PART ONE

The spring of 1913, and a young man from a remote village in Lithuania steals a ride on a train headed for the city. Everything around him has turned the colour of ash, as the cold seeps across the land, pressing any signs of life deep into the ground.

Perhaps it is written in his blood: a special code which will emerge later in someone else, generations into the future, in nightmares and fears; in someone's inability to breathe. In Vilnius, the frowning buildings as he arrives stop him from breathing.

He has a sense of impending tragedy. Maybe his lack of breath has to do with the act of leaving. And yet who would ache to leave this behind – this wasteland of grief and broken souls? Pogroms and nights of bloodshed and terror will live in him no matter how far he travels. Loss has encoded itself in the flow of his blood, in the beating of his heart – a ghost that will travel through time, through his DNA.

The future is already written, but he cannot read it. He can only sense its weight, its texture, and he has to believe that anything is better than this. As his life flashes by outside a fast-moving train, his past dissolves. The village and the 1800s have disappeared forever. The hours in the wig factory are gone. He hopes he will no longer feel he must apologise for the act of living. He hopes to shake the sense of being not a second- or third-class citizen but a tenth-class citizen – the lowest of the low. His shoulders will straighten. He will learn a new language.

His jacket is threadbare and the cold creeps in, tightening around him. He holds a leather bag in which he keeps parts of his soul: the memories of people left behind. Across his back he carries a gift from someone lost: the violin given to him by his father. All that is musical within him is held together in the case, wrapped with string so that it doesn't fall apart.

✡

Nothing can prepare him for the sodden ground of England, sprinkled already with flowers that look like fallen stars. His black jacket with its torn elbows suddenly turns blue in the light of early spring. He wonders how the grass can be so green. The language around him sounds like the twittering of birds. It is like the light: unimposing, forgiving – the music of a shallow stream rather than the rushing of a swollen river.

His destiny, after his arrival in England, is an accident of fate. He takes a step in one direction rather than in another. Boats are leaving for Africa, for Australia, for America. He takes the first available place he can find. Later, all the intricate unfoldings of generations, of lives and loves on several continents, can be traced back to a single moment: the one where he sets foot on the creaking hull of the SS *Graf Waldersee*, a steamship bound for America.

Three sisters have already taken boats to America.

The future reaches across and nudges him towards his new life.

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The young Jewish man who boards the ship holds his violin and his dreams on his lap when he sleeps. His name is Jacob.

New York is a giant even then: a well-dressed concrete-on-granite promise of a new life. Jacob's language sits in his throat like gravel. He looks at the signs and writing of a culture that seems simple, sharp and out of reach. The ghosts of the pogroms have half-drowned already in the freezing Atlantic.

–Your name?

–Jacob.

–Place of birth?

–Sorry?

–Place of birth?

–No.

–Russia?

–No. Yes.

✡

Almost seventy years after the young man boards the train in Lithuania, a girl sits on the steps of a thatched African farmhouse. On this day, the eleventh of April in South Africa, she's turning eleven. The morning sun has turned the veld green-gold. She woke at four, the time of her birth, and went to stare out at the sky. Billions of stars overhead rained down their light. A late moon dipped and set. She contemplated time and space until she was dizzy with infinity.

Granny Bee arrives, as promised, as early as she can. She hugs the girl and then sits next to her on the steps. She hands her a violin case.

–Happy birthday, darling Shelley!

–Is this Dad's?

–Yeah, this is it. It hasn't been played for decades, but it's precious. You see, when your dad expressed an interest in playing the violin as a little boy, I told my own dad in Chicago … and though he had very little money, he bought this violin and sent it over.

–Did your dad play violin?

–Real well. I don't remember too much, though. He should have been a musician.

–But he was!

–Not a professional one. He gave some lessons and I believe he was a good teacher.

–I wish he could have been my teacher. What songs did he play?

–I have to think. Well, of course he played Hava Nagila. *I remember that.*

–Okay, I'll learn that one. Granny Bee, can you show me your tiny fingers?

The girl's grandmother, whose bright skin is still smooth even though her hair has gone salt and peppery, lets the girl touch the pointer and middle fingers on her left hand. The umbilical cord wrapped itself around them before she was born and prevented them from developing. The fingers look to the girl like baked beans, or baby mice. She loves them.

–Granny Bee, can we draw faces on them?

Granny Bee doesn't share the enthusiasm required to turn the fingernails into faces.

–When are you going to comb your hair, my girl? It's real messy.

Real messy. Granny Bee's American accent is full and moist, the promise of some exotic faraway world. In the girl's heart, the sound of an imaginary violin expands until the beauty is overwhelming. It stops, and hangs in the air. Granny Bee says, *In America it's still the tenth of April right now. My mother died on the tenth of April, in 1927.*

The girl tries to imagine. The shape of a lost mother hovers for a moment inside her heart.

–Is that why you went to the orphanage?

–Yeah. My dad couldn't care for us.

–Why not?

Granny Bee doesn't explain. *At any rate, your birthday has made this day a happy one for me, darling.*

✡

Some months later, the girl sits on the steps again, waiting. Mr Miller, the violin teacher, is late. She hopes he's forgotten about her lesson. She opens the violin case and pulls out the instrument chosen by her great-grandfather, the violinist. Long ago, thousands of kilometres away, his hands held this. She imagines him playing a scale on the three-quarter-size instrument in some shop, thinking about his grandson in Africa, thinking, *Yes, this one sounds good.*

Mr Miller's white sedan arrives. It's brown with dust from the dirt road. In the way he confidently straightens his collar, it can be seen that he is an excellent teacher who will make certain that she corrects her lazy hold on the violin, her too-tight grip on the bow, and her slow progress reading music. She stands up. Her heart empties. The notes she will play today will be harsh and scratchy and often out of tune. They will elicit criticism and shame. They will not do justice to such a fine instrument. They will not fill her with their beauty and illuminate the world.

She doesn't know, as she stands there watching the teacher get his violin out of the back of his car, that this day will mark the end of months of lessons; that he will tell her he is wasting his time with her; that she will put the violin carefully back in its case, and leave it untouched for the next thirty years.

When she finally plays *Hava Nagila*, she will be thousands of miles away from those verandah steps and the house in Africa, and Granny Bee will long since have passed away.

Exactly a century after Jacob's arrival in America, his great-granddaughter, the girl with buried dreams of a violin, uncovers his story and the story of his daughter, the orphan girl. In bundles of letters tied with yellowed string, whisperings in the blood, passed down through the ages, voices from her ancestors, hidden from the light for so long, begin to speak.

As she unravels his story, it emerges as a series of opaque clues. Images drift into the gaps that history did not record, and flood them with life and colour. In the twenty-first century she rubs away the whitewash of time and uncovers pieces of her own soul embedded in some unrecognisable place. They tumble out unexpectedly – like resolutions that collide with each other at the end of a cheap paperback.

✡

At first, when Jacob arrives in New York and muddles his way through the paperwork that will make him a new citizen in a new world (by the grace of God), he believes he will learn to breathe again. But he knows that this breathing will not be a lifetime of deep inhalations; it will be the tentative takings of his new country's air. The sky is a wide, high blue, and the heat from the ground envelops him.

He has to make his way to Chicago, Illinois, where he finds his three sisters in rented quarters. When he knocks at the door and Rochelea opens it, colour drains from her face. She calls Saidie and Helen and then she falls over in a faint. Later she tells him they imagined he was dead. All this time and no word, not even a letter.

They have been living here for a year already. Jacob's dream was always to follow.

They usher him into the small living area, which seems luxurious to him, and strange. They tell him that they spend every Shabbos in a borrowed shul that is really a church. When they notice their father's violin case held together by string, the sisters are silent. Saidie wipes away tears. Rochelea explains to Jacob how hard it is to wrap her tongue around the unfamiliar shapes of the English language. *It doesn't fit*, she says. *English tastes too sweet, and has no depth. No one can understand my heart when I try to put it into these round words made of air.* Her struggle comforts him.

Jacob feels an embryonic joy that will never have the chance to illuminate his life. Grief is already written in the rough palms of his hands, in the fullness of his trembling lips, as he remembers jumping off the train in Vilnius, feeling the cold wrap icy tentacles around his heart.

Chicago does not embrace Jacob with any warmth. The buildings hunch away from him. The moment he opens his mouth to say anything, his lack of English defines him. The people are like the buildings, and recede from his incompetence in their mother tongue. He plummets into a void and cannot pull himself out. He is like many immigrants: needy, hardworking, talented, invisible.

So, it is hardly surprising that making a living is a struggle. The violin sits in its case. He travels across the country selling goods. In the warmer weather, he makes the most of the absence of ice and snow and expands his horizons. One day he is travelling with his horse and cart through Indiana. The wide prairies are behind him. A summer thunderstorm darkens the afternoon, and by the time he arrives at old Eli's farm, heavy drops of rain make small craters in the dust outside the house, and he knows by the sulphurous smell of lightning that he will stay the night.

* * *

The soup is warm and, outside, the elements rage. Fields turn into a shimmering wave. But the wildness outside is nothing compared with the storm in Jacob's heart. Old Eli's daughter Ethel, the eldest of their nine children, reaches across the table to take his bowl from him.

–*Would you like some more?*

–*Sorry?*

–*No, no, I keep forgetting your English isn't that good.* Her laugh is bright, like her eyes. When she speaks English, he likes its softness. When she slips into Yiddish he notices that it's not yet a stranger's language to her.

–*מער? More?*

–*קיין, דאַנק. No, thanks.*

Her smile is like the sun at the end of spring.

The last time he visited old Eli, he didn't take much note of his children still living at home. It seems that overnight one of them has turned into a woman. She is already twenty-five, but he doesn't know this then. He doesn't know that when the family boarded the ship to go to America, her brother Woolf, arriving late, took a ship to Africa, and that Ethel carries him tightly in her heart.

Jacob feels her hand brush his as she takes his bowl away, and the tempest in his heart threatens to blow him down.

He wishes that the storm might never end.

She moves through the room and demands no space. When he offers to help with the washing-up she is so astonished that her cheeks flush, and he feels the earth's slow turning.

After dinner, one of the children is playing the violin uncertainly. Staccato raindrops pummel the roof. Something stirs in Jacob. Before he knows it, he is standing by the boy, encouraging him in broken

English to keep the bows long, the fingers relaxed, the movement fluid. And when the boy finishes and hands Jacob the violin, lightning flashes and the image of Ethel, a dark-haired goddess standing in the doorway, is burned into his heart forever.

That night, music fills the house. Children trickle into the room. Old Eli and his wife let go of the heaviness of the farm for a moment. A candle, forgotten songs and a language that seems distinctly out of place at first create spirals of human warmth that swirl bodies into movement. Jacob's fingers have found once more the patterns and intervals, the rising and falling tones that are the sound of his soul. Ethel stops dancing after a short while, coughing, holding her chest. But her eyes are on fire. She leans, red-faced, against the stone wall.

✡

The storm rages on through the night and Jacob cannot sleep. But this agony is something to relish, a heightened sense that makes him dare to contemplate the unthinkable.

In the damp morning, just before Jacob leaves the farm, he asks Eli for his daughter's hand in marriage.

The proposal is made formal later through a marriage broker. This is how things are done. Jacob's sisters are distressed.

–How will you afford to keep a wife happy?

–She will need many things that you can't give her. Trust me, women have many needs, especially in America. You cannot take a wife and then offer her nothing.

–But listen, please! She's not that kind of a person. זי איז ניט אַזוי. *Wait until you meet her.*

✡

The eleven-year-old girl who could not make beautiful music come out of the violin is still there three decades later, as I take the instrument, heavy with history, out of its case. I resist the desire to crumble into a past self. The dream from the night before is so strong that it moves me beyond my fear of failure and less-than-perfect intonation. In the dream, I was a solo violin-player and the music that emerged was a sweeping African dawn of effortless notes. I find the courage to begin a scratchy G-major scale. The teacher is kind. He is encouraging after the first five minutes.

–*Great intonation*, he says. *You'll see – it'll all come back to you*.

He looks at my fingers, which cling to the neck of the violin.

–*Relax*, he says. *The violin's not a life raft.*

But I fear that maybe it is. I tell him I'm very slow at reading music.

–*I don't want you to read the music. Close your eyes, and play me another scale.*

In the darkness, behind the flickering blacks and reds of my eyelids, there is no bow-hold, or grip, or intonation. The notes expand and swell and my fingers find their position. When I stop and turn to him, his eyes are like still ponds moved by a sudden gust.

–*Play me something you remember.*

–*I've forgotten it all.*

–*The body has a way of remembering. Try it. Think of the last thing you played.*

At first it's just one bar, something buried in the brain and remembered by the fingers. But then the whole phrase returns, and my heart carries the tune all the way to its end.

I open my eyes and look to him for disapproval. No doubt the sounds are still as scratchy and unbeautiful as they were almost three decades ago.

–*Sorry, that was really horrible.* I have to get in there before he does.

He shakes his head. *How can you say that about something you've played with your whole body, your whole soul?*

That night, from a resonant realm beyond my reach, the music of a violin plays through my dreams.

✡

Jacob's life has, until this point, followed a tragic curve. On the night of the attack, his neighbourhood was burned to the ground. His house was the only one left standing. Men came inside, seething with a hatred he could not understand. He watched from a cupboard while these men, whose faces were masks of hell, rained blows on his father's head, and he heard the last words of that gentle man:

–*In the name of God, what have I done?*

Jacob learned that you did not have to commit any crime to be punished by death.

His mother and sisters walked back from the edge of the ghetto through the ash in the early morning to find Jacob lying over his father's cold, broken body.

So, when the marriage broker informs Jacob that Ethel has accepted his proposal, he does not know what to do with the sudden exodus of butterflies from beneath his rib cage.

He carries the news with him quietly and delivers it to his sisters. They are dumbfounded, fearful. Jacob's salary has been scarcely enough for them all, and now he is adding another mouth to feed. He sees their distress. When he speaks, his voice is like the breeze, light, disturbing nothing.

–*Now, now*, he says, as if they were still children. *I've taken care of you already. The marriage broker will find you suitable husbands, and* *you won't have to worry any longer. He tells me there is a great demand for our kind of Jew.*

–What kind of Jew is that?

–The Gefilte Fish Ashkenazis are coveted. His smile is a rare ray of light in the room.

–Why do they call us Gefilte Fish Jews? It's rude! עס איז גראָב!

–It's a compliment. Our tastes are less intense, less crass, less … oh, I don't know. Apparently we have a reputation for being intellectual. Apparently many new immigrant men want to better themselves, marry up. I have no idea why.

–I don't want to be married. And I'm not intellectual. This is one point they agree on.

–You can't be spinsters forever.

Saidie puts down the sock she has been darning and walks out of the room. In the gust of her wake, the paraffin lamp flickers and goes out.

That is the longest conversation Jacob will have with his sisters for many years. He knows he will never win, and anyway, their understanding of the necessity of what must happen in life transcends their annoyance. He smiles again. His marriage is sealed. The delicate flower of hope for his new life awaits. As he is coming to believe – God will provide.

For the next three months, as he exchanges letters with Ethel, his heart swells with a new and unfamiliar sensation. It is as though, unaccustomed to joy, his heart feels pain every time it fills. He wonders whether seeing Ethel again will begin to heal something in him. In this no-man's-land between bachelor and married man, Jacob takes up his violin. Every night he drives his sisters crazy. They complain half-heartedly and he knows they don't mean it. In the music, and the rhythm, and the rich notes played on the D-string, which has a particular resonance, the voice of their father whispers its love, and no one has any real desire to silence it.

✡

In the hours when the night is heaviest just before dawn, I dream that I am about to play the violin. I take it out of its case and in my hands it comes apart. The bridge has collapsed and the strings hang loosely over the body of the instrument. The bow is in tatters and I have no idea how I am to make music on such a useless instrument. But I pick it up anyway and place it in the hollow curve between shoulder and chin, and the sound I make is as rough and raw as a torn soul. I feel tears burning in my throat. This is the furthest from beauty.

When I wake up in the morning, I stumble out of bed and go downstairs. I take out my gleaming wooden instrument and hold the bow as if it is a gift from another world. Moved by the fleeting brightness of an older dream and the words from my teacher, I close my eyes, dispel the shadows and slide the bow over the strings, thinking of the flow of water, the way the prow of a ship displaces the waves and moves single-mindedly towards its destination.

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The day that Ethel and Jacob get married is drenched in sunshine. Even Jacob's sisters are smiling. Ethel is an angel in white who floats beside Jacob, an apparition of joy so brief that in the span of history's long narrative, she is a single line on a page.

At first they all live together. But soon Jacob's savings allow the newlyweds to move out into their own house. Jacob peddles fruit and vegetables and odds and ends. English fluency eludes him. When he puts on his new language and tries to wear it, he is like a man attempting to dance in square wooden shoes. His soul resists its lightness. But love softens the cold and brightens the long, dark days.

His world is transformed by the arrival of a daughter who lies in her crib, a pink treasure from a faraway world.

Ethel is thirty years old. She is concerned because the baby has two tiny deformed fingers. They are little stubs. When she came out, her umbilical cord was wrapped tightly around the fingers.

–*She has strangled fingers*, Ethel tells Jacob. *Children will be cruel to her.* But Jacob hushes her and shakes his head.

–*She is perfect.* זי איז גאַנץ.

He is so besotted with his daughter that he hardly sees how pale Ethel looks, how she struggles. She has been diagnosed with diabetes. He kisses his daughter's forehead. *Bertha*. They whisper her name.

–איך וויל צען קינדער.

–*Ten children! I would never survive. Besides, we couldn't afford it.*

–*But at least one more!*

–*Jacob!* She laughs, and her reprimand has no conviction.

He can't help himself. His love for his family is an insatiable hunger. He wants more – more of this family, this warmth. Under his skin, the terror of losing something so dear hovers there like a ghost. Perhaps it's because of the losses of the past that he can't get enough of what he already has. He wants to hold Ethel, be near her, touch her. But often she pushes him away. She's tired, he thinks. It's because of baby Bertha, this miracle from heaven whose round face dents the pillow. And the price for this miracle is that his wife sometimes turns away from him.

One wintry day, Jacob receives the news of his father-in-law's untimely death. Old Eli stopped at a railway crossing with his horse and cart to light a cigarette. He didn't hear or see the approaching train.

Ethel mourns the loss of her father, who is soon buried in the Hammond Cemetery. But little Bertha demands love and life and laughter. In the months that follow old Eli's death, Bertha learns to stand, to walk, to talk; her mother's grief is overshadowed by fierce adoration when she holds the tiny hand with its strangled fingers and steadies her toddler on the sidewalk outside the house.

Three years after they have Bertha, Jacob's wish is granted. Ethel gives birth to a little boy. Jacob holds him close to his heart. *Meyer*, they call him.

Money is always scarce. The small house in Hammond, Indiana, has no running water and no heat. The horse and wagon wait patiently behind the house for Jacob each day. Ethel joins the socialists and pours her energy into fighting for the rights of the poor. *We are on our own*, she says. *No one will help us except ourselves. My father managed a flax factory in Kovna Gaberna but came here so that we could have a better life. We deserve respect and fair treatment, and we can't sit here and wait for those things to be given to us. We must take them.* Words, English words, bend to her will, and those around Ethel admire her. Some are even envious of her dedication and sharp intelligence. But her fire, her passion for social justice, consumes its source – like a candle.

Ethel hides her struggle with diabetes to avoid expensive medical attention. Then, her neck thickens. The doctor tells her she has a goitre – an enlargement of the thyroid gland. She has to step back from the causes she believes in so strongly. The icy reach of winter's breath creeps under the door of the house in Indiana.

Jacob and Ethel often argue. Below the surface it's about money and survival. Jacob is unable to be a harsh businessman, the reason for his arguments with Ethel. His customers shake their heads at his generosity, but they still accept it. He lets people owe him money, which they never repay. If he sees that someone needs vegetables and fruit he accepts their assurance that the payment will come next time. But all too often it doesn't.

The children begin school. They sometimes speak Yiddish at home, but Bertha and Meyer are immersed in a world of English words and the language rushes out of them – waves surging onto a familiar shore. Jacob is offered a position to sing at the local shul. His voice has a mesmerising resonance that echoes the vibrations of the violin. But the act of surviving has sapped his soul and he declines, though his heart yearns to do it.

The tragedy happens later.

When Ethel gets sick it seems trifling at first. Just a cold. But quickly, her thin body, weary with its battles, succumbs without much of a fight; the cold becomes a cough, bronchitis and then pneumonia. She is just forty. She whispers to Jacob one night: *Write to Woolf in South Africa. Tell him I'm very sick.* She will not make the trip to the hospital because it's too expensive.

When he wakes up on April 10, 1927, a Sunday morning, the children are still asleep. Beside him, in the bed, the one he has loved, the soft shape of his soul, is dead. Her name is a freezing whisper on his lips. *Ethel*, he says. His heart turns to ice.

He will never recover. At first, he will dissolve in grief. When he finally pulls himself half-together, his sisters will insist that he cannot afford to properly care for his two young children. They will have the next and last long conversation. Then, they will make arrangements: the children will be taken to the Jewish Orphan Home.

He will visit them sporadically, taking on menial jobs to keep alive. He will be a nightwatchman, which will be a better use of time than lying alone in the darkness with the ghost of his wife lost to death and the images of his children lost to life. He will escape by playing music to himself in the hollowness of the day. He will even teach the violin to other people's children. Jacob's enormous soul will try to confine itself to the perimeters of life's harsh demands.

When he dies, his entire savings, which he had imagined might ease his children's lives, will be claimed by the government of his adopted country.

He will leave nothing behind but his love, recorded in a single sentence uncovered in the twenty-first century by his great-granddaughter.

Lithuania: the train, the young man and the beginning of a new century.

And now this breaking of dreams.