

The Banquet of Esther Rosenbaum

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The best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, who with bleeding hands and hearts hold fast to the intelligence of their time.

Huelsenbeck: *Dada Manifesto*, 1917

I know that new ideas can only be executed by the hungry and the discontented.

George Grosz

Prologue

1946

“Glass chandeliers have melted in the heat of the flames, forming chains as fine as spun sugar. Walking through the auditorium, they clink eerily above my head. Theatr Hoffmann is littered with tiers of scorched velvet seats and the bodies of dismembered plaster angels. Pigeons eye me balefully from the nests they have constructed in the crumbled ruins of the stalls. Occasionally, a bird flies up from the burnt floorboards, its wings setting into motion the glass threads of the chandeliers. The last time I visited, the air was filled with the noise of applause. Clapping hands, beating wings. The first night of *Green Phoenix*. Kaya’s blond beauty as fragile as melted glass; her words burning our hearts. Now, it’s the sugar chain chandeliers whispering and cracking above my head.

The floorboards of the stage are dangerous to negotiate. I crawl my way across its uneven surface to the prompt corner where I sit up on my heels and survey the scene. The sun has settled directly overhead and it’s scorching hot inside the burnt-out theatre, as if the place were still stuck in the eye of a bomb’s conflagration. I carry a bag made out of coarse felt strapped around my body. I loosen the belt ties and pull out a flask of water and a sheaf of manuscript paper. I no longer wear my tapestry skirts and my old neighbour Esau Jakoby is dead. We last met in a snow-filled wasteland, our eyes smarting from the spirals of black smoke that pumped out from the row of chimneys behind us. Esau was a smudge of tears, soot and falling snow.

“It’s Esther Rosenbaum, who else? Taller than the tallest Junker in the land.”

I lip read his words at a distance and I believe this is what he told

me, but a line of barbed wire was coiled across his lips. Then he was gone, down into the ground where he settled like a stone. This is what happened to exiles in those days of snow and death. Our ammonite bones the only story in that blasted wasteland. I pulled my blanket over my head and crouched down in the snow, a curled heap that might, just might be overlooked by the men in the watch towers. I cupped snow in my hands and licked moisture from the clumped flakes. No tapestry skirts to find out my stories, just piles of bones.

My eyes are sharp. One blue, one green; the sea and the forest.

My father told me my first stories and encouraged me to tell my own. I didn't disappoint him, I hope. My stories just whispers at night. Faces pressed so close in their bunks, words melted in dehydrated throats. A woman of worth, at last, "*clothed in strength and dignity.*" Well, there was precious little else clothing us. The snow, the rain. Sunshine as bright as a gold coin, wedged in a sky as grey as my skin. Threadbare people, until night fell and I drew on the floor of the hut with pieces of charcoal rescued from the wood stove. I told stories and I fed imaginations that were as greedy as hollow stomachs. Scheherazade in her soot-coated rags. Once, I invented recipes inspired by the stories of my world, but it was rubbed out as easily as the charcoal pictures under my bare feet. My listeners could only feed on the memories of my story-recipes: clock cakes served up on plates of bone; a jugged hare resting inside a hollowed-out toy drum; pastries twisted up like a Renaissance plait. And a magical clock that played out the lives of its creators: *the metal from a father's belt buckle; feathers from an old woman's mattress; even a cheap candlestick that lit up a first love affair...*

By the end, I had become a voice and little more. Each morning, hands reached out and rubbed my boney feet, forcing me awake. A pulse of heat travelling slowly up my frozen body –

I shall bring my last story full circle sitting in the ruins of Theater Hoffmann. The sun is my only spotlight, my chorus the pigeons who fly around its charred interior.

The stage is set –

bone girl

berlin, 1915

The crisis blows up in the early hours of the morning, shortly before Purim gets underway. It's five o'clock in the morning and the stove in the apartment kitchen is burning hot, releasing the smell of baking hamantaschen. Every spare surface is hidden under baking trays lent by our neighbours. I'm kneading dough in the kitchen alongside Mama when Benjamin finally arrives. He's not wearing either his wig, or his costume, just his everyday moleskin trousers and a green frock coat that dwarfs his scraggy body. He barely glances in my direction, but calls out for Pappa, who is lurking in the bedroom next door. Pappa emerges in a fluster, his black coat flapping at his heels and his prayer shawl unravelling. He is wearing his wig, which I made for him out of old strips of newspaper and parcel string.

"You didn't paint over the dragon, Esther," he chides me, simultaneously ushering Benjamin through the bedroom doorway. "Your backcloth would look better draped over a Christian altarpiece than shown at our Purimspiel."

"It's too late to change anything now."

As usual, Benjamin comes to my defence. I hope it's a good sign, that he's still going to play heroine in the Purimspiel, but the truth is there's been no word from him for days and that's why Pappa has been so tetchy. The dragon I've painted on my backcloth, wreathed round a fig tree, is a mere sideshow. Pappa is convinced his lead actor hasn't learnt his lines, but I think something more is at stake. Benjamin is our next-door neighbour in the mietskasernen and, every year, plays the role of Queen Esther in the Purimspiel Pappa writes and directs with relish – sporting a very daring wig, red as a battle scar. Truth to tell,

with no Benjamin, there's no Purimspiel. But this year, there's a new threat from beyond our borders: war has broken out and rumour bites hard into our lives. There have been constant food shortages, which means days spent queuing in the streets frozen by late frosts, blowing on numb fingers. We can only celebrate Purim, because everyone has rallied round to supply Mama with brown paper bags full of flour and handfuls of eggs. The rumours are many and varied, but rumours of call-up papers being issued to the Jews of the Scheuenviertel has caused a particular stir. Pappa has been shut away in the bedroom writing his playscript for the last couple of weeks and so is completely out of touch with the latest news, but Mama and I hear everything on the stairwells where neighbours gather and barter what little is left of precious stocks – slivers of olive soap, handfuls of ersatz coffee and the sheets of brown paper which we use to replace broken glass. They also whisper the names of sons and fathers who have enlisted. Benjamin Stein's name hasn't been added to the roll call as yet, but I dread it. Although he is a violinist of rare skill – and one recognised as such beyond the Scheuenviertel for his talent – that means little now war has broken out and music and dancing have become a guilty secret along with luxuries, like scented soaps and fresh eggs.

The door to the bedroom is slammed shut and Mama and I are left to bake the hamantaschen, little three-cornered cakes, stuffed full of poppy seeds, which will be distributed to the refugees in the hostel at Auguststrasse later this evening after the Purimspiel. The thought of these cakes makes me lick my lips, but they taste only of sweat. I'm greasing baking trays, my ears alert to the slightest sound from behind the closed bedroom door, when suddenly it flies open again and Pappa stamps out.

"Explain to Ida and Esther what you have just explained to me," he demands.

Please God, I whisper under my breath, let Benjamin have only forgotten his costume – it wouldn't be the first time.

"Tell them why you have to go and fight. Go on."

He drags Benjamin into the kitchen by the sleeve of his coat and thrusts him down on a milk churn, the only available seat.

"Ach, doesn't one blow just lead to another?"

It's true then, Benjamin has gone to enlist and that's why he's been so elusive in recent days. My friend looks over to me, the expression in his eyes like that of a lost dog. He's not finding explanation easy, but why should he?

"I get to wear a uniform and fight for the Kaiser. It shows I'm as good as the next man."

"You need to kill to prove that?" Pappa asks, incredulous.

We all understand what he means – why does a Jew have to go to such lengths to prove his value? A musician who carries a gun is an anomaly, not proof of how we should live alongside our Christian neighbours.

"You should be playing my daughter's namesake, not an idiot," Pappa sneers.

"What do you think, Esther?" Benjamin retaliates. "Will you wish me well, at least? I wanted to make a quick getaway, but I couldn't do that, not after all we have shared as neighbours..."

"Like a burglar?"

I'm snide in my response, because I'm frightened. Benjamin grabs his collar as if under arrest and pretends to hoist himself up off the floor, but I can't laugh at his antics like I usually do.

"You're staying to do the Purimspiel, aren't you?"

Pappa snorts and turns on his heel, back into the bedroom. The door is slammed shut for a second time. Mama follows him and I can hear her trying to calm him down as only she knows how. Benjamin stays sitting on the milk churn.

"I don't know if I can pretend any more, Esther. Take a look at the world out there and then tell me if putting on a dress and playing heroine is going to help? It's a nonsense, isn't it? We have real enemies to fight, but not with words."

There is a long pause, after he has spoken. If I accept this argument, it means losing my friend. So much for the power of the spoken word. Benjamin tries to recruit me to his cause one more time.

"We are old friends, aren't we? Surely we can trust each other to do what is right?"

Saying this, he plucks a parcel wrapped in newspaper from out of his coat pocket. It's my Purim gift, which he hands over with a

typical cavalier flourish. Inside, there's a palm tree modelled out of dough. Benjamin has always bought me gifts of sweets and savouries – wrapped up in tissue paper when times were better – claiming they would take the sting out of my growing pains. Fifteen years old and seven feet tall in my stockinged feet. Many a time, he has made my outsized limbs seem no more threatening than a sneeze. I look at the palm tree lying adrift in my big paw and smile. It's hard to contradict my friend when his very name seems like a place in my heart where everything can be talked into being. He takes the newspaper wrapping back and folds it up into the shape of a bird, then slots his fingers inside its wings and flies it in circles around my head.

“But what about the Purimspiel?” I try again.

“I really don't know, Esther.”

He gives me the paper bird and then he walks out of the apartment – away to a war, or to a bierkeller, who knows? My world seems to have tipped upside down, like a soup plate on an unsteady tray. I usually confide in Pappa when something worries me, but today is different. We share a worry and a huge doubt. Pappa has always said doubt can be a force for good, if it leads to questions. *Teach thy tongue to say I do not know* is his favourite rabbinical quotation, but this morning there are too many doubts surfacing for comfort. Mama returns to the kitchen, looking tearful. Pappa is evidently beyond reasoning with and I don't want another argument about my backcloth.

“We need to find Frau Frankl,” Mama announces.

Business as usual, even if there is a war on and Benjamin is absconding. Frau Frankl and her husband are the best bakers in Gipstrasse and they can be relied on to source spices and other scarce ingredients in these times.

“If she's not at the bakery, she'll be at the hostel, Esther. And take these to haggle with.”

She thrusts a handful of porcelain chips into my pocket. Each chip is as round as a thumbnail and has been marked up with a number matching the seats in the Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue. There are far too few seats, particularly on holidays, so the chips are raffled, but Pappa is cantor and this Purim he has obviously given Mama some of his hidden supply to help her obtain saffron and cinnamon. I make

my way down the stairwell, cautious in the gloom. The stone steps are worn down from overuse (it's like treading on a ladder made out of crescent moons) and they are often crowded with people trading bread and gossip. The savagely cold winter we have just endured saw our cramped apartments and winding staircases overrun by rats, who crawled inside to escape the cold. Their fried bodies still litter the tops of the exposed water pipes, emitting a terrible stench which follows me down into the courtyard. Actually, courtyard is too grand a word for such a squalid place – it's little more than a dirty big puddle fed by open drains.

Our apartment faces out on to Gipstrasse and the wider world, but backs on to dozens of near identical courtyards, an endless brick maze for those not born within its walls. Each courtyard is a dim shaft where the sun tries to penetrate, but more often than not fails. You can barely turn round, because it's always a squash on a day like today when everyone is out and about parading in their holiday finery, children anchored to their hips. I should be celebrating too, because my birthday coincides with Purim, but Benjamin's news has shaken me and I don't feel like decorating my hair with lilac sprigs as I usually do. I'm wearing the new skirt I've been given by Mama, stitched out of one of Esau Jakoby's old tapestries. Esau is one of the Scheuenviertel's many street traders, and a Purimspiel regular. Ever since I started accelerating towards the sky, he's had a lot of business from Mama.

His friend Agnes, the flowerseller, sits (as she always does) at the entrance to our courtyard, selling bunches of brightly coloured stocks. She's blind and her eyes have the texture of boiled eggs. She identifies me with no trouble, because I throw such a huge shadow over her.

“Is Frau Rosenbaum baking hamantaschen? I'll give you flowers for a cake, liebe.”

“Yes, Agnes, she is. I'll bring you some when I get home.”

I make my promise and leave the dark confines of the courtyard for the chaos that is the Scheuenviertel; past the bookshops, publishing houses and printers on Grosse Hamburgerstrasse where my father buys prayer books and the scholarly texts he uses in his classes at the Academy for Jewish Studies (and in the lessons he gives to me, much

to many people's disgust). Past Toynbee Hall where he gives free lectures on religion to Jews who are too poor to even buy a book; past the synagogue which is modelled on the Alhambra and boasts a magnificent dome covered in gilded buttresses. This is one of the few buildings in the district to have central heating and gas lighting. We crowd inside to feed on its light and warmth and marvel at the huge glass skylights adorned with sacred texts. They run over the walls and around the painted cast iron pillars. What we gaze on and pray for is always more than just a gesture, even away from the synagogue.

"Life is religion; religion is life," Pappa says. "They are as close as the hand inside the glove."

I write his lessons down on my hands and maybe this is what our Rabbis do too in their private study? Over time, their many words have run together and formed elbow-length gloves. The hand in the glove, buried in sayings, submerged in meaning. I'm no different. Doctors from all over Berlin have hunted me out to measure my growing bones. They pinch my skin and quarrel between themselves over my terrifying height. Sometimes, I yearn to be invisible, but that has a cost all of its own as I've discovered from the Russian refugees who are pouring into the city for sanctuary.

Their temporary home – an old cotton equipment factory in Auguststrasse – is where I'm heading. Frau Frankl works as a volunteer in the women's dormitory and that's where I find her, flitting between the narrow beds which are slotted in at odd angles between pieces of discarded machinery, evidence of the business that was once run in here. The hostel is a crumbling blister from the outside; inside, it's a claustrophobic, overheated warren, stretching up five storeys. Its walls are mapped with restless shadows, which exceed even my extraordinary height. The furnishings are provided by our neighbours under supervision from the Board of the Jewish Community, including the wooden clothes pulleys which swing dangerously close to my ears. Frau Frankl sees me the minute I enter the dormitory, and charges over to my side. Her cheeks are flushed and her sheitel has slipped on her head, disguising the solitary black eyebrow which cuts across her forehead like a whiplash.

"What's all this I've been hearing from Esau?"

She steers me towards an empty bed, obviously under the impression it will take my weight better than a conventional chair. She opts for a three-legged stool opposite me.

“The Purimspiel is to take place right here and not in your apartment, that’s what,” she continues in her rapid-fire manner. “And can you tell me who might be expected to organise everything, as if I couldn’t guess?”

It looks as if I’m going to have to make peace with Frau Frankl, before trying to bargain with her. Pappa only announced the change in venue last night.

“The men’s dormitory might work,” I suggest. “My backcloth could hang between the wood stoves. What do you think, Frau Frankl?”

“I think your father is a genius, whatever the stage he appears on.”

She looks up at me from her little footstool and smiles. The truth of the matter is, she doesn’t mind a challenge and she has always admired my father, a scholar and a teacher of the faith that sustains her whenever human enterprise gets beyond her control. Frau Frankl is a round, untidy woman with a habit of wearing little leather notebooks, in which she makes her many lists, tied to her skirt belt.

“I hear he plays Haman again – and with a new beard.”

My turn to smile. It’s the moment I’ve been waiting for – the moment I can change the subject and produce the synagogue tickets, which clink satisfyingly as I pour them in and out of my palms. Frau Frankl’s eyes light up. She knows she’ll have no trouble bartering them for assistance in setting up the new Purimspiel stage. We make a pretence of haggling and then she presents me with three paper bags she has already prepared for Mama – one filled with strands of precious saffron, the others with cinnamon sticks as fragile as the charcoal I use to sketch the Purimspiel backcloths.

“Herr Rosenbaum’s choice of subject is sadly an apt one in these times,” Frau Frankl muses, rattling the chips between her fingers. “A woman who prevented a bloodbath just by talking down her enemy Haman at a banquet. Imagine that.”

I have never found it hard to imagine my namesake. She would

resemble the actresses I see photographed in the newspapers – women like Kaya Tucholski, one of the major stars of the Bebelsberg Studio. When war broke out last year, she volunteered to work as an auxiliary nurse in the city’s hospital wards. I’ve kept a photograph showing her on her rounds dressed in a nurse’s cap – and a floor-length, sable fur coat. Kaya Tucholski is a china doll of a woman who inhabits a world I doubt I will ever enter, but that doesn’t stop me dreaming that I might one day paint backcloths for the Schauspielhaus, or the Bebelsberg Studio. And what if Kaya Tucholski were ever to play Queen Esther? What a moment that would be – but our Purimspiel only casts my father’s students from the Academy and several of our more extrovert neighbours like Benjamin Stein.

No doubt, there will also be competition from the flocks of pigeons which regularly escape through the attic ceiling to scavenge for bread warming up on the dormitory stoves. I hate the pigeons’ scabby eyes and querulous manners. So small, so vulnerable, but ignorant of their plight – unlike the Russian exiles. They have lost everything, even their names have been extinguished in the pogrom fires. There’s one such stranger hiding under my dormitory bed, as I sit bartering spices and advice with Frau Frankl. It’s the girl we call Rachel. Frau Frankl pulls her out by her leg, and she emerges reluctantly. Her name is a borrowed one, like many of the other names used by the hostel residents, but in Rachel’s case it’s because she’s a mute. No one has been able to guess her age either, because she’s so thin she could be a pale thread worked up against the dark wood of the dormitory walls. Rachel hides under Frau Vishniac’s bed – one of the older hostel residents – because she’s scared she might otherwise remind her of her dead babies. Frau Frankl searches in her pockets and finds a bag filled with figs.

“Ach, that those two would only find hope in one another,” she says, offering the fruit to Rachel on the tips of her fingers.

It might well be Frau Frankl’s wish, but it’s not one shared by Frau Vishniac. I’ve often seen her creeping along the dormitory walls, tapping them in a bid to wake her children who she’s convinced lie hidden beneath them. I try and keep to the spirit of the festival occasion when I reply, however.

“Well, anything’s possible, as Queen Esther proved all those years ago.”

Rachel has finished the figs, something Frau Frankl takes as a sign to finish our conversation. She crunches up the empty paper bag, as if twisting my words with it. I know she sees things differently, that what she believes possible are the hundred kinds of cruelty of this world, foremost being forced into exile, like Frau Vishniac and little Rachel. “Exile” was a word I once recognised only in my history books. I had never realised before the strangers came that it could exist in my present, outside my reading. Visiting the hostel, I hear stories I can scarcely believe. Frau Frankl says it’s as if people are constantly in the process of redrafting their statements for a court hearing, but what court can possibly bring them back to the safety of their old world? So much has been destroyed and torn apart, as easily as a brown paper bag, so what point in stories that say otherwise? Except that Frau Frankl is a woman of faith, and faith decrees at Purim that we trust in a miracle in which a woman rights the world with a few choice words. Frau Frankl shooes Rachel away from her side, like she would one of the more persistent pigeons, and turns her attention back to the Purimspiel preparations. She consults her latest list in her notebook and recites its contents, as we make our way back down the stairs to the entrance hall. “Chairs – three dozen; nails for the backcloth – a handful; candles – maybe a hundred, if we can borrow enough; trestle tables for the hamantaschen. Ach, Esther, I shall see you at curtain up. Get along now and find Esau. You must tell him he’s to bring your backcloth here the minute he can. ”

Storm

berlin, 1915

I eat Benjamin's palm tree and give the paper bird away to a neighbour's daughter on my return to the courtyard. Hovering at the foot of the stairwell, I wait on Esau. Just inside the courtyard's entrance, someone else stands waiting, a heavily pregnant woman dressed in worn out clothes, her grossly extended stomach mocking the rest of her starved body. The stranger holds a dirty chemise in one hand and rests the other on top of her belly. I realise we are waiting for the same person. Shortly after propping myself against the courtyard wall, a familiar figure lurches into view from the direction of Auguststrasse. It's Esau, struggling between the shafts of his shabby little cart like an ant trying to push along an orange box. The stranger takes a few tentative steps forwards, but doesn't display the chemise and I think she must be shy of trading so blatantly on the street.

Esau lugs his cart past Agnes and her baskets of dying flowers and comes to a halt in front of the pregnant woman. He tips back his top hat by way of greeting. Esau usually wears his hat pulled down low over his brows to disguise the wrinkles that have opened up across his forehead, like a fan. The woman hands him the chemise quickly, looking around her as she does so, as if she were trading a gun, or a nugget of Forget-Me-Not for some wild-eyed addict. Esau's eyes are red rimmed, but they are sharp. The chemise is as ragged as the rest of the woman's wardrobe, so he only offers a few pfennigs in exchange. Before I know it, I've produced a few strands of saffron that have escaped into my pocket and I give them to the woman.

"Sell these as well," I instruct her.

She sniffs up the strands I've put in her hand and bursts into tears.

God knows what memories are let loose for her by the smell, but maybe it's just the confusion she feels at being rescued by a giantess and a monkey in a top hat? The deal done, she walks back down the street, hugging her belly and occasionally taking another sniff at the precious saffron.

"A Purim gift, Esau," I say, before he can tick me off. "Now, listen: there's a job for you to do. Frau Frankl wants the backcloth taken over to the hostel at once."

He smiles his snaggle-toothed smile and shakes his head, but not unkindly. He's traded with the Rosenbaums long enough to forgive our many eccentricities.

"I hope your mother has prepared a dish of something by way of thanks."

"Mama's making enough to feed an army."

"So, Frau Rosenbaum is turning soldier too," he sighs. "It would seem I'm the only one to be left driving a cart and not a tank these days."

He levers his cart to the bottom of the stairwell and follows me up the stairs. We live on the seventh floor of the mietskasernen and it's a steep climb. I look back over my shoulder to ensure Esau is keeping up with my long legged stride and catch him resting against the wall.

"Ach, I walk in straight lines, Esther. This endless winding up and down is fit only for snakes."

Mama consoles Esau with a dish of orange segments when we finally arrive in the kitchen. He shares them with me sitting at the old deal table, which has already been cleared of the first batch of hamantaschen by volunteers living on our stairwell. The table is very old, its surface scarred by dozens of chopping knives. Pappa joins us after a short while, but he is edgy and doesn't contribute much to the conversation. Esau lifts a segment of orange discreetly from the plate, before risking a question that might well lead to his evacuation from the premises.

"And what about Benjamin, Herr Rosenbaum? I saw his costume hanging on the bedroom door as I came in, but no sign of its wearer."

His question hits the rest of us hard, like a bullet. Pappa moans and

Mama drops the baking tray she has just removed from the oven.

“This is not the time, Esau,” she begins, but Pappa is quick to intervene.

“So, when exactly is the right time, Ida? The show due to start at seven and Benjamin already on board a troop ship.”

Mama instinctively puts her hand on my shoulder.

“He might be hunting out ribbons for his costume, Isaac...”

Pappa sighs heavily. He must save the day and he can’t do that sitting on a milk churn. He offers to help load Esau’s cart and they exit over the pile of damaged cakes littering the floor. Mama goes down on her knees and starts picking up the crumbs. Her vertebrae puncture the back of her dress, like beads, and there is a large patch of sweat tucked in between her protruding shoulder blades.

“He really has gone, hasn’t he?”

“You can never second-guess such a man, Esther.”

I decide there and then not to go the Purimspiel, but Mama chivvies me along. She says the walk will do me good, if nothing else, so I leave her packing up the unspoilt hamantaschen and make my way out. My journey to Auguststrasse is slow, but I’m glad to have my hair loose and my stockings rolled up in my pockets, enabling me to feel the soft leather of my shoes against my skin. In sight of the hostel, I bump into Herr Rosenfeld, who is off to Frau Jacob’s to borrow some pins for the costume making. His shoes I can’t help notice are little more than leather threads, stuck together with mud and probably a lot worse from the cobbled streets. He is as pale as a winter candle.

“Your backcloth is up, Esther,” Herr Rosenfeld informs me. “It’s been judged a big success. Certainly, it’s more of a success than the acting company. Eli Mendelssohn hasn’t put in an appearance as yet and he’s supposed to be bringing Haman’s sword. Your father is most put out.”

“But apart from Eli?” I interrupt.

“Does it matter?”

Yes, it does matter. I’m fifteen today, but what kind of celebration is this? I slam the hostel door shut behind me, but I’ve barely made my entrance when a pile of newspaper lands at my feet. It’s Pappa’s wig.

“We can’t continue with this charade,” he shouts to someone lurking in the shadows behind him. “A villain, but no hero? It’s a travesty.”

So, it’s true. Benjamin really has abandoned us – and on my birthday too. I sink down on the bottom stair, legs pulled up to my chin. I’m blocking Pappa’s route, but I don’t move. He gently nudges me with his toe.

“Maybe you could be our understudy, Esther?”

The idea is so preposterous, I burst out laughing. Women don’t act in the Purimspiel, but I’m a giantess. Dispensation, or desperation? I can hardly tell from Pappa’s expression. His burnt cork beard swamps his mouth and his eyes are mere shadows in the dark, dank stairway.

“I can’t,” I reply, surly and ashamed, because what else can I say?

I don’t want to be stared at. It happens all the time out in the street and in the courtyards and I’ve had my fill of living on a stage every waking minute. Pappa shrugs and turns around to talk to the stage manager. The men’s dormitory is packed to the rafters. Nearly sixty people have been crammed in around the wood stoves. Pappa is reluctant to disappoint them by cancelling the show. The stage manager seems to think it’s the best course of action. The attic dormitory is not only overcrowded – there are also problems with a leaking roof and rotten floorboards. The deafening crash of a heavy rainfall drowns out their voices and I fail to hear the end of their argument. I put my hands over my ears and close my eyes, as the storm booms on overhead. I only gradually become aware that it’s raining indoors. Opening my eyes, I find Benjamin standing in front of me, decked out in Mama’s old dress, now heavily embroidered with wool and coloured paper. The rain is sliding off his bridal veil.

“You’ll miss the show, Esther.”

“Benjamin! I thought you’d gone.”

“A change of plan,” he concedes. “One more performance from Benjamin Stein and then it’s away to war.”

Confusion and happiness dart around inside my brain, like drunken mayflies. I want to hug my friend, but I’m stalled by a tuneless trumpet fanfare being played high up in the building.

“That’s my cue,” he says, bunching up his skirts and hurtling up

the first flight of stairs.

I glimpse his work boots as I follow at his heels. Bursting into the men's dormitory on the attic floor, there are startled cries from the audience and several of the younger children burst into tears at the sight of a man in a muddy bridal veil and a wheezing giantess.

“Am I too late, Isaac?”

Benjamin flicks his tulle veil back from his face and flashes a grin the width of the room. Pappa scowls, then smiles. He has obviously cast himself as saviour of a dire situation, but, as usual, with Benjamin around, he's been upstaged.

“Welcome, Herr Stein.”

“Just call me Majesty,” Benjamin retorts.

His boots clomp dangerously close to young hands that stretch out along the floor. Braver souls pull the wool loops on his dress, hindering his less than regal progress to the stage. The acting arena has been marked out by a row of empty tins filled with candles. My backcloth hangs between the two wood stoves, the dragon curling above Pappa's head. A round of applause as Benjamin makes it safely to his wedding day. Only Judith, his wife, remains unimpressed. She rolls her eyes and mutters something to her neighbour.

Judith Stein: a shoehorn of a woman who slips in and out of the mietskasernen, always ready to relieve people of their secrets. She is like one of the hostel pigeons, her eyes quick and alert for any stories to feed on. Judith claims the charities handing out turnip bread in our courtyard are staffed by communists trying to win our votes and that the Frankls who run the district bakery are as bent as a butcher's hook. When she first heard an organ play in our synagogue, she fainted clean away with shock at such a break with tradition.

She loathes the fact that her husband dresses up with brightly rouged cheeks and a horsehair wig wobbling on top of his black curls. She blames Pappa for this outrage, because he writes the scripts for the Purimspiels. She blames me for assisting in the costume making. She blames me, full stop, because her husband remains my constant friend – in spite of my strange looks. Judith Stein doesn't think it appropriate that her neighbours grow as tall as trees. She finds it even less appropriate that they befriend her husband when they are half his

age. She says as much to anyone who will listen (and many do).

She's still scowling when the play begins with Queen Esther and King Ahaseurus exchanging their wedding vows. A plate of Purim oranges stands in for the feast that will celebrate their nuptials, except, of course, it's no celebration because Haman is in attendance, his exaggerated false eyebrows folded up in a vicious frown. He wants the King to issue a proclamation that will see every Jew in the empire put to the sword.

"A nation of deceivers and murderers has infiltrated the tribes of the world," he warns in dark tones, as the wedding banquet gets underway.

The guests, made up of residents drawn from our stairwell, mutter and shake their heads in concern. The King bangs his tankard in support of Haman, unaware that his new bride was born a Jew.

"A nation who put their own laws up against those of every other nation. A nation that will willingly disobey our royal decree and so destroy the unity of the empire."

"Treason!" roar the wedding guests, warming to Haman's theme, and jumping to their feet, overturning crockery, glasses, figs and oranges.

"What nation is this, Haman?" they chorus.

"The Jews," he replies.

The audience falls silent. A few stray oranges tumble against the skirting boards, but otherwise nothing. Haman is usually greeted with jeers and catcalls and the shaking of dozens of rattles, but the audience is silent. The scenario is simply too close to recent events in their lives.

"To the grave with all of them," Herr Frankl, the baker, shouts, his cardboard beard slipping down his chest. "Shake to dust the star of Judah!"

The wedding guests have become a baying mob. Fingers run across throats; eyes roll. Thunder cracks in the distance. Haman slinks offstage and the scene changes swiftly. One of the student actors holds up a piece of cardboard. On it is written: "*Queen Esther's Bedroom.*" Mama's best candlestick and a silver mirror suffice as props. Benjamin's Queen paces the floor between the two wood stoves, shedding bouquet and

veil. Her guardian Mordecai argues that she must go and plead with the King.

“You can save everything, Esther,” he observes with chilling accuracy, “because you have nothing to lose and yet you can win the survival of God’s people. There is a glimmer of a chance, if you believe enough in the King’s love for you.”

“But dare I gamble on it?” Benjamin’s Queen asks, flinging his arms up in a tragic pose. “I shall pray and fast for three whole days and nights and then I will know what to do to meet this threat.”

The refugees move in closer, anxious to catch his every word. They shiver, because they remember only too well the feel of a hollow belly. They remember eating the roots of plants, hiding in holes dug in forest grounds. Benjamin knows this, Pappa knows this. The script – written out on scraps of paper torn from the margins of students’ essays – echoes their predicament, not just that of a Biblical heroine. Benjamin rushes over to the wood stove and smears himself in ashes. I know he’s no longer playacting: he’s gone deep inside the tragedy. His fingers claw through the ashes, smudging the grey rouge on his cheeks and lips. We all hold our breath. An audacious miracle, but here is Queen Esther inspiring belief in us all over again, thanks to a miracle that we know as well as we do our neighbours. A story about a Jewish Scheherazade, who used words alone to secure victory over her enemy.

An extraordinary silence follows Benjamin’s encounter with Mordecai. The thunder eases for a minute, no birds sing, no trees sweep against the hostel windows. Even the children around me stop squealing and pinching each other. Mama lights the candles which stand in old tins around the stage, but they are soon eclipsed by flashes of pale green lightning. It fills the room, its dancing fingers plucking at our upturned faces. The thunder returns and it seems even louder than before, roaring over our heads and obliterating all other sounds.

Benjamin stands frozen against my backcloth, his next speech lost in the storm’s racket. The rain drops like a curtain and the open windows let us breathe in its acrid smell. Suddenly, the floor beneath my feet begins to shake. Mama grabs hold of Rachel and hugs her to her chest.

“Blessed be the true Judge!” she screams, before they both slip through the disintegrating floorboards, as easily as a sheet of paper inside its envelope.

Instinctively, I reach out to Benjamin, but he seems tiny in the rapidly changing dimensions of the attic dormitory. Large cracks have opened up the walls, big black fingers that taunt the bright lightning. They dance together. Cracks and crackles of light and noise. The floor tips up and we move with it. We’ve gone overboard – down, down, into the guts of the upended hostel. An explosion of sound, followed by a terrible motion of sinking into the bowels of the earth. Several dozen people tumble down along with me, spinning like flies trapped in a jam jar. A blanket of bricks holding me as I bounce down into something unseen, unknown. Darkness presses against my eyelids.

The hostel has been whisked away like a piece of cloth. I open and shut my eyes; I listen to my drumming heart. My body is obstructed by a tremendous weight which presses against my chest and my breath whistles through fragments of plaster. Each part of my body is bearing this rubble up in a magnificent balancing act, but each time I draw breath, I’m bringing it still closer to my skin. My body is going to destroy me, after all. A transgressor in a world of pygmies. Hadn’t I always known it? I cling to sound, as a means of escape: the pulse of my blood, the tick of my heart, even the scraping of my hair against brick, but finally there is something else too, a footfall, a voice, and then a small patch of light breaks into my world.

“Esther? Where are you?”

It’s Benjamin. He has organised a rescue party, who ease me out of my brick cell and into the cold air that is the morning after the storm. Benjamin tells me I have been buried for over seven hours. His hands press down over my eyes in order to screen them, only letting them slip away when I’ve been lowered on to safe ground. It’s a while before my eyes stop stinging; the sunlight is so intense that at first I glimpse nothing but smudges of colour which metamorphose into an ugly sprawl of upended furniture, discarded clothing and limbs frozen in flight, trapped under piles of masonry, even the occasional head poking out of the sea of moving rubble. The refugee hostel has folded down to the ground, like a concertina’s belly. Benjamin kneels beside

me, rubbing my hands between his dust-covered fingers.

He struggles to speak, but his wife Judith is not so easily cowed. I can see her hopping from one pile of rubbish to another, rescuing a broken toy, a torn dress, a bloody brick, a loose nail, a letter. This latest catastrophe has brought life only to her lined face and crooked shoulders.

“Not even time to finish a letter,” she calls out to whoever is within earshot. “Look, neighbours, the writing stops just here. A word starts and then the building must have fallen...”

Benjamin ignores her and tries to comfort me. He turns my hands over and over, as if an explanation might have etched itself on to my palms. Judith spots us and darts over. “God have mercy!” she screams, prodding at my body in a vicious inspection. “What evil has she caused us this time?”

A noisy crowd surges up behind her. I can scarcely make out individual faces, but I sense the atmosphere turn electric, although all I have done is let Benjamin comfort me. He is up on his feet, pushing away the crowd who have edged in so close, one of them even manages to stand on my hand.

“Have you no pity?” Benjamin yells. “Her parents dead, but all you can do is stand and watch like vultures? Get a stretcher over here – and be quick.”

“Shut up, you fool,” Judith shouts back. “A stretcher for someone who has bought this disaster on us? A curse is what she deserves – may she follow the coffins of her children to their graves.”

Benjamin pushes her to one side and, ignoring the shouts of the other bystanders, begins to organise a speedy exit for me. I’m bundled up into a pile of knotted coats and carted away, Benjamin’s terrible revelation about my parents’ fate still ringing in my ears. My eyes are screened by a stranger’s hat. When we arrive at the Nursing Hospital of the Jewish Congregation, the doctors tuck me up like a curl of hair across two beds. Benjamin removes the hat from my eyes, but only after the windows of the ward have been blocked out with scraps of rags, leaving no natural light.

I open my eyes slowly, blue first, then the green, searching in vain for my parents in the dimness. A mouse scuttles down the side

of the bed, but it doesn't frighten me; if it dares brush against me, I'll imagine it's Mama's hand stroking me back into sleep after a nightmare. Benjamin sits beside me, still dressed in his bloodstained Purimspiel costume, but I'm unable so much as to reach out and stroke his exhausted face.

Esau

berlin, 1915

We sleep; we wake. I notice one morning that Benjamin's forehead is raw as a slab of meat. He had beaten his head against a pile of stones when he discovered my father, but he only tells me this much later. I sleep for a fortnight and when I first sit up, I discover I'm numb from head to foot. My injuries? I have two broken ribs, torn ligaments in my legs and a very black right eye.

"When did they bury Mama and Pappa?" I croak, my voice cracking from lack of use.

Benjamin pours me a glass of water. He's giving himself time to think how best to break the news.

"On a day that was as cold as you can imagine," he finally reveals. "The courtyard was jammed full. I put a stone on their graves for you, but you must visit when you are better." Benjamin looks away, as if he can't bear to see my distress. "They sleep beneath trees," he adds quietly.

"Chestnut trees?"

The next time he shows, Benjamin brings me a selection of leaves gathered from my parents' grave. Chestnut tree leaves. I press them against my sore eyes and wonder if they were picked from the tree under which my parents first met? Mama was on her way to the Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue and Pappa tried catching her attention by reciting a benediction for a horse chestnut tree standing in front of him. Eventually, she joined in, oblivious to the gawkers surrounding them. I imagine them now standing together under the tree's boughs, Pappa swaying underneath, keeping in time with the windswept branches above him; Mama trying to hide her blushes with the back

of her hand. Spring. Celebration. A faith as warm as a gloved hand on a red cheek, but where had it led them, after all?

I shake my head, trying to dislodge such thoughts. Small fragments of worse memories work loose: a pile of rubble, a child's face gripped by a necklace of brick, bloodstained teeth catching the light... I run through these scenes time and time again, twisting them this way and that, like one of my tapestry skirts, and find new horrors everywhere. Benjamin's presence is the only thing that consoles me. He visits me each day and updates me on the news from the courtyard. Everybody is in uproar, but it's not just the news of war that preoccupies my old neighbours. They are debating the aftermath of the storm and finding portents in every detail. Benjamin is careful, I notice, to avoid any mention of Judith in his reports.

"There is all kind of talk about the absentee landlord," he explains one afternoon. "The authorities made a mistake, you see, trusting a man from outside the community to run the hostel. Frau Frankl has found it all out. This man's agent was a cocky fellow with a real gold watch and tie pin. He used to swagger into the bakery and demand his rolls be baked in front of his eyes. Frau Frankl says he told her rents were deliberately kept cheap, because the refugees were without regular work. They simply packed more in to make up their profits. It must have seemed like a dream come true at the time, but their dreams have failed them in – even in exile. The foundations under their feet were loose as an old man's teeth..."

Benjamin is sidetracking. He can barely look me in the eye.

"You're hiding something, aren't you?" I finally interrupt. "Please Benjamin. You must tell me. The doctors think I can go home soon. I must know what to expect."

His head shoots up when I mention "home." He takes a deep sigh and edges forwards in his chair. His hands loop round mine and he gives them a gentle squeeze.

"The world has turned upside down. That much is certain, Esther. There is more, you're right. But what I'm going to tell you, I don't believe a word of it, not for a minute. You understand?"

"Go on."

He takes another deep breath. "Our neighbours are fickle, but you

know that already. They forget the agent and claim *you* are responsible for pulling the hostel down around our ears. They wonder that you were spared and so many others killed, or injured. They think you have magic powers. There is talk you will soon be excommunicated by the Board. Achje, you've not spoken a word in your own defence, Esther, and they think that proof enough. Everyone's claiming it's your guilt that silences you."

"What chance have *I* had to make my case, lying here in hospital?"

Another squeeze of my hand. Benjamin has tears in his eyes. I have no doubt he is simply repeating Judith's ugly claims and not his own views. He runs his hands through his hair, then inspects his fingers carefully as if worried the colour might have come off on his fingers.

"There is something else, liebe. A stranger is living in your father's apartment. He says he's a long distant cousin and he's made a claim on your home with the Board. I've been round to see him, but it was a waste of time. I managed to rescue some of your clothes though and Esau is looking after them until you..."

"Until I what? Make my home in the gutter?"

"Please Esther. Don't joke about such matters." Benjamin is distressed by my response. He shades his eyes with his hands, which have also been scarred in his rescue attempts.

"But who will help me now?" I ask in what I hope is a more conciliatory tone.

"Well, there's Esau for a start – he argues with anyone who condemns you. He puts me to shame."

"You have performed miracles," I contradict him. "Without you, I would have been lynched."

He doesn't argue with me and nor does Esau when he comes to visit later. He hears the full story not just the tidbits that are fed to Benjamin, who is married, after all, to my main accuser.

"Frau Stein thinks the storm is God's punishment because you seduced Benjamin under her very own nose and in her very own bed," Esau reveals. "Yes, that's what everyone is talking about: how did you manage to knock out the heart of a man twice your age?"

Esau smells of the streets, of mud, smoke, rotten fruit, dead meat, and I start crying at the thought of facing that world once more, my card marked, my silent grief misinterpreted as guilt. Worse, I really don't have family left alive. Esau whips out a handkerchief and mops my face.

"Tender as a hatched chick," he sighs, before returning the handkerchief to his pocket. "But look, what do you say about coming to stay with me until you find work?"

"Mud sticks, Esau."

"It certainly does."

He shakes his trouser leg and large chunks of dried mud fall on to the floor. Esau tells me he has been banned from the Oranienburgerstrasse Synagogue, because he challenged Judith in the women's gallery of all places. He was asked to apologise, but refused, and now trade is falling off fast.

"But what do I care what is said about me?" he says, shrugging. "I've lived in this city's shadows for so long, my heart is a stone."

And so it is, a month after the hostel's collapse, I move into Esau's apartment in Linienstrasse. He lives in a world of soft edges – and unexpectedly low ceilings – each of his two rooms filled to the brim with second-hand clothes. I ransack them to make a bed and my world reduces down to the size of a cufflink. I care nothing for the streets outside now, because they only contain enemies like Judith Stein, who raps on the windows of my new home and curses me. I shrink even further under my ragged covers, but she's not put off. In the end, Esau has to chase her away with a broken umbrella.

"All this nonsense about black magic," he sighs, a couple of months after my arrival. "You would think they were peasants living in a rundown shtetl with nothing beyond their horizon but an early grave. Achje, Esther, you've been brought to ruin by a freak storm. Since when was that a crime? And as for that wretch, Judith Stein!" He takes a few minutes to compose himself. "You have nothing but the clothes you refuse to stand up in. Well, let us turn this to our advantage. I will write to a cousin of mine. He's a tailor in Augsburg who might well have work for you. What do you say?"

"He won't want to hire me, not when he finds out about me."

“You only have to stay until you are fully recovered,” Esau persists.

“I’ll think about it.”

I can’t keep eating Esau’s ersatz spinach (stewed nettles with salt) and Benjamin will be martyred if he continues to help me. I must swallow pride, grief and despair and head for Augsburg, a place I have never heard of before, to work for a man I have never met. Early in September, I put on one of Esau’s second-hand hats and head for the cemetery off Schonhauser Allee where my parents lie buried. I have to hold on to the street lamps as I walk in order to steady my swaying body after such a long hibernation.

I lay stones on each of their graves. I see that the headstones are stained, and, using the hem of my skirt, I scrub away a layer of mud and grit only to discover it’s my tears doing the damage. I lie down on the path that runs between the gravestones and watch the sky through my blue eye. Clouds the colour of smudged charcoal break out across its watery surface. I open up my fingers and let my green eye pierce the view. Nothing changes. The clouds still hang in shreds around the sun, like the peeled fingers of silk gloves. Other visitors tut loudly as they walk past my tall, unburied corpse. They know who I am and they disapprove.

Who will show me any charity? I pull myself up from the ground very slowly. My shoes have rubbed, so I take them off and hide them in my skirt pockets. I want my feet to pick up the mud of the streets; I want to root myself in the place which has turned its back on me.

Retracing my steps to Linienstrasse, I catch sight of Frau Frankl on the other side of the street. She crosses over and hands me the wicker basket she’s carrying – it contains a saucepan full of Sabbath cholent.

“A gift for you both,” she says. “Besides, you will starve, if you don’t eat something soon. And what would your mother have to say about that? Ach, what a woman she was. She made a hat out of leaves once. Wore it to synagogue. The heat from the candles melted the glue and the leaves tumbled about her shoulders. It was like Autumn in a minute.”

Frau Frankl sees the tears in my eyes and pats my wrists. She invites me to go and drink coffee with her and Herr Frankl when I feel

better, then she is away and I head back to Esau's where I find him absorbed in a reply he has received from his cousin. The good news is that Michael the Tailor is in need of a housekeeper and cook, but in the postscript he announces he's glad Esau didn't make a request for money, because business is slack and he is tightening his belt.

"He has done well for himself, in spite of this warning about tight belts," Esau sighs. "And there's hope for you, Esther, with such a position at Michael's. You're fifteen, you can make a new life for yourself."

But in exile, living amongst strangers? I remember Rachel and her shaking limbs, the pregnant woman selling her clothes for food and, suddenly, I feel hollowed out, like an empty egg shell. Force of habit encourages me to turn to Benjamin for help. I send him a note and ask him to join Esau and myself for supper that evening, trusting he will once again be able to rescue me. I have never cooked without Mama's guidance before – so it's with some apprehension I unearth Esau's little stove from under a pile of of ragged clothes. I'm going to bake a loaf of braided bread baked to Mama's recipe, which I will coat with egg yolk dipped on the end of a feather, just as she taught me. A dish of dried herrings and bowls of spinach soup complete the frugal meal, but Benjamin declares it is a banquet. When I serve him "potage" he throws up his hands in mock horror. Apparently, the local restaurants have all dropped the use of French names on their menu cards since the outbreak of war.

"Le potage is now Die Suppe – that's if it's available. If nothing else, we are learning to eat the words of a new vocabulary. But where will it end? You know, Judith tried to buy a turnip only this morning, but the last one was sold three days ago. Achje, you have herrings and spinach in plenty, Esau. You're a good housekeeper."

"I know a lot of people who need shirts."

"This war has everything back to front," Benjamin consoles, wiping my cheeks with the back of his jacket sleeve. "It may well be safer outside the city for the foreseeable future."

He is solicitous and I am wary.

"What about you, Benjamin?" I ask, as casually as I can. "What does the future hold for you?"

“I’ve got a clean bill of health,” he says, taking his medical papers out of his pocket. “I can begin training next week.”

“Why take the risk?” I interrupt him.

Benjamin’s scowling face is all warning, but Esau plunges in after me, regardless.

“I must confess, I don’t know what to make of it all,” he muses. “One kills a reputation dead with her spite, another must shoot his brother in a hole in the ground. I fail to understand these rules of combat. I want only to close the next deal. Buy a new handcart...”

The dangers Benjamin faces signing up are all too real, but it’s the idea of my exile to Augsburg which really frightens me. I thought I could survive it while I still had my two friends living in the Scheuenviertel, ready to welcome me back the minute it was safe for my return. But Benjamin’s decision betrays that hope. I walk out on my friends and hide away in my improvised bed. For several weeks after this botched encounter, Esau begs me to make it up with Benjamin but I insist he come to me, clutching an olive branch. He stays away. Only at the very last minute, on the eve of my departure to Augsburg, does he send his Purim crown over by way of apology.

“Benjamin says when he comes back, he will play actor again,” Esau reports. “But there is a war to fight in the meantime.”

I put the crown on my head. I’m to be an exiled Queen, after all.