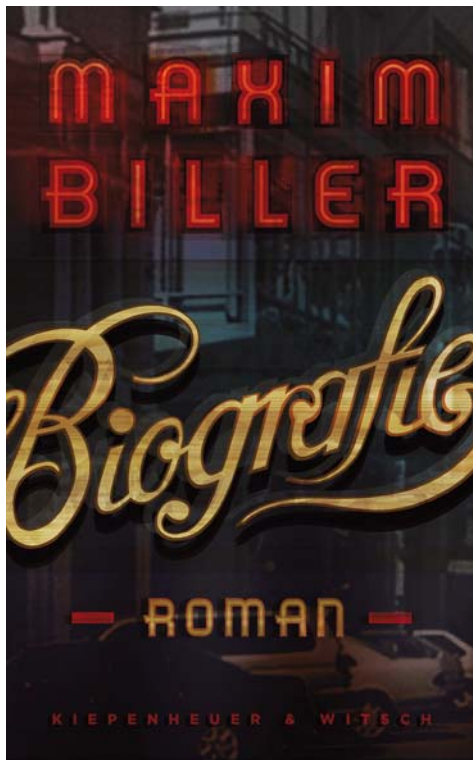


**Biography**  
**by Maxim Biller**  
Novel

Translated by Anthea Bell

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## **Characters**

### **The Forlanis**

*Noah*, the heir, founder of Goodlife, director of the 1<sup>st</sup> Psychocatalytical Institute

*Schloimel*, his father, a multi-millionaire

*Fruma*, Noah's mother, née Zirkelstayn

*Thekla*, the Forlanis' one-legged Bavarian housekeeper

*Merav*, Noah's Israeli wife

*1 and 2*, Noah's daughters

*Malgorzata*, Noah's former nanny, a prostitute

### **The Karubiners**

*Solomon*, known as Soli, a writer

*Papascha*, known as Vova the Terrible, his father, writer, ex-communist, businessman and double agent

*Mamascha*, Soli's mother, a writer

*Serafina*, Soli's sister, also a writer

*Mendel*, known as Jeduschka, Vova's father and Soli's grandfather

*Ingrid*, Vova's German lover

### **The Wechsbergs**

*Mel*, Soviet agent

*Valya*, his son and Serafina's birth father

### **In Hamburg**

*Rabbi Schmuel Balaban*, author of the bestseller *Money Is Everything*, and Serafina's fiancé

*Avi "Blumenswine" Blumenstein*, a millionaire, friend of Noah and Soli in their youth

*Abigail*, Avi's sister

*The two Gartenstein sisters*

*Natascha "Nataschale" Rubinstein*, anaesthetist and the great love of Noah and Soli

*Ethel Urmacher*, communist and Noah's lover

*Karol "Captain" Urmacher*, Ethel's father, real estate agent and a multi-millionaire

### **In Los Angeles**

*Gerry Harper*, known as "El Dick", "Bronco", or the "New Casanova", Hollywood actor, director, and a junkie

*Lou Harper*, singer-songwriter and Gerry's father

*Haimle Rotgast*, Mafia boss, Lou's father and Gerry's grandfather

*Conny Lockhart*, Gerry's mother

*Tal "the Self-Hater" Shmelnik*, Israeli elite soldier, peace activist, agent, screenplay writer and Gerry's best friend

*Fritz von Dunckenberg*, director and lover of Ethel Urmacher

*Jeff Goldblum*, Hollywood actor

*George Costanza*, Hollywood actor

### **In Buczacz**

*The Gestapo chief of Stanislau*

*Huciner*, the pharmacist

*Goldstein*, editor of the *Yiddish Alarm*

*Wais and Weiss*, presidents of the Shomer Hatzair and Hechalutz

*Yechiel Karubiner*, head of the Safa Brura Language School, brother of Jeduschka Karubiner, and Soli's great-uncle

*Dr. Geldzaler-Levin*, the perverted but popular head of the municipal high school

*Motke Zirkelstajn*, the famous fart-artist, father of Fruma, Noah's mother

### **The doctors**

*Dr. Endre Savionoli*, Hungarian anti-Semite and psychiatrist in Hamburg, Berlin, and later Budapest

*Dr. Czupcik*, naturopath, first in Hamburg, then in Tel Aviv

*Tissa Ehrenstein*, psychotherapist and student of Lacan, Petach Tikwa

*Dr. Kohn-Prokopova*, psychologist and specialist in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, Prague

*Dr. Selgado*, Gerry's drug-addicted family doctor, Los Angeles

*Nurse Cummings*, Palo Alto

### **And also**

*Oritele Cohen*, video artist and Solomon's Israeli ex-lover

*Zoar Turgeman*, pop star and Oritele's fiancé

*Shula Cohen*, née Sasson, Oritele's Iraqi grandmother

*Claus Müller*, a.k.a. Claus the Canaille, writer and blackmailer

*Rami Bar-On*, a.k.a. *Rashnavala Pranjabba*, a.k.a. *Shaki 7-Inch*, Israeli elite soldier, antiques dealer and Buddhist monk, in love with Noah Forlani's wife Merav

*Kostya Kostos*, formerly Vova's superior officer, later an entrepreneur and patron of the arts

*Major Sekora*, State Security in Prague

*Government Chief Inspector "Börne"*, Federal German Intelligence Service

*Ute*, known as Knute, director of Goodlife

*Mikhail Chodorkovski*, her lover

*Uri Avnery*, her lover

*Avishai Glick-Apfelbaum*, friend of Tal's youth, burnt to death in a terrorist attack

*Abulafia Shmelnik*, Tal's lesbian mother

*Lilly Schechter*, known as Lilly the Pilly, comedian and Internet lover of Noah and Solomon

*Julča*, under-age Roma gypsy and prostitute

*Ms. Muhammad Ali*, Sudanese lift-and-carry dominatrix

*Guinevere*, the English giantess

*Bunny Glamazon*, mud-catcher

[Book 5, Chapter 1, pp. 725—760 of German text]

1

*To Buczacz*

It was a cold, damp, sunless day in October 1943 when the most notable Jews in Buczacz assembled outside the Old Town Hall at seven in the morning. Two weeks ago, Schloimel had already sent their names to the Gestapo chief of Stanislau, sixty kilometres away and the chief town of the district.

From the first, Schloimel, the son of Feyge, who would also put his father's name on a Gestapo list two years later, had been the man on Buczacz's Jewish Council best able to deal with complex situations. Everyone knew that the sophisticated young Yid with the club foot weighing five kilos, who used to deliver speeches in praise of communism at the House of Culture on the third Thursday of every month before the Russians marched in, and then, when the Germans arrived, did not disappear with the Red Army over the river Strypa towards Odessa and Tashkent, would always strike the balance between hope and reality, good and bad, between the salvation of the *kehillah* of Buczacz that they hoped for and the bitter but inevitable sacrifice of individuals.

Apart from Dr Carla Gross, the librarian, who would spit in her murderers' faces one day in the not too distant future, those standing outside the Old Town Hall that wartime morning were all men, frightened men – Huciner the pharmacist; Goldstein the editor of the *Yiddish Alarm*; Wais and Weiss, presidents of the Shomer Hatzair and Hechaluz; the head of the Safa Brura language school, Yechiel Karubiner, who was the brother of Mendele Wechsler Karubiner, resident in Moscow, called Jedushka by his family; the obstinate activists of Poalei Zion, Mizrahi and Hashmonaim groups; as well as Dr Geldzaler-Levin, the perverted but popular head of the high school. The teachers of the Talmud Torah School had also come, all the Jewish doctors of the city, and all the merchants and businessmen who, until the building of the ghetto, had lived in shabby, gloomy Podhayetzka Street up by the castle ruins in their modern white villas. And last of all came Motke Zirkelstayn, the famous fart-artist and father of lethargic Fruma Zirkelstayn, who would be Schloimel's wife and Noah's mother after the war, and because even today a strong

cloud of sulphur surrounded him, he stood on his own most of the time in Swine Square, as the Ukrainian and Polish inhabitants of Buczacz called their Town Hall Marketplace from that day onwards.

Anyone who did not obey the order from Stanislau and failed to come to Swine Square on the morning of 23 October 1943 was as good as dead already. Anyone who did come – and Huciner the pharmacist and the rest of them were convinced of it – was also as good as dead. But only two hours later they were all allowed to go home again, and after that hope reigned among the most notable Jews in Buczacz. The Germans were registering us only for our own protection when the others are taken off to labour camp, they said to one another on the way home, and as they went they forgot about the white bands with the blue Star of David on their sleeves, they no longer remembered that for months they hadn't been allowed to walk on the pavement, and whenever a goy came towards them they greeted him with a brisk nod of the head.

Six weeks later, the Gestapo chief of Stanislau ordered the same men to go to the Old Town Hall again. This time they did not fear for their lives – and this time, Schloimel went from door to door the night before, warning the most notable of the notable Jews in Buczacz. But none of them listened to him, because since his pro-communist speeches they didn't believe him any more, and no sooner were they standing outside the Old Town Hall at seven in the morning than Gestapo men and Ukrainian militia surrounded Swine Square. After that they were led away in small groups up dark, overgrown Fedor Hill, and the sound of machine-gun fire that was to be heard from there all day was like the drumbeats in the *Ride of the Valkyries*.

Noah looked up from his laptop, and drank a sip of the nettle tea that he always ordered in the Café Schevchenko. He took another sip, washed his mouth out left and right with the soft, almost ayurvedically thick fluid, and as he did so he involuntarily thought of Rami Bar-On's greasy bald head. Did he maybe wash in nettle tea, did he even wash his plucked arse with it? Probably, indeed certainly! Then it occurred to him that since Avi "super hard-on" Blumenswine had been getting on top of Merav three times a day, and doing his useless belly-and-bum exercises morning and evening in the garden of the little villa, next to Merav's new little Buddha, Rami didn't have to be taken into consideration anyway, and he gargled in his slightly scratchy sore throat with his head thrown back and a joker-like grin on his face.

Ah, sweet, entertaining stream of consciousness, and it wasn't over yet, not by a long way! Next he thought, as usual when he was thinking of Avi, of Rami's 600,000 dollars lying in his new account with the Bank of Kiev, paid over to him by the sexy monk because the clause about screwing Merav was no longer valid since Avi's conquest of her, praise be to the reasonably Almighty and the effects of Avi's excessive hormone treatment as a child! He thought of Avi's Nacho Inn repayment (a good quarter of a million, plus 25,000 interest on *Shylock*, and as much again, at least, in compensation), and wondered whether what he was feeling in his "hard, hairless heir's breast" (my own sound bite), was happiness. Then he remembered that I was still declining to leave Tel Aviv and follow him to Ukraine, and he immediately felt worse, but not for long, because he knew that it was only a question of time before I, the ever-complaining Vova flagellant but not quite so clever as an exhibitionist, came to Ivano-Frankivsk (as the former Austro-Hungarian district capital of Stanislau was now called), where for weeks he had been paying for a room for me in Pid Templen, the only kosher hotel in Podolia. His plan – a better, deeper and more far-sighted one than the plan of his fake abduction and execution – allowed for only a few days' rest for me. We would go together to the Lady House in Ushgorod Street, and/or walk in Lermontov Park discussing Serafina's recently surfaced portrayal of abuse, at much more length and with more girly detail than on Skype; we would talk about the chance that both he and I had missed out on with Nataschale, and about our successful deal over the Buddha statue. And we would then, on a particularly grey, damp, depressing morning, redolent of wartime, finally go from Ivano-Frankivsk to Buczacz where, for more than seventy years, the release, the humiliation, and the incapacitating darkness of the underworld of the Podhayetzka ghetto had been waiting for us two semi-survivors.

Once again Noah grinned his triumphant Jack Nicholson grin, then he stopped grinning and gargling, and – with a stertorous, old man's noise – he spat the tea back into the cup. He looked cautiously to left and right, typed a splendid, flowery *Moby Dichter* sentence into his still almost empty *Moby Dichter* Word document, out of old-established habit checked the walls of the café for Mama's cameras, and spat into his cup again. No one was watching him, no one was horrified by his Polish manners, just as no one in Ivano-Frankivsk, alias Stanislau, had ever been interested in his camp, catwalk wardrobe, his pink Dries beach trousers, his blue and white striped Thom Browne jacket, his thin Galliano swastika silk scarf in the middle of a tweeting



West Ukrainian autumn. The waitresses, dozing as they stood behind the dark brown Austro-Hungarian counters of the Café Schevchenko like small, stout ponies, looked up briefly, and after a while one of them – deathly white in the face from working a twelve-hour shift, with rings around her eyes as big as the frames of 1970s glasses, and tired red toes in her eastern-bloc Birkenstock-like sandals – came over to his table and said something vague in Ukrainian. “*Tak, tak, jiękuyę,*” replied Noah in his nursery Polish, and she brought him another tea to gargle with. Then he wrote a little more – it was about Moby Dichter and his new plan to found a make-sex-not-love academy in Darfur – and then he thought again of his beloved bad deeds.

In the old days, Schloimel also used to disinfect his oral cavity with tea as often as he could. “What does the Rav from the last Hasidic dump say? Better a clean mouth than dirty thoughts if you don’t have them already.” For Schloimel it had been luke-warm chamomile tea, which Thekla always had to keep ready for him in the kitchen in Schäferkampsallee (where the neon lighting was on day and night for that purpose). After his flight from Buczacz, and the endless six months spent hiding in the foxholes of Liesnovo and its surroundings, chamomile tea was all that his Russian nurses had given him. On principle, there were no other medicaments available in the Red Army’s field hospitals for wild Jewish hobgoblins covered with eczema. And when he had told Noah and me the Swine Square story on one of the last days of his seventh life – “as a warning, as cover and an educational clip around the earhole, yingelakh!” – he had also kept reaching clumsily and in panic for the glass of chamomile tea standing on his bedside table, just a little too high for him. When he had finished the story, when everyone in Buczacz was dead except for him and Fruma and about sixty others, he closed his eyes, laid his hand pharaonically on his half-bare chest with its thatch of grey hair, and didn’t move again.

“What’s the matter, Papa?” said Noah, quietly and anxiously.

“Who are you?” replied Schloimel in a faint, almost feminine voice.

“Noah, your son.”

“I know. Only joking,” said Schloimel, in a louder voice this time, large, old, dying Schloimel, and he tried to sit up.

Noah held him back at first, but Schloimel was stronger, and propped himself on his long arms to left and right of him. Then Noah helped him, and Schloimel put an arm around his son’s thin, yogi neck and stood up. They turned around in a circle in the bedroom – a soldier and his wounded comrade – and then in another and yet

another. And then, just as I was thinking that I could never stand by Vova the Terrible like that in his last hours, so fervently and so physically close (why would I, Stalinissimus?), Schloimel let himself drop back on the bed and said, “Optimism is the lack of information. Why am I still here, if not for much longer? Well?”

“Why, Papa?”

“Because I never once thought, like the other leymakhs, that the worst was over at last. People say I had seven lives. I say I had a healthy case of persecution mania.”

“I don’t understand, Papa.”

“If it’s a matter of life and death, Petzkele, you mark my words, the goyim are cleverer than us! After the massacre of Fedor Hill nothing happened for a long time, nothing at all. Living like rats in Podhayetzka Street, we were quick to understand the charm of everyday life again. Soon no one wondered in the evening what the next day would be like, because they all knew anyway: it would be cold, with calories in short supply, but not life-endangering. The first of us even began making plans for after the war, business, love, university, emigration. And then – once again I knew what was going on, and once again I warned the others to no effect – the next great operation began on the last Shabbat before Yom Kippur. They came like Podolian wood-spirits at three in the morning, the Ukrainians, the Germans and our own people from the law-and-order outfit. They spent two days dragging the Yids out of their houses, they drove them along Third of May Street and Koleyova Street up to the railway station and put them on empty trains going to the camp in Belzec. Anyone who defended himself – are you two listening? – anyone who hid behind a kitchen door or his old auntie was shot and killed, because the God that doesn’t exist had shown him mercy. Forty-eight hours later the population of Buczacz had dropped by two thousand. The houses and streets were full of corpses that the living had to take away and bury on Fedor Hill, the drinking water was red with their blood. And then? Nothing again. A cold and not unpleasant peace – for months. And yet again most people thought the worst was over. Admit it, Solomon —” here he suddenly turned to me, looking at me with his huge, yellowish white, watery eyes – “admit that you sleep under a red flag at night, you damn communist!”

After that his voice abruptly failed him, as if he had been hit over the head, and when he came back to his senses after a few minutes, he whispered, “Only a few

very clever people began building shelters under their houses, and soon the ground beneath Buczacz was nothing but a single foxhole.”

And now, in brief, something about Noah’s final, tearful, mendacious goodbye to Nataschale Rubinstein. There wasn’t one! After eating at the Indochina with Avi, they went home to 93<sup>rd</sup> Street together, although Natascha was sleeping at the Mount Sinai hospital and never wanted to see Noah again, and while she was in the bathroom, pissing with the door open like a shiksa, removing her makeup, brushing her teeth, pissing again, meanwhile humming “Bridge Over Troubled Water”, “Yesterday”, and “La Cucaracha”, he secretly went to her iPad and looked for the Goebbels video on the Goodlife page.

He didn’t know why he did it, but when he saw himself in the role of horny little Dr Joseph, a manikin clambering over Ethel’s gigantic mountains of flesh, both before and after the deadly poisoning of the brood of the Goebbels children, who had been cobbled together out of potatoes and matchsticks, when Gerry alias Albert le Speer came rushing in, crying, “Oh, *mon général*, do you do it orally too? Terrific!”, when he read the surprisingly numerous positive comments of users, the ice-cold son of Schloimel and Fruma felt even colder than he had been all day anyway, and furthermore he had a fat-woman flashback.

What was it he didn’t like? He didn’t like the fact that he liked his little masterpiece! Those sick, entertaining 4 minutes 50 seconds were dramatic, excessive, sexy; the action, absolutely in line with his taste, was totally pointless and defied all taboos; Tal’s cutting was elegant; and then there was the fact that this brilliant garbage had cost him a fabulous 8 million, and had been a success, at l-l-least when his aim number one in life was to shed the millstone of his inheritance from Schloimel, which for years had been dragging him deeper down into the psychocatalytical primal whirlpool. “Do you really think, Natuske,” called Noah in the direction of the bathroom, “that there’s any point in us trying again? Don’t you think you and sadistic Soli would suit each other much better, like Sara and Abraham after he had chased Hagar away at S-s-sara’s request? We weren’t up to much, you and I, right?”

Natascha silently put her long, melancholy, suffering freckled face with its big black peepers around the bathroom door and looked at the dark bedroom, where there was no light except for the yellowish-blue shimmer of the iPad screen, and huge

shadows of Ethel and Dr Joseph wandered over the low walls of the loft. Noah, lying in bed with the iPad on his naked belly and his tired eyes half-closed, heard her but didn't turn round. She looked at him from behind in silence for a while, then withdrew her head again, and soon after that she was whistling softly – very softly, ever more softly – “I Will Survive”.

“I mean, you don't want to get all *mishpacha* and family-minded with someone whose own family has just buried him, do you?” called Noah without opening his eyes. “You heard what Avi said in the Indochina about my funeral. Not a soul in the whole Achad-Ha'am cemetery shed a tear for me! With gatkas in the latkes, you understand? No one misses Schloimel Forlani's semi-handsome, semi-intelligent son, whose quarter of a talent it was to have money and give it away. Not even the girls were sad, Avi said, did you hear that? They stood beside my grave feeling irritated and bored, in their latest sexy little dresses from Princesse Tam-Tam, with their pre-pubertal tits thrust out and their huge black ghetto headphones, and listened to the soothing grown-up rap with all that bass on their iPhones. Is that what you'd call respect? Respect for life, yes, but not for their late Papa. And Merav, their mother, my so-called widow? The Merav I'm supposed to want back, Nataschale? Who crapped on me when I was kidnapped and wouldn't come up with a single shekel for my ransom? She buggered off twice to her Lexus during the funeral – once when Rabbi Balaban, flown in from Prague, delivered my eulogy, and once when the coffin with my old Dries trousers, the beginnings of about ten novels, and all that pubertal S and M stuff from my bachelor pad in Zlatopolsky Street was already lying two metres deep in the ground, with little bits of earth raining down on it. She sat on the cold, soft leather seats that she'd given herself out of Schloimel Forlani's fortune of millions, checking out the b-b-bloody stock market prices or phoning her business partners in Ethiopia! Did you notice Avi's devious smile when he told us that?” Noah stopped talking for a moment. A universal chill was streaming from his heart into his chest, into his scalp, into his toes. “Yes, I know I wasn't kidnapped. That's exactly what your ever-choosy ex-Noah means! Do you want to marry a man who pretends to the whole world that he's been kidnapped so that he can go underground? Could you trust a cold character like that?” He fell silent again and – out of sheer automatic Internet reaction – looked briefly at Skype in case Savionioli was by any chance online, but of course he wasn't, he never was, not since he had trained for the bloodless expulsion of Sinti, Roma and Jews in

the Hungaro-Slovakian border area and gone on vacation to Lake Balaton with the Jobbik big bosses. And suddenly Noah noticed the long, dark, suspicious silence in Natascha's not-so-lofty loft. Wasn't the fridge working? Had the city of eight million people out there stopped breathing, hooting its horns, going about its business? He got up and went into the kitchen, opened the huge, whispering, GE cooler and closed it again, then put his head out of the window, but of course all hell was let loose on 93<sup>rd</sup> Street, as usual.

“And suppose, Petzkele, she's gone for ever?”

Oh, Mama, you again.

“Would you feel any warmer then, now and in general. I bet you wouldn't.”

Stop it, Mama, one doesn't make jokes like that.

“Why not? And maybe it wasn't a joke. Go into the bathroom and take a look, find out why it's so quiet in there, why she's stopped whistling evergreen hits. Maybe the new Noah isn't a block of ice and puke like the old one. That would be good . . .”

Noah (my Noah) went to the bathroom door, the iPad pressed to his chest, shoulders drooping and eyes lowered, and said more to himself than to anyone else, “Just imagine, Natuske, Soli was caught in a Berlin sauna recently wanking. And then he tried to murder someone, a German who was blackmailing him, so he finally had to clear out. Kol hakavod, a good thing too! The German-hater and poet-prince of the diaspora demeans himself by emigrating to the land of his fathers. And what” – here he looked up, but saw almost nothing, because the only light was from a dim candle stinking of lavender or something sissy like that, the kind of thing that Natascha usually lit, to no effect, when they were taking a bath together – “what is the first thing he does in Tel Aviv? Goes to the Gordon Pool and straight away he pesters English teenagers there! As if he needed to do something extreme now and then, like Schloimel's frigid son!”

He grinned, blinked, focussed – and finally, in the flickering twilight of the candle, saw his future ex. She was lying lifeless in the full bathtub with her head under the water, her tall, slender, totally shaven body shimmering golden brown, and there was blood everywhere in the foamy brew in the bath. It didn't take Noah half a second to understand the full idiocy of this moment. Oh, thank you very much, he thought furiously, from now on my life will consist only of the time before and the time after Nataschale's suicide. Don't I have enough stress with the UBS bankruptcy, the Avi-Rami-Merav operation, with making travel preparations for Ukraine? And

now a damn superfluous trauma like this! Why did I go home with her? We'd ended it all so nicely on Park Avenue. The universal cold was everywhere now, even Noah's eyes felt hard and sharp as icicles, and as he contemplated Natascha's dead body and thought of the thousand formalities to be performed before it was underground, he felt – deep down where it counts – he felt NOTHING.

“So the new Noah is the old Noah, Petzkele, right? What a sh-sh-shame.”

Yes, Mama, I agree, but what can I do about it? It's your fault!

“Explain.”

According to the ten basic principles of psychocatalysis, only seven of which I'm afraid I can remember now, Mama, before Elohim took pity on me and sent the Polish travel bus along, the one that catapulted you and your fifteen metres of large intestine into the Eternal Hunting Grounds . . . you always used to take me on your lap, tell me goodnight stories, caress and kiss me when I was hurt, badly or not so badly, but only when you yourself needed warmth of feeling, which was never! I was obviously going to end up as cold as a penguin's arse, do you get that?

He looked at the iPad, where suddenly Dr Savionoli's long, sad, therapist's face appeared in the Skype window, but when the doctor saw him, too, he ducked hastily behind a gigantic stature of Horthy kissing Hitler.

DO YOU GET IT? repeated Noah out aloud.

“Yes, I get it. I get it . . .” said Natascha, while she slowly emerged from the water again. She emerged like bloody Cindy Crawford, parting her wet, smooth, randy Romanian chestnut hair with her hands, her breasts, still drooping yesterday, swelled firmly and sexily, her little Venus belly gave a seductively fertile impression. “Yes, Noah, I get the idea that even I can't do anything about your cold nature. You've thrown your daughters out of your life, because you couldn't stand your wife and your Herzlia Pituach existence, and I took that as normal because I thought – oh, how do I know what I thought? And now you stand looking bored over my dead body, and instead of crying, instead of calling a doctor or at least those disturbed chevra kadisha characters to prepare it for burial, you go online for some instant therapy with your Hungarian Nazi psychologist. Clear as day.”

“He didn't want to talk to me, baby!”

“But you wanted to talk to him.”

“And anyway you're not dead. Tell me, did you really want to die? I call that goy nakhes, don't you? Did you at least have a few nice near-death experiences?”

Natascha climbed out of the tub, crossed her hands over her bare breasts as if a Security Service execution squad was pointing its guns at her, and said, “Obviously. There was a white tunnel, and a gigantic wedding cake at the end of the tunnel, and a bride and bridegroom standing on the cake kissing each other, and he looked like you, and she looked like Merav. Pass me that towel. And turn round. I don’t want you to see me naked any more!”

He passed her the towel, averting his face, went out and slowly dressed again. “All just a hoax?” he called.

“Like your Sudan video,” she replied.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“And the blood?” He knew he sounded slightly injured, and he felt glad of that unexpected if tiny emotion; even as a semi-survivor and a good student of Schloimel, being his son, he hoped he wasn’t a monster.

“Marc Jacobs pomegranate bath foam.”

“Garbage, right?”

“Of course garbage. I have my period, and I thought it would be a good moment to act as if I was going away for ever.”

“Why w-w-would you want to do a thing like that, Nataschalein?”

She didn’t reply at once, and Noah thought: now she’s going to say she did it so that I would stay.

“Because I . . . because I’m happy only when I think what it will be like to be gone, not to be there any more, not to remind myself of me any more, never again, not of the worst moments in my life – and definitely not of the moments even worse than that! Like never coming round from a general anaesthetic again. Wouldn’t that be nice? Sorry, Noah, I’m not the woman you think I am. Anyone who leaves the ghetto is as happy as someone who cuts off their own leg because they want to find out if limping is better than normal walking. Do you see what I mean?”

“No.” He shook his head in silence as he did up his belt.

“It’s simply still there,” she said. “When I’m putting in a cannula, when I’m getting dressed or going to bed with someone, I still wonder what Papa would say about it. Back in Tel Aviv, at Avi’s birthday party in Luna Park, I still thought that with you I wouldn’t need him any more.”

“And now you know you were wrong, okay? You m-m-miss his strong Romanian hand?”

She did not reply.

“Next time we fuck would you like me to hit you with the New York telephone book, Natuskale?”

She laughed. “There isn’t going to be a next time,” she cried. Then she asked, quietly, “Do I still talk in my sleep? Honestly, yes or no?”

Yes, thought Noah, you recite whole radio plays, long, crazy radio plays, and at first I think it’s a neighbour watching TV at four in the morning, but then it’s going on right beside me in the not so lofty loft, like in the third act of Ansky’s *The Dybbuk*. “No,” he said, “no, no, no. It’s all fine, great, the greatest! You sleep like a baby, you’re almost cured now. Soon you’ll feel the ghetto leg again if you want to. But I’m going to sleep in the Sofitel tonight, all the same. And you don’t have to go to the hospital. Shalom, Natascha Rubinstein, daughter of the man who never understood that you were a girl, and not his son, and I’ve had enough too.”

She said nothing, and it bothered him that it bothered him.

“I love you, Natascha,” he said quietly, as he even more quietly opened the apartment door, “even though I don’t love you, and with someone like me that’s better than nothing!” And at last, for the first time that evening, he felt himself warming up. He thought, too much, too much, I don’t want her suddenly saying I can stay after all, and he put his hand to his forehead. Circula circolorum thirty-seven degrees, slightly raised temperature, after all.

When Noah left the Café Schevchenko, I was standing in the Achad-Ha’am Cemetery in Tel Aviv, trying to make out the Hebrew inscription on Tal’s gravestone. It was 4 October 2007, 1.13 p.m. Ukrainian and Israeli time.

Noah walked fast, concentrating, towards the Philharmonic, which had once been the Gestapo headquarters – “with a lot of paperwork and canteen gossip like any other office” (S. Forlani ). The backpack with his laptop, his water bottle, and eight different boxes of vitamin pills was so heavy that it gave Noah a slight, warm, pleasant feeling of being enslaved, a yes-sir-I’m-about-to-fall-down-dead sensation, and because anyway he was with the young Schloimel in his thoughts most of the time (instead of concerning himself with Moby Dichter’s fate after his flight from the



Sudan, which he intended to squeeze into the end of the chapter about the Central African tarts' trade union), that was very suitable.

Schloimel – as he had told us in his last honest hours – had to take every new list of deportations from Buczacz to Stanislaw himself. The Gestapo chief, a thin little bald-headed man with a sleepy Heinz-Rühmann voice, who always stood to one side of him, invited him into his large, light, cold office for a cup of tea every time. He told Schloimel to take his coat off so that he wouldn't get over-heated with political conversation and catch a chill later, but in fact it was because he didn't want to see Schloimel's star. Then they would spend two hours talking about Kropotkin, Marx, the sailors' mutiny at Kronstadt, the Munich republic, and the question of whether the murder of Rosa Luxemburg had actually served the cause of Bolshevism in the Weimar period for a while. The Gestapo chief – who from a Nazi point of view thought the killing of Luxemburg right because it meant Germany would be radicalized faster – had been a communist himself in the old days in Berlin, a convinced theoretician and a clever strong-arm man. Now of course he wasn't that any more, but since he had met that young Jewish Bolshevik from Buczacz, who looked as wild and handsome and clever and vain as Lenin in his Shushenskoye period (despite his club foot and his desperate ghetto look), liked to reminisce about his own crazy youthful days in the Spartakus League and in the streets of Wedding, Berlin. Communism had been his passion, his attitude to National Socialism was rational.

“I could have killed him,” Schloimel told Noah (and me). “Every time I saw him before a Special Operation, I could have stabbed him with the scissors lying on the table, but then the guards outside the door would have killed me, and the operation would have gone ahead all the same. But all the same I felt ashamed as I went down the long white flight of steps in the Philharmonic to Mickiewicz Square, I got into the train to Buczacz feeling depressed, and that night I would go furiously from house to house in Podhayetzka Street and Koscielna Street, warning people about the next pogrom. But almost no one would listen to me, not even Feyge, my father, your grandfather, Noahle! Why do you think that was?”

Noah did not reply.

“And what do you think, Noah's best friend?” he asked me, reaching for his cup of chamomile tea with a shaking hand.

I shook my head respectfully, feeling secretly repelled by the dozen urine-yellow tea stains on his nightshirt.

“Because I was the trikene merder from the Jewish Council? Or because the Jews didn’t want to live in the woods like hamsters and wild boar? Only someone who had dug a rat hole under his house, hid there and didn’t come out until three days and two thousand dead later would survive. That happened four times, the anti-Semite storm raged through the Buczacz ghetto four times, and after that the Germans hung a notice on the brass-studded door of the Town Hall through which Duvidl Rosenstajn, the most famous mayor of Buczacz, had passed for almost thirty years. The notice said that from that day on the Buczacz district was purged of its Jews. The Poles were wittier. Before every operation, the *Gazeta Buczaczska* wrote: ‘The Jews say everything will be all right.’”

Noah himself was now standing on the long white flight of steps of the Philharmonic. Inside, the Ukrainian Liberation Orchestra was rehearsing a surprisingly calm piece by Schönberg, a work that the aesthete Schloimel had heard almost every Shabbat in the old days, and while Noah was wondering why he didn’t at least feel a brief sentimental rise in his heart-rate, he looked at the pretty little park with pairs of young lovers sitting on its benches, and the delicate but unmistakably obvious Mickiewicz statue, and he imagined himself, after soundlessly strangling that bald-headed Gestapo shit, boarding the train back to Buczacz, instead of taking flight eastwards on foot and making his way through the front to the Russians.

Then, full of an almost goy-like yearning for death, he also imagined himself and me – and the magnificent giantess Ethel, of whom he hadn’t thought again since LA – spending the next three nights and days in one of those long, dark bunkers dug by the Jews themselves between High School Street and the Iron Bridge. I always had a migraine there, so I looked particularly good and relaxed and Balbatian. Ethel was not as fat as in real life, because of the irregular nutrition in wartime, so she was prettier in a cute, Slavonic, *matrioshka* style – but of course she was still strong. So strong that she carried him around on her shoulders while the Jews up above were being chased like chickens, as a way for them both to pass the time, and she could knock him against the slippery wall of the bunker, or slide his face lightly along it.

In this unusually complex vision of persecution, Noah (Malgorzata’s Noah) suddenly developed a first-class Avi Blumenswine permanent erection, and he thought: thank you, God who doesn’t exist, for letting me know at last what it’s like

to be an unneurotic *mujik*. But before he could find time to enjoy that further, his Ukrainian phone rang.

“Forlanikus,” I said, as I dodged behind Tal’s gravestone in Tel Aviv, causing my unfit man-of-letters ankle to make a sound like a humming bird that has been run over, “if I want to I can whisper a few bars to your old Hollywood friend Gerry. Shall I? Is there something I ought to tell him about you?”

“Can’t ‘he’ get in touch for himself?” asked Noah. “Schloimel’s feeble son has just got a real erection for the first time since 1976. Where are you, Solchik?”

“In the Achad Ha’am Cemetery. Saying goodbye to your other companion in the Sudan. As you know, he lost the battle against his post-traumatic stress disorder a few weeks ago. Sweet and meaningful was his death by Ibuprofen. Amen.”

“Yes, you said so in our last seven conversations over the phone. Tell me instead, mayn breeder, when I can book your flight to Ivano-Frankivsk for. I need you! And I bloody need my nice brightly coloured winter coat! So that I can look at a few more people now and then. Did you finally collect it from Merav? And h-h-have you seen the girls?”

“I’ve seen Avi,” I whispered. I ducked, because Gerry, with a bouquet of blue forget-me-nots in one hand and a bunch of limp, nibbled, grey-green khat in the other, was coming closer and closer. He was swaying, and his eyes were as red and glassy as if he’d had eczema of the rims of his eyelids for the last three months, and I thought, oh no, I’ve had enough shadow-boxing with zombies both real and false for today. Then I whispered again, “That stupid fatso is standing outside what was once your little villa, leaning on a crooked hibiscus and gazing blissfully into the oriental morning sun with his kosher piggy eyes. Oh, and he was phoning the administrator of the Birkenau Höfe and then someone from his anti-anti-restitution company in Berlin. I think they finally had planning permission for the Liebermann block. I could tell Gerry so, too. What do you think, shall I annoy the Hollywood star a bit by mentioning his lost Haimlele Rotgast inheritance? Answer that question at once, you miserable Attention Deficiency Syndrome nudnik!”

“Did you say you were in the Achad Ha’am Cemetery, you shmuck?” said Noah. “I’m buried there too! Go to my gravestone, yalla, and put a pebble on it. And wish for something that I’d want myself.” There was a short, intense pause that had a lot to do with thinking and nothing to do with his sewer-rat syndrome. “Were you really very sad when I was dead?”

“I was sad when I heard from Avi that you were alive. I’ll have to end this call now, Forlanikus.”

“Wait a moment! Do you think it was any fun for me to see your Marx-Brothers-in-the-sauna clip? You had more clicks in a day than I’ve had since the invention of Internet sex. Hey, when are you arriving? Buczac calls! We must go back into the historical placenta at long last. We must find out why we’re the two sides of the same medal.”

“Are we?” I asked – I, Solomon K., who knows it all and doesn’t understand any of it. Then I simply rang off, smiling, and shaken by a slight sadistic shudder.

The Liebermann block. Noah sat down on the cold steps of the Philharmonic, listened to the Ukrainian Liberation Orchestra tuning its instruments up inside, and then thought again, for the first time in months, of the 2005 New Year’s Eve party at Valhalla Films, or rather of Gerry’s naïve, arrogant, cute Third-World nonsense, of himself fainting away as if knocked out cold, of Ethel’s aphrodisiac, nurse’s touch. He had met Gerry and Tal the day before by chance, near Weinberg Park, where he had bought some hash for 50 euros from a suspiciously gentle giant of a Moroccan smelling of pumpkin seed extract and Dior Femme, only the hash wasn’t hash, as he noticed only later when he had smoked a few crumbs of that microwave-dried shoe cream kneidel and had puked lavishly on the polished wooden floor of my Swinemünde substitute uterus. He was still all right, very much all right, kayn ayn hore crazily all right! Intoxicated by the prospect of his coming intoxication and by the total absence in Berlin of Merav, he felt a kind of writer’s id growing in him such as only the ever-incomplete know: urgent, cheering, and accompanied by vigorous waves of excitement in the over-empathetic area of his chest and groins. In addition there was the fact that he had been making his way in secret through my brilliant black Smythson notebooks (I hadn’t been able to take them all to Prague), gleaning a few good ideas for his own current project (*XY and his Cases and Just-In-Cases, as experienced, survived and narrated by himself*), and he had also found the *Shylock Was Here* file on my Mac.

So there he was, as pleased with himself as Shabbatai Zwi on the first day of his I’m-acting-like-the-Messiah tour, standing by the traffic lights in Veterans’ Street, already imagining the standing ovations he would get in Stockholm and at St Paul’s Church, Frankfurt – when he saw Gerry Harper in front of the dilapidated Liebermann block, unused as it had been for years. THE Gerry Harper. The El Dick of the El Dick

trilogy and nine-part *The Bullet* saga. The former (or present) husband of Jennifer Aniston (or Cameron Diaz). The full-to-bursting philanthropist of Beverly Hills (according to *Variety* or *Bunte* magazine). Why not George Clooney or Robert de Niro and be done with it? thought Noah. And then he thought that he and I played the Hall of Fame game more or less in the same league, but which of us, thought Noah, will be forgotten in a few years' time if it isn't m-m-me? Beside Gerry, stout, rich Avi looked extremely pleased with himself, as always, and of all things with his two tree-trunks of legs planted in the cracked East Berlin pavement as if they had grown there. A few steps to one side of them a small, tough Sabra guy was prancing about like a lonely, fallen salsa god, chain-smoking and turning around three times a minute in a paranoid fashion.

In the greyish white wintry soup of Berlin, in front of the old pseudo-Gothic wrecked department store façade, the three looked like black market traders in a blurred photograph from the East Berlin police archives – and they were doing relatively black-market deals, at that. The Liebermann Block, before Monsieur Göring made it his private art gallery, had been the best, cheapest department store of the old eastern part of Berlin, and the most popular with the new Nazis of the Wedding and Prenzlauer Berg districts. In 1928, in the prime of the Weimar Republic, Gustav Liebermann, founder of the firm and son of a swine of a Franconian Jew, had sold it to a certain Abimelech Blumenstein from Breslau (who was about as closely related to the family of Avi Blumenswine-Blumenstein as he was to King David), and who didn't get it back from the communists after the war, but all the same he lost it at poker, during a long stay in Las Vegas, to Gerry's grandfather Haimle "Kischke" Rotgast. Later there was a logopaedia institute for Stasi officers in the Liebermann Block, then it was the Red Moscow fashion college, and finally the central library of the Berlin refuse disposal department.

When the Jewish Claims Conference finally went in search of relations of the old owners of properties, in the autumn of 2005, and got in touch, among others, with Avi Blumenswine in New York, that great trickster and liar immediately, in tears, told the stern JCC expert lady that he had been waiting for that phone call for years and was prepared to take responsibility for the run-down property of his murdered forebears, including renovating, filleting and gentrifying it, whereupon the JCC lady, also in tears, replied that she would mail him all the documents right away. At roughly the same time, however, Gerry also heard from Lou that the late Haimele had

once owned a building – a whole department store! – in Germany. That was when Lou was spending most of his time sitting cross-legged on Mount Toruhu, staring at the greasy monk’s short prick, and at the most thinking secretly sometimes, while meditating, of his own money (not that it was his any more). “Gerry,” Lou had said on one of his rare visits to his depressed son as they sat on a bench in the grounds of the Palo Alto withdrawal clinic, “if you don’t know how you’re going to finance your Sudanese film, go to Nazi-Land and get your hands on Haimele’s department store. You can sell it right away, and if you’re half as clever as your Mafia Seyde, you’ll have money left for enough of what they call light drugs in that part of the world to last you half a lifetime. You’re not getting a cent from me for any such crazy project.”

And now Gerry and Tal, having landed only that morning at Tegel airport, as excited as roulette players at the beginning of a winning streak, were standing outside Haimele’s department store – and Avi, who totally and utterly by chance happened to be there too, doing some research into a possible hot cleaning of the Liebermann Block, told them that the great founder of Murder, Inc., had won a Potemkin village playing cards.

“Potemkin village?” said Gerry. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Good heavens, Gerry,” Tal hissed surreptitiously, “something that only looks as if it’s real.”

“Can you let me have that in rather more detail?”

“Suppose you buy some New York cheesecake at Sam’s Delicatessen, and then you get home and open the box, but there’s nothing in it. Only a note saying: *Fuck you, stupid!*”

“Really?” said Gerry, and he sounded as childish and disappointed as at the end of his last cure when Nurse Cummings hadn’t put a vicodin capsule in his beaker of pills one morning.

“Yes, something like that,” said Avi. “I’m sorry. Well, not really.”

“And how am I going to make the Sudanese film now? How am I NOT going to make it? Think of those poor Darfuris – Tal! Say something. Without us they’ll be done for all the sooner.”

“Ask him,” said Avi, turning slowly to Noah, who was just crossing the street and approaching them with something of the look of a sleepwalker. “Here’s the most famous heir of Hamburg-Harvestehude, motto; if I haven’t given you any money yet,

dude, you only have to ask me for it. Hi, Noah, how's things? What are you doing in Berlin? Let me introduce you all to each other."

The Schönberg piece that the Ukrainians were rehearsing on that white, chilly, rainy October day in the former Gestapo HQ, behind closed doors and with windows open wide, was *Transfigured Night*. Noah had never understood why Schloimel, whose usual idea of music was the Berry Sisters, Joseph Schmidt and Rudi Carrell, had listened so often in the past to this complicated post-shtetl music. Until Big Schloimel, on a much too sunny Saturday morning in Hamburg, when the sunlight even reached the purple plastic cover of the old Grundig record player in the gloomy Forlani living room, explained. "Did you know, son, that this Schönberg converted to Christianity but later returned to the faith of his fathers and mothers, after 1933 at that? A little like your Tate in his Buczacz days. Was the guy brave? Or dumb? Or did he know, as the rabbi of Entebbe says, that life is sheyn only when it's sheyn?" "But why do you like that piece so much, Papa?" "Did I say I liked it? It was the only Schönberg record on special offer at Karstadt in Eppendorf."

When Noah now, in the centre of the peaceful, friendly, Jew-free city of Stanislau a.k.a. Ivano-Frankivsk, heard the slowly swelling, trembling stringed instruments of Schonberg's music again after a long time; when after a rather uncomfortable, sweet-sour section, the irresistible charm of which was that it sounded exactly like the pleading, wailing and cursing of a captive tyrant, when something like a huge cotton wool ball of horn and trumpet sounds then assailed his ears; when for a while there was just the grating of bows and the sound of viola strings, and then briefly nothing, then an atonal howl of the whole damned Ukrainian anti-Semitic orchestra, and when finally a bright, almost goy-like carefree melody, as honest, unsentimental and natural as bloody birds twittering, broke through that whole depressing greyish-violet veil of overtones and undertones and nothing – well, then Noah felt the universal cold entirely draining out of his thin, tough, perfectly nourished bio-body for the first time in years, and his ever more urgent longing for the sultry darkness of the Buczacz bunker lighting thousands of tiny flames of anticipation in him.

But he was still sitting on the cold steps of the Podolian district Philharmonic, and a masterful Carpathian wind was still blowing through his longish, wiry, Hasidic hair from all points of the compass, although he noticed now the first-class maternal

warmth somewhere between his bladder and his navel, making him, like some ancient Greek hero, insensitive to the stupidity, derangement and frigidity of humanity. And also he wanted to fuck – not just to be carried around like a r-r-ridiculous baby of a man.

“So time for the Lady House, Petzkele!”

Yes, Mama. I know, but can you please call me Noah. I mean, I’m forty-two!

“Of course!”

Do you think they’re even open today? Usually the roller blinds were down when I wanted to find out about prices and services, and the huge, rusty, n-n-neon ad wasn’t on either.

“Stop stammering Noah. Think, concentrate! You’ve only been there at night, right? And the Lady House is known to be a daytime business. You know how lazy the former creatures of the Soviet are. One fifty-three p.m., the perfect time for an ex-Bolshevik in need of a fuck! Go along with you and relax, okay, Petzele?”

Okay.

While Noah moved first slowly and then faster and faster away from the former Gestapo HQ – he turned sharp right at the corner, into narrow, dark, bleakly Baroque Strachenych Street, past the mock-up of the local synagogue and the tiny Pid Templen hotel in the direction of the marketplace, then down noisy, stinking, and as always overpopulated Gratshevska Street to the bus station – he was still hearing Schönberg’s *Transfigured Night*. How could that be so? The jarring violins, the weeping violas, the conductor’s baton coming down with a thump on the conductor’s desk – it was all still there and just as loud as before, when he was sitting under the open windows of the Philharmonic and drawing existential closing line after existential closing line. He stopped suddenly outside the only KFC branch in Galicia, and turned like a thief looking for a secret pursuer, but of course he no longer saw the white modernist concert hall in the style of a capsized ocean liner of the thirties – and he thought, no, I’m much too far from Mickiewicz Square, it’s an acoustic hallucination. And then he thought, joking but also serious, scratching his badly shaven chin like the rabbi of Abu Dhabi: okay, my life is a kind of film featuring me, the successful loser, and Soli, the lying moralist, in the leading roles, and this heartrending Schönberg music is its soundtrack.

“What’s the film called, Petzele?”



*To Buczacz. Or no: Who Wants to Stay A Millionaire?* No, in the sense of the latest psychocatalytical findings, it is called *Transfigured Night*. Because that's what it's about, it says that every human being, Mama, I repeat every human being, has at least one unbearable trauma to deal with, under the headings of war, Stalin, bankruptcy, adultery, total lack of literary talent, childhood abuse active or passive, etc. – and that he must love or else, like Tal, the poor bastard, get out.

At this point of his internal dialogue, Noah noticed, in surprise, how clearly and with what a sense of conclusive direction he was suddenly able to think. Goodbye, ADS? No more stammering and stuttering? Well, he thought, why not? And shifting his heavy backpack from one shoulder to the other, he murmured with quiet enjoyment, *oyoyoy!* He took another few steps, bringing him to Chmielmicky Boulevard two or three blocks from the Lady House, and he didn't know what made him randier: the idea of being squashed like a fly next moment by a Hutzulian giantess two metres tall, or this sudden, tripartite clarity about life in his head. To left and right of the Allenby-like dilapidated, lively but perfectly safe shopping street, came first cheap jewellers' shops ("We also buy gold teeth from Muslims!") and tourist shops with hats, chairs, breadbaskets and life-size Jewish puppets made of straw, for burning at home. Then came stalls selling cheese plaits, yoga and kvass. And then the huge old cinema, in which at the moment – so said the placard outside — Fritz Dunckenberg's new animated film for children *The Speculator and the Dead Count* was showing, preceded by a short film from the UFA studios (*Our Misfortune, The Jews*), which Noah failed to notice, so deep was he in his personal vision of the future.

And then he was outside the Lady House at last. The grubby white roller blinds were up, the recently cleaned glass door was half open, and in his underpants (Schiesser Retro collection, autumn/winter 1999, model Adolf for the man with the flat teddy-bear bum and the snake-like coiled prick) he immediately had a historical reaction. He looked up, slowly rather than quickly, like someone who doesn't want to exhaust all the fun at the very start, for instance like Thekla in the old days, when she would spend hours in the morning oiling, cleaning and checking her flesh-coloured prosthetic leg before finally putting it on and strapping it into place. Right, Mama, he thought, one more little lift-and-carry session, and that will be the end, by the life of Rami Bar-On and the Peace Now characters who have poor Tal on their consciences, and maybe I'll even have one of the Ukrainian gorilla ladies knock me out slightly

today, can you please NOT film that? He made the rich-Jew face, raising his downy Hasidic chin and his oyg, rather close together but not unintelligent, a little more – and was looking into the display window of a shop selling, for heaven’s sake, buttons and underwear.

What the hell was this? Wasn’t the Lady House a brothel after all? Was it a perfectly normal haberdasher’s shop, the sort known in the golden age of Jewish emancipation and the early industrial revolution? Oh, sweet, heavy, black pain of disappointment! The luck of bad luck! The depressing quasi-orgasm of failure! This was better than an hour with a local version of Bunny Glamazon, when the premature, luke-luke-warm gush of sperm in the sweatbox of a highly professional packet of muscle, only apparently got up to look like a vagina. He turned with the self-ironic expression of an Englishman about two hundred years old, leaned back against the autumnally cold glass of the display window, and turned up the volume of the Schönberg violins in his head.

“And when do I get to see my granddaughters again, Petzele?”

Never, Mama, you’re dead.

“Alevay.”

Yes, alevay – luckily.

Over there, on the other side of the street, was an old, rundown building of the turn of the last century. The leaden cornices were black and bent, the greyish brown façade was so full of holes that the white masonry showed under it like the sinews under a deep flesh wound. And on the long, plain, first-floor balcony, slightly askew, stood a sad, faded, red sun umbrella. A pity he couldn’t talk to Dr Savionoli now, instead of his crazy mother, thought Noah. Unlike Fruma, he was always right. True, he had always told him that he hated winning, he couldn’t stand success, that he felt like a pig in clover when he failed – but there had never been any talk in Savionoli’s aryanized Hamburg Rotherbaum practice of the coldness, lack of feeling, etc., of which almost all women from Merav to Mama, from the early-maturing HLG girls to Natascha, accused him. Fuck, the Nazi therapist was right! But had he told him why it was like that? That anti-Semite and future castration expert of the Hungarian Jobbik party kept the answer to himself, of course. But Neo-Noah, the clear-minded, self-confident, highly concentrated thinker suddenly understood it for himself.

The room in which Schloimel had spent his last weeks and months was large, bright and empty. No sign of Jewish baroque anywhere, no dark rabbinical and Seder

scenes on the walls, no family photos in silver frames on a Teutonic-looking oak dresser. It had been the sexless marital bedroom of the Forlanis for over thirty years, and Fruma had to vacate it after the advent of the big C, because in his state then Schloimel couldn't stand her eternal flatulence any more. To the left of the bed there was an exercise machine that Schloimel had used for the first and last time somewhere around the end of the eighties. The frame with the drip stood to the right of the bed, and looked more like a gallows than something saving his seventh and last life. In those days Noah and I usually sat at the foot of the bed, looking into Schloimel's huge, white, dying face as if it were the pages of a book in a language and in print that we had never heard of.

"There's no tea left," said Schloimel, after the last circuit of the bed that he and Noah had made.

Noah stood up, sat down again and called angrily for Thekla.

"Do you want to know what some of the people of Buczacz of your own age always said at the end?" whispered Schloimel. "'All roads lead to the Fedor Hill,' they said, 'but not for us!' So they crept out of the ghetto by night along the Karubiner mishpoke's tunnel and got weapons – and celebrated every day that they lived, in their Shabbat suits and old ball gowns, like they were at birthday parties. And afterwards they groped each other in silence under the Black Bridge, to make sure that they were all still there. They were so much cleverer and more realistic than the old folk! They were the only ones who took my warnings before every operation seriously, they were even younger than me, and they were my salvation."

"How come, Papa?" asked Noah.

"Simple, yingl. My own name was on the last list I gave the Gestapo chief of Stanislau. But all the same I went back to Buczacz and didn't go off into the woods on my way. And do you know why? Does that conceited four-eyes beside you know?"

We neither of us said anything.

"Because I only wanted to go home. Because I couldn't take any more. Because on that day, for reasons quite different from the leymakhs of our stetl, I thought: it's over, I don't want to fight any more, I don't want to exchange my life for the death of my own people every day any more." He breathed out, just once, with a loud, stertorous, old man's sound. "But then, tired with the journey and the Gestapo sheygets' eternal politics, I went into the Ring Café, and those splendid boys and

girls gave me a vodka and said: ‘The hour of battle has come, Schloimtschikl. Are you going to join in? From today you don’t have to be a ghetto police officer any more.’”

“You never told me that, Tate.”

“There’s a lot I never told you, boy. After that we hid, four girls, four boys, for months with the farmer Gruber in a tiny annexe without windows or doors that he’d made for us. There were two camp beds, no roof, just boards with bales of straw on them, and if we didn’t lie this way and that like Gruber’s rabbits, if we didn’t tell each other about the books we’d read in the dark, we went hunting Poles outside by night, the Poles who gave away the last living Jews after the last Special Operation.”

“Schloimtschikl,” said Noah, smiling. “So that’s what they called you?”

And I said, as seriously and with as much interest as if I were interviewing a wicked German philosopher for the *NYT*, “So you really were a partisan, Herr Forlani?”

“Mister Bolshevik here can’t imagine that of a ghetto Jew like me, eh?”

“I’m not a Bolshevik, Reb Forlani! I’m pinkt amkhu asoy like you!”

He looked at me in a brief moment of surprise, put his left hand to his throat, his right hand beside him, his eyes closed, and he stopped moving.

“Papa,” said Noah, “stop it! Stop acting as if you were dead. It’s not funny.”

But Schloimel’s eyes stayed closed, his white face went sallow like newspaper in a time-lapse film, and suddenly his huge bare chest with its thatch of grey hair wasn’t moving any more either.

Once again Noah called angrily for Thekla, and when she limped in with the steaming teapot he said, “We don’t need that any more. Papa is dead.” Was he crying? Yes. Was he indifferent to this, the first existential loss of his life? No. The tears were running down his unmoved, badly shaven toad-face like rain down a window pane, he slowly stood up and sat down on the bed beside his father, and put his wet cheek against Schloimel’s motionless right hand.

“Just once we only caught the father of one of those damn Shmalzovnis,” said Schloimel, opening his eyes again. “But then we got the son too at his funeral. And once we had to chop the head off an old – a very old – woman who screamed and defended herself. After that the Poles and Ukrainians didn’t betray any more Jews at all, and almost six hundred of us survived.”

Noah smiled and mopped his cheeks with Schloimel's bedspread. "And then?" he said.

"Then the Red Army arrived," said Schloimel, "and the living dead crawled out of their damp holes in the ground, out of icy cold walled-up cellars and airless cupboards. They were happy, happy, happy, and so were we who had saved them. But God had another surprise waiting for the Yids! The Germans drove the Russians away, and got the survivors too, all but the last sixty."

"Fuck," said Noah.

I said, "There is no God."

And Schloimel said, "After that I was alone for six months in the foxholes of Liesnovo – because they caught Gruber and my friends as well." The teacup shook in his hands, the gallows holding up the drip shook, Schloimel shook all over. "Tell me," he said, "what do I say, the dying rebe of Schäferkampsallee, when my highly talented but confused son asks me what he is to believe in when I am gone? I think, I tell him, that I never believed in anything myself, or only in a million marks. Because every life ends as if it had never existed, every love dies, every success turns to failure, but of course he can do as he likes. Hear that, Klayntchik? You're free." Noah nodded unhappily, but also with the sly look of a survivor who is glad that the immortal sick man won't be able to tyrannize over the whole family any more. "Do me one toyve when I'm gone. Stop playing at brothers with this writer here. He hasn't got a neshome! He's not as sensitive as he acts, he's egotistical and cold, and you are much too warm and kind for him. He isn't even a real communist! Amen." Three days later, at one in the morning, Schloimel the Great died. "End of the territory," said Thekla, before she called the chevra kadisha – this time for good. Noah and I stayed brothers all the same, whatever Schloimel's last wish had been, but after that Noah never again believed that you could be happy as a Jew and a man and Noah.

"Did you hear that, Dr Savionoli? Only fear of disappointment made him so hard – although unfortunately not between the legs, ha ha ha."

Go away, Mama. Therapy is private.

"Sure, Petzele, sure it is."

The red sun umbrella on the dead balcony opposite moved slightly in the wind, the Schönberg violins squealed and whimpered like electric knives, and cut Noah's great

little heart into slices like pastrami. Now where? he thought. And: if Schloimel had had nine lives, would he still be here?

He moved skilfully as a gecko away from the cold – ice-cold – display window of the underwear shop that luckily was not a brothel after all, crossed the street, and stood in the entrance of the dark, rundown, six-storey building from the turn of the century. Then he took off the backpack with his new, much too heavy and superfluous giant MacBook, in which he had so far written a single sentence (“When Moby Dichter left his wife, sad to say she was already dead”), heaved a sigh of relief, ran his forefinger over the panel of doorbells, slowly read the names out loud, spelling the letters in the Cyrillic alphabet, and when he finally reached “Forlani family” he rang it.

Well, no, of course it didn’t say “Forlani family”. All the same, he had rung someone’s bell, and when, because he didn’t answer the response at once, a deep, unfriendly, croaking female voice shouted at him in Ukrainian down the intercom, he shouted back even louder in German. “That’s enough, I’ve had enough! Will you please all stop calling me names! I don’t want it any more. I know I’m no use for anything, I can’t write, I make childish videos, my therapist is a Nazi and my flatulent mother ejected me from her arsehole. So what? Are you any better? Do you know how many pointless ideas you’ve had? Goodlife – you don’t fancy it? CCC – hakol chara! The *Stoned to Death* tour with the Yyawes – about as successful as *Mein Kampf* in Israel? So what? Here are some more Noah disasters: 18 million down the drain! Wanking only on my belly! The Buddha in my ex-wife’s garden that doesn’t belong to me any more! The ten books I was going to write, and I never got beyond ten opening sentences! I love it, you stupid arseholes! I have fun not having any fun, get it? And best of all I like living without my spoilt, lethargic daughters! That really, brilliantly hurts! Because I, as the son of practically the only survivor of Buczacz, and thus half a survivor myself, I just love defeat, death while I’m still alive, un-lived love, yes, dammit, the doc is right, all I like is an unfinished almost semi-fuck! And PLEASE don’t bring up Pilatus Pilates Pilati, my great studio apartment with the rack, you fuckers, get it? I’ve sold it! I sold it the moment it began making money. Oooh” – and he uttered such a loud groan that the first passers by stopped dead – “oooh, oooh, I got off on that!”

The croaking in the intercom that had begun by trying to shout him down had given up long ago. The passers by – little old ladies with colourful Huzulian

headscarves, wiry pseudo-gangsters, young people in fake American Apparel hoodies – went on their way once they had seen that the screaming madman looked like a runaway Yeshiva student. But Noah didn't mind that, he needed no *rachmones*, no compassion and no audience today. Crouching down, he made his way along the crumbling façade of the apartment building, sobbed without tears, and heard the twittering of the Schönberg strings louder and louder, suddenly so clear, wonderful, almost unearthly. And then, instead of continuing to yell any more, he said to himself: I don't want any more insults. No more reproaches, please. Love! No blows, no cameras! I want to go home, Mama, home to Buczacz, back to the Karubiner family's dark, damp cellar, where Soli, Ethel and I will tell each other our favourite jokes for a few years, until we've rotted away or the Red Army liberates us. That would be more than enough for me.

“Promise, Petzele?”

I promise!

“Hmh, maybe you're not such a block of ice as I thought. Mazel tov. And you really did shed tears for Papa, did you? And for me too?”

Well, anyway, more than I shed for Natascha when she made out that she was going to cross the Jordan. Happy? Mama, what was that sound? Did you just . . . by Spinoza's shaven face, that hurts! Please go away. And don't worry, I'll soon stand up and go back to the hotel and read a few sentences in Agnon's book that Soli recommended to me before my afternoon nap, and if they're good, I'll work them into the *Moby Dichter* story unobtrusively, let's see, let's see.

“What's it called, Petzele?”

*Like a Guest At Night*, Mama, Bye. Bye!!!

“What do you mean, byeee, Noah? We've hardly talked at all,” I whispered. Noah held the iPhone to his ear in surprise, and for a moment he didn't know where he was or who he was talking to. “And switch your Skype on, mousie,” I said even more quietly, so that Gerry couldn't hear me. “I miss your cute Hasidic face, you beheaded kidnapping victim!” Noah tapped the Skype app, and when he saw that it was me, and I was on my thyroid stress trip again, thin and pale and unreasonable like recently during the “Post From The Holocaust” trials, he said, “Well, what is it, Reb Savonarola? I'm not talking to you again until you get off that plane in Stanislau!”

“There's something I didn't tell you just now. Something super-important and super-crazy!”

“Crazy how? Crazy like Schloimel’s affair with the wife of the police officer on the floor above us? Or crazy like the arraignment of al-Bashir at The Hague before he could liquidate half a million subhumans? Go on, talk!”

“Serafina’s getting married!” I told him. “Poor, fat Serafina is marrying that repellent, thin, inclined to be gay porn artist Balaban! Balaban is going to be my brother-in-law, get it? She thinks he’s even going to change his surname and be called Karubiner just to annoy Vova. Rabbi Karubiner! How do you think that sounds, Forlanikus?”

“Better than Oritele Turgeman,” said Noah. “Do you think, writer, that your ex and the crooner have thought up a name for their unborn infant yet?”

I didn’t reply. Then I held up my fist to the iPhone camera. “Or better than Merav Blumenswine,” I said.

“Really? Your little monkey is going to marry that fat g-g-gorilla? Mezuyan!”

“Yes.”

“Says who?”

“Avi himself, the new master of Herzlia Pituach, who didn’t give me your coat until I’d promised to have his memoirs ready by Purim. Why, Forlanilein, do people always have to blackmail each other?”

“What’s he threatening to do otherwise, write them himself?”

“Otherwise he’s going to post the video of me wanking online again.”

“And where’s my coat?”

“I’m wearing your damn coat, and in all this bloody heat, can’t you see that?”

I held the iPhone away from myself and pushed off from Tal’s gravestone, behind which I’d been hiding from Gerry all this time. As I did so I looked over the wide, white cemetery rising in the direction of Mount Tabor, with the Middle Eastern October air flickering over in the Middle Eastern October sunlight in a pastoral manner, and assumed my keen Winnetou-fails-to-see-his-end-coming expression. Gerry had disappeared, and in all other respects I was alone in the Achad Ha’am Cemetery too. “Oh shit, my ankle,” I said out loud, crouching down again. “Ouch.”

“Aren’t you happy about Serafina getting married?” said Noah. “Then you’ll be rid of her at last. Then she’ll never pester you again.”

“When did I tell you that?”

“Do you really not remember?”

I made the face of a surprised dreamer at the telephone camera.



“You told me a whole lot more, too,” said Noah. “Vova the double agent! Jedushka who was given away by his own son . . .”

“Listen to who’s talking,” I interrupted him.

“ . . . the kids’ drawing of Vova strangling you and Serafina with his shmuck. Forgotten that, too? Are you the one with ADS now?”

“Yes, I remember,” I said, “it’s only twelve minutes ago.” I said nothing for a long time, feeling my swollen red ankle with relish, and suddenly I said, “Noah, I don’t think Vova the Terrible fucked Serafina after all!”

“Sababa, Soli, you’re seeing reason. I told you before, not every pretty, disturbed woman you fancy was abused by her Papa.”

“I didn’t fancy Serafina. And pretty isn’t the right word in connection with her.”

He gave a sweet, dirty laugh.

“And what am I going to do now?” I asked. “They want me to go to Prague. They say they’ll look after me, the way they used to but even better. I can sleep in and write in my old kid’s bedroom and make out all I like. Only when the TV people come from Hamburg they want me to be nice and talk at length about Mamashka and her new book. I don’t want to, Noah! I’m still cross with them because when I was three they left me in Moscow with Jeduschka, And I haven’t forgotten a single time that Vova hit me. No, I don’t want to go there.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“I want . . . I really want to go home.”

“Then come here, you *nevalye*, and don’t get worked up. You can have a nice big double room here, right next to mine, in a pretty little ghetto hotel. And if you don’t want to rub up against someone in the municipal swimming pool we’ll find you a nice submissive sixteen-year-old *chonte*. I have enough money for that sort of thing again! And we’ll write in competition the way we did in Punta del Giorno: I’ll finish writing my *Moby Dichter* novel, and you can finish your *Shylock* book. Or is it finished already, you cute little writer piggy?” He grinned affectionately and enviously. “And then we’ll make a memory tour of Buczacz. With a surprise ending. Okay?”

I nodded – silently – at the telephone camera.

“Or do you still think,” said Noah, and we both stood up at the same time, he in Ukraine, I in Israel, “that I can’t write? You’re just afraid that I might be better than you, you deep-frozen brute. Schloimel was right.”