, but then decided to keep silent and wait. He would get around to it.

"Claire," Lica whispered, "beautiful Claire Goldemberg. I loved her." He sniffled and wiped his eyes. "Then came the baby, a preemie."

*What sort of nonsense is this?*

"Such a tiny little thing."

"Who are you talking about?"

"The nurse thought she wouldn't make it." He paused briefly and swallowed. "But Judith ... She survived." Then he turned to Jacobina and, for the first time, looked her straight in the eye. "Your half-sister."

She leaned back and took a deep breath. *He is delirious. The medicines.* She'd better call the redhead. Lica frowned, and his gaze drifted back to the Eiffel Tower. "Claire and I separated," he said in a hoarse voice. "Later I met your mother. I promised to write to Judith, to visit her, to send her money."

Jacobina had to catch her breath, and despite the warmth in the room, her fingertips were frozen.

"Then came Hitler." Lica fell silent for a moment and sighed. "The Nazis, and the stupid Romanians who joined them, wanted to exterminate us. First they took Uncle Philipp." He paused briefly. "Then me." For a long time he was silent, as if the last part of his confession was going to be especially painful. "I ... I lost touch with Judith. I never saw her again," he said eventually.

Jacobina's stomach was in knots, her legs had turned to lead. Her eyes followed the black tire marks that the wheels of beds had left on the floor. Little dust bunnies had gathered in a corner by the window. Hadn't someone just cleaned the room, or had she imagined that, just as she'd imagined that she knew her father? The bell sounded in the church tower, and hammered inside her head. There before her lay a man, old and deathly white, remembering, in his final hours, a girl he hadn't spoken to in years. Life was one disgusting lie.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" whispered Jacobina. Tiny beads of sweat had formed above her lip, and she wiped them away with her index finger.

"Brown curls," he mumbled, "light-brown curls. Just like Claire."

*A half-sister!* All these years he'd lived with that truth, and lived it without her. Twice he'd backed away from paternal responsibility — neither looking for one daughter, nor speaking of her to her sister. *What a terrible coward.* She wanted to tell him that, now, scream it out. It hurt so much. But she just swallowed hard. She felt as though she couldn't move her tongue.

"Oh, the war," he'd always said with a dismissive wave of his hand whenever she'd asked him about his past when she was a child. "It destroyed us." She knew about the deportation. He'd been lucky, he always said, that he hadn't landed in one of the extermination camps in Poland, but had stayed in Romania. But he never wanted to talk about it then and always broke off the conversation. She didn't know any details, only that he'd escaped and then quickly left the country,



and Europe, with Mother and her. She had never pushed him to say more. She didn't like her parents' dark faces when they said the word "war" — stretched out and full of abhorrence. The war meant nothing to Jacobina. Europe was far away, and the war was long ago. She was only a baby then, and couldn't remember anything about it. The name Bucharest was noted in her passport as her place of birth. That's all she had to know.

"Soon my time here will be up," Lica whispered. "Finally, this rotten life is over."

"You should have told me," Jacobina struggled to say again. Lica turned toward her. His eyes were watery and seemed to have lost all their color. "I couldn't," he said, "I was too ashamed, Jackie."

Jacobina bit her lips. His candor came so suddenly.

"The last time I saw Judith in Paris, she was thirteen," he continued. "Or perhaps already fourteen. Long before the war. It was springtime." He looked back at the picture. Jacobina followed his gaze, and, for the first time, she noticed that the picture was slightly crooked. Lica gestured awkwardly a few times and tried to pull a pillow out from under his back, but he soon gave up and looked back at her. She stood up, grateful for the silent plea for help and the chance to do something that didn't require speaking. She helped him sit up in bed, pulled the pillow out from underneath him, smoothed it out, and placed it behind his head. When she touched his bony shoulders, she was startled. There was not much left of him, apart from regrets.

"We were sitting on the Champ de Mars, admiring the Eiffel Tower. It looked just like in this picture, almost pink in the early morning light. And proud, like its people."

Jacobina raised her eyebrows.

The door opened, and the young orderly who had brought supper earlier returned to collect the tray. The cheese sandwich was still lying on her father's plate, white and untouched.

"Would you maybe like some soup or a hot drink, Father?" asked Jacobina, not because she was concerned that her father hadn't eaten anything, but just to have something to say — anything unrelated to what she'd just heard. Something normal, trivial.

The orderly — *Jean* was the name on his badge— was freckle-faced and wearing glasses with small, round lenses. He looked at them and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Madame. For special requests, you have to fill out a sheet and give it to the nurse in the morning."



Jacobina nodded absent-mindedly, and watched as the man picked up the tray. How large his hands were. "Would you like a sleeping pill, Monsieur?"

"He just woke up," Jacobina hissed angrily before Lica could answer. "You can't give him a sleeping pill now."

"Oh, excuse me," he said, quickly taking a step backward. The dishes clattered and slid around on the tray. "The pill is for room 55." He smiled wearily. "Long day today." Jacobina didn't answer.

"Life is long," Lica mumbled, "much too long." He stared grimly at the orderly.

"Please leave now," Jacobina said to the orderly, then added "Jean", hoping he would comply more quickly if he heard his name. The young man hastily left the room, shutting the door noisily behind him.

"Turn out the light, Jackie," said Lica, "it's too bright."

Jacobina switched off the wall lamp and sat back down in the armchair, then loosened the laces of her boots and stretched out her legs. In the darkness she could see only the dark image of the bed and Lica's head. He was breathing hard. *Where to begin?* Jacobina listened to the footsteps outside in the corridor. Soft conversations, brief laughter. "Jackie," he said after a while. "You know, your mother was my life. After her death, everything fell apart."

Jacobina's eyes filled with tears. What about *her*? Where was her place in his heart?

"When she passed, the memories caught up with me," he continued, "Everything came back. Judith's curly hair, the years in Romania, the camp. We lived like animals, had lice, typhoid fever, and only shit to eat. After her death, the memories pounded me, day and night. It was unbearable. But I simply couldn't talk about it."

Jacobina clenched her fists. "You had *me*," she finally uttered. And then he said something completely unexpected. "I was afraid of you, Jackie. You were always so independent. You never listened to me. You weren't afraid of anything. You dropped out of school and went straight to New York." He paused briefly.

She could hear him rubbing the back of his hand over his face.

"You were just like me, before they broke me. You wore your heart on your sleeve. I felt so small and old when you were around. How could I have whined about the war to you?" Jacobina's throat knotted up. "I hated myself, and took it all out on you." His voice sounded strained. "There was nothing else I could do. It was never easy for me to talk about feelings, certainly not with you." He tossed around, groaning. The mattress springs squeaked and a pillow fell to the floor. "Your mother



arranged our flight from Romania — she was so strong." Jacobina thought she detected a smile in his voice. "She helped me pull my life back together." He tossed and turned restlessly. Jacobina reached in the dark for the pillow, and placed it back on the bed where she thought his arm was resting.

"For years, I tried to continue as if nothing had happened." He cleared his throat softly. "But nothing was right anymore, I was completely delusional."

Tears were rolling down Jacobina's cheeks. She was afraid her father would hear her crying and wiped them away, ashamed of herself.

"After her death, it all came back again," he whispered. "Impossible to forget, to run away." He coughed loudly, spluttered, and struggled for breath. Gradually, he calmed down again.

Jacobina couldn't hold back any longer. Her pent-up feelings were much too strong, and burst out like an undigested meal. Her upper body shook as she leaned forward, pressed her hand to her mouth, and tried in vain to suppress her sobs.

"I'm sorry, Jackie," Lica whispered in the darkness. *I'm sorry.* The words she had waited for for such a long time. She broke out in loud sobs.

"Come here, my child."

She straightened up, reached for Lica's hand, and held it tightly. His fingers were stiff and cold, like those of a corpse. For a long time, she cried uncontrollably, her face buried in the bedcovers. All those years, the lost years.

"You must find Judith," Lica said. His voice sounded hoarse, its tone imploring. "Promise me."

Jacobina paused, trying in vain to control her tears, and, finally, her sobs calmed down. She let go of her father's hand, and took a handkerchief out of her pants pocket to wipe her face. She didn't have to worry about her make-up running, as she wasn't wearing any.

"I want you to ..." Her father's voice faltered, he swallowed, and breathed loudly through his mouth. "I want you to finish what I have been putting off all my life."

Jacobina raised her head, and stuffed the wet handkerchief back in her jeans. "Please," gasped Lica. His hand searched for hers on the bedcovers.

She reached out over the sheets. Lica grasped both of her hands, and squeezed. A profound sign of affection from the broken man who, for years, had suppressed his pain out of shame and self-control, whose wounds were so deep that they could never heal.



At first she felt sorry for him, then something like tenderness toward her father — an unfamiliar feeling - arose. She wanted to stroke his head, but she didn't dare.

"Please," he said in a scratchy voice, struggling for breath.

"I promise," Jacobina whispered. What else could she say?

Lica swallowed hard. The busy footsteps in the hallway stopped abruptly. Jacobina listened intently in the silence. "Can you pull back the curtain?" Lica asked, "I'd like to see the snow again."

She got up, pulled the curtains aside, and saw the swirling snowflakes in the light of the street lamps. Lica turned his head toward the window.

Jacobina wasn't properly dressed for this weather. In the rush to leave New York, she'd forgotten her gloves and picked up the wrong jacket. She was glad it was only a few steps to the guesthouse.

"I'm going back to sleep for a while," he said, with the same determination in his voice that Jacobina recalled from childhood. "You should, too."

"I'll stay until you fall asleep."

"No, you can leave now. I'll watch the snowflakes fall — it helps to put my mind at rest."

With great effort, he turned on his other side to get a better view out of the window. Jacobina got up and stared uncertainly for a while at the silhouette of his back, but he said nothing. *He wants to be alone.* She took her jacket. "OK, then, I'll go now and come back tomorrow morning," she said, knotting a thin scarf around her neck. "I'll bring you some breakfast."

The thought of breakfast with hot coffee was pleasant. The scarf itched, and she quickly loosened the knot before tiptoeing to the door, which she closed quietly behind her. Then she headed toward the elevator, her steps echoing in the hallway. She stopped at the nurse's station, where a young woman with long braided hair sat at the counter distributing tablets into little plastic cups, with a large cup of coffee and an open cookie box at her side. Jacobina suddenly became aware of her own hunger. She gave the nurse a nod.

"I'm leaving now. You know how you can reach me, don't you?"

"Which patient is it?" the nurse asked, slightly irritated, before taking a sip of coffee. "I love Canada" was printed on the mug. Jacobina had never seen the woman before.

"54. Grunberg."



Without setting the cup down, the nurse looked at the bulletin board on the wall. "You're in the guesthouse, I see," she mumbled as she took another sip.

"Please, call me right away if there's any problem," said Jacobina, reassured at seeing that the nurse was apparently well organized. "I'll come right back."

The nurse nodded and turned her attention back to the pills. *Perhaps I really shouldn't go.* She turned around and hurried back. The redhead emerged from one of the rooms. When she saw Jacobina, she muttered something and pointed her finger at her watch. *I don't care if visitors' time is over.* Jacobina slipped past her without saying a word. She stopped in front of Lica's door, and looked around in all directions. She felt she was being watched, but the redhead had shuffled off in the other direction. Jacobina placed her hand on the door handle, then hesitated. He'd said he wanted to sleep, and there would be plenty of time to talk in the morning. She'd bring him a fresh baguette and coffee with lots of milk, just the way he always liked it, and for the first time since Mother's death, they'd have breakfast together without quarrelling. She'd ask him about Judith, and perhaps talk a little about herself. A fresh start, so shortly before the end. She let go of the handle, turned around, and headed for the elevator.

Jacobina switched on the light. The room was cold; someone must have turned off the heat — *in the middle of winter!* This made the room feel even more uncomfortable than it already was. The sound of rushing water was coming from a radiator pipe. The maid had folded down the brown bedspread and placed two pillows with embroidered flowers at the head of the bed. Jacobina's pajamas lay neatly folded on the nightstand.

She walked over to the thermostat and turned up the heat, then switched the light off again, and sat down at the window with her jacket on. Her stomach growled, but Jacobina didn't feel like going out in the cold again, alone, to get something to eat — not today.

She rummaged about in her handbag, discovering what remained of a chocolate bar, then ripped off the paper and bit into it. The sugary mass felt like a lump in her stomach, but the feeling of hunger had passed. As Jacobina looked out at the snowflakes, she knew that Lica would most certainly be doing the same, if he hadn't already fallen asleep. In the deserted street, a sudden gust of wind carried the snow through the air in a wide arc. At that moment she felt very close to her father.

Somebody opened a door out in the hallway, and Jacobina settled deeper into the armchair, listening to the humming of the radiator. Lica had never made snowmen with her, she remembered. He hadn't read fairy tales to her either, nor checked over her homework. That was always Mother's job. Lica's influence and activities



had been focused on another area. He read to her from the Torah, told her of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, and took her to the synagogue. He wasn't a strict follower of his religion, always enjoying eating shellfish, while, for him, kosher wine was indistinguishable from dishwater. But he attached great importance to conveying to his daughter a feeling of belonging that had nothing to do with the geographical division of the world. As a child, that had meant nothing to her, it was simply what she knew. But later it became the keystone of her life.

The room warmed up, and Jacobina slipped out of her jacket and closed her eyes. Memories came flooding back. Again, she saw her father before her, pale, unshaven, and sitting on a kitchen stool with his hands over his eyes. In front of him, a cup of cold tea. "Put the blinds down," she heard him say in a grumpy voice, "the light makes me sick."

Years earlier, in the spring, how he had laughed while picking her up, and placing her in the little seat he'd attached to the center bar of his bicycle. How she had taken her place proudly between him and the handlebar, holding her breakfast roll in one hand. "Be careful," Mother called after them. Then he took her to school.

A knock on the door woke Jacobina up with a start. Where was she? How long had she been sitting here? Another knock, louder this time.

"Madame? Are you there?"

Jacobina stood up, stumbled over her handbag in the dark, and felt her way along the wall. *Where, for God's sake, is the light switch?* "I'm coming," she called, but the woman outside hadn't heard her, and knocked a third time.

"It's urgent." Her voice sounded agitated. "Are you there?"

Jacobina opened the door, and the woman from the front desk was standing there, completely out of breath. No doubt she had run up the stairs. "Please come down," she panted. "There's a call for you."

There wasn't a telephone in her room, to which the call might have been forwarded. *The hospital*, flashed through Jacobina's mind. Without closing the door behind her, she ran down the faded oriental carpeting that draped the stairs. *He wants to talk to me. He can't sleep.*

But as she reached for the receiver and held it to her ear, she knew it was something different. The time had come. The moment she had been expecting for days, for years, had finally arrived. The moment she'd thought wouldn't change anything.

"Madame Grunberg?"

"Yes," she gasped almost inaudibly into the mouthpiece.

"This is Sister Louise." She paused. "Your father has passed away."

Jacobina didn't reply.

"It must have been shortly after you left," the nurse continued. "I am sorry."

*Now there are only the two of us*, Jacobina could hear Lica say. All had been in vain. The ages-long feud. The unspoken feelings. The belated confession. All that was now swept away by a much deeper, permanent pain.

Only later, in her room, was she able to cry.



*Chapter 2*

Washington, D.C., 2006

Click-clack, click-clack. She recognized his hurried steps from far off; she could pick them out from thousands of others, the quick, aggressive sound of his leather soles on the linoleum floor. Béatrice knew what that meant. In a moment he would storm into her office without knocking, his eyes pinched, his chubby face reddened. Then he'd throw her carefully crafted press release onto the table and hand her his edited version. Her title would be crossed out, the lead sentence buried somewhere on the second page, and whole paragraphs would be completely gone. *Lesson One: He knows better than anyone else.*

Before she had completed the thought, he yanked open the door. With a sigh of resignation, Béatrice leaned back in her chair and turned around to face him. Michael's frame rose up before her as far as his small, stocky figure would allow. His flat face, bulging eyes, and short-cropped black hair terrified her.

In his hand he held a sheet of paper. Her text.

*Translated by Anne Stokes*

(pp. 43-7)

*Paris, September 1940*

I was balancing on one of the middle rungs of a wobbly ladder in the library when I came across the slip of paper. The bright blue paper was unusually thick and folded over repeatedly, and it was stuck inside Marcel Proust's *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, Editions Gallimard, 1919. 492 pages. The cover was tattered, the spine cocked. Students were constantly asking for it, as the book was a set text for those studying literature. Last year I'd had to struggle through Proust's labyrinthine sentences and eccentric metaphors myself. Words like heavy perfume. My first thought was that someone had left his notes behind. I put the other books that I had clamped under my arm down on the shelf, and pulled out the blue note. *To Judith* stood at the top in small, neat letters. I stared in amazement at my name.

A light puff of wind swept through the room, and the half-opened window banged shut. I got such a fright that I almost lost my balance. I clutched the ladder tightly, climbed down hastily, and unfolded the note.

*The flowing movements of her delicate white hands, which never rest was written in black ink. Her slim figure, her gentle tread. Whenever you enter the room, you light it up. C.*

The words made my heart beat faster. Who on earth was C? I turned the note over to see if the sender's name was on the back. But nothing was written there. I'd never received a message like this before. And now when the times were too serious to think of love notes, I was holding one in my hands.

Around three months ago, the French had capitulated, and the Germans had occupied half of our country. Marshall Pétain referred to this humiliation of the French people as an "armistice". Since then, the Germans had lodged themselves in our luxury hotels, and our city had become foreign to me. Everywhere signposts containing long German words that no Frenchman could pronounce sprang up out of the ground. The swastika fluttered on the Eiffel Tower, and we had to put our clocks forward an hour to Berlin time.

Someone called my name, and I looked up. Monsieur Hubert, the director of the library, was approaching me, stroking his thinning hair. "Have you already recorded the new acquisitions in the index?" he asked. Behind his small, round glasses, his eyes twinkled good-naturedly.

Someone at least was acting as if life was carrying on normally. Admittedly, he had also resumed his normality a bit since the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, the day the first German troops reached the Porte de la Villette. Indeed, many Parisians



who fled south in early summer out of fear of the German threat had returned again. The cinemas had resumed their showings, and the cafes and restaurants had re-opened. Life seemed vibrant again. But things were not as they appeared. An eerie uncertainty had been hanging over the city for weeks.

“Yes, of course, Monsieur. I did that yesterday,” I replied somewhat distractedly, staring again at the lines in my hand.

“You can go home now, then, Mademoiselle,” he said. “It’s late.” He sighed softly as his eyes drifted over the bookshelves. “People are queuing up at Georges’s again. Food’s becoming increasingly scarce. Get on your way quickly, before everything’s gone.”

Dear, good Monsieur Hubert. I smiled at him. He was always thinking of others. He reminded me of my father, or, rather, of the image of my father which I had assembled from the few puzzle pieces I still had in my memory. I thanked him and said goodbye as I stuffed the cryptic blue note into the pocket of my skirt, and left the library.

When I stepped into the Place de la Sorbonne, a warm September day embraced me. The branches of the large beech trees which lined the square moved languidly in the afternoon breeze. The cafe on the corner was touting a plat du jour as usual, and the latest editions of *Paris Soir*, *Le Temps* and *Le Figaro* hung from the newspaper kiosk. Yet something was different. Although the academic year had only just begun, it was oppressively quiet on the otherwise very lively university square. A few students were standing around in small groups, huddled together. They didn’t dare look up at the passing German soldiers, who were laughing and smoking their way across the square in freshly pressed uniforms. They looked good, the German occupiers. Tall with close-cropped hair and powerful legs. They exuded strength and virility.

I blinked into the sun and set off to Georges’s, the grocery in Rue des Écoles. Even this far off, I could already see the nearly endless queue which had formed in front of it. There had to be over 200 people! There had only been half as many yesterday. By the time I got to the counter there would most likely be nothing left.

Still, I got in line, since there was no point trying my luck somewhere else. By this point, there was little to be had anywhere. The hunt for food determined the course of the day in Germanized Paris. We had to queue for every single slice of bread. Yesterday I’d been able to get hold of three eggs and some real coffee. The milk was long gone. Georges said he would maybe get more next week.

Ahead of me was a woman in a black dress. A boy in shorts was clinging to her, and in her arms she held a screaming baby, wrapped in a blanket. She was trying to soothe it, but the baby wouldn’t stop crying. The boy’s knees were



scratched, and he had an empty shopping basket in his hand. When I smiled at him, he hid his face in the pleats of his mother's skirt. I turned around and saw that there were at least another twenty people behind me. No one was talking. No one was laughing. No one asked any questions. Everyone seemed to be lost in their own thoughts.

I pulled the bright blue note out again. What beautiful, expressive handwriting. Although the message was very short, it seemed well conceived, as though C. had considered for some time what he ought to write to me.

I studied my hands. Were they really delicate? And was my tread really gentle? I looked down at my feet, which were encased in a pair of well-worn leather shoes. It only occurred to me now how much description these two sentences contained. As though he had observed me from his seat until he found the right word for me and each of my movements. I decided that the next time I was on duty, I would look out the index card for the Proust volume and check to see who had borrowed the book today. My curiosity had been piqued.

After standing in line for almost two hours, I finally entered the shop. I was lucky. Contrary to my expectations, not everything was sold out, and I bought a couple of slices of cheese and four apples. Mother would be pleased that I hadn't come home empty-handed.



(pp. 85-92)

Twenty minutes later, Béatrice was standing in a much too large sweatshirt in front of a seedy apartment building on the corner of U-Street and 15<sup>th</sup>. As recently as ten years ago, the U-Street district had been known for drug dealing, and was viewed as an area that white middle-class people had best not enter. But then the city had put up several apartment buildings in the neighborhood with predominantly black occupants, and had opened a metro station. In the meantime, the area had become a multicultural attraction with interesting secondhand shops and ethnic restaurants, which Béatrice and Joaquín also visited from time to time, if they felt like Ethiopian cuisine.

In front of the entrance to the grey concrete building in which Jacobina Grunberg lived lay a pile of bundled-up advertising leaflets. Squeals of children came from an open window. A dark-skinned man in shorts and trainers sat smoking on a semi-collapsed wall. He was wearing headphones and bobbing his head back and forth in rhythm to the music. There were no name plates. The doorbells were merely arranged by number. Béatrice pressed 1350 B, and waited. When she heard a loud buzzing sound shortly afterwards, she leaned into the door and entered the building. The entrance way stank of musty water and fried food. Broken glass bottles and cigarette butts littered the floor, and the plaster was crumbling from the walls. The gentrification of the neighborhood had stopped at the exit to the metro station, it seemed. Béatrice had to hold her nose. Why did that Lena have to send her straight into the worst area! She would have preferred to have turned around immediately. Reluctantly, she got into the elevator.

When she arrived upstairs, she knocked on Mrs. Grunberg's door. A deep, husky voice called out, "Who's there?"

"*Sunset Aid*," Béatrice replied. The words felt like sticky hard candy in her mouth. On the right side of the door frame, she noticed a small oblong metal plate with Hebrew characters engraved in it. It had been nailed on slightly askew. Béatrice was annoyed at herself as she contemplated the letters on the plate. How could she have let herself be so blindsided by Lena.

The door opened, at first just a crack, then completely. When a tiny, hunched figure with big round dark eyes and grey curly hair appeared, Béatrice was startled. The woman's hair seemed dirty and stuck out shaggily from her head. Her skin had large pores and was wrinkled. Jacobina Grunberg was leaning shakily on a stick. She nodded her head to indicate that Béatrice should follow her.

"About time," the old woman mumbled as she shuffled back into the living room. "I'd given up all hope of you guys coming today." She was wearing



a tattered terrycloth bathrobe. Pajamas with blue flowers peaked out from underneath. She had thick tennis socks on her feet.

Béatrice stepped into the dark room. She narrowed her eyes to a slit, but she could just make out blurred outlines. The shutters were down, and only a few narrow strips of daylight pierced through the gaps at the sides. An inaudible TV cast flickering shadows onto the wall, and a radiator was clanking somewhere. The acrid smell of artificial air freshener pervaded the apartment.

“Where’s the light switch?” Béatrice asked, putting down her bag.

“Don’t want the lights on,” the old woman muttered. Then she sat down on the sofa with a groan.

Once Béatrice’s eyes were used to the sparse light, she followed the woman and sat down next to her. Her body sank immediately into the plump, soft upholstery, and her hands soon felt the fuzzy artificial fabric. She looked around the dreary living room. Boxes, an overturned folding chair, and other pieces of junk lay among crumpled-up newspaper. In the walls were nails that had been put in crookedly, and the picture frames they once held were lying on the floor with their glass in pieces.

“I’ve brought you noodle soup,” she said, trying to sound cheerful.

“Soup!” exclaimed the old woman with a rattling laugh. “Slop for old folks. D’you think I’ve got no teeth left?”

“I don’t think anything at all,” Béatrice responded coolly. “It’s simply what they gave me.”

“To hell with your canned soup,” the old woman yelled, letting her stick fall to the floor. “I want something decent.”

Béatrice had envisaged her work for Sunset Aid as a cozy little chat with Washington’s senior citizens. But clearly not! She cursed her decision and the whole organization. What had she gotten herself into? Tomorrow she would pick up her blazer from Lena, and wouldn’t show her face again.

The old woman coughed. “I simply can’t stand your damned soup and this oatmeal any longer,” she croaked. She pulled out a hanky and spat into it. “And I hate the taste of cinnamon.”

“Then get something delivered,” Béatrice retorted. “Chinese, Thai, a burger and fries. Whatever you like.” She felt an urgent need to open a window.

“Get something delivered. Pfff. You obviously haven’t been working for Sunset for very long,” the old woman countered, raking her fingers through her greasy hair. “If I could afford that, I definitely wouldn’t be begging from you



guys.” She leaned forward, wheezing, and reached for her stick. “Before, in New York... Everything was different then.”

Béatrice immediately regretted her thoughtless suggestion, and fell silent. She wanted to do something to calm the woman down and then take off as fast as possible.

Lucio! Everyone liked his cooking. She pulled her cell phone out of her pants pocket and dialed his number. While she waited for the dial tone, she turned to the old woman and asked: “D’you like Italian? It’s on me.”

Jacobina Grunberg didn’t answer. But in the glimmering light of the TV, Béatrice saw a fleeting smile come across her face. A smile? She must have been mistaken.

“Ciao, Lucio, I’d like to place an order,” Béatrice warbled upon hearing the familiar “Buona sera”. She ordered everything she could think of: tomato bruschetta, ossobuco with fried zucchini flowers, mushroom risotto, and penne all’arrabbiata, and a double helping of tiramisu. As she was putting through the order, she realized that she was hungry herself. So, she would just sit here and have dinner with this remarkable woman. And if she asked Lucio to send along a bottle of red wine, she’d be able to get through the ordeal.

“It’ll take a while,” Béatrice said after hanging up. “So, now I’m going to open the shutters. This place urgently needs an airing.” She stood up and walked over to one of the little windows.

“Don’t touch anything in here!” the woman snapped at her. “This is my apartment.”

Béatrice flinched and stood indecisively. Then she sat down again. She would have to take a gentler approach. “Tell me something about yourself, Mrs. Grunberg,” she asked the woman. “How long have you been living here in D.C.?”

Mrs. Grunberg stared at the mute screen. “There’s nothing to tell,” she mumbled.

Béatrice glanced at her cell phone. It would definitely be another half hour before the food arrived. “Do you have any family?”

“You’re wasting your time,” Jacobina muttered, without looking away from the TV, on which a figure skater in a bright pink sequined dress was spinning around at an insanely high speed.

“Fine,” said Béatrice after a while, “I’ll tell you something about me, then.” She was surprised herself at the patience which she was mustering up for the old woman. “I come from France, from Paris.”



The old woman extended her tortoise neck, and looked at Béatrice. “Paris?”

Béatrice nodded, surprised at Jacobina’s sudden interest. “Yes. My mother’s still living there.”

The old woman breathed faster.

“You can feel pretty foreign here in the U.S.A.,” Béatrice continued, hoping to encourage Jacobina to divulge something about herself. Jacobina leaned back on the sofa, but said nothing. Her hands were shaking.

“Mrs. Grunberg?” Béatrice asked slightly concerned. “Do you feel unwell?”

“My father,” Jacobina whispered suddenly, “my father.” She didn’t say any more than this.

The two women sat in silence next to one another, listening to the clanking radiator and watching the figure skating. At some point, Jacobina’s breathing grew steady and quiet. She had fallen asleep.

Finally, the doorbell. Béatrice rushed to the door. She exchanged a few words with the delivery man while he handed over several plastic bags with tempting aromas rising from them. Soon the entire apartment smelled of Lucio’s food. When Béatrice went back into the living room, she saw Jacobina rubbing her eyes and yawning. The doorbell must have woken her up.

“Where are the plates?” Béatrice asked as she reached into the bags and placed warm, white cartons of various sizes on the glass table in front of the sofa.

“Back there,” mumbled Jacobina, indicating the kitchen with her head. Then she stretched out her legs and looked at the cartons with a furrowed brow.

The kitchen area was situated next to a narrow door, which led to the bathroom. The sink was full of plates with brightly colored, sticky edges and dirty coffee cups. The electric range was covered in a thick black crust. Next to it was a small fridge covered with the remains of peeled-off stickers, which was hissing.

Béatrice took a deep breath, reached into the sink, and rinsed off the plates.

As Jacobina Grunberg chewed the first bite, she closed her eyes with relish. “Man, that’s good,” she gasped with reddened cheeks. She quickly started acting like a different person. The broad wrinkles across her brow straightened



out, and her big round dark eyes twinkled with delight. Her right arm was no longer shaking.

Béatrice smiled and took a slug of wine from a bright blue spotted coffee cup. She hadn't been able to locate any glasses.

Jacobina piled meat, risotto, mushrooms and pasta onto her plate, and devoured the food with such gusto that you would think she had been living on nothing but potato peels for months. Béatrice gnawed on the tip of a carrot, observing the old woman. The fact that she'd been able to alleviate this woman's miserable day-to-day existence for even a few minutes filled her with a sense of satisfaction that she hadn't experienced for a very long time.

"I'm Béatrice, by the way."

Jacobina washed down the last of the tiramisu with half a coffee cup of wine, sighed blissfully, and sank back into the sofa.

"Heaven sent you, Béatrice," she said. Then she made a couple of smacking sounds and burped. "The others that Sunset usually sends deliver a bag of canned food and take off as fast as they can." She wiped her mouth with one of Lucio's grey paper napkins. "No one has any time. No one's interested."

Then, surveying the empty cartons on the glass table, she asked in an imploring tone: "You'll come again soon, won't you, Béatrice?"