Victoria Park

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October

Smoking Salmon

At the end of Wolfie's garden is a shed he built in the summer of 1951, the same year he turned nineteen and opened the kosher deli next to Victoria Park. He scavenged the timber from a house shattered by the Blitz and laid the roof with red clay tiles prised from the rubble. For sixty-six years he's used it to smoke salmon. It was there when he earned a reputation for the best bagel in Hackney, when he married Mona, when their daughter died, and when he finally retired last year and handed the reins of his business over to his neighbour, Luca.

This morning, Wolfie rose with the first light and went to check on the salmon. He crossed the dewy grass and cracked his shed door open so as not to disturb the dark. He picked up the small flashlight hanging from a rusted nail and used it to illuminate the fish. Suspended from the rafters, they looked like marble sculptures. The walls were seasoned with decades of charred smoke residue,

which had turned sticky over time. Its earthy smell reminded him of the huge bonfires they used to light in the park, when he ran around the neighbourhood collecting 'a penny for the guy'.

His method for smoking salmon was known to no one but Mona, and the secrecy added to its appeal. 'Is it beetroot?' customers had asked him. He'd shake his head, 'No, no. Are you crazy?' 'Honey?' they'd venture. He'd laugh. From the day he discovered the right mix of applewood and oak chips, and when Abe the fishmonger started ordering in the wild Loch Duart salmon just for him, Wolfie hadn't changed a thing. He always collected the salmon forty-eight hours before it would be sold, or eaten, and brought them to his shed. He could fit six whole fish in there and carried each one lengthwise like a baby so as not to break the flesh. Then he sharpened his knives, steel on steel ringing out like wedding bells. He sliced away the heads and tails in two confident strokes, then ran the blade along their middles. He held the fillets to the light so they could shine in their silver skins before he removed those too. He then caked their torsos with generous heaps of rock salt and a little molasses, and speared each one with an iron hook.

The salmon for tonight's Shabbas dinner had been curing for ten hours. He examined the crusted bodies hanging from the rafters, and then washed the salt away with a watering can. He lit the woodchips and closed the

shed door with a gentle click, like he didn't want to wake them. In twelve hours, the fish would change from pale to deep orange, mirroring the evening trail of the sun as it tucked itself behind the park's ring of beech trees. Then he'd slice it Scandinavian style, vertically, inch thick. The ritual pleased him, the motions and movements familiar – like curving an arm around Mona's body in the night.

He opened the garden gate and headed for the west side of the park. It was a routine Mona had prescribed for him since retirement. 'There's nothing a brisk walk can't fix,' she would say. 'Grump, slump, or fury.' She was right, as she so often was. The air in his lungs inflated his mood; stretching thigh muscles made for a pleasant burn. It was a reminder of his mobility, his good health. The park was almost two hundred years old and he would imagine the tree roots beneath his white plimsolls entwined for decades, spreading out beyond the gates, ambitious and ancient. Black poplar, cider gum, sweet chestnut: they were majestic, yes, but also twisted and stooped – even awkward sometimes, and this made him feel better about his body. The bunions and the lumps and the liver spots. He was ageing and they were ageing, and that was the natural way of things – to grow and degrade.

Grove Road split the park in two, and he followed its length south towards the canal, passing the old boating lake. The island in the middle featured a red Chinese pagoda, flanked by English elms and beeches. Waterfowl,

plump from scraps of bread, made abstractions of the weeping willows and yellow laburnum reflected on the water's surface as they swam. Runners lapped the park, friends jogged together in conversation, never short of breath. The dog walkers greeted him. One of the young mums who bought bagels from the deli raised a hand in hello. It was good to see the same people each morning, just as he had when he worked.

Halfway through his usual circuit, he took a seat on his favourite bench and ran his fingers over the faded gold lettering: *Shirley-Ann: the song ended but the melody lingers on*. Such a girlish name, Shirley-Ann. He imagined she'd been a chorus girl – blonde ringlets, blue eyes – but that she'd died young. Left behind a fiancé, maybe. He rubbed his knees. The ache of arthritis was more pronounced in the mornings. He couldn't get used to feeling so aware of his bones.

A middle-aged man yelled at a sheepdog. The women clustered by the rose garden were engrossed in their New Agey thing, all bright leggings and slow arm movements. The turn of their bodies like a baby's mobile, rotating. Whatever it was they were doing, it relaxed him. The sky changed from grey to a pale pink.

In the kitchen, he was greeted by a stack of dirty dishes, half-chopped vegetables, and great piles of garden herbs. Sheets of silver foil and baking paper covered the oak

table. Luca always said that the mess shrank the room, defying its high ceiling and the light that flooded through a slanted skylight. But Wolfie liked the kitchen the way it was, the sliding doors the length and width of the back wall opening out on to the garden where he'd watch Mona potter about in soil-caked overalls, humming along to Adele.

A huge pan of water bubbled on the busy hob and Wolfie set a timer to eight minutes. At the sound of the alarm, he drained three dozen eggs and plunged them into a bowl of iced water. Knocking their tops on the granite counter, he peeled each one with deft fingers, leading with the thumb, and deposited the shells in a pile set aside for compost. A mundane job, but he let his thoughts drift. When he ran the deli, he was always tired and irritable by midday. He'd growl at the staff – the salt beef was sliced too thick, the rollmops were tilting in their rows, or he'd curse the shelves buckling under the weight of tinned apricots, sardines, and barrels of pickled herrings. But alone at dawn, Mona still sleeping, he would walk the length of Victoria Park Road, cross the roundabout, and take pleasure in each familiar step of opening the deli. He'd lift the groaning iron shutters, flick the lights, put money in the register, tie his white apron in a determined bow – *Wolfie's* stitched across its breast in royal blue – and welcome the day.

He'd been popular with the customers. They liked his bright, sharp face – the tyranny of red capillaries across the

bridge of his nose made him look sunburnt year-round, or as if he had just told a dirty joke. Owning the deli meant he was privy to the neighbourhood gossip. Someone's husband came home blind drunk again, or young so-and-so is in the family way. But Wolfie kept the whisperings to himself.

In those days, he was considered one of the lucky ones. After a rich benefactor befriended him, he'd become his own boss, always certain a pay packet was coming at the end of the week. So he spread his good fortune – even the neighbours he wasn't so keen on were treated to some extra latkes, slipped into a brown paper bag. 'Eat, eat!' he'd insist. 'Stop being so polite. Pick it up with your fingers. It's not biting *you*.' He knew which foods could fix the worst of moods. 'Mrs Klein, you're hankering for a little chicken soup with ginger,' he'd say, rolling the syllables with a faint German accent, too soft for most to notice. 'I feel it in my bones.'

'Lord, yes. That's exactly it,' she'd reply. 'How did you know?'

Cooking helped him to shrink the borders between giving people what they needed and understanding what he needed himself.

He lifted a large mixing bowl from the crowded shelves, leaning a little on tiptoes to reach, and scooped the entire contents of a jar of mayonnaise – made yesterday, slowly, with a generous glug of olive oil – into it. With a fork,

he broke the eggs into large chunks until they made a warm orange and cream mess. It had been circulated at synagogue that egg mayonnaise was the new rabbi's favourite bagel. Since then, dozens of challah offerings had been made. But surely none could surpass Wolfie's? If he couldn't impress with his egg mayo then he was finished, though Rabbi Ellensen was an American, and what if they ate theirs with onions or something else meshuge? Well, he would do it his way and the rest was in God's hands.

Wolfie delighted in cooking for guests but nothing gave him more joy than feeding Mona. Mona, who was pencil-slim the day he first saw her whirling around a Mile End dance hall. He'd been too shy to ask her for a date outright, awed by her golden hair and petticoats which flared beneath her dress as she spun, so he told her to drop by his deli. 'Lemme put some meat on those bones,' he'd said. She came, to his surprise, the very next day and sat at the counter, swinging her tiny feet and hugging her ribs as she guzzled down the plate of prune tzimmes and soused herrings with potato salad that he pushed in front of her.

'I've never tasted anything so good,' she said.

He plonked another dish down, a chicken casserole with latkes that he'd warmed on the stove in the back. 'Try that,' he commanded.

'I'm too full. I couldn't manage another bite!' she protested, laughing.

'Eat! Eat!'

Her murmurs of approval satisfied him and, as he studied her narrow frame, he decided it was up to him to round her out.

He didn't know then that she was a Kindertransport child, too. That her Austrian accent had been beaten out of her by foster parents, or that she'd only been given scraps to eat for years. He'd find all that out only after they were married. But these days Mona toyed with her food, disinterested in the steaming, aromatic plates he served up. He baked her pies with flaky butter crusts and stout-steeped beef shanks, but she would only pick at them, play with the pastry. Not even his chicken soup, with its light nourishing broth and tender meat floating among lokshen, could tempt her. It was as though she'd forgotten the joy that comes from eating. Lately, the outline of her ribcage could be seen through the cotton of her dress. He considered it a personal failure.

He examined a pencil-scrawled schedule, the timings of each dish carefully mapped out. As usual, he'd taken on too much and was expecting all of their closest friends and neighbours for dinner. He couldn't abide a quiet house, hated that there were no abandoned toys strewn across the floor, no washing line full of clothes. The coat rack in particular filled him with a deep melancholy when its pegs were bare. So, he took every opportunity to overcrowd the kitchen table with

hungry mouths. With chewing and talking and drinking. With life.

He rolled the challah dough then swiftly turned it into two thick plaits.

Luca's voice called out from the garden and then the back doors slid open. Luca entered with a basket full of chicory, radishes, carrots and horseradish root. He dropped it on the edge of the counter top. 'It's all here,' he said. 'Enough for an army, as usual.' He stooped to kiss Wolfie's cheeks.

Wolfie ruffled Luca's pile of black curls. 'Look at this,' he said, pawing over the produce, checking its quality. 'That alter kocker is redeeming himself. Slowly.'

'Please – no more arguments over tomatoes.'

Wolfie lifted a hand to his balding skull and ran a finger over his overgrown eyebrows, still black when everything else was grey. 'Oy, the principle, son. It's the principle.' He scooped up carrot chunks from the chopping board and dropped them into a pan of water along with gefilte fish.

Luca shook his head and surveyed the kitchen with an expression of amusement. 'Chaos as usual,' he said. 'Elena and the kids want to know what's on the menu.'

Wolfie opened the oven and slid the challah into its depths. 'Well we might have to get creative with what we tell them. Chopped liver. Gefilte fish and beetroot horseradish. Chicken soup. My smoked salmon, of course,

then brisket and chicory salad, with Mona's apple strudel to finish.'

'I don't suppose you'll let me help?'

'No, no. All under control.'

Luca took a seat on the brown bar stool and picked up Wolfie's worn cookbook. Bound in green leather, the cover was tacky with old food and marbled oil stains. He flicked through the pages. 'Is there anything you don't deface with stickmen?'

Wolfie laughed. 'Stickmen are the best – they're always pushing or pulling things. If you're going to doodle, at least you can put them to work,' he said. 'Should've kept it pristine, though. A first-edition Florence Greenberg's worth a pretty penny now.'

'Florence who?'

'The other Jewish bible. I've been using her recipes since I learned to boil water. They're like family to me – except without the disappointments!'

Luca smiled, turning the book in his hands.

'How's the new fellow at the deli working out? Any good?' asked Wolfie.

'He's great. Very outgoing. Customers love him. I'll go over for the lunch rush.' Luca leaned in to smell the posy on the table. 'Did Mona pick these? Freddy wants to know if she'd like some help gardening tomorrow?'

'Yes, that'll make her happy. He's a good kid. It's time she ate breakfast. Would you mind bringing her down?'

Luca's heavy tread reverberated on the staircase above. Wolfie scooped a pile of raw liver on to a wooden board and chopped the reddish-brown flesh into chunks before dropping them in a hot iron pan. He filled the sink with warm soapy water and began to clean his knives.

When he looked up a few minutes later and saw the expression on Luca's face, he sighed and took the pan off the heat.

'I've looked everywhere,' Luca said, laying a large hand on Wolfie's shoulders.

'Everywhere?'

Luca nodded.

'Oy gevalt. Oh Mona.'

'She won't have gone far,' Luca said. 'We'll look together. Bet she's at the playground again. We'll find her before the bread is baked.'

There was a long silence as Wolfie turned and opened the fridge, looking into its depths as if his wife might be inside. 'Thank you,' he said softly, 'that'd be a great help.' He closed the door, and then switched off the oven. 'I'll just get my hat.'

Mona refused to wear a watch. She had no interest in the exact time of anything. Instead, she preferred to rely on sun-looking and instinct. When she was a girl in

Austria, just before the train left, her mother slipped her father's gold watch into her hands and told her to keep it safe. At five years old, she hadn't grasped telling the time, but adored the soft brown leather strap, creased and lined from wear, the shine of its gold-rimmed face, the mystery of Roman numerals. All she remembered of her mother now was the outline of her silhouette at the station, shoulders hunched against the wind, the black of her coat. It was her abiding memory of Austria, but it returned to her so often sometimes it felt as though she'd only just left. She still heard the tick of the second hand as it went round and round. The watch was the first thing they took from her when she was sent to the home. So when she left the house this morning, Mona looked up at a blue sky full of low-hanging clouds and figured it was around nine a.m. and Patrice would be about to finish her night shift.

The garden was brimming with pink nerines. She bent down, gathering their spidery petals to her nose, and inhaled. They'd make a wonderful bouquet for her friend. She pulled the thin stems away from the main stalk and took a stray length of brown string from the rose trellis and caught their ends in a tidy bow. She opened the garden gate and crossed the road. She entered the park through Grove Road. Wind whipped up the leaves, their tips turning to rust, and scattered them across the pavement like confetti. It had been raining and the grass seemed

replenished, bright and springy, and there was a pleasant earthy smell. She stopped walking, surprised the pens full of guinea pigs, rabbits and wallabies weren't there. Nor was the aviary. Perhaps they'd been taken for cleaning.

The playground was already overrun with shrieking children. How pleasant, to be so free. No over-darned stockings, no hair set in curlers overnight, no lacquered fingernails. How nice to get mud on your shoes! She was still partial to a puddle herself. That was the joy of having your own children, she supposed – a second childhood. Goodness knows the first time round was no picnic. She couldn't wait to have a brood of her own; Henry would make a wonderful father. It was partly why she chose him, of course. And it helped he had a good job at his father's textile factory in Whitechapel. One year of marriage to get themselves on their feet, then they'd start a family.

She passed the Chinese pagoda but it looked different – the paint too red, too new. Where had they found money to spruce it up during rationing? A breeze caught the edges of her yellow dress and she pulled the worn cloth belt around her – it never tied tightly enough. She lusted after the softness of Betty Grable's body, her apple cheeks and plump hips, so wide and appealing. Perhaps that was what it would take for Henry to propose – a little rounding out, softening up. Then he'd see her as the child-rearing kind. The sharp angles of her hips and

ribcage were an embarrassment but at least she was a natural blonde and didn't have to fuss with peroxide like Patrice every few weeks. Nothing worse than a sludgy brown parting.

On the east side of the park, a woman sat alone, cross-legged and straight-backed beneath the wide canopy of an ash tree. Her eyes were closed. What on earth could she be doing? Strange – though it was a lovely tree, quite majestic.

Mona sailed on to Old Ford Road with quick, light steps. The sun pushed between cracks of clouds and she sang skipping songs under her breath as the warmth hit her face. *Salt, mustard, vinegar, pepper. Handy-pandy, sugar candy.* Patrice could always skip better than her *and* keep going – even in the dark. Poor Patrice, growing up with a drunk excuse for a father. No wonder she'd ended up in a line of work dealing with dreadful men. And there, look, on a bench were more gutter-minded men, two of them wrapped round one another, elbows and arms interlocking. She tutted as she passed.

She stopped. The shops weren't in the right place. Or was it the right order? She cast around in her mind – what used to be here? Abe's fishmongers? Did he leave Bethnal Green? She kept walking. The pie and mash shop was setting up for lunchtime trade and she looked longingly through the window at its marble tables, its mirrors etched with pictures of eels, seaweed

and shells. Had she eaten breakfast? Her stomach felt tight, angry. Probably not. She would walk the long way round past Rinkoffs, buy something warm with cinnamon in it.

Inside the bakery, men and women jostled and pushed one another, shouting orders across the smeary glass counter. She didn't recognize the young man who served her. Was he a Turk? He really should have been wearing a hat to cover all that hair. She pointed at a cinnamon swirl.

'Where's Clive?' she asked, taking the paper-wrapped bun from his large hairy hands.

'Who?'

'Clive. The owner.'

'I don't know who that is, lady.'

'Well you should know who your—'

'That'll be two twenty.'

'What's that?'

'Two pounds twenty.'

She laughed. 'You making fun of me? That's not the price. What do I owe you?' She laid her posy on the counter and felt about in the pockets of her dress. 'Oh. I – I don't have any money on me.'

'You gotta be kidding.' He shook his head. 'Tell you what, lady, I'm too busy for this – it's on me.'

'It is? Well thank—'

The man turned to the next customer.

'Oh,' she said, then bit into the flaky Danish. She savoured the flavour, letting the rich butter pastry go soggy in her mouth as she sucked the cinnamon.

'Mona? What you doing here, lovely?'

The voice had an accent she couldn't place. When a hand was laid on her shoulder she spun round. A concerned-looking woman was staring at her. She had olive skin, smooth and bright, and her eyes crinkled at the corners.

'Who are you?' Mona asked.

The woman smiled. 'It's me: Veronica.'

She looked hard at the woman. 'I – I don't know any Veronica.'

'I clean your house every Monday, Mona. Lovely, aren't you cold in that summer dress?'

'You're confused,' Mona said, 'and I'm afraid you're making me late.' She glanced at the woman again, and then left the bakery.

Outside, the whine of cranes and juddering drills offended her. So many men with strange hats and huge plastic glasses. People were speaking to each other at ear-splitting volume. She looked at the street ahead, wondering what brought her here. 'What are you staring at?' she asked a passing young girl who didn't appear to hear her.

She kept walking. Strange music blared from food stalls in Whitechapel market. She couldn't isolate the different sounds and they stung and jolted her. The high

street was busier than she'd ever seen it; it was wild with colour. She sneezed several times, something peppery teasing her nose. A breeze of recognition fluttered over her and she remembered Cable Street and Patrice's shift. She drifted in its direction, following the narrow road slowly but the movement of people around her was rapid. Light pulsed. More strange music. She reached a junction and was mesmerized by the tallness of trees, towers of green glass. Everything reaching up, up, up.

Wolfie walked with pronounced steps as if treading on sand not pavement. It wasn't that he didn't want to hurry, but maybe if his pace could be measured, then the gnawing thrum inside him might quieten too. He'd noticed Luca's usual long gait had slowed to half-time and now there was a prick of embarrassment along with a growing sense of panic. They'd checked the playground and across the long stretch of Cambridge Heath. He was worried about the road, the rush of traffic, the speed of all those young cyclists, weaving through cars. And what if she stumbled? One trip is all it would— Just one.

The sunlight was bouncing off the concrete now. He rolled back his shirtsleeves and found his watch read midday – they left the house thirty minutes ago. Church

bells pealed in the distance and he realized Luca was asking a question.

'The first time she wandered off she made it as far as Lea Valley,' Wolfie replied. 'She used to play around the marshes when she was a girl. Then it was the museum on Cambridge Heath Road, then Meath Gardens on Roman Road, though it was called Green Street in those days. She used to walk all over Hackney back then.'

'If Lydia went further than the park I'd have a fit!'

'It was a different time.' Wolfie shrugged. He tilted his head up to the sky and let the first real warmth of the day roll across his face. He closed his eyes, the past breaking open in him and with it a brief betrayal of happiness. 'There wasn't any fear of strangers. We all knew each other. No adults fussed unless you didn't show up for mealtimes – then you'd get the belt if your dinner went cold. Though it was never much more than bread and dripping.' He opened his eyes and took in the press of the crowd around Bethnal Green tube station. The street swelled with people – so many more than when he and Mona were young, when Bethnal was considered a Jewish ghetto. 'You should have seen Mona in those days,' he said. 'Her hair was like gold before it turned silver.'

There was a buzzing in Wolfie's pocket, which was alarming until he remembered the present Luca gave him for his birthday. He pulled out the small black phone.

'Luca, I don't have my reading glasses.' He handed it over. 'What does it say?'

'From Veronica,' Luca said. 'She just saw Mona at Rinkoffs but Mona didn't recognize her.'

'Af tsores. How could she not know Veronica?' Wolfie murmured. 'Rinkoffs was where she used to stop off on the way to see Patrice.'

'Who?'

'Her best friend when she was young. She died years ago.'

Luca paused. 'Do you think maybe it's time?'

'Not you as well. It's not up for discussion.'

'She's putting herself in more and more danger.'

'This isn't danger. It's broad daylight. She's just confused. No more of this, OK?'

Luca frowned and fell quiet. As they rounded the corner on to Whitechapel High Street, the passing snippets of conversation grew louder, younger and more urgent. The street was littered with the pulp of dropped tomatoes, stray chillies, coriander leaves. Shouts of the market-stall men added to the clamour. It sounded like music, the sustained notes of an unknown language. They passed students loitering outside the hospital college, their dizzying array of styles recognizable from each decade he'd lived through. The stream of whizzing bicycles unsettled him.

'Slow down,' Wolfie muttered to the back of their heads.

'Freddy wants one of those fixed-gear bikes. But over

my dead body is he going to cycle through London with no brakes.' Luca stepped aside to avoid a young family as they spilled out of a new block of flats.

'How I hate those places,' Wolfie said, pointing at a recently opened Tesco Metro. 'Sad aisles full of pre-chopped veg and microwave meals. So lonely.'

'I can see her,' Luca said, his voice breathy with relief. 'Who's she talking to?'

Wolfie followed Luca's gaze and saw a flash of bright yellow. Mona hadn't worn that dress in a long time. He remembered the day she bought it – ten, twelve years ago? Monty had driven them down to Brighton in his old green Astra. Mona trawled through the packed rails in the Lanes, enamoured with the brightly coloured clothes. When she yanked aside the changing-room curtain to show him, she looked like an after-image of the sun – a vision burned on his retina. She'd bought a necklace that day too, he recalled, though lost it soon after. It had a clasp that wouldn't quite catch.

Across the street now, Mona was gesturing wildly to a shopkeeper, a shadow of hair under her exposed arms. He watched her for a long time, or what seemed like a long time, perhaps it was only a few seconds, and he saw his life in a flickering reel behind him with nothing in front.

'Maybe she thinks he's Patrice's pimp,' Wolfie said. 'A lot of her friends from the children's home ended up prostitutes.'

Luca was silent and took Wolfie's arm, and they walked to where Mona was arguing loudly with a Bengali man.

'Mona, altz iz gut,' Wolfie said. 'Come on, my darling, let's go home. You'll feel better there.' He grasped the pointed end of her elbow with his hand and guided her away.

'Where's Patrice? Tell this man. You must do something!'

He wanted to do something but didn't know what, so he embraced her, put his face in her hair, breathed in the familiar scent of camomile shampoo, and felt the urgency of her heartbeat. She pulled away abruptly and yelled at him only inches from his face and her breath was sweet like cinnamon.

The kitchen was warm with bodies crowded around the oak table, its sliding extensions pulled out with a snap and draped in the lace Shabbas tablecloth moments before his guests arrived. Wolfie had set the table with the good china and crystal glasses with red paper napkins folded inside, their gold edges fanned out. He lit the long-stemmed Shabbas candles before sunset to honour the Torah's commandments to guard and remember, one of the few traditions he still adhered to, and now the wavy flames cast his friends and neighbours in a flattering

glow. The aroma of baked bread, smoked salmon, and the spice of patchouli – Monty's preferred cologne – mingled in the air. Everyone had brought flowers, except Rabbi Ellensen who'd greeted him with a jar of home-made blackberry jam. He'd run out of vases and didn't know where Mona kept the rest.

He sat at the head of the table, masterminding the consumption by murmuring, 'Eat, eat,' until soon the eating and talking were no longer distinct. Chomping, agreeing, chewing, interrupting, cutting, scraping. Sounds of satisfaction. The clang of porcelain dentures on silverware.

'Wonderful egg mayonnaise, Wolfie,' Rabbi Ellensen said. She kissed the crumbs from her fingers.

He smiled back at her. She looked younger up close than she did standing on the synagogue's small stage. She was the first female rabbi he'd ever met, and under forty too. She'd moved from California with her husband for his job, she'd told him. They'd been married fifteen years, which felt like child's play.

There were murmurs of agreement about the mayonnaise. It would have all been perfect if Mona hadn't been upstairs, sleeping. But the compliments fell flat, the conversation washing over him. He'd answer, 'That's right, that's right,' only to find that no question had been asked. He picked at a liver cracker. Perhaps a long sleep might break Mona's cycle; maybe she'd even wake up

hungry. He didn't want to disturb her but longed to put a hand on her knee under the table, for the rabbi to meet her properly. Hosting the rabbi for Shabbas was a much-coveted spot, and her attendance today had been booked months in advance. She'd led a wonderful Kiddush, complimented the beautiful textiles Mona had stitched to cover the challah when the wine was blessed. When the rabbi tore the bread to pass around the table, she spoke softly of the value of shalom bayit, peace in the home, and he'd had to bow his head.

He observed the crowded dinner table, full of friends and neighbours and their children, the family that he and Mona had made for themselves, and he felt like a witness – not a participant.

Monty caught his gaze. 'Tell us about the Italian lessons, Wolfie,' he said.

'Well, apart from being the oldest person at college by about forty years, it's all very enjoyable,' he replied. 'I want to take Mona to Florence, order fave e cicoria, riso and patate e cozze with a perfect accent. Like a second honeymoon of sorts.'

Luca and Elena praised his pronunciation but he caught the look of surprise they shared. He felt a kick of annoyance.

'We never went on a honeymoon,' Elena said.

'Neither did we, come to think of it,' Wolfie replied. 'It was still rationing time.'

'Imagine the shopping in Florence,' Monty said. 'Mona is the perfect Italian size. And you could do with some dapper clothes.'

Wolfie smiled. 'I'll leave that to you, my friend.' He stood and tapped a fork against the edge of his wine glass. 'Firstly, everyone please fill your glasses, for a day without wine is like a day without sunshine.' He paused to let the Beaujolais pass around the table. 'I want to thank you all for joining us on this Shabbas, particularly Rabbi Ellensen who we welcome into our community and who I'm honoured will be blessing Mona and I at our sixty-fifth wedding anniversary in the new year.'

The room resounded with the clink of crystal.

'Mona and I have been fortunate enough to witness the many comings and goings of this neighbourhood, and though there are some who have sadly passed on, our circle is always growing. It's a shame Mona's not feeling well today because nothing makes her happier than celebrating Shabbas with the people she loves. So,' Wolfie raised his glass once more, 'to you all and to new beginnings.'

'No – to you and Mona,' Monty said, 'our favourite cantankerous fools. We love you.'

Wolfie performed a little bow. He took a long drink of wine, then went to the oven and brought a tray of brisket back to the table. Its flesh crumbled as he portioned it out. His guests emitted throaty hums of appreciation as

it was passed down. He watched as Elena spooned some of the meat juices from the serving platter on to Freddy's plate. The boy kept his head down low, close to the dish, and nodded a little in thanks as he shovelled food into his mouth, slurping. Elena smiled a small smile as he ate before rolling the sleeves of her black cardigan and serving herself. Luca was opposite, looking after Lydia. Wolfie realized he hadn't heard husband and wife say a single word to one another all evening, save for a polite request to pass the horseradish.

'Do you have to keep your phone on the table, Freddy?' Luca asked his son.

'What's all this? Where's Henry?' Mona's small frame appeared in the doorway. Her hair was mussed from sleep, her face pale against the yellow dress, rippled now with creases.

'Who's Henry, Aunt Mona?' Lydia asked, abandoning the panda doodle that had begun to take shape on her napkin.

'My sweetheart, of course. Who are you?'

Freddy looked up from his plate and turned to Elena. Monty lowered his head and the warmth of the brisket steamed the lenses of his tortoiseshell glasses. Wolfie saw in the rabbi's face a slackening, a moment of lost composure, though she recovered quickly.

'Wolfie, perhaps Mona needs some more rest,' Luca said.

'Or dinner?' Freddy offered.

'Yes, both, I think,' Wolfie said. 'Come, my darling, let's take this brisket upstairs.' He excused himself from the table, picked up his plate, and with a wave he instructed the eating to continue.

He clasped his wife's small hand and together they climbed the stairs to their bedroom. The room was stuffy and with great effort he pushed up the sash window and let in the cool evening air. He stood for a moment and looked out at the silhouetted beech trees and the park beyond. When he turned, Mona had already slipped beneath the blue floral sheets, their pattern chosen after an agonizing twenty-minute deliberation at last year's John Lewis Christmas sale. He remembered her fussing over the greens and pinks, lifting one set out after another and inspecting their cloth. How infuriating he'd found her interest in thread count, barking at her to hurry up and choose – it was only linen. He pulled the cord of the bedside lamp and Mona's face submerged in the shadows, her silver hair spread across the pillow, and as he looked at her confused, worn-out expression, he wished furiously to go back to that moment and tell her to buy all of them.