

1943—Rachel

There were a few times that I felt paralyzed with fear—fear that was so strong it coated me like rust that makes metal, that was once limber and flexible, brittle. That moment, with my arms around Abi and Sarah, was one of those times. I was sure that was it. We had been hearing about raids every day, and I knew it was only a matter of time before we were caught in one. We were too lucky, always getting away in the nick of time, and always finding someone who was willing to help us—for who knows what reason. All of that was coming to an end, I thought, when I heard that knock on the door. I gasped and grabbed my throat, trying to stifle the scream. Will it end like this? Thoughts swirled in my head, finally stopping at one agonizing image: Where had my childhood gone—that time not so long ago filled with giggles and promise? . . .

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1937—Rachel

“Rachel!” I heard a hushed scream coming from outside. Rising from my seat, I went over to the window.

“Rachel? Are you coming?”

It was Bina, my best friend. She was wearing a red dress—the skirt fluttering in the wind—under a black shawl that she had tied around her neck.

“Let’s go!” Bina whispered, continuing to beckon me.

I smiled and motioned to her that I was coming. I looked down and ruffled my own dress, which was wrinkled from sitting and reading. My mother had made the dress years ago, and she would have been happy to see me wearing it now. I took a last glance in the mirror and headed towards the door of my house.

“Father, I’m going out!” I yelled to my father as I grabbed my own shawl to cover me and flung open the door to an impatient Bina.

“Ready?” Bina said, a mischievous smile growing across her face.

“Let’s go!” I said, grabbing Bina’s arm as we started to skip down the dirt road. It was getting dark, but the glow of the sun still barely lit the road in front of us.

“Where are you two going?” A voice called, startling us.

We stopped in our tracks to see my older brother Chaim. He was jogging down the road just steps behind us. We looked at each other giggling, and then both looked at Chaim, neither of us answering.

“Come back, I’ll drive you.” He winked at us, motioning to follow him back to my house.

We all hopped into Chaim’s car and he started the engine. Chaim was proud of his car, and took any opportunity to use it. He worked in Krakow and had been saving for months in order to afford it. When he had first come back to visit our little village of Butla, everyone there came out to see his car. It was one of only few vehicles ever to drive down our dirt roads—definitely the first car owned by a resident of Butla. He deserved it. He, like everyone in our family, worked hard, saved money, and knew how to spend it on the right luxuries. Despite his being ten years older than I was, Chaim and I had been close before he left. I was proud of my big brother and loved that our family was the talk of the village when he returned.

Bina and I giggled the whole car ride to Turka, the next village over. The car weaved up and down the hilly countryside, through fields of wheat and other farmlands. When we arrived, Chaim parked in front of the main building at the village entrance. Bina and I jumped out, flattening our hair that had blown messy in the wind. I gently pressed down on the sides of my head to ensure my long braids were still intact. Good. They were.

We could hear the loud music roaring from inside the building and saw the lights flashing as people walked passed the windows. Bina and I squealed with excitement and ran inside as Chaim slowly followed us.

It was packed inside, with girls and boys dancing in the center, and everyone else standing around the sides drinking and laughing. Bina and I quickly moved straight to the center of the room, lining up with the others dancing to the Polish folk music. We knew all the steps, having practiced at home together. Both of us were beaming with excitement as we lifted our skirts and skipped around. I glanced to the front of the room, smiling at the four-person band creating the music. One of the band members—a heavysset man—was playing a cello, while a second member—an older woman—had a fiddle tucked under her chin. In the front, a younger man played the accordion and a young girl sang while shaking a rattle.

“Rachel! What are you doing here?”

I heard the loud voice from behind as someone tapped my shoulder. It was another one of my older brothers, David. He had come here earlier in the night with some of his friends. I wanted to come with him, but he thought I was too young.

“Hi!” I yelled. My feet didn’t stop and I continued to twirl. “Chaim brought us!”

David smiled at me and grabbed my hand to twirl me around.

“Rachel, you have to be at least sixteen to come here,” he said.

“I will be soon enough,” I smiled. I was fifteen—this was the second time Bina and I had snuck into this dance club. The last time, we had walked a full hour to get here and danced the night away before hitching a ride back with a couple of boys we met.

“All right. Well, I am here if you need anything,” David said, squeezing my hand before he went back to his friends.

I couldn't blame him for being protective. I was the youngest in our family, with six older brothers. David was the second-oldest brother, age thirty-eight, and the only one who still lived in our small village. He had a house right next door to Father and me, where he lived with his wife, Hinda, and their two children. He was a farmer and had a huge field behind his house where he grew apples and peaches, as well as lettuce and other vegetables that he rotated each season. He also had a few cows who produced the sweetest milk I had ever tasted.

For as long as I could remember, David has been almost like a second father to me, especially since our mother had died when I was ten. Our five other brothers—Shlomo, Meir, Itzik, Zeilig, and Chaim—all left Butla as soon as they could to move to the big cities, find work, and see the world, but not David. He couldn't leave me.

“Rachel!” Bina yelled over the loud music as she got closer to my ear. “That boy over there is staring at you.”

I turned to where she was gazing and saw a young boy, probably a few years older than I was. He was leaning against the wall, holding a drink in one hand. His eyes locked into mine and a crooked smile appeared on his face.

“He's cute,” I said to Bina, still dancing. I broke eye contact with the boy, knowing that I had looked back at him just long enough for him to know I noticed him.

A moment later, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“May I?”

The boy was standing behind me, holding out his hand. I smiled at him and placed my hand on his, allowing him to grip it and pull me closer to him.

“I'm Jan,” he said, leading me through the Kujawiak folk dance. He moved gracefully and confidently, as if he were used to dancing like this.

“You're a great dancer, Jan.”

“Thank you,” he said. “So are you. I have never seen you here before.”

“Maybe you just weren't looking,” I said as he raised his arm to twirl me around.

“I would have noticed you,” he said, catching my other hand to stop my twirl.

When the song ended, we stood facing each other. He was slightly taller than I was and had blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. I blushed as we stared at each other . . . until Bina grabbed my arm.

“Rachel, we have to go,” Bina said. “Excuse us!”

Bina pulled me away from Jan, who still held my gaze.

“Rachel?” he said. “When will I see you again?”

“Soon,” I said, finally breaking his gaze as Bina forced my feet to move away. David was standing near the door of the club, looking unhappy. But what older brother wouldn't be unhappy, seeing his little sister growing up?

“I think it's time to get you home,” David said as we approached him. “You have school tomorrow.”

“David, we’re fifteen; we’re not kids anymore,” I said, following him out to his car.

“Yes, but you are still my little sister,” he responded. “And that means, no matter how old you are, I am still responsible for you.”

Bina and I hopped in David’s wagon. His horse, Moshe, had been guarding it while he was inside. Chaim’s car was still parked in the lot.

“Next time you want to come, tell me and I will take you,” David said.

“Really?” I screamed.

“Yes, you’re going to go anyway. It may as well be with me,” he responded.

Soon we arrived back in Butla. David dropped Bina off at her home and parked the wagon in the grass between our houses.

“Right to bed!” David said when we got out of the wagon.

I smiled at him. “Thank you. I had a lot of fun tonight!”

He laughed. I gave him a quick hug and ran inside.

The next morning, I met Bina on the way to school. Butla was too small of a village to have its own school. It had so few residents that we knew every single person who lived there. Only about a thousand people lived in the two and half square kilometer village on the edge of a great forest.

Every morning, Bina and I walked the hour to school in Turka. Not only was it large enough to have the school and a dance club, Turka even had electricity and indoor plumbing. With almost ten thousand residents, Bina and I had many other children to mix with there.

“So, who was that boy last night?” Bina dove right in.

“Jan.” I smiled curtly.

“That’s it? That’s all you are going to tell me?” Bina said.

“He seemed very nice,” I responded, blushing.

“Nice! He seemed more than just nice,” Bina teased. She continued teasing me until we got to Turka and walked past the empty dance club from the night before. The building was dark and showed no trace that just hours before it had been full of people, music, and dancing.

We arrived at school and sat quietly in our seats as the teacher taught us arithmetic and Polish. Our third class of the day was religion. For this class, we all got up and went to different classrooms, based on our faith. Bina and I were both in the class for Jews. Other students went to the Roman Catholic class or the Greek Catholic class. While the Greek Catholic class was the biggest, the Jewish class wasn’t far behind. In this class, a Jewish teacher taught us about the Torah and the traditions of our faith.

When class started, one of the boys, Getzel, raised his hand.

“Yes?” the teacher called on him.

Getzel stood and cleared his throat.

“I just wanted to tell everyone goodbye,” Getzel said. “My family is going to Palestina tomorrow. We’re making Aliyah.¹”

Getzel stood proudly, scanning the room for reactions from the class. The class started murmuring to each other. Getzel was not the first person from Turka to move to Palestina, but he was the first person whom I knew personally.

Over the last few years there had been a lot of talk in Turka about the Zionist movement— about creating a country only for Jews. Every day, the Zionist organization of Turka was getting bigger, and many of the Jews started saving money in order to move to the Holy Land.

I raised my hand, curious about Getzel’s announcement. The teacher nodded at me, allowing me to ask my question.

“Why?” I asked Getzel. “Do you not like living here in Turka?”

“No, I like Turka well enough,” Getzel said. “But Palestina is the land given to us by God, and we need to go there to create the Jewish country.”

“But why do we need a Jewish country?” I pried.

“So we are safe,” Getzel said.

His answer took me aback. Jews and Catholics lived in harmony in Turka, Butla, and the surrounding area. Jews were about ten percent of the population in the area, and I sometimes felt that everyone thought we were special because we were so limited in number. I had never felt that safety was a concern for us Jews.

“What’s it like there?” another student blurted out.

“It’s beautiful,” Getzel beamed. “They say it is the land of plenty, where everyone has enough land, money, and food to live comfortably. And because everyone is Jewish, everyone celebrates Shabbos together . . . and everyone helps each other out.”

“Getzel, we will all miss you very much,” the teacher said. “Be sure to send us a postcard when you get there. Now, class, let’s start our lesson for today.”

I couldn’t pay attention to anything the teacher said. She was talking about the week’s Torah portion, but I was still thinking of Getzel’s announcement. What place could be more beautiful than here?

When religion class finished, all the students mixed again, sitting together as though we had never been divided at all.

After school, I had choir practice. I had been given a solo for our upcoming recital and was excited to rehearse. As I left my classroom to go to the rehearsal, someone caught my eye in front of the school.

It was Jan, from the night before. He was standing by the school entrance, carefully watching everyone who walked by. After a moment, he saw me and came running in.

“I had a feeling you went to school here,” he said when he approached me.

“Were you looking for me?” I teased him.

¹ The act of immigrating to the Holy Land. In Hebrew, Aliyah literally means “to go up.”

“You didn’t give me another choice, did you?” Jan said. “Was I supposed to wait until I happened to see you again?”

“Why aren’t you in school, Jan?” I asked him.

“I’m eighteen,” he said. “I work on my family’s farm, over there.” Jan pointed to the green pastures on the outside of the school.

“Oh,” I said. I hadn’t realized he was so much older than I was.

“So, can I see you some time?” he said. “What are you doing now?”

“I have choir practice,” I said to him.

“Wow, you dance and sing,” Jan said. “A woman of many talents, I see.”

I blushed.

“And after choir practice?” Jan said.

“You can meet me back here in two hours,” I said, before rushing off to rehearsal.

I was giddy when I arrived at rehearsal. The next two hours seemed to go almost in slow motion, but finally we finished practicing and I raced out to the entrance of the school. Jan was there, waiting for me in a small tractor.

“Can I give you a ride home?” he said, offering me a place on his tractor. I hopped on, giggling to myself.

“I’ve never been on a tractor before!” I said.

“Really?” Jan said. “What does your family do?”

“My father has a vegetable store,” I responded. “We do a little gardening. My brother has a farm.”

“So where am I taking you?” Jan asked.

“Butla,” I responded, happy that I didn’t have to walk the hour back home.

“Butla, it is,” Jan maneuvered the tractor to the main road that connected our two villages.

“So, Rachel, how much longer are you in school?” Jan asked.

“I’m in tenth grade now,” I said.

“And then what?” Jan asked. “I doubt someone like you will stay in Butla to work at your father’s vegetable store.”

I laughed. “My brother lives in Krakow, so I want to go there and become an actress.”

Jan turned to me. “It suits you.”

We arrived in Butla and I directed Jan to my house.

“So, can I take you out tonight?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Tonight is Shabbos.”

“Shabbos?” Jan asked in confusion. “Are you Jewish?”

I nodded.

“You don’t look Jewish,” Jan said, confused.

“What does that mean?” I laughed.

“Nothing,” Jan responded. “Can I take you out when Shabbos ends?”

“You can,” I responded, as I let myself off the tractor. “Saturday at sundown, I will wait for you here.”

“I’ll see you soon, Rachel,” Jan said. “Have a wonderful Shabbos.”

Jan tipped his cap and turned the tractor around. I watched him leave, smiling to myself, before turning around towards my house. Aunt Tzipora was kneeling in the garden, but was watching me approach.

“Hi, Aunt Tzipora,” I said as I walked towards her. “How are the vegetables doing?”

Tzipora smiled, tilting her head to invite me to kneel down with her. Tzipora was my father’s sister and had moved in with us to help out around the house after my mother died. Tzipora was digging potatoes out of the dirt. My mother started the vegetable garden when she was still alive. She planted many kinds of herbs and vegetables all around the house, ensuring that we always had a variety of things to eat.

“Is Father home?” I asked. Father went to Shul every Friday, where he often spent the afternoon hours before he returned home at sundown to do the Shabbos blessings with us. I wouldn’t say we were religious. Yes, my father had a beard and wore a yarmulke, but that’s what Jews did.

Tzipora shook her head and handed me the potato she had just pulled out. Then she wiped her hands on her apron and motioned to me to help her stand. Tzipora didn’t speak. She was mute and had been since I could remember. I don’t know why, or if she had been this way all her life, but I knew she was always listening.

I held out my hand to help her up, and the two of us went into the house. I loved coming home on Fridays. The smell of freshly baked challah wafted through the air, and a big pot of soup simmered on the stove.

Tzipora washed the potatoes from the garden and started making cholent, my favorite dish. She diced the potatoes and added them—as well as black beans, kidney beans, chickpeas, and tomatoes—into a large pot where chunks of beef were already browning. I watched her as she filled the pot with water and sprinkled in salt, pepper, and other herbs she had gathered from the garden. She closed the lid and turned the fire down low. The cholent would cook all night and we would eat it tomorrow for breakfast. Tzipora made cholent every Friday, just like my mother had.

I lifted the lid from the pot of soup, and fished out a carrot with my fingers. Tzipora clicked her tongue sternly, shaking her finger at me as I put the carrot in my mouth. Tzipora hated it when I stuck my fingers in pots of food, but what fun is that? The carrot was soft and the broth of the soup squeezed out when I chewed. I loved Fridays—they were just so magical.

Tzipora motioned to me to grab the Shabbos candles to light before the sun went down. I took the candles, placed them in the window, and grabbed a match to light them. Tzipora stopped what she was doing and came up behind me, putting her hands on my shoulders as I struck the match and lit the two candles. We both then waved our hands over the light towards our eyes, welcoming in the Shabbos.

*“Baruch atah Adonai eloheynu melach haolem, asher kid’shanu b’mitzotav ve-tzivanu lehadlik neir shel Shabbat.”*² I said the blessing.

A few minutes later, Hinda, David’s wife, came in the door with their two children, Sarah and Abi. Sarah, age five, was holding her three-year-old brother’s hand as he waddled in behind her.

“Good Shabbos!” Hinda said, placing a chocolate babka cake on the kitchen counter. She came over to kiss Tzipora and me, giving us both a big hug.

“Good Shabbos!” I repeated back to Hinda. Hinda then started helping Tzipora. She grabbed the set of plates and silverware and started setting the table.

I knelt down to hug my niece and nephew. Sarah squeezed her little body into mine, tightly wrapping her arms around me. I kissed her forehead and held out a hand to Abi, who giggled as he handed me a small yellow flower that he had been holding behind his back.

“Wow, thank you, Abi!” I said. I took the flower and placed it behind my right ear, tucking the stem into my braid. “How do I look?”

“You’re beautiful, Aunt Rachel!” Sarah exclaimed. Abi put his hand to his mouth and blushed.

“Thank you,” I responded, tickling Abi’s stomach. I led the children to my bedroom so we wouldn’t be in the way for Tzipora and Hinda. Our house was a quaint little space, with just two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a dining room. We had a little outhouse around the back. Thankfully, I lived here with only Father and Tzipora. When my brothers were younger, they all shared the room that was now mine. Since they left, Tzipora stayed with me in here, and my father had the other room.

“How about I read you a story?” I asked, as Sarah and Abi climbed onto my bed. I grabbed a picture book of mine and snuggled up with them as I read.

A few minutes later I heard my father, David, and Chaim talking outside. They were returning from Shul, and speaking loudly to one another. They always stumbled back noisily after drinking the Kiddush wine at Shul.

Sarah, Abi, and I jumped off the bed and ran to the door to meet them.

“Father!” I yelled when the three of them walked through the door. My father picked me up and twirled me around. While my father was already seventy-two years old, age didn’t seem to have slowed him down much.

After everyone hugged and kissed, we all gathered around the dinner table, which was lit by the candlelight. The table was covered with a bright white tablecloth and glistening white dishes that we saved for Fridays and holidays. In the center of the table sat two fluffy challahs covered with a cloth that my mother had embroidered. It said Shabbos Shalom, in Hebrew, and had big flowers cross-stitched around the letters.

² The Jewish blessing for lighting the Shabbat candles. The blessing says Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to kindle the light of the Shabbat.

My father poured our silver Kiddush cup full with wine and raised it up. He cleared his throat and started chanting the Shabbos blessing, his soothing voice filling the room.

*“Baruch ata Adonai boreh pri hagafen,”*³ he finished.

“Amen,” we all said, and then took our seats.

My father went around to bless his children, first David, then Chaim, and last, me. Finally, he uncovered the challahs, and blessed them.

*“Baruch ata Adonai hamotzi lechem min ha’aretz.”*⁴

“Amen!”

Father then started ripping one of the challahs, giving each one of us a piece. The bread was still warm, and the insides were soft and sweet. Tzipora then brought the soup to the table, ladling out bowls for everyone.

“So, Rachel, how was school today?” my father asked, taking a sip of soup.

“Good,” I responded. “The Weisses are moving to Palestina.”

I had been thinking about my classmate Getzel and his announcement all day.

“Really?” my father asked.

“A lot of families are moving,” Chaim said. “Even from Krakow; the Zionists are trying to convince everyone to go there.”

“They are right,” David said. “We need to go if we want our own country.”

“It’s supposed to be beautiful,” Hinda said. “Green pastures, blue seas. I heard it’s paradise.” Hinda was a member of the local Zionist organization. They met regularly to learn Hebrew and to support the cause of establishing a Jewish country.

“Ha,” my father laughed. “Surely it is full with Arabs and the Jews live in huts in the sand.” His laugh started to turn into a cough.

“Getzel said everyone there is Jewish, and that they live there like kings,” I said.

“And they speak Hebrew,” Hinda said, winking at me. “I’ll teach you if you want to learn.”

“But why should we leave here?” my father asked, clearing his throat. “We have everything.”

“Except a country just for us,” Chaim said. “Where we never have to worry about anyone who hates us.”

“Who hates us?” I asked, surprised.

“A lot of people don’t like us, Rachel,” Chaim said. “I know here in Butla we live peacefully, but it’s not like that everywhere. For example, in Germany, there is a lot of anti-Semitism. Jews cannot own land or work in many professions, or be involved in politics. Also, in Russia, Jews cannot openly practice religion.”

“But why?” I asked.

“No reason, really,” Chaim responded. “Probably because we’re successful. Or because they just need to hate someone.”

³ The Jewish blessing for wine on Shabbat.

⁴ The Jewish blessing for bread on Shabbat.

“Let’s talk about something more positive now,” Hinda cut in. “It’s Shabbos.”

“Chaim took Rachel to the dance club in Turka last night,” David changed the subject.

“David!” I exclaimed. My cheeks grew red from embarrassment.

My father laughed. “Well, David, maybe next time you will take her. She’s not a little girl anymore!”

We all laughed. Once we finished our soup, Tzipora collected our bowls and brought out chicken, vegetables, and gefilte fish that she had cooked. We all filled our plates and continued eating and laughing the rest of the evening.

Soon, Sarah and Abi fell asleep and I helped Tzipora clean the dishes in the kitchen. David and Hinda scooped up their children and left, saying goodnight and that they would see us in the morning for cholent. Chaim left with them. He stayed with them, as their house was a little less crowded.

When everything was cleaned and Tzipora went to bed, I stayed with my father in the dining room.

“So, you like dancing?” my father asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Don’t ever go to the dance club without one of your brothers,” my father said. “You will be safe with them.”

My father kissed me goodnight and went to his room. I was also tired, and went into my room. Tzipora was already asleep in the bed and I snuggled in beside her.

When I woke up, Tzipora was already gone. The bright light from the window and the smell of the cholent motivated me to get out of bed. I got dressed and walked over to the kitchen, where Tzipora was setting the dining table.

“Good morning,” I said, as I skipped over to the stove and lifted the lid on the cholent. The thick sauce was bubbling and the steam rose up to my face. Suddenly I felt Tzipora lightly slap my hand, forcing me to drop the lid back down. I smiled at her and backed away from pot.

Soon, Hinda came over with the children, and shortly thereafter, the men returned from shul. Again, we all sat down at the table, and Tzipora filled our plates with cholent. I grabbed a piece of challah and dipped it into the cholent on my plate. The bread absorbed the sauce, becoming soft and spicy with the seasonings.

After the meal, I took Abi and Sarah into the forest behind our house. The forest had tall trees that caused the entire ground to be shaded. The ground was moist and covered in green vines and bushes with different-colored flowers. Sarah liked to pick the flowers, which she would take home and hang upside down until they dried. Abi was more interested in finding mushrooms, so I always had to watch him to make sure he didn’t put any poisonous ones in his mouth.

A few Saturdays ago, I didn’t watch him so closely, and Abi ate a poisonous mushroom. He seemed fine at first, but an hour later he became red with fever and started sweating profusely. As soon as I told David and Hinda what happened, David immediately

hooked Moshe up to his wagon and rode with Abi to the doctor in Turka. The doctor, also a Jew who didn't work on Saturdays, was shocked to see David coming in the wagon, and immediately understood it was a life-or-death situation. He pumped Abi's stomach and gave him medicine, which he had to take for a week. That whole week Abi fought the fever, but by the next Saturday, he was good as new. Nobody scolded me for not taking good care of Abi, but I felt responsible. Not only did I endanger my poor nephew's life, but I also made David and the doctor break the Shabbos.

Now, I watched Abi carefully as we walked through the forest. I was singing a song I had learned in my choir practice, and thinking about Jan.

Like all Saturdays, the day went by quickly. We returned from the forest just before sundown. Sarah had a basket full of brightly colored flowers and had even more which I had braided in her hair. Abi had fallen asleep, and I was carrying him back home.

When we arrived at my house, I saw Jan's tractor parked out front. He was sitting on it, wearing a straw hat that seemed like it was almost floating at the crown of his head.

"Hi Rachel," he said as we approached.

"One minute," I silently signaled to him, as I went inside with the kids. David, Chaim, Hinda, Tzipora, and Father were all sitting at the table playing cards.

"How was your walk?" Father asked.

"Look what I found!" Sarah exclaimed, holding up her basket of flowers for all to see.

"It was nice," I said, putting Abi down on the couch. "I'm going out with Bina."

I am not sure why I lied, but it just came out. I had never gone out with a boy before and didn't want to have to start answering questions.

"Don't get into any trouble!" Chaim joked as I ran out the door.

Jan was still waiting patiently on his tractor.

"Hi," I said when I reached him.

"Hi Rachel," he repeated. "How was Shabbos?"

"Great as always," I smiled.

"So, what is there to do here in Butla?" Jan asked.

I laughed. "Nothing really. We could just walk around; there is a big forest behind our house, where it is nice to go."

"I brought a few things," Jan said. "We'll have a picnic there."

Jan jumped off the tractor and grabbed a bag that was sitting next to him. I led him towards the forest, careful not to pass any windows when we walked by my house. It was getting dark, so we stopped right before we entered into the woods.

Jan took a blanket out of his bag and laid it down for us. We both sat down and Jan continued to unpack his bag. He also took out a small lantern, which he lit. He then pulled out biscuits and fruits.

"You sure came prepared," I joked with him.

"I had a feeling there wouldn't be anything else to do here." He laughed as he handed me a deep purple plum.

“These plums are from my farm. I just picked them today,” Jan said.

I took a bite of the soft, juicy plum. Delicious.

“So, you didn’t tell me about you,” I said, wiping my mouth. “Do you like being a farmer?”

Jan laughed. “I don’t know, I never thought about it. I guess I would have liked to finish school.”

“Maybe one day you will go back,” I said.

Jan smiled at me. “Maybe.”

“And you?” Jan continued. “You are going to Krakow and will become a famous actress?”

“That’s the plan.” I laughed.

“You won’t forget about all the little people here?” he said.

“Not the important people,” I joked.

“You are definitely too good for a place like this,” Jan said. “I know you will make it.”

Jan and I sat there for a few hours, talking and looking at the stars. He knew some astronomy and pointed out the Big Dipper, the North Star, and Cassiopeia. We lay on our backs and he told me the story of Queen Cassiopeia, who was considered the most beautiful queen in Greek mythology. She was stuck in the sky as punishment from Poseidon because she and her daughter were more beautiful than any sea nymphs. She was forced to spend half the night upside-down, further part of the punishment for her beauty.

When Jan was telling me the story, I couldn’t help but think of how cruel Poseidon was for what he did to her. Because of pure hatred and jealousy, he punished a poor girl who couldn’t help the way she looked or the way she was born.

When Jan finished telling the story, he leaned over on his side and stared into my eyes. I held his gaze, smiling deeply at him. Then, he slowly leaned in and kissed me. It was my first kiss, and the thrill of it sent sparks through my body. After a second, Jan pulled his head back and smiled at me.

“Rachel, you are very beautiful,” he said.

I blushed. “I think I should be getting home soon.”

“I had a really nice time,” Jan said. “Can we do this again?”

I nodded, still blushing. We got up, and packed up the food and blanket. Jan carried the lantern as we walked back towards my house. With his other hand, he gently grabbed my hand, interlocking his fingers with mine.

When we got back to my house, Jan kissed me on the cheek and tipped his hat to me.

“Goodnight,” he said.

“Goodnight,” I repeated, watching him get on his tractor. When he left, I turned around to walk into my house.

I had expected the house to be empty by now, as it was already late, but when I entered I saw David, Chaim, Hinda, and Tzipora all sitting quietly at the table. Their faces were lit up from the lanterns hung around the room, and I could feel the thickness in air.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Rachel,” Hinda said. She got up from the table and walked towards me. “It’s your father. He wasn’t feeling so well, so he went to lie down.”

“Is he OK?” I asked, searching everyone’s faces for an answer.

“I am sorry,” Chaim said, looking at me. “He didn’t wake up.”

Hinda hugged me tight, not letting me go.

“I am so sorry, dear,” Hinda said. “I know how close you were.”

“He was very peaceful,” David said. “He was very old, and had a full life.”

“No,” I shook my head.

“He was seventy-two,” David said. “Most people here are lucky if they reach sixty.”

“No, but he didn’t seem old,” I said, barely able to release the words.

“Don’t worry, Dear,” Hinda said, still holding me tight. “Everything is going to be all right.”