

Mouth of Truth

A NOVEL INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

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I

*Did you know that the stones of the road do not weep
that there is one word only for dread
one for anguish
Did you know that suffering is limitless
that horror cannot be circumscribed
Did you know this
You who know.*

— Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*

Chapter 1

Vancouver, Autumn 1980

She stands motionless in the walled garden. The sunflower heads have drooped, their golden crowns faded and withered in the pale sun. A crow shrieks as a sudden gust of wind chases the leaves off the big maple. It's the time of year when the past steals in and kidnaps her to the days when Papa was still alive. They'd celebrate his birthday and she'd write poetry about how much she loved him. On another day she and Papa would go to celebrate her birthday at Grandfather's villa in the country, where the sunflowers towered over her.

She was Batya then, before her identity was swapped for that of another girl. A threat of death bartered for the possibility of life. Can it be that she is now retreating to that place where Batya was hidden? Even now, each day she still arms herself to face the world as the new girl she had to become, Beata, the survivor. *Bee-atta*, she enunciates—a Polish name, so foreign to her then.

The wind turns into a gale, stealing her breath and almost knocking her off her feet. She soon overcomes her inertia and bolts for cover into the living room, sliding the doors shut with all her might to save herself, to escape from the world outside. The house is quiet but feels alien. Nothing here links her with the past. Not the glossy walls, the vaulted ceilings or the polished floors. At such times familiar memory flashes from afar pierce even the wall by which she has enclosed herself, leaving no exit. In the silence of this house the flashes blind her and burn her skin and leave her longing for a cool dark place where she had once felt safe. Where her father held her tight while bombs fell around them. She stops by a door and opens it. A steep set of stairs winds down to the cellar, where it is dark. There is something here of her father. Something she has put away and forgotten about. She moves carefully down the slippery steps and gropes for the light switch.

A bald light bulb illuminates an old trunk. She slowly lifts the lid. Breath-

ing in the dust makes her cough. A smell of decay assaults her. It must reek like this when you open a coffin, she thinks. Rummaging through ancient clothes, misshapen hats and wrinkled fabrics, she finds the black shoebox. She hid it the day of her father's funeral, some thirty years before. She wanted so much to forget. But she opens the box. Inside lies a mix of photos, a bundle of typed notes rolled up and held by an elastic band, even the Polish passports with which they entered Canada. And a crumpled sheet of yellowed paper. She picks it up and smooths the wrinkles against her thigh. Her eyes strain to read the faded, typewritten words.

Name: Beata Bielicka

Born: Warsaw, Poland

Date: January 5, 1933

Mother: Magda Bielicka

Father: Pavel Bielicki

Religion: Catholic—Baptized at the Church of Three Crosses

Here it is—her false birth certificate and the new identity given her during the war. Her parents' aliases were different from hers now. Papa said he didn't want to put her in harm's way, in case he and Mother got caught. She could pass as their niece when out of the ghetto, where no one must know her real name. In the document, she became a Christian girl, Beata Bielicka. Soon Beata would become the voice in Batya's head telling her what to do. From the age of nine, Batya had to lie. Papa told her that lies might save them from death, but the truth might kill them. She didn't understand, because till then Papa had taught her always to tell the truth.

She unrolls the bundle of notes and reads the typewritten words on long sheets of paper. *I accuse*, it read, *Stefan Rogacki of blackmail*. Batya continues reading her father's accusation of the man who had been his best friend and who took in her little sister Tereska to protect her from the Nazis. She reads her father's testimony, as an indictment against Rogacki for blackmailing her father for his two properties in Warsaw. But it wasn't clear why the blackmail took place, except the next pages said that Papa lost his case because Rogacki appeared in court with a pack of lies against him.

This was news. She had known nothing of this and wondered how these papers got into her trunk. Rogacki took away their properties so small wonder they were poor when they came to Canada with nothing, only a suitcase each, their lives and their city in ruins. Papa, the once successful lawyer, started

making a living by painting flowers on boxes and selling them to the local gift shop. She must ask her mother about this.

She examines the old black-and-white photos.

Papa lying in the grass between two young ladies. Were they his girlfriends?

A toddler, the name Tereska written below. She had almost forgotten what her sister looked like.

Papa and Batya in a forest before the war.

Back then the two of them would wander among the trees and ferns picking mushrooms and wild berries. Whenever they'd separate, Papa would whistle a tune to signal his whereabouts. With him by her side she had always felt confident and safe. During the war, Papa would guide her along dangerous streets, protecting her from the gun-toting Nazi soldiers. He would explain things she didn't know, things about the present and the past. He would tell her about the family's happy life before the war began and before she could remember.

How she longs for his words and his reassuring presence. She looks at the images glued to the black paper of the thin album, and fragments of life with her father flicker before her eyes like a silent black-and-white film. Papa the lawyer reciting a speech for the court, walking back and forth in his study with hands behind his back like Napoleon.

Papa giving beggar children two *zlotys*.

Papa writing poetry and painting pictures.

Papa, who loved her and saved her life.

"Remember your past. Know who you are," Papa had told her when she was very young. If only he had told her more about himself. And now his secrets are buried in a grave.

She opens the envelope Mother handed her the day of Father's funeral and pulls out a piece of cardboard. Here is Papa's drawing of lilies of the valley, so real, the tips of her fingers can almost sense their silkiness as they trace the contours of the petals. "To my daughters, Batya and Tereska, hidden in a village," reads the inscription. Beneath it is Papa's poem, *about two sisters separated from their parents by a raging storm*. "Lilies of the valley, fragrant bells..." He promised *when the clouds passed and the sun returned, they would all be together again*.

But we were never really together again, were we? Batya puts the poem aside, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Papa's death, much too early, shut the door on that remote world where

a part of her still lived. As he lay dying in the hospital, she felt as if she was dying with him. She sat beside his emaciated body, holding his hands—the hands that wrote poems and painted flowers; the hands whose fingers held that strange silver disk, turning it round and round; the hands that were now growing cold. She watched his parched lips forming words she could barely hear. Only his eyes spoke clearly, of physical pain and mental anguish. “I’m so unhappy,” he murmured. She felt helpless. Her father, her fortress, was crumbling before her eyes.

Her mother, Marta, took her by the arm. “You have homework to do. Go home, Batya,” she ordered, trying to pull her away from Papa’s bedside. “Don’t upset your father. Do you think he wants you to fail?”

She was an obedient daughter who usually did as she was told. Yet seeing Papa in pain, she rebelled and said no for the first time. But within an hour, under her mother’s stern gaze and no longer able to bear the sight of her father lying there in the shadow of death, she gave in. As she was leaving the room she heard him whisper, “Forgive me, my child. Please forgive me.”

Forgive him for what?

Mama returned to the apartment much later that night, her face greenish-white. “Papa is no longer with us,” she said in a hollow voice and walked away. Numb and unable to cry, Batya sat on her bed thinking that her life, too, had ended.

During the burial, Batya stood beside the grave petrified, seeing nothing but the leafless branches of a willow tree, hearing only the thud of the earth against the casket as it was lowered into the frozen depths. *They are burying Papa alive, she thought. He is not dead. He is still around us—a ghost who will come in the night to haunt me. I have been a bad daughter.*

After the funeral, she stood by the window of their third-floor apartment, looking down at the faintly lit path. It was empty but she could still see, as she had a few days before his death, the stretcher that had carried Papa to an ambulance. His face was yellow and worn against the white sheet, his eyes reflecting pain but his lips attempting a smile as he looked up at her, standing there, waving goodbye. Soon he vanished inside the ambulance—just as that morning the casket had vanished into the grave. When friends came to pay their respects, Batya remained in her room. She lay on her bed till dark. She wanted to avoid the people crowding around her mother. Finally, she heard them leave.

She didn’t know how long she had lain there when the door to her room opened. She sat up on the bed, startled. A figure stood on the threshold,

bathed in the light of the street lamp streaming through the window. *It's Papa*, she thought again, rubbing her eyes. *He's come to punish me for wishing he would stop writhing in pain.* But as the room brightened, she saw it was her mother, regal and elegant in a black dress that emphasized her classic beauty and the deep sea-green of her eyes, now red from crying.

That was when her mother gave her the blue velvet pouch. "Papa also left you this," her mother said, placing it on Batya's desk. Batya already had the envelope with the poem inside. Now she understood that these two objects were all she had left of Papa.

Marta Lichtenberg's face revealed nothing. She turned to leave, closing the door behind her. Batya wanted the warmth of her mother's arms, yet she could not move. Instead she hugged the blanket Papa had so often used on his feet when they felt cold.

She feels a chill and shakes herself out of her memories. Still stooped over the trunk in the cellar, she finds the velvet pouch at the bottom of the shoebox. She takes out the silver disk, with its round face and sharp features, now tarnished black, like the moon during an eclipse. The face—half human, half mythological deity—seems to be staring at her, enraged.

The face looks much as it did when in Papa's possession: a polished disk with a vertical crack across the cheek and the elliptical mouth, splitting the lip and forming a narrow ravine to the chin. The mouth is open, as if ready to shout. The eyes, one round, the other narrowed into a small hollow, are menacing.

She turns it over and over, examining it for clues. On the back she can barely read the word *Cara*, meaning "darling" in Italian. Or is it the name of a woman? Below is an engraving—an image of some twisted logo—and another word she cannot decipher.

How did this ever come into Papa's possession?