

THE PRIZE

HELSINKI IS A CLEAN and spacious city, bland after the exuberance of Paris, relatively intact despite the Soviet bombing. To Elena Warshavsky—born Likht—it appears almost untouched by the war. Only here and there are buildings half-destroyed, roofs missing, windows empty of glass, piles of sheared stone dusted with snow. But much has already been repaired, and life is returning to ordinary, the people lumpy and officious, stoic in the face of withering cold. The last seven years she has spent in London, a tiny flat in St. Pancras, where for a time she grew used to the sound of air raid sirens, the tremble of explosions—most distant, a few close enough to be followed by the clatter of falling brick—and the smell of smoke. She can't imagine that city whole for decades to come.

Still, it was safety compared to the place she'd fled: Vilnius, where she'd lived her first nineteen years, before leaving behind parents, two brothers, nearly a dozen aunts and uncles, more cousins than she can name. She has not returned to find out if her house on Rudnicka Street still stands, if anyone she once knew has survived. She doubts she ever will.

The Finns—unlike everyone else on the continent—protected their Jews from German allies, and as a result the community here, though small, is healthy and well-organized, not only amenable to her cause but optimistic about its eventual success. Not like those in Stockholm, refugees mostly, who said yes, we agree, a permanent homeland is our only chance of survival, and then shrugged and sent her away with almost nothing. "We are very...enthusiastic to have you with us," says her host, in halting English, when he greets her in the lobby of her hotel, a once-grand building near the waterfront now filled with sailors charged with clearing mines from the Gulf. The main boiler is broken, the desk clerk has told her, and blankets are in

short supply. Last night she slept in her overcoat and all her clothes, including shoes.

"Our numbers are few," says her host, switching now to Yiddish, "but our hearts are as big as our appetites." He laughs and slaps his belly. He is a slender, brittle-looking man of fifty—a widower, according to the Paris operatives who arranged this visit—wearing a coat with frayed cuffs and a hat missing its ribbon. He has a long mustache that makes her name him, privately, the Walrus. His real name is Dorfman, and like most Jews in Finland his origins are Russian. They think Polish Jews are all peasants, her husband Grish said when she asked, a second time, if it was necessary for her to come alone. They won't give me a shilling. But a cultured Lithuanian. They'll hand you their wallets the moment you walk in the door.

She knows it isn't only her country of birth or breeding that matters. She is twenty-six and shapely, with fine features and pale skin, hair light enough that she might be taken for a native. In London, no one ever guessed she was a Jew—or a foreigner, for that matter—before hearing her speak. Even after they did, officers in the Ministry of Supply, where she worked as a typist, stopped at her desk, invited her to have a drink at a nearby pub. One offered to take her away from the dangers of the city, give her shelter at his mother's cottage in Hampshire, where he'd visit every weekend. None mentioned wives, nor made any effort to hide wedding rings.

By then she'd already met Grish, who'd arrived in late 1940. Before that he'd been in Cape Town, where he met followers of Jabotinsky and began to dream what they have both come believe is the only feasible future: Jews living on their own land, under their own control, by the force of arms. He was small and fierce and mostly bald at twenty-eight, and from the start she loved the way he spoke in a hurried near-whisper, as if everything he said might lead to his arrest. Only later did she wonder if she might have felt different had she met him at another time. Any time, that is, other than when fire burned along the Thames all the way to St. Paul's, when she might have fallen into the arms of whichever man distracted her from the acrid stench and the soot that burned her eyes.

What she admired most about Grish was his certainty. He saw no conflict in supporting the British in their fight against Hitler while simultaneously editing a newspaper calling for the violent overthrow of the Mandate. Both were crucial to fulfilling their dream, she agreed, but she struggled to despise soldiers patrolling the streets of Jerusalem after cheering those who shot down German planes over the Channel. Competing emotions were too much to bear during those terrifying days, and she found it easier to celebrate victories that would mean an end to the bombardment than to decry the arrest of Zionists thousands of miles away.

But now that the war has been over for more than a year, the full scope of the Nazi horror exposed, she has learned to ignore contradictions. She has not yet been to Palestine, only dreamed herself under that Mediterranean sun, and the vision she carries as she walks with the Walrus down a freezing Helsinki street, dark already at four in the afternoon, the wind blowing stiffly off the water, is of herself in a loose blouse, long skirt, wide hat, the tops of her feet turned pink around the white shadow of sandal straps. In spring, Grish has said, or perhaps summer, they would finally make the journey they've been imagining for years. For now it is still too dangerous, their leaders rounded up weekly since the bombing of the King David Hotel.

About that incident he has said little, except to mention that it came as a surprise to him. Does he approve? Does he believe it was necessary? He will not say, nor does she ask. As for herself: whether or not she condones or condemns the killing, whether or not she accepts, as she has been told, that British officers were given enough warning to evacuate—she has mostly convinced herself to believe this—she recognizes it has brought unprecedented attention to their struggle. If not for the bombing, she knows, the Jews of Finland wouldn't be so eager to welcome her in the middle of December into the basement of their synagogue, where the Walrus, with dramatically lowered voice, introduces her as an important member of "the Underground," fearlessly taking on the British Empire.

There are twenty-five, maybe thirty men and a scattering of women sitting on uncomfortable chairs, most of them better fed

than the Walrus, no hint of shortages in their fleshy necks and pink cheeks and heavy jowls. Their coats are newer, too, the women's collars trimmed with fur. She recognizes the surprise in many of their faces when she stands at the front of the room. This girl—this gentile?—a member of the IZL? She has seen the same look in Geneva, in Paris, in Stockholm, has learned to let it settle on her a moment before saying, "It is an honor to speak on behalf of our people." She addresses them in English, which comes easier now than Yiddish or Lithuanian, the latter of which she hasn't spoken since first arriving in London. Hearing her accent makes the audience members ease back into their seats, their expressions changing from skeptical to solemn. "For so many, it is too late to dream of a homeland. For my parents, my brothers and cousins, my aunts and uncles. But I am here to honor their sacrifice. I am here for those of us who are left, and for our children not yet born."

She has made her pitch enough times now that she knows when to pause, when to let her voice rise, when to cut off suddenly and let silence fill the room. She describes the Mandatory Government's broken promises, its mistreatment of prisoners, the beatings she has heard about from Grish, who's heard about them from people who've spoken to the victims. She reminds her listeners of the dangers that come with delay: at any moment another Hitler might rise—even here in beautiful Finland—and if we don't have a place of our own, guarded and secure, there will be no chance for us to survive. To stay in Europe is impossible. The United States is no Promised Land but a land of false hope, another Germany lulling us into comfort, making us believe we are safe until the glass begins to shatter. We must act now. We are not a war-loving people, but we must find the warriors inside ourselves. We must buy guns, ammunition, explosives. We must learn to use them.

After she's finished, the stolid Jews of Finland approach her one by one, handing her coins or black and orange bills printed with the image of a long-tongued lion wearing a crown and wielding a sword. "Next year in Jerusalem," several say, eyes misted. One young man, balding early like Grish, tells her that a film about the Underground is soon coming to Helsinki. He and all his friends are planning to see it, and the next time she visits even more people will want to hear

her speak and give her money. She asks the name of the film, and he says, "*The Odd Man*." She suspects he means *Odd Man Out*. It has been playing in London for months, and though she has not seen it, she knows it is about the Irish Underground, not the Jewish. His smile is keen, his cheeks feverish. She does not have the heart to tell him.

The Walrus waits with her until the last of the group has gone and then begins to button his coat. She'd like to count the money before leaving, or at least stack it neatly by denomination, but already he's heading toward the stairs, so she stuffs it by handfuls into her pocket. She will have plenty of time to arrange it later, in her frigid hotel room, where last night even fully dressed she couldn't stop shivering beneath a single blanket and a pair of newspapers she'd spread on top. She thinks of Grish alone in their flat, bent over his typewriter, as on so many nights when she's been there, watching his back and wishing he would quit writing and join her in bed, then feeling selfish for putting her needs ahead of so many others—for failing, as he puts it, to keep the prize always in her sights. You are too young, too beautiful, to give up your life, he said when she swore her devotion to him and to the struggle. You should be with a man who falls to his knees before you every day, who will give you beautiful children.

And she answered: My happiness means nothing until our people are safe from harm. She believed the words as she spoke them, thinking of her parents and brothers and cousins, but as soon as Grish shrugged and offered his grim smile, she recognized how empty they were. Whenever she compared her fate to that of her family, she felt only relief. And what else but her own happiness did she consider when she pictured a land of sunshine, protected by fierce, determined men like Grish?

She loved him, she was certain of it, and she wanted nothing more than to link her future to his. But she didn't realize that would mean giving up the present. If only he would look at her just once without distraction—to admire her, desire her, his mind free of secret missives and arms shipments and retaliation for reported crimes. Two days after

they married, he asked her to take this trip to raise funds for the cause. Do whatever you have to, he said before she boarded the train to Dover. I promise I will not judge.

The Walrus holds the door to the street open for her, and even before she reaches it, the cold surprises her anew, bringing tears to her eyes. It has started snowing since she went in, small flakes falling at a slant in the steady breeze. Still, the Walrus pauses to tell her about the synagogue's history, built adjacent to a clothes market where his grandfather mended trousers at the turn of the century. During the war they worried the orange dome would make an easy target and considered painting it black. But thanks to Finnish intelligence and advance warnings that shut down all the lights in the city ahead of the raids, the shul—along with most of the city's important landmarks—was spared. How lucky they have been, he says, and then, passing a thumb under each eye, adds that their good fortune makes them want to help those who haven't fared as well.

Elena shivers and stamps her feet. "I'm sorry," she says. "I had better walk."

"Of course." The Walrus reaches out an arm as if to put it around her shoulders but then lowers it. "Our winters. You are not accustomed."

He leads her in a different direction from the way she remembers coming. But this is her fourth city in three weeks, and she may be remembering the route in Stockholm or Geneva, where other strange men gazed at her with interest and skepticism, doubting that this fine-boned, fair-haired girl was really a Jew, much less an agent of the Irgun. Like the others, he walks too closely, his arm brushing hers. Each step takes her through his clouded breath, which smells of tobacco, though she hasn't seen him smoke. "Every one of our little group donated," he says. "All thirty-eight who came tonight. Plus eleven who could not be here. I collected from them earlier in the week." From inside his coat he pulls out an envelope, holds it out to her.

"I'm humbled," Elena replies. She doesn't want to take her hand from her pocket. Even with gloves on and buried in wool, her fingers are nearly numb. Why didn't he give it to her when they were still inside? She does her best not to seem impatient, taking the envelope

carefully and folding it beside crumpled bills, coins rattling beneath. "Our commanders in Palestine. They will be especially grateful."

"Still," the Walrus says. "You've raised perhaps four hundred marks. Five hundred at most."

"Everything helps," she says, trying to maintain the tone of humility expected of someone soliciting aid. Such a tone often comes naturally to her, but now, with snow speckling her coat and pricking her face, she does not feel humble or appreciative, only ready to be off the street and left to herself.

"It won't cover the cost of your travels. Not even half."

"We have to begin somewhere," she says. As they turn a corner she catches a glimpse of the cathedral that towers over the waterfront, green dome on white cupola, farther away than she expects. Now she's certain they're heading in the wrong direction, away from the city center, away from her hotel, into a block of squat flats, four stories of painted plaster, some of it crumbled away to reveal brick beneath, the shops on the street-level shuttered. The Walrus has picked up his pace, and she takes extra steps to keep up with him.

"When you convert the currency, it will be worthless," he says. "You would do better to buy what you need here and bring it to Tel Aviv."

"Guns?" she says. "I have no way to carry them out of the country."

"Of course not. This entire mission is foolish."

She can't see his lips behind the long mustache, but his voice has grown hard, all trace of deference and admiration gone. He turns abruptly down a narrow lane whose sidewalk is blocked by oddly shaped heaps of snow. It must cover something—is this where they hide the rubbish absent from the rest of the city?—but she can't make out anything distinct beneath the unbroken whiteness. They walk down the middle of the street, skirting frozen puddles. The wind has picked up, the cold now making her nostrils stick together when she inhales.

"It would be a complete failure," the Walrus says, "if not for me."

She wonders if the money in her pockets could secure a better hotel room, one with heat. But she knows she can't return to London empty-handed, even if the currency is, as the Walrus says, nearly

worthless. Not that she knows where to look for a hotel in any case, not in this part of the city, which, once residential, now appears abandoned. No cars parked on the street, no lights in windows, no voices in the darkness. Her heel catches a patch of ice, and her foot slides sideways. The rest of her follows, but before she falls, the Walrus snatches her elbow and holds her up. Even after she's straightened, he leaves his hand on her coat, pulling her along now, fast enough that she's almost running. She checks over her shoulder to see if someone is chasing them. Sweat drips down her sides, far beneath her layers of clothing, but it does nothing to relieve the cold in her hands and feet and face. Grish has described the lives of their comrades in Jerusalem, clearly picturing himself among them: huddled in secret meetings, ducking down darkened streets, evading the scrutinizing gaze of British spies. He envied such a life during their drab days in London, and now he can envy her, too, when she tells him about her breathless sprint, pulse pounding in her ears as the Walrus yanks her into a doorway.

"If not for me," he says, "it would all be a waste. But I've been preparing. Since before the war."

The door is thickly painted, layers of glossy black, drips dried in place. The lock, too, has been painted over, so she can't distinguish the hole from the metal surrounding it. Neither, it seems, can the Walrus, muttering in Finnish as he works the key around, the sounds strange in his mouth now that she's gotten used to hearing him speak the language of her childhood. Beside the door is a row of buzzers, no names written in the spaces beside them. Finally the key makes its way in, and the lock snaps. He pushes the door open with his foot, nudges her forward. Not quite a shove, but forceful enough to require a long step across the threshold in order to ease the pressure of his hand on her back. The hallway is dark, but her eyes have already adjusted enough that she can make out a stairway at its end, the shapes of closed doors darker than the walls around them. It's hardly warmer here than outside, but as soon as the outer door shuts behind him, the Walrus begins unbuttoning his coat.

"I knew what it would come to," he says, walking ahead to the stairs, not waiting for her to join him before ascending. "Even before

Hitler, I knew. I read Jabotinsky in 1923."

He's started up to the third floor before she reaches the landing on the second. But even now that she's no longer being pulled, she feels compelled to follow: by curiosity, but also by spite that comes as a surprise. Losing her, that's what he deserves, she thinks, again picturing Grish bent over his typewriter as she lies in bed behind him, wearing a gown so thin he could see her outline beneath it, if only he were to look. When she makes it to the top of the stairs, the Walrus is already working the lock of another door down the hall. "I've been getting ready all this time," he says. "Every little scrap I gathered for twenty years. Never a mark on anything but the necessities. Never an extravagance. No new clothing, no extra food. Not for me, or for—"

He stops before naming the wife she has been told about, taken by some unnamed illness a year before the war ended. But Elena has her in mind now as she follows him inside. The flat is small and spare and messy, she can see that even before he switches on a lamp. The sitting room is furnished with two chairs and a round wooden table heaped with newspapers, an ashtray, a straight pipe carved from light wood. There is a radiator in the corner, and hearing its tick and hiss, she heads straight for it, holding her fingers above the warm metal. The Walrus takes off his coat and hat and throws them over one of the chairs. Then he disappears into the bedroom and returns with a leather satchel, drops it at her feet.

"From the start, I traded it all for pounds sterling," he says. "Use their own money to chase them off our land. Shoot them with their own bullets."

The satchel's strap crosses her ankle, but she doesn't bend to lift it. She doesn't want to put any space between herself and the heat rising from the radiator's coils. The pleasure of it makes her forget herself and ask crudely, "How much?"

"Enough to buy a hundred rifles. Or a bomb to blow up another hotel."

"We are grateful," she says, and bobs her head, though she suspects her gratitude means little. What good can it do? "Your generosity. It won't be forgotten." She imagines what it must have been like for his

wife to live in this stuffy flat, as small as the one she and Grish have shared. The filthy shades always drawn. The closet, she suspects, hung with a pair of shabby dresses, taken in where they sagged, mended at worn-out seams. Her future dwindling as the leather satchel fattened. And yet was she still grateful to have been here and not in Warsaw or Minsk or Vilnius? "You didn't give up your pipe," she says, spying a small paper packet beside it. "Tobacco is expensive."

If he hears her, he does not respond. Instead he takes off his blazer, unties his tie. "I've been picturing it," he says, and slips off his shoes. He leaves them where they are, in the middle of the sitting room floor. Without them, how will he take her back to her hotel? "The weapons my money pays for. The sound of the explosives. When I read about the King David, I thought, They have detonated my bomb before I can collect my reward. For days I was despondent. But of course one bomb is never enough."

Why not picture, as she has tried to, the years following the bombs, when all the guns have fallen silent, the bright sunshine in a land all their own. But she, too, has had an easier time imagining bloodshed and screams, exploding glass and tumbling stone. "We celebrated when they beat the Germans," she says. "Just a year ago, they were our heroes."

"And we Finns fought beside the Germans against the Russians. One does what is necessary."

Feeling has come back into her fingers, a throbbing that doesn't lessen when she rubs them together. "Your reward?" she asks.

The Walrus has begun to unbutton his shirt. "They chose well," he says. "A prettier girl than I could have hoped for. Than I could have even imagined."

With these words he turns his face away, his fingers still fumbling with the buttons. He may be blushing, but in the dim light she can't tell. She is surprised but not shocked, nor outraged. But neither is she ready to decide whether Grish has known she would end up here, has been picturing it since first meeting her in smoldering London, a trembling girl with a gentile's face, desperate for a bit of comfort. The Walrus tosses his shirt onto the chair, crosses arms over his narrow chest. He is too thin, really, to be a walrus, too bony, but still she can't think of him

as Dorfman. He seems to be waiting for her to say something, to offer her consent. I'll do whatever I have to, she told Grish during their early days together, when bombs still shook the city daily. Just don't leave me here alone, she said only to herself.

"We want you to know your efforts are valued," she says to the Walrus now.

He gives what she guesses is a nod of relief, that dark mustache dipping down, eyes closed. His bare shoulders are hairless and puckered, his torso white, but his face has reddened for certain. Though not from embarrassment, she thinks. She can see tears on his cheeks, or imagines she can. After all he's given up, why shouldn't he cry? But tears have always been easiest to picture, real or not. Without another word, he turns and hurries into the bedroom.

She pulls off her gloves, shrugs the coat from her shoulders. She is warm enough now not to shiver when she's free of it. This is a better fate than so many others, she tells herself, and tries once more to envision the bright desert beside a blue sea, her feet in warm water, Grish lying on the sand, his eyes set on her and nothing else. But the image is as hazy and fleeting as it has always been, less substantial than that of the crowded house on Rudnicka Street, or of London full of smoke and rubble, the bald head out of reach, dreaming faraway dreams.

She reaches behind to unzip her dress, and it drops to her feet. Without bending, she slips off her shoes, one of which catches on the strap of the satchel. She kicks it away. When she has nothing left to take off, she retrieves the pipe and packet of tobacco and carries them to the man whose sacrifices she has been sent to repay.