One Hundred Saturdays

Also by Michael Frank

The Mighty Franks
What Is Missing

One Hundred Saturdays

Stella Levi and the Search for a Lost World

Michael Frank

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for

STELLA,

of course,

and in memory of my grandmothers,

SYLVIA SHAPIRO RAVETCH

and

HARRIET FRANK SR.,

storytellers all

“The tremendous world I have inside my head . . .”

—Kafka

The sea isn't wine-dark so much as a blue so bottomless and transparent that it hurts to look into it, the way it can hurt to look into another person's eyes. I am gazing at this bottomless, transparent blue and I am listening to a ninety-two-year-old woman describe what happened by its shore, at this spot where we are standing, seventy-one years ago nearly to the day.

July 23, 1944: A Sunday. The Germans deliberately chose a Sunday, she tells me, because on Sunday all the shops were closed. And they sounded the air-raid sirens, even though no planes flew overhead, even though no bombs fell out of the sky that day, because the sirens kept everyone indoors—everyone else. In all the hours—six, maybe more—that it took them, more than 1,700 of them, to walk down to the port, not a single civilian bore witness, or objected, or came to say good-bye.

It was like a funeral cortege, she says, of people in mourning for themselves.

At this spot where we are standing, the entire Jewish community of the island of Rhodes—her community, on her island, the place she considered her own little piece of the earth—was loaded onto three boats that would take these 1,700-plus human beings to the port at Piraeus, and from there to the prison at Haidari, and from there to the trains that would deliver them to Auschwitz two weeks later, cumulatively the longest journey, measured by time and geography, of any of the deportations and in many ways one of the most, if not *the* most, absurd.

"We were old people and young women and children," she says. "Most of us had never been off the island in our entire lives, and that included me. It would have been simpler to murder us all here and let us, at least, be buried with our own kind."

Now the ninety-two-year-old—Stella Levi—looks at the water, at the horizon. She stares at the clean, sharp line that separates water from

sky, one blue from another. Then she turns back toward me. Her face is shadowed, her eyes remote, seeing what I am unable to imagine.

For a long moment she is silent. Then she says, "Maybe after a certain point you can no longer come back in person. Maybe you can only go back in your mind."

Stella has come, not for the first time but possibly the last, to the Juderia of Rhodes—to connect, or reconnect, or try to connect, once again, to the neighborhood in which she was born and grew up, like her parents and grandparents before her, and generations before them, all the way back to the late fifteenth century, when these Sephardic Jews were banished from Spain and scattered across Europe and the Mediterranean. Because she has come here, I have too, even though I don't yet know her even a fraction as well as I will. Having learned, while I was in Rome, that she was planning to make a late-in-life return visit to Rhodes, I booked a ticket and more or less invited myself. Later she will tell me this was one of the reasons why she decided to trust me with her story. Later I will understand that I went, in part, to earn her trust.

The two of us had met just a few months earlier at Casa Italiana, the Greenwich Village home of the Department of Italian Studies at NYU, where one evening in February 2015, late for a lecture, I hastily dropped into a chair, the only open seat remaining at a long rectangular wooden table. As I was catching my breath, a question came floating over my shoulder, posed in a thick Italian accent: "Where are you coming from that you're in such a hurry?"

The woman asking this question was older, elegant. Her features were emphatic, her hair tinted brown and immaculately shaped to frame her face. She was wearing a dark skirt, a cardigan, silver rings with stones on alternating long fingers.

I told her that I was coming from a French lesson. She nodded thoughtfully.

I had come to Casa Italiana, as she had, to listen to a talk about the relationship among museums, memory, and Nazi Fascism. The speakers

would discuss memorials, the challenges of marking the actual settings where abhorrent events have taken place or of marking, or commemorating, these abhorrent events in unrelated places.

She had a second question now: "Might I ask *why* you are studying French?"

Her brown eyes were sharpened, honed with curiosity. I sensed her wanting, expecting, an incisive or at least an interesting answer. I only had the answer that I had. I explained that French was the first foreign language I ever learned, beginning in junior high school; after years of speaking more Italian, I told her, I was trying to bring it back. I didn't want to embarrass myself when I traveled, I said. I would like to read Proust in his own language one day.

Somehow, under her fierce gaze, I feared that all this came out as *baguette-croissant-beret*—as in, I would like to be able to ask for such items in a Parisian shop.

She nodded again. "Are you interested in knowing how French served me in my life?"

Having discovered that I spoke Italian, she switched languages, as now so did I. "*Certamente*."

"When I arrived in Auschwitz," she said, "they didn't know what to do with us. Jews who don't speak Yiddish? What kind of Jews are those? Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardic Italian Jews from the island of Rhodes, I tried to explain, with no success. They asked us if we spoke German. No. Polish? No. French? 'Yes,' I said. 'French I speak . . .' "

She paused. "I spoke French, *some* French, because my sisters attended the Alliance Israélite Universelle. What they studied, they shared at home. Also I went on to study the language in school. Many of us girls from Rhodes did. Because we spoke French, at Auschwitz they put us with the French and Belgian women, who spoke French *and* Yiddish, and a little German too, enough so that they could translate and they could communicate. And they understood. Because they understood what was going on, they managed to survive—and therefore so did we."

She sat back in her chair. "*C'est comme ça que le français m'a servi dans ma vie.*"

• • •

The following morning, I received a call from Natalia Indrimi, the director of Centro Primo Levi, a New York–based organization dedicated to exploring the Italian Jewish past that had organized the lecture. I knew Natalia because I had asked her for help researching a story set in Italy during the war years, a subject that had interested me ever since I lived in Italy for a time in my twenties.

Stella Levi, Natalia said, the woman I'd sat next to the previous night, had enjoyed her visit with me. When I said that I had too, she went on to say that Stella had a little something she had written about her childhood and youth in Rhodes for a brief talk to give at one of Centro Primo Levi's upcoming evenings, and as she was unsure of her written English, she wondered if I would meet with her to help adjust those few pages.

Two days later, as I passed under a green awning on University Place, I had no way of knowing that this was the first of one hundred Saturdays spread out over the next six years that I would spend in the company of a woman I would come to think of as a Scheherazade, a witness, a conjurer, a time traveler who would invite me to travel with her.

Maybe you can only go back in your mind?

Maybe.

1

"For a while now I've been thinking it might be time for me to see a psychiatrist again."

This is nearly the first sentence Stella says to me when I step inside her apartment on Saturday.

"I don't know if a psychiatrist would even know what to do with me," she adds. "I went to see three in the 1950s, when I moved to New York. They didn't know what to do with me then either."

I haven't even stepped beyond her small foyer. I do now. Stella indicates a chair; I set my jacket onto it.

"They didn't know what to do with any of us who had come back from the camps. How could they, without having been there? Even when I told them, tried to tell them. But possibly *I* wasn't ready?"

Stella sits down in her armchair and points to the sofa arranged perpendicular to it. She is dressed in smart slacks, a white blouse, a different cardigan from the other night.

I sit down.

"What do you feel?" she asks. "Is it a good idea?"

I think: Psychotherapy—at the far end of life? Certainly it would take some researching, some trial and error, to find the right person. What would such a person be like? What would she have had to experience, or study, or read, to be able to understand, let alone help, someone who had lived through what Stella has?

She doesn't wait for me to respond. "I'm not sure. I haven't been feeling right—in myself. I guess what I really feel is the need to talk."

She looks at me head on, a ninety-two-year-old woman with a question, a need. Here we are: person to person, on a quiet Saturday afternoon in her home in Greenwich Village, meeting properly for the first time.

"Are the camps . . . something you want to talk about now?" I ask.

In her eyes a flash of feeling, not quite anger, but close. "I thought you came here to look at a few pages I've written about Rhodes."

"I have," I say carefully.

She gives me a look that I interpret as suspicious, then opens a folder. It turns out to be the wrong folder, so she springs up and heads toward her desk, which stands in a corner of the living room—and *springs* is the right word; it's as if a tightly wound coil is set free, sending her into the air.

I've never seen a ninety-year-old move like that. An eighty-year-old either, come to think of it.

A few seconds later she thrusts several typewritten pages into my hands. It's clear that she expects me to read and respond to them while I am sitting on this sofa, under her gaze. They feel like a test.

I read them carefully, aware of her eyes on me the whole time. In these pages Stella offers a snapshot, several snapshots, of her youth in the Juderia. She describes an exotic practice called an *enserradura*, something an older woman performed on you if you were a young woman, nearly always unmarried, and anxious or depressed: You were closed up in the house for seven or eight days with this older woman who was a kind of healer, a practitioner of folk remedies and cures—Stella's own grandmother, her mother's mother, was one. Confined for the entire week with this healer, all you were allowed to consume was water and a thin broth. Meanwhile, for the duration of the *enserradura*, the houses nearby on both sides were emptied out so that you could have complete silence and tranquility as this older woman sat by your bed holding a handful of *mumya*, which was said to be the ashes of Jewish saints brought back from the Holy Land. This older woman's hand, holding the *mumya*, circled your face while she said a prayer over you. She kept praying, and circling, until you yawned and she yawned, and then she started over again the following day. After seven or eight days, with a final yawn, you were deemed cured. You got up and went to the Turkish bath to wash and send all the bad feelings decisively away.

I finish reading about this practice, this *enserradura*, and look up at Stella, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, sitting in her living room, with its walls painted alternately deep ochre and a Pompeiian red, its shelves packed with books in five different languages, its floor

thick with muffling Turkish carpets, its computer, television, and devices. "I'm going to guess you never had an *enserradura* performed on you when you were a young girl."

"Oh? What makes you think that?"

"Intuition."

She focuses those biting, clear eyes of hers on me, then says, "Of course not. I wasn't that kind of girl. None of my sisters was either. In fact my sister Felicie—the intellectual in the family—used to say, 'We have to stop even *speaking* about these things. Modernity has come—the Western world is at our doorstep. Freud, Thomas Mann.' " She pauses. "*Now* I can speak of them, though. Now I have come to see that the world I was born into might have been . . . I don't know . . . interesting."

"You didn't think so then?"

"Then I wanted to be free. I wanted a life, a bigger life than I could have in this small neighborhood on this small island in the middle of nowhere."

She sits back, then indicates the pages I've just read. "So? How are they?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure you need my help."

"The English isn't perfect," she says.

"The English isn't flawless, but the stories . . . the one about your aunt, Tia Rachel, collecting rainwater on her terrace to wash her daughters' hair, standing outside with bowls and pans as the clouds open up and rain comes sheeting down, and your uncle saying—"

"*Esta en ganeden*—she's in paradise."

When I seem confused, Stella adds, "It gave her such pleasure, you see, to collect the rainwater." She makes a gesture with her hand. "I would like you to fix up what I wrote. Will you?"

Yes, I tell her. I will.

2

In the intervening week I tinker with Stella's pages and send them to her by email. She writes back to say that she still feels they're all wrong. They're not, but as I will learn, it's not easy to satisfy Stella. Or, rather, it's not easy for Stella to be satisfied with herself.

I return the following Saturday, and we look over my suggestions. This takes us maybe ten, fifteen minutes in all. When we finish, she slips them back in her folder, gives the folder a melancholy glance, and sighs.

We sit together in silence.

I decide to say what I've been thinking during the past week. If she's game, I say, I would like to continue to come listen to her on Saturdays. I would like to ask her about her life, in Rhodes, and in the camps, and after the camps.

"Possibly the rest," she answers, "but not the camps."

"Why not the camps?"

"Because I don't want to be that person."

I ask her what she means. She describes the kind of survivor who has recounted her experience so often that it becomes atrophied, distant—mechanical; she doesn't see the point of people doing that. She has never wanted to be a performing survivor, a storyteller of the Holocaust, ossified, with no new thoughts or perspectives, and with this one event placed so central, too central, in a long, layered life.

I understand, I tell her. And yet—yet what if she began by talking to me about life in Rhodes *before*, along the lines of the pages she gave me to read? What if she could preserve those ways of living, those people, that world?

"There are just a handful of us left," she says thoughtfully.

"Another reason why," I say. "Because when you . . . go, the story of that place, and those lives, will go with you."

"You think I don't know that?" In a softer tone she adds, "There's so much I haven't told. Many parts, the—more difficult parts."

"Do you have any children?" I ask.

"One son, yes. John."

"Have you told those parts to John?"

"Only a few."

Why only a few, I wonder.

"I didn't want to burden him."

"And to your grandchildren, if there are any?"

"Three: Randy, Rita, and Lewis." She pauses. "And I have, a little, but . . ."

"But?"

"I wasn't ready, I suppose."

"Like with the psychiatrists?"

She doesn't nod. But she doesn't shake her head either.

"Are you ready now?"

"Maybe next time," she says. Then she stands up.

3

We resume our places the following Saturday: she in her armchair, I on the sofa next to a white porcelain lamp that is covered with three-dimensional flowers and leaves. We exchange pleasantries, then for one moment, and another, we sit in awkward silence.

"Aren't you supposed to ask me a question to get me going, like where I was born, or my first memory, or something like that?"

Those eyes: suspicious yet provoking at the same time.

"Why don't you tell me when you first knew you were different?"

"What makes you think I was different?" she asks, her eyes sparkling now.

She was fourteen, by a month or two. The notion came to her in the middle of the night—she had no idea how. Possibly from watching her just-older sister Renée turn sixteen and begin to spend hours sitting in

their living room and their *kortijo*, the enclosed courtyard that was a feature of the better houses in the Juderia, all of a sudden like an adult woman bent over needlework at their mother's side, sewing, embroidering, preparing—for the husband she hadn't met, and wouldn't choose for herself. Nightgowns, handkerchiefs, table linens. Sheets, pillowcases. Stella despised all that handiwork. She thought it was a ridiculous way for a girl to spend her time, preparing for this phantom man or boy that someone (her mother, another mother, an uncle, a matchmaker) was going to pluck from the available candidates and present to her like a prize. She had another idea. Before going to bed one night, she found an old suitcase in the back of a closet. She brushed away a thin coating of dust and spread the suitcase out on the floor. She packed it diligently, with clothes, shoes, empty notebooks, pens, a coat. She set it by the door, climbed in between her sheets, and went to sleep.

In the morning her mother found the suitcase and asked her if she was planning on going somewhere.

"Of course I am," she told her. "To university, in Italy."

"Of course, to university, in Italy"—Miriam, her mother, echoed. Miriam had not been educated beyond elementary school, and none of her daughters had gone beyond the equivalent of middle school except one. But she didn't laugh or become upset. She didn't say, *You might outgrow these clothes by the time you're eighteen*. She didn't say, *You'd be the first girl in the Juderia to do such a thing.* She simply nodded at the suitcase and let it be.

Perhaps it was easy to leave things be with the baby of the family, especially when there were the older girls, three left still to worry over and plan for, meaning to marry off and set up in life.

With Renée, the sister who was closest in age to Stella, it became a joke: Stella and her packed suitcase, Stella at fourteen prepared to go away to university in Italy. But not for Stella. She kept it ready for months, repacking it every so often. As the months turned into years, the jokes never went away. But neither did the suitcase.

4

Where *did* she get the idea to start packing, at fourteen, for university?

Possibly from her sister Felicie, though whether because of her or despite her, Stella can't decide.

They were seven siblings—Morris, Selma, Felicie, Sara, Victor, Renée, and Stella. But since Morris left Rhodes before Stella and Renée were born, and since Selma left when Stella was just six, for most of Stella's childhood Felicie was the reigning oldest child, and a very particular one at that.

Stella used to slip out of bed to listen to Felicie, who sat up late into the night with her friend Robert Cohen just to *talk.* Robert didn't seem to be Felicie's boyfriend. His socks didn't match, for one thing, and they sat far apart across the room from each other and never appeared to touch. But they spoke (and spoke . . . and spoke), exchanging ideas and mentioning names that Stella barely registered: Henri Bergson. Tolstoy. Proust. And Felicie didn't behave like other girls in the Juderia, or even in the family; she wasn't like Selma (what Stella remembered of Selma) or Sara, who helped their mother with the cooking. She sat in her room, reading, all day, all evening long. She didn't even come to dinner when she was called. She spent so much time reading that she developed a bald spot on the back of her head for which Dr. Hasson had to mix up a special *pomata.*

Felicie wasn't made for the modern world; she didn't belong in Rhodes. She had the brain of a European intellectual of the early 1900s in the body of a young woman who grew up in the Middle East; hers was a different mentality, a different way of being entirely. Felicie never cared about her clothes. She didn't bother to comb what little hair remained on the back of her head. When the family posed for a photograph just outside the medieval walls that enclosed the old city, she alone among the children turned her back to the photographer.

What was wrong with her? Was anything wrong with her?

5

Felicie was the first member of the family to leave the Juderia after middle school to be educated by the *suore*, the nuns, at the *scuola femminile*, the Italian high school for girls, thereby inspiring Stella to do the same. Felicie was such a memorably accomplished student that, years later, when it came Stella's turn to follow, the *madre superiora* greeted her the first day by saying, "*Vediamo un pò se sarai brava come Felicie*"—let's see if you turn out to be as good a student as Felicie.

Felicie set the standard. And not just at school. She and her like-minded friends took Stella to visit Monte Smith, where Italian archaeologists were excavating the acropolis, with its temples, stadium, and theater that was believed to have been used for a legendary school of Greek rhetoric. She visited Greek Orthodox churches too and liked to study the mosques—from the outside anyway. Felicie helped Stella to understand that they came from somewhere significant, somewhere with a wider horizon than the Juderia, the beach, and the Kay Ancha, the main piazza of the Juderia with its array of shops. Felicie was the first young woman Stella ever heard say that she had no interest in preparing her trousseau. She wouldn't even consider getting married; she had no boyfriend (or girlfriend); she challenged authority, precepts, assumptions.

Felicie explained human nature to her own parents. When Sara was out later than usual, and Miriam stood by the door, watching and worrying while Stella looked on, frightened for what might happen when she turned up, Felicie would sit down with her mother and father and deliver a mini discourse on human liberty and happiness to explain, and thereby justify, why it was perfectly fine for a young woman to exercise free will and come home whenever she chose. And surprisingly they would nod, absorb, agree—apparently agree.

It was from eavesdropping on Felicie, in her late-night talks with Robert Cohen, that Stella first heard anyone speak critically of the Fascist regime they had all grown up under, though at the time she scarcely

understood what this meant. All she knew was that her older sister's conversation was somehow worrying to her parents, and if it had been overheard might have gotten all of them into trouble. "It's a good thing," Miriam said, "that they have their talks at night."

Felicie, the wise daughter, the reader, the clever student who was politically awake: she wrote a brilliant essay about crime and punishment in the thinking of the ancient Greeks that inspired David Amato, a rare member of the community who had gone abroad to further his studies, to propose that Felicie go to Paris, where she might attend the Sorbonne and train to become an educator, the obvious (and virtually the only) path for a bright young woman who was uninterested in marriage or working in a shop, an office, or at a trade.

Miriam had a cousin who lived in Paris. Felicie spoke French fluently. She would not be alone—there would be someone to put a bowl of soup in front of her and keep her company while she studied—but Felicie said no. Unhesitatingly, unequivocally no.

Stella took this hard, her sister's failure of courage: "Felicie was free, and free-spirited, in her mind but not, I discovered, in her soul. It would have changed her life, maybe all of our lives, who knows. But instead, my sister, she wouldn't even consider the idea; she was afraid of living in the outside world."

6

If Felicie was an imperfect model, Renée was the anti-model. Born in 1921, so two years older than Stella, Renée was fashionable; she was fastidious about every aspect of her clothing, her shoes, and her hair. Stella didn't care so much about how she looked (though she cared more than the plain-dressing Felicie). Renée was a *signorina*, a proper young lady, who never used words like the slightly coarse *pasticcio* (mess); Stella said whatever came to mind. Hesitant and delicate, Renée was diagnosed as an asthmatic, and attracted much of her mother's worry and coddling.

Stella was robust and eventually became a distance swimmer who set off for the beach in last season's hand-me-down bathing suit, whereas Renée had to have the newest style. Stella was an intrepid diver, she had dozens of friends. She was curious, ambitious, and bold. Renée was more selective and discerning, her prudent opposite in every way.

"But do you know," Stella says, "after all these years I'm not sure whether Renée was born delicate and careful or whether my mother simply treated her that way and so that was what she became. As I would eventually discover, deep down she was strong, but she was *considered* the frail one, always warned to wear a sweater, to avoid the water if it was too cold. That's how it is in families. One person is one way, the next must be different . . ."

I ask Stella what that left her with.

"The freedom to choose what I wanted to be," she says.

7

At fifteen, Renée set to work on that trousseau, she and Miriam together. There was nothing else for Miriam to do after the older girls had gone—and there was no trousseau-making for Felicie, certainly. She made Renée a beautiful *camicia da notte* of satin; she embroidered table linens and the borders of hand towels. Renée, as if on cue, turned sixteen and had *un flirt* with the son of Alhadeff the banker; there was talk in the community, and Miriam heard about it. As part of the far less well-to-do branch of a rich banking family, Miriam had an acute sense of the local social hierarchy. "Don't get above your station," she told Renée. "It will never happen." And it never did.

If Renée couldn't marry the banker's son, then whom *could* she marry?

Certainly no one in the family, even though cousins were known to marry in the Juderia. Stella's maternal grandmother, Sara Notrica, the healer, was among them. She'd been married to her first cousin Moshe

Notrica, and her verdict on that particular configuration was this: "*Never* marry a relative, never *ever*."

The girls grew up hearing this all the time. It was a warning, a curse. When a cousin in Congo, a perfectly respectable young man, proposed to Renée, she said she couldn't even consider the idea.

Moshe Notrica died before she was born, but Stella grew up knowing that these cousin-grandparents of hers lived apart—in that time and in that place—and it made an impression on her. So too did the fact that her grandmother Sara lived in a house loaned to her by her wealthy banker brother Giuseppe Notrica, a notable philanthropist in the community who had no children of his own and was determined to improve the lives of young people (he endowed the school, built houses whose rent provided books and clothes for indigent students, and established the Fondazione Notrica, a social and cultural center that presented lectures and held dances and other entertainments for local youth). From early on Stella had a strong understanding that, on her mother's side anyway, her family belonged, yet didn't quite belong, to a certain class of people. "You never know in which direction the wheel of fortune will spin," Miriam pointedly told the girls. "It's best not to envy, or resent, what other people have."

Miriam may not have *openly* resented, but she acted in a way that told a more nuanced story. When she came to live with her mother-in-law in her house across the street from the synagogue, the Kahal Shalom, Miriam improved it by bringing with her the furniture that had been part of her trousseau: a credenza, a handsome table and chairs, wrought iron and gilded bedsteads that seemed too fine and too elegant for the setting as it stood. She installed marble on the living room walls; a pavement of black-and-white stones known as *sheshikos*, as was the style in the better homes in Rhodes; a crystal chandelier; and an entry with an attractive gate. "My father grumbled because he didn't like to spend money," Stella tells me, "but he had married a Notrica . . . and anyway he always gave my mother what she wanted."

He had married a Notrica, meaning a young woman who came from money but didn't necessarily have it herself. The Notricas, the Menasces,

the Alhadeffs—or the branches of those families who had means, since not all of them did—had moved outside of the Juderia, to a neighborhood known as the Marash ("outside the city walls" in Turkish), large swaths of which had originally been a humble Greek quarter that the Italians rebuilt with modern houses fitted with bathrooms and state-of-the-art kitchens presided over by housekeepers in starched uniforms, not mothers or grandmothers. Stella would end up going to high school with some of the girls from the Marash, and despite her mother's *stated* philosophy, which she understood and tried to metabolize, she wasn't immune to feelings that certain inevitable comparisons brought on, especially after synagogue, or on holidays. "Our better-off relatives stopped by after services to take a sip of wine or taste one of Mamma's marzipans, but they never stayed for dinner. It may seem like a small thing, but children can be very sensitive to these differences, and it marked me. It marked me in ways I didn't understand until much later in life, when for too long a time I ended up caring too much for clothes, appearances, material goods . . ."

When Sara Notrica died, for seven mornings a chauffeur steered a gleaming black car into the narrow streets of the Juderia and delivered her well-to-do brother Chaim to the Levi house, so that he could sit and mourn and pray with the rest of the family; then every evening the chauffeur collected him again and whisked him off, it seemed, not to just another neighborhood but another world.

That too was something that marked Stella. That too she never forgot.

8

It's not as though the Levis were struggling, at least not in the prewar years. Stella's father was one of the more successful Rhodeslis (*Rhodeslis* is how people from in the community refer to themselves in Judeo-Spanish); a supplier of wood and coal, he continued a business started by his father. He had a monopoly on government contracts for selling coal, with

a territory that stretched to twelve islands, and with a Turkish partner he operated the all-important customs scale at the port. For decades the business thrived, and the family lived well, or well enough, not like the rich banker uncles but with sufficient resources to engage the services of a housekeeper, a laundress, and a woman who came to make *fideos*, Signora Rachel di Dalva, who gave Stella the job of hanging the angel-hair-like pasta out to dry on the railing that lined the terrace. With another family they also shared a festively painted two-room *cabina* on the beach, where the younger children spent much of their summers in joy-filled, sunlit freedom.

Nevertheless the Levis were very much in, and of, the Juderia, which is something that Stella absolutely does not regret, at least not now (it was a different story when she was sixteen, eighteen, twenty and bristled under some of the restrictions that came with being embedded in such a tight-knit community). During her childhood and youth on Rhodes, the Jews, the Greeks, and the Turks, and eventually the Italians too—despite their different backgrounds, religions, languages, and cultures—managed to share the island as they had for centuries in relative harmony, but nevertheless where one lived mattered deeply, and it has come to matter more and more to Stella as she has looked back over the abiding themes of her long and varied life: "When you lived outside of the Juderia you didn't truly belong, since it wasn't possible to belong, not truly, to the Italians, the Greeks, or the Turks."

By remaining in the Juderia, Stella tells me, you lived among the old women who sat outside and told stories in the afternoon within emergency oil-lamp-lighting, or prayer-saying, distance of the synagogue. You took your dishes to be baked in the communal oven and while you waited for them to finish baking you spent the hour gossiping with your friends. You didn't bathe at home because there were no baths at home, or showers either, but at the Turkish baths, once a week, before Shabbat. You sang and learned the Spanish *romansas*; you absorbed, and came to live by, the proverbs (twelve thousand counted by one scholar alone) as though they were molecules in the air or blood in your veins; you learned

to prepare your grandmothers' sweet and savory dishes; you walked with care across the uneven cobblestones; and you fell asleep inhaling the perfume of the courtyards with their intense, unforgettable brew of jasmine and rosemary, lavender and roses and rue.

"None of the girls who *lived out* could tell you anything about any of this," Stella says. "But I can."

9

One evening when she was eleven or twelve, Stella was again listening to Felicie and Robert Cohen speak deep into the night, this time about God, but what, specifically about God, she wasn't certain—until the next morning when at breakfast their father, who had apparently also been listening, said to Felicie, "Did you and Robert mean to say that *man* invented *God*? Did I hear that right?" After taking a deep breath Felicie answered, "Yes, Papa, that's how I see it, that's how a lot of us see it nowadays."

Man invented *God?* Stella expected an earthquake, a tempest. Instead Yehuda's head fell to an angle. He wasn't offended; he was perplexed, curious. Confused. This man who, like most people in the Juderia, followed the Jewish religious calendar through the year, and who never missed a call to prayer, a holiday, or a ritual, and who always went off to work wearing his tzitzit, albeit hidden out of sight under his shirt, and who spent his sabbath afternoons after services reading the Talmud, merely took in what Felicie had to say. He respected her intellect; he believed she knew something, saw or possibly understood something that he did not—"Either that, or he didn't want to pick a fight."

For Stella it was the first time she heard anyone question (or examine, or reflect on) their religion. The Levis lived opposite the Kahal Shalom. Every time there was a fright or a concern, a piece of worrying or bad news, Miriam would send the girls flying across the street to say a prayer

or light an oil lamp, or she would hurry there herself. The synagogue was their anchor; Judaism organized their time, their sense of the world, their consciousness—but did it have to?

10

Yom Kippur that fall was, as usual, preceded by one of Stella's least favorite rituals, the ceremony of kapparot, when family members stood still as a live, squawking chicken was circled around her (or his) head, with the belief that her (or his) sins would thereby be transferred to the chicken. A familiar phrase was recited, much and variously invoked in the Juderia, "*kon el nombre de Avraam, Yishak, i Yakov*"—in the name of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and then the shochet slaughtered the chicken, which was afterward given to the poor.

When she was a small girl, sometimes Stella was lucky: because her family was so large, they ran out of chickens before it was her turn. But not this year. She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth . . . and soon the unpleasantness was over.

After the kapparot, they left Felicie, the nonbeliever, at home to read—she made a point, on this, the holiest day of the year, of at least reading the Bible, or Biblical commentary—while the rest of the family went across the street to the synagogue.

Stella took her place upstairs with the other women. About halfway through the service, she looked down as several of the men, among them her neighbor and good friend Nisso Cohen, stood up to approach the ark. Before these men stepped up onto the platform that stood before it, they shook off their slippers, as was their custom, being Cohanim, and at that moment Stella heard the word *Adonai* sung in a piercing, plangent voice and felt a chill travel through her entire body; she felt, briefly, as if she were levitating over her seat, no longer anchored in it but floating, weightless, there and not there at the same time. "I had no idea what this was or what this meant, I had never felt anything like it before and I never

felt anything else similar until a lifetime later, when the nephew of my friend Fanny Levy brought back hashish from his honeymoon in Mexico, and I had a few puffs and, voilà, the same chill, the same floating"—and, with it, the awareness that she could neither name nor identify when she was a girl, but which she understood as an adult to be a recognition that the human brain, that spongy mass of fat and protein, had a most powerful, mysterious control over her consciousness and could suggest a sense of something higher or larger, something *beyond*.

"Is that the definition of belief, then, the sensation that you are rising up, that you are somewhere other, that some other possibility exists out there? That's what I experienced when I was a girl, just that once, only I didn't believe it was God that I was feeling then, and I didn't believe it was God when I smoked that hashish, and I don't believe it now, but I did feel *some*thing. And I remembered the feeling all my life."

11

The women in the family who remained unwaveringly devout were Stella's grandmothers.

For Stella's paternal grandmother, Mazaltov Levi, synagogue was the only place, other than the Turkish baths, and the cement bench outside of (and built into) the house, where she actually *went*. She had her fixed seat that she took most every Saturday morning; she knew the prayers and believed in their powers; the ritual gave shape to her week, her month, her life. A story was told about Mazaltov that illustrates how her religion formed her entire perspective: One day in the teens, when the first tourists began visiting Rhodes, a ship from Spain docked on the island. The travelers were accompanied on a guided visit to the Juderia, and Mazaltov, hearing these visitors speaking Spanish, declared, "But how wonderful, they're all Jews!"

Her grandmother believed that they were all Jews simply because they spoke Spanish, which was close enough to the language the Levis

spoke at home: Judeo-Spanish, meaning the old Spanish—Castilian—that the banished Jews took with them when they left Spain, folding in over the centuries some Portuguese, a bit of Greek but more Turkish (which was logical given that it was the language of the longtime rulers of the island), and of course Hebrew. "Can you imagine the simplicity of a woman like that?"

I shake my head. Stella shakes her head.

"I'm not even sure that she ever once in her life stepped outside of the Juderia. In fact I don't think she ever did." Again Stella shakes her head. "We're talking about ten, twelve square blocks in all."

Her grandmother Sara was an entirely different story. She didn't merely leave the Juderia. Every year after a certain age, when she was in view of eighty, she traveled to Jerusalem, where she hoped to die and be buried, which in Rhodes and elsewhere in the Jewish Mediterranean was considered the most desirable place to end one's life. Her banker brother, Giuseppe, and his wife had gone there to do just that and eventually succeeded, but each time Sara went to Jerusalem, she kept on living. So she would fill her bags with *mumya* and other herbs and cures, come home to the island, and get back to work.

When she returned from her trips Sara would gather the grandchildren around and tell the story of her adventures, her visit to the tombs of Abraham and Sarah, say, where she walked down a narrow tunnel, following a flickering candle, and how it was frightening and beautiful, both at once. Arguably, though, this was less Sara the believer than Sara the storyteller who not only after her travels but often on winter evenings would enchant the children with *konsejas*, tales of an often moral or instructive or silly nature, like those that featured Joha, the wise fool, or foolish wise man, at any rate a memorable trickster who was much invoked in the Juderia of Stella's youth.

12

Sara was not a trickster and nor was she a fool; she was a wise woman, much in demand in the Juderia. "To have a grandmother like that," Stella says, "was a source of pride."

Picture this, she tells me—

Young women who succumbed to frequent spells of anxiety. Yehuda one winter catching a cold, a serious cold that progressed into pneumonia. In the uneven, unlit stone streets of the Juderia, people, young and old, robust and frail, afraid of falling and wounding themselves, or indeed falling and wounding themselves. Who did these struggling or suffering people turn to, what did they do, for cures and remedies, or to soothe and calm their nerves and fears?

Two Jewish doctors practiced in the Juderia, Dr. Hasson (Felicie's pomade-maker) and Dr. Gaon. Outside of the neighborhood a Greek physician, Dr. Filo, who spoke Judeo-Spanish, was occasionally consulted as well. The family dentist, also Greek, practiced fifteen minutes away on foot outside the walls. But often, before anyone ran to the professionals, they turned to the old women who'd received recipes and cures, practices and prayers, from their mothers and grandmothers and were constantly being summoned, hurrying from one house, one sickbed, to another.

Late in life, Stella's older cousin Rebecca Amato Levy—the daughter of Rachel who washed her daughters' hair with rainwater—wrote a book of personal reflections called *I Remember Rhodes.* Stella lifts it off her shelf and reads me her cousin's description of following their mutual grandmother into the homes she was requested to visit:

> With an air of confidence, she would enter the home of the sick as if she were a doctor. Her carriage was regal. She wore a long gown and robe (*sayo* and *antari*), a small hat (*tokado*) with the brooch in the center of her hat, and a gold belt and necklace.

> Her first words upon entering the home were '*traimi un punado de sal!*' Bring me a fistful of salt.

Stella's eyes gleam as she tells me that the *enserradura* was simply the most extreme, and longest, of these treatments and maybe for that reason the one that remains especially vivid to her—either that, or maybe because whenever it was being administered in her street she and her sisters were sent to sleep over at their cousin Sara's and stayed up late into the night playing, a mini holiday.

There were other cures, though, ones that Stella observed for herself and ones she learned about later on, because by the time she came of age they were beginning to fade away:

For falls, if you were a child, or for night fears or bad dreams experienced at any age, the old woman would calm you down by applying three pinches of sugar on your tongue, and she would recite *Kon el nombre del Dyo* or *Kon el nombre de Avraam, Yishak, i Yakov*. Sometimes, as a kind of reprimand to the street that caused you to fall or injure yourself, the old woman would ask you to accompany her to the exact spot where the mishap took place, and she would throw salt or sugar down on the ground and recite the prayer. Stella saw her grandmother do this frequently.

Salt served many purposes. It could play a role in the *enserradura* (in combination with, or in lieu of, *mumya* if the latter was scarce), and even outside of the *enserradura* the old women would take a few pinches in their hands and circle your face—a practice known as a *prekante*—if you had been frightened (for example, if you'd seen a rat, or if you walked all of a sudden into a dark, scary room, like an attic or a cellar).

To cure acne, leeches were applied behind each ear. Stella vividly remembers watching as her older sister Sara underwent such treatment: Miriam picked up one leech, which kept creeping off course and crawling down Sara's neck, and put it back where it belonged.

To ease the severe asthma—much more severe than Renée's—that afflicted their aunt Lea Galante Notrica, the suffering woman was made to tent her head with a towel over a basin filled with marijuana smoke and inhale, or else drink a tisane brewed from the same herb.

To resolve Stella's father's cold, the one that progressed into pneumonia, Stella's grandmother Sara treated him with *las ventozas*, or cupping: a wick was lit, dropped into a glass, and the glass was upended on his back, where the rising heat created suction that was believed to draw the toxins out of the body. Sometimes the skin reacted—puffed up too high—in which case tiny incisions were made with a knife to cause it to deflate again.

For *sarampion*—measles—a specialist came in, a Turkish man who accompanied you to the beach, where he washed you down with cold seawater. For more severe cases he also made little slices in your forehead.

For fainting fits or dizzy spells, lemon was often inhaled.

For Miriam's *dolores de kavesa*, likely migraines, Sara treated them in this way: she sliced lemons or potatoes extra thin, placed them on Miriam's forehead, and wrapped her head with a tight cloth. Potatoes were also effective at absorbing fever; after they'd been wrapped around a burning head and left there for some time, they were practically cooked.

"My God," I say to Stella when she tells me that one.

"Don't say, 'My God,' Michael. There was a logic to these cures. They had been handed down through the generations. And, what's more, they worked."

13

When I arrive the following week, Stella's cousin's book is still on the table in front of me. While Stella is filling her water glass, I open it.

For *bukeras*, or sores on the corners of the mouth, you are to rub them early in the morning against anything made of steel still covered in dew.

For symptoms associated with having had an encounter with the evil eye (*oju malo* in Judeo-Spanish), such as loss of appetite, lethargy, and so on, you are to wear a blue stone or bead. Or throw a handful of salt into the toilet while urinating. (Salt again!)

These stone beads, Stella tells me when she sits down, or their near relations, a charm in the form of a hamsa, or hand of Fatima, she and her sisters often wore pinned to their underclothes (sometimes along with sprigs of *ruda*, or rue) as an insurance against all kinds of worries or dangers or hurts.

For *los locos*, the mentally disturbed: there was nothing to be done. After the Italians took charge, such people were sent to an institution in Palermo, and for years afterward Palermo was associated with mental illness. If someone displayed behavior that was *loko* or even just *un poko loko* people would ask, "*Mandaremos a Palermo?*"—Shall we send him to Palermo?

For festering sores, rheumatism, or arthritis: A crosscut was made on the arm or leg, and a garbanzo bean was placed in the middle of the incision, covered with a grape leaf (*oja de kura*), and held in place with a knotted scarf. After a few days, a sore would appear, the leaf would be changed, and also the bandage, which would be filled with pus from the sore that developed. This continued until the pain, and the toxins causing it, went away.

(This time I refrain from uttering "My God." I know better by now.)

For *gota*, a stroke, there was no cure at all.

I flip ahead in Rebecca Amato Levi's book to a collection of folk beliefs, and begin rapidly taking notes—

You do not borrow eggs at night
You do not talk about teeth at night
A bed without a pillow is bad luck
If you are speaking about death and you sneeze, you must pull your earlobe
If you eat at the table without a tablecloth, the devil will come and put you down as a tablecloth

The list is long, compelling, in places dreadful. But to Stella's mind what's truly interesting is the *why* behind these beliefs:

The salt or sugar being thrown down into the street where people fell, or were afraid to fall, and the prayer being recited afterward? This, Stella points out, is connected to the topography of the Juderia and its history. Before the Italians came, before there was electricity, after nightfall the narrow streets of the Juderia were indeed verifiably dangerous, and people were afraid of falling and not being found until morning, so someone devised a response using the tools at hand (salt, sugar, a prayer).

The bed without a pillow? That was because when someone died, it was customary to take the pillow away. Stella's father, after sitting beside her grandmother Mazaltov's deathbed, at one point eased the pillow out from under his mother's head. Everyone understood what that meant.

After I close the book, Stella reminds me that the Rhodes of her youth was undergoing a multifaceted transition toward modernity. While her grandmothers' generation was still alive, yes, they continued to respect their beliefs and embrace their treatments, but even then there was an understanding that other choices, other ways, might be called for.

By the time her grandmothers had both died in the mid-1930s, everything had changed. "We let go of the old ways—well, *many* of the old ways. We went to the medical doctors more often. Anyway one or another of us was always running to the pharmacy—Menasce or Spano, we patronized both—for Veramon, the analgesic my mother took for her headaches, and other medicines that the pharmacists, as was the habit then, mixed up themselves. After all, you couldn't always count on there being a cold potato or a cucumber in the house when you needed it, could you?"

14

What about her mother, I ask Stella. Did Miriam have these healing skills—did they transmit from her mother and *her* grandmother?

Stella stands up, walks across the room, and picks up a framed photograph of a woman with crimped hair wearing an elegant dress, long

necklaces, smart shoes. "Does a woman who dresses like this look like she might perform an *enserradura*?" she asks. Miriam was chic, clearly, and also, Stella adds, in many ways modern in her behavior and her thinking—certainly light-years more modern than *her* mother. But the truth is that she didn't have the time to run around and recite incantations over people when she had the house to run, the children to feed. This was her job, and with seven children it was nearly all-consuming for many years.

Like most of the women of her class in the Juderia, Miriam didn't do the food shopping; it wasn't considered proper for a lady to trade with (male) shopkeepers and tote her purchases around on her arm. Either the food came to her, from Turkish or Greek farmers or dairymen who visited the Juderia daily, or she sent the children to pick up what was needed. In fact Miriam only ventured into a shop to buy fabric to take to the dressmaker, or to the shoemaker to be fitted for—always—custom shoes. (The children in the next generation wore factory-made shoes imported from Italy.) Eventually a Turkish fellow called Gabai opened a tiny but convenient grocery store across the street from the Levis' house, but even then, if Miriam required something, she would still send one of the children, she never went herself.

Preparing the food was a different story. Miriam cooked, assisted by the older girls, Selma and Sara, while they were still at home, with Selma ending up being the most accomplished of all of them in the kitchen. Felicie pitched in—"so she wouldn't feel bad, and after all you can't read *all* the time"—but Renée and Stella, in the early years, were too young to lend a hand; instead they were given pieces of dough to play with.

Food prepared at home, as opposed to being sent to the communal oven, was cooked, typically, on two coal-fueled burners in the kitchen, though for larger meals and holidays Miriam would set up a kind of barbecue, also coal-fueled, in the *kortijo.* (Hot coals also provided the source of heat in the charcoal box irons they used to iron their linens.) Their diet was prepared on a base of olive oil; no one used butter, Stella says, until the Italians came, and never at all in the Levi home. When I ask Stella how she knows when butter was introduced, since that happened