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her heritage



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Chaim Potok

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About the Author

With each of his novels, Chaim Potok has shown that he speaks to a vast audience not only about the Jewish religious experience, but about religious experience itself, about the profound—sometimes painful, sometimes joyous—effect religion can have on us. Now, in a novel as moving and deeply felt as anything he has ever written, for the first time he explores our experience of religion through the story of a young girl.

TO THE MOTHERS

Mollie Friedman Potok

and

Sonia Leona Brown Mosevitzky

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."
The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

WALLACE STEVENS

Wilderness is a temporary condition
through which we are passing to the
Promised Land.

COTTON MATHER

BOOK ONE





MY MOTHER CAME FROM A SMALL TOWN IN POLAND, MY father from a small town in Maine. My mother was a nonbelieving Jew, my father a nonbelieving Christian. They met in New York while my father was doing a story for a leftist newspaper on living conditions in a row of vile tenements on Suffolk Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where my mother worked. This was in the late 1920s. They fell in love, had a brief affair, and were married.

Save for his sister and one uncle, none of my father's family attended the wedding. They were all staunchly devout Episcopalians, sturdy and elitist New England stock whose ancestors had come to America before the Revolution. They had lost sons in America's wars: in the Revolution, in the Civil War—two fell in that war: the first at Bull Run, the second at Gettysburg—and

in the First World War, in which the eldest was badly wounded at Belleau Wood; he returned home and died soon afterward. My father's family—except for his uncle and sister—did not attend his wedding because he had left home against the will of his parents to go to New York to become a journalist, and because he was marrying a Jewish girl.

My mother had made the journey to New York from Europe soon after the end of the First World War. During the war she had attended a prestigious school in Vienna, where she had concentrated in English literature and modern European philosophy. She was about nineteen when she arrived in America. Her only relatives on the American side of the ocean were an aunt and a first cousin, her aunt's son. She moved into their small Brooklyn apartment. Her aunt, who had inherited some money from her late husband, the owner of a small garment-district sweatshop, saw her through college and certification as a social worker, and then suddenly died.

My parents' wedding was attended only by their friends, an odd assortment of leftist writers, editors, poets, theater people, journalists—and that one New England uncle and my father's sister. It was, my mother told me years later, a very noisy wedding. Angry neighbors called the police. My father's uncle, who was responsible for much of the noise, invited them in for a drink. He was from Maine and had little knowledge of the humorlessness of New York police.

Seven months later, I was born.

Our family name was Chandal. My parents named me Ilana Davita—Ilana, after my mother's mother, who had died some months before my mother left for America; and Davita, the feminine equivalent of David, after David

Chandal, my father's raucous uncle, who had drowned in a yachting accident off Bar Harbor a few weeks after the wedding.

In later years I discovered that my father's uncle had been named after my father's grandfather, who had left home in his early twenties, wandered for a time through New Brunswick, bought a farm in Point Durrel on Prince Edward Island, worked the land for nearly five decades, and returned home to Maine to die.

I asked my mother once, years after my father was gone, what the name Chandal meant. She wasn't certain, she said. She had searched and inquired; her efforts had yielded nothing.

"Didn't you ever ask Papa?"

He hadn't known either, she said.

For as long into the past as I am now able to remember, there hung on a wall in my parents' bedroom a glass-framed nine-by-twelve colored photograph of three white stallions galloping across a red-sand beach, hooves kicking up sand, two racing neck in neck, the third following close behind. They are running along the rim of a pale green surf that is broken by two low parallel lines of curling waves. The water beyond is deep green. The sky is gray. White birds hover over a nearby sandbar. In the distance a line of reddish cliffs reaches across the horizon from the upper left until about halfway into the picture, then drops off into the sea. The caption, printed in a fine hand in black ink in the lower left-hand corner, reads, *Stallions on Prince Edward Island.*

And for as long as I am able to remember, a door harp hung on our front door. It was pear-shaped, nearly one inch thick and twelve inches long, and made of butternut

wood. Its width was about six inches at the top and nine inches at the bottom. Four maplewood balls were suspended at the end of four varying lengths of fish line from a thin strip of wood near the top and lay against four taut horizontal wires. The lines were 8-lb.-test fish line and the wires were .027-gauge piano wire. We mounted the harp on the back of the front door and when we opened or closed the door the balls struck the wires and we would hear *ting tang tong tung ting tang*—the gentlest and sweetest of tones.

The photograph and the door harp hung in every New York apartment we lived in during my childhood. And we lived in many apartments.

We moved often, every year or so, from house to house, from neighborhood to neighborhood, on occasion from borough to borough. In each of the apartments in which we lived, we would be visited from time to time by a tall courtly man in a dark suit and a dark felt hat. Mostly he came when my father was not home. He would stay awhile in the kitchen with my mother, and they would talk quietly together. For a long time I did not know who he was. "An old friend," my mother would say. Once I heard her refer to him as her cousin. "His name is Ezra Dinn," she responded hesitantly to my question. Yes, he was a relative, her dead aunt's son, the only relative she had in America.

One winter we moved twice in three months. I remember the second move. The photograph of the beach and the stallions had been hung on a wall in my parents' bedroom; the harp had been set on a nail on the inside of our front door, and I could almost reach it if I stood on the tips of my toes—but we were barely out of the big moving barrels, cartons still lay about unpacked, and suddenly

there were movers once again in the apartment, burly men treading noisily and grunting as they lifted onto their backs our heavy mahogany furniture, the open crates with my parents' books, the large cartons with my father's papers and magazines. I remember that move because my small room had been bitter cold and bedbug-ridden, and I was happy not to have to sleep in it again. I remember too that one of the movers, a tall man with a large belly and a fleshy face glistening with sweat, let his eyes slide over the titles of some of my parents' books—and his face went stiff and his jaws clamped tight. He shot my mother a look of disgust. She came to below his shoulders in height but met the look defiantly, craning her neck and staring straight at him until he turned away.

Very early I became a wanderer. I would walk the streets of each new neighborhood like some hungrily curious fledgling. My parents were frightened at first, for I seemed able to slip away in the blink of an eye, and vanish. They scolded me angrily and repeatedly, but it did little good. I needed the streets as antidote to the pernicious confines of the apartments in which we lived. I possessed an uncanny sense of timing and direction and seemed always able to return before serious parental panic set in. In the end my parents grew accustomed to my goings and comings, and left me alone.

Where did I live during those early, barely remembered years? I can recollect pieces of a surrealist landscape. Tracks high overhead on tall squat pillars and the iron thunder of elevated trains. Long lines of silent men waiting on sidewalks for food. Dimly lit staircases, malodorous hallways, quarreling neighbors, wet cobblestone streets, grimy hillocks of snow, wailing children, the smell of cooking cabbage and salt water, the yellow-white sand

of high dunes, the swelling and crashing of waves—and always the music of the door harp and the silent galloping of horses across the red sands of a remote beach.

One winter we moved to a tenement near a river. In the apartment next to us lived the leader of the local street gang. He was in his teens, tall and grimy. He wore dark corduroys, a navy blue pea jacket, and a fisherman's cap, and he smelled of herring and onions. I would shy away from him whenever I saw him. Once he came by as I was jumping rope on the street with some girls. He put a foot into the wide swing of the rope and broke its rhythm and laughed as he walked off. He chanced to walk by one afternoon as I hid in the dim cellarway of our tenement during a game of hide-and-go-seek and frightened me with his leering look and glittering eyes and pimpled face. One night I heard his voice through the walls of my room. He was laughing shrilly. My heart hammered in the darkness.

One Saturday morning I was in the corner grocery store with a penny my mother had given me and was searching for a candy when he came in, tall, gangly, dirty, his cap set at an angle over his dark eyes. A cold wind blew in with him.

"Close the door," the grocer called from the counter. "I don't need the winter inside my store."

The boy banged the door shut and took some steps inside. He spotted me. I tightened my fist around my penny.

He came over to me. I stared up at him. He was so tall!

"My old man said he heard you lived down near the bridge a couple years ago and over on Broome Street before you moved here."

Vaguely I remembered a towering bridge and dark water and the stench of bloated things near barnacled pilings.

"There's a gang on this block that beats up little kids who ain't protected. You want protection?"

I did not know what to say because I did not understand the word protection.

The boy bent toward me. I saw his dark gleaming eyes and pimpled features and moist lips, and felt in that instant his contempt for my weakness.

"Hey, I'm talking to you. Girls need protection on this block. You give me a penny a week, and I'll—"

From behind the counter came the voice of the grocer, a big-chested man with thick arms and callused hands. "Izzie, you do your business in my store and I'll break your head. Leave her alone."

The boy straightened, tipped his head back, glared at me from under the peak of his cap, then turned and left the store, banging the door shut behind him.

That evening during supper I asked my mother what the word protection meant.

My mother explained words to me in a special way. She would give me the present meaning of the word and a brief account of its origin. If she did not know its origin she would look it up in the dictionary in the bedroom near my father's desk.

She told me that the word protection came from a word in an old language and had once meant to be covered in front. Now it meant to guard someone against attack or insult.

She wanted to know where I had heard the word, and I told her.

"Ilana, you see how the exploited working class lives?" she said. "Look at what happens to their children."

"He sounds like a very indecent fellow," my father said. "I think I'll have a talk with his father."

I lay awake that night listening to the beating of my heart. The radiator made loud banging noises. My mother had explained to me once that the janitor let the furnace burn down and the radiators go cold so the landlord who owned the house could save money. Landlords were capitalists, she said. Exploiters of the working class. But that would end soon. The world would change. Yes. Very soon.

Her dark eyes burned when she talked like that.

In the darkness of my room I heard a shout. The boy's voice pierced my wall. "I won't bother her. No, I won't go with Uncle Nathan to Newark! He's nothing! *Nothing!*"

Through the wall came the sounds of a man's angry voice and flesh striking flesh and a muffled cry.

About a week later my mother told me that we were moving again.

The apartments we lived in changed often, but my parents' friends seemed to remain the same. Sometimes there were meetings in the apartments. Adults hugged me, kissed me, tickled me, ignored me. A fog of cigarette smoke would collect in the air. Almost all the talk was noisy and about politics. Strange words and names would fly about like darting birds. Dialectical materialism, historical materialism, tools of production. Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt, Mussolini, Trotsky. Brownshirt gangsterism, black-shirt murderers. Unions, bosses, capitalists. On with the struggle!

The meetings always ended with singing. I liked the singing and would listen to it from my room. My father

had a rich baritone, and sometimes I would hear his voice above the others. They sang, "I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, Alive as you and me." They sang, "Solidarity forever, Solidarity forever, Solidarity forever, For the union makes us strong." They sang, "And just because he's human, A man would like a little bite to eat; He won't get full on a lot of talk; That won't give him bread and meat." Sometimes the singing was so loud I was sure it could be heard all through the house and perhaps even in the street. I would lie awake in my dark cold room and listen to the singing and to the beating of my heart.

Once someone went past my door, and I heard, "What the hell are they doing living in this place? Don't they have money?"

"I don't know," a second voice said. "Maybe they want to live with the proletariat."

Over breakfast the next morning I asked my mother what the word proletariat meant.

She said it was an old word from another language and it originally meant a worthless person who had nothing to give to his country except his children. Now it meant the lowest and poorest of people.

I was not sure I understood, and asked her with a child's exasperation why she always needed to give me the old meanings of words, why couldn't she simply tell me what a word meant today? And she said, patiently, in her slightly accented English, "Everything has a name, Ilana. And names are very important. Nothing exists unless it has a name. Can you think of something that doesn't have a name? And, darling, everything has a past. Everything—a person, an object, a word, everything. If you don't know the past, you can't understand the present