

"My grandson tells me that I'm not a romantic. I don't disagree with him. For his impression is shaped by what he has observed over the years. He doesn't know me the way I was before the war, when my heart soared for a woman whose name he wouldn't recognize, whose photograph he has never seen.

I married his grandmother in 1947, in a dimly lit apartment within walking distance of the East River. There were snowdrifts piled high outside the fire escapes, and the windows were so foggy they resembled frosted glass.

I don't think I had known Amalia more than three months when I proposed to her. She was from Vienna, another transplant from the war. I met her in the public library. She was hunched over a stack of books, and I don't know if it was the way she wore her hair or the cotton wrap dress that was inappropriate for the climate, but somehow I knew she was European.

She told me she was a war orphan, having left Austria just before the war. She had not heard from her parents or sister in months.

"I know they're dead," she told me flatly. "I immediately recognized that tone of voice: dead to emotions, a mechanical reflex that functioned solely to communicate. She ticked off only the necessary points of conversation like a finger to an abacus, with nothing more.

She was wan, with pale skin, honey-colored hair, and wide brown eyes. I could see her clavicle rising like an archer's bow from beneath her skin, and a tiny, circular locket resting between her small breasts.

I imagined that within that gold locket there was a photo of a lost love. Another tall, dark boy lost to the war.

But later, after several weeks of meeting at a small café near my classes, I learned there had been no boyfriend left to die in Austria.

Although she was forced to wear the yellow star in the weeks following the Anschluss, her family was initially able to keep their apartment on Uchatius Strasse. One afternoon, as she walked home from school along the Ringstrasse, her eyes lingered on the cobblestones. She said she had gotten used to walking with her head down, because she wanted to avoid eye contact with anyone. She no longer knew whom she could trust, who was a friend, "or who might report her if she looked at them the wrong way. She had heard too many stories of a neighbor who was falsely accused of stealing, or one who was arrested for breaking a newly issued law affecting the Jews. On this particular day, her eyes caught sight of an envelope fluttering from underneath a bicycle tire. She claimed she didn't know what made her reach out to grab it, but when she took hold of the envelope she saw the return address was from America: " "Mr. J. Abrams on East Sixty-fifth Street in New York City.

She immediately recognized that it was a Jewish name. She told me that knowing there was a Jew somewhere across the ocean, in the safety of America, gave her a strange sense of comfort. That evening, she wrote to him in German, not even telling her parents or her sister. She told him how she found his name, that she needed to take a chance, to tell someone—anyone—outside of Europe what was happening in Austria. She told him of the yellow stars that her mother had been forced to sew on their coats. She told him of the curfew, and the loss of her father's business. She told him how the streets were now lined with signs that said JEWS FORBIDDEN, how windows were smashed with hate, and how the beards of those who maintained the Talmudic code were shorn by young Nazis searching for fun. Lastly, for no other apparent reason other than that the day was approaching, she told him her birthday was May 20."

"She had not really expected Mr. Abrams to write back. But then, weeks later, she did receive a reply. He wrote that he would sponsor her and her sister to come to New York. He gave her directions on whom she should speak to in Vienna, who would give her money, and who would secure their visas and transportation out of this wretched country that had forsaken them. He told her she was a lucky girl: they shared the same birthday and he would help her.

He told her there wasn't enough time for a lengthy correspondence. She should do what he instructed her immediately, and not diverge from the plan. There could be no discussion, he could not arrange for her parents' transport. When she told her parents of the letter she had written and Mr. Abrams's reply, they were not angry as she had feared, but proud that she had shown such initiative and foresight.

"What could two old people do in a new country anyway," her father said to his daughters as the three of them sipped their favorite drink—hot chocolate. It was his nature always to make light of things when the family was pressed into a difficult situation. "When this Nazi horror is all over, you will call for us, and your mother and I will come."

"She and her sister then traveled by train to Danzig, where the steamer was to depart from. But when they boarded the ship an SS officer looked at their passports with the word Jude stamped on it and blocked their path.

"You can get on." He pointed to Amalia. He then pointed to her younger sister, Zora. "You will stay."

Amalia cried to the soldier that she would not leave her sister. It was not fair; they both had their papers, their tickets, and passports all in order.

"I decide who boards this ship. Now you can get on alone, or you can both get off together." Amalia turned to disembark with her sister. She would never leave her. To abandon your own sibling simply to save yourself was an act of treason she was not willing to commit.

“Go . . . Go . . .” her sister insisted, but she refused. And then her sister did the unthinkable . . . she ran off alone. She ran down the plank and into the crowd. Her black coat and hat blended in with what seemed like a thousand others. It was like finding a single raindrop in a downpour.

Amalia stood there screaming her sister’s name, searching for her frantically. But it was of no use. Her sister had vanished.

The steamship’s horn had signaled its impending departure, and Amalia found herself on the gangplank alone. She didn’t look at the officer as he examined her papers for the second time. She was sure by his lack of interest in her that he didn’t even remember that she had been the victim of his willful and incomprehensible cruelty less than an hour before. She walked into the belly of the ship, carrying her battered black suitcase. She looked back one more time—hoping against hope that Zora had somehow sneaked on board—and then stood by the railing as the anchor was lifted and the boat pulled away. Zora was nowhere to be seen in the faces waving at the dock. She had vanished into the fog.

I tell you Amalia’s story because she is now dead. Dead fifteen years next October. Mr. Abrams gave her money when she arrived in New York. She met him in his office on Fifth Avenue, an office paneled with dark red wood and with a swivel chair that he turned to face the park.

She told me that when he turned to her, Mr. Abrams asked her where her sister was. He shook his head when she told him how Zora had not been allowed to board. “You were very brave to come alone,” he commended her. But she had not felt brave. She instead felt the weight of her betrayal, as if she had left her only sister for dead. He took some money from a drawer and handed it to her along with a piece of paper with the name of a Rabbi Stephen Wise. He promised he would help get her a job and a place to stay.

The rabbi got her on her feet, setting her up with a seamstress on the Lower East Side, where she worked for twenty-five cents an hour sewing flowers to the brims of black felt hats. She saved what little money she could after paying her landlady for the room she shared with two other girls from Austria, in a vain hope of bringing her parents and sisters over one day. In the beginning, there were letters from them, ones that arrived with thick black lines applied by a censor. But eventually, after the war had begun in Europe, her letters began to be returned to her unopened. She heard her roommates repeat vague rumors of concentration camps and transports, hideous things she couldn’t possibly believe to be true. Gas and ovens, one girl even told her. But that girl, a Pole, was prone to drama. There could be little truth in her stories. Amalia told herself that girl was mad.

She grew even thinner than she was before. So thin you could see right through her skin. Her hands began to bleed from working with a needle and thread so many hours, and her eyesight grew poor. She almost never went out, except to the library,

where she practiced reading English, still saving every penny she made to fund her family's future passage. That first day I met her there, I asked if I could take her to Café Vienna, a hole in the wall on the corner of West Seventy-sixth and Columbus Avenue. Every night it was filled with a hundred fragmented Jews; each of us had someone we were searching for. People showed photos and wrote names of the missing on matchbook covers. We were all adrift, the living lost, trying to make connections in case someone had heard of someone else who had arrived—who had survived—or who knew something. And when we weren't shaking a hand of someone who knew a friend of a friend of a friend, we drank whiskey or scotch. Except my Amalia. She only ordered hot chocolate.

So I eventually learned whose faces were in the locket, you see. Even though I never saw them until our wedding night, when she took off the necklace and laid it on our nightstand. I came back from the bathroom while my new wife lay sleeping, opened up the tiny gold circle, and silently peered inside.

What do you do with black-and-white faces that do not speak but continue to haunt you? What do you do with letters that are returned to you from across the ocean? The dead do not answer their mail, but our wife still sends them letters all the same. So I think of what my grandson says about me, that I have no sense of romance.

Did Amalia and I ever really speak of those we left behind? No. Because if we did, our voices would crack and the walls would crush us with the memory of our grief. We wore that grief like one wears one's underclothes. An invisible skin, unseen to prying eyes, but knitted to us all the same. We wore it every day. We wore it when we kissed, when our bodies locked, and our limbs entwined.

Did we ever make love with a sense of vitality, or unbridled passion and lust? It seemed to me that we were both two lost souls holding on to each other, fumbling for some sense of weight and flesh in our hands—reassuring ourselves that we were not simply two ghosts evaporating into the cool blankness of our sheets. We each could barely stand to think of our lives and families before the war, because it hurt like a wound that would never heal. It stank with rot and clung to you like soaking-wet wool.

Amalia and I were at battle with our memories. That is what I remember mostly of our marriage. We feared we might drown in all those lost voices and other lost treasures from our homelands. I became a doctor, and she the mother of our two children. But every night in the thirty-eight years that I held her, it was as if she wasn't really there.

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