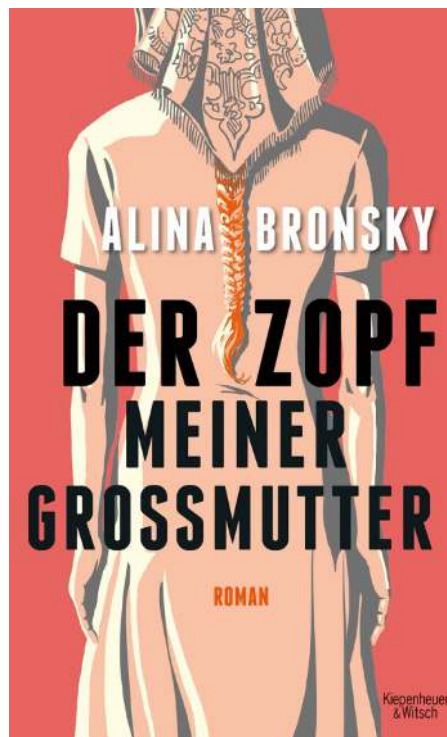


MY GRANDMOTHER'S BRAID

by **Alina Bronsky**

Sample Translation by Tim Mohr



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SUNSHINE INN

I can remember the exact moment Grandfather fell in love. In my eyes, he was ancient – already over fifty – and his new, delicate secret hit me with a wave of admiration tempered by schadenfreude. Up to then I'd thought of myself as my grandparents' only problem.

I sensed that Grandmother wasn't supposed to know about it. She'd already threatened to kill him for far lesser offenses, like when he crumbled bread during dinner.

I was nearly six and knew a thing or two about love. While in preschool in Russia I'd fallen in love with three caretakers in a row, sometimes even overlapping. In the nine-story apartment block where we'd lived before we emigrated, there wasn't a girl under eighteen that I hadn't at least had a brief crush on. When my grandmother noticed my lingering gaze following bouncy skirts or ponytails down the street she held her hands in front of my eyes. "Don't let your eyeballs pop out of your head. You'll never get one anyway."

In silent protest against this prophecy, I subsequently fell in love with a woman I'd never seen. I just liked the look of her name on a poster: Rosa Silberstein. At home I hummed the five syllables of her name to myself over and over again until my grandmother listened more closely and ordered me to cut out the nonsense, things were grim enough as they were.

Not long afterwards we arrived in Germany as quota refugees and Grandfather met his love.

At the refugee home, we were, as Grandmother noted unhappily, surrounded by Jews. She'd never made a secret of her antisemitism: "Not because of Jesus or anything. I have genuine, personal reasons." It nearly made her burst to have to keep herself from using certain curses during toasts with the neighbors. Then she'd revel in the fact that she'd managed to gain access for us to the privileges of the golden West under false pretenses. "Just so you don't think we're really Jews," she hammered home to me while feeling my forehead for a fever. "Grandpa had an uncle who had a brother-in-law. He had a Jewish wife. That's why we're here. That's how it works. Don't ask."

I nodded eagerly, as if I believed something as a result, or at least understood. I'd never seen an uncle of my grandfather, not to mention the wife of his brother-in-law. Generally I tried to avoid talking to Grandmother unnecessarily, first and foremost because I never knew what sore spots my questions might touch. I barely remembered the border crossing, only that Grandmother's mood immediately betrayed disappointment.

The home was a former hotel with cracking plaster and a sign still adorning the entrance that said "Sunshine Inn." Most of the residents walked to synagogue on Friday evenings, where after services there was a buffet that was both lavish and free of charge. Grandmother ironed my blue pants every Friday and cut my fingernails so she didn't have to be ashamed of me. She was intimidated by the real Jewish children.

Despite her distaste, she would never consider skipping Shabbat. She grudgingly honored it by dressing up: she coiled her dyed red braid atop her head like a snake, and made her polka-dotted dress festive with the addition of a silk flower at the neck. Behind her put-on confidence I

sensed her deep fear of being exposed as an imposter and being sent back to the collapsing Soviet Union.

While the shabbiness of the home disappointed Grandmother, the shiny, new synagogue elicited a respectful word or two. She wholeheartedly welcomed the fact that women sat separately from men during services: “I’m happy not to have to see his grouchy mug for a while.” She sought out the neighbors she knew from the refugee home and snared them in long conversations at the cold buffet before she inconspicuously – she thought – swiped this or that food item.

The next morning she’d unwrap the rolled pancake or savory pastry from the napkin and dish it up for Grandfather. I was permitted only to watch: the food had been touched by strangers’ paws and was therefore not for me to eat. At the same time she went over all the previous day’s conversations. Grandmother looked unfavorably on most of the new acquaintances: she was suspicious of people who left their homelands, except when it came to herself.

“Of course, there are also decent people,” she said on one single occasion, and Grandfather and I listened closely. “I met a delightful woman. Her name is Nina and she teaches piano. Lives here with her daughter. The girl’s Maxi’s age, but normal. No husband, lucky her, bringing up her illegitimate daughter all alone. You know her, Tschingis, you carried a sack of potatoes upstairs for her once. Why would she need so many potatoes when it’s just the two of them? You’d let me break my back but you’ll play the gentleman for others.”

My grandfather’s hand twitched for a second, and the filling of ground meat and leeks burst out of the pastry.

QUACK

In Germany, Grandmother took me to the pediatrician. Actually, she explained to me on the way, this was the real reason for our emigration: to finally be able to take me to an upstanding doctor for treatment, who could give hope to me – and more importantly, to her – that I might survive into adulthood, even if it meant Grandmother would have a millstone around her neck for decades.

She had my medical files with her, they were bound in leather and looked like the rediscovered handwritten manuscript of a lost classic. They were filled with diagnoses, glued-in blood and urine analyses, and unreadable notes from various specialists Grandmother had consulted and who had regaled her with conflicting opinions. Slips of paper or prescriptions sometimes slipped out of the files, and Grandmother quickly gathered them up and stuffed them back inside.

The German doctor's office was colorful and bright, and the memory of the Soviet polyclinic, with its painted-over windows and threateningly demanding hygiene posters seemed like a fever dream. A mountain of toys rose on the worn carpet. I knew that I wasn't allowed to touch any of them. Anything that Grandmother hadn't personally disinfected was contaminated with germs. Still, I enjoyed even just looking at them. The nurse weighed and measured me and gave me a smile that made the back of my neck warm.

To Grandmother's indignation, we had to go back to the waiting room after that. It was full of children of different ages, all of whom were

spreading diseases. One coughed, others sneezed, and Grandmother suspected the ones without outward signs had contagious rashes they'd secretly hidden beneath their clothes. She pulled me frantically onto her lap, and I was definitely too old for that. Though she had publicly humiliated me so often that I felt immune to nearly any embarrassment.

“If I'd known about this chaotic situation, I'd have brought facemasks,” Grandmother said, trying to wrap her scarf around my mouth and nose, which suffocated me and itched horribly. “Now sit still, Grandma's not a trampoline.”

“I'm suffocating,” I rasped.

“Asthma?!” She rummaged through her bag for the spray – she'd brought a large number of them across the border with us out of precaution – without bothering to free me from the stranglehold of the scarf.

Luckily we were called into the examination room at that moment. The doctor was a man, which my grandmother approved of enthusiastically, since she trusted men more, at least when it came to medical questions. She smacked my medical files down on the table. “Chronic bronchitis, chronic sinusitis, chronic gastritis, moderately myopia, vegetative-vascular dystonia, allergies, diminished growth, mumbles, decelerated reflexes, decelerated cognitive development, early childhood trauma. But you can see for yourself.” She spoke only Russian.

The doctor bent forward with a furrowed brow. With one hand he shielded himself from my grandmother's stream of words while he stretched the other out to me. After a moment's thought I took his hand. From the German words directed at me I was able to filter out some I

knew, laid myself down on the examination table and pulled off my t-shirt.

The doctor sat down next to me and listened to me with the stethoscope, holding up his hand every time Grandmother opened her mouth. He shined a light in my ears, pressed around on my throat, and knocked on my back. This last thing I took as an encouraging sign.

“What?” said my grandmother when he made a waving gesture in our direction. “What does that mean – *bye*? What does *healthy* mean?”

I explained it to her when we were out on the street and she had stuffed the medical files back in her bag.

“How do you know that?” she asked. “Who taught you? We only just arrived, and you’re an idiot.”

I shrugged. In my fist I held the gummi bear I was allowed to take from the jar as we left.

“Quack,” said my grandmother. “He didn’t take any x-rays. I’d even prefer our drunken women. What do you have in your hand? Can’t you see the bacteria stuck to that thing? Do you want to get sick? Give it to me.”

I handed her the gummi bear and Grandmother popped it into her mouth.

BIRTHDAY

The nurse's smile had made me remember why life is beautiful despite it all: there are women everywhere. The first weeks in Germany had gone by in a fog, and now I felt as if I was waking up again.

I'd always thought of women whenever I felt a cold claw gripping my heart. Grandmother had started to prepare me for my demise very early. The notion that time was trickling away gave me a sensation like goosebumps, and I wanted to soak up as much beauty as possible. I loved everything about women. The thin ones were lithe and fragile like daddy longlegs. The sturdier ones radiated warmth and plushness. If women were big I admired their strength, and if they were small I regretted the fact that I couldn't protect them. That my grandmother was also a woman never crossed my mind.

On every birthday Grandmother greeted me with the words, "Oh miracle, thanks be to heaven and myself, he pulled it off again." She gave me socks and mittens she'd knitted herself, and later presented me with a giant cake, the sight of which always plunged me into despair. I knew how it would end even before Grandmother announced: "Look, once again Grandma spared no cost or effort and hunched over my work all night. Chocolate cream, three layers. The freshest eggs available here. Take a good look at it, from every angle. What do you think? It tastes divine, you must believe me."

I believed her immediately without even asking whether I could try a slice. I knew the answer so well that I could recite it to myself: "Do

you no longer need your pancreas? This kind of food is for normal people. You eat with your eyes, which is healthier anyway. You may also smell it.” She dragged her finger along the cake plate and held a creamy dollop up to my nose.

I’d never had any friends, which I thought was normal, because my grandparents didn’t have any, either. In Russia, Grandmother had usually invited one or two random neighbors for my birthday, but they never came back again. My seventh birthday took place during the first few months in the refugee home. I wondered whom Grandmother would invite this time so as not to have to eat the cake alone with Grandfather.

Grandmother found the Germans suspicious from the start, and besides, she didn’t know any – setting aside the unsatisfactory exchanges of words with the pediatrician or the refugee home’s maintenance man. “We have to stick to the Jews,” she concluded with resignation, inviting the delightful neighbor with whom she’d chatted about my streptococcus at the synagogue. “Nina’s her name. Can you remember that? N-I-N-A. Very polite, fine fingers, not surprising given her profession. Don’t scare her off, you philistine idiots.”

It was my grandfather who opened the door for Nina and stepped silently to the side to let her into our little apartment, which consisted of two hotel rooms that had been combined since our little family represented a “married couple with male child.” For a brief second he flinched and it seemed as if he wanted to keep her from entering the barely existent foyer and his life. Then he took the crucial step to the side. She came in and grazed him with her shoulder as she went past.

Nina looked as if she’d been drawn with a soft pencil. She had a pretty parcel with her, which Grandmother took from her and quickly

stowed in one of the cabinets. A girl entered the room behind the visitor, and she looked like a little copy of her mother.

“Delightful girl,” said Grandmother before the guests even had a chance to say happy birthday to me. She poked me in the back so I’d make space. “Please sit right down! The tea will get cold. Tschingis!” She shoved my motionless grandfather to the side. “What are you standing around for, go get another chair. Nina’s daughter, you can sit here on the couch. Careful with the tea. Scalding is the worst kind of injury you can get. I only ever give my idiot the cup once it’s cooled.” She put a half-filled cup of tea on the windowsill for me.

They were our first guests on German soil. Since the kitchen was too small, Grandmother had set the table in the larger of the two other rooms. The table was pushed next to the couch where she and I slept at night. “Now please sit down, dear Nina. Tschingis, aren’t you listening? You’re sitting here.”

We sat around the table and Grandmother talked. When the conversation turned to me, which was often the case, I felt a look of concern from Nina and one of *schadenfreude* from her daughter.

“I don’t know how I can send him to school, dear Nina. Here they want six-year-olds in the first grade, the cruel bastards. How can one possibly let a creature like this out of the house? That would be irresponsible of me. He can barely digest anything, and the other pupils will make mincemeat of him, don’t you think?”

“I would hope not,” said Nina kindly. I didn’t dare look in Grandfather’s direction.

“You’re a teacher, you must have experience with children who are mentally and physically disadvantaged.” Grandmother kept her focus on the visitor.

“Unfortunately not,” said Nina. I felt a twinge: I would have liked it if she’d contradicted Grandmother, which some people actually dared to do when they first met our family, they expressed their astonishment at the assessment of my mental and physical condition. The bravest among them even suggested that there was nothing peculiar about me at all, which was brushed aside by Grandmother with an, “As if you know anything!”

“What are you sitting around for, Tschingis? I baked, with my own hands. With the best ingredients. No garbage from a confectionary shop. I don’t want to poison anybody.”

I followed with wistful glances as the big slices of cake were put on plates and slowly disappeared. In front of me was placed a plate with a greenish mound on it that slowly turned brown. My tea was still cooling on the windowsill.

“Pay no attention to him, dear Nina and Nina’s daughter. I grated an apple for the poor lump, unfortunately it’s all he can digest. My work never lets up.”

Grandfather sat there silently. I wondered if it was the first time I’d ever seen him focus so intensively on someone, or if I just never noticed because Grandmother’s presence completely dominated my attention. Because it seemed indiscrete to continue to try to read Grandfather’s feelings, I turned my attention to the girl, who had a nice, round face but who started to kick me under the table.

“You’re a happy woman, Nina, because you’re single and have a normal child. Just look how delightful she is. So quiet and polite,” said Grandmother while I tried to maneuver my shin out of kicking range.

“Your son makes a nice impression, as well,” said Nina.

“My son? You’re just flattering me. I don’t have a son, never had one. I’m an old woman long past menopause. This creature is my grandson. What all I’ve endured with him. Every year counts double for me.”

Nina remained silent, shocked.

“But that guy,” said Grandmother, gesturing toward Grandfather, “he still looks like a boy even as an old bag. It’s the Asian genes. They just don’t age. Their skin is much thicker than us whites’, understand? They just keel over at some stage. Heart. Tschingis, say something.”

Grandfather sat upright. Grandmother’s stream of words just beaded on him and rolled off like a summer rain.

“And how Jewish are you, Nina? A quarter? An eighth? You just look too delightful.”

Nina took a sip of tea. Something in her face changed. I cringed because it looked at first as if she were about to break out in tears. She held her cup in front of her mouth for a long time, and I slowly realized she was trying to stifle a fit of laughter.

“One hundred percent,” she said, setting the cup down silently. She smiled at my grandfather and I watched with fascination and horror as deep red crept up his dark cheeks. I’d never seen him blush before, and I crossed my fingers beneath the table in the hope that my grandmother didn’t notice it.

“We’ll see if you manage another year,” said Grandmother as we lay next to each other on the sofa that evening and she tucked the covers all around my frail body so as not to give the drafts any chance even though it was thirty degrees in the shade. My birthday celebration had put her in a sentimental mood, and I worried she would hug me now, or worse still kiss me. In an effort to divert Grandmother from threatening me with tenderness, I fell back on a reliable game: “And what if I don’t? Will I have a nice funeral?”

My calculation was correct: Grandmother’s eyes began to shine. “The nicest,” she assured me fervently.

“Like the one for dear Maya?”

“At the very least.”

I was satisfied. Maya was the good child Grandmother had raised before me. In Grandmother’s memory Maya was an eternal girl, bigger than me at the end, but never grown up. Her stories about Maya were short and confused. Sometimes I begrudged Maya and her angelic existence, after all I’d been a curse in human form since my first breath, and direct comparisons weren’t any fun.

“And when I’m buried, you and Grandpa will come?”

“Who else, dummy.”

“And maybe also Nina and Vera?”

“If they have any decency.”

“And who else?”

“Don’t be troublesome. Maybe the red-haired Jew.”

The red-haired Jew was a frightening figure from Grandmother’s bedtime stories. I didn’t think it was fair of her to include him now. The nice atmosphere evaporated. I rolled onto my side.

“You know what?” said Grandmother. “You need to learn piano.”

“Why?” I sat back up and the carefully tucked covers fell from around me.

Grandmother had always dissuaded me from learning anything up to now because it would be too taxing for me. That’s why I’d kept it from her that I could now read passably and do a bit of math, because I’d kept cautiously asking Grandfather about various letters and numbers. For two years now I’d been able to tell when Grandmother got fleeced at the market. When she accused merchants of cheating her, it was without fail the wrong ones.

Grandmother yawned loudly. “You could give recitals. Earn money, buy Grandmother a house. Nice white one, garden in front, like the Germans. My brother learned how to play the piano. His teacher used to smack his knuckles with a ruler and cried a lot.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did *she* cry?”

“It’s obvious. Because he couldn’t play, dummy. She told our parents they should rather have him learn boxing.”

I said nothing.

“They didn’t let me try an instrument at all at first,” mumbled Grandmother drowsily. “Because apparently I broke everything. What nonsense. But I always listened at the door and learned more that way than my brother, rest his soul. You know what, actually you don’t need piano lessons. What good would it do? Who would you play for? And when? You don’t have too much time left anyway.”

“But the German doctor didn’t find anything serious.”

“I’ll tell you something Maxi: that is the worst sign.”

AMONG GERMANS

On my first day of school, Grandmother got up at six. She went about what she referred to as “prettying oneself up,” which she normally did only for the weekly visit to the synagogue: she plucked her eyebrows and put on blue-green eyeshadow. She woke me up and called me down to breakfast in a hoarse voice.

“Why so early?” I whined, the covers wrapped around me.

“So you have time to digest in peace,” she said. “You can’t go to the bathroom at school, the toilets are full of germs.”

“But I don’t need to right now.”

“Of course you do. It’s just a question of discipline.”

I spooned up what was on this day particularly gooey oatmeal. It felt as if it would stick to my intestines. I used the moment when Grandmother left the kitchen to empty the contents of the bowl into the sink and wash it down the drain with plenty of water.

I sat back down just in time, as Grandmother came back and cast a glance at the sink. “Did you throw up?”

I nodded. I faintly hoped she’d let me stay home, but she just patted me on the head. “It’s the anxiety. School is hell.”

Grandmother threw a couple pens and notebooks in her large cloth bag, combed my hair with a side-part, made sure I had a long-sleeve undershirt beneath my sweater, and led me by the hand out of the apartment. We crossed the hallway and beneath a pale, threadbare carpet, the wood floor creaked in sympathy. We stopped in front of Nina’s door.

Nina's daughter, Vera, was in the same class as me even though she was ten months younger. As Grandmother knocked in order to pick her up to walk together to school, I tussled my hair, ready to blame it on a draft.

Nina opened the door in a robe. She looked alarmed.

"Is something wrong? It's only seven."

"Maybe for you. But for me it's nearly noon. I have to speak to the teachers." Grandmother rolled her eyes knowingly, took my hand, and so began my school career.

"You can't be there all the time during class." The young teacher looked the way I sometimes pictured my mother: blonde, slightly wavy hair, blue-green eyes, and a few freckles on the bridge of her nose. Grandmother never spoke about my parents as a matter of principle. "Don't speak of the devil," she yelled if I tried to ask about them.

"He won't get along on his own." My grandmother poked me in the back so hard I nearly stumbled into the teacher. "Translate it for her!"

I passed along her words. The teacher's eyes widened. "That's extremely unusual," she said.

"What does she want, Maxi?"

I told Grandmother in Russian. She grabbed my ear, pulled me upwards, and with the other hand made a sweeping gesture from high to low, indicating my whole personage.

"Look at him. Does he look as if he can be on his own?"

I translated.

“Honestly, yes.” The teacher smiled encouragingly at me. I’d never had so many women smile in my direction in my entire life as had in these early days in Germany. “He even understands the language.”

I translated.

“He doesn’t understand anything. Where is he supposed to have learned? From TV? He’s an idiot, he can’t add two plus two, and he knows half the alphabet at best.”

I translated.

“That’s why children go to school. To learn to read and write.”

I translated, full of wonder at the beautiful woman’s calm.

“Other children will beat him up.”

“Please don’t worry.”

“Never been alone without supervision.”

“We have twenty-four children in the class, and do you see any other parents here?”

“He’s a poor orphan.”

I stopped translating, I couldn’t keep up anyway. I felt bad for the princess-like teacher. I knew what she didn’t yet know: that she didn’t have even the slightest chance against my grandmother. Though she held out longer than I would have expected.

Grandmother pulled out my medical files. She’d invested a small fortune in the translation and notarization of every scrawled note about my health after she’d been unable to find a German doctor who would confirm the diagnoses. Grandmother kept complaining to Grandfather that the local doctors obviously weren’t as well trained as those in the Soviet Union, as they hadn’t even heard of some of the conditions. Grandfather patted her hand.

“Please express your concerns to the school administrators.” The teacher suddenly seemed worn out. She was no longer smiling and wasn’t looking in my direction anymore, either.

Grandmother nodded and left, only to come back again. She smiled triumphantly and took a seat at the back of the room with feigned nonchalance.

The longer Grandmother held out in the back row, the more hardened she became in her belief that the education system was “like in Africa” – her most disparaging description of a broken state of affairs. It irritated her that students were permitted to go to the bathroom anytime and that the teacher allowed us to eat and drink during class without first checking our hands for germs or the lunchboxes for banned foods.

The work we were assigned wasn’t making Grandmother any smarter, either. But this didn’t stop her from hurrying to my place as soon as anything was passed out, putting on her glasses, and explaining particular terms to me, though she was nearly always wrong. Even in everyday life, only with much luck could she effectively use her handful of German words, and in school she had utterly no chance. The small chair disappeared beneath her when she joined group exercises and dictated nonsensical answers to me. In order to keep her busy, I dreamed up little problems for her and I let her color in the pictures on the math worksheets.

She followed me step for step during recess, too, and prevented every attempt I made to mingle with the other children. While I stood at the edge of the schoolyard and watched my fellow students at frenzied

play, she bent toward me and wiped my mouth or forehead with her handkerchief and whispered:

“Don’t ever play with the little Turk, he has crazy eyes, like he’s about to bite. And do you see that girl? Her posture is nearly as bad as yours, she’ll be wearing a corset for scoliosis in a few years, mark my words. Hey, watch out with that ball, you Aryan freak, or else I’ll have a kick-around with your head! You see how lively normal children are? Why are you standing around next to your granny like a sack of flour?”

But little by little the homework got too complex for her and standing around the schoolyard too boring. Grandmother began to bring her knitting for her hours in the back row. One morning she snapped at me that she wasn’t a watchdog and couldn’t guard me around the clock. If Germany insisted I was of school age, then Germany would have to make sure I stayed alive at school. She pressed into my hand a list of foods that would surely kill me, made me promise to tape the list to the classroom door, and said her goodbye at the front gate of the school.

“And don’t speak to the red-headed Jew!” she called after me as I ran across the schoolyard, barely able to believe my luck.

“What?” I stopped abruptly and went back to her. I had long since come to regard the red-headed Jew as a character out of fairytales, like Baba Yaga or the seven dwarves. “Is he real?”

“What do you think? That’s why you should never tell strangers your name. Got it?”

“Even at school?”

“Why not at school?” Grandmother exploded. “They’re already watching you. Just imagine that you’re out in the schoolyard and a

stranger comes to the fence and calls you. You should definitely not answer, understood?”

“Does he really have red hair?” I asked, bewildered.

“How should I know?” Grandmother waved me aside and turned to go. As she did, she bumped into Vera, who was trying to maneuver past her with her jacket open and a bubblegum bubble in front of her mouth.

“Child!” Grandmother changed her tone immediately. “Always on time. Will you keep an eye out for Maxi when I’m not around? I’ll pay you a mark per week.”

Vera cast a mocking look at me and sucked the bubble back into her mouth. For a moment I was worried the gum would get stuck in her windpipe. “Two marks.”

Grandmother leans her head pensively. “She’s smart, too.”

Grandmother never tired of warning me about my classmates. She impressed upon me that I was not only physically weak and mentally deficient but also that I had a cursed appearance that made people want to beat me up.

On my first class photo she marked the children who seemed suspicious to her during the weeks she spent sitting in my classroom. She analyzed their facial expressions, sorted them by last name and origins, and made a ranking of the most dangerous classmates.

“The Turks are wild,” she said to me at the kitchen table, though she didn’t distinguish between Syrians, Afghanis and actual Turks. “If they see you and your idiotic grin, it’s lights out. And you can’t appeal to

their parents, they're real clans, complaining doesn't do any good. Have you heard how the Golden Horde captured Kiev in the old days? But of course you don't have history lessons, you just draw things with crayons. Just don't tell anyone that you have anything to do with Jews. They'll scalp you straight away."

I shuddered. I had slowly come to doubt the truth of some of her assertions, but when it came to sewing fear, Grandmother was still very convincing.

"Chinese," she said, circling with her pen the face of a classmate whose mother was Vietnamese. "Stick close to her, but don't trust her. She doesn't want you to be better than her, and she'll lie to you."

"I don't even talk to her."

"That's a mistake. You should talk to her, learn her tricks. But then again who wants to talk to you. Stay close to the girls, they probably won't knock you around as badly, but don't play with them or else the Turks will take you for gay. Understand?"

Yes," I croaked.

"Do you feel coldy? Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue out and say *Ah*. Sure enough, throat's red, full of streptococcus. There's something on your tongue, could be fungal, that'll eat you from inside. You listen to your granny."

Her prophecies didn't come to pass. Nobody tried to beat me up. Ever since the time of Grandmother's accompaniment at school, I'd been considered untouchable, and my classmates' gazes went right through me as if I were invisible to them as well. They tripped over my feet once in a while and then ran off without even turning around. Nobody wanted to know what percent Jewish I was. There was only one child who overtly

hated me and who also always had to sit next to me because the teacher, despite our protests, thought we were best suited to work on group projects together “as a result of our similar backgrounds.”

Whenever Grandmother found bruises or scrapes on me during her regular checks, I made up a different Arab name to confirm her suspicions about a violent gang being hot on my heels. I would never in my life admit that the injuries were inflicted by a girl being paid to watch out for me: Nina’s daughter, Vera.

SINGLE WOMAN WITH DEPENDENT

Grandfather stood at the window, motionless. It had gotten dark and I could only make out his silhouette. Every once in a while I wondered whether he was even still breathing. At some point Grandmother noticed, too. She put down her glossy magazine and went over to him inquisitively.

I knew what there was to see. Nina came home around this time. She usually crossed the courtyard with a bag of groceries followed by Vera, who dragged her schoolbag behind her. They both disappeared into a rear entryway, and a few moments later the light went on in the second floor window across the way before the curtain was drawn and then only shadows were visible behind it. When Nina was late, Grandfather waited until she finally arrived. Sometimes she reemerged shortly afterwards with a bag of garbage: an unexpected gift that conjured up a faint smile on Grandfather’s face.

It was strange to me that my grandparents were now standing there together. Suddenly Grandmother became animated, waving and knocking on the glass.

“Look! It’s Nina! Where’d she get that jacket?”

Grandfather took a step back and looked away.

“She’s moving out the week after next,” said Grandmother, still pressed to the window.

Grandfather’s back slumped. I spoke for him: “Really? Why?”

“Everyone leaves. Normal people have proper apartments thrown their way. She was in a particular hurry to get out of here, I heard. Found a place with two rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. I think it’s because she plays piano. We’re the only ones who have to waste away in this dump because your grandpa would prefer to look out the window than do something for the family.”

“She won’t be there anymore,” I said.

Grandmother poked Grandfather in the back. “Won’t you even lift a finger? Single woman with dependent, helpless in the world. We’re upstanding people, you have to help her.”

Grandfather said nothing.

“Without a man, lucky her,” said Grandmother pensively, and not for the first time concerning Nina’s situation. “But somebody has to hammer the nails into the wall. She has those delicate musician’s fingers, can’t do anything else in life. That’s what happens. Tschingis, help the poor woman move.”

Grandfather nodded without making eye contact with her. I heard an accelerating hammering and slowly realized that it was his heart,

which in some mysterious way seemed connected to my own so making his excitement pump through my body as well.

Grandmother shook her head. “Gather up the junk you brought from home. Screwdrivers and whatever else. So slow on the uptake, this man. Have to spell everything out.”

Only later did it become clear to me that Grandmother hadn't come up with this initiative out of pure charitability alone. She'd been trying for quite some time to deepen her relationship with Nina. “A respectable woman,” she told me. “Pleasure to know her. You don't have to worry about suddenly having a knife in your back with her. A rare thing these days. Ninety-eight percent of immigrants are untrustworthy.” She'd already knocked at Nina's door a few times in vain, as Nina was either not there or hadn't opened the door.

While other children in the home were scared of my grandmother, Nina's daughter Vera regularly sat at our kitchen table. Grandmother had sweets and presents at the ready in order to lure Vera to our place after school, almost like the child molesters she warned me about in her goodnight stories. As far as I was concerned, the fact that she paid Vera to look out for me at school was enough, especially since Vera wasn't exactly dutiful about that. As soon as she had dragged me across the schoolyard and shoved me into my seat she didn't look out for me at all – aside from the occasional kick under the table. Though she had no difficulty giving detailed reports about my school days if Grandmother asked.

“He didn't do much. Actually he didn't even move.”

“That's how he is, dear Vera. He's got no strength. Did anyone mistreat him?”

“No. They all know I’m looking out for him.” Vera didn’t even blush saying that.

“But even you can’t always have your eyes on him.” Grandmother sighed.

While Vera unwrapped a new doll, Grandmother laid our homework notebooks side by side. She compared the work, complaining the whole time about my scrawled handwriting. “Look how neatly a girl writes. If I could I’d make you into a girl, Maxi, but it’s too late for that, unfortunately. Don’t listen to old Margo, Vera, she just admires your handwriting. Every single letter is perfect, no wonder you get good grades. You’ll finish school with honors, go to college, have a career, and marry rich. And you, shrunken-head? Nothing to say? Vera, dear, when’s your mother coming home? I need to talk to her.”

At some point Grandmother finally managed to catch Nina in the courtyard. She asked her straightaway about my musical education. Nina took a step back, Grandmother took one step forward. She held Nina’s sleeve, just to be safe.

“It’s well-known that it’s never too early to expose children to the wonders of music, dearest Nina.”

“But you say yourself that the boy is already overwhelmed with the material in first grade.”

“The teacher teaches pure nonsense, the child is dumber than when he started school. Music could be helpful for Maxi’s development.”

“To be honest, I don’t trust myself to teach such a special student.”

“There’s nothing special about him, he’s just falling apart.”

“Exactly, I’m just not attuned to that.” Nina made every effort not to look at me.

“Think it over, Nina. I ask no more than that. I know that even Jews have a heart, and you are such a delightful person. My husband will help you with your move. We have no ulterior motives behind that. Let your conscience decide.”

I hadn’t really believed that Nina would soon be moving out. I was used to things being promised without ever being fulfilled. In Russia, Grandmother had always talked about how we needed a larger apartment, but we’d never moved. I was still waiting for a promised trip to the seaside, as well as the annually promised Christmas tree. The promise to move to Germany was the only one that had ever come to fruition – and that one, out of all of them, Grandmother had kept a secret because she feared we’d be stopped at the border. So even as we packed we never mentioned the name of the country where we were emigrating lest the nosy neighbors who were no doubt listening through the walls would cause problems.

Nina taught me that some promises come to pass more quickly than I could grasp their momentousness. The move that came so suddenly to me kept not only her but also Grandfather busy. He helped her pack her things into the two suitcases they’d come to Germany with and whatever was left into a few moving boxes. He carried everything down to the little panel van that he’d personally arranged to get. Afterwards he spent what felt like weeks at Nina’s new apartment. There were walls to paint, used furniture to assemble, a stove and washing machine to set up, grouting in

the bathroom that needed to be redone. Grandfather came home late on those days and usually went straight to bed. Sometimes he'd get up in the middle of the night and slip out. When I went to the window I'd see him in smoking next to the trash bins in the courtyard.

“Look at that, the old man's become a tradesman,” said Grandmother when Grandfather, just home from Nina's, disappeared into the shower. “That woman has him slaving away. And here at home nothing gets done anymore. Must I mop the floor myself so you don't suffocate from dust?”

I nodded, because that seemed the safest option.

“Now you nod, too? Are you on his side? Have you two made a pact against me? Do you want to slip something into my food?” She brooded for a moment and suddenly changed her tone. “Wouldn't it be nice to learn to play music, Maxi? Sit there so sharply at the piano in a tuxedo? Show me your fingers. Might as well get rid of them, you won't go far with those short sausage fingers. But at least you can't hurt yourself doing it.”

It was my grandfather who took me to my first piano lesson at Nina's new apartment. It seemed only fair to me – without him, Nina would probably never have agreed to teach me. I was worried that Grandmother would react jealously to this new arrangement and insist on sitting behind me during the piano lesson like during the first weeks of school. But she brushed it aside: “I have enough to do. Grandpa can also take care of you – don't lose the child along the way, you hangman.”

Grandfather took my hand. His hands were raw and dry like paper. His grip was strong and gentle at the same time, and I enjoyed not having anyone pull me along or complain that I was going too slowly or too fast or had sweaty palms, which could be evidence of a fever or lung nodules or even my impending demise.

From the first step outside our building I felt like I was on a world tour. Up to then my life in Germany had rarely extended beyond a circle enclosing the home, my school, and the pediatrician's office. Greater distances made Grandmother nervous. Her discomfort transferred onto me, so that I was always relieved to have survived any longer trip, like to a Russian-speaking dentist, for instance, without any long-term damage.

The silence emanating from my grandfather gave me the chance to observe the surroundings and discover amazing things: the fluttering leaves at the top of the trees changed colors with the direction of the wind, switching between light green and silver; ants ran busily along cracks in the asphalt; and nobody, and I mean nobody, paid any attention to me.

I hopped onto the streetcar with Grandfather and my brief happiness was replaced with sudden panic.

"Here!" I said and pulled him to the front seat, directly behind the driver. According to Grandmother it was the safest seat in a streetcar. She'd taught me since I was little to always sit behind the driver in buses and cars, as well. "If something happens, he'll instinctively steer in a way that keeps him from harm. And you're directly behind him – even better positioned!"

If the seat was taken, she shooed the unlucky occupant away: "Make room for a little invalid. Some people!" If there weren't two seats

then Grandmother remained standing, since she already had her life behind her. She shielded me from other passengers with her body and shot angry glances around.

Grandfather apparently wasn't aware of this seating system, but gave in at my insistence. There was only one seat free behind the driver, and to my horror, Grandfather sat down in it. I wasn't prepared for this eventuality, and I didn't know what to do. Just standing there seemed an impossibility. Grandmother would never have allowed me to remain standing during a ride since I might be flung against people, windows, or doors. But making my way through the carriage to look for another seat, on the other hand, would mean losing contact with my minder, which was no less risky. I clutched the support pole.

Grandfather didn't notice my distress. He patted me on the head lightly. It seemed as if he wanted to say something. But he remained silent. His glance stayed only briefly on me, then shifted out the window. Grandmother would never have let me out of her sight in a situation like this, she always locked her sky-blue eyes on me as if it took the power of her soul to hold onto me, to protect me, and to get me through life.

Slowly I calmed down because nothing happened and I had survived standing through two stops already. I watched my grandfather. Furrows went across his broad forehead like plant rows through a freshly plowed field. His skin was much darker than my grandmother's, darker even than my own. His eyes seemed to have no pupils. When she was in a good mood Grandmother called Grandfather Steppenwolf and Nomad Child, and in her extremely rare moments of happiness she talked about my grandfather's family, who went around with yurts and sheep and put buffalo milk in their tea.

I'd tried many times to picture it, but never managed. My grandfather drank his tea with sugar. Grandmother's stories came across like fairytales.

When I was still little, I'd assumed Grandmother had kidnapped Grandfather so that he'd help her with everyday tasks and run little errands for her: go shopping (even though he brought home the wrong stuff every time), repair a table, stand on a chair to change a lightbulb, or grab canning jars off the top shelf.

Grandmother had a fear of heights. Once she stood up on a low stool and broke out in tears because she was so panic-stricken that she couldn't get back down. Grandfather hurried over to her and held out his hand, led her to a comfy chair and held her hand until she calmed down. At that moment I realized he was with her voluntarily and that unlike me, he could leave anytime.

[END OF SAMPLE]