

This is an excerpt from the near the end of Part 1 of **Lament: A Soviet Woman and Her True Story**. The setting is Odessa, Ukraine, in October 1941, four months after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. After a summer-long siege, ending in the Red Army's retreat, the Axis forces have occupied the city; and as happened also in Kiev, a timed bomb has gone off in the occupiers' new military headquarters (again they'd chosen a building formerly occupied by Stalin's secret police). Amid the many Romanian dead are members of the Einsatzgruppen of their German allies, Hitler's Jew-killers on the ground. Now an order has gone out for reprisals. Attempting too late an escape out to the countryside, instead the pregnant protagonist, her two young nephews, her in-laws and a hapless wine clerk, wind up driving straight into the massacre that follows (graphically at points), as witnessed by Musya Kotz's real-life model.

([Courtesy of Nostalgistudio](#))

Picking up speed, the truck barreled into a wide intersection. There it braked hard to a shuddering stop. Boys, bags, heaps skidded forward in compressed confusion. Musya's head took a bump on the cab's back window frame; the nephews' skulls were fine, her fingers checked. In the cab Papa Kotz was moaning—injured? Dying? But his wife's voice sounded hollow not with shock or grief but fright:

“No! No! No!”

Traffic continued to race past. Over an uproar of motors and horns laced with sirens and screams came quick shuffles of machine gun fire. A tap on the cab window: Yankel, white-faced, signaling through the dust-gray glass: *Down*. Then his hand across his eyes and a slow headshake: *Don't Look*. Musya nodded. As the truck edged forward, she slid down to lie as flat as she could and settled her nephews close on either side, saying to shut their eyes tight and pretend it was bedtime. Naturally they bargained: in exchange for compliance, a hero brothers story, a new installment they demanded right away.

Musya nodded and began. “One day, Jim and Tom were exploring for new caves.” Just then the truck wheels jumped and jolted over a hard obstruction, at which the split-sided carrier bag gave up the spirit and spilled its contents across her legs. “Stay down,” she ordered. One glance, once she could finally sit up far enough to see past her own abdomen, sufficed to

reveal the situation: her legs were half-buried in cans. Smoked fish, mainly. There was nothing she could do about it now.

She glanced through the gap and there was a man floating above the road, three or four meters away, she could see his striped pants cuffs, his pale blue socks, his polished oxblood dress shoes, defying gravity—an authentic wonder. Curious, she leaned a little closer to the gap only to see another levitator pass, this one in rough brown trousers that were stained and torn open to show bloody knees, black blood; this one hadn't left the Earth to its own rotation so effortlessly as the first. She had a confused notion that both men were capitalist scientists whose conquest of weightless flight—an awesome discovery, truly an attainment to the power of ancient gods—gave them command of the scene and of all the people on this stretch of road, at least, if not throughout Odessa. The next flying man to appear had lost his pants entirely, lift-off had stripped them down to his ankles from which they hung inside-out like a rotten peel. The bare legs, still as ivory, were splashed with ink-black hair that grew denser as she dipped her head to see it thatch and curl into a cushion for a manhood thick, purple, half-concealed by a shirttail. Musya's eyes grappled with this sight as it receded. Immediately in front of her now was a dead woman dressed for work on a cooperative restaurant serving line who'd been hanged by her neck from a streetcar wire with her own uniform belt.

A sharp elbow nudged and Sender asked, “What happened?”

“No! Stay down, don’t—nothing happened. Keep your eyes closed.” She could see they hadn’t looked, hadn’t seen, but she covered Sender’s face with her folded shawl. Wool-muffled, he went on:

“In the story, Musya, what happened? They went exploring for new caves, you said.”

“They found one,” she answered quickly, “very deep.” Far below everything, her lips continued, the deepest cave they’d yet discovered was full of flowers. They grew from the rock, profuse without sun, a cave garden of thick freckled colorless petals and leaves—the color of rocks—and honey-scented, fertilized with everything that drained down deep, seeping from Odessa’s heavy body. The cave flowers stirred and all together turned their pale blooms towards Tom’s lantern flame.

She began to vomit and barely reached the side before she could spew over it. Small cans tumbled everywhere in the truck bed. Crushed between the metal and her choking bulk, poor Anton kicked and struggled. Finally she spat, wiped her mouth on a sleeve, and stole a glance up the road ahead, then another behind at the tracks that partnered the parallel wires of her old streetcar line. Dead hanging bodies were strung up along the route as far as she could see: she could have counted dozens. Under a few, the living had collected to lament, to howl, to clutch dead ankles, to collapse and huddle in the road. Most

were unattended. Clearing the panicked sidewalks like some great segmented insect came a line of men with stepladders.

“I can’t breathe!” Anton used his fists now. His face was cherry red. She apologized and reached to gather him to her aching breasts—almost in time. He dodged her and spotted something, legs bleeding through long underwear most likely. “What’s that?” he cried.

She caught and pulled him back, saying, “Nothing.” Conjecture came in hot breath to her collarbone:

“Malokhim!”

Angels—this was almost to laugh at. “No.”

“Where? I want to see!” Excited and curious, Sender reached for the shawl. “Where are they?”

“No! They’re only traffic guards,” she insisted. “Boring. But we can’t look at them, if we look they’ll get angry and they might stop us. We have to keep going—don’t look!” She settled Anton beside his brother and covered both their heads with the shawl. “Don’t you want to hear about the cave flowers?” They did but grumbled anyhow, for they liked the sight of guards. Thinking of the peppermint balls she’d stashed away weeks ago, Musya turned to reach for her bag and caught sight of something outside that made her stare.

A woman, a very small one, had been hanged fully clothed in costume. An odd costume, it featured a structured bodice atop an old-fashioned mermaid’s tail skirt and it looked familiar. Musya puzzled over the blue bead-trimmed fabric and then she

recognized the style, the cut: absolutely, this was one of her mother's dresses—definitely one, that is, of the dresses her mother had sewn and her father had sold to a client, one of his miserly age-shrunken old women who now, still wearing it, hung there in the weak sunshine, tiny and terribly stretched, with one foot stuffed in a house slipper and one foot bare, yellow and blue. It was so very familiar, Musya thought she herself and not her father might have sold this dress, years ago; she even thought she recognized the widow Tsigal whom she had failed to visit. But the purplish dead features wouldn't come clear no matter how she strained her eyes before face, dress and woman had passed out of sight, gone behind the next victims. The slipper had looked new.

“The cave flowers turned their heads all at once towards the light,” she continued in a firm voice. “And Jim was so surprised that he dropped the lantern on the ground.”

“It was Tom's lantern—not Jim's, Tom, his lantern,” Sender complained. “I want to look!” Anton, too, he wanted to see more angels.

“No looking. Tom dropped the lantern.” She paused as the story paused to choose direction. Did the lamp oil spill and catch fire, were the hero brothers quickly surrounded by kerosene flames—or was the one flame snuffed, leaving them in total darkness? Would there be conflagration in the garden, the cave flowers aflame, twisting in agony, uprooting themselves from the rocks, fleshy petals blackened, burst stem walls piping

on the boil? Or lightless limitless blackness and a rustling in the hollow chill, rustling that would become a rushing wave of sound and overpowering sweet, sweet scent as the lonely, carnivorous cave flowers advanced?

Musya didn't know, she couldn't decide. She lay back in the truck bed. At the next slight curve the full sun fell behind the hanging bodies and cast their shadows one by one across the tarpaulin roof—eyns eyns eyns—as if through fence palings. In the truck cab Baila Kotz's voice sustained a single wailing note, a violin and siren hybrid. The lantern shattered, what came next? And why hadn't she paid a polite call on the widow Tsigal as her Daddy had told her to, weeks ago, when she could have done it easily? The old woman might have waited, expecting her visit, might even have laid in some chocolates for old time's sake. Seized by regret, Musya Kotz kicked restlessly at the juddering cans. The future was changeable, no outcome was certain; a single day, an hour, one action, one remark dropped however carelessly inside the past could change everything. A timely kindness might have tinkered with the clockwork of all time to come and prevented the worst from occurring—but she'd withheld kindness. “The lantern broke,” she said, “and the flame—”

Sender nudged her with his knee. “But you said they had electric torches.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.” He sounded less puzzled than exasperated. “From the crate.”

“What crate?” She was mystified.

But Anton also remembered. “You know. From America.”

The Americans—she’d forgotten all about them. They were allied with the Soviet Union in the war. This was supposed to have helped but didn’t appear to be helping. She still didn’t recognize the crate. “Tell me,” she said. Shouts came from the road as Yankel made a sharp turn; the tires jolted over the tracks again and they entered a side street. The plot filling her ears with unsequential detail was barely familiar. Of course, sometimes the boys took the telling of the Jim and Tom saga upon themselves and sometimes her attention wasn’t the closest. She wondered what else she’d missed. She felt grateful, in any case, to the United States of America for the electric torches with which both heroes were equipped. A deep breath, and she was able to begin again: “So Tom switched on his torch—”

“Jim! Jim’s torch! Tom’s is broken.”

She really frustrated them sometimes. She pulled both boys closer as the truck bed bounced and banged hard enough to make the heavy luggage jump. Gears pounding, not braking at all, they raced through the foul smells of a tannery precinct and then left, right, down narrowing streets lined with low, poor, crumble-roofed dwellings. Geese raged in a long yard. The cave flowers proved friendly and hardly more carnivorous than Jim

and Tom themselves, really. They spoke Yiddish, Flower Yiddish, Musya explained. Intrigued by the ways of humankind, and maybe grown a little bored with life in their lightless cave, the flowers were eager, once they'd learned of its existence from the hero brothers, to join the war above, lending what help they could to Odessa's underground resistance. Suitable for service on many sorts of missions, these versatile and fragrant allies could, for instance, disguise themselves as congratulatory bouquets and upon delivery to various high-ranking officials among the city's fascist conquerors, devour their recipients.

Here the ride turned too rough for storytelling. Down one dank, stenchful alleyway after another the rattling truck pitched as Yankel sped steadily. Rotten plaster mappd with stains streamed past. At the first open spot the truck slammed to a halt. People were near, voices, activity on a poor street. Musya's stomach was heaving from the sudden stop. She looked for some water. Yankel came out from the cab and spoke, amazing her:

“We're here, Musya. Your parents' house.”

A wild survey showed her nothing familiar—almost nothing. Obscurity and mud: “How on earth did you find it?”

“I know every street in Odessa and every suburb.” Pride made him blush. “It's my talent.”

A great one, she told him. Falk's sending Yankel to drive made perfect sense now, because a more out of the way corner to live and grow up in she couldn't imagine. Had the street

always been so narrow? A thin crowd seemed like a throng passing. Panicked and hurried, struggling for footing, shouting and shoving to make way for its babies, its old folks, its bundles and handcarts heaped with suitcases, a population squeezed past—no one she recognized. Who were these people? They eyed the truck, showing teeth, desperate and covetous strangers. Yankel helped her down onto the muddy road and across to the door of the little house where she promised to hurry. He returned to guard the steering wheel. She hoped neither parent would have much to pack.

Except for the drunkard in the cellar, once a soldier, who remained to moan the refrain of his eternal marching song, the house appeared abandoned. Newspaper sheets, cabbage leaves and all sorts of rubbish choked and slickened the little staircase up to her parents' room. She picked her way carefully, in time to the cracked old voice coming through the floorboards. *The Red Army is the strongest*, she didn't think so, feeling chilled. Her parents had left Odessa without her, she thought.

But a call came in answer to her knock and Musya stepped inside. She paused by the door. The mother was sitting at her work table, not sewing but reading, she held a sheet of paper in her hand.

“Oh, it's you,” she said.

They looked at each other. Musya thought her mother might be quite breakable, she was so emaciated. Neatly combed and dressed and deathly thin, she sat reading old

letters. With an unpleasant sensation, Musya recognized her sister's handwriting, black and spiky. "That's my greeting?" she said.

The mother frowned. "What brings you here? I've shunned you, Musya, I told you this."

"If you shun me so much then what made you send me the book with my poem?"

"Because I don't want it here. I don't have room for it, as you can see."

Musya glanced around at her old looking glass, her old bookshelf, quite full, her old things taking up space around the curtained sleeping alcoves. "So you couldn't send my gramophone? That's much bigger."

"You want the gramophone? Take it."

"I do want it."

"Then take it," said the mother.

"What's wrong with you! What makes you hate me?" She raised her hands to her face and realized that she was clutching a can of sprats, Swedish, in oil. "Mommy, tell me. What did I do so wrong?"

A sigh. "Musya, you're too excited, sit down."

"I can't sit down, there isn't time—where's Daddy? We have to go, please, I have—there's a truck outside, we're going to the country. Please, get your things, only what you'll need, warm things, food. Daddy, come, get up!"

Nothing happened. “He’s not here,” the mother said. “And I’m not going anywhere until he gets home.”

“So when will that be? Where is he?” A shrug, another. “When did he leave?”

“Six days ago. He went to get food. It was lunchtime, he was hungry.” Her mother glanced again at the letter in her hand, its closing lines plucked a slight smile from her features before she folded and returned it to its faded blue envelope. “He found one of his old women to take him in and feed him Turkish delight, no doubt. He’ll be home soon enough. You’re free to wait.”

Musya’s breath got shorter as the room began to buzz. Six days. She thought of Falk’s visit, Falk’s wife. Six days ago the Romanians and their Einsatzgruppen friends had just arrived in town. It would have been a bad day to go shopping—so bad, it didn’t seem possible that anyone with a brain, especially one in a Jewish head, would have attempted such a thing. She moved across the room; her hand reached up and drew aside one sleeping alcove curtain and then the other, pepper-patterned one; she moaned at vacancy. Immediately she began to listen for her Daddy’s footstep on the stairs, any second now it was bound to come, he’d be picking his way through the filth and probably exclaiming in a mild undertone at the waste of good cabbage; already the wait was unbearable. Six days the mother had had of this wait. As for the shopping he hadn’t brought back with him—she looked around.

“Have you any food here?”

“I don’t need food.”

This was where Anton got his stubbornness, inherited, exactly from this woman. “Mommy, get up and get your things together and let’s go, we have to leave right now.” She looked for a traveling bag and found one under a bed, dragged it out and swatted at the moths that rose from the carpet sides. “Here—what do you need?” Her mother hadn’t moved. “Please, Mommy, don’t you understand? You can’t stay here, you can’t wait for Daddy any longer. There’s a massacre outside—it’s reprisals.”

“It’s a pogrom,” said the mother. “Be accurate, Musya. This is a pogrom.”

“It’s—what? You know?”

“Of course I know. I have ears and a window, I know what a pogrom sounds like. Here we are.” She smiled an especially bitter smile. And Musya, noticing the black gap where a tooth had been, was struck by its actuality. Her mother was no longer young. Her mother was mortal. Her mother was right: here they were, in the present moment.

“Please come with us.” Her childhood voice, she couldn’t help it. “Please, Mommy.”

The mother refused, almost gently, still firmly. “No. You go along. Take care of my grandchildren.”

“Come be with your grandchildren! And your daughter—your living daughter and her baby, too—we all need you. Come take care of us.”

“Don’t be silly. And Musya, whatever you do—don’t die in childbirth. Please, for my sake. And yours. My aunt died in childbirth and it’s the worst death for a woman, so painful and such a waste.”

“Yes.” She remembered now this great-aunt, this story; the memory had been absent from her mind but it was all coming back to her.

“Promise me.”

“Yes, Mommy, I promise not to die in childbirth.” Desperately she added: “You should come, Mommy, and be there to help me when—I mean, I won’t die if you’re there, Mamenyu.”

“I couldn’t do you any good. What do I know? I sew terrible dresses.”

“Did you know, Mommy, they’re hanging people from the streetcar wires? Women, too?”

“It doesn’t surprise me.”

“I don’t want you to stay here—I don’t want someone to take you and hang you from a streetcar wire.”

With a last shrug, the mother turned back to her work table. “Hanging is quick. It’s not as bad as what happened to your poor sister.”

“But Liza died in bed, with her family beside her—she was so ill, Mommy.”

“No. Before. What killed her.”

“Tuberculosis killed her,” said Musya.

“Betrayal killed her.” Emaciated hands ran across the heaped letters as if the mother kept reading with her palms. “Your sister was a woman of faith.”

Outside a horn bleated: Yankel. This was taking too long. “Mommy, let’s talk about it on the way, you can bring your letters and we can read them together—please, we have food in the truck. You need to eat something.”

There was something corrosive in the look turned on her now. “How can you think I would leave your father to go with that family of devils?” Musya stared at this. Devils? The Kotzes—and she knew her Kotzes by now—were tedious, obsessive but woolly-brained, lovers of comfort, rather lazy and selfish people. Devils they weren’t. Her mother was raving. “Devils and destroyers!”

“But I thought you liked them, Mommy. You always said they were very respectable.”

“Don’t you dare throw my words back at me, Musya!”

“And don’t you dare criticize, Mommy, when you gave your daughters to that family, both of us—you did that, Mommy.”

“I did that.” The enormous eyelids slid closed and she raised a wrist to her forehead. “Yes.”

Musya glanced at the wall and noticed that Vera Kholodnaya’s old publicity photograph had faded considerably. “Mommy, we don’t have time for dramatics now, please.”

The mother’s hand slapped the work table. “Do you know what kind of man your husband is? The man you let, the man

you allowed.” She stopped and gestured at the pregnancy. “Have you any idea?”

“What kind of man?” Musya almost shouted. “A silly man—a ridiculous man! My sister’s husband, the father of her children. A terrible housekeeper, a terrible planner, a terrible man to have for a husband in an emergency—what do you want me to say? He has his good points. He’s kind. He’s a gentleman,” she added, using the Russian word. Never had she felt more certain that Boris Kotz was dead than she did at this moment as she struggled to speak of him as if he were still alive. Her eyes stung with tears for him, for herself, for her children. “And a good father—he is!”

“Do you have any idea how many people your good gentleman helped send to prison? With his letters, how many good men and women are dead because he denounced them by name?”

There was no time for this now. Letters, her mother wanted to talk about letters—letters were the problem, that at least was true. Out from the past, dead Liza’s words had crawled like biting insects; Musya pictured the squirming black syllables scabbed on her mother’s brain where they bit and fed. She wished she had a match, she could burn the whole heap. “Mommy, please—let the past alone.”

“The past is all I have.”

“What? Mommy, you have me—you have your grandchildren.”

“His children.” A large teardrop rolled down her mother’s starched linen cheek. “The children of a murderer.”

“But Liza loved Boris Kotz, she was very nice to him before she died, really, she didn’t accuse him of murder, she didn’t say any of this.”

“Of course not. She forgave him. She said he couldn’t help it that he’d lost his faith.”

“But—faith is difficult.”

“How would you know?” her mother demanded harshly. “When have you ever shown any interest in God, even a biseleh—never.” Recalling her vision, on the day of the harbor detonations, of God and his jackbooted angel troops straddling Odessa, Musya stayed quiet. Her mother kept on: “Your sister was a good woman, Musya, not like you or me. She believed and she acted according to her beliefs. She could do that. Not me. I can’t believe anything, I don’t have that ability. I’m all head—I just know things. And you, you follow your moods, your whims, your—your appetites. But your sister Liza had faith. She believed.”

“So? So? Look what good it did—look where it got her. A grave in Siberia with not even a stone—a wooden board, Mommy, that’s what Liza got for believing.” And if not for her sister’s faith, Musya herself would have had an entirely different life—maybe in America, she thought suddenly. If not for God, she might be in America, a free woman.

The mother said, “At least she kept her honor.”

“Excuse me? I don’t have honor? I’m a married woman, too, Mommy, you should remember, it’s thanks to you that I am. You don’t like your son-in-law and mekhutonim, blame yourself. You could have called me home.”

“I couldn’t go against your sister’s wishes! And she never expected you’d give yourself—it was you, Musya, you were the one, you could have done differently, you could have chosen—”

“To what? To live the rest of my life without ever having a man again? No thank you!”

The mother was disgusted. “Oh! Musya! You and your men!”

She heard another call from the truck horn. They could have argued forever, she knew. “Are you coming with us or not?”

“I’ve told you.” It was as she’d already explained, she’d wait there for her husband to return, she couldn’t leave before he came home. Musya practically slammed the tin of sprats onto the work table and stepped back to blow her nose. The mother studied the red and white lettering. “Is this from that crook?” she said. “That so-called uncle?”

“Falk is no crook, Mommy, he’s a respectable businessman and he’s saving our lives. He’s a fine, good man with a heart of gold.”

“Oh yes?” The mouth so like Liza’s twisted. “Don’t tell me he’s gone after you now. And in your state—what, his wife’s sister isn’t enough for him?”

Too angry to speak, Musya advanced on the mother to kiss her goodbye, a rough kiss on her hair parting, on her scalp that smelled sour. The hair was mostly gray and thinning. She was over fifty years old, her marriage and her daughters had come to her late in life. Perhaps she ought not to have had them, especially the husband; she'd often said so. But there they were or had been. She'd had them. She was a wife and mother.

Who said, "Don't forget your gramophone."

"I won't!" Musya stomped across the room and took her old reward to herself from its place in the corner into her arms. It made a cumbersome burden. "Zay gezunt, Mommy," she said.

"Zay gezunt, Musya. Good luck to you."

Safely negotiating the slimy and treacherous staircase took every bit of her attention. At the bottom she wept, great wet heaving sobs that roused the drunkard below who roared out, she couldn't tell what, the noise bore no resemblance to language or song. As she made her way to the street her thoughts were swirling. Then she remembered the dress, the one she'd spotted earlier that day, her mother's handiwork—she'd meant to ask whether the widow Tsigal had ever ordered one in peacock blue with emerald lining the train. She'd hoped to hear no, that someone else had bought that particular item, some other client. It was too late to hear this, now.

Musya stopped short. The landscape seemed to keep moving for a moment before returning to her side with a bump. How could it possibly matter whether it was some widow other

than the late Lev Tsigal's who'd been murdered and strung up by the neck from a streetcar wire? Could it be worse if it weren't? It couldn't. For something that happened, worse wasn't possible. The very worst had reached its limits here and now enclosed them. With sudden forceful clarity Musya perceived that something like a huge iron bell had been lowered over the scene and the city around her by the evil done in that single death alone, that murder alone—and it had not been alone. Iron walls in space were amplifying the city's panicked screams and cries for help but they'd never let a whisper escape Odessa: no, not one. Nobody could hear, no help would be coming. Even worse, at any moment some giant fist was liable to strike the bell and pulverize the brains of every creature trapped inside with sound waves; the suspense itself was painful. Musya had to urinate badly. She'd reached a late stage of pregnancy and this was a problem. Why was she carrying a gramophone? She opened her arms and the gramophone dropped and shattered into fifty pieces on the hard earth.

Lament: A Soviet Woman and Her True Story, a novel by Liz Mackie, is available in print and for e-readers. Visit the publisher's website at [Nostalgistudio](#) for links and to learn more.