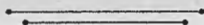


YAD VASHEM



Between the display featuring European Jewry before the rise of Nazism and the one about Kristallnacht, there was a transparent glass partition. This partition had a straightforward symbolic meaning: To the uninitiated, Europe before and after the night of that historic pogrom might have appeared the same, but in truth they were two totally different universes.

Eugene, who was walking briskly, a few steps ahead of the guide, had not noticed either the partition itself or its symbolic meaning. The crash was unsettling and painful. Blood trickled out of his nostrils. Rachel whispered that it didn't look good and maybe they should go back to the hotel, but he just crammed a wad of tissue up each nostril and said it was nothing and that they should just keep going. "If we don't put some ice on it, it's going to get all swollen," Rachel tried again. "Let's go. You don't have to . . ." Then she stopped in mid-sentence, took a

breath, and added: "It's *your* nose. If you want us to keep going, we'll keep going."

Eugene and Rachel caught up with the group at the corner, where the Nuremberg Laws were explained. As he listened to the guide, with her thick South African accent, Eugene tried to work out in his mind what Rachel would have said if she had kept going: "You don't have to turn everything into such a drama, Eugene. It's so tedious." Or "You don't have to do it for me, sweetheart. I love you anyway." Or maybe simply, "You don't have put ice on it, but it'll probably help." Which of those sentences, if any, had she begun to say?

Many thoughts ran through Eugene's head when he first decided to surprise Rachel with two tickets to Israel. He was thinking: Mediterranean. He was thinking: desert. He was thinking: Rachel smiling again. He was thinking: making love in a suite at the hotel as the sun was beginning to set beyond the walls of Jerusalem behind them. And in this entire ocean of thoughts there hadn't been even the slightest thought about nosebleeds or about Rachel starting sentences and not finishing them in a way that always drove him crazy. If he were anywhere else in the universe, he probably would have started to feel sorry for himself, but not here.

The guide was showing them pictures of Jews stripped naked in the snow, at gunpoint. The temperature there, said the guide, was fifteen below zero. A moment after those photos were taken, everyone in the picture—every single one of them, women, the elderly, and children—was forced to get into a pit

in the ground and was shot dead. When she finished the sentence, she looked at him for a moment with a vacant stare and said nothing more. Eugene couldn't figure out why she was looking at him, of all people. The first thing that crossed his mind was that he was the only one in the group who wasn't Jewish, but even before that thought had formed fully in his mind he realized it made no sense. "You've got blood on your shirt," the guide said in a detached voice. He looked down at the little spot on his light blue shirt and then up again at a picture of an elderly couple, naked. The woman in the picture was covering her privates with her right hand, trying to retain a bit of dignity. The husband was clutching her left hand in his large palm. How would he and Rachel react if they were ever taken from their cozy Upper West Side apartment, led to the nearby park, and ordered to strip naked and get into a pit? Would they, too, end their lives holding hands? "The blood, sir," the guide said, interrupting his line of thought. "It's still dripping." Eugene crammed the wad of toilet paper deeper into his nostril and tried to give her one of those "everything's under control" smiles.

It began beside a very large picture of six women with their heads shaven. To tell the truth, it had begun four weeks earlier, when he threatened to sue her gynecologist. They were sitting together in the elderly doctor's clinic, and in the middle of Eugene's half-menacing rant at the doctor, she said, "Eugene, you're shouting." The look in her eyes was distant and indifferent. It was a look he hadn't seen before. He really must have

been talking loudly, because the receptionist entered the clinic room without knocking and asked the doctor if everything was okay. It had started then and only went further downhill as they stood beside the picture of the women with the shaven heads, thousands of miles away from Rachel's doctor's office. The guide told them that women who arrived in Auschwitz pregnant had to abort before they began to show. Because pregnancy in the camp was nothing short of death. In the middle of this explanation, Rachel turned her back to the guide and moved away from the group. The guide watched her move away and then looked at Eugene, who blurted out, almost instinctively, "I'm sorry. We just lost a baby." He said it loud enough for the guide to hear and softly enough for Rachel not to. Rachel kept moving away from the group, but even from a distance, Eugene could detect the tremor running down her back when he spoke.

The most moving and poignant place at Yad Vashem was the Children's Memorial. The ceiling of this underground cavern was studded with countless memorial candles that were trying—not very successfully—to offset the darkness that seemed to work its way everywhere. In the background was a soundtrack reciting the names of children who had died in the Holocaust. The guide said there were so many of them that it took more than a year to read off all the names in succession. The group started to make its way out of the hall, but Rachel didn't budge. Eugene stood beside her, frozen, listening to the names being read off, one by one, in a flat drone. He patted her

back through her coat. She didn't react. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have said it the way I did, in front of everyone. It's something private. Something that's only our own." "Eugene," Rachel said; and continued staring at the dim lights above her, "we did not lose a baby. I had an abortion. That's not the same thing." "It was a terrible mistake," Eugene said. "You were emotionally vulnerable, and instead of trying to help you, I sank into my work. I abandoned you." Rachel looked at Eugene. Her eyes looked like the eyes of someone who'd been crying, but there were no tears. "I was fine emotionally," she said. "I had the abortion because I didn't want the child." The voice in the background was saying, "Shoshana Kaufman." Many years earlier, when Eugene was in elementary school, he'd known a chubby little girl by that name. He knew this wasn't the same one, but the picture of her lying dead in the snow flashed before his eyes for a second anyway. "You're saying things now that you don't really mean," he told Rachel. "You're saying them because you're going through a tough time, because you're depressed. Our relationship isn't doing well right now, it's true, and I'm to blame for much of this, but—" "I'm not depressed, Eugene," Rachel interrupted. "I'm just not happy being with you."

Eugene kept silent. They listened to a few more names of dead children, and then Rachel said she was going outside to smoke. The place was so dark that it was hard to make out who was there. Other than an older Japanese woman standing close by, Eugene couldn't see anyone. The first time he found out

Rachel was pregnant was when she told him she'd had an abortion. It made him furious. Furious that she hadn't given them even a minute in which to imagine their baby together. That she hadn't given him the chance to rest his head on her soft stomach and try to listen to what was happening inside. The rage was so overpowering, he remembered, that it frightened him. Rachel told him then that it was the first time she'd seen him cry.

If she'd stayed a few more minutes in that memorial hall, she might have seen him cry a second time. He felt a warm hand on his neck, and when he looked up he saw the older Japanese woman standing right next to him. Despite the darkness and her thick lenses he could see that she was crying, too. "It's awful," she said to Eugene with a heavy accent. "It's awful what people are capable of doing to one another."