
"A sensitive, deftly crafted memoir."
—Kirkus Reviews
Michelle Ephraim
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A Tragicomic Memoir of Love & Shakespeare

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MICHELLE EPHRAIM

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for my family

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In writing this book, I learned that a memoir must tell a story that is both personal and universal. Memoir writers must recollect the past from the vantage point of the present, creating a narrative with a distinct shape, with entry and exit points that organize pain into something coherent and meaningful—for themselves and for their readers. To this end, I have compressed certain events and periods of time and sometimes merged two or three individuals into a single character. To preserve anonymity, I have altered some names. Please know that everyone who appears in this book, whether explicitly or in camouflage, has been created with my most honest, respectful, and affectionate intentions.

"Our house is hell."

This is what Shylock the Jew's daughter, Jessica, says when she first appears in William Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice. *If Jessica were a modern-day teenager, we could understand her "hell" as cheeky exaggeration. An omigod-sucks-like-hell.*

But it wasn't until the 1960s, almost four hundred years after Merchant *was written, that the word was used "adverbially as an intensifier," according to* The Oxford English Dictionary. *In the 1590s, when Shakespeare brought Jessica to life, "hell" was deadly serious: it was "a place, state, or situation of wickedness, suffering, or misery."*

Jessica's house isn't the literal underworld; it's just a sad place she's desperate to escape.

Act One

Sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.

—SHYLOCK, *The Merchant of Venice,* I.iii.111

My father loved to read the Grimm brothers' stories aloud to me, his German accent soaring to a joyous crescendo at the climactic moments. Through the words of those old fairy tales, he took me back to his own childhood in Berlin. The private Jewish school he attended before the Nazis shut it down. How he passed as a blond, blue-eyed kid whose friends' parents invited him to their Christmas parties. Underneath the Nazi flags that hung outside their houses, he'd wave goodbye and depart for home with a bag of holiday cookies. They knew he was Jewish, but he didn't look Jewish, so therefore he kind of wasn't. He and his parents stayed so long because they thought they were safe. True-blue, blue-eyed German Jews.

After the war, an ocean away, the scrawny boy with the fair hair and fair eyes became a bald dad who was so hypersensitive to light that he wore oversized Foster Grant aviator shades year round. Every morning at breakfast, they'd perch on his nose like a silent expletive to the sun glaring off our Formica table. Because it was the seventies, we owned a couch covered in rough fabric gristle, and it was there that I'd listen to him read, an eager first-grader wedged tightly against him in one of the scratchy corners. I thought of my father as more of a creature than a man. His arms and chest were hairless, and he smelled of nothing, except the barest whiff of Old Spice. My father was a goofy dad, big on sound effects. For Hansel and Gretel munching on the gingerbread house, he went bug-eyed and produced a sonorous "gomp-gomp-gomp," his mouth stretching into rubbery ovals. The witch's plot to roast the kids got the same: "gomp-gomp-gomp, gomp-gomp-gomp." He read with confidence, his translation of the German into English smooth and proud. He was pleased that I liked the fairy tales and also *Der Struwwelpeter*, or *Shock-Headed Peter*, stories of children who misbehave and suffer the

consequences. In one, Little Konrad persists in sucking his thumb and, just as his mother warned, the Scissor Man appears. A lithe, swift colossus, he bursts through the door and, with a viper's precision, snips off Konrad's thumbs with his gigantic shears

My father gave Konrad one emphatic "KNEEEEP!" with the zeal of a kid on a rollercoaster, his German accent at full tilt.

I felt his parental love and also the agitation of such a bond. I heard in his buoyant voice the pleasant surprise of finding me, a little girl, a decent companion. I heard, too, the bittersweet melody of his words. I understood that the stories were like consolation prizes. My father couldn't stay in Germany, remain the German boy he was, grow up into the German man he was meant to be, so he had these books.

Sometimes, by myself, I would pull out *Shock-Headed Peter* and stare at the pictures. Konrad's bleeding hands. A girl, burned alive, because she played with matches. The skeletal remains of a boy who kept refusing supper.

The book told me what had happened to my father. He, too, was the son of a cold mother who didn't believe in thumb sucking or soothing of any kind. I wondered about my grandmother, as I did about my own parents, and whether their cold disposition was all the Nazis' doing. Or did explanation lie in some inevitable, inborn darkness? Either way, my father had learned the same lesson as Little Konrad: in this cruel world, children will suffer for minor transgressions, or for no reason at all.

The Scissor Man could come at any time.

My father insisted our books be returned to their original spot on the shelf, and held in a particular manner while in transit. I was meant to use both hands, one at the top, the other supporting from the bottom, no dirty fingers on the pages. As with all of my father's movements around the house, his careful placement of a book back on the shelf was accompanied by rapid-fire commentary. "Jacob Grimm. Died 1863. Berlin! Wilhelm Grimm. Died 1859. Also, Berlin! The Berlin-Spandau Canal. Also, 1859!" Details about the history and construction of German boats would follow.

One time, I forgot to put *Shock-Headed Peter* away on the shelf, and

my father found it on the floor, opened wide to the leaping Scissor Man. He made a point of stomping his feet when he was angry, almost as if he were mimicking a petulant child. An exaggerated march that stopped at my door, just as he started the three-pounding. That's how I thought of it, the three-pounding. Three smashing knocks that I'd never answer because, even if I hadn't been frozen in terror, I'd never be able to get to the door before he flung it open.

My mother would have been able to hear the three-pounding from the kitchen. The house had thin walls, and my parents took advantage of its acoustics to yell at one another in German from different rooms. I knew only enough of their native tongue to recognize the routine phrases.

My mother claimed she'd tried to teach me German when I was very young, but in truth she was ambivalent about my learning it. To do so might make me fully German in my father's eyes. In our house, "German" was a compliment. "German" was superior. When I said something my father thought was clever or if I earned any accolade at school, he would announce that I had *his* German blood in my veins. From my father's perspective, my mother had no such blood. She was born in the same country and had also fled the Nazis, but her parents had emigrated to Hamburg from Poland. Like other German Jews with his lineage, my father considered her Polish, not German. She was substandard stock, not a compatriot.

Given my father's obsession with his German identity and our German blood, it seems inconceivable that he didn't simply speak to me in German. Now I wonder whether it was a quiet admission that this language, this culture, this German life, didn't belong to us anymore. Maybe my fluency would have felt, painfully, like simulation. We had the consolation prizes, and that was all.

According to my mother, I was born with a perfect forehead. She was an expert on foreheads, she said, given her line of work. As a professional photographer whose specialty was children's portraiture, she'd seen more than her share of foreheads, and mine was the best one, period. In the basement closet she'd turned into a

darkroom, she'd shut herself away for hours, bathing the glossy sheets in her chemical tubs and emerging with 8 x 10 rectangles of staring children in various shades of grey and white. But I was her primary subject. It was my firm belief that no child in the world was more photographed than me. She hung galleries of me and my perfect forehead all over the house.

When people referred to my "family," I knew to think only of me and my parents, who were a good decade older than my friends' parents. Just the three of us in our modest ranch home in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. My mother's father had died when she was pregnant with me; her mother died when I was a toddler. Neither had met me or my father. The only relatives who were a regular part of our lives were Oma and Opa, my father's mother and father who lived across the country in California. My father was an only child, too, and his parents had long cut ties with any other living family members.

My father had a lifelong fixation with ships and trains. He'd studied mechanical engineering and naval architecture at UC Berkeley and had ended up in D.C. at the Department of Transportation, where he'd work for forty years. In middle age, he assembled ship models, which were encased in glass all over our house, but his greatest achievement took up a good third of the basement. When I was an infant, my father began working on a reconstruction of the old German railway system. On a handmade wooden platform that filled an entire room and then some, he'd constructed a healthy chunk of Deutschland: the tracks, trains, and stations surrounded by the papier-mâché mountains of Bavaria; the wide, grey plaster streets of Berlin; the spray-painted sawdust of my father's childhood playground. And everywhere you looked, half-inch plastic Germans: backpackers amid clumps of foliage (ground-up foam, glue, dye), a family of four entering a concrete-slab *plattenbau* apartment (wooden matchbooks, clay, black paint), firemen in crisis positions around their Ford firetruck (store-purchased, shiny). Every single visitor to our house got led down the stairs, across the orange shag rug, through the heavy vinyl accordion partition, and into the Train Room, which I started to think of as Little Germany.

My father bought me a child-sized pinstriped version of his own conductor's hat and a silver whistle to wear around my neck. I'd proudly introduce every new friend to the wonder of Little Germany, my father and I in our twinning headgear, me blowing hard on the whistle as he happily agreed to work the mammoth control panel and take the trains for a go around the tracks.

My father the engineer built a lot of things: Little Germany, a puppet theater, a chest for my stuffed animals, and, best of all, a grand four-story dollhouse. It didn't look at all like our own house, but above its front door he'd put our house number, 4906, in a careful diagonal of gold stickers. He'd used fabric scraps to create curtains for every window in the dollhouse, and the walls were decorated with real wallpaper, each room a different pattern. He installed a doorbell on the front that buzzed when pushed, and every room had ceiling lights, outfitted with tiny bulbs and operable light switches on the wall. The sloping red roof had hinges, and if you lifted the slats you could see all the wiring, which he'd tucked neatly into nests that made me think of my favorite red licorice. There were plenty of dolls and furniture. A large family filled up that house. The dollhouse, like Little Germany for my father, was my fantasy of Home.

After the displaced *Shock-Headed Peter* incident, I didn't take a book from the bookshelf in the living room for a long time, and when I did my fingers prickled, as if in visceral memory of an electric fence. It was a dangerous spark and an intoxicating one. It was the same rush I got in our backyard, a nice green space with plenty of small trees and bushes for me to indulge in my solo, imaginative games. My greatest passion was the dirt, which I could dig at for hours, stabbing relentlessly with my small shovel. I'd unearth bits of glass and stone, driven with full conviction of imminent treasure. Maybe a ring with an ancient message or an urn decorated in gold filigree? The fantasy wasn't monetary. It was that the found object would link me, specifically, to a story of intrigue. I'd discover that I wasn't really a lonely only child with reclusive parents; I was, in fact, a girl protagonist deeply enmeshed in all sorts of plotlines and characters. The concept was no less exciting for its lack of specifics.

I'd carefully refill the holes and pat down the dirt before going back inside. I wouldn't dare let my father discover the cavities of disrupted soil.

We didn't own a lot of books, which was fine with me. But what I read, I read hard. Books, like the backyard, promised me a portal. I remember the sensation of my finger sliding across the page when I first started to read the Grimms' stories by myself, my anticipation of discovery so intense that I had a physical urge to scrape at the words with my nail. In books was the constant possibility of fellowship; reading alone on the scratchy couch, I was on vigilant lookout for characters with whom I shared anything in common.

My favorite fairy tale in the Grimms' book was *Rapunzel*, the story of a girl forced into a tower and kept away from the world by someone who claimed to be her guardian. In the fairy tale, the witch Mother Gothel makes a deal with a man she's caught in her garden stealing greens—rapunzel lettuce—to satisfy the cravings of his pregnant wife. Mother Gothel says she will spare his life in exchange for their baby. When the baby she calls Rapunzel hits puberty, she locks her up in a tower deep in the woods. A handsome prince and Rapunzel manage a clandestine romance, but when Mother Gothel finds out, she exiles Rapunzel into the wilderness and almost kills the prince. Still, the couple prevails, and we're told they live happily ever after. The Grimms leave the reader to ponder Mother Gothel's intentions. Does she imprison Rapunzel for her own twisted reasons? Or is she trying to protect Rapunzel from a world she believes, however misguidedly, to be cruel?

I saw myself in Rapunzel—locked up and surrounded by the things my parents said would keep me safe. There were the stacks of canned goods in the basement, the wads of cash stashed all over the house. My father had even built shallow hidden drawers under all the closet shelves. When we did the Holocaust unit in elementary school, I resented the teachers for wanting us to feel inspired by Anne Frank's words: "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart." My parents were living, breathing carriers of Holocaust history, and this was not their takeaway.