The sky was full of humans, and I was one of them. Way above the Atlantic Ocean, I exhaled, and had no choice but to refill my lungs with air expelled from inside the strangers crammed close around me. According to the digital map on the seat-back in front of me, we were about halfway there. My nose began to tingle, and that could only mean one thing: I would grow a cystic pimple, a massive throbbing lump, right there, a millimetre above my right nostril. At thirty-nine, I was travelling alone for the first time, and my reasons for crossing the ocean seemed, from this vantage, murky at best.

An attendant came by with his cart, and I asked for a coffee. Leaning my head back, I pressed the hot cardboard cup under my nose against the tingling spot, since heat often warded off cysts before they really got going. Oh, go away, painful nose-swelling, please go away. Soon I'd meet relatives I barely knew, and I'd face strangers for the rest of the month. Not to mention Matteo. Hotter than optimal, painful, really, and I didn't want to burn myself, had to get it just right. But, I thought, this is a particularly sensitive spot, that's why it hurts so much. Three minutes is usually good. How long has it been? Okay, three minutes starting now. I closed my eyes.

There were approximately half a million humans in the sky at any given moment, travelling at hundreds of miles an hour. That's a million socks and a million shoes, not counting all the shoes and socks packed in a million suitcases. Arms and legs, and human hair, each strand growing in its follicle. Bodies. Bodies of people who died on holiday and whose remains must be buried at home. Bunnies in cages, cats and dogs. Urine. Germs! E. coli and HIV. And tumours, and bedbugs.

Three minutes. Okay. I put the coffee cup down.

Lingerie and parkas, I thought. Jeans and lipsticks. Paper and ink. All just zooming through the sky, all day every day.

I touched the spot under my nose, and the skin didn't feel so good. When I made my way down the aisle to the toilet, and looked in the mirror, the end and underside of my nose appeared, sure enough, an angry red. Burnt. The rest of my face skin looked oily and yellowish in that special plane-bathroom glow that seems a perfect embodiment of the urine-and-disinfectant smell that accompanies it. Even my eyes and hair were tinged with sickliness. I folded the door in toward me, stepped out of the bathroom, and scanned the scene before me, a grid of indistinct blue chair backs and lolling heads. This was why I had never travelled alone before: lost already,

on the plane. Breathing into my ribs to ease the stab of panic, I wandered the plane for at least ten minutes, peering into each row for my new yellow headphones before I spotted them in the middle of a chair, my white notebook tucked into the mesh pocket with the magazines and puke bag. My row-mates jostled to let me back in, and I sat for several minutes with the notebook gripped in both fists before opening it again. I felt twelve years old, when I'd kept my navy-blue diary tucked between my mattress and the wall, tucked it into my schoolbag each morning, checked for it throughout the day, reaching in to feel the comforting cloth cover against my palm.

Inside the white notebook, I'd tucked my retyped and printed-out pages of my grandfather's seventy-three-year-old journal.

> **In the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and forty-two, when brute barbaric violence and injustice reigned over the greater part of Europe, I was one of the hundreds—if not thousands—who by a secret escape fled the violence and injustice which directly threatened their lives. What follows here is a short chronicle of that pilgrimage to safer places.**

Jos van Embden had written these words long before he became a husband, or a father, or my Opa. In July 1942, now exactly seventy-three years ago, he was thirty-three years old. A young man, tall and blue-eyed, his blond curls styled into a meticulous side-parted pompadour.

> **It is merely a matter-of-fact travelogue, from which few, if any, extraordinary or shocking facts will be omitted. Let it be noted by way of an excuse, that it is not my intention to compose something meant for publication. But now that I am here in the unoccupied part of France and have found—at least for now—a somewhat safe anchorage, I want to write these facts down for myself and possibly also for relatives and friends in this moment when all the peculiarities are still clear in my mind, so that later on when we live again under happier and more humane circumstances, the memories of all of this will not have faded completely.**

Jos's account covered two weeks, during which he escaped from German-occupied

Europe. He'd been fired from his job at Royal Dutch Shell, with the heartfelt regret of his employers. The new German government had passed laws barring him from working, from visiting movie theatres, from riding a bicycle, or riding in a car, or riding a tram, unless on the front platform. He was forbidden from leaning out of windows, or using balconies that faced the street, or wearing clothing that had not been embossed with a yellow star reading *Jood*. On July 15th, exactly seventy-three years before I sat in that plane, all Amsterdam telephone subscribers were required to declare their race, and anyone who admitted to being Jewish had their service cut off. Worse things were coming, there was no doubt. Opa's brother was going into hiding; his mother, already elderly, was sure no one could be bothered to track her down.

***

A child wailed somewhere behind me, and I remembered, or thought I remembered, the agony of flying before I'd known how to yawn, the pain that built up inside my ears. I had flown across the Atlantic the other way when I was a toddler, not yet three. My parents' families, though they'd started out in England too, already lived in the US and Canada, and we were going too.

Once all on the same continent, my parents and my sister and I visited Oma and Opa every summer and every winter. Dad's family didn't celebrate Christmas, so Oma and Opa got us then by default. We made our annual sojourn in the car, first twelve hours from a DC suburb, and then just five hours once we moved again to Ottawa. Oma and Opa lived just past Toronto in the then-small town of Barrie, and they'd stand by the window waiting to see us driving up, then run outside to catch us in their cashmere-clad arms.

"Darling," said Opa, deep-voiced, hugging bodily, knees sharp angles through his corduroy trousers. He wasn't naturally inclined to cuddling, but let Chloe and me maul him, smiling, saying, "Oh, hello, hello, yes, yes. Hello."

"Girls! My girls!" I loved Oma the most, the most of anyone. Her cheeks so soft, always a whiff of perfume around short, smooth, greying hair. "Naomi," she said, the British pronunciation, all emphasis on the *a*, the *o* all but swallowed. She said my name as though she'd missed me unbearably, as though just as relieved to see me as I was to see her.

Oma hugged my parents, and Mum said, "Hi, Dad," kissing his cheeks Dutch-style, left, right, left, and Opa said, "Hello, Bernard," pleasantly enough, and shook Dad's hand, but I was

inside by then, touching the walls, wrapping my arms around the stairs' wooden banister, hugging the house itself.

Those wintery days at my grandparents' Victorian-style brick house glowed with bone-toasting homey warmth, warmth like that of a plump breathing body, warmth practically solid enough to banish the trap-door feeling of everyday life. Snow fell gently on the nearby lake, gifts lay piled under the silver-tinsel tree in the living room, stockings hung waiting for Santa, who'd bring fruit and nuts and maybe a dreidel for my dad's sake, and the wood-burning stove heated TV time in the den after dinner. Inside the coziness, those days moved with a slowness that started out soothing but gradually became sedative, dragging like armfuls of thick wool blanket. The hours lay heavy between breakfast and lunch, and between lunch and teatime. Maybe a walk along the snowy lake-path before dinner, maybe a few turns down the slide in the park across the street, before back to sitting and sitting and all the grown-up blah blah blah. On Christmas Day, my aunt and uncle and cousins came over from their house in the nearby countryside, and the ten of us sat facing each other, someone droning on and on about the new high school curriculum or a transmission problem or worse. My sister and cousins and I slumped into the sofas, barely bothering to stay awake.

"Trivial Pursuit?" said my uncle. Hours would pass. Opa knew all sorts of answers. He was old! He knew all about history and literature, though nothing about sports or entertainment; he teamed with my uncle, who knew all about those. Opa remembered what scientist discovered the cure for some disease in olden-day novels, and what general led his troops into some battle in some far-off country practically a million years ago. I was officially on their team too, so sat on the floor by Opa's customary armchair, but I didn't even know what continents the countries were on, never knew a single answer, and wanted to lie on the floor and moan, and wait for my aunt and uncle and cousins to leave, so I could read my new Roald Dahl and Judy Blume books.

"*The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry," Opa responded to one question. He went on to quote the book in French, and then English. "For the travellers the stars are guides. For others they are nothing but tiny lights." He pronounced his *th*s like *d*s.

I leaned listlessly against Opa's legs, removed one of his slippers, and tried to straighten his long crooked toes inside his black dress sock. He rested his giant hand on my head. "I do like children." Opa wore a navy dress shirt with a knitted silk tie, and a wool cardigan. "Especially with a nice Chianti." That was his favourite joke.

We sat at the dining table boy girl boy girl. Since Opa was Dutch and Oma British, they had fashioned a Dutch-British Christmas-dinner tradition. Each of us received the first letter of our name in chocolate (Dutch), and we ate tins of cheese-infused crackers (also Dutch). We pulled Christmas crackers that sparked with a puff of smoke, and wore the paper crowns inside (British). We ate a goose (British), marzipan (Dutch), and mincemeat pies, fruitcake soaked in rum, and flambéed plum pudding (all British).

"Delicious." Opa patted his flat stomach. The adults sipped cognac from tiny glasses. And then my aunt and her family drove off, and that was that as far as they were concerned; we'd see them in the summer. Another week would pass before Opa stabbed cloves into oranges and simmered the little citrus hedgehogs in red wine to sip while the Times-Square apple fell on TV.

Throughout that week, Mum and Oma reminisced about their years in the Netherlands and England and Indonesia, and did the *Guardian* crossword together. Opa opened envelopes at his desk, wrote columns of numbers in his tiny handwriting and tapped away at a calculator. Shovelled the driveway, boiled the kettle for tea. Dad holed up in his room working, typed at a computer he'd brought, paced as far as the phone cord allowed, footsteps circling, rising and falling and rising and rising.

Once I'd finished all my new books, my sister and I tried to play a game involving cards with pictures of different animals, but the instructions were all in Dutch, so we gave up and watched TV. Watched TV and watched TV. At six, when the good shows ended and every channel played news, I pulled one of the Victorian hardcover children's books from the shelf, books that were old even when Oma was little. I wandered the house still hypnotized by the TV's cartoon glow. Prodded the backs of cupboards and closets, felt along walls, and peered behind books for secret doorways. In a novel, a child in a rambling old house would only stay bored for a page or two, tops, before finding a portal into another world, or a passageway into hidden rooms of delicious horrors, or the diary of someone who'd lived and died and left secrets.

***

My sister and I shared a bedroom at Oma and Opa's, where, over the years, we'd share all the confidences that we kept to ourselves, in our own little rooms at home, for the rest of the year.

When we were seven and four, though, we didn't have much to tell, only wondered what life in Canada would bring, played with our Cabbage Patch Kids, with their pungent baby-powder-scented plastic heads on soft bodies, and discovered that if we crouched beside the big air vent by the closet, we could hear conversations going on in the rest of the house, our parents' and grandparents' voices reverberating down through the furnace and whooshing back up on the warmed air. I strained for something juicy, especially when Mum and Dad and Oma and Opa stayed up late drinking Dutch Gin and playing mah-jong, clinking little ivory tiles at the kitchen table. Mostly they made muffled jokes that didn't seem very funny. Oma and Opa laughed in tones reserved for adults only, Oma mischievous, Opa open-chested, but at what? Mum and Dad laughed, but held back, as though they weren't sure. When the voices became loud enough to decipher, that usually meant an argument had begun.

"They have no *right*," Oma said, and, "not the only people anything bad ever happened to," and "persecution complex."

Dad's voice, quiet and tight, didn't come through so well. Just, "my mother," and "my grandmother," and "you've met my grandmother," and "six million."

"The point," Oma said in a loud clear voice, "is that you can't take someone's country and then claim God gave you permission in some made-up stories." Mum and Opa seemed to be trying to smooth things over or change the subject, but Oma's voice went on: "…no such thing as race…a religion. It's a *religion*!"

Later, our parents argued in their own bedroom, and their voices were so loud Chloe and I barely needed the vent to hear.

Dad said, "We're supposed to wander the world forever, with no home, persecuted wherever we go?"

Mum's response was muffled, frustrated, baffled. Something about, "Just say you don't believe in that anyway. You've never been there. You're not a Zionist anyway, so I don't see—"

"Your mother's a racist!" yelled Dad.

"…doesn't believe in race."

"Can't you think for yourself? Why do you have to agree with everything she says?"

"…just shhh shhh shhh," said Mum. Oma and Opa were right across the hall from them.

"What are they talking about?" Chloe whispered.

I didn't know. The argument always seemed the same, the same words and phrases

drifting up, *racist* and *dogmatic* and *Zionist* and *persecution complex*, and *Holocaust*, which my father and his whole family pronounced differently—"Holly-cost"—but the words just hovered, anguished in the dark, with no meaning attached to them.

The next day, Dad did not emerge from his office until dinnertime.

***

"Are we Christian?" I asked on January second, in the car. I was seven that year, and we were on our way back from Oma and Opa's house to Ottawa, where we'd just moved from DC. We were still living in a hotel, waiting for our house to grow innards, and to start our new Canadian lives.

"No," said Mum. "We're not religious."

"We're Jewish," said Dad.

"Well, maybe you are," said Mum.

"What are we, though?" I asked. Chloe was asleep with her head on my lap.

"We agreed before you were born that you'd have to decide that for yourself," said Mum. "You know that your father's family is Jewish. And mine isn't religious."

"Opa is Jewish too," said Dad. "That means you're three-quarters Jewish."

"No, he isn't," said Mum. "You're confusing her."

Oma's parents had been Anglican, Mum explained, which was a British kind of Christianity invented by a king who wanted to get divorced. She talked about Henry the Eighth for some time. Oma had been baptized, and had attended church as a child, but had become an atheist as soon as she grew up. Opa's parents were Jewish in the sense that *their* parents were Jewish, but even they weren't really religious. Even though he considered himself secular, a Dutchman and nothing else, Opa had left the Netherlands during the Second World War because the Germans took over, and they were trying to kill all the Jews, and they thought he *was* Jewish."

"Which he was," Dad added. "If you're born Jewish, you're Jewish. It's a race as well as a religion."

"No it isn't," said Mum. "And anyway, Judaism is matrilineal, passed down from mother to children. According to the religion laws. Oma isn't Jewish, so I'm not Jewish. I'm not Jewish, so you girls aren't Jewish."

"That's an antiquated notion," said Dad. "You girls *are* Jewish. You have three Jewish grandparents, so you're of the Jewish race."

"There's no such thing as race," Mum said. "Race in that sense is a fascist notion."

"That's a very unusual and—*weird*—opinion. That you grew up with, Trish. But everyone else *on Earth*, every normal person, believes Judaism is a race."

"*Bernard*—"

"Your parents say they don't believe in race," Dad's voice burst out of him as though Mum had lit an explosive waiting inside his chest. "But they're just racist, and you refuse to reconsider, to think for yourself—" Chloe blinked awake and peered up at the front seats, giant brown eyes dismayed.

"It's *your* family that's racist," Mum said. "It's *your* mother who thinks in terms of race at all, who thinks I'm not good enough because I'm not Jewish."

"You *are* Jewish, if you'd just admit it, and my mother is sensitive because of what she's been through, everything she's lost. Just try, just try for once to put yourself in someone else's shoes, to imagine the grief, the *grief*, the *crushing*—"

"Why are you yelling?" said Mum. "*Please*."

"Opa left Holland?" I said, loudly.

Dad fell into a tense silence.

"Anyway," Mum said through her teeth, grimacing at Dad, who turned for a moment to give her his most scornful scowl. She turned to face me. "Opa had to escape, to flee, with Nazis at his heels. Since then, he hated all religion more than ever. Don't ask him. Don't bring it up. Do you understand? He doesn't like to talk about it."

"Why?"

"Because when he went back, after the war, his mother was gone. The Germans had killed her."

"Just like they killed most of my family, in Poland," Dad added.

Don't talk. Don't talk about it. My sister sat up, and Dad drove and drove, and Chloe and I took up our customary car chant: "When are we gonna be there?" Any answer—four hours, two hours, half an hour—reaffirmed that the answer was, in fact, never.

But we did get there, to this new frozen there, and a couple of months later moved out of the hotel and into our house, and years passed, the eighties, nineties, high school and university

and jobs, a new millennium, Toronto and New Brunswick and Alberta, and Chloe and I became more Canadian than English or American, Canadian through and through, and I never found any secret doors or diaries, never met any of the time travellers I'd always kept an eye out for.

Opa began losing things around the house, even after they sold the home for a smaller one, and over ten slow years he lost his whole self to Alzheimer's. He died in a nursing home, and after a few more years, Oma had Alzheimer's, too. My old diaries, boxes of them, drowned in a basement flood. I wrote a novel about a family that could only move past its secrets by deciding to forget, to stop looking. Like my mother's family, the family in my novel was Jewish, but only nominally; the grandparents had left that tradition, and that trauma, behind in Europe. Their silence held inside it a formless dread. I married Lev, and he stepped on a glass, and his relatives lifted us in chairs and gave us Seder plates and haggadahs as gifts, and he had to explain to me what they were for. I stopped celebrating Christmas. Lev hung a mezuzah over the door, but then it fell apart, the tiny Torah verse inside unfurling, and I put the whole thing in a Ziploc bag and shoved it under the dishcloths, and eventually he left me and set out to find a real Jewish woman to marry. I still loved time travel stories, but in real life, I knew, the past leaves only vague shapes, faint fragrances, like a party that's wrecked the room and dispersed, the preciseness of each moment lost and gone forever.