

A N O V E L

the

REVISIONIST

Leichenbell

HELEN SCHULMAN

THE REVISIONIST

A NOVEL

HELEN SCHULMAN

CROWN PUBLISHERS, INC. • NEW YORK

Copyright © 1998 by Helen Schulman

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Crown Publishers, Inc., 201 East 50th Street, New York, New York 10022. Member of the Crown Publishing Group.

Random House, Inc. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland
www.randomhouse.com

CROWN and colophon are trademarks of Crown Publishers, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

Design by Leonard Henderson

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Schulman, Helen

The revisionist / Helen Schulman.—1st ed.

1. Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945)—Historiography—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3569.C5385R48 1998

813'.54—dc21 97-39836

ISBN 0-609-60208-X

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

THE REVISIONIST

Also by Helen Schulman

Not a Free Show

Out of Time

*Wanting a Child: 22 Literary Writers on Their Difficult but Mostly
Successful Quest for Parenthood* (Coedited with Jill Bialosky)

To Bruce—who else?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their generosity, support, and *patience*, I would like to thank: the Corporation of Yaddo, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, *The Paris Review*, Elissa Schapell, J. K., Dani Shapiro, Rick Moody, Sloan Harris, Karen Rinaldi, Miriam Kuznets, the excellent Elizabeth Gaffney, my wonderful family, the cast and crew at Columbia University, and always, the memory of Lee Goerner and Eric Ashworth, who believed in me before I knew who I was.

DAVID HERSHLEDER WAS TIRED. IT HAD BEEN A LONG, HARD week, perhaps the longest of his foreshortening life. He was thirty-nine and a neurologist. He knew from long, hard weeks before. Why should this one be different? Days in and out this go-around were as similar and as varied as days usually were at the hospital. Tuesday he'd had grand rounds; he'd supervised students on Monday and Wednesday; spent Thursday reluctantly with his handful of private patients. Whatever time he could squeeze out of the rest of the week was devoted to the EEG lab and his research. Maple Syrup Urine Disorder: a form of mental retardation, mysterious in that the primary symptom is the patient's piss smelling like a squeeze of Aunt Jemima. Dystonia: involuntary movements that often lead to sustained, bizarre poses, something like the freeze-tag of Hershleder's youth. There was his predecessor's pet project, the death studies (he'd inherited the data when Dr. Lawrence Edelstein himself ended up a Labor Day highway statistic), and Hershleder's own follow-up, brain birth: When does human life begin? His hypothesis: If "death" is no longer defined by cardiac malfunction but by the cessation of cerebral activity, then human life itself can only begin when those same cerebral neurons commence firing.

The ramifications, ethical and otherwise, of his inquiries were endless, but at this time, this exhausted, worn-out time, and for most of his adult life, ethical ramifications were of less interest than theory itself. And even that—the pure elastic beauty of science when it was decoded and made available to the willing Hershleder mind—was less seductive than it had been in his youth.

Lately, Hershleder's flirtation with aberration, originally so intoxicating, was proving to be wearing. His romance with the opening and closing of the eye of God, the observer, once so rich and satisfying, had begun to cool. And yet his professional life, with all its twists and turns and inevitable frustrations, was all-consuming. Often he felt as if he was whirling wildly, like a teenage girl burdened by an uncontrollable popularity; as far as work was concerned, Hershleder's dance card was dizzyingly full.

While he was no stranger to primary studies, most of his work involved secondary sources, a synthesis of the literature at large. He was a reader, Hershleder, a looker-upper. It pleased him endlessly to sort through graphs and papers, to pore over charts and brain maps, to gaze at a photographic study of an anencephalic monster as if it were some stupendously horrible work of art. No matter how vile the disorder, Hershleder was helplessly drawn by his own desire to puzzle the mess in question out. He would dally eagerly with anything two-dimensional. It was that third dimension—the depth of breath and bone and brain—that scared him half to death. Hershleder was allergic to his patients.

When giving one of the privates—a nice guy, a forty-five-year-old attorney with a wife and twin daughters—a diagnosis of glioblastoma multiforme, Hershleder had said, “There’s good news and there’s bad news.”

He’d had to say something. Dealing directly with people had never been his forte. The words just spilled out of his mouth.

“Bad news first,” said the attorney, like a true attorney, Hershleder thought.

“You have a malignant brain tumor,” said Dr. Hershleder.

After a lengthy discussion of possible treatments and procedures, the attorney insistent that the good doctor visit him with an inviolate pronouncement of the days and weeks and years—please, God—left to his humble existence, as if he, Hershleder, were capable of doling out the remaining chapters, the attorney had asked wearily, “So what’s the good news?”

“The good news, the good news . . .” the exhausted Hershleder struggled. Was there such a thing? Had he not thrown that phrase out unthinkingly, in an impulsive effort to improve his bedside manner?

“You could have had a glioblastoma *multi-multiforme*,” Hershleder said, nonsensically.

The attorney nodded, grateful to learn that it was possible to be worse off than he was.

In the privacy of his own mind, Hershleder came to another conclusion: The good news is it could have been me. Then he berated himself over the selfishness of the thought.

Now, as Hershleder swiveled around in his black leather chair, his eyes just open enough to note with pleasure the rich

array of different woods that forested his office—the cherry of his chair, the mahogany of his desk, the ebony of the brain-shaped paperweight he was awarded as chief resident years before—Hershleder made a noise. He threw his head back, his comb-over falling dark and curly and long on one side of his head, his pink scalp peeking out the other, his white neck exposed, and he made the sounds of a tired man. He made the sounds of his father.

“Aaacch,” rose from the throat of David Hershleder, at just the same timbre and pitch as it had coughed its way up the esophagus of Irv Hershleder, his father the doctor, and of Chaim Hershleder, his father’s father, the dress store owner. But the grandfather had died long before Hershleder’s little ears had whorled and formed—he was four months in utero the day of the funeral—enough so that they could record the phlegmy arpeggio that would someday become his legacy. Hershleder had heard his own father’s sighs only intermittently during his childhood, as his father was often absent for the same reasons most fathers were absent in the fifties, in the sixties—he certainly hadn’t heard them frequently enough to make an absolute case for monkey-see monkey-do. So this sigh of sighs, it was part of his inheritance. Still, at first his mother believed she could wean it out of him. “Dovidil, please,” said Mrs. Hershleder. “That sound, that sound! It could kill you.”

His poor mother. Mrs. Hershleder had spent much of her life with her hands over her ears, to block out *this* annoyance as well as an entire cast of others: the screech of her screaming children, her whistling kettle, the cackle of her busybody

sister, the sound of her own loneliness echoing, echoing against the walls of her bones so that she simply vibrated with deprivation, with lack of intellectual connection, lack of romantic touch.

Hershleder's earliest recollection of his mother was when he was a toddler and they had just moved into Stuyvesant Town, a redbrick haven of the middle class. Before that they lived in Queens, a garden apartment, a yard, a green-and-white ticked awning. But he had been too little to remember that—he'd only seen the pictures, heard the stories. Magically, he'd been raised as an only child—the youngest, a boy—even though he'd had two sisters. It was Fifteenth Street and Avenue C, apartment 5F, where Hershleder developed memory. That morning, he and his mother were alone, together, in the living room. He was buckled up in one of those harnesses, strapped to the playpen like a mental patient so that he would do no harm to the furniture (new slipcovers), no harm to himself (a coffee table with sharp corners). He remembered looking up from his toys to see her, the lovely total *her* of his being, standing in the middle of that messy room with her long, thin hands over her ears; how thin her hands were, the skin so translucent you could see through it like smoked glass. She was whispering, "I can't stand it."

What was it? baby Hershleder had wondered, the squeal of the television, the gunshot of a car backfiring? Was it Mindy and Lori (his sisters) and their morning squabble over some cloudy pink angora sweater? Or was it what he feared most, that his three-year-old presence was what Mrs. Hershleder couldn't stand?

It wasn't until years later, after her death, that Hershleder realized that with his gabby sisters mostly away at school, with his father forever on call, Mrs. Hershleder's beloved piano permanently lent out to some neighbor's child prodigy, that instead of all that noise it was a certain kind of silence that his mother couldn't stand. She couldn't stand the fact that there was no other sound in her world at that moment that satisfied her but that of her boy's breathing, Hershleder's own rise and fall not enough to fill the chambers of his mother's empty heart. When that same mother heard that "aaach" rise from her own boy's throat time and time again when Hershleder was in the throes of puberty and adolescent angst, it made her sick. That's when she, who had been reading Freud in the spare moments of all that waste of her young womanhood, threw in her vote for nature over nurture, left his father and went back to school to save herself.

She pursued a degree in Holocaust Studies. Because she was a survivor, the war was the most significant chapter of her own small insignificant history, a period of time, a series of events, that she had not recovered from, and so she frantically invested in this course of study in her later years, when she couldn't bury her memories any longer. She wanted, she told Hershleder, some small understanding of what had happened to her.

She was trying to explain her devotion to her work. She was trying to explain her one-hundred-percent preoccupation, the hours in the library, the dishevelment of her clothes, her hair, the apartment: the dishes rotting in the sink, the laundry on the chair. She was trying to explain her *descent*.

But it had been hard for Hershleder to listen. He'd been a boy, frightened by the pain of his living mother.

Now, perhaps, Hershleder might be old enough to want to hear her. Maybe.

But she died, *she died!*—Hershleder couldn't believe sometimes that his mother had died—before obtaining her Ph.D., before getting another lover, before filling the painful silences with some music of her own.

Aaach.

This was the tragedy of his life. He was making his father's sound again.

His father's sound; was his mother right, was it hereditary, the product of some errant gene, like Lou Gehrig's disease or colon cancer? Hershleder had been a boy who wanted to please his mother. As a man, it horrified him to find that this terrible trait of his father's, like some alien animal, lived inside his throat.

Making that sound was breaking one of the many will-not-do vows Hershleder made in childhood that he was incapable of keeping as an adult. For one, he wore a suit and tie every day of his life, almost. Just a few nights prior he had said sternly to his own boy, "When I was your age," and then the ghastly, "Because I'm the father." What's more, his family lived in the suburbs! Perhaps the biggest crime of all, he had allowed the two of them, his funny-looking offspring, the freckled fruit of his loins, to be born; he sentenced his children to life spans of their own.

How many nights had Hershleder lain awake as a child, had he sat up in bed as a teenager smoking cigarettes, smoking

pot, wondering why his parents had forced his appearance on this earth? Wouldn't it have been easier for all concerned, especially in his teen years, and considerably less painful, if he had been left to float in the cosmic pabulum of unassigned elements, random energy—for this is how he had pictured pre-life as he called it then: a bubbling, contented porridge, a fertile oatmeal of atoms and what-have-you? But when push came to shove he had given in to the same quest for immortality as his own parents must have done—that and the tearful nagging of his biological clock-watching wife. Perhaps this was the definition of maturity, Hershleder thought, knowing that you are trapped by the same traps as your parents.

Now Hershleder rubbed his palms across his cheeks as if he were washing his face awake.

"Dude," said Inge.

She was in the doorway. His chief lab technician. She was Norwegian, her hair as white as her coat, bones so big, Hershleder, the observer, was constantly aware of her skeleton. Cheekbones so loud and prominent, they looked like the wingspan of a small, powerful bird, and when she chewed a sandwich or on the soft tissue of her inner lip—as she did now—those cheekbones appeared to be rhapsodically in the midst of flight. *Handsome* was the only adjective for her, the only adjective in the world, except for *frightening*.

She was learning English, the vernacular.

"TGIF," said Inge. She placed a stack of EEGs, each as thick as the yellow pages of a town the size of Ithaca, New York, on his desk.

"TGIF," said Hershleder.

"To be read," said Inge.

"I know," said Hershleder.

Her eyes were two bright blue gas jets. Flamethrowers. She cracked a Nordic smile.

"Party-hearty, Kimosabe," said Inge, her giant, perfect shin-bone connecting to her giant, perfect knee, and then onto her femur, that ivory tusk, sending an electrical message singing up into her hips: wiggle, wiggle.

As she walked out of his office for the weekend, Hershleder was visited by a vision that he was instantly ashamed of; he could picture her skeleton a millennium later on display at the American Museum of Natural History under a sign that read THE SHIKSA GODDESS.

Inge had been in this country only about a year and a half and had providentially found her way straight to Hershleder. Age-wise, she must have been hovering somewhere near thirty. She'd come here to be with a younger boyfriend, an ex-frat boy, all-American whiz kid she'd met while eating at a luncheonette outside a scientific conference center in Oslo. He accounted for the "party-hearty." Hershleder had met this boyfriend, a jovial, football-playing sort, at the hospital Christmas party. Louie. He was a boy genius, a rocket scientist, literally—he did research for NASA—with a neck the size of Hershleder's waist. Of course, Inge herself was no slouch in the brains department. As far as Hershleder was concerned, she was the brightest bulb in the socket in Neurology, including two of the attendings and the chief resident. Inge was the finest technician he had ever had in the EEG lab. Lately, she had taken to running things.

Hershleder reached across his desk for the phone. It was a long reach, a large desk, a mahogany desk, a doctor's desk, covered with files and old unread EEGs, reference books, several half-drunk cups of sludgy coffee. A layer of ash as delicate and gray as antique lace had wafted across his papers; officially, Hershleder had quit smoking nine months before. This present dusting of desk and suit clothes was only a minor setback. It occurred to him that if he blew his work clean, disorder and chaos would fly, resulting in more disorder and chaos, and so he did not blow but lifted the receiver and tapped into one of the service's many outgoing numbers. One of the buttons on the phone bank was a direct line to his heart.

She'd been christened Eliza Isabella, but no one ever had the chance to wrap a tongue around that queenly moniker. Her brother Spencer called her "It" from the day she was born. "Itty" was a parental attempt to soften the blow. Itty, his wife, his wife! And their two dastardly children. All it took was a light press of a finger pad and father and family were almost instantly reconnected, a high-fidelity umbilicus, a finger in a light socket, a filial defibrillator ready to shock them all back to life. The receiver up, the finger lifted in anticipation like a pianist's, and then the imp, the shadow of the bad boy Hershleder never was but always dreamed of being, the hookey player, stretched awake inside him. Why not take his time? If he called Itty now, he'd be wedded to taking the 4:40 back to Larchmont. Why not stretch it out a bit, that isthmus between work and homework, between doctorhood and fatherhood, between being tired and being tired?