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part I

The Mountain

Chapter 1

“Choose life!” Lisa says.

Her motto, her toast, her battle cry, as she raises the glass of wine, clutches the stem so tightly the glass trembles and red drops spill down the side. “*Nu?* Chews life,” she crows again in her German-accented English, giving Toni the “look,” fierce and filled with a terrible pride but also with sparks of accusation that make Toni squirm and kick her feet against the crossbar of the dining room table. The Sabbath candlesticks wobble and the flames twitch. Toni grabs her egg-cup-sized beaker to shrill in response, “Choose life!”

“Ai!” Julius protests, steadying the candles with one hand while his other flies to his temple. As if his daughter’s voice were an arrow penetrating the soft, vulnerable depths that lie beneath a thin layer of skull and bare skin. “Calm down, both of you.”

Friday night, the grand moment of the week has arrived, when the three of them sit down to the big table, set with the embroidered cloth and the gold-rimmed dishes, and they linger over the meal, enveloped in candle glow. On Friday nights especially, the invisible Others are present: the uncles who live across the ocean in Italy, Grandma Antonia and Grandpa Markus who were snatched away, Minka the cat, Julius’s childhood companion when he lived in Vienna long, long ago. They are here, along with a slew of lost relatives—the ones who couldn’t escape—because Lisa has a way with ghosts. She pulls them in through the cracks in the walls. She talks to them, calls them by name, or simply mentions “our loved ones” in a voice thick with sadness and

an unsettling rage. Julius grunts and shifts, uncomfortable with such displays of emotion, but his discomfort makes Toni feel the Others all the more, as if their shadowy selves crowd him, and that's what makes him cringe. Her papa doesn't care for company much.

On Friday night, there's food enough for a tribe, more food than the three of them can possibly eat at one sitting. Noodle soup, a whole chicken roasted to golden-brown perfection, dumplings, red cabbage with caraway seeds, fruit compote and Bohemian *Mehlspeise* for dessert. There are blessings, whispered like magic spells, over candles, wine and *challah*, while Julius taps an impatient forefinger against the table. All ceremony irritates him, but Lisa insists. There are the happy kinds of arguments between Toni's parents, their voices flying across the table like ping-pong balls. There are chances for Toni to boast about her tree-climbing prowess and to pretend she is drunk, falling under the table in a fit of giggles. Sometimes, after dinner, if her father can be persuaded, there's a paper hat made out of a napkin and, if her mother is in the mood, a fortune read from a deck of cards. The only thing that can spoil Friday night is when, as on this night, Lisa has come home with a cardboard box from the store where she works—Shmelzer's Ladies' Fashions—and a gleam in her eye, as if she's already won the argument that will erupt after dinner. *After dinner, you'll face the music.* The box will be offered like a gift. The contents will be wrapped in rustling layers of tissue paper. Inside will be the Loathsome Thing. Toni shuts her mind against what's to come and concentrates instead on her thimbleful of sweet, fiery wine.

Mumbling a quick *l'chayim*, Julius sips from his own glass, then quietly translates, as his mouth curls in a skeptical smirk and his eyebrow lifts. "To life" is the correct meaning of the Hebrew toast. You could also say "*Prost*," which is Latin for *pro sit*, or "*Zum Wohl*," or "Cheers." *Your mother has her fixed ideas, but we'll go along to keep the peace*, the raised eyebrow says.

Toni probes the burning liquid with the tip of her tongue and wonders. She's already alive. What is there to choose? To be sharp. To be a Somebody. To be as lovely and darling as the Nutkevitch twins next door. To be the miracle child her mother insists God delivered at Toni's birth. The infant Toni inched into the world, blue in the face, the umbilical chord wrapped around her neck, a terrible silence locked inside her. But the doctor worked with clamps and suction pumps while Lisa struggled to call out through her swoon of fatigue. Finally, baby Toni filled her lungs and wailed. Then, though half dead with childbirth, Lisa had bellowed, "Bring her, or I'll get up and fetch her myself." So they brought the red-faced bundle with the tiny trembling fists. On the spot, Lisa chose the name Antonia, after Grandma, who hovered above in the air, waiting anxiously for her namesake to arrive. Whenever Toni's mother tells the story, she gazes tenderly past her fidgety present-day child at a vision of the perfect little bunny that once was.

The chicken, gravy-soaked dumplings, and braised cabbage fill the room with savoury aromas. Eat, eat, eat. But eat with understanding. Lisa demonstrates with a skinned morsel of chicken breast, her lips pressed together, her eyes shut. The mind must be filled with beautiful thoughts while the mouth is filled with the mashed-up stuff. For years, your Mama and Papa went without, and now they slave to put this feast on the table. We have meat every day, we have to, otherwise we might as well be back in the internment camp, that long-ago time before you were born. *You don't know how good you have it.*

Julius eats slowly, methodically, with deft movements of his knife and fork, chewing every bite thoroughly, wiping the plate clean with *challah*. Then he bites off the ends of the chicken bones and sucks out the marrow, the most nutritious part. He accomplishes all this without a sound and without a fleck of grease falling onto his neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper goatee. He washes down his food with glasses of red wine. Now and then he dabs his lips with the corner of his napkin.

Dinner is serious business. It's a sin to waste. Abundance may be here now, but you never know.

Their plates rest on the white Sabbath tablecloth that Lisa embroidered with images of birds, flower baskets, and ribbons, all finely cross-stitched in blue and gold thread and just like the one Grandma Antonia once made and was lost. Along with everything else from the olden days. The china they use now was bought at the bargain basement at Ogilvy's. One bowl in the package was chipped, one saucer was missing, but it's still a fine set. Plain white with gold rims, nothing kitschy, giving the table dignity. Sadly, there are no mocha cups. Lisa keeps her eyes peeled, scans the department store ads in the *Montreal Star*, but though there are White Sales, Spring Sales, and Wedding Bell Sales, mocha cups are not to be found in this primitive land. This country with one foot still in the Ice Age.

In the kitchen, the stainless steel percolator perched on the low blue flames of the gas stove sings its merry song: *pok, pok, pok*.

"Canadians know nothing about real coffee," Lisa pronounces with a vehement shake of her head. "They just shoot a bean through the water. Back home in Karlsbad—"

"Pah," Julius interrupts. "Don't tell me about that provincial town you came from. In Vienna, we knew coffee."

His eyes, a pale, frozen grey behind his glasses at the beginning of the meal, have slowly melted into a warmer colour. Loosening his tie, he reveals the knob of Adam's apple in his throat, leans back in his chair, with his long legs stretched under the table, and winks at Toni. The fun begins.

"What are you talking about? Karlsbad, provincial! Royalty came to Karlsbad. Princes and princesses, all the cultured greats of Europe." Lisa's eyes flash and her chin quivers with holy indignation. "On Sundays we strolled the colonnaded promenade. We stopped at Café Im-

perial. We always got the best table because the owner's daughter was in love with our Franzel."

"Your fat *shlemiel* of a brother?" Julius says.

"Don't listen to him, Toni. Don't let him fill your ears with poison. Both my brothers are handsome men. They take after my Papa, may his soul rest in peace. Even in the internment camp, girls were after my brothers."

"All in your head! Anyway, that was when the war had trimmed a few pounds off their guts. Which have come back with interest in the meantime."

Julius grins so that Toni can see the gold tooth winking at the back of his mouth.

"Tell about the coffeehouses in Vienna, Papa," Toni shouts. "Tell about the whipped cream."

"*Quatsch!*" Lisa says. "When did he go to coffeehouses? He never had two cents to rub together. He was a clerk in a hole-in-the-wall bookshop."

"I was a senior employee in a distinguished publishing and book-selling firm in the 9th district." Julius clears his throat and looks annoyed. Then the laughter comes back into his eyes. "The coffee in Vienna had mounds of *Schlagsahne*," he says with reverence. "Whipped cream that shook like a belly dancer when the white-aproned waiter approached with his tray. But in your mother's town, all they gave was a thin squirt of foam."

So the banter continues while the cuckoo clock ticks, the radiators clank, a stiff March wind rattles the loose windowpanes. The conversation, in German with bits of English, Yiddish, and Italian mixed in, flits back and forth between Karlsbad, Vienna, Trieste, Bolzano, Ferramonti, Cortino, Fossoli, the Umbrian hills—towns in Italy to which her parents drifted after the war, or places where they lived separately, before they met. Some weren't towns at all, but camps or prisons

or places with caves for hiding during the war, when they had to go underground. Toni gets mixed up with before, during, and after the war, with all the names, the episodes, the rules that kept changing, the mysterious words. There was running, escaping, shooting, like in an episode of *Gunsmoke*, but with something else going on at the same time, something dark and shameful and unfathomable, like the headless man behind her bedroom wall. *You can't know how it was, and it's good you can't know.* Best to listen quietly to the bits and pieces that slip out and to wonder. The War. That was long, long ago, before she was born, and yet it is still happening, isn't it? Questions are dangerous. But sometimes they jump out anyway.

“What does internment mean?”

There, she's done it. A sudden silence fills the room, along with what she thinks of as the Brown Smell. Those words she understands, but not quite—“interned,” “imprisoned,” “underground,” “house arrest” “displaced”—change the quality of the air. Instantly the atmosphere becomes like that cold, damp, and queasy-making place beneath the outside cement stairs where cats pee and the Brown Smell lurks. You aren't supposed to notice. Noticing makes the changes in the room more terrible, yet strangely thrilling too, so she can't help but ask again, her voice high, insistent: “Tell me, tell me!”

Lisa rears up in her chair, her chin trembles, her mouth opens. She is ready to spit out words like gunshot, the whole wretched story, but Julius flaps his hand and makes rough gurgling sounds—*harrumph*, *harrumph*—as if something is caught in his throat. His face grows pale. He is choking, drowning.

“Never mind,” Lisa hisses, rising from the table. “Help me clear the dinner plates. Hurry up.”

When the dirty dishes have been stacked beside the sink and the glass bowls set out for the sugar dumplings, Lisa says: “I have something for you, *Bubbele*. Come with me.”

Her tone coaxes. Her expression has changed from thunderous to sly.

“What about dessert?” Toni cries, sensing the new danger.

“Come with me first. Then dessert.”

Toni's heart sinks as she follows her mother through the door of her parents' bedroom, where, in the centre of the big bed, the cardboard box from Shmelzer's awaits. Lisa opens the box with a flourish and fishes out a girl's dress that she holds up in the air between pinched fingertips.

“*Nu?* What do you say? Lovely, isn't?”

The dress is blue-and-white-checked cotton with a wide flared skirt and petticoat underneath, bands of rickrack along the hem and sleeves, a Peter Pan collar, a cinched waist, and a cloth belt that ties in a bow at the back. Toni knows her mother went to a lot of trouble to make the dress with her own hands during moments stolen from her long day's work at Shmelzer's where she sews alterations in a curtained-off alcove. Toni's closet is full of similar creations. Last month, Lisa brought home a tartan jumper with a pleated skirt. Before that came the despicable dirndl dress with the polka-dot skirt, laced bodice, and white blouse with puffy sleeves. Toni's mother can't understand why her daughter would prefer to wear trousers and T-shirts, filthy with grass and mud. Why scuffed up sneakers and hair like a rat's nest? Such attire is *schlampig*.

“People judge you on your appearance,” she always says. “The world respects you if you look your best. You can never have enough respect.”

Lisa herself is always well turned out in good quality suits and dresses—bought at a discount at Shmelzer's—brooches and necklaces (costume jewellery, but no one would know), powder, rouge, and a bold slash of lipstick for a smile to conquer the world. Julius is an elegant dresser, too, in neat, dark suits, the pants crisply pressed, white

shirts, sober tie, highly polished shoes, and a matching felt fedora with a tiny flared feather tucked into the band. He never appears on the balcony on hot summer evenings in an undershirt as do the other men of the neighbourhood. His shirts, long- or short-sleeved, are always done up to all but the very top button, even when the stifling heat of August blankets the city. So how did Julius and Lisa Goldblatt, refined and cultivated people in the old European style, get such a gypsy of a daughter? This is the question her mother sometimes throws at Toni and offers her own answer. It's this shabby neighbourhood the family's stuck in for the moment. It's that gang of boys Toni runs around with. The janitor's son and the other fellow with the flat feet and the odd boy with the shifty eyes—juvenile delinquents in the making, the lot of them, and none of them Jewish either. *Stay away from those little hooligans.*

Her mother holds the new dress aloft in one hand, clamps Toni's shoulder with the other. "Don't make such an ugly face. Go ahead. Try it on."

"Do I have to?"

"I would have jumped for joy to receive such a lovely gift when I was your age. I would have fallen to my knees and kissed my mother's hand. Put it on!"

After many sighs, Toni stands before her mother with bowed head. The stiff new material itches, the waist pinches, the collar chokes, the skirt and petticoat billow and rustle, and everything is wrong. Toni feels like a badly built kite, certain to plunge nose-first into the dirt after the first attempt at lift-off.

"Hmm. You grew behind my back. I'll have to let out the hem and sleeves." Lisa peers at Toni, puzzled, as if she were expecting a somewhat different child to be standing before her. "Still, it's very nice. Look in the mirror."

She pushes Toni toward her vanity table with its army of makeup

bottles and perfumes and its large, oval mirror that tilts up and down so you can see yourself from different angles. There she is, trussed in checked cotton, wrists dangling, scabbed and knobby knees exposed. Every dress she's ever worn makes Toni feel both confined and naked, aware of the great, empty spaces between her legs and the folds of material waiting to tangle her up when she walks. She thinks of Mabel, the chimpanzee who appears on the *Ed Sullivan Show* clad in frilly dresses and matching bonnets, strings tied in a bow under her chin. Mabel looks very black and hairy against the pale, flimsy material of her outfits. Her trainer, who is dressed in a tuxedo, invites Mabel to dance, and they shuffle around to waltz music, he taking graceful steps, she shambling awkwardly, the dress flapping around her bowed legs. At the end of the performance, Mabel curtseys, blows hideous smacking kisses at the roaring audience, and lurches about as if yanked by an invisible chain. All the while she stares directly at Toni through the TV screen, her dark eyes knowing and sad.

Toni fumbles for the buttons behind her back.

"Can I take it off now?"

But Lisa isn't ready to release her from the frilly prison.

"Leave it on. You keep that dress on if you want your dessert."

"But that's not fair!"

The outrage! The unbearable trickery! Her mother's cool, unyielding eyes. The same adamant expression is reflected in the face of Grandma Antonia as she stares out from her pewter-framed picture atop the bureau. Those two are always ganging up on her. Dashing down the corridor, Toni throws herself at her father's feet.

"Please, please, please, please, Papa," she wails. Hot tears splash down her cheeks. He gazes down miserably, biting his lips. His hand clutches his temple, *Ai, ai*, it hurts right there above his eyebrow where her unhappiness has lodged itself, burrowing deep and growing bigger than any suffering she can possibly imagine.

“Stop that. Look how you aggravate your poor Papa.”

Lisa shouts. Toni screeches. A shudder runs up Julius’s long limbs. He can’t bear a scene. *Go away, go away.* His hands flap as if shooing off a swarm of flies, but it is he who leaves, hurrying down the hall to shut himself in his study, a tiny nook between the bathroom and the fire escape, which is crammed with books, two towering shelves of them, that form a solid barrier against the noises from the rest of the house.

Sent to bed early, Toni clutches her teddy bear in one arm, her golliwog in the other, and sucks her thumb—she knows she’s too old for this, almost eight, but sometimes you need extra comfort. It’s not her fault that Papa got a migraine. It’s not fair that Mama is so mean. Soon she won’t be allowed to be a tomboy anymore. She will have to wear dresses every day instead of the clothes that she considers like a second skin, the shirts, dungarees, and scuffed-up sneakers that smell of basement corners, bubble gum, street gutters, coal dust from the furnace room, and the big, wild woods.

From their place of banishment behind the dresser, the unloved tribe of dolls snickers. Some are girlie dolls with long-lashed eyelids that fly open when you tip them, exposing their foolish blue eyes. Some are bald-headed babies with outstretched arms and puckered lips that form a perpetual “Oh” of want for the bottle that never comes. They are birthday-present disappointments, one and all, the results of Mama and Papa’s and the faraway uncles’ good intentions. She had to smile and say “thank you” for each doll, while her heart sank at the stupid, oh-so-pretty faces. Only Teddy and Golly are real chums.

The neglected dolls jeer and mock: *You can hide us but you can’t get rid of us.* Same with the dresses that crowd the closet. What to do? Her one-eyed Teddy, old and wise, doesn’t mince words. *Run away. Build a shelter of pine boughs in the woods. Live like Radisson, the explorer.*

Leave right now. I dare you. But it is cold beyond the edges of her covers. The bare linoleum would send shivers up her legs. The woods on the Mountain are still soggy with snow. Above her head, a long finger of yellow light slants across the ceiling, making the darkness in the room lonelier than ever. But worse is the sound behind the wall. The headless man has begun to moan. His strangled cries reach out through the plaster, and all she can do is burrow down beneath the covers, pressing Golly and Teddy to each ear, while chanting “Mama-PapaMamaPapa” to drown him out.