

Estranged daughter learns her mother was in WWII Shanghai Jewish ghetto.

SHANGHAI LEGACY

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S H A N G H A I
L E G A C Y

If she had only known, Maya will look back and think later, she would have arrived on time for her weekly visit with Hannah. But then, had she known many things, she would have acted differently these first forty-nine years of her life.

She's twenty minutes late. Even though she took the 8:38 train from Chappaqua as usual. Even though she hurried along the pavement from Grand Central as usual, whisking by the many shop windows, not even allowing herself to stop at the art store on Lexington. Still, her legs—or would Hannah call it perversity?—have somehow lost precious time, and now she must rush up the steep stone stairs of the old brownstone, heart slamming in her throat.

On the top step she gulps one last breath of bracing—normal—air, and lets herself in with her own key. Good that she has held onto it; who knows if Hannah would give her one now.

With her shoulder, Maya shoves the door open. Harder every week, she thinks, compared to the silken glide of her brass and cedar front door in Chappaqua.

And dirtier: her dark gray sleeve comes away with a puff of whitish dust. “Not dirt,” Hannah would probably scold. “Character and history. The home that gave you life!”

A home where the air is lifeless, without expectation, thinks Maya, once inside. Even with all the lights on, the entrance and living room

are dim. She hurries to the dining room at the back, which is totally dark. Deserted. No: there's a glint of neon white and the faint beat of Caribbean music.

She switches on the light, which pops like a flashbulb. The white glint turns out to be the immaculate uniform of the nurse's aide. She is perched at the edge of the massive mahogany chair that flanks the armoire. Seeing Maya, she jumps up, clutching a black portable radio to her ample chest.

"Sorry I startled you, Martha." Maya lays a gentle hand on her starched white sleeve, feeling the potent body heat beneath. "What are you doing, sitting in the dark like that?" Maya smiles as she scolds; the woman is still new.

Her moist chocolate skin obscures her age; she could be anywhere from her thirties to her fifties. She shrugs in the direction of Hannah's room. "The missus doesn't like to waste electricity." As if to avoid being caught in the act, she snaps off the radio, though it clearly runs on batteries.

Maya cringes behind her pasted-on smile. Hannah has already gone through three helpers—wonderful, gentle, hand-picked caregivers who were nearly impossible to get. Hiring Martha had been a downright coup.

"Please, put on whatever lights you need. Turn up the heat. Use the record player in the living room. Make yourself at home. *Please.*"

The whites of the woman's eyes seem to recede. The black irises widen, glinting like lacquered balls. "She doesn't want me, Miss Silver. I've tried..."

Maya waves her hand wildly to ward off the words she's been dreading from the start.

But the woman grabs them, warmly but firmly subduing Maya. "I've worked for other older ladies who have their hard ways. They start off like this, too. Don't need no help, don't want no help. They can manage all by themselves. Little by little, I bring them 'round. But your mother..."

"She just needs some time," Maya pleads, unable to wrest her hands from the comforting grasp.

“Your mother,” she repeats, dipping her nurse’s cap toward Hannah’s room again, “she is like a melon that will never ripen, Miss Silver.”

“I’ll talk to her.” Maya’s hands flutter uselessly. “I promise.”

The lines on the woman’s face deepen; she’s obviously well over fifty. “I can’t go on each day like this. She fire me, you hire me back. She fire me, you hire me back.” The island lilt hardens to one grim bass note. “I have another opportunity, Miss Silver. I have two daughters to educate.”

Hannah’s room reeks of old starch, sweat, and mothballs, as though it’s been recycling the same air for decades. Which it probably has. One of Hannah’s pet house rules is keeping windows closed to prevent drafts.

In bed she lies still as a fallen statue. Maya bends closer, tilting her own cheek to test for a sign of breathing.

“You’re late.” Hannah booms to life, not opening her eyes. Shrewd as ever: she knows she’s about to be scolded. What better defense than a good offense?

“You’ve scared away that perfectly lovely woman,” Maya hisses in one heaving breath. Cringing at the Hannah-like whine of her own voice, she still can’t stop herself from bleating out the whole story.

Hannah’s heavy wrinkled eyelids snap shut like hard-shell mollusks warding off attack. “I never said anything about the electricity. Besides, I told you on the day she came. I don’t need any high-priced help.”

“But Mother, it’s obvious that you do. And what possible fault could you find with this woman? Her cleanliness is beyond question. The white mesh stockings, the spotless white shoes; she epitomizes the old values you constantly lament as lost.” *She is even shrewd*, Maya doesn’t say. A must for this job.

“I can take care of *myself*. I always have, and I always will. Until the day I die.”

Maya glares at the iron line of Hannah’s pursed lips. *Then do it! I’m done with you*, she yearns to scream at this impossible mother—

Marion Cuba

who, once, to teach Maya a lesson, took a vow of silence that almost broke her heart.

But that is her game, thinks Maya. Has always been her game: to push me away. Well, it won't work.

Maya takes Hannah's freckled hand. "It isn't a bad thing to accept help."

Hannah winces, clamping shut her shelled lids as though she's been struck.

Useless to lecture her about pride. There is one more tack Maya can try. "What would your grandchildren think if they knew you were giving up?"

A palpable hit: for the first time in decades, water floods Hannah's eyes. It doesn't form into teardrops; that would leave her completely naked. It just lies there pooled, held by gravity.

And by sheer will, thinks Maya. But at least she's gotten through to Hannah.

"Tell me what I can do," Maya whispers, barely breathing. She moves in closer, inhales the intimate moisture of her mother.

But Hannah flicks her head away. She emits a strangled sound. Maya struggles to hear the words that follow. All she can make out is "tired."

"Of course, you're tired." Maya's voice is absurdly cheery. "You're weak from fasting. I have just the thing you need," she continues to chirp.

Twenty minutes later, she is back with an offering. Head high, shoulders back— *the old values are not lost on me!* her posture declares. Using her foot and elbow to help, she do-si-dos inside, and, lifting the tray high, kicks the door shut. Eyes down, she bustles around the footboard and lays the tray down on the bedside table.

Not until she raises a spoonful of soup does she glimpse Hannah's hand, clenched like a claw in the air, wheeling toward her. With one blow Hannah swats the spoon from Maya's hand, splattering the liquid onto her nightgown like orange vomit.

Maya clamps her own face into breathless neutral to deflect the force of Hannah's defiant eyes. A silent count to ten, then Maya offers up the grilled cheese sandwich. Comfort food. Stagnantly she inhales its sweet buttery smell: *See how warm and enticing it is?*

Hannah doesn't blink. With one stroke she slaps it away. The worn cotton sheet greedily sucks up the grease.

Daddy is gone! Maya wants to shriek. *Your dear son is gone! I am all you have!* Instead she grits her teeth and forces her voice to a purr the way she used to do when Jenny and Matt were infants. "Mother, won't you let me make you comfortable?"

Crossing to the dresser for a fresh gown, Maya gets her answer. The protruding footboard—for what must be the dozenth time—rams like spite into her thigh. Always the same spot; an inky bruise will sprout in minutes. Her skin, like Hannah's, is fair and milky.

Was. Maya is stunned by the ruin of Hannah's body as she wrestles off the soiled gown. The one good infant memory she does have: the feel of the moist feathery bed of Hannah's chest as she wiped Maya with the soft terry-cloth towel, swathing the hood over her head.

And now! That moist freckly skin has become hardened with brown age spots. *Like her heart,* thinks Maya, wriggling each arm into the new gown. Hannah doesn't fight her, but she doesn't help either.

Straightening, Maya pulls a clean top sheet from the linen trunk and methodically begins yanking off the soiled one. Suddenly, Hannah's breath is audible and quick; her grizzled hand grabs the edge and yanks it in the opposite direction.

Maya has to struggle to hold onto the slippery sheet. "What can I do for you, Mother?" Her voice swoops to a shriek. "Speak to me!"

Maya's lifelong plea. Hannah's answer is to pull harder on her end. And now they are in another tug-of-war.

One that Hannah, eyes a gleam, jerking and lurching and hefting as if fueled by some newfound energy serum, wins.

The greasy, twisted cloth rips through Maya's hands like burning rope. "So you just want to kill yourself, is that it?" she yells. And storms from the room.

Marion Cuba

Well, Maya can be stubborn, too. After being disconnected twice, placed on hold with maddening music, rerouted, then instructed to wait for a callback, she finally speaks to the doctor.

Useful, at last, Maya races back inside the bedroom. She babbles, chattering at breakneck speed to the limp body in bed. “Then we’ll just have to put you in the hospital and feed you intravenously.”

But this time the statue doesn’t spring to life. Maya stoops to test for a telltale wisp of breath. There is none, only a dank sour smell.

With her lips she brushes Hannah’s forehead. The lines are almost erased. The chalky skin has sprouted a film of sweat as if Hannah had been tearing around the room in Maya’s absence.

Maya’s eyes dart hopelessly to the ceiling, then down. “No!” She slaps at the rumpled sheet alongside Hannah’s body. “No, no, no...” Maya continues to lash at the bed, until her palm, raw from their tug-of-war, cracks down the center like an eggshell.

An instant seam of blood spurts up in beads. The flesh is already beginning to distort and swell around the jagged gash. But she feels no pain.

Her mind whirls inside her skull. *So this is my mother’s legacy. Another scar. And a lifetime of questions.*

The large pale gray envelope pushed through the mail slot of the front door is imprinted “Ascher Galleries” in fine calligraphic type.

A hand-written note is clipped to the outside.

Dear Maya,

Here is a first small part of your mother’s translated pages. I’ll phone when I have the next installment and perhaps we can get together. My advice: take it slow.

Sam Ascher

Slow? Maya races to the sofa, curling up near the only decent lamp. She’s been waiting all her life to wrest some word—some *clue*—from Hannah. And here it is.

She rips open the envelope with her finger, in the process, stung by a paper cut. She swears, wincing, then shrugs. Sucking at the tender spot, she opens her eyes wide.

November 30, 1938

Our journey was endless, almost a month, across Siberia, through mountains, stopping in the dead of night at some unknown, dark and frightening place, then reboarding the train for China. From there it was another rocky, torturous three days on a Japanese steamer, only to finally land at this filthy yellow harbor.

Crowds of beggars in their rags were our only greeters. The air is so damp and cold, it bit at our faces and through our clothes like whips. I wept bitterly in Mother's arms. "Hush, my Hanna-le." We should be grateful, she told me. Shanghai is the only place in the world that will *have* us without a visa.

Right there, at the reeking filthy shore, Mama made Papa and me recite a blessing. My lips repeated the *Shehechayanu*, but I was *not* thankful to God for allowing us to reach this day. Inside, I was cursing our luck.

Imagine people like us having to flee like criminals from our beloved Berlin. And all my beautiful things left behind! My embroidered velvet dresses, my buttery leather shoes from Italy. I couldn't take any of them. Not even my doll collection. Of course, I don't play with them anymore, but they are treasures Papa brought me from all over the world.

When I did manage to hide my hand-painted Meissen figurine as we were rushing to board the train, it slipped out from under my coat and the porcelain head got smashed to smithereens.

If only we could have waited just three more weeks for my thirteenth birthday. Mother had a sophisticated party planned for me. This year we were going to dress up in long taffeta dresses and have tea in china cups and the most wonderful Viennese pastries. And, of course, my best friend Frieda was coming.

How I miss her. But her parents refused to leave. Just like Uncle Heinreid, who planted himself in his dining room chair and would not budge. I am a loyal German, he kept saying. This is my country; I am a loyal German. And, *Deutschland, Deutschland, bei uns in Deutschland.*

Marion Cuba

Well, I agree with him! It *is* better in Germany. The thought of celebrating my birthday here is unbearable. What good is marking another year in this smelly, uncivilized place?

January 2, 1939

Yesterday Mama said that from now on, in the New Year, I must no longer be spared the truth. What could be worse than what we have already endured? I wondered.

But what she told me *was* worse. Our beloved Fasanenstrasse Synagogue was one of the hundreds smashed and burned on that horrible night of the broken glass. All the windows were shattered. All the holy books and the arc were desecrated. She put her hand over her eyes when she murmured, "The Torah was set on fire."

How could that be? How could anyone do such an evil vicious thing? I dreamed about it all night. I kept seeing the colonnaded columns and the arched windows, like a castle. And then I saw a huge explosion, and the sky rained bricks and glass. I woke up screaming so many times.

When morning finally came, I got to thinking about our house in Berlin. What if my beautiful bedroom has been smashed and looted, too? God forbid. But I've hatched a plan. Even if it has, we can restore it to its exact beauty when we return. If I close my eyes, I can remember every detail of the blue and white quilted headboard and the matching bed skirt and bedspread. I can see the white organdy curtains that flutter in the windows in summer. When we left, we had changed them to the heavier blue and white print drapes for winter.

Here they've put our whole family, Mother, Daddy, and me, into a refugee camp, where we sleep and eat and are *nobodies*. Our section of this building has six other families. The plumbing is disgusting; a communal cement room with showers with filthy curtains. The towels are like rags. Besides my lovely clothes, we had to leave behind every household thing we owned. Our cozy featherbeds, the afghans Mother crocheted, the thick Turkish towels nestled in our sweet-smelling wallpapered closets. Everything! Just thinking about it makes me weep.

Here the beds are metal, placed along a drafty window. Daddy and mother lie next to me, all of us in a line like crushed tin soldiers. Most nights I am the last to fall asleep. I just keep staring up at the dark ceiling, with the wet silver moon shining in through a high window that shows up the ugly pores of the damp stucco walls, and I think: We have been forsaken.

Maya drops the pages in her lap, surprised at how little they weigh. A moan like that of a woman in labor pierces the living room. And another.

Moans, she realizes, that are tearing from her own throat. Rhythmically, with each exhale, the sound continues. As though to breathe at all is to suffer pain.

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