From the *American Scene: The Woman Downstairs*  
by Alfred Kazin

Alfred Kazin, who contributes this story of life in Brownsville, is one of this country's most highly regarded critics. He has written for the New Yorker, New Republic, Partisan Review, and numerous other periodicals, and is the author of *On Native Grounds* (1942), a study of American literature. This selection is from a work in progress, *A Walker in the City*, an “entirely personal book about New York.” On completion it will be published by Harcourt, Brace.

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When I was fourteen, and lived in Brownsville, the drugstore on our corner was bought one day by a strange little man named Solovey, who with his blond wife and two daughters came to live in our tenement, taking over the small dark apartment behind the drugstore on the ground floor.

They were very puzzling; we could not make them out at all. Both the Soloveys had an inaccessible air of culture and “refinement” which to the end made them seem visitors among us. They brought into our house and street the breath of another world, where parents habitually read books, discussed ideas at the table, and displayed a quaint, cold politeness in addressing each other. The Soloveys had traveled; they had lived in Russia, Palestine, France, Italy. They were “professional” people, “enlightened”—she, it was rumored, had even been a physician or scientist, we could never discover which.

There were many mysteries about them; the greatest was why they had come to live in Brownsville. We looked down on them for this, and suspected them. We lived in
Brownsville because we were too poor to go elsewhere. Brownsville was virtually my parents’ first stop after the steerage, and one we were all going to move out of as soon as we could manage it. To leave Brownsville was the sensible ambition of every poor Jewish family. So that to come *deliberately* to our slump neighborhood, when one was a middle-class intellectual and had lived in France and Italy, suggested some moral sickness and apathy, a dangerous perversion of the feelings. We felt in the Soloveys’ move a contempt for all the proper conventions.

Of course the Soloveys were extremely poor—how else would they have thought of moving in among us? Their two drab little girls, who bore the pretty Hebrew names of Avivah and Shushannah, went about looking so ill-nourished that my mother was indignant, and vowed to abduct them from their strange parents for an afternoon and feed them up thoroughly. Mrs. Solovey was herself so abnormally thin, shy, and usually distracted, that she seemed to float away from us when she passed through the hall. There was no doubt in our minds that the Soloveys had come to Brownsville at the end of their road. But what could they hope to gain from us? If they had ever sought to recoup their fortunes in a Brownsville drugstore they were soon disenchanted. The neighborhood women bought such drugs as they had to when illness came. But they hardly went in for luxuries, and they had a hearty, familiar way of expecting credit, as their natural right from a neighbor and fellow-Jew, that invariably made Mr. Solovey furious. Yet this was only for the principle of the thing; he showed no interest in making money. He seemed to despise his profession, and the store soon became so clogged up with dust and camphor-smelling paper wardrobes and display placards indignantly left with him by salesmen of beauty preparations which he refused to stock, that people found it unpleasant to go in. We thought him cynical and arrogant. Although he understood Yiddish well enough when someone addressed him in it, he seemed to dislike it, and only frowned, curtly nodding his head to show that he had understood. The Soloveys talked Russian or Hebrew to each other, and although we
were all impressed when we heard them going on this way between themselves, we also disliked them for it. Not to use our familiar neighborhood speech, not even the English expected of the “educated,” meant that they wanted us not to understand them.

Mr. Solovey was always abrupt and ill-tempered, and when he spoke at all, it was to throw a few words out from under his walrus mustache with an air of bitter dislike for us all. His whole manner as he stood behind his counter seemed to say: “I am here because I am here, and I may talk to you if I have to. Don’t expect me to enjoy it!” His business declined steadily. People were a little afraid of him, for he would look through a prescription with such surly impatience that rumors spread that he was a careless and inefficient pharmacist, and probably unsafe to use. If he minded, he never showed it. There was always a half-open book on the counter, usually a Russian novel or a work of philosophy, and he spent most of his time reading. He would sit in a greasy old wicker armchair beside the telephone booth, smoking Murads in a brown-stained celluloid holder and muttering to himself as he read. He took as little trouble to keep himself clean as he did his store, and his long drooping mustache and alpaca coat were always dusty with cigarette ash. It looked as if he hated to be roused from his reading even to make a sale, for the slightest complaint sent him into a rage. “I’ll never come back to you, Mr. Solovey!” someone would threaten. “Thanks be to God!” he would roar back. “Thanks God! Thanks God! It will be a great pleasure not to see you!

“A crazy one,” the neighborhood women muttered to each other. “A real mad one. Mad to the point of death.”

The Soloveys had chosen to live in Brownsville when they could have gone elsewhere, and this made them mysterious. From some unfathomable act of will, they had chosen
us. Yet for me they were beyond all our endless gossip and speculation about them, our ignorance of their circumstances, our wonder at their fatalistic poverty. They fascinated me simply because of their contrast with ourselves. There was something about the Soloveys’ open marital relation for which I could find no parallel, no clue, in the lives of our own parents. Whenever I saw the strange couple together, I felt that they were still lovers. Our parents, whatever affection might offhandedly be expressed between them, always had the look of being committed to something deeper, more sober, than mere love. Their marriages were neither happy nor unhappy; they were arrangements. However they had met, whatever they still thought of each other, “love” was something that belonged to their past, never to the present. To them marriage was an institution, entered into out of immigrant loneliness, a need for companionship with one’s own, which mechanically resulted in the “family.” The family was a whole greater than all the parts that made it up, yet intelligible only in their solidarity. I am perfectly sure that in my parents’ minds love was something exotic and not wholly legitimate, reserved for “educated” people like their native-born children, who were the sole end of their existence. My father and mother worked in a rage to put us above their level; they had married to make us possible. We were the only conceivable end to all their striving; we were their America.

So far as I knew, love was not an element admissible in my parents’ experience. Any open talk of it between themselves would have seemed ridiculous. It would have suggested a self-indulgence, a preposterous attention to one’s own feelings, possible only to those who were free enough to choose. They were not so free. They were awed by their own children as, in a different manner, they were awed by their own imagined unworthiness, and looked on themselves only as instruments toward the ideal future that would be lived by their children. As poor immigrants in Brownsville, painfully conscious of the difference between them and the “successes”—oh, those “successes” of whom I was always hearing so much and whom we admired despite all our
socialism!—everything in their lives combined in some unconscious and self-
derogatory order to make them look down on love as something they had no time for. Of course, there was a deep envy and resentment in this, and when on rare occasions my parents did discuss the unheard-of collapse of someone’s marriage, I noticed that their talk had a hard and severely moral aura around it, as if those who gave themselves up to love must inevitably come to grief. Love, they might have said, was not serious. Life was a battle for security and advancement; it had no place, as we had no time, for whims. The problem of life, as it was burned into me as a child not only in my family but also in the street, in our talk after school, in our games, was getting ahead. By this we meant not becoming rich (though that would have been very nice; it was simply inconceivable) but mounting a foothold, “making sure.” The precipice that led down to joblessness, eviction, hunger, and therefore moral self-destruction, was always before us.

Love, in fact, was something for the movies, which my parents enjoyed, but a little ashamedly. They were the land of the impossible. On those few occasions when my mother, a fanatically industrious dressmaker who kept a little shop in our home, allowed herself a visit to the Supreme, or the Palace, or the Premier, she would return, her eyes gleaming with wonder and some distrust at the strangeness of it all, to report on erotic fanatics who were, thank God, like no one we knew. What heedlessness! What unholy daring! What riches! To my mother riches alone were the gateway to romance, for only those who had money enough could afford the freedom, and the crazy boldness, to give themselves up to love.

The Soloveys were not rich—they were as poor as we, even poorer. They were lost people, strange and bereft people. They had floated into Brownsville like wreckage off
the ship of foreignness and “culture” and the great world outside. Yet there was a
visible tie between them, a deep consciousness of each other, that excited me, for it
seemed illicit. This was all the more remarkable because, though lovers, they were so
obviously unhappy lovers. Had they merely doted on each other, they would have
seemed curious but infantile. But they seemed to hate each other, and could often be
heard quarreling in their apartment, which, since it was on the ground floor, sent every
sound out into the street. These quarrels were not like the ones we heard at home.
There were no imprecations, no screams, no theatrical sobs. In our homes family
quarrels were awful but not serious. “You’re killing me! You’re putting me into an early
grave! May you be plunged ten fathoms into the ground!” Such bitter accusations were
heard all the time, but did not mean very much. Yiddish is one of those tongues in
which one breaks all the windows to let a little air into the house.

But in the Soloveys’ quarrels there was something worse than anger; it was
hopelessness. We felt in them such despair, such a direct confrontation of each other
without illusions, that they puzzled us by not sharing their feelings with their children.
They alone, the gruff ne’er-do-well husband and the elusive sick wife, were the family.
The children did not seem to count at all; the lovers, though their love had been spent,
still lived only for each other. And it was this that made them so strange, stranger than
Mr. Solovey’s books or Mrs. Solovey’s vaguely shocking blondness, stranger than the
unfathomable despair that had brought them to us. In this severe dependence on each
other for their emotional life there was a defiance of the family principle, of us, of their
own poverty and inefficiency, that made our values seem crude and provincial. It was
only in novels and movies that people abandoned the world for love, gave themselves
up to it—gladly. Yet there was nothing melodramatic in the conduct of the Soloveys,
nothing we could easily describe and condemn. It was merely that they were sufficient
to each other; in their disappointment, as in their love, they were always alone. They
left us out, they left Brownsville out; we were nothing to them. Our life was
compounded of our mutual resemblance and need, and the great things that went into it—the Sabbath, the holidays, the dark love between parents and their children, the synagogue, the trade union, the fight “to get ahead,” our self-enclosed Jewishness—made a common theme on which any family in Brownsville could play its independent variations without ever departing from fundamentals. But in the love despair of the Soloveys something seemed to say that all our interests were shallow, that we looked at life too narrowly, and that in any event we did not count. Their loneliness went deeper than our solidarity.

Morally, they were outlaws in Brownsville, and this attracted me to them. For in my own way I, too, was seeking to escape Brownsville, or at least to defy it. But I did not know where or how to begin. I knew only that I could dream all day long while pretending to be in the “real” world, and that my mind was full of visions that were as intimate a part of my being as loneliness. I had no conscious desire to seek a way out. A sense of isolation was so automatic with me that it led, without any effort on my part, to a flight into books that had a more immediate meaning than the life around me. I felt that I was alone, that there were things I had to endure out of loyalty but could never accept, and that whenever I liked, I could in my mind swim out from the Brownsville shore to a calm and sunlit sea where imaginary friends came up from the deep. Every book I read re-stocked my mind with a fresh set of helpful characters whose great virtue was that they came out of backgrounds dissimilar to mine. They came into my life proud and compassionate, recognizing me by a secret sign, whispering through subterranean channels of sympathy: “Old boy! What have they done to you!” From long practice, I learned so well to adapt myself to them that I could not always tell where my personality left me and where theirs came in to reinforce me. My gift for impersonating characters in the books I read was such that as each fresh excitement faded, I felt myself being flung down from great peaks of longing. I was not always sure which character I was playing, there were so many in my head at once; or how I could
accommodate one to the other; but after an afternoon’s reading in the public library, I could walk past the pushcarts in the open market on Belmont Avenue, where the old women in their shawls hoarsely cried their wares: “Housewives! Beautiful Good Housewives! Storm Us! Tear Us Apart! How Can You Resist Such Bargains? Housewives!”—playing out the story of Richard II, or the poignant crippled hero of *Of Human Bondage*, a book I had read to tatters in my amazement that Mr. W. Somerset Maugham knew me so well. In that twenty minutes’ walk from the library to my home I sometimes played out the life cycles of at least five imaginary characters. They did not stay very long in my mind, for I discovered new books every day; somewhere I felt them to be unreal, acquisitions bought at the price of reality; but while they lived, they gave me a kind of happiness that reverberated in my mind long after I had reached our street and had gone up the worn stone steps of our tenement.

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The Soloveys came into my life as an unexpected visitation of the *great friends*. Everything which made them queer in the eyes of the neighborhood deepened their importance for me. I was yearning to spend the deepest part of myself on someone close, someone I could endow directly with the golden qualities of the brotherhood I joined in books. I was passionately attached to my family, but it would never have occurred to me to ask myself what I thought of them as individuals. They were the head of the great body to which I had been joined at birth. There was nothing I could *give* them, and at that time, nothing that I wanted to. What I did want was some voluntary and delighted gift of emotion to rise up in me; something that would surprise me in the giving, that would proceed directly from me, and was not, like the obedience of family love, a routine affair of every day. I wanted to bestow some affection that proceeded from an idea; to feel myself raised upwards by a human being who would cut me off from the old life. My family loved me, as I loved them, in well-worn measures
of tribulation. We looked to each other for support; we recognized each other with a mutual sympathy and irritation; we all bore some part of each other in ourselves. So deep was this in me that not until many years later did I come to think of my parents as individuals from whom I could ever estrange myself or, an even more painful realization, human beings who could ever have had a life in which I played no part. I took them for granted as the height and depth of my outward existence, and I took their love for granted; it never occurred to me that there might be something free and happy in the response to that love—that there could be something more than loyalty in family love itself.

And so I gave myself to the Soloveys—or rather, tried to give myself to both, until I realized that it was not parents I wanted, but a woman, and that Mrs. Solovey was that woman. I was still at an age when I could have adopted them both, without diminishing or contradicting my longing for her. But the very thing that made her so lustrous to me—her air of not being quite placed in life, her detachment, her candid sensuality, as I imagined it—was missing in her husband’s deterioration. As the store went from bad to worse, he seemed to plant himself more and more in the back of it, like a dead tree defying us to cut him down. He barricaded himself behind his counter, where his books lay in a mound of dust and gradually displaced the cheap toilet articles and placards advertising beauty preparations. Except in emergencies, hardly anyone came into his store, even to use the telephone. Most people were afraid of him, and the neighborhood kids took special delight in exasperating him by banging a handball above his apartment windows. Yet there was something indomitable in his bearing, and with it an ill-concealed contempt for us all, that made it impossible to feel sympathy for him. His blazing eyes, his dirty alpaca jacket always powdered with a light dust of cigarette ash, the walrus mustache that drooped down the sides of his mouth with an expression of disgust for us, for his life—everything seemed to say that he did not care how he lived, whatever we thought of him. Having determined to fail, his whole bearing
seemed to say, he had chosen us to watch him; and he would fail just as he liked, shocking us as he went under, like a man drowning before our eyes whom our cries could not save. Perhaps he liked to shock us; perhaps our shame and incredulity at seeing him put back so far were things he could viciously enjoy, since the whole manner of his life was an assault on our own hopes and our plain sense of right and wrong. There was something positive in him that had chosen to die, that mocked all our competitive anxiety and our admiration for success. We failed every day, but we fought our failure; we hated it; we measured every action, every thought, by its help in getting us around failure. Mr. Solovey confused us. In some unspoken way, full of bitterness and scorn, he seemed to say that success did not matter.

The others thought him crazy, and perhaps he was; but I thought I knew his secret, for I, too, was in love with his wife. I was perfectly sure that all his misery came from the force and bafflement of his attachment to her. The hopeless love between them had scoured them clean of normal concerns, like making money and getting on in the world and being parents. The store went to pieces, the two little girls in their foreign clothes played jacks all afternoon long on the front steps, Mr. Solovey denounced us with his eyes, and Mrs. Solovey walked among us in her dream of a better life. But alone, as I imagined it, they glided up and down in their apartment like two mutually fascinated fish. This was the way I saw them; her beauty was the only key I had to their mystery. I based it entirely on my incredulous delight in her.

I am sure that no one else saw Mrs. Solovey as I did or made so much of her helplessness. But she incarnated for me everything that was missing in my family life and in Brownsville. To the others she must have seemed only a thin and ailing woman, of some indeterminate age in the neighborhood of forty, whose aloofness would have
been offensive if she had not so obviously been ill. But it was her dreaminess, her air of not being quite related to anything around her, that pleased me most. She floated through our lives; in some ways she was never really with us. All the better for me, who needed someone passive whom I could bend to my imagination. She was more accessible than any character I had ever found in a book, but as pliable; more real, but as deliciously unreal. There she was, only two flights of stairs below us, someone I could see every day, yet a woman like no other I had ever seen. Her blondness flashed out in our dark tenement, among our somber and dogged faces, with a smiling wantonness. I had not seen many fair-haired people until I met Mrs. Solovey. There were a few Russian Christian children at school, and there were the four daughters of our janitor, Mrs. Krylot, all of them with bright golden hair and faces as deeply carved and immobile as a woodcut; but they did not count; their blondness seemed naive and uncouth. Mrs. Solovey’s I identified from the first with something direct and sinful, the very provocativeness of her hair being its sinfulness. Our dark coloring had a censorious and disciplined quality; I associated it with mind, control, effort, the denial thrown across the face of desire. But in Mrs. Solovey’s blondness and languor I saw the complacent stirrings of nakedness itself.

Poor woman, she never knew how recklessly I took my toll of her. She was the perfection of all my fantasies. The poor details of her real life meant nothing to me; I could not see her true dimensions at all. I was so busy re-creating her to my own purposes that I ignored everything which might take her away from me. Yet in this was the symbolic sacrifice of my old self I had longed to make. For I did not, after all, want to see what she had in common with us—what would her charm have been to me then? I wanted to play on the margin of difference—her blondness, her deep quietness, her air of “cultured” suffering—that separated her from us. I wanted everything about her which lent her queerness in the eyes of Brownsville; I could dispense with the rest. More exactly, I sought out in her everything that was not stamped with our poverty,
our moralism, our Jewishness. In my ignorance of any other life, in the appalling sameness with which we all duplicated each other’s earnestness and anxiety, I had come to assume that Israel was a synonym for deprivation, and I was astonished and delighted to find in Mrs. Solovey, a Jewish woman, ties with the greater world outside that I had never thought I would have. In my mind all Jews were poor and all poor people were Jews. In some way I never dared admit to myself, I had come to believe that there were two kinds of people and that we, for some reason, were not really people. Mrs. Solovey’s dignity, her gentleness, as much as the sexuality I conferred upon her, aroused me from the torpor of my self-pity, and made me realize I could ask everything of the world without changing my skin.

I did not understand this then, not even when we spoke together one afternoon.

She came into our kitchen one day, looking for my mother to make a dress for her. I was alone, doing my French lessons at the table. When she spoke to me in her timid, Russian-accented English, I felt myself flying back to the world of Anna Karenina. There was a grandeur of suffering in her face, in the spindly thinness of her body in the old-fashioned dress, that had for me some immediate connection with the 19th century Russian novel. The characters of Tolstoy were always more real to me than the people who lived next door, and in my unappeasable longing for imaginary ancestors I had exaggerated the surviving but certainly not predominant Russian elements in our own household to fasten on the old Russian intelligentsia as my kind of people. Russian literature was the only secular culture my father brought to America; Russia was a daily reminiscence that flowed out of the samovar, that was kept alive in our veneration of libertarian socialist ideals, in the circle-necked blou/?/es I wore as a child for photographs “à la Gorky,” in endless discussion of the relatives who had
stayed behind. There was a memory of Russia in our house that was entirely spiritual in its nostalgia. A part of us all was always reaching out to Russia as a country of the mind. To me, who had never seen it, who associated with it purely literary memories, Russia was the grand antithesis to all bourgeois ideals, a cultural image for truly free people. I was perfectly sure that there was no literature in the world like the Russian; that the only warm hearts in the world were Russian; that other people were always dully materialist, but that the Russian soul, like Nijinsky’s dream of pure flight, could always leap outwards, past all barriers, to a lyric world in which ideal socialism and the fiery moodiness of Tschaikovsky's *Pathétique* would be strangely at home with each other.

When Mrs. Solovey stood in our kitchen that day, asking for my mother, I seized upon her intuitively as a living portion of my true homeland. I was glad that my mother was out; I felt that I could now enjoy Mrs. Solovey alone. She stood at the door, smiling uneasily, deliberating with herself whether to wait, and when I pressed her, gravely sat down on the other side of the table. I had already made so much of her, on the basis of our casual encounters in the downstairs hall, that seeing her so close gave me, pleased as I was, a curious feeling of alarm. How would it turn out? How did one address a secret image when it walked in on you, and sat down with you, and smiled, smiled uneasily, not fitting itself to the imagined design? Looking at her there, I found it hard to think of her as a wife and mother, held to the wildly unhappy husband below, to the two little girls who were always playing jacks by themselves on the front steps. She was Anna, Tolstoy’s and my Anna, the sensual and kindly and aristocratically aloof heroine who was unhappily married, who bewitched men’s minds, who shocked everyone in St. Petersburg by the gentle insistence of her sexual power. She might have just walked in from a frosty afternoon’s ride with her lover on the Nevsky Prospekt, swathed in furs, a mink toque on her head, slyly impervious to the stares and whispers of the envious crowd.
“You are, uh, going perhaps to school, young man?” Mrs. Solovey asked after a long silence.

I nodded.

“Do you, uh, do you like going to school?”

I explained that I had mixed feelings on the subject.

“Oh!” she said doubtfully, not sure that she had understood. There was another long silence. Uneasily, I turned back to my French grammar.

“What are you studying, young man, so serious young man?” she smiled.

I glumly turned the book around.

Surprise and delight showed in her face. “You are studying French? You are perhaps already speaking it? Almost it is my favorite language! From the time I was a girl in Odessa I have been studying it with application, with pleasure. How pleasing it would be to speak French with you as I wait for your mother! Yes? Shall we have some conversation?”

“Yes, Mrs. Solovey,” I fumbled. “Il... il me... ferait? Il me ferait très heureux.”

She laughed. “Ferait? Pas du tout! And you have not a suggestion of the true accent! I suppose you are learning French only to read? But that is a mistake, I can assure you! It
is necessary to speak it, to speak! Think how you would be happy to speak French well! To speak a foreign language is to depart out of the usual life. It takes you from yourself. Do you not think it is tiresome to speak the same language all the time? To feel that you are in a kind of prison, where the same words you speak every day are like the walls of a cell? To know with every word that you are the same, and no other, and that it is difficult to escape? To be in one’s own language all the time is to be held fast. You cannot leave. But when I speak French I have the sensation that for a moment I have left, and I am happy.” She smiled at me. “Come, will you repeat your lesson to me?”


“Et vous?” she interrupted. “Comment vous appelez-vous?”

“Alfred.”

“Alfred! Voilà un joli nom! Un nom anglais, n’est-ce-pas? En connaissez-vous l’origine?”

“What?”

She sighed. “En-connaissiez-vous-l’origine?”

“Je pense… pense… un roi d’Angleterre?”

“Bien sûr. Et la légende des petits gateaux?”

“What?” I did not understand a word.
She tried again, very slowly.

I shook my head.

“But what is it they teach you in this American public school!”

“We’re not up to irregular verbs yet.”

“The old peasant woman, she asked the king to watch the cakes on the hearth. That they should not bum. But he thought and thought only of his poor country as he sat there, and he let them burn.”

“La vielle paysanne. . . était. . . était. . .”

“Fâchée. Magnifique! She was very, very displeased. Que c’est facile! You must not stop now. Tell me something more about yourself. Quel âge avez-vous?”

“J’ai quatorze ans.”

“You avez quatorze ans! How nicely you say that! My older girl, she is only nine. Maintenant, diites-moi: qu’est-ce que vous aimez le mieux au monde?”

I stared at her glumly. The word I wanted most to say was “tu,” but it would have been meaningless.
“Alas, I fear you have not understood me. I must be careful to speak more slowly. Quand-je-parle-comme-ceci-me-comprenezvous?”

“Oui.”

“Bien. Qu’est-ce-que vous aimez le mieux au monde?”

“Livres, je . . . pense.”

“Les livres!” She laughed. “Un gentil aveuí Quel genre de livres?”

I flourished every kind I could think of.

“Tout ça? Tout? Vous êtes un peu pédant.”

“What?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Let us try again, young man, young scholar man. Do you not like the sea?”

“Oui. J’aime la mer beaucoup.”

“J’aime beaucoup la mer. Encore.”

“J’aime beaucoup la mer.”

“Et puis?”
“Les montagnes.”

“Et ensuite?”

“I know what I want to say, but don’t know how to say it.”


“Yes,” I said. “I like some girls very much. But . . . it’s on the tip of my tongue. . . .”

“Pas en anglais!”

“Well,” I said lamely, “I like summer.”

“Summer! I love summer, too. More than any other season. *Pourquoi préférezvous l’été*?”

“La . . . la chaud?” I gave it up. “The warmth . . . the evenness.”

“I understand very well. I feel sympathy with your answer. I myself come from Odessa, in the South of Russia. Do you know of Odessa? On the Black Sea. One of the most beautiful cities in all the world, full of sun and white buildings. It is really a part of Greece. When I was a girl in Odessa, I would go down to the harbor every day and stare out across the water and imagine myself on a ship, a ship with blue sails, that would take me around the world.”

“You have lived in many places.”
“Oui. Nous avons habité des pays différents. La Russie, la France, l'Italie, la Palestine. Yes, many places, young man.”

“Why did you come here?” I asked suddenly.

She looked at me timidly for a moment. I could not tell what she felt, or how much I had betrayed. But in some way my question disconcerted her, for it suddenly blew away our little conversation piece. She rose, made a stiff little bow, and went out without saying another word.

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She came back several times to see my mother; occasionally, I saw her in the street. But she made no effort to continue my practice in French, and I did not know how to ask. For a long time I did not see her at all. We knew that Mr. Solovey had gone bankrupt, and was looking for someone to buy the fixtures. There were rumors that once, in the middle of the night, he had beaten her so violently that people in the building had been awakened by her screams. But there was still nothing precise we knew about them, and after many weeks in which I vainly looked for her everywhere and once, on a foolish pretext, tried to gain admittance to the apartment, I almost forgot her. The store was finally sold, and Mr. Solovey found a job in a urinalysis laboratory on Nostrand Avenue. But they continued to live in the apartment back of the store. One morning, while her children were at school and her husband was away, Mrs. Solovey sealed all the doors and windows with tape, and sat over the open gas jets in the kitchen until she was dead. It was raining the day they buried her. Because she was a suicide, the rabbi was reluctant to say the necessary prayers inside the synagogue. But they prevailed upon him to come out on the porch, and looking down on the hearse as it waited in the street, he intoned the service over her coffin. There were hundreds of the
neighborhood women in their shawls, weeping in the rain. Most of them had never seen Mrs. Solovey, but they wept out of pity for her children, and out of terror and awe because someone who had lived with them was dead. My mother was among the mourners outside the synagogue, and I needed urgently to find her. But the crowd was so large that I could not see her, and I waited in the back until the service was over.