THE POSTCARD

My mother lit her first lung-charring cigarette of the morning, the one she enjoyed most, and stepped outside to admire the whiteness blanketing the entire neighborhood. At least ten centimeters of snow had fallen overnight.

She stayed outside smoking for a long time despite the cold, enjoying the otherworldly atmosphere of the garden. It was beautiful, she thought, all that blankness, that erasing of colors and blurring of edges.

Suddenly she heard a noise, muffled by the snow. The postman had just dumped the mail on the ground at the foot of the mailbox. My mother went to collect it, putting her slippered feet down carefully so as not to slip.

Cigarette still clamped between her lips, its smoke dissipating in the freezing air, she made her way quickly back to the house to thaw fingers numbed by the cold.

She flipped through the stack of envelopes. There were the usual holiday cards, most of them from her university students, a gas bill, a few pieces of junk mail. There were also letters for my father, from his colleagues at the National Centre for Scientific Research and the PhD candidates he supervised, all wishing him a happy new year.

All very typical for early January. Except for the postcard. Slipped in among the other envelopes, unassuming, as though it had hidden itself deliberately.

What caught my mother's attention right away was the handwriting, strange and awkward, like no handwriting she had ever seen before. Then she read the four names, written in the form of a list.

Ephraïm
Emma
Noémie
Jacques

They were the names of her maternal grandparents, her aunt, and her uncle. All four had been deported two years before she was born. They died in Auschwitz in 1942. And now, sixty-one years later, they had reappeared in our mailbox. It was Monday, January 6, 2003.

Who could have sent me this terrible thing? Lélia wondered.

My mother felt a jolt of fear, as if someone were threatening her, someone lurking in the darkness of the past. Her hands began to tremble.

"Look, Pierre! Look what I found in the mail!"

My father took the postcard and examined it closely, but there was no signature, no explanation.

Nothing. Just those four names.

At my parents' home in those days, one picked the mail up off the ground, like ripe fruit fallen from a tree; our mailbox had gotten so old that it was like a sieve—nothing stayed inside—but we liked it that way. It never occurred to any of us to get a new one; that wasn't how our family solved problems. You simply lived with things, as if they deserved the same respect as human beings.

When the weather was bad, the letters would get soaked, their ink running and the words becoming permanently indecipherable. Postcards were the worst, bare like those teenage girls who run around with exposed arms and no coat in wintertime.

If the author of the postcard had used a fountain pen to write to us, their message would have been obliterated. Had they known that? The names were written with a ballpoint pen.

The following Sunday, Lélia summoned the whole family: my

father, my sisters, and me. Sitting around the dining-room table, we passed the card from hand to hand. None of us spoke for a long time—which was unusual for us, especially during Sunday lunch. Normally, in our family, there's always someone with something to say, and they always want to say it *right now*. But on that day, no one knew what to think about this message that had shown up out of the blue.

The postcard itself was nothing special, just a touristy postcard with a photo of the Opéra Garnier on the front, the kind sold by the hundreds in tobacco shops and kiosks all over Paris.

"Why the Opéra Garnier?" my mother asked.

No one knew the answer.

"The postmark is from the Louvre post office."

"You think they could give us more information there?"

"It's the biggest post office in Paris. It's *huge*. What do you think they'll be able to tell you?"

"Was it mailed from there for a reason, do you think?"

"Yeah. Most anonymous letters are sent from the Louvre post office."

"It's not recent. The card itself must be ten years old at least," I observed.

My father held it up to the light and looked at it carefully for a few moments before declaring that the photograph dated from the 1990s. The print's chroma, with its saturated magentas, as well as the absence of advertising panels around the Opéra Garnier, confirmed my hunch.

"I'd even say it's from the *early* '90s," my father clarified.

"How can you be so sure?" my mother asked.

"Because in 1996 the green and white SC10 buses, like the one in the middle ground of this picture, were replaced by RP312s. With a platform. And their engines in the rear."

No one was surprised by my father's knowledge of Parisian bus history. He'd never driven a car, much less a bus, but his career as a researcher had led him to learn countless details on a

myriad of subjects as varied as they were specialized. My father invented a device that calculates the moon's influence on Earth's tides, and my mother has translated treatises on generative grammar for Chomsky. Both of them know an unimaginable number of things, almost all of which are completely useless in everyday life—most of the time. But not that day.

"Why write a postcard and then wait ten years to send it?"

My parents continued their musings. But I couldn't have cared less about the postcard itself. No—it was the *names* that were calling to me. These people were my ancestors, and I knew nothing about them. I didn't know which countries they'd traveled to, what they'd done for a living, how old they'd been when they were murdered. I couldn't have picked them out of a photo lineup.

I felt a wave of shame.

After lunch, my parents put the postcard away in a drawer, and we never talked about it again. I was twenty-four years old, my mind full of my own life, of other stories to be written. I erased the recollection of the postcard from my memory, though I kept hold of the vague intention to ask my mother, one day, about our family's history. But the years slipped by, and I never took the time to do it.

Until ten years later, when I was about to give birth.

My cervix had dilated too early, so I was on bedrest to keep the baby from arriving prematurely. My parents had suggested that I spend a few days at their house, where I wouldn't have to lift a finger. Suspended in a state of anticipation, my thoughts turned to my mother, my grandmother, and the whole line of women who had given birth before me. It was then that I felt a pressing need to hear the story of my ancestors.

Lélia led me into her study, where she spends most of her time. The little room always reminded me of a womb, its air thick with cigarette smoke, its walls lined with books and filing

cabinets and bathed in the pale winter sunlight that streamed through windows overlooking the Parisian *banlieue*. I settled myself beneath the bookshelf and the ageless objects on it, all those memories blanketed with a film of dust and cigarette ash, as my mother retrieved a black-speckled green archive box from among twenty identical ones. As a teenager, I'd known that these neat rows of boxes contained the relics of our family's dark past. They'd made me think of little coffins.

My mother reached for a pen and a sheet of paper—like all retired professors, she views everything as a teaching opportunity, even parenting. Lélia's students at Paris 8 University Vincennes-Saint-Denis adored her. Back in the good old days, when she could smoke in the classroom, she used to do something that fascinated her linguistics students: with rare dexterity, she could finish an entire cigarette without the ash dropping to the floor, keeping the thin gray cylinder between her fingertips. No need for an ashtray, she'd set the worm of ash down on her desk, delicately, and light up another one. It was a skill that demanded respect.

"I should warn you," she began now, "that what I'm about to tell you is a blended story. Some of it is obviously fact, but I'll leave it up to you to decide how much of the rest comes from my own personal theories. And of course, any new documentation could flesh out those conclusions, or change them completely."

"Maman," I said. "I don't think cigarette smoke is very good for the baby's brain development."

"Oh, it's all right. I smoked a pack a day during all of my pregnancies, and in the end, I don't think you three turned out so bad."

Her answer made me chuckle. Lélia took advantage of the pause to light another cigarette. Then she began to tell me about the lives of Ephraïm, Emma, Noémie, and Jacques. The four names on the postcard.

Book I
Promised Lands

Chapter 1

Just like in all the Russian novels," my mother began, "it started with a pair of star-crossed lovers. Ephraïm Rabinovitch was in love with Anna Gavronsky, whose mother, Liba Gavronsky, born Yankelevich, was a cousin of the family. But the Gavronskys didn't approve of Ephraïm and Anna's love."

Seeing that I was already completely lost, Lélia paused. Cigarette wedged in the corner of her mouth, squinting against the smoke, she began rummaging in the archive box.

"Hold on, let me read you this letter; it'll make things clearer. It was written in Moscow in 1918, by Ephraïm's older sister."

> Dear Vera,
>
> My parents' troubles continue to pile up. Have you heard about the mess between Ephraïm and our cousin Aniouta? If not, I can only tell you in complete confidence—even though it seems that some in the family are aware of it already. Simply put, An and our Fedya (he turned twenty-four two days ago) have fallen in love—they've gone utterly mad with it—and it's upset us all terribly. Auntie doesn't know about it, and it would be utterly catastrophic if she found out. They see her all the time, and they're in agony. Our Ephraïm adores Aniouta, but I'll admit, I'm not sure I believe her feelings are sincere. Well, that's the news from us. Sometimes I'm completely fed up with the whole thing. Must stop writing now, my dear. I'm going to post this letter myself, to make sure it doesn't go astray.
>
> With love,
>
> Sara

"So if I understand what's going on here, Ephraïm was forced to give up his first love."

"And another fiancée was quickly found for him: Emma Wolf."

"The second name on the postcard."

"Exactly."

"Was she also a distant relative?"

"No. Emma came from Lodz. She was the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, Maurice Wolf, who owned several textile factories, and her mother was called Rebecca Trotsky—no relation to the revolutionary."

"How did Ephraïm and Emma meet? Lodz must be a thousand kilometers from Moscow."

"Far more than a thousand! Either the families used the services of the synagogue *chadkhanit*—the matchmaker—or Ephraïm's family was Emma's *kest-eltern*."

"Her what?"

"*Kest-eltern*. It's Yiddish. How can I explain it . . . Do you remember what I told you about the Inuktitut language?"

Lélia had taught me, when I was little, that the Inuits have fifty-two words for snow. *Qanik* is falling snow, *aputi* is fallen snow, *aniou* is snow they melt for water, and so on and so on.

"Well, in Yiddish, there are various terms that mean 'family,'" my mother continued. "There's one word for the nuclear family, and another for in-laws, and a third term that means 'those who are considered to be like family' even when there's no blood tie. And then there's a basically untranslatable term, something like 'foster family'—*di kest-eltern*. 'Host family,' you might say, because traditionally, when parents sent a child away to university, they looked for a family who would provide lodging and meals for that child."

"And the Rabinovitches were Emma's *kest-eltern*."

"Yes. Now relax. Just listen. It'll all make sense in the end, don't worry."

Very early in his life, Ephraïm Rabinovitch broke away from his parents' religion. As a teenager, he became a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and declared to his mother and father that he didn't believe in God. Deliberately provocative, he made a point of doing everything forbidden to Jews on the holiday of Yom Kippur: smoking cigarettes, shaving, eating, and drinking.

In 1919, Ephraïm was twenty-five. He was a modern young man, slim and fine-featured. If his skin had been fairer and his mustache not so black, he could have passed for an ethnic Russian. A brilliant engineer, he'd just earned his degree despite the *numerus clausus* in effect, which limited the number of Jews admitted to university to 3% of total enrollment. He wanted to be part of the great wave of progress sweeping the nation and had great ambitions for his country—and for the Russian people, *his* people, whom he hoped to join in the Revolution.

Being Jewish meant nothing to Ephraïm. He considered himself a socialist, first and foremost. He lived in Moscow, led a Moscow lifestyle. He agreed to marry in the synagogue only because it was important to his future wife. But, he warned Emma, theirs would not be an observant household.

Tradition dictates that, on his wedding day, the groom must smash a glass with his right foot after the ceremony, a gesture representing the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. After this, he makes a vow. Ephraïm's vow was to erase the memory of his cousin Aniouta from his mind forever. But, looking at the shards of glass littering the floor, he felt as if it were his heart lying there, broken into a thousand pieces.