We Were the Lucky Ones

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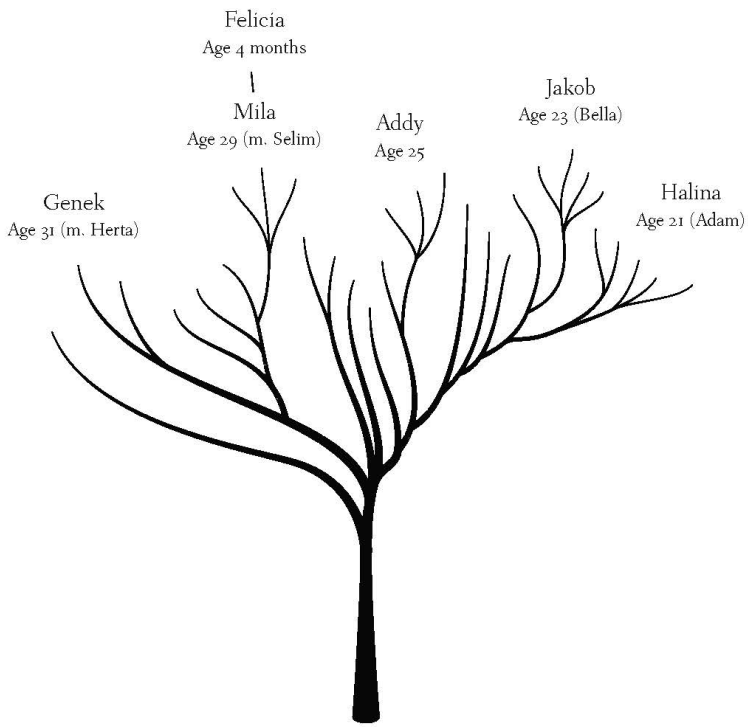
To my husband, Robert Farinholt, with all of my heart. And to my grandfather, with love and wonderment

The Kurc Family

March 1939



Based on true events

By the end of the Holocaust, ninety per cent of Poland's three million Jews were annihilated; of the more than thirty thousand Jews who lived in Radom, fewer than three hundred survived.

Part I

CHAPTER ONE

Addy

Paris, France ~ Early March 1939

It wasn't his plan to stay up all night. His plan was to leave the Grand Duc around midnight and catch a few hours of sleep at the Gare du Nord before his train ride back to Toulouse. Now – he glances at his watch – it's nearly six in the morning.

Montmartre has this effect on him. The jazz clubs and cabarets, the throngs of Parisians, young and defiant, unwilling to let anything, even the threat of war, dampen their spirits – it's intoxicating. He finishes his cognac and stands, fighting the temptation to stay for one last set; surely there is a later train he can take. But he thinks of the letter tucked into his coat pocket and his breath catches. He should go. Gathering his overcoat, scarf, and cap, he bids his companions *adieu* and weaves his way between the club's dozen or so tables, still half full of patrons smoking Gitanes and swaying to Billie Holiday's 'Time on My Hands'.

As the door swings closed behind him, Addy inhales deeply, savouring the fresh air, raw and cool in his lungs. The frost on Rue Pigalle has begun to melt and the cobblestone street shimmers, a kaleidoscope of greys beneath the late-winter sky. He'll have to walk quickly to make his train, he realises. Turning, he steals a glimpse at his reflection in the club's window, relieved to find the young man peering back at him presentable, despite the sleepless night. His posture is square, his trousers cinched high on his waist, still sharply cuffed and creased, his dark hair combed back the way he prefers it, neat, without a part. Looping his scarf around his neck, he sets off toward the station.

Elsewhere in the city, Addy presumes, the streets are quiet, deserted. Most

iron-gated storefronts won't open until noon. Some, whose owners have fled to the countryside, won't open at all – FERMÉ INDÉFINIMENT, the signs in the windows read. But here in Montmartre, Saturday has faded seamlessly to Sunday and the streets are alive with artists and dancers, musicians and students. They stumble from the clubs and cabarets, laughing and carrying on as if they hadn't a worry in the world. Addy tucks his chin into his coat collar as he walks, looking up just in time to sidestep a young woman in a silver lamé gown, striding in his direction. '*Excusez-moi, Monsieur*,' she smiles, blushing from beneath a yellow plumed cap. A singer, Addy surmises. A week ago he might have engaged her in conversation. '*Bonjour, Mademoiselle*,' he nods, continuing on.

A whiff of fried chicken triggers a rumble in his stomach as Addy rounds the corner onto Rue Victor Masse, where a line has already begun to form outside Mitchell's all-night diner. Through the restaurant's glass door he can see customers chatting over mugs of steaming coffee, their dishes heaped with American-style breakfasts. *Another time*, he tells himself, continuing east toward the station.

His train has barely left the terminal when Addy pulls the letter from his coat pocket. Since it arrived yesterday he's read it twice and thought of little else. He runs his fingers over the return address. *Warszawska 14*, *Radom*, *Poland*.

He can picture his mother perfectly, perched at her satinwood writing table, pen in hand, the sun catching the soft, plump curve of her jaw. He misses her more than he ever imagined he would when he left Poland six years ago for France. He was nineteen at the time and had thought hard about staying in Radom, where he'd be near his family, and where he hoped he could make a career of his music – he'd been composing since he was a teenager and couldn't imagine anything more fulfilling than spending his days at a keyboard, writing songs. It was his mother who had urged him to apply to the prestigious *Institut Polytechnique* in Grenoble – and who had insisted that he attend once he was accepted. 'Addy, you are a born engineer,' she said, reminding him of the time when, at seven years old, he'd dismantled the family's broken radio, strewn its parts across the dining-room table, then put it back together again like new.

'It's not so easy to make a living in music,' she said. 'I know it's your passion. You have a gift for it, and you should pursue it. But first, Addy, your degree.'

Addy knew his mother was right. And so, he set off for university, promising that he would return home when he graduated. But as soon as he'd left behind the provincial confines of Radom, a whole new life opened up for him. Four years later, diploma in hand, he was offered a job in Toulouse that paid well. He had friends from all over the world – from Paris, Budapest, London, New Orleans. He had a new taste for art and culture, for *paté de foie gras* and the buttery perfection of a freshly baked croissant. He had a place of his own (albeit a tiny one) in the heart of Toulouse and the luxury of returning to Poland whenever he pleased, which he did at least twice a year, for Rosh Hashanah and Passover. And he had his weekends in Montmartre, a neighbourhood so steeped in musical talent that it was not uncommon for the locals to share a drink at the Hot Club with Cole Porter, to take in an impromptu performance by Django Reinhardt at Bricktop's, or, if you were Addy, to watch in awe as Josephine Baker fox-trotted across the stage at Zelli's with her diamond-collared pet cheetah in tow. Addy couldn't remember a time in his life when he'd been more inspired to put notes to paper – so much so that he'd begun to wonder what it might feel like to move to the United States, the home of the greats, the birthplace of jazz. Maybe in America, he dreamt, he could try his luck at adding his own compositions to the contemporary canon. It was tempting, if it didn't mean putting an even greater distance between him and his family.

As he slips his mother's letter from its envelope, a tiny shock runs down Addy's spine.

Dearest Addy,

Thank you for your letter. Your father and I loved your description of the opera at the Palais Garnier. We're fine here, although Genek is still furious about his demotion, and I don't blame him. Halina is the same as ever, so hotheaded I often wonder if she might implode. We are awaiting an announcement from Jakob that he and Bella are engaged, but you know your brother, he can't be rushed! I've been cherishing my afternoons spent with baby Felicia. I can't wait for you to meet her, Addy. Her hair has begun

to grow in – cinnamon red! One of these days she'll sleep through the night. Poor Mila is exhausted. I keep reminding her it will get easier.

Addy flips the letter over, shifts in his seat. It is here that his mother's mood darkens.

I should tell you, darling, that some things have changed here in the last month. Rotsztajn has closed his doors to the ironworks – hard to believe, after nearly fifty years in the business. Kosman, too, has moved his family and the watch trade to Palestine, after his store was vandalised one too many times. I'm not relaying this news to worry you, Addy, I just didn't feel right keeping it from you. Which brings me to the main purpose of this letter: your father and I feel that you should stay in France for Passover and wait until summer to visit us. We'll miss you terribly, but it seems dangerous to travel right now, especially across German borders. Please, Addy, think about it. Home is home – we'll be here. In the meantime, send us news when you can. How is the new composition coming along?

With love, Mother

Addy sighs, trying once again to make sense of it all. He's heard of shops closing, of Jewish families leaving for Palestine. His mother's news doesn't come as a surprise. It's her tone that unsettles him. She's mentioned in the past how things have begun to change around her – she'd been livid when Genek was stripped of his law degree – but mostly Nechuma's letters are cheerful, upbeat. Just last month, she'd asked if he would join her for a Moniusko performance at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw and had told him of the anniversary dinner she and Sol enjoyed at Wierzbicki's, of how Wierzbicki himself had greeted them at the door, offered to prepare something special for them, off the menu.

This letter is different. His mother, Addy realises, is afraid.

He shakes his head. Not once in his twenty-five years has he ever known Nechuma to express fear of any kind. Nor has he or any of his brothers and sisters ever missed a Passover together in Radom. Nothing is more important to his mother than her family – and now she is asking him to stay in Toulouse

for the holiday. At first, Addy had convinced himself that she was being overly anxious. But was she?

He stares out the window at the familiar French countryside. The sun is visible from behind the clouds; there are hints of spring colour in the fields. The world looks benign, the same as it always has. And yet these cautionary words from his mother have shifted his equilibrium, thrown him off-balance.

Dizzy, Addy closes his eyes, thinking back to his last visit home in September, searching for a clue, something he might have missed. His father, he recalls, had played his weekly game of cards with a group of fellow merchants – Jews and Poles – beneath the white-eagle fresco on the ceiling of Podworski's Pharmacy; Father Krol, a priest at the Church of Saint Bernardine and an admirer of Mila's virtuosity at the piano, had stopped by for a recital. For Rosh Hashanah, the cook had made honey-glazed challah, and Addy had stayed up listening to Benny Goodman, drinking Côte de Nuits and laughing with his brothers late into the night. Even Jakob, reserved as he usually was, had set down his camera and joined in the camaraderie. Things had seemed relatively normal.

And then Addy's throat goes dry as he considers a thought: what if the clues were there but he hadn't been paying enough attention? Or worse, what if he'd missed them simply because he didn't want to see them?

His mind flashes to the freshly painted swastika he'd come across on the wall of the Jardin Goudouli in Toulouse. To the day he'd overheard his bosses at the engineering firm whispering about whether they should consider him a liability – they'd thought he was out of earshot. To the shops closed all over Paris. To the photographs in the French papers of the aftermath of November's *Kristallnacht*: smashed storefronts, synagogues burnt to the ground, thousands of Jews fleeing Germany, rolling their bedside lamps and potatoes and elderly along with them in wheelbarrows.

The signs were there, for sure. But Addy had downplayed them, brushed them off. He'd told himself that there was no harm in a little graffiti; that if he were to lose his job, he'd find a new one; that the events unfolding in Germany, though disturbing, were happening across the border and would be contained. Now, though, with his mother's letter in hand, he sees with alarming clarity the warnings he'd chosen to ignore.

Addy opens his eyes, nauseated suddenly by a single notion: *you should have returned home months ago.*

He folds the letter into its envelope and slides it back into his coat pocket. He'll write to his mother, he resolves. As soon as he gets to his flat in Toulouse. He'll tell her not to worry, that he will be returning to Radom as planned, that he wants to be with the family now more than ever. He'll tell her that the new composition is coming along well, and that he looks forward to playing it for her. This thought brings a trace of comfort, as he imagines himself at the keys of his parents' Steinway, his family gathered around.

Addy lets his gaze fall once again to the placid countryside. Tomorrow, he decides, he'll buy a train ticket, line up his travel documents, pack his belongings. He won't wait for Passover. His boss will be angry with him for leaving sooner than expected, but Addy doesn't care. All that matters is that in a few short days, he'll be on his way home.