

Excerpt from *The Fall of the Berlin Wall* – a novel

Thanksgiving Week

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The Fall of the Berlin Wall – a novel

“Maybe I’m proud myself, even if I’m shameless. You just called me perfection. A fine perfection! – if just for the sake of being willful I’ve trampled on a million and a brilliant man.”

--Nastasiya in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*

Prologue

Rachel and Jacob Black – Friday morning, November 24, 1989

It was the wind that made it worse. Twigs were carried in the air, and dead leaves flew by. Yesterday was Thursday, and the black clouds of a huge Thanksgiving storm – greater than anyone predicted – had dropped from the north like a giant descending on the city, a massive

primordial force obliterating everything that was familiar, felling trees, dropping a foot of snow on the Heights. And now this morning, the arctic wind kept blowing more snow east into Cleveland Heights with its hilly neighborhoods, the first foothills of the Appalachians. Its houses, built in the first decades of the twentieth century, were porous to the raging winds. The old double-glazed windows rattled violently. The storm blew wires down and pilot lights out, and with few exceptions, there was no heat or light for blocks on end.

When Jacob Black's heater went out this morning, he descended the stairs to the darkened basement to inspect the pilot light. When he directed a flashlight into it, he saw there was no way he could relight it, for without electricity, the newly installed heater refused to start. So much refused to work in this old house – and in his shithole of a life, as well. A stream of unspoken obscenity filled his mind as he trudged back up the stairs. Rachel and little Mikey waited at the top. When she heard what the situation was, she picked up the kitchen phone. It still worked, and she called Sarah and Jack, who lived up the block.

“Yes to both questions,” Jack answered. “We have electricity, and come on over. We’ll wait out the storm together. Sarah is still sleeping, but she’ll wake up soon.”

So they put on their heaviest winter coats, boots, hats, and gloves as the wind buffeted the windows and pressed in on the house. Rachel carried a packed purse, Jacob a valise with a shoulder strap, and four-year-old Mikey his favorite brown bear with its button eyes, in a plastic bag. Together they stepped onto the porch. The wind temporarily paralyzed them, and its bursting intermittent hum poured from the sky. What began yesterday on Thanksgiving had not relented. Holding onto his son's hand and gripping his wife's arm, Jacob inched forward down the porch steps and into the blasting snow. In the driveway, their boots sank in the snow drifts. Small branches flew by, disintegrating in flight.

“I’ll carry you,” Joseph said and lifted the boy onto his shoulders.

“It’s so cold,” Mikey said.

“We’ll be there soon,” Rachel said.

“I’m scared.”

They slowly trudged through the snow banks for half a block, could hardly see through the white-out of blowing snow, and finally came to the wooded, untamed lot edging Jack Weinstein’s property. Barely visible next to the lot was his big home on the corner with its snowy path to the dark-stained front door.

In the thick woods a few yards away, there seemed to be a partially buried, snow-covered deer or other animal, and Rachel stopped to stare at the curious sight. Jacob, with Mikey on his back, continued to Jack’s house.

She carefully stepped off the sidewalk and walked a few yards through snow to the frozen form in a little ditch among the trees. Suddenly she recognized the snow-encrusted naked woman, and she suppressed a scream.

Chapter 1

Joseph – Sunday afternoon, November 19, 1989

The seat was narrow, the space for his knees and long legs was small, and the classical selection on the earphones – Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony – had come to its staticky close and given way to an unobtrusive hum. It was four days before Thanksgiving, and in half an hour, he would land in Cleveland for a holiday visit to see his sister and brother-in-law. Joseph’s body felt awkward and cramped after five hours in flight from San Francisco, and he shifted in his seat,

irritably aroused beneath his clothes. Flying in planes was one of the things he disliked most about giving concerts.

Of course, his late father had taken more than a flight a week to give concerts before he semi-retired. Joseph was not as in demand as the great pianist Alexander Petrov had been, and his sister would tease him about it, saying Joseph shouldn't complain about flying just once and awhile; Sarah's mockery was par for the course in the family. At his peak, his father had been paid many thousands of dollars for each performance, and his recordings were legendary. Their mother, dead only four years now, was worse than Sarah. She would say, "I'm glad your father is not here to see you now. Sacha's playing struck sparks from the soul, and it is left to you to extinguish them." But his mother was wrong. His concerts and occasional recordings were excellent, and reviewers said his brilliance at the piano was simply different from Sacha's. Over the fifteen years since his father's death, his own playing had changed. It had become less tense, less taut, and more varied: what was loud had terrific strength, and what was soft flowed out with a new sort of joy. Why not?

He wondered if his brother-in-law would recognize him when they met at the airport. It had been a couple of years. They were both in their forties, and his black hair had become sparser, with some grey at the sideburns. He still had his large Petrov nose, but he had grown a pencil-thin moustache and looked a little like Proust, a hero of his youth, but unlike his early idol, Joseph had a big rangy body. He looked forward to seeing Jack and Sarah. She loved to tease Joseph, but when their parents were alive, she often tried to save him from their withering scrutiny by distracting them or interceding. In recent years, though, she had decided to mock him especially about his friendship with her husband, and he felt sorry that Jack had to hear his wife's obligato of criticism. Jack was so good-willed, and his acceptance of Joseph seemed undeterred.

The plane landed and deposited him into the warren of passageways illuminated by fluorescent lights bleaching the kiosks, clothes, and the Sunday stream of passing faces. Mostly weary, undistinguished, and indistinguishable people scurried by in grim, late-fall jackets, jeans, and tee-shirts, some bearing Browns or Indians logos, and the occasional business suits and dresses. Albert, his former partner and still his good friend, had seen him off at the San Francisco airport, with its international range of passengers so different from the Cleveland Hopkins airport. Once out of the security perimeter, he walked into the central hall for departures and arrivals and looked for Jack.

Joseph saw him before he looked up. With his curly red-brown hair, his tweed jacket, and his green eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses, Jack looked like a professor. He still wore earth-tones, a tan work shirt under the dark brown jacket, black jeans, and brown work boots – neutral colors but at least not the washed-out, ground-down look of the Clevelanders around him. Medium-sized and still youthful at forty-six, Jack always looked comfortable in his body. Below his fine, wide upper lip, he slightly smiled, though he seemed a little tired, and some worry appeared to weigh a bit on his shoulders.

“Jack!” Joseph waved from the exiting crowd. Jack’s face widened into a broad smile, and he called out to his brother-in-law, gave him a handshake and then a hug. Joseph’s hand felt the soft tweed jacket on Jack’s shoulder. His own suede jacket was in the carry-on he pulled, and when the exit door let in the November wind, he realized he wore only his black silk shirt against the cold.

“Was your flight okay?”

“Sure, but you know how much I love to fly.”

“Oh yes. But it’ll be worth it. It’s so wonderful to see you. And anyway, you had to come. I need you to be here.”

“What’s going on?” Joseph asked, but then said, “I’m a terrible friend, Jack. You know how I neglect to answer letters, not responding for months.”

“You’re not a terrible friend. You respond to me,” Jack said and punched him lightly on his upper arm. He was so warm, attentive, and animated – it was as if Jack were able to understand many levels of a conversation at once, as if he were hearing several voices sounding in your one voice.

In the parking garage, they put the carry-on suitcase in the trunk of Jack’s aging green Honda, and when they got inside, Joseph said, “Turn on the heater. Please!”

They drove onto the freeway, which finally headed due east and split the southern suburbs from the northern part of the city by Lake Erie.

“So what’s going on?” Joseph asked.

After a moment, Jack said, “Well, I’ve begun something new, though it’s nothing like Hostage Music. Ten days ago, when the Berlin Wall ‘fell,’ I couldn’t believe it – how past barriers could just disappear like that. So I want to compose these reconstructions of the past that erupt out of the piece just as they’re about to vanish. The fall of...” He was silent then.

Joseph said, “Tell me what’s really going on.”

“Sarah,” he began but was somehow unable to continue. He drove onto another freeway heading north and seemed now to change the subject. “Remember when Sue was born, sixteen years ago. Sarah made it her decision alone, whether to have our baby. You know, Roe v. Wade had just legalized abortion in 1973, and at Thanksgiving dinner she told us she was over a month pregnant and that she had decided to have an abortion. But by Christmas, thank goodness, she

changed her mind, and we got married on New Year's Eve. You're the one who suggested the date!"

"And Sue was born early, a preemie, May 4, 1974."

"So, you might say Sarah is a little erratic," Jack said and suddenly shouted. "Shit!"

"Sure, Jack."

"Didn't mean that. I'm sorry. I took the wrong turn just now and have to get on the freeway going the other way, or we'll end up in Solon, far to the east."

As they returned to the freeway heading north, Joseph said, "You remember four years ago, when Mother died and the nursing home called Sarah as the oldest child, and naturally she decided what to do without consulting me in San Francisco. She just flew to L.A. and arranged an immediate orthodox Jewish burial for Helen, a Greek atheist and the widow of a Russo-German-Jewish agnostic, but of course, Helen Petrov had to be buried in an orthodox Jewish pine box. Shit, yes, Sarah can be erratic! 24 hours could not pass! I barely made it to the gravesite. When the casket was about to be taken out of the hearse, a foreman asked me if I'd like to see my mother before interment. The gravedigger took the top off the pine box, and I leaned in to see her, shrunken and colorless in a cotton shroud. The other gravediggers kept grousing a few yards away. But I couldn't believe what I saw, there were electric sparks darting through her halo of wispy white hair."

"So sad, Joey," Jack said. "What can we do? She does what she wants, but sometimes, thank goodness, she changes her mind."

"Before Helen died, I should have gone down to her nursing home, taken her in my car and driven her on the open road, maybe to one of the quiet beaches north of Sunset. I would have

held her arm and wandered with her on the sand, even if it meant she'd collapse – there are worse ways to die.”

Jack got off the freeway now, and made his way west on Fairmount Boulevard. There was little traffic this Sunday as they passed trim lawns and sedate houses, some of them small and middle-class. As they drove further west into Cleveland Heights, more and more of them were old magnificent mansions

“Truly, Joey,” he said, “Sarah wants to be a good human being. And she is! She’s arranged a wonderful party in your honor this evening. It’s just that sometimes she can’t control her feelings, and she changes from being lively and sensitive and aware to being angry and defensive, and then back. But even when she’s wayward and defiant, I can’t help it, I love her still.”

Chapter 2

Sarah – Sunday evening at the Weinstein party

The young man was working at the dark brown, well-polished credenza in the dining room, setting up glasses and beginning to open bottles of Bordeaux, Montrachet, and other vintages. The house bell rang, and Sarah could have had Tony go open the door, but Jack’s graduate student – thin, affable, and amateurish – had his hands full. She rose from one of the armchairs by the wide bay window, which was dark now at 7 p.m. on this Sunday evening in November. Tiffany-style lamps illuminated the living room with its high ceiling, its wide, richly-patterned oriental rug, and its two dark-red upholstered couches facing each other in front of the fireplace. Some of her somber, architectural photographs hung framed on the wall among a few paintings. The Sinclairs were at the entrance, and she greeted them in a high, lyrical voice. They

were wearing heavy coats against the windy November weather; he was over 60, she was 51, and they had two sons. Sarah embraced May and shook hands with Robert, a tall, somewhat formal, silver-haired, transplanted southerner, who taught English at the State University in Cleveland; she saw some scant signs of his psoriasis still at his wrists and neck. May, who had immigrated from Germany as a girl, worked as personal assistant to the conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra.

After the coats were hung in the entry closet, May said in her distinct accent, “I love your dress. It’s velvet, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Sarah said, “black velvet. I used one of my scarves for the red sash around my waist.”

“Beautiful. It’s so simple and elegant.”

Next to enter were the Blacks. They were neighbors, who lived in a small house down the block. Sarah and Jack’s daughter babysat this evening for their little son. Jacob Black was a talented writer, and she knew he had helped to host visiting poets when he was teaching at Cleveland State. Now he taught part-time at several different colleges, and Sarah felt sorry for him because a few years ago he had not gotten tenure at the university. The Sinclairs were good friends of the Blacks. Rachel was plump, outspoken, and full of life, while Jacob was thin, rather quiet, and sometimes acerbic.

“Mikey really loves your daughter, thank goodness,” Rachel said. “Sue is such a cute teenager. Are we early?”

“No. Just on time. Let’s get you something to drink.” She looked about for Jack, who had not yet made his appearance. Joseph came down the stairs just then, and Sarah said, “Here’s my brother, Joseph. Meet our neighbors Rachel and Jacob Black.”

“Sarah’s said wonderful things about you. You’re a psychiatric nurse, no, Rachel?”

“That’s me. I work in University Hospital’s adolescent ward.”

“When I was an adolescent, I could have really used your help,” Joseph said, laughing.

“Let’s face it, Joseph, you could really use her help right now!” Sarah said. Turning to Rachel, she asked her when Sue would put Mikey to bed, and she saw Jack walking out of the music room through the living room toward them.

“Rachel, Jacob. Great to see you.”

“Where have you been!” Sarah asked him irritably. Next to Jack was Smythe, the Director of the Cleveland Music Settlement; he was a Brooklynite with an ascot tie and an affected British accent.

“Stanley came early, and I was showing him something at the piano,” Jack said.

Sarah let her jaw go slack, lowered her high voice into a moronic, childish mumble, and mockingly repeated, “I was showing him something at the piano.”

She saw him give her an angry stare. Under his breath, he said, “Why are you being an asshole in front of these people?”

Just then his dean at the Cleveland Institute of Music arrived. Regina Ramadanoff came with Vladimir Kline, a piano professor at CIM. She was a slight woman in a well-tailored grey suit, and her rather deep Slavic voice, sounded as if she were always on the verge of grunting or harrumphing.

“Wonderful to see you, Regina,” Jack said. “How is Stephan doing?” With pursed lips, Regina said her husband was still under the weather.

“How are you, Dima?” Sarah softly asked the suave pianist, with his chest stretching his suit coat, his wavy brown hair, and his compelling eyes, which could unexpectedly shift from

vulnerable sensitivity to an accusatory stare or just as easily to indifference. His father had named him Vladimir after the great Horowitz.

“I am fine. And how are you, my Sarah dear?” he said and tenderly took her hand.

Regina turned away to greet Joseph, who was watching his sister and sipping from a glass of red wine. “Where can I get a glass of that?” she asked.

“Jack has outdone himself this evening, Regina. Come this way. It’s fantastic. Chateaux Petrus!”

“Huh! In honor of you, Joseph,” she said. “We are so glad you visit. And Tuesday is your lecture and performance.”

More people arrived, and now Tom Mubar was at the door. Next to him was his son, Paul. Jack greeted them both and shook their hands. Tom had been a friend for over a decade, from when both were young professors, Jack at the Cleveland Institute of Music and Tom in Art at Oberlin College. Sarah watched as Jack held Tom’s shoulder with his extended hand, for the artist would never allow himself to be hugged. It was part of his mystery, she thought. With his thick black hair and moustache, olive skin, and intelligent eyes, he looked like a revolutionary or at least a friend of revolutionaries. Both father and son were dressed in jeans and long-sleeved shirts. Tom’s was pink, and young Paul’s was black, with the sleeves rolled up revealing tattoos looking like phoenixes.

“Paul needed the car, so he’s dropping me off.”

As Paul left, Regina Ramadanoff leaned toward Tom, pointed in the direction of his departing son, and said, “Ugh, why did you let him tattoo his arms?” Tom stared at her as if she were an idiot and said nothing. He turned toward the crowd in the dining room with its credenza of drinks and its dining room table covered now with a lovely array of foods, many reflecting

Sarah's California origins – a whole salmon with dill sauce and cucumber slices for scales, a variety of cheeses including brie, French feta, and pepper-jack, with olives, sliced salamis of all sorts, sourdough French bread, guacamole, humus, and finally a spiral-sliced honey baked ham.

Later, in the music room, Joseph stood next to Sarah with some other guests, and among them was Vladimir Kline, whose voice rose enthusiastically in praise of the great teacher of piano at Juilliard, Rosina Lhevinne, who was the wife of Josef Lhevinne, a brilliant pianist and contemporary of Alexander Petrov, father of Sarah and Joseph.

“Rosina was a wonderful teacher. Always so kind and even tempered. So fine – she was the sweetest old lady,” Kline said, gesturing and inflating his chest.

“Yes, she could be very sweet, very nurturing,” Joseph said, “but she was not simply ‘the sweetest old lady.’ She had a deep understanding of life as well as music. When we were students and she spoke at Aspen, she was almost 90, and she said, ‘Despite how small and worthless you may seem to yourself, you must try to find the strength to continue, to make the world more beautiful.’”

“Those were clichés, for public consumption!”

“No, Dima. Sometimes she would disappear from Juilliard for days, suffering from deep depression. I would call her each day. She would breathe so heavily on the phone and keep repeating, ‘how can I help myself, how can I help myself...’”

“We know that feeling...of helpless sadness,” Sarah said, looking at Dima. “I often think about suicide. Last week, when I went to lay down in my bed, I thought, ‘Please, God, please. I never want to wake up. Let me die tonight.’” She grimaced and said, “But as you see, here I am this evening, chipper, charming, and elegant, if I do say so myself.”

“You are, my dear,” Dima gently said. “And may you wake always from all bad dreams.”

Others spoke up, and soon Sarah took Joseph into the noisy living room. She said, “I remember you helped Dima when he was with you at Julliard. He’s such a sensitive man, but like us, he can be possessed. He is one of us, Joseph.”

She was distracted by seeing Jack talking to Tom, sitting on the thick, upholstered armchairs by the dark bay window. Sarah watched them and felt the male intensity of Tom with his Mediterranean features. She heard, next to her, a suddenly intense conversation between the Sinclairs and the Blacks.

“A lot of what I have to do, a psychiatrist should be doing,” Rachel said. “It’s above my pay-grade. This summer, Nick, sorry, I mean a schizophrenic boy on the unit had gotten agitated, and I called for a tech to help me. As the man came down the hall, the boy lifted his hand to his eye and used two fingers as a sighting device. I thought he act as if he were shooting him, but no, he measured him between his fingers, and then he pretended to slip him into his mouth. It was hard not to laugh as he munched away. Then he started to scream and lifted his fist over my head.”

“Oh my god,” May said.

“You deal with violent schizophrenics,” Robert said. “They can’t pay you enough to do that.”

“That’s the point, isn’t it? I shouldn’t tell you two, here, but we’re going to declare bankruptcy,” Rachel said. “We have no choice. At least we’ll be able to keep our house and our car.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Rachel,” May said, and her German accent was somehow intensified, not in disapproval but in recognition of reality.

“Exactly,” Robert Sinclair said. “I wish we could help.”

“What can I do, Robert?” Jacob said bitterly. “I’m already driving all over Cleveland teaching at four colleges, one class each. And three nights a week, I’m the cashier selling tickets at the Cinema, so the art house crowd can pity me. It’s humiliating.”

“Exactly, I...”

“‘Exactly, exactly, exactly!’ If you say that one more time, I don’t know what I’ll do,” Jacob hissed. “Just don’t say it again!”

Robert’s face turned white, his hands visibly trembled, and he was speechless. People around them turned away.

“Oh, Jacob,” Rachel said, “how can you say that to your biggest supporter, your best friend?”

Sarah took Robert by the hand and ushered him gently away, out of the living room to the dining room and up to the graduate student overseeing the drinks. She pointed down to a side door of the burnished, dark brown credenza and said to the moonlighting student, “Inside there, you’ll find a bottle of Scotch. Please pour my dear friend a glass, with ice. Yes, there. Exactly.”

Chapter 4

Jack – Monday morning, November 20, 1989

Amid the mess of papers, files, and open scores on his study desk, Jack found an open space where he set down his breakfast – a cup of dark-roast coffee with milk and toast and apricot jam plus a half-dozen almonds. It was just after 8 on Monday. Sarah and Joseph were not downstairs yet, and Sue had left for high-school. Last night’s party had filled the house with the voices of a score of people. It was silent now, and he felt haunted again by the feeling he had for months now of living in a sort of vacuum, as if he floated weightless on the surface without any