The 2018 Winners of the Short Story Contest

Grand Prize Winners:
Shiksa by Catherine Lechicki &
Little Aunt Lina by Maya Mahony

Second Prize:
What Was Lost: My Grandmother’s Last Days in Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia by Jen Ehrlich

Selection Committee:
Maya Arad
Sara Houghteling
Dan Schifrin

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The Taube Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford University would like to present the stories of the winners for the 2018 Short Story Contest:

**Grand Prize Winners:**
*Shiksa* by Catherine Lechicki
Page 1

*Little Aunt Lina* by Maya Mahony
Page 7

**2nd Place Winner:**
*What Was Lost: My Grandmother’s Last Days in Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia* by Jen Ehrlich
Page 17

Special thanks go to the selection committee:

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Sara Houghteling
Dan Schifrin

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“That’s racist.”
His words surprised her, just as her words had surprised him.

They were sitting at a rickety table outside Mashti Malone’s in Hollywood eating ice cream. It was noon on a Friday. The cracked asphalt parking lot, the rundown businesses upstairs, the billboards advertising fast cash and free HIV tests, the bums begging for change at the bus stop, the yellowing palm trees lining La Brea Avenue — all of it was sunnier because she was in love.

Zack and Ania had been dating for six months. He was tall and fat. He had dark hair that was perpetually a little greasy, a wiry beard and laughing brown eyes. He was a good kisser and he was boring in bed. When she got moody and tried to pick fights with him, he would sigh and say, “I’m going to go,” and get up and leave her apartment. His calmness infuriated her. But he never passed out from drinking too much Jim Beam, and he didn’t snort coke in her bathroom. He never accidentally fucked a waitress. He wasn’t trying to get cast as an extra on a sitcom and he didn’t have a talent agent. His job was more than a thing on the side to pay the rent. He had his own place and he had a car. He called his mom every week and he carried a photo of his little sister in his wallet. And he was nice to Ania.

So Ania had said yes when he asked her on a date and she had agreed when he asked for them to be exclusive and now she introduced him to people as her boyfriend, even though the word felt salty in her mouth. They had quickly fallen into an uneventful and comfortable rhythm. Most nights they walked to Ralphs grocery to pick up two salmon fillets and a family size box of blueberries. Salmon was the only thing either of them knew how to make well, and they’d prepare it in his dirty kitchen and then eat the blueberries in bed. Eventually he’d prod her with his erection and she’d say not tonight, but usually they’d end up fucking anyway. Afterwards she would pick a book off the little shelf he’d built for her next to his bed and read while he played video games on his computer and ate chips. Sometimes she’d step out to have a cigarette on his stoop. When she came back in he’d look at her disappointedly and tell her she reeked and ask her how many she’d smoked that week. Two, she’d lie. I’m proud of you for cutting down, he’d say.
One night he showed her his high school yearbook. She was in his bed with a bottle of wine and it was raining outside. She studied the photos of him on the basketball team’s page, the photos of him delivering the valedictorian speech, and the photos of him on his class trip to Europe. His body, except for his head, was less hairy then. She teased him about the thick chain he used to wear around his neck, which made him look like a punky white kid who’d inevitably get knocked out first in a fight. “Big dick playa!” He hooted from behind his desk. Then he pulled the old chain from one of his desk drawers and walked around to the bed. He dangled it in front of her face. The pendant on the chain was a clunky silver Star of David. “I didn’t know you were Jewish,” she said. “Oh yeah,” he shrugged as he took a swig from the wine bottle and peered over her at the signatures in the back of his yearbook. “I’m glad you and Mark are going to Harvard together so you can keep tormenting him,” read one of the notes. “You’ve met Mark,” Zack said to her. “And that girl who wrote the note... Everybody had a crush on her.”

Zack and Ania didn’t talk about religion often. The Jewish thing didn’t come up again until that sunny Friday, at Mashti Malone’s. She said something in passing about the painting — the painting of the Jew counting money — hanging in her parents’ foyer. It was normal. People in her hometown, back in Poland, built shrines to the Virgin Mary on the outside of their homes for protection, and they hung portraits of Jews counting money inside for luck.

“That’s racist.”

Zack’s words cut her. She wasn’t racist. Her family wasn’t racist. “Why?” she asked him. He launched into a diatribe about how his parents fled the Soviet Union and came to America as refugees; about how his uncles weren’t admitted to university because they were Jewish; about how, back then in Russia, store vendors refused to sell his mom peanuts because they could tell she was a Jew. Then he talked about the stereotypes. How everyone thought Jews were rich and that they controlled the world.

Ania’s great-uncle thought the Jewish lobby secretly dominated the government. But besides him, no one in her family thought it and they rolled their eyes when he brought it up at dinner parties. Anybody could buy pictures of Jews with gold coins at every tourist bazaar in Krakow, and thousands of people did buy them. It was a cultural oddity. Ania’s family wasn’t racist.

She didn’t know how to talk about it, this racism thing. So she gave Zack the only reasonable response that came to her mind. “You don’t understand,” she said. One half of Mashti Malone’s
welcome sign flickered sadly behind Zack’s shoulder and went out.
“We are Jewish.”
“What?”
“We were. We were Jewish,” she backtracked. “We had to, my
great-grandparents had to, convert during the war. So this painting,
we’ve had it for a long time, it reminds us of the religion, our religion,
what it used to be.”

What she said was half true. They’d had that painting for a
long time.

Zack cocked his head to the side thoughtfully. “You never
said anything.”
Ania told him about her family. She talked about her great-
grandparents. She didn’t herself know how they died, so she told
Zack that they were executed by the SS. Her other relatives, she said,
took refuge with Poles during the war. After witnessing the post-war
pogroms, they married into Catholic families. And now, Ania said as
she stared into the melted ice cream in her cup, none of her relatives
talked about it.

“Wow, what the fuck,” Zack said. Ania was surprised by the
sincerity in his voice. He was going to say something else, but she
sneezed, and then his phone rang. “Oh shit,” he said, glancing at the
screen. His lunch break was over. They cleared their cups from the
table and made their way toward Zack’s car. He leaned down and
planted a wet kiss on her cheek as he fumbled in his pocket for the
key. “I’ll call you later,” he said and plopped into the driver’s seat. He
sped past Ania as she made her way to the bus stop. “I got a kiss for
you too, baby,” he hissed one of the thugs at the stop, to the great
amusement of his friends. “Fuck off,” Ania snapped at him. She lit a
cigarette and turned to her phone. “Jews Poland pogroms,” she
clicked into the search bar. She breathed a sigh of relief at the list of
pogroms that appeared on her screen; the dates she told Zack
matched up to the actual dates listed on Wikipedia.

Zack didn’t bring up the Jewish thing again for three months.
He and Ania carried on with their Ralphs runs and she continued to
hide a pack of cigarettes in her purse. Then he invited her for dinner
at his parents’ house. The day of, she brought with her a bouquet of
carnations and an apple cake she made using her grandmother’s
recipe book. The cake was lopsided and fell slightly in the center. It
was the third one Ania had made that day. After the third try, when
she followed her grandmother’s directions down to each drop of
vanilla extract and the cake still turned out like the previous two, she
blamed her stove. So she sat now with the lopsided cake in her lap
and the bouquet of flowers at her feet as Zack’s car wound through
the narrow roads into the Hollywood Hills. He chatted about work and occasionally pointed to celebrity homes hidden behind imposing gates. Ania started counting the Maseratis parked along the curb. “Aren’t people scared their cars’ll get bumped?” she asked. Zack shrugged. “Yeah, the neighborhood’s changed a lot,” he said, referring indirectly to the opulent wealth of the properties nestled into the hillside. “My parents invested early,” he added, almost apologetically.

At the top of the hill Zack took a sharp right and turned into a wide driveway. It was packed with cars. “Come on,” he said, as he switched off the ignition and opened his car door. “And you know what? Maybe leave the cake in here.”

“Why? Does it look that bad?” Ania looked down at the sad layer of powdered sugar atop her creation. She should have used icing.

“No,” Zack said quickly. “It looks great. It’s just a Passover thing. We’ll have some later.” He winked at her, and she gave him a tight smile.

She then followed him, sans cake, up the sidewalk to the front door. The house wasn’t new like many of the others in the neighborhood, but it was a sprawling property with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the city. As they neared the door, a graying man in a wrinkled polo shirt threw it open and shouted, “Issaczyk, you’re late!”

Zack greeted his father and introduced him to Ania. “Finally you bring home a girl,” Zack’s father said gruffly as he shook Ania’s hand. “Come in. Watch the dog.” The three of them crossed through the salon. There were handbags and shoes strewn over the furniture and floor. They walked past the staircase and down a narrow hallway into the dining area, where people started greeting Ania. There was Zack’s brother with his very pregnant wife. Zack’s cousins. Zack’s aunt and uncle. A woman holding a baby who smiled at Ania and waved the baby’s hand at her. Zack’s grandmother. Family friends and their spouses. After shaking some twenty eager hands, Ania reached Zack’s mother. She was standing at the island in the middle of her kitchen, leaning over a steaming piece of meat. Her frizzy hair was pinned into a neat bun at the nape of her neck and she was wearing a flattering black dress. Her legs were thinner than Ania’s. When she noticed Zack she dropped the meat thermometer onto the counter and exclaimed “Issaczyk!” as she pulled him in for a hug. Then she turned to Ania and took the flowers from her hand, saying, equally warmly, “Dear! You shouldn’t have. You must be Ania.” She hugged Ania, too, and then ushered her toward the table. “Please! Sit. Make yourself at home.”
Slowly the guests drifted to the table and glasses of wine went around. Zack’s mother positioned herself at the head and thanked everyone for coming and wished them a happy Passover, and then recited some blessings over her glass. Ania watched as everyone took parsley from a platter at the center of the table and dipped it in a bowl of water. Zack’s brother’s pregnant wife, sitting to Ania’s left, handed Ania a piece of crunchy bread. Someone else passed her a bowl of soup. Everyone erupted in chatter and Ania answered questions about where she was born, what she studied, what languages she spoke. Zack and one of his cousins shouted something at each other from opposite ends of the table. With each round of drinks, more Russian snuck its way into the conversations circulating around Ania. After everyone got second helpings of meat and vegetables, Zack’s mother stood up again and made another round of toasts. Everyone raised their glasses to family and friends, and, in light of the recent wave of swastikas that appeared on park benches and public bathroom stalls after Trump’s election, to the safety of Jews across America. Then Zack’s mother made another toast, this one to Ania. “We are so happy to have a new guest join us for Passover this year,” Zack’s mother said and everyone clinked their glasses. “Yeah, we were starting to think Big Zack was gay,” one of Zack’s cousins said as he clapped Zack’s back. Everyone fell back into their own conversations. Zack stroked Ania’s arm. They continued eating and eventually some of the guests began thanking Zack’s parents and excusing themselves from the table. When there were some seven people left in the house, Zack’s mother brought a teapot from the kitchen and began offering everyone tea. Zack’s father lazily picked at his teeth with a toothpick.

“Ania, does your family celebrate Passover?” Zack’s mother asked as she filled Ania’s cup. Ania’s eyes widened momentarily, and, having picked up on the moment of hesitation, Zack’s mother added, “Isaak told me your family is Jewish.”

“Oh yes,” Ania said. “Yeah. No, we don’t. We don’t really observe the, ah, Jewish holidays.”

“They’ve got this painting, Ma. Tell her about the painting,” Zack offered, turning to Ania.

Everyone’s side conversations had died down, and Ania was suddenly aware of the quiet in the room. Zack was comfortably sprawled across an armchair in the corner. Others were spread out around the half-empty table. Zack looked at Ania expectantly.

“Yeah, we have this painting back home. Uh, it’s like a tradition that people have these paintings of Jews.”
“He’s counting money!” Zack exclaimed to his family, clearly fascinated. “Why do people have stuff like that?” He turned back to Ania.

“I don’t know, really,” Ania said carefully, offering everyone watching her a polite smile.

“Mmh,” Zack’s mother said, not unkindly. She had sat down next to Zack’s father, and she was playing mindlessly with the delicate Star of David that hung around her neck.

“Where were they in the war?” Zack’s father said. His accent was thick.

“In Poland.” Ania nodded as she spoke. She wanted to look engaged.

“They all stayed?”

“Yeah, they’re all in Poland.”

“That’s difficult,” Zack’s mother said sympathetically. “More tea?”

Ania tried to think of something vague and intelligent to say but she was interrupted by Zack’s father. “That painting is from Russia,” he said, motioning towards a painting of a sad Jew playing a violin on the back wall of the dining room. Then he started saying something about the war. Zack had told Ania that his father was interested in history. Ania leaned back into her chair and tried to be attentive, all the while wondering to herself whether Zack’s family thought she was stupid. They didn’t pry any more into the Jewish thing and after another round of tea, Zack and Ania said their goodbyes and took off in Zack’s car. They went back to Zack’s place and had sex. Afterwards they drank more wine and ate Ania’s cake. It had deflated some more while it waited for them in the car, but the apple filling was good. “My family loved you,” Zack told Ania before they fell asleep.

A week later Ania broke up with Zack. They were driving past Mashti Malone’s and it was another sunny Friday. “Do you want ice cream?” Zack asked. “No, I want to break up,” Ania answered. He pulled into the parking lot and parked the car.

They didn’t talk about it much. There wasn’t much to say. Ania stared grimly out at the gray lot and dilapidated buildings while Zack asked her a string of unanswerable questions. Eventually he said, “Okay, I’m gonna go.” He dropped her at the bus stop and while he waited to pull into traffic, he watched in his rearview mirror as she lit a cigarette and wiped her nose on her sleeve.
Grandma Miriam welcomes you into the apartment. You are cold and elated from the walk from the subway station. Grandma Miriam looks more beautiful than ever: that curling white hair, the parallelogram of light that flashes in her left eye like a tiny sliding door. A cataract? A reflection? She hugs you with strong arms.

“The heat’s broken in your dad’s old room, so you’ll stay in George’s room this time.”

“I thought nobody went in there?” you say.

“I’ve just fixed it up.”

You follow her down the short hallway and into the forbidden room. You have peered in before, but have never stepped foot inside. The mezuzah on the door is plain and blue. The carpet is brown and exceedingly normal. There is nothing here but a bed and a desk. Out the window snowflakes pulse and sway. Gone are the posters from the wall, the shirts in the closet. Grandma Miriam has covered the walls in wallpaper with tiny purple grapes, and the closet is full of blankets and sheets and tax-files. It’s all ready for your visit.

“I inherited this apartment from my Little Aunt Lina,” says Grandma Miriam. “My cousin Rachel didn’t want it. Too many memories. This room belonged to my cousin George. I just left it the way Aunt Lina had left it.”

“Dad told me it gave him the heebie-jeebies growing up,” you say, perhaps unwisely.

Grandma Miriam grimaces. “I know.”

She beckons you over to a photograph on the wall. It’s a small photograph, black and white, that has dimmed to brown over the years.

“My favorite cousin,” she says. “He was forever picking me up and swinging me in circles.”

In the photo, George is a wonderfully handsome young man, in his air-force uniform, posing with his sister and her new baby before he leaves for World War II. You’ve learned about the war in school but you don’t know how it felt. You have friends who are Japanese and German. You’ve learned about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Looking back is so different than looking around. You don’t know the fear then, the clarity. You don’t know the depth of hate. Look at this photograph. Look at her cousin. Can you imagine the depth of love? Yes, of course you can. Time passes; hate changes; love stays the same. He has dark hair and a laughing face. Everything about him is vivid.
“Sit down on the bed,” says Grandma Miriam. “You’re old enough to hear this story.”

Lina was a short, stout woman, who, unlike her older sisters and brothers, could not remember the ship-ride over from Lithuania. Her whole world was Brooklyn, with occasional forays into Manhattan or the Bronx. Maybe Queens, once or twice. She told all of the nieces and nephews to call her “Little Aunt Lina.” Miriam was Lina’s favorite niece, or perhaps it was that Lina was Miriam’s favorite aunt; either way, Miriam was there the day Lina said goodbye to George at the docks.

There was Lina’s baby, so grown up, so beautiful in his white uniform, hugging Lina goodbye. All around them were bright ships’ masts and shouts and the slapping, sparkling water. George’s uniform reminded Lina absurdly of a pair of pajamas he had worn when he was about seven years old. The pajamas, like the uniform, had been white and simple and had made George’s dark hair look dramatic. He had run into her room with a nightmare, his hair sticking up at odd angles. It had been shortly after Lina’s husband, George’s father, had died. She had picked him up and swung him onto her hip, even though he was getting a bit heavy for that. She had liked the weight of him against her hipbone, his chest rising and falling with his trying-not-to-cry, his breath warm against her neck. She had carried him over to the window, which looked out on bricks and fire-escapes, and she had pointed out the snowflakes dancing.

“Look how the wind picks them up! Isn’t it beautiful? In the morning, the sidewalks will be very white and we will get bundled up in our coats and our mittens and our scarves and we will go out and play in the snow…” And on she had spoken, softly, soothingly, with her baby growing heavier and heavier on her hip, until his breathing had calmed.

But what words were there now? This was not a nightmare from which she could pull him with words of snow and mittens. He was more than a foot taller than her now, and had to bend over to kiss her forehead.

“But...”

“Don’t worry, Mama, I’ll be back before you know it,” he told her.

He wasn’t afraid. All his friends were going off to the war, too. It was a grand adventure, and he would kill some Nazis, or maybe some Japs, and then he’d come home and get on with his life and marry beautiful Cecilia with her flashing eyes and her strange habit of nibbling her thumbnail when she read the newspaper. He’d sit up late with his friends when they were all old men, and they’d tell
war stories and the grandchildren would marvel that they had ever been so young and brave. Well, maybe he was a bit afraid. Maybe he was terrified. But he was strong and young and walking purposefully in the same direction as a lot of other people who were also walking purposefully, all in these dashing white uniforms. The water seemed thicker than normal, steadier, as if had swallowed so much beauty, so much reflection of home, that it could only loll around, love-drunk, rolling over itself in voluptuous contentment. Everything had a rhythm to it, a purpose, a drumbeat.

No more idling along in university, grimly regarding the newspapers. No more smoking on fire escapes with his friends. No more walking down Madison Avenue with Cecilia, her shoulder brushing most delightfully against his arm—no. What he meant to think was no more idling along, not doing anything to help, when across the world cruelty and chaos raged.

In later years, when George was long dead, Miriam would remember the clarity that seemed to emanate from him that day. He was now a part of everything, he was fighting for it all. He was on the side of good and good would triumph.

He picked up his little cousin Miriam and swung her in a circle.

No letters arrived from George for quite some months. Then, on a bright morning in early May, Little Aunt Lina’s doorbell rang. When she opened the door and peered into the hallway, nobody was there. Just a large bouquet of flowers, with a note. She recognized the handwriting at once.

“Dear Mama, Happy Mother’s Day! All is well. Give my love to everyone. I remain, always, your George.” There was no return address, no way that she could write back. But it was his handwriting, slanting in that peculiar way that showed he was left-handed, and with none of the i’s dotted.

Little Aunt Lina sat down at the kitchen table and wept. Then she called her brothers and her sisters and her nieces and her nephews and her daughter, Rachel.

Rachel came over with her baby, who was now a toddling, grumpy little person fond of pulling hair. He would, many years later, become the shame of the family by committing a white-collar crime and getting jailed.

“Look,” said Lina. “George sent flowers for Mother’s Day.”

Rachel had not sent flowers for Mother’s Day, or even a card, and felt quite inadequate. But she was so tied up with the diapers and the formula feedings and her flat-footed, hot-tempered husband that
she thought *she* should be getting pampered for Mother’s Day. She shouldn’t have to schlep over to her mother’s apartment and watch her weep over George, who had always been a favorite.

Then, for many months, there were no letters. The army wouldn’t tell Lina where to write him. Only that he was flying somewhere over the Pacific.

Miriam was eleven years old and wore her hair in two long braids. Tommy Rosenberg, who sat in the desk behind her in Hebrew school, liked to dip the ends of her braids into his inkwell. When Miriam wore her favorite dress with the blue sash, tied in a big beautiful bow, Tommy surreptitiously untied the sash and retied it around the chair back. When she stood up, the whole chair came with her.

Miriam often took the subway to Aunt Lina’s apartment after school. There was no George to pick her up and swing her in a circle. Even Rachel had moved out and had a grumpy baby. Poor Little Aunt Lina. Miriam never dreamed that one day she would be a widow herself, with her children moved out, living in this very apartment.

Aunt Lina wasn’t like Miriam’s other aunts and uncles. She listened to Miriam’s grievances about Tommy Rosenberg, and didn’t laugh at her for daydreaming and letting herself get into these scrapes. Instead she patted Miriam’s hand and said, “I’m so sorry, Miriam, that must have been mortifying.” Little Aunt Lina seemed to remember how it was to be a child. Like there was some part of her that had never grown up.

Those days, Aunt Lina mostly talked about George.

“I wish he were fighting the Nazis,” said Little Aunt Lina. “They’re the ones slaughtering our people. These Japanese won’t amount to anything.”

“I went to the movies last Sunday,” Miriam said. “They had a feature about the Japanese before the main show and they sure looked scary.” And then she frowned; perhaps this had been the wrong thing to say. It was very confusing to have to protect the grown-ups. This war was turning everything upside down.

Little Aunt Lina’s birthday was a sluggishly hot day in mid-August. Miriam was away at summer camp, walking hand in hand around the lake with Tommy Rosenberg, who had asked if he could be her boyfriend for the summer. Aunt Lina’s doorbell rang. Another bouquet of flowers. Another note in George’s beloved handwriting.

“Dear Mama, Happy Birthday. All is well. I love you dearly. Yours, George.” Again, there was no address. The note was not dated.
“I’ll make tea,” said her daughter Rachel, who never knew what to do when her mother cried. Her mother was supposed to be a soothing, laughing person, not an old woman crying in a kitchen.

When autumn came, George Hellerman was declared missing in action. All of Lina’s sisters and brothers and their husbands and wives and children came and filled up the little apartment like a shiva. They brought kugel and bagels. Miriam sat wide-eyed in the corner. George’s friends did not come because they were still at war. Cecelia came, in a long blue coat, her face blotchy and red from weeping. Lina couldn’t stand to see it. What right did this shiksa have to weep? Cecelia had only loved George for two years. Lina had loved George all his life.

Lina’s brother came over and pressed Lina’s hands. “Missing doesn’t mean....” he said, but Lina turned her face so quickly that he couldn’t say the word “dead.”

Rachel’s grumpy child toddled around the apartment pulling open drawers and banging into things. He appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, holding one of George’s shirts. Lina stood up, very pale and small, her cup smashing to the table with a great thunk and the tea splashing. “Nobody is to go into George’s room,” she said. Miriam still remembers how frightening Lina’s voice became all of a sudden: toneless, controlled. “Nobody is to disturb George’s things. They must be ready for him when he returns.”

When all the relatives left, Lina went into George’s room with the shirt the child had taken out. Everything was just as George had left it. It was late afternoon and the sunlight came in weak and golden through the window. His baseball posters were peeling quietly off the wall. A photograph of Cecelia glinted in a silver frame on the desk. Lina hung the shirt in the closet. The closet was full: he hadn’t brought many civilian clothes with him. She pressed her nose to the fabric. It smelled very faintly of aftershave and smoke. Lina took off her socks and her shoes and crawled into George’s bed, fully dressed. The sheets felt cool and soft against her skin. Missing does not mean dead. Missing does not mean dead. Missing does not mean dead.

Months passed. No word from the army. Lina saw Cecelia walking down Fifth Avenue, holding hands with another man.

On Mother’s Day, Lina’s triumph came. Her vindication. A bouquet and a note from George. There it was, his slanted handwriting. “Dear Mama, Happy Mother’s Day. I’m sorry I cannot be
there to see you in person, but I’m sending you my affection. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be back before you know it. Love always, George.” The note had no address. It was not dated.

Aunt Lina stopped visiting her sisters and brothers. She didn’t want to leave the apartment, in case George showed up, and needed her. What if he had deserted? He had always been a sensitive child; maybe all the gore had been too much for him and he had run away. If he showed up on her doorstep, she was not going to be gone.

“Poor little Lina,” her sisters and brothers whispered to each other.

“Missing,” she told them, very certainly, when they came to visit, “does not mean dead.”

It made Miriam’s heart hurt to think about her cousin George. Sometimes just the rumble of an airplane going by overhead would make her remember.

A year went by. And another. Miriam stopped wearing her hair in two braids, and wore it pinned up. Miriam stopped wearing dresses with sashes and instead wore skirts and blouses, except for in gym class, when we all had to wear mortifying, one-piece, brown overall-like things and play field hockey out in the park for the world to see. When she tried to cheer up Aunt Lina with descriptions of the mortifying gym outfit, Aunt Lina’s eyes gazed at a patch of air above her head. When she had finished recounting, Aunt Lina patted her hand, smiled wanly, and said, “That’s nice, Miriam.”

Every May and every August Aunt Lina received a bouquet of flowers with a note from George. The notes had no address. They were not dated.

One day, on the walk from the subway station to Aunt Lina’s apartment, Miriam decided to stop in a florist’s shop. It was cold outside and the shop looked warm and full of color. The little bell over the door sang as she stepped inside. The air smelled of jasmine. Fanciful yellow flowers curled overhead.

“Can I help you, miss?”

It was the florist, from behind the dark wooden counter. He was a middle-aged man with sticking-out ears and a sparse, friendly beard.

“Oh, no thank you,” said Miriam. “I’m just looking.”

Maybe one day Miriam would have a boyfriend who would buy her flowers like this. Tommy Rosenberg was, as Miriam liked to say, ancient history. The bouquets were magnificent: roses and peonies and little sprigs of babies’ breath. They looked exactly like the bouquets Aunt Lina got twice a year. Could this be where George
ordered them from?

"Actually," said Miriam, "I have a question. Do you happen to deliver flowers for a man named George Hellerman?"

"I deliver a lot of flowers," said the florist. "That your beau?"

"My cousin," said Miriam, blushing. "He’s off at war. He sends flowers twice a year to his mother? Maybe he mails the notes to you and you put them in the bouquet? But maybe not, I don’t know how it works…"

"Notes?" said the florist. He plucked at his beard. "Hmm… Tall man, dark hair?"

Miriam nodded. She could feel her heart beating.

"Yes, I remember. Sweet kid. He left a large stack of notes with me before he went off to war. Enough to last for years, he said. Just in case. He paid me in advance and asked me to deliver them with flowers every Mother’s Day and every birthday until he came home. He hasn’t come by so I’ve just kept sending them. But you’re his cousin, you say? Has he come home now? Should I stop sending them?"

Miriam’s ears were filling with warm air, and all the sounds were getting muted.

"Miss? Miss, are you all right?"

Miriam clutched at the counter. "I’m—I’m all right. I have to go. He’s—he hasn’t come home yet. Thank you."

She made her way out the door. Everything was very bright and cold and full of wind. Trash swirled in little eddies. The flowers weren’t from George. There was no more George. He would never pick up Miriam and swing her in a circle. He was gone. Miriam took the subway home. She couldn’t face Lina today.

That Saturday after synagogue, all the aunts and uncles and cousins came over to the apartment where Miriam lived with her parents. Everyone came but Little Aunt Lina.

"You all know what Miriam found out at the florist’s," said Miriam’s mother once they were all seated around the table. "I think some of us have suspected for some time…"

There was a long pause. Rachel’s grumpy six-year-old dropped cholent onto the white table cloth. Everyone stared at Miriam.

"I didn’t tell the florist to stop sending the notes," said Miriam. "I didn’t tell him that George was declared missing. I was just too startled in the moment. But I could go back…"

"No," said Rachel, very forcefully. "My mother’s barely hanging on as it is. How would she survive without these flowers? Besides, they haven’t found a body."
“You just want her to keep believing a lie?” said Miriam. She tried to sound indignant, but it came out rather bleak and hoarse.

Miriam’s uncle lowered his balding head. Miriam’s cousins shook their heads and muttered. Miriam’s father reached over and took Miriam’s hand.

“We have to think about what’s best for Lina,” said Miriam’s mother. “She’s very fragile right now.”

Miriam went on visiting Aunt Lina every Mother’s Day and birthday. Each time Miriam thought: this time the notes will run out. Or: this time I will tell her. But the notes kept coming. And Miriam never told her. At the time, she thought it was crazy. To live like that, suspended in memories. But later she would begin to believe that we are all a bit like Little Aunt Lina, collecting evidence for a doomed and beautiful thesis. For a story that will heal us or hurt us or hollow us out or hold us together. This happened, then that happened, therefore: but therefore what?

“My little baby, my George,” Lina would say, “all grown up. He’s hiding somewhere and still he thinks of his mother.”

Miriam would make her tea as she wept, and follow her into George’s room. Aunt Lina would open the closet and show her the shirts, all hanging in a row.

The only time Lina left the apartment was to go grocery shopping. It was a muggy July afternoon, and Little Aunt Lina was on her way to the grocery store, when out of the blind driveway of the post office, a mail truck came backing up. Little Aunt Lina was looking up at the sky, thinking that this was the same sky that George was seeing, wherever he was. She died before she knew what hit her.

A middle-aged member of the Veteran Volunteers For Recovery trudged along the perimeter of a tiny island in the Paulau island chain in the South Pacific. There were papayas and coconuts, and the water slapped and sparkled against the shore. The veteran could feel the sweat collecting in his armpits as he slogged after the guide, a solemn young man from the village, who had to keep halting his long-legged stride for the veteran to catch up. The veteran wished he were back home in Arkansas, organizing a parade. This was a lousy thing to have volunteered for. Creepy. Like a treasure hunt for treasure you didn’t want to find. The guide turned away from the shore, into the dimness of the mangrove swamp. The mangroves’ smooth roots twisted into the mud. Light fell through gaps in the branches and draped over the tree trunks like white shawls.

“Almost there,” said the guide. “Nobody in my village has
touched it all these years. We just leave offerings. We thought the gods sent it down, and nobody wants to mess with gods’ business.”

“Not even to check if there was a body inside?” said the veteran. The mud was sucking at his boots and his back ached.

“We didn’t know it was an airplane. We didn’t know there could be somebody inside.”

Over a hill, through fields planted with taro and yams, to where the land dipped down into a damp valley. A warm breeze shushed through the ferns. Drops of water speckled the undersides of leaves like perspiration.

And then, here it was: a mass of splintered metal, still recognizable to the veteran as a Curtiss P-36 Hawk, one of those single-seat monoplane fighters from the early years of the war. The whole disaster crawled with vines and creepers. Years ago, these plants had been crushed, suddenly, by the downward thundering of the airplane: leaves pulverized, stems snapped and leaking amongst the smoke and the shards. But they had grown again in the intervening years, climbing voraciously over the blistered siding and into the smashed glass of the cockpit. There would be a corpse in there. The veteran had seen enough corpses in Korea to last a lifetime. He stared at the ground, breathing shallowly. Flies buzzed over a cluster of rotting yams. A hibiscus flower lay like a yellow butterfly on the dark volcanic earth.

“Ay!” came the guide’s voice, and the veteran looked up to see that the young man had already climbed into the cockpit.

The veteran willed himself forward and peered in. There it was, a real skeleton, picked almost clean, arms and legs at awful angles. Nothing at all like the wooden skeleton his fifth grade teacher had displayed in the back of the classroom in Arkansas. He willed himself not to vomit as he reached into the ribcage to retrieve the dog-tag that dangled there. It was still legible. George Hellerman, it read.

The story ends. You and Grandma Miriam look out the window. It’s still snowing. The air between you and the next skyscraper is alive, the horizon drawn close and blurred white like fogged glass. Grandma Miriam falters for a moment: what was it she wanted to tell you? Maybe she didn't mean to tell, but only ask: How long to keep loving once the beloved is gone?

You are sitting very near her on the bed. You reach over and take her hand.
The story is hard to believe. But maybe it's always hard to believe. Whenever you love someone that much. We tell stories to bring back the dead, to hold them close, to transform them. Look at this photograph: George is not a skeleton anymore. He is a vivid, laughing boy. Once the coffin lowers we do not talk of corpses but of human beings: remember? And remember?
November 10th, 1938 began like all the days since the leaders of Western Europe had handed our homeland over to Hitler at Munich—hushed, hurried, and eerily quiet. However, as I walked to work at the British & Continental Mining Corporation, I sensed an air of increased hostility, of lurking expectation.

I wasn’t surprised, as I entered the office, that the boss wasn’t around; he hadn’t shown up in the six weeks since the British Prime Minister promised “Peace in Our Time” as the benefit of giving Hitler western Czechoslovakia. The boss’s wife was at her receptionist’s desk though, knitting another scarf for the children she didn’t have and bitterly wanted and scowling even more than usual. She never had liked me, even before the poison of anti-Semitism burbled to the surface in our town. Still, I bid her a good morning—not being one to resent a person so clearly miserable—and cheerfully greeted my co-workers. They only nodded back silently; it seemed they knew something I didn’t—a deeper shift in the night I hadn’t been told about. The usual morning gossip, chattering, yawns and complaints had been replaced by silence. The atmosphere was tense, quiet, as if everyone was worried that speaking in my presence would cause the room to crack.

I went to my desk and started starting the day as I always did by going through the accounts. I couldn’t quite decipher the harsh commands but I heard quite clearly the cries of the boss’s wife, “if you want to take my husband, why don’t you take the Jewess?”

My breath froze in my chest. I felt as if my heart would cease beating, as if my body was trying to be quiet enough to hide me from the danger. The moment we all feared had arrived despite our hopes that our nightmares never come true in the light of day. But the sun was shining and the dread in my body was too tangible to be a dream.

Peter, the office manager, rushed in pleading, “Get in the cupboard, Lotte, please.” I hesitated, considering it, but what would be the point, I couldn’t stay in the cupboard forever; what would I do when I came out? I wouldn’t cower from them.

I walked into the reception room where two Nazi officers were shouting at the boss’s wife.

“There,” the wife screamed, “there is the Jewess, take her!”

The officers looked at me, causing my back to automatically arch a little higher and my head to raise slightly—as it did whenever I
was called upon in class or challenged in an argument—though my
body screamed at me to run. One officer roughly grabbed my arm,
pulling me down the stairs I had walked a thousand times before and
into the street, pushing me into a truck already filled with
“prisoners.” The prisoners were the other Jews who hadn’t fled
Carlsbad the moment the news of the invasion had come upon the
radio, Jews who just a few hours before had been citizens like any
others.

The streets were filled with cruising trucks and idling ones
pouring black smoke into the air, turning the pastel buildings
temporarily black. Some people were trying to escape—Max, the
tailor, Carl, a boy who’d been one year behind me in school—but they
only made it a few steps before being grabbed by their coats, thrown
to the ground and beaten viciously by the soldiers. And for their
efforts they too were thrown into the trucks and taken away with the
rest of us.

I knew every winding, hilly street of this town. And as we
travelled up and around past the shimmering Opera House and gold
domed Orthodox Church I thought someone would shout out, tell the
driver to stop, say we were not the enemy. No one did. As passed the
park and the aptly named “Grand Hotel” Pupp I knew where we were
going, the new police station we had watched being built. We had
been amused at such a regal palace to hold drunks and shoplifters.
But that was then, we were the criminals now.

The truck arrived at the police station, the first place the
Nazis had taken when their tanks rolled leisurely into town, almost
gloating in their knowledge that their might would be unopposed,
their power unchallenged. Hard, large hands pulled me down, pushed
and prodded me towards the prison. The corridors and stairs were
crowded with officials and troopers, and some civilians, all shouting
abuse at us. I recognized some of the hecklers, school friends whom I
spent countless hours with over thirteen years of classes, customers
from Mother’s shop whom I’d helped dress in the newest fashions,
faces from the Elefant café with whom I’d chatted with about
everything from the weather to local gossip, who’d shaken their
heads in dismay at the news from the West—people who were my
friends, I thought. Some stopped shouting when they saw me, they
seemed as stunned as I was to see me being dragged to prison. Others
turned away, pretending not to know the girl with whom they had
shared a classroom since the age of four, or skied with, or shared a
pastry—a girl they had talked to at dances and socials, and teased
and flirted with just days before. I knew it was foolish to hope they
would help me but when they turned away I realized the unthinkable
had happened, my neighbors and friends now saw me as not Lotte, not Aranka’s daughter, not the girl who’d won a scholarship to the Sorbonne, but as the Jew and only the Jew. Or they simply wouldn’t see me at all. I realized in that moment that not only did they lack the power to help me, they didn’t want to.

The solider who had dragged me from the truck pushed me against a window, my nose giving way as he shoved it into the shining glass—a sharp, metallic pain, like a needle pushing back into my skull. Turning my head, I saw the glorious synagogue of Carlsbad burning to the ground; the blue paint peeling from the turrets in burning shreds, the glass exploding outwards, the acrid smoke clawing inside my nose. Through the window came the harsh rhythm of the gathering mob screaming, “kill the Jewish murderers.” Anger flashed making my cheeks hot and chest tight, they were the murderers, they were the criminals but as quickly as the anger arose it turned from red-hot flame to frozen terror, reason didn’t matter anymore, the truth was lost in their hatred.

Tears of fury and fear, exacerbated by the bitter smoke billowing from the synagogue blanketed my face, snot seeping from my bruised nose, and then my ears turned back on and I heard the laughter. The Nazi guards surrounding me were taunting me, “you’re only here for your own protection; if you wish to leave and face the crowd’s righteous judgment you may.” I couldn’t speak, none of us did. I wanted to answer, to shout, to do something but I couldn’t get a word out. No one spoke and no one dared leave either. The laughing continued, “what do you expect, Jews are cowards as well as murderers and crooks,” as the soldiers pushed the women into a small room and the men into another.

I looked around, and saw women I’d known my whole life crying—some hysterically, some hopelessly. Some were holding each other tightly; all past petty disputes and dislikes vanished in this new world. Others stood silently with dead glazed eyes. Then I saw Irma, alone in a corner. I ran to her, embracing my fiancée’s mother for the first time in all the years we’d known each other, and asked her what had happened, how had she arrived there, where was Josef?

Irma whispered. The hard and confident voice that always intimidated me had shattered; soldiers had come to the apartment early that morning. She’d been in her slippers and housecoat; they hadn’t allowed her to change. They’d taken her and Josef together but the two were separated inside the station. At first that made my heart slow; he was close at least, somewhere in the building, but then it fell, the only thing worse than my dying alone would be both of us perishing together.
Irma kept asking, “What do you think they want from us?” I couldn’t answer. They had taken the land, surely they would take our homes and businesses—that is what they had done in Germany. Would that be enough; I didn’t know. Trying to comfort the older woman, I murmured how it was better to be where we were than outside with the mob. We were at least safe from the rage that seemed to have gone from a simmer to an explosion as soon as the soldiers arrived. Irma shook her head, her instinct to contradict me so intuitive, but for the first time, perhaps, in her life she was without words.

I held Irma’s small cold hand for what felt like hours but could have been just a few minutes. Then, I was pulled away by an officer and taken roughly to an interrogation room. He started shouting that he didn’t believe I was Jewish—my skin was too fair, my nose too thin—he assumed I had been arrested simply because I was engaged to Josef. He shouted, spittle flying from beneath his mustache, that I was soiling my pure Germanic maidenhood by having a Jewish boyfriend. I didn’t answer—either to reveal that I was in fact Jewish or to defend Josef—I simply looked to the floor, refusing to cry. I had read once that when faced with a bear one should never make eye contact but rather raise up as tall and yell to demonstrate that one isn’t easy prey. I’d never seen a bear but I always figured if I did I could be scare him away. Sitting in that small room as the officer screamed passionate disgust, I realized that it’s one thing to be brave when there’s a chance it will matter, it’s another when cornered it seems that any effort to defend yourself will only hasten your demise. I wanted to be brave, to say something, to do anything, but I couldn’t. I had lost not only my body but my voice. Eventually, he seemed to grow tired of my petrified silence, disappointed at my lack of contrition or tears, and pushed me back into the room with the other women.

For three days and two nights we stayed. Our limbs shook from cold and fear, our minds alternating between terror and stupefaction, our bodies becoming more alien as they longed for the things of normal life—food, water, a change of clothes, a tub to wash in, a bed—longings which our minds ridiculed as frivolous compared to the danger we were in. I learned that even when your mind is an inferno, your body—with its needs—goes on.

Food was given to us three times daily—one slice of bread and cup of coffee or water. My stomach growled loudly when I finished the bread, even though I took the smallest bites I could, not chewing but rather letting the starch dissolve on my tongue before taking another nibble. Trying to trick my body into thinking that
because it took longer to eat it was more food it was a gnawing pain that started in the gut and crept up into my head, eyes, and eventually, out to my limbs. Every cell in my body, furious at the starvation, shot needles into my nerves to move me to find more. I’d never been seriously hungry before, not like this, not where I couldn’t think about anything else, and made lists in my head of random things—countries capitals, species of birds, books I’d read—to distract from the pounding in my head and grating in my gut. I was angry at my stomach; how could it complain of hunger at a time like this, when my life was at stake? Yet it continued to grumble and ache with hunger—as if unaware that there was something special about this fast, something much more serious than low blood sugar and dehydration.

We slept on the floor, packed like sardines, one almost on top of the other and not a single blanket despite the cold fall nights. I’d never been a sound sleeper—tossing and turning with worries of the day—and even with my hunger and exhaustion the hard floor and fear kept me awake and aware of the cement beneath me. My back ached but so did my knees, my shoulders, my neck and head. Every inch of my body was stiff and scrunched and I couldn’t make any of it stop. My stomach turning with hungry cramps, my tongue sticky and thick from thirst, I didn’t believe I could live long like this—I was day hike tough, skiing in a snowstorm tough, but this was something different entirely—and I wondered what would happen to mother. Where was she? Was she safe in Prague or had the Nazi advance reached beyond the Sudetenland? If she had not been captured, what would she do when she heard about me? Would she survive the loss of the only person she had left? I remembered that she was with Lisel; she would take care of mother. It was funny that Lisel and I had traded mothers, she taking care of mine in Prague, and me lying next to hers in prison. I thought we really were sisters now, though Josef and I hadn’t yet gotten married. I finally had a sister but what good was that if I never saw her again?

The first night was pierced by the hysteria of a young mother who had been arrested when her baby was with the nanny. She spent the day and night crying, begging to be released to find her daughter. As her breasts swelled with milk and her screams became more desperate the “good” guard who had let us use the bathroom said that her baby would be all right. His opposite number, the one who gleefully blocked us from the bathroom, laughed and shouted that Jewish babies should be burnt alive, their evil snuffed out before it could blossom.
The mother’s pain increased and her screams became unbearable, even to the sadistic soldier. Finally, they took her away and, though I knew I ought to be fearful for her fate, I was secretly thankful the screaming had stopped. The fear was unbearable, and the pain immense, but that sound was the worst I had ever heard, it pierced my heart, sucking out whatever sanity I had left. I didn’t know what they had done to the poor woman; I didn’t want to. So I focused only on breathing in and out, to keep myself from unleashing my own unremitting shrieks.

We all spoke rarely, but occasionally someone would whisper, “What is going to happen to us, what do they want,” and others would reply, “we’ll be taken to Dachau,” “released,” “Sachsenhausen,” “shot in the alley,” “Buchenwald.”

I didn’t whisper, didn’t let myself imagine. We’d heard stories of what had happened to the Jews in Germany and now, legally, we were there too—captives of the Third Reich. I kept my mind as empty as I could, practicing a technique I’d learned when my father died and we spent days with relatives and acquaintances coming to the flat and pretending they knew how I felt. The trick was to concentrate on the pattern on a woman’s dress or count the stripes on another’s scarf. Breathe in, count, breathe out, count, push away everything except the focus on my breathing and counting. This kept me going; real thoughts would have driven me mad.

On the third evening we were divided into two groups. Irma and I together were loaded into a truck. It was even colder outside than it had been on the concrete floor, the autumn wind whipping my face and arms as it tunneled down the mountains and between the buildings on the town’s narrow streets. It seemed darker than I’d ever seen—as if all the citizens in their homes were afraid to turn on the lights lest they be found to have violated Hitler’s code in some way—and it was eerily quiet. I’d never seen the streets totally empty, no young couples kissing by the river, no old men smoking in the bars, no husbands taking refuge from their wives or young people breaking curfew. It was a shadow of the town I knew and yet, even in the pitch black dark, as we drove through the empty streets, I knew every turn. I could track where we were as the truck turned right and left, and groaned at the increasing slope of the hills. I couldn’t see but I knew that physically, not much had changed, apart from the ashes where the synagogue had stood, all the buildings remained. All the beautiful, fanciful hotels, cafes, restaurants, and homes were still there. I could imagine that the shops were still filled with clothes, toys, and souvenirs. When we paused for the driver to decide which way to turn I could hear the warm and salty mineral waters still
poured from the fountains. The physical town was the same—and yet it had just been ripped apart, like a bad seam in one of mother’s dresses. And as I said goodbye I wondered if it would miss us.

We were driven into the hills that I had hiked up and skied down countless times and into the deep woods to a school in Cheb, thirty miles away. The school was already filled with prisoners, most of them elderly men and women, huddled together against the cold, confused and shaken far more than I. And I wondered in terror where they had been brought here from and where their young men had been taken instead. Irma and I didn’t speak, but I saw her scan the crowd and shake even more as she too realized that whatever hope we had of seeing Josef again seemed to grow fainter with each new mile. I didn’t want to think about it but the idea kept creeping back into my mind like a rodent determined to infiltrate a pantry, what if Josef was already dead? What if I were a widow before I was a wife?

After an hour or two of frozen silence broken by sobs, we were split up into groups of six and put back into the trucks. I managed to hold Irma tightly, determined to keep one person I knew and loved with me as long as possible. We were driven deeper into the woods and then suddenly stopped. A soldier ordered everyone out. Acid crept up my throat and my legs began to give out, I was sure I was going to be shot dead then and there. My life didn’t flash before my eyes, I didn’t think of my loved ones and everything I wished I had done, instead I just heard a voice screaming in my head, “I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die. I want to live. Let me live. Please, please, let me live.” I was too afraid to scream out loud; my voice vanished, like in the nightmares I had since the day I’d found father dead in his bed but in my head I screamed, “I don’t want to die.”

My silent pleas were interrupted by an officer, “I’m leaving you here. You must get out of Germany’s land that has been freed from Czech occupation. Don’t get caught or you’ll go straight to Dachau.”

We were still, unsure what to do, and shocked by this sudden, unexpected reprieve. Our ears heard the words but our minds couldn’t process what they meant. The officer shouted furiously, as if at a misbehaving dog, “Leave! Go! Get out of here!”

I began to run but was pulled back, realizing I was still holding Irma’s hand and Irma hadn’t moved. Terrified that this was our only chance and angry at her stillness I pleaded, “we have to go! Come on. Run.”

Irma didn’t move. Panicking that I’d have to leave her behind, I shouted, “Irma, we have to go, we have to get to Prague.
Think of Josef, think of Walter, think of Lisel.” Hearing her daughter’s name, the glaze left Irma’s eyes and she came out of her trance. “Lisel,” she whispered, “yes, Lisel.” With that, we began to run—or rather shuffle as fast as we could after three days of little food and water, and less sleep.

Were we really free or was this another sadistic game—the soldiers releasing us only to see who could recapture us first? I didn’t know if I could trust what had happened so I pushed my body as I never had before. Each time we saw German uniforms in the distance we turned the other way in a panic. Any shadow that resembled a man made us shriek and lurch away. Irma kept losing her slippers, her bare feet sliding on the sharp, frozen dirt. I didn’t want to stop but she couldn’t go on like this, so I took the handkerchiefs from our heads, bent down, and tied the slippers to her feet; the slippers continued to slide but at least the torn soles of Irma’s feet got some protection from the snow and ground. The wind was howling, a cold burn against our eyes, ears, cheeks, and the night so dark that we ran into bushes and tree branches but despite the pain from each bit of exposed skin and blood seeping from our faces and feet, we kept running, knowing that whatever was behind us was worse. Was death.

After a few hours, when total exhaustion threatened collapse onto the snow, we ran straight into a German guard who emerged from behind a large tree. Frozen, our chests heaved and our hearts stopped. Looking into this tall man’s cold blue eyes, I was petrified, and thought again, “I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die” but before I could speak the guard said, “This is the border. Over there is still Czech territory; go there, you’ll be safe.”

We stood still for a moment, confused, unsure, wanting to cry and scream and thank him but I couldn’t speak. This time Irma pulled me away and, tearing my eyes from the guard’s, we sprinted in the direction he had pointed. Irma forced me to keep running until the soldier was out of sight and then, only then, did she allow us to rest for a minute, panting and dry heaving in the frozen mist. It was mid-morning when we reached a populated area and heard Czech.