Wien, Wien, nur Du allein wirst stets die Stadt meiner Träume sein!"
Vienna, Vienna, only you will always be the city of my dreams!"
In spite of the hardships my family experienced and the times when there was not enough money for food, I feel I had a very happy childhood. And most of all—I was in love with Vienna!

From the first and only chapter of my father's memoirs.

ONE

MY EIGHTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD mother leaned back on the couch with her eyes closed, her hair permed in improbable brunette waves. The *New York Times* crossword puzzle, half-filled-in with ink, rose up and down with her breathing. Our younger daughter, thirteen-year-old Lydia, sprawled on the window seat, asleep yet again, one gangly leg over a pillow, the other trailing onto the floor. One of my husband Martin's sheepskin slippers was upside down in the center of the worn Tibetan rug. On the television screen an actor played *Clair de Lune* on the piano for his lover, and a brass lamp illuminated their faces.

"I made a lamp just like that at the technical school in Vienna." My eighty-two-year-old father's voice emerged from deep inside an easy chair. His thin wrist extended out of a too-large flannel shirt when he pointed at the TV screen. When he rested his arm again, his fingers began the classic pill-roll of Parkinson's.

"That's interesting," I said, not really listening.

Lydia's blond hair had fallen across her face. I pulled her grubby T-shirt down over her belly, lifted her leg off the floor, and tossed a multicolored throw over her. She didn't stir.

Diamond Ledge, our old cottage, sits on a hilltop rolled off the south edge of the Sandwich Range. Outside the front window snow still covered the ground. Fog floating above our pond

View from Diamond Ledge in winter.

obscured the view down to Squam, the glacial lake carved into the valley below us.

It was early spring of 2003. As often happened on our weekend trips to New Hampshire, Martin had had to run back to Boston for a meeting with some of his partners at his law firm. I was a gynecologist and had a part-time job in a Boston hospital. My full-time job was caregiver and family worrier. And there was a lot to worry about at that time. I hoped the Seder that evening would go well.

My parents had driven the entire seven hours from Syracuse in one day, my father behind the wheel. My mother was refusing to drive any distance by then; my father's Parkinson's was progressing. I realized it might be their last road trip.

And a few months earlier, Lydia had transformed from a joyful child into an anxious adolescent. First, she had terrifying nightmares about thugs breaking into our house and stabbing all of us to death. After a few weeks of that she became lethargic. She was sleeping more and more and was gaining weight, except

her arms and legs remained delicate. I'd been running her in to the pediatrician's office frequently, saying, "This looks like an endocrine problem, don't you think?" Every time the doctors had replied, "Why don't you let us be the doctors, and you be the mommy? We've run all the tests. Maybe she's just depressed." That possibility had been raised a few times, and it always sounded like an indictment of our parenting, not a diagnosis. And because of my own history of depression, I felt doubly guilty.

I sat down next to my mother. Her newspaper slipped out of her hands onto the floor. I picked it up and put it on the scratched coffee table, strewn with unopened mail I'd brought up from our suburban home and a game of Scrabble my mother was winning. A family photo album from the thirties and forties lay open next to me.

"Who's looking at this?" I asked the room. No one answered.

I closed the book and shoved it on the shelf under the coffee table. A curled snapshot fluttered out onto the rug. Labeled on one serrated edge "Our First Meeting with Harry," the photo must have been taken in my grandparents' tiny rental in Vancouver on Christmas Eve, 1943. My parents, Eden Jane Wales and Harry Gruenberg, cram to one side of an upholstered couch. A Christmas tree looms behind them. My mother looks directly at the camera with an open smile. My father sits at an angle. He is surprisingly handsome compared to the old man seated near me, whose hair was still black with just a little silver, but whose nose had turned bulbous and cheeks jowled. My parents were both twenty-two years old in that picture. My father was in the engineering program at the University of British Columbia; my mother was finishing her nursing studies at a sanatorium in rural British Columbia and was home for the holidays. My mother's sister Phyllis and her future husband are beside them.

My father cleared his throat and crossed and uncrossed his spindly legs. I glanced at the movie on the VCR. I'd seen it before—*The Scent of Green Papaya*, a love story set in Vietnam mostly in the

My father's first Christmas, 1943, with my mother's sister, Phyllis and my father's university roommate, Mel Julson, Vancouver, B.C.

fifties. In the final scene the woman is pregnant and sits serenely in her lover's garden in Saigon. A fighter jet flies far overhead, sounding like a distant scream. It is the only suggestion of the war that was about to tear that country apart.

When the credits ran I flipped off the set. Lydia was still asleep, my mother's mouth hung open, and my father's dark eyes were still fixed on the silent television. When I passed into the kitchen, our other daughter, sixteen-year-old Heather, didn't look up from the math homework arrayed across the dining table. She was wearing her Exeter crew sweatshirt, and her thick hair was tied back into a low ponytail. Her brows angled sharply upward, her profile was flat. I dumped potatoes into the sink and began peeling, looking out at a maple whose trunk had been half hollowed out by lightning. I was forty-eight, but in the window's dim reflection I looked like a dark older sister to my girls.

Like my father, Heather approached every question from a novel angle. She read everything: biology texts, historical novels,

and sci-fi. She would plunge into deep thought and seem inaccessible for days. I'd see her go under; but I could never predict where she would surface again. She left for boarding school at Exeter, the same school Martin had attended, as a self-possessed teenager. When she came home to visit she seemed unsettled, but I sensed that I was the last person she wanted to talk to. I felt like I volleyed conversation over the growing canyon yawning between us, and that, more often than not, my words never reached her.

When she was in sixth grade, Heather had discovered my father's extensive genealogy research, written in the years after he retired from the engineering faculty at Syracuse University. He'd created almost a hundred family trees, tracing his family back from Vienna through Germany to a shtetl near Kolomea, in what is now Poland. He'd even traced my mother's family back several centuries from the north of England to Scotland. There were several pages of Austrian political history, and then he'd written something about most everyone, even relatives who died long before the war. His writing was cheerful and full of exclamation points, similar in tenor to the stories he had told me when I was a child, about growing up with his large extended family in wonderful Vienna. His lighthearted stories didn't match the carefully rendered trees, so many branches withered with phrases like "gassed at Auschwitz," or "died? Minsk?" His parents had a page each. His younger brother, Uri, barely had half a page. Their younger sister, who had disappeared into Germany in 1941 when she was fifteen years old, didn't even have a section of her own. A few of his large extended family and friends made it out of Europe, but many more "perished," a word that made them seem like fruits and vegetables forgotten in a drawer of the refrigerator. I'd only glanced at the cheap plastic binder when my father hefted a copy into my hands in 1994. I was busy with work then, and the girls were still small.

But Heather read the book from cover to cover and used it for a middle school project titled *My Champion*. My parents

came out to our home in Wayland, Massachusetts, to watch her presentation. She wore my father's Burberry raincoat and his tweed cap. She narrated his solitary train journey out of Austria in 1939, at the age of eighteen. When he crossed the border from Germany to Belgium, he flushed his last pfennigs down the toilet, after a soldier warned him it was illegal to leave the Reich with any German currency. With her cobalt eyes and taffy mane, Heather looked nothing like my father. At the end of her rendition of my father's escape from the Nazis, her teacher's eyes glittered with tears. My father looked pleased. Heather got an A.

I didn't hear my father join us in the kitchen until he spoke.

"I made a lamp like the one in the movie, as well as a metal paperweight with an Art Nouveau design."

I nodded at his faint reflection in the window.

"When the Brown Shirts came to our door they told us to leave. They took the lamp and the paperweight."

My mind struggled with my father's unemotional voice, the scene he was describing, and getting dinner ready. I replied with the first thing that popped into my head. "Were they polite?" I asked. My question hung in the air for a moment, giving me time to consider its absurdity.

An animal growl emanated from my father. It made me spin around to face him and I knocked a plate off the counter and it shattered on the floor. Heather started up from her work and looked down at the broken plate and then from me to my father.

The serene man we knew was gone. He looked terrified. "Were they polite? Were they polite? They were not polite." The quaver that usually held my father's voice captive had evaporated. "It was Kristallnacht."

Heat rushed to my face as he went on, speaking fast and loud. "They banged on our door, and when Mutti opened it they pushed her aside." It was as if he was in the middle of a scene that only he could see. "The local policeman was their leader, a man we saw almost every day. The rest were members of the

fascist youth, wearing dark shirts and carrying clubs." My father moved out from behind the counter and stood next to me. He seemed to tower above me. His speech accelerated further. "They took our keys and pushed us out the door and we fled."

"Where did you go?" I shouted back at him even though we were just inches apart.

He didn't answer me, but stepped back, then mumbled and groaned. He spoke a stream of words in German. I couldn't understand him, although he said "Mutti" again. I tried to put my hand on him, but his arms windmilled. His eyes strained wide. He seemed to be looking through me to something far beyond. But just as suddenly, he focused on me and shrank back into his familiar, stooped form. His voice was quiet but steady.

"When we returned, the doors were open—the same with our Jewish neighbors, the Melzers and the Harbands. Everything was smashed and thrown across the rooms. What little we had of value had been taken, including my lamp, the paperweight, and a suitcase with clothes we were sending on to Uri in Palestine. A few marks my sister had hidden were also taken."

He held the counter as he staggered to the kitchen table. He struggled to drag a chair out and lowered himself into it. Then he flipped through Heather's math book. Heather looked at me. I indicated the text with a nod of my head. Heather slid her notebook in front of him.

He studied her solution then leafed through her textbook.

"How would you solve this one?" he asked, pointing at one of the challenge questions. He had told me that Heather e-mailed math problems to him from Exeter, and they corresponded back and forth, debating various solutions. I don't think they talked about any of their day-to-day activities or exchanged thoughts on anything other than math or physics.

He took a paper napkin, his stationery of choice when he wanted to explain something to me when I was Heather's age. Then he pulled a ballpoint pen out of his shirt pocket and clicked

it three times. It circled over the page before alighting, and his unsteady numbers slanted down the page.

"Let's try another approach," he said. "Yours is good, I just want to show you a different way to come at it."

The broken plate crunched under my clogs when I walked to my father's side and put my hands on his shoulder. He reached up and patted me. I felt his familiar tremor.

My mother was reading the front page in the living room when I left them. Lydia had flipped onto her stomach and her arm hung down toward the floor.

"Did you hear that?" I asked my mother.

"Hear what?"

"Dad—did you hear him in there?"

"No." She folded the newspaper in half, then quarters.

"He was talking about Kristallnacht. Was he in Vienna on Kristallnacht?"

My mother thought for a minute. "What year was that?" she asked.

"I don't know, but did he ever talk to you about still being there?"

"He seems to be talking about the whole thing a lot now. Maybe it's that new medication he's on." She put the paper aside. "He used to sit across from me for hours and not say a word—forget about actually having a conversation. Then he went off to that room of his and closed the door. But now he's talking again. You can't get him to stop."

"But, Mom, this isn't Dad running on with one of his old stories. He was speaking German."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"What did he say—when he was speaking German?"

"I don't know. I think it was something about his mother and his sister. I don't know enough German to follow him, and he was talking pretty fast. Does he ever speak German with you?"

She picked up the paper again and unfolded it. "Never. Well, not since he tried to teach me when we were courting. All I know is that he gets started on one of those old stories and you just can't turn him off. And this stuff comes up at the most inappropriate times with the wrong people. No one needs to hear these things now. It has nothing to do with them."My mother started up on her puzzle again.

"What would be the appropriate time, Mom? Who are the right people?"

My mother sighed and didn't look up. "What's past is past. You can't do anything about it."

Lydia turned again but didn't wake up.

I went back to the kitchen. My father stooped over the dustpan, sweeping fragments of the plate into it with a whisk. Heather must have gone upstairs. The potatoes waited in the sink.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

"Sure, why not?"

I opened the cabinet under the sink and my father emptied the dustbin into the garbage. He cleared his throat and looked out the window.

"Let's hope the weather gets better tomorrow," he said.

I started peeling again. "When was Kristallnacht, Dad?" In the window's reflection my father's head barely came to my shoulder.

"1938, November."

"So you were still in Vienna then?"

"Yes, I wasn't able to leave until March of 1939—why do you ask?"

"Because you were just talking about it."

"I was?"

"You were."

My father unfolded a towel and pulled a plate out of the dishrack. "Yes, they came to the house and told us to leave. So, we left. Uri had already gone to Palestine. Fortunately, my father wasn't home. They arrested a lot of the men that day." My father swallowed.

"What else do you remember?" I asked.

"That's all I remember about that," he answered.

I wondered if that was true, or if he were somehow protecting me. He opened the silverware drawer and pulled out knives and forks.

"I'll set the table," he said, and turned his back.

Later that evening, Heather finished arranging the Seder plate on my favorite blue and white platter and brought it into the dining room. Martin, back from Boston, poured a French Bordeaux into a goblet next to each setting, his long arms reaching across the table. The embroidered *kippah* my father had brought for him had slipped sideways. His full head of black hair was dusted with gray at the temples.

Lydia stood up to ask the questions. Braces reined in her teeth; her hair was tangled in a rubber band.

"Different—this night—why is this night different from all the other nights?" Her eyes jumped around the page; I wondered if that was something she had always done, and I just hadn't noticed. My mother sat rod-straight atop a pillow, which brought her up to the same height as the rest of us; she snuck a piece of parsley off the Seder plate.

My mother had given up the Anglican church when she married my father. When my two older brothers and I were growing up she tried the Jewish holidays for a while. I have a vague recollection of stony matzo balls in salty broth. Later she told me, "Your father gave me no instruction, so I just gave up." We went back to the holidays she grew up with, although stripped of Jesus and the Holy Trinity. My father brought a tree home every December but sat in the far corner of the living room as we opened gifts wrapped in recycled paper from the prior year's revels.

Martin was raised a relaxed Catholic in Manhattan. When our daughters were small, he decided we needed some sort of weekend ritual and settled on the Unitarian Church. We both liked the minister and the music, but when Heather and Lydia

had to be dragged out of bed, and nursery school responsibilities loomed for me, the girls and I dropped out. Martin continued for a while. After that, if someone asked us if we were religious, Martin answered, "We're lapsed Unitarians!"

Our Passover Seder was a holdover from those days, when I wanted something that would offset the Christmas season. I photocopied a coloring book Haggadah and covered it with construction paper. I always made twice as many matzo balls as I thought we could possibly consume, and they all disappeared by the end of the evening. The girls dragged bed pillows down to the dining room, so we could recline at the table. Heather and Lydia hid the *afikomen,* and then forgot about it. We would find the stale matzo months later, slid between books or under a chair.

My father read the answers to each question in Hebrew; under beetled brows his eyes tracked right to left. In a sing-song cadence, Martin made quick business of the plagues that befell the Egyptians, making the girls and my mother laugh. Heather got up to help me dole out the soup. Her matzo balls went into vegetable broth; she had given up meat when she was thirteen.

We slurped together. Candlelight illuminated the burl on the long, maple table. The woodstove glowed behind us. My father didn't seem to mind the butter in the matzo balls; he asked for seconds. Heather nudged Lydia, who was beginning to slump against her pillow, her lids closing.

"Wake up!" Heather said.

Lydia started. "I wasn't sleeping."

"You think?"

"I was just reclining."

After a chocolate desert, Heather stood up to close the door. "I think Elijah's been by already." She sipped out of the prophet's goblet.

Martin and I washed the dishes together after dinner.

"I need to head back down to Boston in the morning. Something else came up on a deal we're working on. You okay here?" he said.

"I'll drive down on Wednesday." I pulled a pan out of the drain to dry. "Listen, my dad had a sort of outburst today."

Martin submerged another pot into the enamel sink. "*Vhen* I *vas* young, it *vas vonderful!"* he said. He switched to my mother's clipped Canadian-British speech. "Oh, Harry, enough!"

I whacked Martin with a dish towel. "Quiet, they'll hear us." I tried not to laugh. "Anyway, their accents aren't that strong."

"*Vell, vhatever* you say."

"Seriously, they both have little accents. I can't even hear them."

Martin put a pot on the counter, I spoke to his back. "You're not really listening, you know."

"I heard you."

"Yeah? What did I say?"

Martin straightened up. "You said your father had some sort of—"

"Yes?"

"Episode."

"I think it was a flashback. He was speaking in German. He never speaks in German."

Martin turned back to the pot.

"It reminds me of what happened when they took that last trip to Vienna," I said.

My parents had taken the last of their many visits to Austria in 2000. My Uncle Uri had just died, and Uri's daughters were flying from Israel. They wanted my father to show them his childhood home. Neva and Maya invited me to join them. I considered making the trip, but I'd never wanted to go to Austria and couldn't fathom why my parents went as often as they did. Anyway, I was busy and didn't make the time.

After a week with my cousins in Vienna, my parents went on to Tyrol. On his first day out, my father looked up at the mountains, fell off a curb and broke his leg in three places. After surgery, he recuperated for three weeks on a ward with six other patients. My mother didn't call me until the day my father was discharged

from the hospital, and only then because I was picking them up at the airport and they needed a wheelchair for my father. When my father came on the line, he rattled on in German with great animation and speed. Until then, I had only heard him speak German when we traveled in Europe, and then it came out in a halting fashion, as if it weren't his native tongue.

Although I was usually good at languages, German was so guttural and the structure so rigid I never got past the basics. "Dad, I can't follow you," I kept saying, the phone cradled against my shoulder while I unloaded groceries into the Sub-zero in our kitchen in Wayland. I was startled at the tenor and strength of his voice. He spoke a few slow sentences in English and then broke back into fluid German again. His German was melodious, as if it came from a part of his brain that was beyond the grasp of his Parkinson's.

"My father's voice had that same quality this afternoon," I said to Martin. "Like someone much younger."

"Okay." Martin handed the pot over to me.

I dried it and put it back on the stove.

"The dinner was good," Martin said.

"Maybe we should take Lydia to see a specialist?" I said.

"What kind?"

"I don't know—an endocrinologist or a psychiatrist?"

"We're kind of jumping around here." Martin appraised me with our daughters' wide-spaced eyes. The muscle in his right cheek twitched, the way it always did when he was considering what to say. "Maybe you need to wait for the bridges to come to you first, and then cross them?"

"Ouch."

"Come on," Martin pulled his hands out of the dishwater and gave me a hug.

"I'm worried," I said into his chest. Dishwater dripped down my back.

"What else is new?" he asked.

Correspondence

Dear Martin,

Most of the time, I don't see my depression as mood, or random firing across synapses. Rather, it is a blinding clarity of vision, where I see the void yawning below us, and the fragile construct of our lives balanced briefly and perilously above. When I'm happy, or at least when I'm not depressed, I don't hear or see the void knocking against the parquet below me, or see it shining a flashlight between the floorboards. But as soon as I swallow my dense stone, I'm aware the floorboards are ephemera, an illusion that in my day-to-day makes me feel as if I'm walking on solid ground. But there is no ground grounding us—just that vast emptiness. Should I walk toward the light?

Making love is a commitment to life, isn't it? How often is that supposed to happen now, anyway? You still seem to have desire, but is it necessarily for me, or is it for that girl I once was, the one you woke out of a dead sleep, tangled in the sheets on the mattress in your empty apartment? And my desire? It turns up at odd times now—when I'm washing the pots and pans or mulling over a graph in the *New England Journal*. By the time you get home, by the time we climb into opposite sides of our bed, morphed from a twin, an antique three quarters, a full, a queen and now a king, we both have to stretch out our arms if we want to touch. But we don't. Perhaps an argument lies between us like an opaque wall. We roll to face away from each other. I hear your breath deepen.

My dreams have all but disappeared; I guess that's the depression. But last night for some reason I had one. You were driving. We were in a red convertible with the top down. At first, we were in New Hampshire, driving by the chapel in Wonalancet. Then I smelled the fragrance of eucalyptus and we were on the winding roads up to Zfat, a place I traveled with my father and uncle long ago. We came around a hill and saw the Sea of Galilee shaped like

a harp below us. You were distracted. Your lips were moving, yet I couldn't hear your voice.

The two wheels on my side veered off the road. Gravel hit the undercarriage and at the last minute you reined us back in. We glided through the narrow streets of Tiberius and passed the outdoor market. We joined a parade of cars driving single-file onto a rickety dock going out onto the lake. You looked across at the mountains of Syria and we slid into the water. You were still talking as the car filled. The water was warm.

"We're sinking," I said. "We should leave our things behind." You floated left and disappeared. I floated right and woke with my arms around you.

From my computer file labeled: "Letters to Write but Never Send," a therapeutic exercise

With Martin in Paris, c. 2005.

Early in the morning on Saturday, February 5, 1921, a momentous event occurred: I, Harry Grünberg, left the comforts of my mother's womb and for the first time saw the light of day. Undoubtedly my parents, Leo and Elka Grünberg, were pleased. Of course, I cannot really recall this moment. Nor can I remember anything from the first several months of my life, or even the first few years. So I have to rely on some physical evidence: my birth certificate, the first few photographs which survived, and the stories I have been told by my relatives. Of course, the evidence of these stories is always a bit suspect, since they get embellished as the years go by … One thing is clear from these pictures: the face is the same on all of them … For this and many other reasons, my relatives often told me that I was born an adult. I agree with that assessment to some extent. I was always very serious and I think considerate with my parents and others, but I also think there was always a little boy in me and that I retained this duality up to my present old age.

From my father's unfinished memoir.

My father, 1921.