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The Making of Helen Weinzweig's "My Mother's Luck"

Ruth Panofsky

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The Archives Matter / A vos archives

Guest edited by Ruth Panofsky

Ruth Panofsky

The Making of Helen Weinzweig's "My Mother's Luck"

Helen Weinzweig was the author of two novels and one short story collection. *Passing Ceremony* (House of Anansi Press, 1973), her debut novel, was hailed as an important feminist work. *Basic Black with Pearls* (House of Anansi Press, 1980), her second, won the Toronto Book Award. *A View from the Roof* (Goose Lane Editions, 1989), her volume of short stories, was nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award. During her lifetime, Weinzweig's fiction was translated into French, German, and Italian. Recently, House of Anansi Press reissued her timeless novels with handsome new covers. "My Mother's Luck," Weinzweig's most acclaimed story, was collected in *A View from the Roof*. It was written in the form of a monologue and in 1996 was adapted for the stage and CBC Radio by playwright Dave Carley. The story's genesis is the focus of this installment of The Archives Matter.

Weinzweig was born on May 21, 1915, to Lily Wekselman and Joseph Tenenbaum, in Radom, Poland. At the age of nine, she and her divorced mother immigrated to Toronto, where her mother opened a hair salon. Weinzweig did not know her estranged father until she was seventeen. Upon arrival in Canada, she began formal schooling for the first time and deliberately abandoned her native Polish and Yiddish languages. Her childhood was one of poverty, neglect, and ostracism.

In late adolescence, Weinzweig spent two years at a sanatorium in Gravenhurst, Ontario, recuperating from tuberculosis. It was during this period that she developed a love of reading and discovered Buddhism. After completing high school, she was forced by the Depression to seek employment. She worked as a stenographer, receptionist, and retails sales clerk. In 1940, she married the composer John Weinzweig and the couple had two sons. Weinzweig was a homemaker until 1960, when at the age of forty-five she turned to writing at the suggestion of a psychiatrist who was treating her sudden and distressing inability to read. She built a studio on the top floor of her home at 107 Manor Road—pictured on the cover of this volume—and devoted the rest of her life to writing. Weinzweig also advocated on behalf of authors across the country and became a founding member of the Writer's Union of Canada. She died on February 11, 2010, in Toronto.

The two archival pieces featured here complement the published story "My Mother's Luck." Both documents can be found in the Helen Weinzweig Papers, which are held at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto (see Ms. Coll. 00603). Although the Weinzweig Papers are open to scholars, it was Paul Weinzweig, Helen's elder son, who first brought the pieces to my attention. The first is a three-page biographical sketch Weinzweig wrote in 1963—four years before she would publish her first short story, "Surprise," in *Canadian Forum*—for a creative writing course she took at Columbia University. The typescript introduces her incisive self-awareness, her distinctive voice, at once sharp and witty, and her subject—her mother and their complicated relationship. Unlike the standard profile I provided above, Weinzweig's

self-portrait—characterized by striking facts, wry humour, and a sophisticated sensibility—is inimitably her own.

The second piece is an eleven-page typescript entitled "The Zurich Years: A Memoir of My Mother." As the subtitle indicates, its subject is "the enigma" who was Weinzweig's mother and the eight-year period she lived in Zurich with Weinzweig's father. Although many of its details find their way into "My Mother's Luck" —in fact, one might consider the memoir a prelude to the story—they differ in terms of perspective. The memoir seeks to come to terms with a woman who, though dead ten years, inhabits the mind of her daughter—"she invades my thoughts with an arrogance she never showed in life." Written in the first-person, its narrative voice is that of a daughter who has been cowed by an indomitable, inscrutable mother.

"My Mother Luck," in contrast, features that same mother as the first-person narrator, while her daughter is recast as a silent listener whose shadowy presence on the margins of the chronicle serves as a necessary literary device. Lily's tale of unremitting hardship is propelled forward by her headstrong personality. She recalls her miserable childhood, youth, and marriage in Poland. Driven by will, impelled by a sense of justice, and graced with an innate intelligence, she eventually divorces her husband and immigrates to Canada. Eschewing further subservience to men, she becomes a single mother to her daughter—the teenager is named Esther as a guise for Helen—whom she raises under hardscrabble conditions in Toronto's Kensington Market neighbourhood. Lily is an unapologetic, embattled figure with a desire for freedom and a determination to thrive.

Via Weinzweig's authorial intervention in "My Mother's Luck," Lily is transformed into a vital, public figure who retains centre stage in both the published and dramatized versions of her life. In contrast, daughter Helen remains a conduit to her mother and recedes with "The Zurich Years: A Memoir of My Mother" into the archive. Thus, when read together, the narrative accounts assembled here—the biographical sketch, the memoir, and the published story—bring into focus the enduring potency of Weinzweig's intimate tie to her mother, in both personal relationship and writerly practice.

Ruth Panofsky, FRSC, is professor of English at Toronto Metropolitan University, where she teaches Canadian Jewish literature and Holocaust literature. Most recently, she edited *The New Spice Box: Contemporary Jewish Writing* (New Jewish Press, 2020). Her essay collection *At Odds in the World: Essays on Jewish Canadian Women Writers* (Inanna Publications, 2008) features an interview with Weinzweig and a profile of the author's work.

Helen Weinzweig, "Biographical Sketch"

Columbia University, New York City, 1963

iographical Sketch-
Helen Weinzweig

For Columbia University,
New York City 1963

I was born in 1915 in a small town in Poland. I am descended from a long and undistinguished line of poverty-stricken, ignorant ghetto Jews. All the "shtetl" nostalgia and all the ironic humour of Sholom Aleichem will never soften the bitter memories of my mother. She says, in sorrow, that perhaps Hitler did a great thing to wipe out those ghettos. My father was an intellectual, trained for the rabbinate, turned atheist, who wanted to escape his world. Fifty-odd years ago a number of Polish Jews went to Switzerland, where they were accepted in a social climate akin to Paradise. My parents got to Zurich so that my father could study - what, I do not know, since my mother, who cannot read or write, was never quite clear what happened. She recalls only having to work in order to eat, that she was frightened and confused, that she was constantly pregnant and ill. She had no more children as abortion was legal. My father, the student, was involved in more important matters, like anarchism, Ibsen and Schiller, and tried to involve my mother in an idealistic life. They divorced when I was four.

My mother and I returned to her people in Poland, where we were no more welcome than the lice and bed-bugs everyone had to endure. Yet my mother had had a taste of dignified living, even under hardship, in Zurich. She determined to leave Poland. Her eldest brother in Toronto, Canada, was prevailed upon to send for us.when I was nine.

For the first time I was able to go to school. Whatever criticism I had later, in the flamboyance of youth, of our tight-lipped, spinster school-teachers, I take it all back now. The missionary zeal of these earnest people with these strange children of these foreign peoples - that zeal, that dedication must not be underestimated. My teachers were unyielding in their demands: that we learn to speak English correctly; that

we be clean and polite; that we observe the rules of the game in the school-yard. Perhaps Britain won battles on her cricket fields. I'm certain democracy in North America was first experienced in the school-yards in our public schools. We were also conditioned to a certain rigid and uncompromising Presbyterian set of ideas, which, in later years, we had difficulty in fitting in with our European temperaments. In our teens we all suffered a division in direction: it was natural to most of us to be openly and sentimentally emotional, we tended to exaggerate in language and action; yet, at the same time, we attempted a rational, reasonable and controlled approach to our situations and to one another. We wrote high-flown essays on the superiority of British justice; we extolled for pages the pleasures of walking through a field of daffodils (who ever knew what one looked like!); while secretly we administered to ourselves drugs distilled from the agonies of Anna Karenina and Crime and Punishment.

The Depression put an end to our ambivalence. I left school and learned to type. Through "pull" I got a job at five dollars a week. There were other jobs (no one I knew had a "position"), including that of secretary in a brokerage firm that dealt in imaginary mining stocks. I was saved, if not from jail, at least from being a witness in a scandal, by becoming very ill. I was not finished with Poland. It seems that the bacilli had not declared themselves at Ellis Island, and waited until I was nineteen to go into action. I would have to go to a sanatorium. Methinks I did protest too much, crying and carrying on in the ancient tradition, while I could hardly wait to get away from my mother, her fourth "husband" and the cold attic room. I was absolutely delighted to land, even in a moribund state, in a clean hospital bed, surrounded by kind, friendly "gentiles", who reminded me of my school-teachers. I lay in bed two years, joyously putting myself together, and reading, reading, reading .....

The world I came back to was entirely different than the one I left. While I was away, they organized libraries, put on concerts and plays, made people kinder and more intelligent. Amazing! I sought, and obtained, an interesting position in a doctor's office. I sought, and obtained, an interesting and satisfying companion. I married him three years later.

My husband is a composer, with an outstanding reputation in Canada. For the past ten years he has taught composition at the University of Toronto, which, translated, means he can have his cake and we eat, too. We have two sons, one 21 and the other 17. In this period of domesticity, I have worked, off and on, at many things: stenography, selling and nursery school.

My interest in literature, mostly contemporary, is very strong. Now and again I have attempted a short story, and it takes me a year to get it down. First, the old dichotomy persists: I like cool, understated English, where the emotion is implicit and gives the reader a take-it-or-leave-it tone; while I long to express feelings overtly and they come out like soap-opera. I am not inventive in creating fictional situations, but would like to put on paper why something happened, rather than what. Ideas for a story are invariably concerned with the core, the essence, of a relationship. And what goes wrong. In this course I hope to learn to make the characterization stronger. And get used to the idea of saying it badly, rather than not at all.

Helen Weinzweig, "The Zurich Years: A Memoir of My Mother"

THE ZURICH YEARS

A memoir of my mother

-by-

~~Helen Jenenbaum~~
HELEN WEINZWEIG

It has been over a year since my last novel was published, yet I have been unable to start a new work. It is not "writer's block" which prevents me from writing. It is my mother. She has been dead for ten years, but the moment I sit down to write I hear her shout, "Remember me!". "Remember what!", I shout back, "you never talked to me, you told me nothing!" Paradoxically, I am more aware of my mother now than I have ever been before. This woman who expected little from life, who asked nothing of anyone, who considered herself unworthy of notice, has, in death, become persistent in her demands for attention. She invades my thoughts with an arrogance she never showed in life. My recollections of her are dark with sorrow and rage, but they are not what I want to write about. What then? Perhaps even a meagre memory will disclose clues to the enigma who was Lilly, my mother.

She was the eldest of a large family in the Jewish ghetto of Radom, Poland. For a girl to have been born into poverty and terror was in itself a blue-print for an uncertain future. Her mother was gentle and frail and died at forty-two. Her father was tall, handsome, with a pock-marked face. I remember him mostly wrapped in a prayer shawl, phylacteries

wound about his forehead and left arm, swaying in a corner of the room, intoning litanies. The rest of the time he was silent, a man distanced by futility and religion.

"When I was nine I was sent to live with my grandmother in Lublin," she once said in a rare moment of confiding in me.

The year was 1904. Lublin is a city not too far from Radom. That is all I know. My mother offered no more. She had no skill with conversation: shespoke only to give an order or a reprimand, and I never had the temerity to demand more. Now I imagine her seated on a pedlar's cart, beside the driver; or perhaps, on a soft pile of cloth in back of the wagon, embarked on a journey that must have caused the young girl to feel vaguely that she was unworthy of remaining with her mother, father and five sisters and two brothers.

"I asked myself, what will become of me," she added another time. "But my grandmother was very good to me. She had a small grocery store, I could eat all I wanted to."

A grandmother. Whose mother, her mother's or her father's? It was as if the details of her transitions in life were of no significance. One was born in this or that place, into this or that family, poor or poorer, one prevailed or one died.

"My grandmother loved me."

Love. She never said she loved anyone. There was never a sign that my mother felt even ordinary affection. She remained aloof, her head held high and held back. She touched no one, not even me, her only child. If standing when I came near, she moved away; if seated when I approached, she

Bose and moved to another part of the kitchen. What was her response, I used to wonder, when one or another or perhaps all of the three husbands and four lovers, at one time or another, must have whispered, "I love you".???

The cart rumbled off one morning with the child of nine and the train came back with a young woman of sixteen. Her memory, too, must have suffered indignities. She appeared to have no recall of the years between. For the loving grandmother had died. She returned to Radom and went to work in a grocery store, for by now she was experienced in weights and measures; she knew how to bargain with farmers for their cabbage. She was very strong and could lift sacks of flour and potatos.

Home was two dark rooms with an earthen floor. Wakefulness induced by bed bugs. Vermin. Sores that would not heal. The ears always strained for the clatter of horses' hooves. The terror of an unsheathed sabre. Sudden death. The family now diminished by two sisters and one brother who had languished and died while she was away. The other brother was in Canada. So that when a son of her employers came home for a visit from Switzerland and fell in love with her a year later, she married him within weeks and went back with him to Zurich.

My father was my mother's first husband. This son of her employers was a student in Zurich. At that time he was in his late twenties, more than ten years older than my mother. In Radom he had been a brilliant Talmudic scholar, became a rabbi and married the daughter of a rabbi. What secular knowledge could have filtered through the ghetto walls to turn him into an atheist, a heretic who divorced his wife and fled to Switzerland, intrigues the imagination. He entered the university of the Gentiles in Zurich, the same one, I kept telling my mother who found that fact irrelevant, the same one Albert Einstein went to. In the first years of this century for

a Polish Jew to behave in this manner was shocking and most uncommon. But there he was back home, my father, unrepentent, strutting with conceit despite his sins, courting my seventeen-year old mother. She, in turn, was flattered to have been singled out by this worldly man. Moreover, he was what she termed a "modern" man. He did not want a dowry (she had none); he refused to let her cut her thick auburn hair, and wear a wig, as was the orthodox custom. As for my intellectual father wanting to marry an illiterate young girl, low class in even the ghetto hierarchy, was no mystery. For she was [illegible]ful. She had violet eyes and thick black lashes and straight brows; a pallor that made her skin almost translucent. She moved with grace and precision.

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Of those Zurich years, eight in all, she said only that she and my father fought a great deal; that she had to work to support the two of them; then the three of us; that she had to leave me alone in their room while she went to work; that I was taken to a creche when I began to walk; that all my father did was study and this he did not do at home because I cried a lot and he found it hard to concentrate.

The lean, strong body of my mother can be seen moving through the streets of Zurich. She is no more concerned with the beauties of the city, with its lake and river, than she had been with the squalor of the ghetto. She is unaware of the revolutions that are taking place all about her. At that time, in the period of the First World War, Zurich was an Open City for the diseâe fected. She walks streets that are exploding with Marxist thought; she passes the railroad station through which Lenin is being transported in a sealed car to Russia; she turns a deaf ear to my father's instructions on child-rearing

according to the theories of Sigmund Freud; she might pass James Joyce on the Bahnhofstrasse. Perhaps she even walks by and glances idly in at the Cafe Voltaire where Tristan Tzara is mocking the seriousness of all art. In the midst of all this, my mother lives out her troubled days apparently unaffected by the upheavals all around her.

And as she moves about the city, anxious about her job, although they give her time off twice a day to nurse her baby; worried that her husband is not at the University but is with another woman; worried that she is pregnant again; wondering what will become of her -- all this time she notices out of the corner of an eye the many young women who sit in cafes, smoking cigarettes. The young ladies wear short skirts, mannish suits; their hair is shingled. She hears about the practice of "free love."

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The early ghetto imprint prevailed: one worked in order to eat. No other consideration was ever allowed to blur that necessity. She must have been then, too, isolated, self-deprecating and suspicious.

"Your father was ashamed that I couldn't read and write. He tried to teach me -- not Yiddish or Polish, but German. It was the language of art and literature and science, he said; He tried to educate me. I could always tell there was going to be a quarrel when he said, Now, Lilly, try and understand... and then I'd get a lecture. I could never figure out what I was doing wrong. All I knew is that I was always tired, you cried a lot, I had to get up early to take you to the creche and then go to the other end of the city to work. All I knew was that I had to work so he could be a scholar. All he knew was words, words, words. Words that never put food in your mouth. n

"He bought me a small notebook, gave me a sharp pencil and told me to write down what I bought and what it cost. He claimed he was teaching me to spell and add and subtract, but I know he wanted to keep track of every penny so that I would have nothing for myself from all my hard work." That she was illiterate she considered normal; she saw nothing wrong with not being able to spell or do arithmetic. She could work, couldn't she? "Since I was nine years old I have had to work; since I was nine years old I have been able to look after myself. No one is going to tell me how to live my lif so long as I can work." In Zurich she got a job in a beauty parlor, where she was taught to marcel and dye hair. She was very proud of these skills, since they provided an upward step from the dirty drudgery of a grocery store.

Of that serene city of Zurich, of the people she met, of times and places -- not a word. Outside of my father, me and herself, she spoke of one other person only: a woman doctor who lived in the same building, who befriended her; who taught her hygiene, told her about fresh fruit and vegetables. Perhaps she also taught her a fierce independence that stamped her life. "No man", she said years later on the departure of a lover, "no man is going to tell me what to do." Of strange or happy or sad things which happened to her, of interesting events or ideas -- she seemed to have registered nothing. One experience only: a night in the theatre when she saw Ibsen's play, A Doll's House.

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I imagine she learned then, during the Zurich years, to set her face in that expression of neutrality that neither invites nor refuses commerce. This was radically different from the look of anxiety which prevailed among the immigrants of the '30's in Toronto. It was a look of indifference to

an air of mystery to others, but served mostly to set her further apart from her neighbours. She never became part of the life around her, earning her own living, remaining independent, sometimes married and sometimes "living in sin", as they used to say.

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She could not say afterwards what finally happened to end her marriage to my father.

"What do you mean finally? Things don't happen all at once. You want a drama like in a play by Ibsen? One person right, one person wrong ...? Life is not like that. There is a moment, no longer than the blink of an eye, when husband and wife turn into strangers. They could pass in the street and not know each other. That's what finally happened."

That crucial decision to divorce meant a return to a life that was the antithesis of everything that was possible in Zurich. Instead of prosperity there was hunger; instead of cleanliness there was disease; instead of tolerance there were pogroms. With her four-year old child my mother left Zurich for the devastation that was post-war Poland, 1919. Perhaps she had no choice. Swiss citizenship is difficult to obtain, and without it foreigners can not remain in the country.

My father crossed another border into Milan. One day the question would arise why he did not stay on and continue his studies at the University.

"I got even with him. He thought I was just a stupid shtetl girl but I showed him. I told the police."

"What, what, what did you tell the police? What did he do?"

"Better you shouldn't know. Anyway, what's the difference now." Then she smiled, just a little, unable to resist the memory of her triumph. "I fixed him. He was deported from Switzerland."

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Still, the Zurich years must have had their effect. She was not content to stay in Poland. This transition she resisted. She quarreled with her sister about their willingness to spend the rest of their lives in dirt and ignorance. There were nights when my grandfather awaited her and beat her for suspected waywardness. Her protests that in Switzerland women were free to go out alone at night were of no avail. She wept, "What will become of me?" We remained in Poland four years.

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This is what became of her in Toronto: she had her own hairdressing parlor, employed two operators, her daughter was in school, she lived in a four-roomed flat; and if one man wasn't living with her --"when yo you've seen one, you've seen them all", she often said -- then it was another, no prizes any of them, but "free love" was not to be denied.
She spent her days in a spotless white uniform, writing in an appointment book, figuring out bills, counting money. There was about her, even on the warmest days, with the dryers going constantly, a cool detachment. She seemed not displeased with what had become of her.

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The Zurich Years. - 6 -

When I was seventeen and got my first job and my first pay cheque (it was five dollars), I went to the Royal Alexandra to see Ibsen's The Doll's House. When I got home at midnight my mother was still up. She was in the kitchen which was back of the store, sitting at the kitchen table, her uniform drawn up, her legs bare, her head resting on her arms, her feet in a basin of water. It was Saturday night. She accepted my explanation for coming home so late.

"Just like your father," she said, "the first few cents you make, you go to the show when you need food. We always found money to go to a show even when we didn't have enough to eat. He said the theatre was food for his soul." She picked up the theatre programme and said, loftily, "I saw that play when you were three years old." And then my mother, who did not even live in Zurich for all she ever spoke of it, suddenly had a clear recollection of one event -- Ibsen's play, The Doll's House.

Everybody in Zurich talked about it. Here I worked in the beauty parlor the customers talked of nothing else. So, for once, I didn't fight he shouldn't waste the money when he said he was going to the play. Instead, I said I wanted to go, too. I must admit it was nice to sit in a dark, warm theatre and see actors on a bright stage, acting. (Get me some more hot water, there on the stove. Ah, that's better.) That night after the play, your father and I had a good talk, like equals. We didn't agree about Nora leaving but for the first time we talked and didn't fight.

Your father thought Nora was crazy to leave. Thorvald gave her everything, treated her like a little doll, loved her like a pet. What's bad? he asked. So they have a little argument, like everybody does. And just

for that, just because of a little domestic problem, she leaves a good husband, a comfortable home, fine children ...? She was crazy, she should have been sent to a hospital.

"'It must have been very hard for Nora to leave her children. It just shows how sure she was what she had to do,' I said, 'besides they had good servants.'" Yours father said, 'She was stupid to leave a good life even if it was a bourgeois one, just to become a seamstress.'

"I was disappointed in him. I thought he was a modern man. Just a week before he was all excited about hearing Leon Trotsky lecture on Revolution. Here was this anarchist, your father, unable to see that Nora was being treated like a piece of furniture. I told him, 'Nora had to leave in order to keep her dignity and her pride.' 'Ha! he sneered, 'dignity and pride don't last long in a sweat shop.'

"All the next day I could think of nothing except what Nora did. I never thought a woman leaves a man except if he beats her. From that night on I began to change. I cut my hair. On my home from work I would go into a cafe and have a cognac and a cigarette. I threw away the notebook. At the end of the week I kept the money I earned, giving him just enough for the tram. When I became pregnant again, I got the woman doctor to arrange an abortion. Your father threatened to have the woman doctor disqualified and to have me put away in an insane asylum. There was no reasoning with him. Like Thorvald, he couldn't understand his wife's -- my -- actions. Like Nora, I had to leave. "

I didn't ask, lest the answer be in the affirmative, if she had had servants, would she have left me,too...

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The Zurich Years. - 11 -

The time came when it was necessary for my mother to go to a nursing home. She was seventy years old. She had had a series of small strokes. Her pride and her dignity were now sustained by a severe paranoia: she suspected everyone of dark plots; she would not stay in my house. When we were leaving her basement apartment, she halted at the door, waved an imperious hand that demanded I wait, looked back at her few modest possessions, at the fresh curtains, starched doilies, gleaming windows and shiny floors, and said, "Good-bye, my little palace."

At the nursing home she was gravely co-operative in the admission procedures, answering questions thoughtfully. We went to the room she was to occupy. A nurse bustled and chattered and helped me hang up my mother's other dress and put away her personal things. When this was done, the nurse went out. My mother and I faced each other at opposite sides of the bed. She looked at me as if she had just won some sort of victory. There was the same small smile as when she confessed that she had my father deported from Zurich.

"Well," she said, "I hope you're pleased with yourself. You've succeeded where your father failed -- you've put me away in an asylum."

-- 30 --

Helen Weinzweig, "The Zurich Years: A Memoir of My Mother"

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The cart rumbled off one morning with the child of nine and the train came back with a young woman of sixteen. Her memory, too, must have suffered indignities. She appeared to have no recall of the years between. For the loving grandmother had died. She returned to Radom and went to work in a grocery store, for by now she was experienced in weights and measures; she knew how to bargain with farmers for their cabbage. She was very strong and could lift sacks of flour and potatoes.

Home was two dark rooms with an earthen floor. Wakefulness induced by bed bugs. Vermin. Sores that would not heal. The ears always strained for the clatter of horses' hooves. The terror of an unsheathed sabre. Sudden death. The family now diminished by two sisters and one brother who had languished and died while she was away. The other brother was in Canada. When a son of her employers came home for a visit from Switzerland and fell in love with her a year later, she married him within weeks and went back with him to Zurich.

My father was my mother's first husband. This son of her employers was a student in Zurich. At that time, he was in his late twenties, more than ten years older than my mother. In Radom, he had been a brilliant Talmudic scholar, became a rabbi and married the daughter of a rabbi. What secular knowledge could have filtered through the ghetto walls to turn him into an atheist, a heretic who divorced his wife and fled to Switzerland, intrigues the imagination. He entered the university of the Gentiles in Zurich, the same one, I kept telling my mother who found that fact irrelevant, the same one Albert Einstein went to. In the first years of this century for a Polish Jew to behave in this manner was shocking and most uncommon. But there he was back home, my father, unrepentant, strutting with conceit despite his sins, courting my seventeen-year-old mother. She, in turn, was flattered to be singled out by this worldly man.

Moreover, he was what she termed a "modern" man. He did not want a dowry (she had none); he refused to let her cut her thick auburn hair and wear a wig, as was the orthodox custom. As for my intellectual father wanting to marry an illiterate young girl, low class even in the ghetto hierarchy, was no mystery. For she was very beautiful. She had violet eyes and thick black lashes and straight brows; a pallor that

made her skin almost translucent. She moved with grace and precision.

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Of those Zurich years, eight in all, she said only that she and my father fought a great deal; that she had to work to support the two of them; then three of us; that she had to leave me alone in their room while she went to work; that I was taken to a creche when I began to walk; that all my father did was study and this he did not do at home because I cried a lot and he found it hard to concentrate.

The lean, strong body of my mother can be seen moving through the streets of Zurich. She is no more concerned with the beauties of the city, with its lake and river, than she had been with the squalor of the ghetto. She is unaware of the revolutions that are taking place about her. At that time, in the period of the First World War, Zurich was an Open City for the disaffected. She walks streets that are exploding with Marxist thought; she passes the railroad station through which Lenin is being transported in a sealed car to Russia; she turns a deaf ear to my father's instructions on child-rearing according to the theories of Sigmund Freud; she might pass James Joyce who was writing "what are you afreud of" on the Bahnhofstrasse. Perhaps she walks by and glances idly in at the Café Voltaire where Tristan Tzara, the Romanian and French avant-garde poet is mocking the seriousness of all art during the onset of Dadaism. In the midst of all this, my mother lives out her troubled days apparently unaffected by the upheavals all around her. One of the reasons, of course, was that she could neither read nor write.

As she moves about the city, anxious about her job, although they gave her time off twice a day to nurse her baby; worried that her husband is not at the university but is with another woman; worried that she is pregnant again; wondering what will become of her—all this time she notices out of a corner of an eye the many young women who sit in cafes, smoking cigarettes. The young ladies wear short skirts, mannish suits; their hair is shingled. She hears about the practice of "free love."

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The early ghetto prevailed: one worked in order to eat. No other consideration was ever allowed to blur that necessity. She must have been then, too, isolated, self-deprecating and suspicious.

"Your father was ashamed that I couldn't read or write. He tried to teach me—not Yiddish or Polish, but German. It was the language of art and literature and science, he said. He tried to educate me. I could always tell there was going to be a quarrel when he said, 'Now, Lilly, try and understand ...' and then I'd get a lecture. I could never figure out what I was doing wrong. All I knew is that I was always tired, you cried a lot, I had to get up early to take you to the creche and then go to the other end of the city to work. All I knew was that I had to work so he could be a scholar. All

he knew was words, words, words. Words that never put food in your mouth.

He brought me a small notebook, gave me a sharp pencil and told me to write down what I bought and what it cost. He claimed he was teaching me to spell and add and subtract, but I know he wanted to keep track of every penny so that I would have nothing for myself from all my hard work."

That she was illiterate she considered normal; she saw nothing wrong with not being able to spell or do arithmetic. She could work, couldn't she?

"Since I was nine years old, I have had to work; since I was nine years old, I have been able to look after myself. No one is going to tell me how to live my life so long as I can work." In Zurich she got a job in a beauty parlor, where she was taught to marcel and dye hair. She was very proud of these skills, since they provided an upward step from the dirty drudgery of a grocery store.

Of that serene city of Zurich, of the people she met, of times and places—not a word. Outside of my father, me and herself, she spoke of one other person only: a woman doctor who lived in the same building, who befriended her, who taught her hygiene, told her about fresh fruit and vegetables. Perhaps she also taught her a fierce independence that stamped her life. "No man," she said years later on the departure of a lover, "no man is going to tell me what to do." Of strange or happy or sad events which happened to her, of interesting events or ideas—she seemed to have registered nothing. One experience only: a night in the theater when she saw Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*.

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I imagine she learned then, during the Zurich years, to set her face in that expression of neutrality that neither invites nor refuses commerce. This was radically different from the look of anxiety which prevailed among the immigrants of the thirties in Toronto. To some, hers was a look of indifference, an air of mystery to others, but served mostly to set her apart from her neighbours. She never became part of the life around her, earning her own living, remaining independent, sometimes married and sometimes "living in sin," as they used to say.

She could not say afterwards what finally happened to her marriage to my father.

"What to you mean 'finally'? Things don't happen all at once. You want a drama like in a play by Ibsen? One person right, one person wrong ...? Life is not like that. There is a moment, no longer than the blink of an eye, when husband and wife turn into strangers. They could pass in the street and not know each other. *That's* what finally happened."

The crucial decision to divorce meant a return to a life that was the antithesis of everything that was possible in Zurich. Instead of prosperity there was hunger; instead of cleanliness there was disease; instead of tolerance there were pogroms. With her four-year-old child my mother left Zurich for the devastation that was post-war Poland, 1919. Perhaps she had no choice. Swiss citizenship is difficult to obtain, and without it, foreigners cannot remain in the country.

My father crossed another border into Milan. One day the question would arise why he did not stay on and continue his studies at the university.

"I got even with him. He thought I was just a stupid *shtetl* girl, but I showed him. I told the police."

"What, what, what did you tell the police? What did he do?"

"Better you shouldn't know. Anyway, what's the difference now." Then she smiled, just a little, unable to resist the memory of her triumph. "I fixed him. He was deported from Switzerland."

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Still, the Zurich years must have had their effect. She was not content to stay in Poland. This was a transition to be resisted. She quarreled with her sisters about their willingness to spend the rest of their lives in dirt and ignorance. There were nights when my grandfather awaited her and beat her for suspected waywardness. Her protests that in Switzerland women were free to go out alone at night were of no avail. She wept, "What will become of me?" We remained in Poland four years.

This is what became of her in Toronto: she had her own hairdressing parlor, employed two operators, her daughter was in school, she lived in a four-roomed flat; and if one man wasn't living with her—"when you've seen one, you've seen them all," she often said—then it was another, no prizes any of them, but free love was not to be denied.

She spent her days in a spotless white uniform, writing in an appointment book, figuring out bills, counting money. There was about her, even on the warmest days, with the beehive dryers going constantly, a cool detachment. She seemed not displeased with what had become of her.

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When I was seventeen and got my first job and my first pay cheque (it was five dollars), I went to the Royal Alexandra Theatre to see Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. When I got home at midnight my mother was still up. She was in the kitchen, which was back of the store, sitting at the kitchen table, her uniform drawn up, her legs bare,

her head resting on her arms, her feet in a basin of water. It was Saturday night.

She accepted my explanation for coming home late.

"Just like your father," she said, "the first few cents you make, you go to the show when you need shoes. He always found money to go to a show even when we didn't have enough to eat. He said the theater was food for his soul ..." She picked up the theatre program and said, loftily, "I saw that play when you were three-years-old." And then my mother, who might never have lived in Zurich for all she ever spoke of it, suddenly had a clear recollection of one event—Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*.

"Everybody in Zurich talked about it. Where I worked in the beauty parlor the customers talked of nothing else. So, for once, I didn't fight he shouldn't waste the money when he said he was going to the play. Indeed, I said I wanted to go, too. I must admit it was nice to sit in a dark, warm theater and see actors on a bright stage, acting. (Get me some hot water, there on the stove. Ah, that's better.) That night after the play, your father and I had a good talk, like equals. We didn't agree about Nora leaving but for the first time we talked and didn't fight.

Your father thought Nora was crazy to leave. Thorvald gave her everything, treated her like a little doll, loved her like a pet. 'That's bad?' he asked. 'So, they have a little argument, like everybody does. And just for that, just because of a little domestic problem, she leaves a good husband, a comfortable home, fine children ...? She was crazy, she should have been sent to a hospital.'

'It must have been very hard for Nora to leave her children. It just shows how sure she was about what she had to do,' I said. 'Besides, they had good servants.'

Your father said, 'She was stupid to leave a good life even if it was a bourgeois one, just to become a seamstress.'

I was disappointed in him. I thought he was a modern man. Just a week before he was all excited about hearing Leon Trotsky lecture on Revolution. Here was this anarchist, your father, unable to see that Nora was being treated like a piece of furniture. I told him, 'Nora had to leave in order to keep her dignity and her pride.' 'Ha! he sneered, 'dignity and pride don't last long in a sweatshop.'

All the next day I could think of nothing except what Nora did. I never thought a woman leaves a man except if he beats her. From that night on I began to change. I cut my hair. On my way home from work I would go into a café and have a cognac and a cigarette. I threw away the notebook. At the end of the week, I kept the money I earned, giving him just enough for the tram. When I became pregnant again, I got the woman doctor to arrange an abortion. Your father threatened to have the woman doctor disqualified and to have me put away in an insane asylum. There was no reasoning with him. Like Thorvald, he couldn't understand his wife's—my—actions. Like Nora, I had to leave."

I didn't ask, lest the answer be in the affirmative—if you had had servants, would you have left me, too ...?

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The time came when it was necessary for my mother to go to a nursing home.

She was seventy years old. She had had a series of small strokes. Her pride and her dignity were now sustained by a severe paranoia: she suspected everyone of dark plots; she would not stay in my house. When we were leaving her basement apartment, she halted at the door, waived an imperious hand that demanded I wait, looked back at her few modest possessions, at the fresh curtains, starched doilies, gleaming windows and shiny floors, and said, "Good-bye, my little palace."

At the nursing home she was gravely cooperative in the admissions procedures, answering questions thoughtfully. We went to the room she was to occupy. A nurse bustled and chattered and helped me hang up my mother's other dress and put away her personal things. When this was done, the nurse went out.

My mother and I faced each other across opposite sides of the bed. She looked at me as if she had just won some sort of victory. There was the same small smile as when she confessed that she had my father deported from Zurich.

"Well," she said, "I hope you're pleased with yourself. You've succeeded where your father failed—you've put me away in an asylum."

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My mother never forgave me for looking like my father. I never forgave myself either. My mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw.

Note from Paul Weinzweig: This unpublished typescript, "The Zurich Years: A Memoir of My Mother," was written by Helen Weinzweig around 1982 under her maiden name Helen Tenenbaum. I have very lightly edited the original typescript.

Helen Weinzweig, "My Mother's Luck"

July 6, 1931

I have decided, my mother said, to go with you to New York to see you off. Your boat sails a week from tomorrow. In a week you will be gone; who knows if we will ever see each other again. No, no, stop it. I can't stand anyone slobbering over me. *Now* what are you crying for? I thought you wanted to go to your father. I'm only trying to do what's best for you. You should be happy, going to Europe, to Germany, travelling in style, like a tourist. Not the way we came to this country, eh? Steerage, like cattle. Everything on that boat smelled and tasted of oily ropes. Hardly what you would call a pleasure trip. But then, how would I recognize pleasure—how would I know what there is in this world that gives happiness—when I have been working since I was nine years old. My feet, my poor feet. I can't remember when my feet didn't hurt. Get me the white basin, no, the deep one, from under the sink. And the kettle: the water should be hot enough. Take a chair, sit down. No, I'll fill it myself. We will have a talk while I'm soaking my feet. I suppose we should have a talk before you go. I know, I know; you don't have to remind me; can I help it, the long hours; you think I like to work so hard? It's not only you I have no time for: I don't have time to breathe, to live. I said, sit down! What do you care about your silly girlfriends? They'll find someone else to waste their time with. Jennie? Write her a letter. Ah, that feels better. My poor feet. I'm looking forward to sitting on the train. They told me it takes fourteen hours from Toronto to New York. Just think, I will be off my feet for a whole day.

Why do you look so miserable? I just don't understand you: first you drive me crazy to go to your father and now you sit like at a funeral. Tell you what: in New York we will have a little party before your boat sails. We'll go to a big, fancy restaurant. Sam and me and you. Yes. You heard right. Sam. Are you deaf or don't you understand Yiddish any more? I said, Sam is coming with us. You might as well know: he is moving in with me next week. Your room. No use leaving it empty. There you go again, telling me what I should do. No one tells me what to do. I will stay alone until the Messiah comes, rather than live with another woman. I despise women: they are false and jealous. With a man you know where you're at: you either get along or you don't. They are not hypocrites like women. Marry Sam? What for? To give satisfaction to the old *yentes,* the gossips? I will never marry again: three times was plenty. Get a little hot water from the kettle. Ah, that's better. Now turn low the gas.

So, tell me, have you got your underwear and stockings clean for the trip? Your shoes need a good polish. You don't need everything new. Let your father buy you something, I've supported you for sixteen years, that's long enough. God knows as He is my witness I can do no more. That's what I told your teacher when she came to see me in the winter. She looked around the flat as if fish was rotting under her nose. I couldn't wait for her to leave, that dried up old maid. I told her, I'm an igno-

rant woman, I'll let you educated people figure out what to do with my daughter. Just one thing you should remember, Esther, it was your idea, not mine, that you should get in touch with your father. Whatever happens, you will not be able to blame me. Of course, you can come back if you want. You have a return ticket. You can thank Sam for that. He said I should let you make up your own mind if you want to live with your father. You don't deserve Sam's consideration. The way you treat him: not talking to him when he greets you on his Sunday visits. He—what? Watch that tongue of yours. I can still give you a good licking if I have to. The smell of sweat is the smell of honest work. I don't like it either, but I've had enough from the educated ones, like your father, who know everything except how to raise a sweat. They all talked a lot, but I could never find out what they wanted from me. I cooked and cleaned and went to work. I tried to please the customers all day and then I was supposed to please them at night.

Like that talmudist, Avrom, you remember him—well, perhaps you were too young. One night I came home from work, tired and hungry, and there he was, exactly where I had left him at eight o'clock in the morning, at the kitchen table. In twelve hours nothing had changed, except there were more books and more dirty plates on the table. —And where, I asked him, am I supposed to eat? He didn't even look up. He raised a white hand. —What means the hand in the air? You think maybe this is Poland and you are the privileged scholar, the permanent guest at my table? In America everybody works who wants to eat. With my arm, like with a broom, I swept clear the table. I waited he should say something, maybe he would realize and say he was sorry he forgot about me, but all he did was look at me like he didn't know who I was. Then he bent down and picked up the books one by one, so slow you would think every book weighed a ton. His face got red like his hair, he was breathing so noisy I thought he was going to bust. Just the books, not the dishes, he picked up. He went into the bedroom and closed the door. All I asked was a little consideration, and for that he didn't talk to me for a week.

So what's the difference to me whether they know enough to take a bath. Sam will learn. He needs a nice home. He's a good man, he works hard, a presser in a factory. So maybe he will be tired at night. And he can pay his own way to New York. A working man has at least his union to see he gets a decent wage. What protection has a scholar got? He leans on the whole world and the world pushes him away. Not that I care about money. I am decent with a man, not taking from him every cent, like their greedy wives. Last week Sam handed me his sealed pay envelope. —Here, he said, take out for New York. Buy yourself a nice coat. Naturally, I wouldn't take his money. So long as he pays the rent, a little for the food, it will be enough. If I was to take his money, next thing he will be telling me what I should do. You can be sure the minute he tries to boss me, out he goes, like the others.

Your stepfather, the first one, made that mistake. Max. Tall, the best-looking man I ever knew. He worked all night in a bakery and came home seven o'clock in the morning smelling like fresh bread. You two got along well. He made you lunch every day and filled your pockets with bagels for your class. Every Saturday he took you to the show. Remember? When I came home from the store Saturday night, which was his night off, he was ready to step out. I could only soak my tired feet. One day he got a raise. —Lily, he said, you can stop work. Sell the store. Stay home and look after Esther and me. I said, —and suppose you lost your job, what will become of us in this Depression? And suppose your boss gives your job to his brother who came last night from Poland? Max thought we should take a chance. —Maybe someday I will have my own bakery, he said, I want you should stay home like a normal wife. He was not very intelligent: he couldn't get it into his head we would have no security without my beauty parlor. After that, Max was not the same. He talked to me as if I was his servant. —You, he would call me, instead of my name; you, don't make me nothing to eat. I have a bad stomach. —See a doctor. —A doctor won't help. I choke on your meat. He came and went in his work clothes, so that there was flour dust on the furniture. I even paid for the lawyer to get the divorce, just to get rid of him.

What are you sitting like a lump for? Get me a little hot water in the basin. Careful, slow; do you want to burn me! You are such a *shlimazel!* Wipe it up. Are you blind as well? There, over there, by the stove. Ah, that feels good. I hope you will have it easier than me. Maybe your father can give you the education your teacher said you should have. All I have from life is sore feet. My poor feet, look how calloused and shapeless they have become. Once I had such fine hands and feet. The ankles, they used to be so thin. When I was young they said I had the hands and feet of an aristocrat. If you're really so smart as they say you are, you won't have to slave like me. You should have a life like the aristocrats in Europe used to have before the Revolution. I hope you will have a name everyone respects. What a life those fine ladies of Europe used to have: they got married and lived free as birds. Like George Sand or Madame de Stael. Surprised you, eh? I know more than you think. In the papers I recognize names sometimes I first hear in Zurich: Freud, Einstein, Picasso. What's the matter? See, I did learn something from your father. He may tell you I was stupid, he used to tell me I was an ignorant ghetto girl.

Your father taught me to read and write in German. He tried to educate me. So did Isaac. I could always tell there was going to be trouble when they said—Lily, try and understand.... And then I'd get a lecture. You would think that after your father I would not again be trapped by fine words. Yet I could not resist a man with a soft voice and clean fingernails. They gave me such fine compliments: how my eyes are the colour of violets; my skin so fair and delicate; how charming my smile; and they quote poetry to add to the feeling. I jump at fine words like a child at candy. Each time I think, this time it will be different, but every man is your father all over again,

in a fresh disguise. Talk. Talk. How could they talk. If it wasn't anarchism, it was socialism; if it wasn't atheism, it was religious fanaticism; if it wasn't Moses, it was Marx. Sometimes I wanted to talk, too. Things weren't that easy for me, and I wanted to tell someone about my troubles. They listened for a minute and got a funny look on the face like I remember from the idiot in my village. Once I said to Isaac —That awful Mrs. Silberman. Three bottles of dye I had to use on her hair, it's so thick and long. Naturally, I charged her extra. You should have heard her scream blue murder over the fifty cents. —Where you live up the hill, I told her, they would charge you double. I don't make profit on the dye. I called her a cheapskate. Anyway, it was her husband's money not her own she was fighting over. She called me a low-class low-life. I told her never to come back. Isaac didn't say I did right to throw her out. He explained to me about the capitalist class, and I said, —Don't give me the manifesto. You didn't see her ugly expression, I told him. And he said —Her actions were governed by the class struggle: she is the exploiter and you are the exploited. It was nothing against you personally, Lily. —But I'm the one she tried to cheat; I'm the one she cursed, may she rot in hell. —That's an ignorant approach to a classical social problem, Isaac explained —now, Lily, try and understand.... Still, Isaac and me got along the best. He had consideration. He used to read to me while I was cooking late at night for the next day. On Sundays, we did the laundry together. He couldn't find a job, so he helped me what he could. I found little things for him to do, so he wouldn't feel useless. In the winter he carried out the ashes from the furnace from the store. He fixed the chairs and painted behind the shampoo sink. He was very artistic, the way he fixed up the windows with pictures and coloured paper. He made all my signs, like the "Specials" for the permanents. I was satisfied. Good or bad, nothing lasts forever.

Isaac decided to go into business for himself. Nobody can say I stopped him. I gave him the money to buy a stock of dry goods to peddle on credit. He knew a lot of languages, but that didn't put money in his pocket. He spoke Russian, the customers cried in Russian; he talked in Ukrainian, they wept in Ukrainian; he sold towels in Yiddish, they dried their eyes on his towels. They prayed for help on his carpets; they lay sick between his sheets. How could he take their last cent, he asked me. So he gave everything away. Then he wanted more money for new stock. —I'm not the welfare department, I told him. The way he let people make a sucker out of him, I lost my respect. Then why did I marry him? God knows I didn't want to get married again: twice was enough. The government ordered me to get married.

Oh don't look so innocent. You think I don't know how all that court business started? It was you. You, with your long face and wet eyes, whining at other people's doors, like a dog, as if I didn't feed you right. I can imagine —Come in, come, Esther, sit down and have a piece of cake and tell me all about that terrible mother of yours. Women! Slaves, that's what they are, every one of them; yet if another woman tries

to live her own life, they scream blue murder. I can see them, spending their empty nights talking about me, how I live with a man, not married. The Children's Aid wouldn't tell who snitched on me. Miss Graham, the social worker, was very nice, but she wouldn't say either. —I don't like to do this, she said, having to investigate reports from neighbours. Your daughter is thirteen years old and is paying a price in the community because her mother lives in sin. I said, —I am a decent, hard-working woman. See, my rooms are clean, look, my icebox is full with fruit and milk, Esther is dressed clean, she never misses a day of school. A marriage licence does not make a better wife or mother. She agreed with me, but there was nothing she could do. I had to marry Isaac or they would take away my daughter. I said, —This is a free country, I'll do what I want. So they summonsed me to Family Court. —Your daughter, the judge said, needs a proper home. I told him, —Judge, Esther has a good home. She has a piano in her room and I pay for lessons. You should hear how nice she plays. —That is not the issue: it is a question of morality. —Judge, I said, I know all about morals and marriage. And what I don't know, the customers tell me. You should hear the stories. Is it moral, I asked him, for a woman to have to sleep with a man she hates? Is it moral for a man to have to support a woman whose face he can't look at? —Come, come, he said, these are not questions for this court to answer. We are here to administer the law. If you do not marry the man you are living with, we will take the child and place her with a decent family. Go fight city hall. So we took out the licence and got married. I have bad luck. Isaac decided to write a book on the trade union movement in the textile industry. He stopped peddling: he stopped helping me. He talked of nothing but the masses: ate and slept the masses. So I sent him to the masses: let them look after him. Just shows how much the law knows what's best.

Love? Of course I loved him. For what other reason would I bother with a man if I didn't love him! I have bad luck, that's all. I attract weak men. Each time I think, aha, this one is different. It always begins with the compliments; it always ends with the silence. After he has been made comfortable in my bed, his underwear in my drawer, his favourite food in the icebox, he settles down. I rush home from the store, thinking he is waiting for me. But no. He doesn't look up from the paper. He sits. I ask, —Do you want fish or herring for an appetizer? He says to the paper, —It doesn't matter. We eat. He sits. All I ask is a little consideration for all I do for them. Maybe once a week I would like to have a change. I wouldn't mind to pay for a show. I'm not ashamed to go up to the cashier and buy two tickets. Most women would make a fuss about that, but not me—I'm a good sport. I'm not one of your bourgeois women. That was your father's favourite word. Bourgeois. He said the bourgeois woman sold her soul for *kinder, kuchen,* and *kirche*. See, I even remember a little German. That means—oh, excuse me! You know what the words mean—I forgot you are the clever one....

Hand me the towel. No, the one I use for the feet, the torn one. You're like a stranger around here, having to be told everything. I'll make a cup of tea. You can

stay up a little later tonight: I feel like talking. No, sit. I'll make the tea, then you won't get in my way. What do you want with the tea—a piece of honey cake, maybe?

You and your father will get along, you're both so clever. Words, he had words for everything. No matter what the trouble was, he talked his way out of it. If there was no money for meat, he became a vegetarian, talking all the time how healthy fruits and nuts are; if he couldn't pay the rent, he spent hours complimenting the landlady on her beauty and charm, although she was fat and hairy; if I thought I was pregnant again, he talked about the joys of motherhood. When I cried day and night what would become of us, he talked the hospital into doing an abortion. But mouth work brings no food to the table. How was I to know that, young and inexperienced as I was? When I got married, I wasn't much older than you are now. I was barely seventeen when your father came home to Radom on a visit from the university in Zurich. It was before the war, in 1911. I was only a child when he fell in love with me. Yet, it can hardly be said I was ever a child: I was put to work at nine, gluing paper bags. At fourteen, I was apprenticed to a wigmaker. Every day, as I bent over the wooden form of a head, my boss would stand and stroke my hair, saying when I marry and have my hair shorn, he would give me a *sheitel* for a wedding present if I promise to sell him my hair for the wigs. My hair was beautiful, thick and silky, and a lovely auburn shade. I lasted three months, because his wife got jealous and dragged me back to my father by my silky hair. My father decided I must have done something wrong and beat me with his leather belt. What was there for me to look forward to, except more work, more misery, and, if I was lucky, marriage to a butcher's son, with red hands? So you can imagine when your father began to court me, how could I resist? He had such fine manners, such an educated way of saying things, such soft hands, he was a man different from anyone I had ever met. He recited poetry by Goethe and Rilke, which he translated for me. He called me *"Blume,"* which means flower, from a poem that starts, *"Du bist wie eine Blume."* He didn't want a dowry: I wouldn't have to cut my hair. He was a modern man: his views caused a scandal. Your father wasn't much to look at—short and pale and poor teeth. You know that small plaster statue of Beethoven on my dresser? The one you hate to dust? That belonged to him. He imagined he looked like Beethoven—he had the same high, broad forehead and that angry look. Still, to me his pale, shaven face was very attractive compared to the bearded men of the town. So we were married by a rabbi and I went back with him to Switzerland. Four years later, just before you were born, we were married in the city hall in Zurich so you would be legal on the records.

Let me see, how old is he now? I'm thirty-eight, so he must be forty-eight. The *landsleit* say he never married again. I bet he never thought he'd ever see his daughter again. He won't be able to deny you: you're the spitting image. Pale like him. Same forehead, and the same red spots across when you get nervous. I'd give anything to be there when you're both reading and pulling at your hair behind the right ear. You

certainly are your father's daughter. Even the way you sneaked around, not telling me, writing to Poland, until you got his address in Munich. I should have known you were up to something: you had the same look of a thief as him when he went to his meetings.

Those meetings! An anarchist he was yet. The meetings were in our small room. Every other word was "Revolution." Not just the Russian revolution, but art revolution, religious revolution, sex revolution. They were nearly all young men and women from the university, students like your father. Since he was a good deal older than the rest, he was the leader. They yelled a lot. At first I was frightened by the arguments, until I realized that these intellectuals didn't have anything to do with the things they fought about. It wasn't real people they knew, just names; it wasn't what they themselves did that caused so much disagreement—it was what other people somewhere else were doing. Where I come from, I was used to real trouble, like sickness and starvation and the threat of pogroms. So I didn't pay too much attention until the night we all had a big argument about Nora. First I should tell you about the young women who came to these meetings. They thought themselves the equal of the men, and the men treated them like comrades. Not like in Poland, where every morning of their lives, men thank God for not having been born a woman. In Zurich, the young ladies wore dark mannish suits, had their hair shingled, and smoked cigarettes. Beside them, I felt like a sack of potatoes.

This play, *A Doll's House,* shocked everybody. Before you were born, your father sometimes took me to a play. For that, he found money. He called the theatre food for the soul. All such money-wasters he called his spiritual nourishment. I went anyway, because it was nice to sit in a big warm theatre, in a soft seat, and watch the actors. Remind your father about the night we saw *A Doll's House*. About ten of us came back to our room and talked until three in the morning about Nora. For the first time, I was able to join in. I was the only one who sympathized with the husband—he gave her everything, treated her like a little doll, loved her like a pet. This is bad? So they have a little argument, so she says she must leave him and the children. Leave the children! Did you ever hear such a thing! —The servants know how to run the house better than I do, she tells her husband. —Servants! I said to myself, there's your answer—she had it too good. If she had to struggle like me for a piece of bread, she would have overlooked her husband's little fit. She should have cooked him a nice supper, given him a few compliments, and it would have all been *schmired* over, made smooth. Of course, I don't feel like that now, but that's what I thought the night I saw the play. The men agreed with me: it was stupid to leave a good life, even a bourgeois life, to slave for someone else as a seamstress. The women were disappointed in their comrades: couldn't these revolutionaries see that Nora was being exploited by her husband…? The men argued that she was responsible for bringing up her children and should not have left them to the mercy of servants: that motherhood was sacred

in all societies. The women said Nora was an intelligent, sensitive human being and was right to refuse to be treated like a possession, like a piece of furniture. Nora had to leave to keep her dignity and her pride. Exactly, the men said, dignity and pride are bourgeois luxuries. In the new society..... Back and forth the rest of the night.

All the next day, I could think of nothing but what Nora did. It never occurred to me that a woman leaves a man except if he beats her. From that time on, I began to change. I shingled my hair, I started to sit in the cafés and smoke. When I got pregnant again, I refused to go for an abortion. Four in three years was enough. I don't know why your father, with all his education, didn't know how to take care I shouldn't get in the family way. So you were born. Your father had to leave university and be a clerk in a shoe store. He hated the job: he hated me. You cried a lot. Nothing in your father's books explained why you cried so much. Then your father talked me into going back to work. They were glad to have me back at the beauty parlor. I was a good marceller. It was better to work than be stuck in a little room all day.

And the anarchist meetings started again. While everybody was making plans to blow up the world, I was busy running down the hall to the toilet to vomit. I was pregnant. Well, look who's back they said at the clinic, sign here, Lily. I hope you will have it easier than me. Your father should send you to college. Maybe being educated will help, although sometimes I wonder. I met educated women who never knew what to do with themselves. Once, I remember, I asked one of my customers, *Frau* Milner was her name, —And how was the march yesterday for getting the vote for women? —It was called off, I couldn't lead the march to the city hall, she said, I got my period, only it was a miscarriage and I was hemorrhaging and couldn't get out of bed. —So you think the world is going to stand still until we stop bleeding?

What finally happened? What do you mean, finally? Things don't happen all at once. You want a drama like in a play, a big fight, with one person wrong, one person right...? Nothing like that. I came back from the warm, clean hospital, where they were so kind to me, they looked after me like a child, I came back to a cold room, and dirty sheets, and our six dishes and two pots sticky with food. There wasn't a penny for the gas and I couldn't heat your milk. You cried, your father yelled he couldn't study. After going to university for four years, I couldn't understand why he still needed to study. I had to get up six in the morning to take you to the crèche at one end of the city and go to work at the other end. You wouldn't stop screaming, and I spanked you, and your father said I was stupid to take out my bad feelings on an innocent child. I sat down, beaten. In that moment I knew I was going to leave. There is a second, no longer than the blink of an eye, when husband and wife turn into strangers. They could pass in the street and not know each other. That's what happened that night.

How did we get here? A good question, but a long story. We've talked enough; I'm tired. What's the difference now? Well, all right. You can tell your father how I did it: I want him to know I was not so stupid. He never knew I was getting a divorce until it was all over and I was out of the country. One of my customers was a very beautiful girl. She had long hair which I used to dye a beautiful shade of red, then I marcelled it in deep lovely waves from top to bottom. She came every Monday morning, and every week she would show me new presents from her lover. She was the mistress of a famous judge in Zurich. Her secret was safe with me: our worlds were miles apart.

One day, instead of going to work, I took you and went to the Court House. You were four years old; the war was over. I wasn't sleeping with your father because I was afraid of getting pregnant; and he wasn't sleeping at home much. At the Court House I bothered a lot of people where is Judge Sutermeister; I found out where he was judging. You were very good that morning while we sat outside on a bench, waiting. People smiled at us and asked you your name, and found things in their purses or briefcases to give you—pencils, paper, bonbons, a small mirror. About twelve o'clock, when the doors opened and people came out, I stood in the doorway and watched where the judge went. He left through a door at the back. I went in with you, through the same door. He was sitting at a big desk, writing. Oh, he was an elegant gentleman, with grey hair. He looked very stern at me, and I almost ran away. I didn't wait for him to speak. I stood by his desk and told him my troubles, right away I said I wanted him to get me a divorce, and that I knew all about him and *Fräulein* Olga. He got up, he was so tall, and made such a big scene, like he was on stage; he was going to have me arrested. But I stood there, holding on to you and the desk. —And what will become of her if I go to jail? And what will happen to your career and your sweetheart if your wife finds out her money buys rings and pearls for your mistress? For the next six months, I kept on like usual. *Fräulein* Olga was the messenger for me and the judge. She didn't mind. She said it gave her something to do, asking me lawyer's questions, writing down my answers, bringing me papers to sign. One Monday morning, *Fräulein* Olga came with a large brown envelope holding my divorce papers. Inside also was a train ticket and some money. The judge wanted me to start a new life in America. I agreed. I remembered I had a cousin in Toronto. *Fräulein* Olga was very sad. —Who will do my hair? And she cried.

Two days later, I left our room with you. This time, we went straight to the train in Hamburg. We stayed near the station overnight. I bought underwear for us, a new sweater for me, and a nice little red coat for you. We took the boat for New York. A sailor gave you a navy blue sailor hat with the name of the boat, *George Washington,* in gold on a ribbon around the hat. You wore it day and night, on Ellis Island, on the train to Toronto. It looked nice with the blond curls. I could go on and on. The things that happened, what I went through.... It's one o'clock already! Let's go to bed. First,

wash the cups. Wash them, I said. I can't stand a mess in the kitchen. Remember, never leave dirty dishes around. Show your father I brought you up right. Which reminds me: did you buy rolls like I told you? Good. Sam likes a fresh roll with lox for Sunday. Just think, in a week you will be on the ocean.... Go already. I'll turn out the light....

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