

THE WAR OF THE ROSENS

A NOVEL

BY

JANICE EIDUS

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE WAR OF THE ROSENS*

Janice Eidus' writing is intensely moving and fiercely intelligent. With bittersweet humor, and without sentimentality or nostalgia, she eloquently evokes the diverse voices of the adults and children of the colorful, eccentric Rosen family. She vividly captures not only the world of the Bronx in the mid-sixties, but also the world of one Jewish family struggling to survive in a harsh world charged with beauty and possibility.

Vivian Gornick, author, *Fierce Attachments*

The War of the Rosens is as fierce, unflinching and tender as its feisty ten year-old heroine, Emma Rosen. Growing up in the mid-60's in the Bronx, Emma carries the weight of the world and the fate of her volatile, unpredictable family on her small shoulders, particularly since her parents forbid her to believe in any higher power. *Eidus* explores the timeless world of childhood-- raw pain, bitter injustice, dark humor, achingly brilliant flashes of insight-- and the elusive promised land of adulthood with clarity and grace.

Ruth Knafo Setton, author, *The Road To Fez*

The War Of The Rosens, with exquisite language and a huge heart, introduces us to Emma, a budding poet seeking answers to questions about the nature of good and evil, while struggling with an alternately brutal and loving father, a meek and “lost” mother, and a spiteful older sister. When tragedy strikes the family, it is

Emma, with a tenacious spirit and an indomitable imagination, who, through the power of love and the force of the written word, instigates her family's salvation. The novel's title is delightful irony, as it becomes clear that this family is a metaphor and microcosm not only of the world's sorrows but also its joys. Set in the 1960s's, Janice Eidus has written a novel of redemption for our time here and now.

Sue William Silverman, author, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*

*If you think you can grasp me, think again:
my story flows in more than one direction
a delta springing from the river bed
with its five fingers spread.*

Adrienne Rich, "Delta"

THE WAR OF THE ROSENS

1

Later in her life, Emma Rosen looks back upon that year and gives it a title, as though it were a book or a film: The Year of Awe, she calls it. Or The Year of Mary, Glinda, and God.

Emma's parents look back upon that year, too, with anger and sorrow, but also with affection for their younger selves, a man and a woman desperate to display their love as perfect and seamless, despite the fact that, like all true love, it contained loose stitches and ragged edges.

It was the year Emma began seeing shades of grey in a world

she'd known only as black and white; the year she began questioning why evil co-exists with good; the year she began, in earnest, trying to figure out which was which.

It was the year her family unraveled, then spun out of control.

It's 1965, and the early August air is surprisingly cool, with a faint breeze, the sky, at dusk, rose-tinted. The air feels charged, defiant, as if it's deliberately flouting summer's expectations. Leo Rosen, age 40, inhales deeply and feels his chest expand. Stunning, crisp air fills his lungs.

Leo holds the hand of his ten-year-old daughter, gawky, blue eyed, freckle-faced Emma, so cute that strangers stop them on the street and say, "She should be on TV." They're waiting to cross the street from the Gun Hill Projects in the northeast Bronx, where they

live, to White Plains Road, a major commercial thoroughfare bisecting the Bronx, running beneath an elevated subway line that casts a pervasive, grey shadow below.

Leo and Emma are heading to the local five-and-dime, a few blocks away, a large store nestled among smaller stores: a pet store, candy store, deli, and shoe store, all displaying their wares in slightly-soiled windows.

The traffic light on the corner of Gun Hill Road is slow to change, infamous in the neighborhood for its lethargy, and Leo glances for a second behind him, not loosening his grip on Emma's hand. His gaze sweeps the buildings and grounds of the Projects, where he and his family have lived since their older daughter's birth, thirteen years before. Although he's well aware that the Projects are not beautiful, this "lower middle income development" built in the early 50s and consisting of six tall, factory-like red brick buildings clustered around an occasional chained-off patch of grass, he loves them, doesn't mind their institutional look.

The Gun Hill Projects speak to him of hope, of possibility, of a life far better than the one he'd known in the dilapidated Brooklyn tenements and grimy streets of his youth, streets on which he and his sisters walked wearing the cast-off, ill-fitting clothes of neighbors' children, while his volatile parents struggled to keep a roof over all their heads.

Still, Leo is forever shaped by those streets, and proud of this fact, at the same time that he's glad to have left the streets behind. He's long had to fend for himself, and now, fervent is his belief that we're all on our own in this world, that there is no deity, no higher power, to whom we are beholden for the good things that come our way, no deity or higher power to blame or excuse for the bad.

"Individuals shape their own lives," he's fond of saying to his wife and two daughters, in the stirring, theatrical tones he'd perfected as captain of his Brooklyn high school's debating team.

As they continue to wait for the stubborn light to change, he

points heavenward and declares, "Remember, Emma, there's no one up there watching out for you." Emma has heard his soapbox about No-God and Religion-Is-The-Opiate-Of-The-People many times before. Ever so slightly, she grants him a nod, but no more than that, so that she appears neither insolent nor overly enthusiastic about his ideas. She doesn't want to risk his wrath, and she doesn't want to encourage him.

"And that includes a `God,' who doesn't exist," his fingers describe quotation marks in the air and his voice grows weightier and more somber because he's worried – and he's not prone to worrying about his daughters, he leaves that to his wife -- that Emma doesn't fully comprehend how important it is not to be seduced by religion. Whenever he brings up the subject, she's uncharacteristically silent. Usually, she's pretty feisty, not unlike himself as a young boy, always willing to voice an opinion, whether in agreement or disagreement, passionate one way or another, no matter the consequence. Yet, around this subject, so dear to his

heart, Emma tends to grow silent, as if weighing words and consequences, as if too unsure, or unwilling, to take a stand.

He feels his eyes narrow and his mouth curl in disgust at her refusal to commit to his way of thinking. Woudn't it be better to reach her ten-year-old intellect, to truly persuade her rather than to bully her? Her eyes are wide and earnest, and there's a hint of a private smile on her lips, or is it a frown?

After a long moment, Emma looks away, into the distance, past the stubborn red traffic light. With her free hand, she tugs at her unevenly-cut, dark hair, and pushes it behind her ear. Leo marvels at her beauty, and wishes that her sister, May, was as beautiful.

Still holding Emma's hand tightly as they wait for the interminable light to change, Leo can't resist adding, "Believe me, Emma, atheists are much stronger than those who believe in God, whether they're Jews, Catholics, Muslims, or Hindus."

Tapping his foot, he's acutely aware of how didactic, even

pompous, he sounds when at his most emphatic and impassioned.

He's also aware of the implicit irony of his stance, touting profound and utter disbelief in a God-like authority figure, while insisting upon his own God-like authority. He can be as self-righteous and self-aggrandizing as any Southern Baptist hail-and-brimstone-evoking preacher. In his bones, he understands the draw of evoking fear to claim power.

Gripping Emma's hand even more tightly, as if passing his wisdom by osmosis into her flesh, he solemnly adds, "What I tell you, Emma, is Truth with a Capital T."

Emma stares off into the distance, mouth and expression ambiguous, giving nothing away. Out of the corner of his eye, on the street below the train tracks, Leo sees a pigeon that had been too slow or stupid to move out of the path of an oncoming train, now bloody and flattened almost beyond recognition. It will remain there for days, perhaps as long as a week, attracting flies and oozing filth, until the Sanitation Department deigns to remove it.

The almost-daily sight of these dead birds are, for Leo, wrenching and vivid reminders that, in a random and indifferent universe, death can, and does, strike arbitrarily, sometimes grotesquely, anyone, any time, anywhere. He has already witnessed such deaths of loved ones: his father; his mother; his wife's beautiful young sister; one of his best buddies from college. Too many.

The pigeon is a good object lesson for Emma. "Do you see that bird?" He points emphatically. "Tell me what great and just and fair supreme being – what *deity*," he spits out the word, "would allow such a thing to happen to a dumb, harmless bird?"

Emma stares briefly in the direction of the bird, offers another nod, and another slight, ambiguous smile. Again, he stifles his anger at her as he stares one last time at the pathetic, doomed bird. He forces himself to turn his mind back to the more pressing and immediate matter at hand: Unless the damned light changes pronto, they won't make it to the Five-&-Dime before it closes at six o'clock. If it weren't for the cars whizzing along Gun Hill Road,

one after another, each driver intent on not being the sucker caught when the red finally changes over to green, he would jaywalk and drag Emma along with him.

Earlier that week, Leo had taken Emma to the Five-and-Dime and promised her that if she wrote three new poems by Friday, he would buy her the diary of her choice from the stack of seductively arranged children's diaries, with their assortment of multi-colored designed covers and animal-shaped locks and keys. Love of poetry is something he and Emma share. They read Shakespeare aloud to each other, their voices caressing the words in unison, as if they're a father-daughter poetry act. "Poetry," he says to Emma, "is akin to breathing. Without it, we would all die." As for her older sister, May, poetry doesn't move her at all. She leaves the room when Leo and Emma begin their recitations.

In the Five-&-Dime, without hesitation, Emma pointed at a slim book with a smooth, shimmering pink cover and a gold-colored lock

and key in the shape of a butterfly. "I want that one," her voice was insistent, yet nervous, as if she couldn't believe he would really allow her to choose on her own.

He'd hoped for something less predictably girlish, he'd had his eye on one with a plaid vinyl cover and a muted brown lock, but the main thing was that, if she loved it, she would be inspired to write. Second only to wanting her to grow up to be a proud and staunch atheist, is Leo's desire that she grow up to become a writer, instead of the owner of a candy store in the Northwest Bronx, on the other side of the borough from the Projects. At too young an age, he'd been forced to earn a living, to provide for a wife and family. With his strong, left-wing political convictions, and the "way with words" his high school English teachers had praised, he could have been – *should* have been -- another John Steinbeck, speaking out for the common man, exposing corruption and injustice, helping to change the world. He should have written the great urban version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, showing the world how he, the son

of Jewish immigrant parents, a boy finding his way on the tough Brooklyn streets, politically progressive and iconoclastic, hot-tempered and violent, had grown strong and manly, never sacrificing his beliefs and integrity.

Now, he counts on his creative, feisty youngest daughter to one day portray him in print as he truly is – stifled by the day-to-day act of earning a living, but not crushed like the pigeon beneath the tracks. She will portray him like the phoenix, rising from the ashes to live another 1000 years.

Finally, the traffic light is green. After so long, it's a shock, and Leo feels himself squinting as if he's looking directly into the bright sun. "Get a move on," he says urgently to Emma, pulling her along, growing suddenly angry that her legs are so short, her steps so small compared to his. Perhaps, sensing this, she hunches her shoulders and begins taking rapid steps that are more like hops or jumps.

“Okay, Daddy,” she says, now tugging fiercely at her shoulder-length hair until it comes forward over the same ear she’d just tucked it behind. “*Okay.*”

“Good,” he answers as evenly as he can, detecting slight rebelliousness in her repetition of *Okay*, but he deliberately relaxes his muscles, once again trying to let go of his sudden anger, because even he, a man proud of his erratic and volatile temper, knows that Emma cannot walk any faster.

“Keeping a diary will bring out the best in you.” His pedantry re-surfaces, and his nostrils expand, then conflate, as if he’s just inhaled some fine scent, a Cuban cigar, perhaps, muscular and intense. He’s not a smoker, but some of his buddies indulge in the habit. Cookie Coke's brother, for instance, who lives near Leo's candy store and is never seen without a thick, expensive cigar in his mouth. Cookie Coke, the beautiful Jamaican widow with skin the color of fine earth, and shoulder-length hair like black silk, who lives in the Projects, but who drops by the store to buy sweets --

peppermints and taffy are her favorites -- whenever she's in the vicinity, visiting her brother and his family, which is more and more frequently these days, Leo can't help but notice.

At last, they've crossed the street, but Emma is unhappy as she struggles to keep up with her father, who's walking way too fast. At least he's not continuing his umpteenth lecture about why it's so important for her to believe in "human reason" and not in God, *blah blah blah*. She wants to say, "*Enough, enough*, already, I get it." But she holds back from telling him that she's simply not convinced either way, pro-God or anti, because he'd be likely to fly into one of his stormy, violent rages, like last week when she'd accidentally knocked a glass of cream soda from his hand while he sat having dessert in his favorite easy chair, the one he calls his "throne." He rose and emitted a lion-like roar, then chased her across the living room, finally dumping his bowl of chocolate ice cream over her head as her mother stood by silently, doing nothing more than wringing her hands.

Best not to say a word, that's what she's decided to do whenever the subject of "human reason versus abstract deity," comes up. Best not to let him know that she has serious doubts about some of what he insists to her is "Truth With A Capital T."

Hand in hand, they walk past the butcher shop, she at a trot, trying to keep up, and unable to stop herself from glancing at the large slabs of bloody meat hanging on hooks in the window.

Something sour erupts in her mouth, but she steels herself and doesn't grimace or make a sound. Her father wants her to be "tough," like him, not a "hypersensitive namby pamby," as he sometimes calls her when she disappoints him.

They pass the butcher with no incident, the sour lump in her mouth slowly dissolving, and she decides that this is a good time to look up and smile sweetly at him, to act as though all is well and she's the happiest ten-year-old in the Projects, in the Bronx, on the planet. Now that she thinks about it, she *is* pretty happy, and she takes an extra little half-jump/half-skip because, thanks to her

father, who can be as generous as he can be cruel, she's about to own the most beautiful diary she's ever seen, with creamy pages, a luscious pink cover, and the words *My Very Own Diary* emblazoned across the front in gold curlicued letters, beneath a darling little drawing of a basket of blooming, salmon-pink tulips.

She tightly clasps her father's hand, as tightly as he'd clasped hers before, remembering that she has yet another reason to feel happy: Her handsome, wavy-haired, broad-shouldered father is proud of her "literary ability," and this pleases her enormously. It was a cinch for her to write the three short poems he'd required for her to earn the diary.

Her first poem, expressly for him, she titled, "The Good Father." *You care about the common man/You read aloud from favorite books/You make me laugh and smile.*

"The Cook" was for her mother: *Your roast beef is soaked in gray/Your chocolate cake is rich and creamy/Your French Toast oozes butter.*

"The Poet" was about herself. *I write quietly in my room/I write from my heart/I write the Truth With A Capital T.*

Unbeknownst to her father, two unbidden poems had ambushed her in a breathless, heady rush, on the same day she wrote the other three. She'd torn them out of her notebook as soon as she finished them, and hid them in her underwear drawer.

"May, The Destroyer," was about her sister: *I don't know how to forgive you/for the cruel things you say/for the things you do/Why are you this way?*

"The Tyrant," was about her father: *Sometimes I want to curl up in a ball/And roll far away from you/When you are angry, I grow numb.*

As they near the five-and-dime, Leo glances down into Emma's radiant, childish face, and is suddenly wistful, wishing he could honestly tell her that life isn't as hard as he knows it to be, and that faith *will* lead to rewards on this earth and beyond. But if that

were true, Hitler would not have gotten away with such monstrous deeds, would not have gotten so far in his plan to exterminate the Jews. Okay, sure, maybe the Hitler argument is already too obvious, overdone, beaten to death by pundits on all sides. On the other hand, what's wrong, sometimes, with the obvious? Every day, all over the world, atrocities on grand and small scales were committed, lessons learned, then instantly unlearned and forgotten, God or no-God at the helm.

A world based on racial and economic justice, and equal distribution of wealth, is an end worth fighting for, and that's what true Communism means. Supposedly, Communism has gone out of "style," as if it's a *schmata* in fashion one season, out the next. The ideal of Communism is worth more than all the world's bastards -- Stalin, McCarthy, and the rest of their ilk -- put together. Not that Leo's active any longer, hasn't been since 1956 when the truth about Stalin came out. He left the Party then, along with so many others. Unlike most, he has not shed his ideals, and believes that he

never will.

At the entrance to the Five & Dime, Leo holds open the glass door for a customer who's exiting, a tough teenager with jet black hair and a surly expression. Rather than thanking him, the boy sneers. Leo's jaw tightens. He envisions himself slamming the boy against the door, teaching him some manners. Anger flares within him, burns throughout his body. He's hungry to avenge himself upon this snotty, ungrateful twirp. The other day, in his store, one of his regular customers, a local businessman with a sweet tooth, came in and muttered some comment about "pinko scum." Leo raised his fist. "Out!" he shouted, "before I ram this down your throat."

Yes, he'd happily punch out this boy in a second, but he remembers Emma, who's now softly singing "Casey Jones," one of the pro-union songs he'd taught her. Her sweet voice goes up and down, a musical carousel. The words of the song move him as if he's hearing them for the first time. "Casey Jones, he hit the river

bottom," she sings. Leo clenches and unclenches something that feels like a fist in his stomach, but refrains from striking out at the hooligan who has lit up a cigarette and is walking away, unaware of how narrowly he's dodged a bullet.

Leo marvels at his own rare self control, the third time this morning, as the boy keeps walking further away, north along White Plains Road, one hip thrust out as if in warning to anyone getting too close. Emma, Leo thinks, brings out the best in him.

Inside the five-and-dime, Emma proudly leads her father to the aisle where the diaries are shelved. Watching him lift the precious rosebud-colored book from the shelf and holding it between his strong hands, she feels elated. At the counter, Leo takes out his wallet and counts out a few dollars. "We Rosens believe," he says loudly, waiting for his change, returning once more to the foremost and central subject on his mind, "exclusively in the worth of human beings, not in a supernatural God."

Blah blah blah, she thinks. *Shut up*. Why must he ruin this

precious moment? His broad smile indicates that he's enjoying playing to an audience, enjoying shocking the young woman behind the counter, whose pencilled-in eyebrows rise toward her scalp. "You'll never need any spiritual crutches," he dramatically declares, handing Emma the book; his thin nostrils flare and his bright blue eyes light up.

Embarrassed, Emma nods, and closes her eyes to block out the sight of him. Why does he so much need attention, even from strangers? *He's a child*, she thinks, and immediately feels guilty. She opens her eyes. His neck has turned a rosy, self-satisfied color. She's so confused by her disloyal thoughts about this man who's supposed to be her guide in the world, that her head begins to feel loose and unattached from her body, as if it were wound up and its movement had nothing to do with her. Carefully, she averts her gaze from the embarrassed cashier as she follows her father out of the store.

Nevertheless, as they begin their walk home, at a more relaxed

pace, Emma finds herself mulling over his words, as she has many times before. She thinks she understands what he's saying: *The Rosens may not be good Jews, but they're good people.* But if the Rosens are such good people, why aren't they happy? Why is her father so enraged all the time, her sister so cruel, her mother so mournful and sad, riddled with crippling headaches and nausea that leave her flat on her back for days at a time? Isn't it possible that God -- who doesn't exist, of course -- well, maybe He does exist, and then if He does, isn't it possible that He's punishing the Rosens for not being good Jews? The instant she gets upstairs, she will make her first entry in her luscious new diary: *Dear Diary, What's wrong with the Rosens?*

In the lobby of their building, Leo waits impatiently for the elevator to arrive. One of the two elevators seems stuck on the fifth floor, and the other is "going local," stopping at every floor as it makes its slow descent. Between the damned elevators and the

traffic light at the corner of Gun Hill, the Bronx appears to be falling apart, a borough not yet even fully born, and already on its way out. What will the Bronx have left to offer Emma, standing beside him, clutching her feminine diary to her small, flat chest and staring earnestly up at him.

But, a second later, he's lost interest in her little-girl ways. He's the first to acknowledge that he can't focus for too long on parenting, on his kids, his family – it's too draining, and, at times, too damned boring.

Now, he's thinking about his store, Leo's Candies, which has been steadily losing customers to Sweets Brothers, a new, frou-frou candy store that recently opened a few blocks from his in the West Bronx, not far from the monumental Bronx courthouse, with its grand marble entrance, on a block that's like a twin to the block his store sits on. Both stores are small, tucked in among liquor stores, check-cashing places, florists, and drycleaners. But the similarities end there. Sweets Brothers is garish as hell. A neon-

colored awning and elaborate window displays feature whirling satin ribbons and bows draped behind rainbow-colored, gigantic lollipops and expensive boxes of mouthwatering chocolates. Leo's store reflects his populist ideals: stark windows showing a few boxes of everyday, inexpensive candies.

The owners of Sweets Brothers, Roy and Herman Gelfand, Jews originally from Flatbush just like Leo and his wife, Annette, are balding with perky mustaches. One brother is thin and one is fat, reminding Leo of the comic team of Laurel and Hardy. On the day they'd stopped in to introduce themselves, simultaneously extending their hands for Leo to shake, Leo, unsmiling, held his clenched fists behind his back. The Sweets Brothers shrugged, unfazed, and withdrew their hands. If Cookie Coke hadn't been in the store at the time, buying a box of chewy caramels for her three nephews, watching him with her head saucily cocked and an inviting smile on her lips, who knows what he might have said or done to those balding brothers? After they'd left, Cookie tossed her curtain

of thick, black hair, and said, "Ah, Leo, you remind me of many men from my country." The way she said it, he knew that she liked, and missed, those men. He cockily raised one eyebrow, to show her he'd gotten her message.

The door to the lobby opens with a reluctant groan. Leo and Emma turn in unison to see Hanna Zelig, huffing and puffing and carrying a small paper bag, pushing her way through the door with great effort. Appearing completely winded, as though she's been lugging bricks rather than just a few light groceries, she joins Leo and Emma in their vigil. Her sleeveless, ill-fitting dress, an unflattering shade of orange, brings out her pallor and emphasizes the sad, loose skin of her thin upper arms. Probably no more than fifty, her back is bowed like an ancient crone's, and patches of thin, sparse hair dot her scalp. It occurs to Leo that perhaps her hair never grew in properly after the Nazi butchers shaved it off -- a terrible thought, and he shudders.

A *ghost*, Leo thinks, that's what Hannah Zelig is, a ghost come back from the grave, to remind the living that, eventually, the grave is where each and every one of them is headed -- God or No-God. The faded blue numbers branded forever on Hannah's forearm jump out at him, and he thinks about the cattle cars, the gassing, the torture, the mass graves ... her own husband and young child killed in the camps, so everyone says ... But what does he really know of her life since then? Not much. Sometimes he sees her out with her friends, a group of giggling, synagogue-attending *yentas*. She plays Bingo, goes to the Catskills on weekends, travels in the Project's gossipy social circles that he's not interested in.

In the beginning, when Leo and Annette had first moved to the projects, Annette had befriended a few neighbor women, annoying *yentas*, all of them, not so unlike Hannah, playing *mah jongg* and giggling and chattering like foolish teenagers, all married to timid men whose milquetoast ways and tepid politics didn't interest Leo. Gradually, over time, Annette sees these women less and less, and

this pleases him. Once or twice she's said, "I get lonely. No friends any more. And you're always at the store." But she never says more than that, and he lets it be. She has him; she has her children. What more does she need?

"What a *shayna maidela*," Hannah exclaims, smiling down at Emma, then taking a long deep breath that sounds like a wrenching sigh, a sigh so deep Leo feels it as his own. He blinks, once, twice, before tears can form.

Outside, Leo hears a collision of sounds: a screaming child having a tantrum, a placating mother, crooning, "Sweetheart, let Mommy kiss you ..." He feels a grimace cross his features. Why doesn't the mother just tell the kid to shut up, smack her across the face?

Emma studies Mrs. Zelig, her warm eyes, her pale, washed-out skin. She knows that Mrs. Zelig is religious, and she's suddenly ashamed of the way her father mocks the piety of observant Jews

behind their backs. "After everything that's happened" -- he refers to the horrors of World War II, of which he's a proud veteran -- "they still think there's a God who's looking out for them?" He refers to them and not to us, and she's surprised that he includes even those Jews in the Projects who were in German concentration camps, the ones with thick accents, tired faces, and tattooed arms, like Mrs. Zelig, standing before them.

Hannah Zelig puckers her lips, her eyes surprisingly alive and engaged, Leo thinks. She points with her chin toward the sounds outside. "Poor little one," she says, and he's unsure if she's referring to the wailing child or the incompetent, sniveling mother.

"Hot," she adds, then shifts the bag of groceries to one arm, fanning her face with her free hand. "Too hot today."

Her guttural Yiddish accent reminds Leo of his own mother. The accent is all that Myrtle Rosen and Hannah Zelig share. Leo's mother was rosy-skinned and plump, flirtatious, downright vulgar at times, with every man she came into contact with, butchers and

milkmen, her husband's brothers and cousins. She drove his already violent, screw-loose father to bona-fide bouts of jealous madness, in which he pulled out tufts of hair from his own scalp and hers. In Yiddish he screamed at her, called her *nafka* (slut) and *koorvah* (prostitute). In English, he added, "Harlot! Murderer!"

Myrtle and Arnold Rosen had slapped Leo and his two younger sisters around on an almost daily basis, for reasons he never fully understood: Arnold didn't like the way Leo held his fork; Myrtle resented Leo's sisters for falling asleep without saying goodnight to her. "You lousy children," they shouted together, "you don't love us enough, and so we don't love you!" "Ingrates," Arnold shouted, then *slap, slap*. "Little miseries," Myrtle shrieked, *slap slap*. Both of them long dead, and Leo misses them, despite himself. Arnold from attenuated, brutal cancer; Myrtle, an instantaneous heart attack.

Leo stares again at the numbers on Hannah's arm, trying not to picture what she must have looked like, how she had felt, on the day they were savagely burned into her pale flesh. For a moment,

he thinks she's screaming, as she must have done that day. But it's not Hannah -- it's the little girl outside starting up again.

He forces himself to meet Hannah's eyes, although he doesn't respond to her comment about the heat, since it's absurdly cool outside for August, and already he's so tired of her. He just wants the damned elevator to come.

A moment later, the damned elevator does, indeed, arrive, smelling faintly of urine, although there's no puddle in sight. Emma buoyantly races inside, clutching her precious diary to her chest. Leo politely waits for Hannah to follow before he steps inside, carefully keeping his distance, not wanting, even for an instant, for their bodies to touch.

Hannah leans her skinny, bent frame against the elevator wall, sighing and fanning herself, revealing callouses the on her knuckles the size of grapes. "*Oy*, unbearable heat," she mutters again.

A broken record, Leo thinks. What is wrong with her? Menopause? Or, does she walk around, every single moment of

every single day, with a burning oven inside her flesh, an oven like those in which her friends and family perished?

The elevator stops at her floor, and she sighs one more time, a sound emanating from deep inside her ghostly bones. *Get out*, Leo thinks, *go away*.

She waves goodbye to Emma. "Write about me in your diary, sweetheart." Her harsh accent turns her *w* into a *v*.

Relieved that she's gone, unwelcome tears suddenly stinging, Leo reminds himself that he fought in the war, in Japan, where he could have died, too, and he has nothing to be ashamed of, no reason to feel like less of a man. No coward is he, no self-hating Jew, no *meshugane* who doesn't know who he is or what he believes. He'd hated the war, its unrelenting grimness, the fact that he'd lost good friends and almost died himself on a ship hit by the enemy -- and he can still remember the feeling as the boat began to sink into what he was sure was a bottomless ocean of murky darkness from which he would never emerge. But he and his

brethen were miracuouly rescued, and they all lived to remember their fear that day. Abruptly, he blinks away his last unwanted tear, hating, most of all, the fact that throughout history, in the name of one man's God versus another's, so many innocent lives have been lost.