

The Briggait

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The last she sees of them are their handkerchiefs waving from the rail of the tender as it pulls away from the pier, tiny moths fluttering in the breeze. The sky is luminous on this Saturday morning in July, a brighter blue than Tillie has ever seen in Scotland. Anchored in the River Clyde is the ship, the SS *Caledonia*, its massive black funnel looming above the upper decks and an American flag whipping from the rear mast.

Tillie watches as the tender ties up to the ship and unloads the departing passengers, among them her beloved family. In the churning mob on deck Dora and the children have disappeared completely. Tillie won't wait to see the *Caledonia* steam out of the harbor. Too empty for tears, she picks her way up the sloping stone embankment and returns to the railway station to make the hour's ride from Greenock home to Glasgow.

She finds a seat by a window and when the coaches are full, the conductors slam the doors shut. Somebody blows a whistle. The engine hisses as it begins to pull the train out of the station. Picking up speed, the train chugs

past fields, farms, woodlands, meadows. To Tillie's left, not far from the track, winds the River Clyde, with its myriad of steamers and ferries moored at the quays.

Glasgow has been Tillie's home for eleven years now. A widow with young children, she sailed from Libau, Russia, to Hull in a cattle boat, packed in with hundreds of Jews fleeing the Old Country and its poverty and persecutions, miseries of all kinds. Chaya-Tsipe was her name then, another person almost. Somehow they survived the journey, she and four of her daughters and her son Mendl, a boy of six. Waiting for them in Glasgow were her stepsons, big handsome lads with mustaches, and her daughter Rachel.

The passenger seated next to her, a broad woman in an even broader hat decorated with flopping feathers, offers her a butterscotch in a twist of paper and says, "Your people are away to America, too, I expect."

"So hard to let them go."

"Aye, 'tis a sorrowful thing, right enough. Who knows when we'll see them again?" Beneath her feathers the woman returns to her own thoughts, sucking on her sweet.

Along the river are piers and shipyards, thickets of masts and cranes poking up into the miraculous blue sky. After some miles the tracks veer southeast, away from the river. The train pulls into Paisley and stops while a handful of passengers haul their baggage onto the platform; then it rattles on toward Glasgow.

Of all Tillie's children, Rachel is the only one left in the city. First, Tillie's stepsons ventured to America to prepare for their wives and children. Three years ago Mendl, too much like the father he never knew, stubborn and strong-willed, departed also. Tillie couldn't stop him. Basha and Eida are in England, living with in-laws, waiting for their husbands to earn their passages. Earlier this year Reyne and her brood sailed off to join her husband in New York, and now, today, Dora and her three young ones.

The train slows as it enters the huge glass dome of St. Enoch Station. "All oot fer Glesca," the conductor calls, and Tillie moves with the crowd past the buffet and the ticket windows, out onto the street. The walk from the station isn't

far: south along Stockwell Street toward the river and then up the Briggait, past the fish market and the old Merchant's Steeple. Because she'd gone to Greenock, Tillie's stall in the old-clothes market is closed and locked, on a Saturday, the busiest day of the week.

Tillie hasn't kept shabbes since coming to Glasgow. It isn't that she no longer believes. It's not for women to believe or not to believe. And it isn't as though she doesn't care about the old traditions and rituals, which for thousands of years have bound her people together and comforted them in their trials—though in her day she's resisted one or two of those traditions herself. Tillie works on the sabbath because that's when the Glaswegian and Irish slum-dwellers come to shop, and on Sunday everything shuts down. That's the way of it in Glasgow. Nothing happens on a Sunday.

Passing under the railway viaduct, she considers whether to open her stall now, as she planned. It's only noon, and she could sell plenty of old clothes by the end of the day, if the bargain hunters are in a mood to buy. No, she decides. She's too weary and downhearted to be haggling over pennies today. So instead of turning down the alley toward the market, she crosses the cobblestoned street to her tenement. In spite of the fine weather, the pub on the ground floor looks full to the brim. Two men emerge whistling, and the fumes of stale beer and damp sawdust mingle with the ordinary smells of the Briggait: coal dust, privies, horse manure. Just past the pub she enters her close, number 36. On the first landing she encounters Weintrob the pawnbroker, who boards with the Appelbaums on the floor above hers. He's a widower, and Tillie suspects he has his eye on her. He lifts his bowler from his wiry gray hair. "So your family's all gone then, Mrs. Morgan?"

"Not quite. I've a daughter living in the Spoutmouth. Grandchildren."

"You could take in a boarder," he says, smiling. "Bring in a little extra cash, keep you company."

"I suppose I could, at that."

She sees that he's missing a tooth in his lower jaw. Still, Mr. Weintrob is not an unattractive man, though his brown suit could stand a pressing and his hat a brushing. She moves past him and up the stairs.

Her flat is silent, empty. From the open kitchen window she hears shouts of children playing down in the back court amid the wash lines. For the first time ever, not one of them is kin to her. On the floor she sees Minnie's bonnet. It must have been dropped in their rush to leave. Tillie holds the bonnet to her cheek and that's when the tears come.

Because it's Sunday, the shops in the Briggait and Saltmarket are all shuttered, except for the pubs, where, according to the law, "travelers" may eat and drink. So the "travelers" come the seven miles from Paisley to refresh themselves, and the Glaswegians travel to Paisley those same seven miles. Carrying the basket with her cake in one hand and holding her umbrella in the other, Tillie passes families going to their churches, looking bedraggled in the rain. Yesterday's fine weather has vanished.

From Saltmarket she turns onto Gallowgate and walks the four blocks to Spoutmouth, where she rounds the corner. On the ground floor of Rachel's tenement is the shop of Watkins the bacon curer, strings of blood sausages dangling in the window. Although his business isn't open on a Christian Sunday, filthy smells still permeate the neighborhood. They seep up through the floorboards into Rachel's flat, and Tillie wonders how the family can bear it day in and day out. Pig. Treyf.

The thought of eating such things disgusts her, but not because the rabbi says this or that. It's her body that rebels, making her want to retch. When Yosl decided to move his family here from Rose Street, after the sixth child was born, Tillie thought the bacon curer's shop an evil omen and said so. "That place knocks you over with its stink. It rubs your nose in the difference between our people and those people." Yosl shrugged and said, "We can't live in one room anymore. Spoutmouth is closer to the factory than Rose Street."

"Mr. Watkins seems like a nice man," Rachel said.

Yes, they seem nice, and then they kill you.

Now, since the move to Spoutmouth, there's a seventh child, little Betsy, who isn't yet walking. Tillie has been midwife to them all, except for the firstborn,

Manuel, named for Tillie's late husband. Manuel came into the world while Tillie and her other children waited in Riga for their passages to be earned.

Inside the close Tillie folds her umbrella, shakes off the raindrops, and climbs the steps to her daughter's first-floor flat. This building is older even than her own in the Briggait. None of the neighbors is Jewish, but Irish peasants or down-on-their-luck Glaswegians. No WC on the landing. The family has to use the privy in the back court, and no washhouse graces that court, either. Rachel has to do her own laundry, heating the water for the tub on her iron range, or haul it to the steamie on Gallowgate, the baby half buried among dirty clothes in the pram and the others toddling along beside her. So . . . lucky Yosl is closer to the factory, while Rachel struggles to the steamie, and Watkins the bacon curer with his knives could be a Cossack in disguise for all Tillie knows.

Tillie takes her cake out of the basket and sets it on the table. Katie, wrapped in a blanket in the bed-recess, crows in delight. A cake is a treat usually reserved for holidays.

Yosl comes in from the front room, sits at the table, and sips from a glass of tea left there since breakfast. His shirt is rumpled and he's unshaven. "Out somewhere," Rachel says when Tillie asks about Manuel. "With his friends." Only Jewish boys are allowed to play on Sunday, and they'd better be quiet about it so as not to incite the wrath of the gentiles. Rachel holds the baby, Betsy, in one arm and slices the cake, golden with eggs and butter, in the other. The children who are old enough bunch around the table, gobbling cake and begging for more. Like a mother bird, Yosl pops morsels into the little ones' mouths.

"Come, Bobeshi," Katie calls, and Tillie takes a plate of cake and sits with her in the bed-recess, what Glaswegians call the "hole-in-the-wall." The girl sighs, nestling against her grandmother amid a snarl of bedclothes. Katie, the first grandchild she was midwife to, is Tillie's favorite, and everyone in the family knows that. But something's wrong with Katie and has been from the start. Her skin color reminds Tillie of that soft, white, sour crowdie cheese they sell in the market here. She's too small for her ten years. Even in the summer she gets coughs she can't shake. It's Katie's heart, the doctor says, which will give out sooner or later, God forbid.

“So they’re off,” Yosl says. “Good and seasick by now.”

“I hope not,” Rachel replies, wiping Betsy’s nose with a rag.

“If you put some kind of pill in your belly button, that’s a sure cure for seasickness,” Yosl says. “A Carter’s Little Liver Pill. Or Doan’s pill. How you make it stick there, I forget.”

“I want to go to America, too,” Katie says.

“Someday, Kateleh.”

“Everybody’s going. I don’t have any cousins left.”

“Be patient. Your turn will come.”

May God not smite me for this lie, Tillie thinks. The truth is, even if Katie was strong enough for the journey, Yosl has neither the gumption nor wit to make that leap across the ocean the way the other men in the family have. He doesn’t speak a word of English, let alone French, and never learned to read and write, even in Yiddish. Never took the pains or was too dumb, Tillie doesn’t know which. And he’s tired, always tired. Maybe he has a weak heart, too, and passed it on to Katie. His work in the cigarette factory is women’s work, really. He strips the tobacco leaves from the stems, menial labor he’s been doing for years, can’t ever progress to a better job in that factory. The mechanics who oversee the cigarette rolling machines make good money, Tillie’s heard, and they don’t have to breathe fumes from the leaves or get motes of tobacco sucked into their lungs. Because he can’t or won’t stand up to the gentile factory managers, Yosl will be stripping leaves forever.

Tillie’s inclined to blame this marriage on her stepson, Betsalel, who here in Glasgow held Rachel’s fate in his hands. Why didn’t he notice Yosl’s dimness and lack of ambition? But Tsalel must have embraced the first suitor to come along, no doubt eager to rid himself of the responsibility. Rachel, with the beauty of all the Morgan women—except for the unfortunate width of her nose—could have done much better for herself, in Tillie’s opinion.

Later, entering the close at number 36, she again passes Mr. Weintrob, an oversized black umbrella tucked under his arm. “I’m off to find myself some supper,” he says. “Would you care to join me, Mrs. Morgan?”

“Thank you, but no.”

He doesn't try to hide his disappointment. However, Tillie feels the need to get on with her new task, learning to live alone.

Tillie's stall is in an enormous stone temple of a building in Greendyke Street, across from the Green. The words “Clothes Market” are chiseled into the face of the building, up near the roof, as if there's a single soul in Glasgow or for miles around who doesn't know what's inside the three arched entryways. Merchants who are richer than Tillie have their own shops, maybe in Argyle Street, and poorer ones sell out of barrows in or around the Briggait. Some hang their wares from pegs on walls. Tillie, too, began with a barrow, outside in the damp and cold. After three years she was able to afford the few shillings rent for a stall in the market building, a step up in the world. She can lock her wares inside at the end of the day and doesn't have to worry about the weather, doesn't have to lug everything home with her every night.

The hawkers who trade cheap wares door to door for bundles of old clothes sell those bundles to Tillie and to the other dealers. It's a gamble because you pay for the bundle before you unwrap it. Maybe there's a fine wool suit that will fetch a good price, or maybe only faded and threadbare togs that have been handed down through a family of nine children. Tillie sorts, cleans, and mends, displaying the clothes as enticingly as she can in the stall, hoping to give the second-hand at least a hint of charm.

Poor Jews in the Old Country, those who didn't know or weren't allowed to practice another craft, dealt in used clothes. Such unimaginable mountains of old clothes re-cut, re-sewn, and re-sold, before finally being turned into rags. Tillie finds nothing degrading in the work. She makes a living at it and helps to support her daughters and grandchildren, too, which for a widow is not nothing. It doesn't hurt that Tillie has her family's good looks and has learned enough English, Glaswegian English, to be able to flatter and coax customers into buying when they intended only to look or into paying more than they think they can afford. She takes pride in turning discards into treasures. Many a raggedy slum child has been handsomely outfitted out of her stall.

It's after six, and she's more than ready to lock up. She smells his cigar before she sees him, Weintrob the pawnbroker. He lifts his bowler and greets her, giving every sign that he means to make a leisurely survey of her inventory, poking through a stack of folded handkerchiefs and fingering a row of silk cravats dangling from a length of twine.

"Will you take two bob for it?" he asks, picking a necktie at random.

Two shillings is far more than the tie is worth, but she gives him no argument. A man can throw away his money if he so chooses. *Plink* goes the shiny coin stamped with the head of King Edward into her till. "I'm just closing up for the day."

"I thought you might be." He tucks the cravat into a pocket of his brown suit and helps her swing shut her stall's iron grating, waiting while she snaps the padlock. "I hope you'll allow me to accompany you home, Mrs. Morgan?" Tillie's friend Aggie, who's locking the stall next to hers, gives her a wink.

Together, Tillie and Mr. Weintrob walk to the market door, along with the last straggling shoppers and dealers. They head west onto Greendyke Street. A mist rises off the river, and the air is damp and salty. Mr. Weintrob sucks pensively on his cigar as they pass St. Andrew's Church—it's called the whistlin' kirk, for some reason, though Tillie's never heard a peep out of the ancient building. "My husband once dealt in skins and hides," she remarks as they near the hide-skin-and-tallow market.

He appears surprised at the mention of a husband, but he must have realized she had one once. Though even for Tillie it seems a very long time ago, almost like a dream. "May I ask about him? Your husband?"

"He was a soldier in the tsar's army, forty years old when I married him. I was fifteen. Soon afterward the army released him because he'd served his time. He was dealing in hides when my first three daughters were born. This was in Riga. Then my two sons were taken away by the smallpox, one after the other, and my next daughter too, of the bowel catarrh. He had to quit being a hide dealer because he was making no money at it. He lost two of his own children in those years, too."

"He was married before?"

“Oh, yes. He married me two months after his wife succumbed to the cholera. He had all these children, you see, with no one to manage the household. The big boys were almost as old as I was, and I can’t have been much of a mother to them, but that was his thinking, and besides, he liked me. He didn’t need a matchmaker to find me, he’d seen me at weddings and on my way to shul.” Tillie laughs. “I’m afraid he found me something of a handful. I refused to cover my hair after my marriage or to do the family’s laundry—he had to hire a washerwoman. Sometimes I spoke my mind a little too much for his liking.”

They’re turning the corner onto Saltmarket now, and Mr. Weintrob takes her arm as they wait to cross the street. Three trams slide by on their tracks. A little red-headed boy waves to them from the upper deck southbound tram. It’s pleasant to feel the warmth of Mr. Weintrob’s arm, she discovers.

“And after hides?”

“After hides, my husband became a peddler. He’d take his horse and cart loaded with candles or tin ware and trade them to peasants out in the countryside for beans, barley, eggs, maybe a chicken. Sometimes he’d be gone for days, and I’d be terrified that he’d gotten into some kind of trouble with the authorities and was lying in a ditch. But he always came home, and so I gave birth to two more children, daughters. Suddenly he was taken by the typhus, not by a policeman’s bullet, after all. My boy, Mendl, was born after the Angel of Death came for his father.”

“All these children now gone to America.”

“Or England. All except Rachel.” Fog is rolling in off the river now, combining with soot from the coal fires to make a gloomy false dusk. Gas lights have been turned on in some of the shops. “You’ve had your sorrows, too, Mr. Weintrob.”

He tosses his cigar end into the gutter. “Four children in graves in Plontch. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of Plontch. It’s in the south of Poland, on the river, with a big wooden shul. Life was getting harder and harder there, and so nine years ago we came to Glasgow, my wife Fruma and my two sons. But my boys have gone to America and taken the name Winter. Winter, what kind of name

is that, Mrs. Morgan, I ask you? Snow and ice. They don't take the trouble to write. They're too busy. After Fruma died, I gave up the flat and came to board with Appelbaum the shoe cutter. I'll be saving money, I said to myself. But for what, Mrs. Morgan? For what do I need money?"

They've reached the close at number 36, and now there seems nothing more to say. They climb the steps and nod as they reach her landing, as if they haven't spoken to one another these words of pain and loss.

In her little entryway Tillie finds two letters that the postman has slipped under her front door. One is from her daughter Reyne, a rushed note saying that she and the children are well, Sol is busy at work and going to his political meetings, she's looking forward to Dora's arrival. The other envelope is thicker, and it's from her stepson. His name, Charles Morgan, is written in his bold, slanting script on the back, with the address: 1700 Washington Avenue, New York, New York. Charles used to be Betsalel, a much finer name, in Tillie's opinion. Admittedly, Tillie is a stupid name, too. You can't expect Scotch people to get their mouths around Chaya-Tsipe, and when she still had her barrow, one of the other dealers started calling her Tillie. Then everybody else did. It became as much a part of her new self as the floppy felt hat that protected her head from rain and snow.

Inside the envelope are not only a letter, but a piece of paper that has *Anchor Line* printed inside a decorative border at the top. Tillie doesn't read English well, but she knows what this paper is, because her daughters Reyne and Dora each received one like it from their husbands this past year. It's called a "memorandum of prepaid passage certificate" and bears her name in handwriting and the date of purchase. Tsalel has paid twenty-six dollars and fifty cents for a third-class passage from Glasgow to New York. That's a large sum of money, Tillie knows. And without even reading his letter, Tillie understands that he wants her to go to the Donaldson Line ticket office in Union Street and book her voyage to America.

Tillie's been aware that this day would arrive eventually, but in the distant future, so distant she needn't bother to think about it. That it's come now, at this very moment, makes the official-looking document tremble in her hand.

Often she and Mr. Weintrob happen to meet in the close, exchanging pleasantries, and now and then he stops by her stall in the clothes market. He'll buy a handkerchief, maybe, or a pair of gloves. "Steady customer," Aggie observes with a sly grin. "He wouldna be your beau, would he?"

"He would not," Tillie replies firmly.

Weeks pass, and it's now August. On her Sunday visits to Rachel she chooses not to mention the letter from Tsalel, nor does she sit down at her own table to answer it. The envelope lies on a shelf in the kitchen, reproaching her for her indecision.

Down on her hands and knees, her skirt tucked up into her waistband, she scrubs the linoleum in the "room" of her room-and-kitchen flat. Already she's aired the bedding, washed and folded the sheets. Nothing at all is left of Dora and Albert, who lived in this room after their marriage in 1900. Their babies were all conceived and born in this room. When Albert went to America, Dora and the children stayed behind.

She wrings out the rag, the harsh lye soap burning her hands. The two times Reyne's Sol had gone to America, she and her children moved in with Tillie, too. Already in the flat were Tillie's youngest daughters and her boy. Crowded, it was. Bedding on the kitchen floor at night and sometimes four children in the hurley bed, head to foot. Squabbles, of course, and often they didn't have much to eat except potatoes, bread, and herring. But those were cozy, happy times, Tillie thinks now. The floor as clean as she can get it, she rights her clothes and tidies her dark hair, damp and curling from the heat.

Dumping the pail of dirty water into the kitchen sink, she looks down at the court. Clothes flap on the lines and neighbor children run and hide among them. The City Union train on its viaduct, which is cheek by jowl to 36 Briggait, rushes by on its way to the northeast, rattling pots and dishes on her shelves. For a moment Tillie pauses, her hands resting on the edge of the sink, watching the children play. Next she'll scrub the kitchen and then her landing and the WC and the steps down to the next landing. It will keep the loneliness at bay.

Maybe she should follow Mr. Weintrob's advice and take in a boarder. A widow like herself, perhaps.

On the following Sunday when Tillie goes to the Spoutmouth, she carries in her basket a pound of cheddar she bargained down to a cheap price, a dozen eggs, and three loaves of bread. In this big family the food won't last long. Rachel's so occupied with the babies that she doesn't seem to notice how weak Katie is, and she's impatient with the constant coughing. "She keeps everybody awake all night," Rachel complains, as if Katie could will herself to stop.

And there will be yet another baby in eight months or so—Tillie as midwife and mother has a sixth sense about such things. At least Rachel's babies pop out like peas from a peashooter, as do Dora's. It's Reyne's labors that are long and terrifying. The last time, with Rose, Tillie thought she was going to lose them both.

"A letter from Dora this week," Tillie says. "Albert has a nice place for them on a street called St. Urbain. It's near a park, and Dora can take the children there. Reyne's not far away."

"I'm happy for her," Rachel says, not very happily.

Once again Tillie omits mentioning the passage certificate, though it's much on her mind. Go or stay? Go or stay? If she leaves for America, who will make sure Katie has nourishing food? Who will pay for the doctor's visits?

"Tell me a story," Katie says. "Please, Bobeshi."

With her glass of tea Tillie settles herself in the bed-recess next to her granddaughter.

"Well, let me think . . . Once upon a time, long ago, in a faraway city called Riga, in a faraway country called Russia, there lived a man whose name was Lipman. This Lipman had a beaver hat more than a foot high, of which he was very proud. One day Lipman happened to leave his hat on a chair in the hallway. When he went to retrieve it, and placed it upon his head, something inside the hat sank its claws right into his scalp, then scurried down his back and hid under a blanket chest. Lipman's shriek brought the whole family running. Very red in

the face, uncertain who to blame for the trick played on him, he blamed everyone. Well, Kateleh. Who do you think the culprit turned out to be?"

"Who, Bobeshi?"

"None other than little Rachel's pet kitten. He thought Lipman's hat a cozy place for a nap."

"Was little Rachel my mama?"

"Indeed she was."

"What became of the kitten?"

"Oh, he grew up into a tomcat and ran away, I think."

"Who was Lipman? What became of him?"

"He was my stepson, your uncle. He stayed behind in Russia."

Not a word from Lipman in the eleven years since Tillie left Riga. If any of her letters reached him, he declined to reply. Their parting was hardly amicable. Beneath his stiff civility she perceived a cold rage, and she knew he considered her leaving Riga a betrayal. Yet he accompanied her and the children to the railway station. The last she saw of him, as the train for Libau pulled away, was his tall beaver hat.

"Why did my uncle stay in Russia?"

"That's what he preferred. Some Jews wander. Some don't."

Yosl begins to talk about the factory, how much the work hurts his back, and baby Betsy wakes, crying. Tillie goes to the stove to make more tea.

In the late afternoon she walks back to the Briggait. As she enters the close, Mr. Weintrob appears. "A bite to eat, Mrs. Morgan? I'd be glad of your company." He's wearing his brown suit. Does he own no other? Couldn't Mrs. Appelbaum stir herself to give it a pressing? Someone should take him in hand.

Tillie starts to give him some excuse, but she needs a bit of cheering, and what can it hurt? She hurries upstairs with her basket and then joins him in the street. At Victoria Bridge they wait for a tram heading south toward the river. When they board at the rear, he says, "We'll go up," and before she knows it, they've climbed the steps as the tram lurches along the track. Now they're on the open top deck, with an unobstructed view of the Clyde. Below the bridge,

downriver, is a multitude of steamers and ferries, some moored at the quays, some plying the water. Tillie holds onto her hat so it won't fly off, and they laugh, squeezed together on a seat meant for one. The sun struggles out of the fog, making this a real holiday.

They disembark from the tram on the south side of the river, in the Gorbals, and he leads her, his hand gently under her elbow, to Bloom's Hotel in Norfolk Street, where there's a kosher restaurant, busy on a Sunday. He orders plates of brisket and noodles with vegetables. Familiar food, but well prepared and comforting.

"My stepsons lived here in the Gorbals," she tells him, "and my daughter Rachel, too. My first grandchild was born on Thistle Street, before I came to Glasgow."

"Then, if I may ask, why did you take a flat in the Briggait?"

"No mystery about that—in the Briggait I could have a barrow. It's where the customers are. I had young children to support, and I didn't want to lean on my stepsons."

"Quite understandable. I wouldn't want to have to lean on my sons."

She selects a piece of carrot, chews thoughtfully. "Do you ever think of going to America, Mr. Weintrob?"

"America's for young people," he says, spooning horseradish sauce onto his plate. "I'm fifty-two years old. I have a good business, customers who rely on me. Why should I turn myself into a greenhorn all over again?"

"What about your grandchildren?"

"As yet I have none, but what if I did? I don't intend to spend the rest of my days as the old grandpa in a corner, hunched over a Yiddish newspaper, muttering to myself. A man with a different language, not to mention a different name, from my own flesh and blood."

He calls for tea, and they sit awhile longer, after their plates have been carried away by the waiter. "Will you have a little something sweet? Bloom's is famous for their strudel."

"Thank you, no."

Taking a fresh cigar from his breast pocket, he says, "You like being independent, Mrs. Morgan."

“I do.”

“I admire you for that. Very much. However, being independent can be lonely.”

“That’s the catch, isn’t it?”

“I wonder . . . if you’ve given any thought to my idea that you take in a boarder.”

“I’ve thought about it, yes.”

“Mrs. Morgan, I myself could be your boarder.”

“You’re not happy with the Appelbaums?”

“Not as happy as I might be.”

Tillie isn’t so dimwitted that she doesn’t know what he has in mind. To be respectable, a man and a woman living in two rooms without relatives in a constant swarm would have to be husband and wife. What he’s suggesting is in the way of a marriage proposal, but one she might choose to let pass without bruised feelings on anyone’s part.

She gazes down at the white tablecloth, which now has a brown stain near the gravy boat. She’s tempted to agree, very tempted. She’s fond of Mr. Weintrob, and it’s been a long time since a man held her in his arms. She thinks she could have a good life with him. She wouldn’t have to leave Katie. But there’s the certificate of passage and Tsalel’s plea.

At last she says, “I’m afraid I’m not ready to decide about a boarder. One way or the other.”

“You’ll let me know?”

“Surely I will.”

The hawker, a scrawny Glaswegian who lost an arm in the First Boer War, swings a bundle out of his cart onto the floor of her stall, and then another. “There ye go, Tillie, seven bob each—an’ I’m givin’ ye a bargain. Got ’em from a lady that was flittin’ to a new hoose.”

One bundle is tied up in an old sheet, the other in a threadbare linen tablecloth. “Twelve bob all two,” she says.

“Thirteen.”

“Done.”

Angus pockets the coins, tips his cap, and trundles off with his cart.

It’s a Saturday, a stream of customers all day, and Tillie doesn’t unwrap the bundles until almost closing time. Inside the tablecloth are some ladies’ shirtwaists, not neatly folded but all bunched up, along with some corsets, petticoats, and nightgowns, a bit musty smelling, but once of good quality. Inside the other bundle, mixed in with more waists and day dresses, is a frock in two pieces. Again the clothes are wadded up as if of no account, but Tillie knows this dress is special. She smooths it out. It’s an afternoon tea dress in black silk. Lined bodice, baleen stays, and on the front a ruffled yoke with bands of satin ribbon edged in lace. Three-quarter-length sleeves. Tiers of ruffles down the skirt, all beautifully hand sewn. This dress came from Argyle Street or even London, and not very long ago. How did it come to be stuffed into an old sheet and exchanged for a few bob?

Tillie’s been in this business long enough to have a pretty good idea. The lady who owned these clothes died of some disease or accident, and the new wife sold them off to the first hawker who knocked on her door. Not so much for the money, as to rid her life of the first wife’s baleful ghost. Tentatively Tillie holds the blouse up to her body to judge it for size.

Aggie pokes her head into the stall and whistles in appreciation. “Ain’t ye the lucky one, Till. Perfect fit, like twas made for ye.”

“Bring enough to pay my rent, maybe.”

“If twas me,” Aggie says, fingering the ruffled skirt, “I’d nae part wi’ this frock, not for a gold sovereign. I’d put it by for a special occasion.” The bodice would hang limp over Aggie’s skillet chest and the skirt hardly reach her shins.

“What special occasion?”

“Ye never know.”

The next day is overcast, and the churchgoers Tillie passes on Gallowgate look distracted. Or, in the case of the men, suffering the effects of their Saturday in the pub. The mothers snap at wayward children, and the men draw

on their cigarettes to blunt the pain of forced sobriety and forced religion. In the Spoutmouth Tillie enters the close at number 32 and climbs the steps to Rachel's flat.

"How are my darlings?" she asks, unpacking her basket onto the oilcloth-covered table. No cake today but a loaf of dense dark bread, eggs, scones, and a half-pound of Strathkinness cheese. Katie, feeling better and not coughing, tastes a scone, breaking it open to pick out the raisins. Rachel is nursing the baby, Manuel is out somewhere, and the younger children are playing some sort of noisy game in the front room. Yosl sits at the table with his glass of tea. If he could read, he'd have his nose in a newspaper, but since he can't, he's just planted there on his behind like a tree stump.

"Yosl is thinking of quitting the tobacco factory," Rachel says.

"Oh?" Stripping leaves isn't bad enough—now he wants to join the unemployed? "To do what?"

"To become a leerie."

A leerie! What next?

"It would be better for his health," Rachel says, switching Betsy from one breast to the other under her shawl.

"Shorter hours," Yosl explains. "Out in the fresh air."

Leeries go from close to close lighting the lamps at dusk, and the streetlamps, too. Fresh air in Glasgow? It's fresh if you don't mind fog and smoke and coal dust. And that awful-smelling stuff they use to ignite the gas. Isn't it poisonous to the lungs?

"Leeries are always welcome, wherever they go," Yosl says. "Not like factory workers. People are grateful to have their closes lit."

"What about the wage?"

Rachel and Yosl don't give a straight answer to that, but Tillie suspects it's not even as much as stripping tobacco leaves. "People tip you," Yosl says.

Nobody in Tillie's close tips the leerie more than a few bob at Christmas. "Well, that's news, Yosl." She pulls a chair up to the table and takes Katie onto her lap. "It happens that I have news, too."

“What, Bobeshi?” Katie asks. “Is it something good?”

“I’m not sure.” From her pocket she fishes out the prepaid passage certificate, now creased and dog-eared. “Your Uncle Tsalel sent this. He’s paid for my ticket to America.”

“Oh, Mama,” Rachel cries, “and you don’t know whether that’s good news?”

“I haven’t made up my mind.”

“I would go in a minute, if . . .”

If Yosl could make a living in America. If Katie could survive the journey. Rachel doesn’t need to say these things.

“You must go, before you’re too old,” Rachel says to her mother.

“What do you mean, old? I’m only forty-nine. Hardly a gray hair on my head.”

“I would miss you, Bobeshi,” Katie says. “But soon we’ll get on the big ship and cross the ocean, too. And I’ll see all my cousins.”

“If only,” Tillie murmurs, stroking Katie’s limp dark hair, so thin she can see the white of her scalp beneath the strands.

On the last day of August Tillie returns from work to find an envelope left under her door by the postman. Her daughter Reyne’s letter is longer than her usual note, the sheet written on the back as well as the front. She begins by saying how much she misses her mama and mentions the certificate of passage, which she knows Tsalel sent some time ago. She describes Tsalel’s flat in a section called the Bronx, where Tillie will live when she comes to New York. Tillie will be glad to hear that Tsalel is earning good money in the fur trade. His flat is large, and his wife Liba has a room all prepared for Tillie’s arrival.

Reyne writes also that at this time of year the seas are calmer than when she herself sailed, in January. Tillie won’t be seasick if she departs soon, before winter storms again begin to blow up in the Atlantic.

As if it’s nothing more than an afterthought, Reyne concludes: “Well, Mama, another baby is on the way. I didn’t forget that you urged me to wait awhile, to recover my strength, because the labor with Rose was so bad, but

waiting just wasn't possible, for reasons I think you understand. Rose and I would have perished if you weren't with us, and for your help I thank God every day. Please come, Mama."

Yes, Tillie understand the reasons, well enough. A heedless husband who can't leave his wife be, though he knows her health is fragile and another baby could kill her. A curse on Sol Mendelson for his selfishness, Tillie thinks bitterly. May he suffer and remember.

In the morning, after a night during which sleep would not come to her, Tillie climbs to the third floor of the tenement and bangs on the front door of the room-and-kitchen above hers. At first there's no answer, but at last stooped old Mr. Appelbaum opens the door, a glass of tea in his hand, his pants pulled up over the tail of his nightshirt and the braces dangling. From the landing she can see through the tiny lobby to the kitchen, where dishes clutter the table. "My wife's away to visit her sister in Aberdeen. On the train," he adds helpfully. "Is it the washhouse key you're after?" He looks vaguely behind him toward the kitchen. "I'm sure my wife passed it on to the next lady in the queue."

Tillie's not so sure of that—there's been many a cross word spoken to Mrs. Appelbaum over the whereabouts of the washhouse key—but she says, "It's not the key I want, it's Mr. Weintrob. Is he at home?"

Appelbaum the shoe cutter lifts his straggly eyebrows. "Weintrob doesn't keep me up to date on all his comings and goings, Mrs. Morgan. Maybe you could find out for yourself."

So Tillie enters the lobby and knocks on the door to the "room." Again there's a long pause before the occupant appears. His bushy gray hair is uncombed and he's in his shirtsleeves. "Come in, come in," he says.

Obviously, upon hearing her voice, he shut the door on the unmade bedding in his bed-closet and stuffed random items into the press. The room smells strongly of cigar smoke. "Please sit," he says, opening his arms toward the single armchair. She doesn't take it.

"I'm going to tell you this straight out, Mr. Weintrob. You cannot be my boarder."

He looks stricken. "Might I know why? Have I offended you in some way or . . ."

"No, nothing like that. My stepson sent the voucher for my passage to New York, and there are important reasons why I must go."

"Ah. I see." He rubs the bristles on his cheek. "You'll be leaving soon?"

"Very soon. I'm sorry."

"No sorrier than I."

His room faces the Briggait. Through the open window they hear horses clopping on the cobblestones, a barrow being rolled along, a man shouting in anger or anguish, too far away to make out his words. The train on its viaduct rumbles by, shaking the building. When the last car has gone, Mr. Weintrob says, "I have one request, Mrs. Morgan."

"Yes?"

"When you're settled in America, will you have made a photograph of yourself to send to me?"

She thinks of the black silk dress. She'll wear the black silk dress to have her photograph taken for Mr. Weintrob. "Yes, I promise."

"I can give you the money."

"I think I'll be able to afford it, Mr. Weintrob," she says, smiling a little.

The next day Tillie goes to the Donaldson Line ticket office in Union Street and books a sailing for Saturday, September 15th. At the counter the clerk asks questions for the ship's manifest: name, age, nationality, race, name of the person who bought her ticket, address of her final destination. For occupation she says "none," and the man writes down "nil." On the 15th of September, 1906, she'll be mother, grandmother, widow, nothing more.

In the following two weeks she sells the contents of her stall to Aggie and the other dealers, getting a few quid in return, and then the contents of her flat to a junk dealer for a few quid more, most of which she will give to Rachel when she says goodbye. She purchases a secondhand wicker suitcase and in it packs

the silk dress, with two or three day dresses and some underclothing and night-gowns, tying the suitcase round with twine because she doesn't trust the clasps. She expects not to need much in that place on the other side of the world with a name like the cry of a goose.

The plan was for Rachel and Yosl and the seven children to accompany Tillie to St. Enoch Station, arriving in two horse-cabs and saying their goodbyes on the platform under the domed glass roof. But at the last minute the baby comes down with the croup and Katie feels poorly, too. Instead, there's a hurried and unceremonial farewell in the Spoutmouth. Yosl offers to accompany his mother-in-law to the station and carry the wicker suitcase, and as they walk along he tells her about how St. Enoch wasn't a man at all but a woman, the mother of St. Mungo—what a funny name, Mungo—and isn't it strange that the city would name a square and a hotel and a church and a grand railway station after somebody's mother. "Christians do strange things," Tillie says. What's really strange are the useless notions that rattle around in Yosl's head. It's begun to rain and she hastens her steps, wrapping her cloak around her.

Inside the station, when they reach the platform for the train to Greenock, passengers with their baggage are already crowding into the cars. "Take care of them, Yosl," she says, and he swears he'll do his best. "No, no, don't see me aboard; there's too much of a crush." Awkwardly he hands over the suitcase. It's not very heavy, not nearly as heavy as her heart.

Now she repeats the journey she took in July when she saw Dora off, the train stopping for a few minutes at Paisley, where more scared-looking emigrants get on, lugging their bags. Streams of rain slant across the window glass. Under a low, gray sky the train follows the winding path of the Clyde, along the ship-yards, and at last they're off the train and inside the station at Greenock.

Gripping the handle of her suitcase, she joins the throng of rain-soaked passengers making their uncertain way down the stone paving to the pier. Babies are crying; parents are crying. Tillie tries to focus on what's ahead of her, her beloved family at the other end of the journey.

Yet she feels shrunken already, like the sad old man Mr. Weintrob envisioned himself becoming, in a corner of some relative's flat, poring over a Yiddish newspaper, clinging with desperate futility to the old life.

They're herded onto the tender and soon aboard the SS *Athenia*, where Tillie has to show her ticket again. On the deck the steerage passengers are rudely segregated into three groups: single men, single women, and families. "Widow," she says to the young official in a jaunty cap.

"For'ard to the bow," he mumbles, and she struggles with her wicker suitcase through a narrow passage crammed on either side with trunks, boxes, valises, coiled ropes, and other nautical gear, and with confused emigrants milling about because they haven't understood the instructions.

The crowd sweeps her to the hatch that the single women are meant to use. At the top she sees that it's straight down, very far down into the bowels of the ship with only a rope to grasp. She can't imagine how Dora and Reyne managed this with their little children, no husband to help and keep them safe. The steps are slippery and narrow, and she feels faint, hanging onto her suitcase in one hand and the rope with the other, but the women behind her are shoving her downward, into the darkness, and there's a horrible stench, as if of dead bodies, rising up to greet her, and she's on her way.

