

## ] Potatoes

Everyone who passed, Bella had seen before. For the five months in which she'd lived in Memphis, every shopkeeper was not from here, but from Grodno. The man delivering newspapers was the butcher from back home. Every young woman she caught sight of from a distance was her next-door neighbor's daughter. And now just ahead, the eight-year-old boy on the street was her youngest brother Shale, walking hand in hand with a short, skinny woman who, Bella's eyes assured her, was her mother.

Bella followed them from a distance so that they wouldn't see her. On a Friday afternoon, Market Street bustled with words. She recognized those that were in Yiddish, but the rest were locked away, as foreign as every face would be had her mind not invented a way to lessen the shock of being in a strange city. In this neighborhood known as the Pinch, there were Irish and Italian immigrants too, and in their eyes she recognized her own fear, and wondered if despite their best efforts, they too still lived in the countries they had left behind. Did the faces, the houses, the streets live fully formed inside their heads?

Bella, her father, and two of her brothers had come to Memphis as opposed to any other city because her father had a third cousin here. In Grodno, such a tenuous connection meant little. Here it meant everything, as had the words this cousin wrote in a letter to another cousin, who had shared it with them: *you can make a living here*, slim words they'd heaped so much expectation upon it was a wonder they had not sunk; words they'd traveled upon as surely as the ocean liner that sailed from Dansk to New York. When they'd arrived, Shale's trachoma had prevented him from entering, so he and her mother had been sent back to await his recovery.



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When Bella reached the corner of Market and Main, she lost sight of the boy and the mother amid the bustle of people, the rowdy group of boys talking and laughing. At the outskirts of the crowd was another young boy, this one taller, in a different cap, with a burst of freckles Shale didn't have, but it was Shale nonetheless.

Of her three brothers, Shale was the only one for whom she felt the fealty of love. Perhaps because he was the youngest, perhaps because he had always been frail, she thought of herself as his protector. At the sight of this latest Shale, she couldn't hold herself back; she ventured closer to the group of boys. One of the oldest of the boys, actually closer to a man than a boy, turned away from the group and watched her, though she didn't know why. Perhaps his mind too fell victim to this rampant misconfiguration where everyone was at the same time someone else.

Stepping closer, she realized that she knew him, not from home, but from the Neighborhood House where she had gone the first few months she was here to study English. His name was Sam Goldberger and he had been the teacher of her class, thirty young women and men crammed into a classroom better suited for children, and he, the lone male teacher, standing at the front, calling out English words for them to repeat. He was not much older than she. His eyes were pale blue, his hair that peeked out from under his cap was the color and texture of wet straw. She wanted to learn English—desperately wanted a way to free her tongue from the paralysis it suffered since they had arrived in Memphis—but she sat silently at her desk, afraid to call attention to herself, afraid she would be asked to speak aloud on her own.

One Wednesday night each month, the desks and chairs were moved aside, and a dance was held. Though she longed to go home before the music began, she forced herself to stay because she heard the voice of her mother, urging her to smile, to enjoy herself. Her mother would not recognize her now, how serious, how downtrodden she had become. At home, she had tried to help out, but had known how to slink away for a quick visit to her friend next door, then to lose track of time, and return only once the cleaning was done, dinner made.

Though she had feigned disinterest, she had listened carefully to the conversations of the other girls who made a habit of whispering and giggling about Sam and had learned that he was from Memphis, born here to parents who had been born here as well. He lived not in the



Pinch, but farther east, on Bellaire Drive. He was reputed to be serious and smart, a boy of whom great things were expected, who already was planning with his older brothers to open a printing press, who brimmed with books he had read and places he would visit. It had to be a matter of pity that Sam showed any interest in she who was besieged with a shyness so malevolent that had it been visible on her face, she too would surely have been sent back along with her mother and Shale.

"Would you like to dance?" he had asked her, in English, in front of a group of girls whom she'd stood near though didn't know by name.

Bella's face burned with embarrassment, and she pretended not to have understood. She wondered if the other girls had put him up to it, if her loneliness was so visible on her face that only the cruelest of men could ignore it.

"Dance," he articulated in slow, careful English as he did in class, as though he expected her to repeat after him.

Her own private lesson, but she was too shy and ashamed to say anything.

"Music," he said, pointing to the lone woman who played piano in the corner.

"Food," he said, pointing to the cookies laid out on tin trays on a table.

"Smile," he said, touching her lips, tracing the shape.

"One day," he promised, "you will talk to us."

She had looked away. In Grodno, she had loved to dance, but here, she could no more make her feet obey her than her tongue. She agreed because she saw no other choice but she had not looked at his face, only at his shoes, light brown leather that was well-worn, though not as worn as her own. She studied the other pairs of shoes dancing across the floor, the sturdy leathers, the upturned delicate pairs, some with buttons, some with bows, some a welcome departure from black or brown.

Across the floor, beneath a rustling skirt, danced a pair of light gray slippers, the prettiest she'd ever seen. The sight of them stirred in her a longing for the shoes she'd once had. It was silly, surely, to care about the shoes—that loss of those black leather boots, with the row of tiny buttons up each side, was the least of it—and yet she couldn't help but remember the pleasure she'd taken in setting them by her bed each night and covering them with a spare scrap of cloth. She had lost them



the time she'd taken Shale to dig for potatoes in a field that lay on the outskirts of town, where it was said you were allowed to dig and take what you found. The outing had seemed like an easy way to entertain Shale and to help her mother; it was also a way to spend the spring afternoon outside. When she and Shale arrived at this field after an hour's walk, farther and more strenuous than she'd anticipated, she'd taken her shoes off so as not to get them dirty. It had never occurred to her that when she and Shale returned for them, they'd be gone.

Now, on the street, Sam was waiting for her to say something. After the dance, she had stopped going to class, even though it was the only hour all week that felt like her own. In a cave inside her heart, where she dared to admit the truth to herself, she knew that it wasn't just the lessons that made her so nervous, but the way she had been unable to remove her eyes from Sam's face. She had been afraid that he would see how she hung upon his words, not speaking them aloud, but once she was home, practicing them in front of the mirror.

"Where have you been?" Sam asked her, again assuming that she could speak English.

Bella shrugged her shoulders, looked away. But he was not going to let her evade the conversation so easily. He switched to Yiddish, which, he'd told the class, he'd learned from his grandparents who themselves had come to Memphis as teenagers.

"We've been looking for you. Five weeks and you haven't come," he said.

"My family needs me," she whispered, not sure he could hear her.

"Our class needs you as well," he said, but the look on his face made it plain that he spoke only of himself.

So she had not imagined it. His interest wasn't one more thing her mind had conjured up. Bella gave him a shy, quick glance; she looked away, then met his eyes and smiled. If he could speak the silent language of her face, he would know that it was an invitation to pursue her. He was as surprised by the sweetness of the gesture as she. Was this a brief appearance of her former self, peeking out? If only she could free her tongue, she would be far more bold. She would grab him by the arm and ask him what he saw when he looked at her: Somewhere in the flecks of her eyes, in the now lustreless braids of her hair, did he see an inkling of who she used to be?

Another group of boys, similar in age and dress, but louder, more



boisterous, approached. This time it wasn't a trick of her eyes, but she actually did recognize two people, her brothers Eli and Reuven, who were at that moment supposed to be in school. Within two weeks of their arrival, they began attending Fairview Junior High, which stood at the edge of the neighborhood. There had been no conversation about the fact that they would attend and that she, needed at home, would not. She had said nothing, but her brothers had felt her disappointment; on their first morning of school, as they brimmed with excitement and bustle, they had shocked her when, in a rare moment of seriousness and kindness, they promised to attend school on her behalf; whatever we learn, they'd said, we will teach you.

Angrily, Bella walked toward them. In the three months in which they'd attended school, they not only hadn't made good on their promise, but had managed to alienate every teacher with whom they'd had contact, managed to be called into the principal's office on an almost daily basis, where their knuckles were rapped, their bravado tested. Her father sent her to talk to the principal, though Bella's English was no better than his, and she had the additional burden of needing to explain why it was that she had come in place of a parent.

"Why are you here?" she scolded Reuven and Eli quietly.

"Who are you?" they asked.

"Never seen you before."

In the eyes of the other boys, she could have been any of their older sisters, come to call them home. They waited for her to say something, but even with her brothers, her mouth had swallowed her tongue.

"School is already over for the day," Reuven said.

"If you went to school, you would know that," Eli said and the other boys laughed as well.

If her mother were here, she would be in school too. If her mother were here, she would not have to try to summon a love for Reuven and Eli that she did not feel. Nor would she feel the impossibility of walking into one more store, to buy another day's worth of groceries, would not have to worry about preparing their food, washing their clothes, would not have to remake herself constantly into the shape others needed her to be.

"She's lost her tongue," one of the boys with them said.

"We have one brother with bad eyes, now a sister with no tongue," Reuven and Eli said to each other.



They looked at her with a hatred she couldn't understand. At home, her brothers had been required to listen to her. But here, they saw her weakness and rebelled. No longer did the fact that she was the oldest matter anymore; no longer did she have any means to stop their behavior that grew increasingly out of control. But none of this did she report to her mother in the letters she wrote each week, not wanting to worry her. Instead, Bella took pains to fill the lines with as much practical information as possible, the layout of the small apartment that their cousin had helped them find, the foods she prepared for their meals, the look of the stores, the sounds of the streets, all in the hope that if her mother could envision where they were, neither of them would feel so alone.

"What kind of brothers are you?" said Sam, who had been watching their exchange, and came over, playfully cuffing Eli on the shoulder, then doing the same to Reuven. "You don't even let her go to school one night a week?"

"She doesn't want to go. That's what she told us," said Eli, rubbing with exaggerated gestures the spot on his arm that Sam had touched.

"She does want to go. You listen to me. Even if she says she doesn't want to go, she does."

"She doesn't say anything, or haven't you noticed that yet?"

"I've noticed plenty," he said. "You take care of her, do you understand me?"

He was expecting her to thank him, but only because he didn't understand her shame. To hide, she focused her attention on her brothers, on whose faces she saw, for the first time, a flash of Shale's vulnerability. Suddenly, a rare moment of pity for them: What did they know of why their father had suddenly changed his mind about the need to leave Grodno, what hushed conversations about her had they overheard in their own beds. Even though they, as twins, were inseparable, what burdens did they now bear? It was not just she who suffered the fact that though they had left Grodno as a family, they had each arrived here alone.

Without speaking further to Sam, without looking at her brothers or buying food as she'd intended, Bella turned and ran home, where she lay on the sofa. It was cooler now in Memphis, and for the first time in months, the windows could be closed. When they first arrived, in August, she had been shocked by how hot it was; who could have imagined that the air itself had arms that could wrap around her neck? Then,



and now once again, she fell prey to the thought that perhaps it had been better in Grodno. To give into this thought would open an abyss beneath her, but she could no longer prevent herself from doing so. She remembered the Grodno in which she'd known where to walk and how to talk, a city in which she and Shale had confidently set out, that time when she took him to dig for potatoes, and they'd sung as they walked, she telling him fantastical stories of the food she would make him when she returned with potatoes.

The sounds of streets and songs and people, both here and there, grew faint, and she closed her eyes, thinking with dismay of the last letter she received from her mother which said that Shale's eye infection had not yet healed. To hide herself from the interminability of the separation, she took refuge in another memory, this one of her mother on the boat, a week into the journey, pulling from her pocket an orange, slightly battered and turning brown, but an orange nonetheless, as miraculous as though she'd plucked it from a grove springing forth from the salty water. Into each of their outstretched hands, she'd placed a wedge, which they'd hungrily consumed. Then her mother had come up behind her, her body a whispering touch against her own. Her mouth close to her ear, her words were soft but unmistakable. "Forget everything that happened."

When Bella turned to face her, wondering if she was being offered either a warning or blessing, her mother's gaze had shifted outward, her face concealing her intentions as surely as the sea would close over her were she to fall overboard.

Bella awoke to Reuven and Eli bursting into the apartment. It was almost sundown, and they looked around expectantly, in search of dinner.

"We invited your friend for dinner," Reuven announced.

"Who?" she asked, as confused as if he'd spoken in English.

"Your teacher," Eli said.

Her heart fluttered with an excitement she tried to mask from her brothers, unsure whether they intended this as retribution or reconciliation. She rummaged through the cupboard, thinking she would make potato soup, but there were only a few potatoes, not enough to feed her family, let alone an unexpected guest. Alarmed, she looked around the kitchen, which despite her efforts remained gray, dirty, dingy. She'd walked instead of shopped, slept instead of cooked. If Sam were to come to an empty table and a messy home, the shame she'd felt



in class would be magnified. In her own eyes too, she would cease to be someone he might seek out.

With sundown less than an hour away, Bella ran from the apartment. She turned first onto Market Street, but all the stores were closed. She checked each store, knocking impatiently in the hope that one of the shopkeepers would recognize her and let her in. The sun was setting, but she couldn't go home without food. She had no choice but to venture into unfamiliar streets that were becoming cloaked in darkness. Until now, she had been afraid to leave the neighborhood; she scarcely believed there was more to this city than these streets. Only the nearby presence of the Mississippi River assured her that the world had not closed off. Were she to find her way onto one of these boats, its captain might transport her from this river to the ocean, and by magic, into the Bovar River, because despite what forms the maps drew, all the waters of the world connected somewhere.

Bella walked past the closed stores, past Market Street Square, past any vestige of familiarity. She came to a church, a cemetery, a court house. She passed houses so large that her mouth dropped in envy. She tried to keep track of where she'd turned and in what direction she'd gone, but soon she couldn't turn back because she didn't know which way back was. She would never find her way home; she'd spend her night on these streets. She'd walk to the edge of the city, to the edge of this country and never find her way back.

The fear which she'd tried to hide from since she arrived pounced upon her. She was back, not in the Grodno which she longed for, but the real one whose borders mapped the terrain of her fear. When she'd realized that the shoes weren't there and had looked up to see them in the hands of two boys she didn't know, she was initially just angry. But as the two boys drew closer, suddenly older than she'd first realized, she became afraid. Dangling the shoes by their laces, so that they danced in the air, the boys taunted her. "Come and get your shoes," one had said. "If you steal potatoes, why can't we steal shoes?" the other yelled out. For the boys, this was a game. For her and for Shale, it was the hidden world of nighttime fears come to life, standing before them in the afternoon sun. Detecting the malice in their voices, she grabbed Shale's hand and began to run, sure that home could not be so far away. She ran to the screams of their laughter. She ran to the sound of footsteps behind her, wild like hoof-beats.



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She hadn't been able to outrun those footsteps then, and now, separated by the passage of an ocean, by the passage of many months, she was still unable to outrun them. Those pounding sounds had followed her—were they the only thing that had, in actuality, come with her from there to here? She'd tried to listen to her mother's advice, but the more she tried to push Grodno from her mind, the more it insisted upon following her.

In Memphis too, the sound of footsteps followed her, in the distance but coming closer. This time it was not just the screams of laughter but her name being called, Bella, Bella, Bella, a threat, a taunt. At least in Grodno, she had known what to fear. Here, she didn't know the shape fear could take, when it ambushed her from all the places where it liked to hide.

She came to the end of a street, and there was the entrance to Confederacy Park, whose name her brothers had mentioned, having gleaned from their classmates' tales of the dangers lurking there. They recounted these stories with bravado, sure they would be able to defend themselves when necessary, because they didn't know what it was to be able to protect neither yourself nor those you loved.

The path inside the park was lined with trees, but it was so dark that she couldn't see their branches, only felt aware of their presence above her. This time she didn't run against pebble-laden roads with no shoes; her feet were not cut and bleeding; this time she didn't hear Shale's voice screaming in fear, making her stop in order to help him, not realizing until it was too late that the boys weren't interested in Shale. This time she didn't have Shale to think about, didn't have to choose between saving herself and thinking she needed to save him. This time the voice calling her name grew fainter, and there were no arms pushing her down, no need to worry that Shale was just off in the distance, witnessing her struggle to be free from the assault upon her body and the part inside herself that she used to think of as her soul. She was free too from the look in Shale's eyes—as much as she missed him, she didn't have to live with his futile attempts to ease her pain.

Faster, and stronger, Bella ran, emerging from the park with a speed and force she didn't know she still possessed. Across the street, a light was illuminated, a store still open. Inside, a shopkeeper was wiping off a counter. Panting, she banged against the glass door. She'd never seen him before, neither here nor in Grodno, but even so, he



opened the door, alarmed by the wild look on her face and the disheveled state of her hair.

He brought her a glass of water and she drank. He motioned to a chair and she sat.

"How can I help you?" he asked, in English, and though she only partially understood what he had said, she was moved by the kindly way in which he spoke.

"*Kertofle*?" Bella asked, the Yiddish word for potato.

He stared uncomprehendingly at her.

"*Kertofle*, she repeated, "*kertofle, kertofle, kertofle*," her voice growing louder and more desperate with each repetition. In the air before him, she drew the shape of a potato, but he could read nothing from her wild gestures.

Still to no avail, but the patience and kindness on his face were unexpected. As she searched for what to say, someone burst through the door, as winded, as flushed as she had been moments before. His face had not been concocted in her mind. It was not one born of the past, but one that lived here: it was Sam, who was supposed to be sitting down now at her family's table. Somewhere inside the thicket in her head, where she knew more than she had allowed herself to believe, she pulled out an English word. She opened her mouth, which formed a small solid object.

"Potato?" Bella asked. Her pronunciation was mangled, her accent thick, but the word was right.

"Potato," Bella said again. "Potato."

Only once the shopkeeper went to get what she'd requested would she meet Sam's beseeching gaze. Bella turned to him and began to speak.