

# ON TERROR

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I've curled my body into a ball to shield it from the kicks of a band of Irish boys. The air, dense with humidity, dark with clouds, is suddenly filled with screams of terror — a terror substantial enough to be weighed and measured. It isn't the shouts of "Dirty kike," the boys' grunts, nor my own animal whimpers that frighten me most. It's those screams, Rose's screams. Bright as the light that splinters in glittering shards behind my eyelids as I escape into unconsciousness.



The woman's name is Lena. She makes an appointment with me — I'm a therapist — to discuss "personal matters." Her accent on the phone is as familiar as an old armchair and revives melancholy memories of New York City's Second Avenue, Ratner's Deli, Coney Island. I feel as if I know this woman: probably in her seventies, Eastern European, and, because the only Eastern Europeans I knew were the survivors who flooded the city after the war, probably a Holocaust survivor.

I'm both wrong and right.

Lena is, in fact, in her seventies. Her handshake is firm and energetic in defiance of her age. Her taut features bespeak a woman who doesn't display her feelings. Her forced briskness suggests an uncertainty about being here. Despite her stockiness, there is something indefinably fragile about her. She asks me to move the comfortable wing chair into the May sunlight that filters through my window. There is the hint of a vanquished queen about her erect posture as she sits.

This is the first step of what becomes a weekly ritual: Lena will ask me to move the chair beside the window, even on overcast New England days, as though her very desire for sunlight will command its presence. She'll be immaculately dressed in clothing she tailors herself: blue or gray suit, fussy blouse, matching jewelry. Her hair will be curled into a blue-white cloud around her face. She will bring me a home-baked sweet, and we will share a cup of tea, a few words about our families. She'll always be reluctant to move beyond the small talk, as though she has come for a casual visit, rather than to reveal secrets. Each session is another step up a long stairway, with weeks passing before she ventures onto the next:

I learn that she has a son who graduated from college with a degree in psychology.

That she's a poet with one slim volume from a small press.

That she had her son at sixteen, the result of a rape by an American soldier.

That she married another American soldier after the war, and his mother hated her.

Then one day she tells me her father was in the SS. He was in charge of deportation of Jews, very powerful in her small Austrian hometown. She calls him "the Demon."

I think of Lena as a sepia photograph, very old and curled in on itself, the kind that must be unfurled slowly or it will rip. I am in no hurry to view the photo. I'm afraid of what it might show.

One October morning, as Lena sits in the darting shadows of a heavy rain whose winds whip leaves of scarlet and gold from the trees, she takes another step: "The Demon, when he found my poetry notebook, ripped the pages out and burned them in front of me."

Her eyes, magnified by thick lenses, are mild as she tells me this. Her hands rest on her lap. I examine her for signs of somatic distress: trembling fingers, drawn mouth, quivering shoulders. Nothing. She sits erect in her chair and says, "He was SS and ignorant."

My stomach clenches, and I am momentarily a terrified little Jewish girl. Hoping that my face betrays nothing, I encourage her to say more. She shakes her head no.

Later, driving home, I ask myself if I can continue to work with Lena. But the decision is out of my hands. *This is what you do for a living*, I tell myself. *She comes to you every week. Look how long it took for her to reach out.*



A member of the battered-women's group I run tells the group about the time her ex-husband threw bricks through the picture window in her living room. She stares at her hands, which clutch one another, the fingers red and chapped. She trembles so violently that her chair creaks. The woman beside her takes her hand. There is absolute silence in the room. The smell of coffee from the cups everyone holds is bitter and strong. She finally nods gratefully and continues: "We were screaming, the kids and I. Glass was flying everywhere, and I tried to wrap myself around them so they wouldn't get cut. We could have gone into the bedroom, but I was paralyzed, and anyway, there really wasn't any place to hide. He'd cut the phone line. I thought, *This time he's finally going to kill me*, and I didn't want the kids to see that. But a neighbor called the

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*Some identifying details have been changed to preserve patient confidentiality.*

— Ed.



JOHN ROSENTHAL

police, and he took off when he heard the sirens.” She shakes her head. “Everything was covered with glass.”

A nod passes around the circle from woman to woman. I suddenly feel exhausted, my chest tight. Every woman here has had windows broken, has lived under a reign of terror, a rain of splintered glass.



**A** snowstorm closes the Brooklyn schools. My mother, before leaving for work, cautions my brother and me, five and eleven, to stay on the block. She leaves us alone every morning, but there is something about this spent-blizzard day that frightens her. We assure her we will keep close to home even as we scheme to go to the playground that afternoon and push the snow-covered swings so that ice crystals fly in all directions, like doves glistening in the crisp air. Her eyes tell us she knows we’re liars. After she leaves, we fly downstairs, jubilant at the white dunes that rapidly gray with the exhaust of passing cars. I help my brother build a snowman and warily eye the neighborhood boys. They’ve beaten us both up in the past, but today they seem content to leave us alone. Perhaps the cold has rendered them generous. They scoff with almost affectionate amusement at the lopsided snowman we build, the cigarette butts we use as eyes. Perhaps the lack of heat in everyone’s apartment has made us temporary allies. Perhaps

they are impressed that we continue to survive them.

Rose’s guttural cries shatter the calm. The world seems to recede into the background, leaving Rose in sharp relief as she stumbles past us, gesturing toward the overcast sky in an appeal for mercy. I catch a sour, wasted smell. The neighborhood boys, frightened of Rose’s madness, duck into doorways. My brother drags me to the mouth of the alley. Everyone watches silently as Rose halts, nostrils quivering, like a pursued animal testing the wind. Her stringy hair whips around as she searches for something nobody else can see. Then, with a piercing wail, she bends and rips off the boots given her, like all her clothes, by members of the nearby synagogue. She raises them above her head and throws them over the plowed snow that separates street from gutter. They land far apart, yet facing each other, as if for consolation. She begins to circle faster and faster. Her feet are red and raw from the cold. She rips off her shabby coat and throws it too into the gutter. A passing car drives over it.

I study Rose, her crazy eyes and stick-thin legs, the number on her arm. My brother’s arms circle my waist from behind, and his head rests against my back. I know his eyes are closed. We are in an airless land; everything but Rose’s cries has been sucked into a vacuum. Those screams have texture; they are the color of cold and fear.

The door of the shoe-repair shop flies open, and the cobbler, a small man, his arm numbered as well, limps rapidly over to Rose, takes her arm, throws his coat around her shoulders.

She quiets instantly and deflates. This woman who a moment ago dominated everything is now tiny and frail. The cobbler wraps her in his arms and rocks her, whispers words we can't hear, then leads her to his shop, a wide-windowed storefront that swallows her. The neighborhood boys emerge like foxes from their dens, and their uneasy laughter seeps into the silence she's left behind. They will not beat us up today.

Lena's desserts are always American. I taste them and assure her, "The best I've ever eaten." She waves her hand as if to protest, but her eyes fill with relief. She can't relax without this reassurance, as if I'd turn her away if it weren't for my enjoyment of the sweets.

I cut a slice of the banana bread she's brought and pour tea for us. Her chair is in front of the window, a blinding blanket of late-January snow behind it. I move my chair to avoid the glare, bite into the banana bread, lower the slice to the napkin on my lap, and say, "Thank you, Lena. It's the best I've ever had. Please, take a slice."

Her eyes brighten, and, as always, she refuses. "No. For your family. How is your family?"

"Well, and yours?"

"Well."

I wait. The furtive way she examines the photograph of trees on my wall makes me think that today she's ready to take the next step.

First we climb the old ones: finding wood or coal in the rubble after the war to make a fire, stealing food, the rape. "I was raped by an American," she says, utterly without bitterness. "I made it through the whole war: Russians, Poles, British. It was after the war . . . an American. It's right that an American marries me, takes care of the child."

She hesitates, looks at me, and speaks for the first time of her father's hands.

She hated them. They had a life of their own. They were strange, reckless animals bred from no parents imaginable. They were predatory, swift, always seeking to wound.

"Always, Lena?"

She closes her eyes and hums softly. "Maybe I remember them rocking me, holding my hand when we walked." Her eyes fly open. "When does corruption begin? It was always there, even before Hitler, waiting to blossom. I believe this." She tells me that her mother tried to deflect those hands, to make herself their sacrificial victim. "But sometimes she passed out from too much schnapps." She nods slowly. "Yes, I was his favorite victim because I was so weak."

I lean forward in my chair and ask, "Weak, Lena?"

"That is what he told me," she says. " 'You are weak, useless.' "

"No." I shake my head. "How do you explain your survival during the war, the way you took care of your mother after your father's death, your courage in coming to a strange land, dealing with your difficult mother-in-law, raising your son and sending him to college, selling your poems? Are those

the actions of a weak, worthless person? They sound like the result of strength and determination to me, Lena. I admire you greatly."

She sways like the trees outside the window in the winter wind. I think I see a film of tears in her eyes.

She says, "I make good banana bread, no? The best."

I take another small bite and say, "The best."

"Maybe not so weak," she says and shrugs.

I've met the fireman before, at other community dinners at the firehouse. He's a young man and appears to be in fine physical condition, though a bit thin. He's had a couple of beers, and maybe that's why he decides to tell me his story.

We stand outside and watch a streaky orange sunset ripple over the sky. The temperature is dropping quickly. I shiver and think about going in, but he begins to speak: "There was this arsonist terrorizing the neighborhood. Nobody knew who he was. Everyone was freaked out: the police, the fire department, but especially tenants in low-income housing. That was his target. Anyway, my first fire was one he set, as it turned out, and I got lost in the building. I couldn't see through the heavy smoke. It was like a solid wall." His voice cracks, and he shakes his head to regain his composure. He's embarrassed.

"How did you get out?" I ask.

He takes a sip from the nearly empty bottle in his hand and says, "A guy I trained with kept calling me, and I kept answering until he found me. I couldn't stop coughing. I kept thinking of the headline: 'Fireman Dies At First Fire.' Funny, huh?"

I picture smoke, blindness, choking. *Not funny*, I think.

"I was lost in this forest of smoke. I thought, *This is it. Unbelievable. My first fire.*" He swallows hard. "At one point, the heat blew out every window. The damned explosion sounded like wineglasses shattered by an opera singer."

"Did it really?" I ask.

"No." He takes his time answering. He doesn't want his voice to break again. "It sounded like nothing I'd ever heard before." Then he adds, "It terrified me."

"Yes," I say. "I'm terrified hearing about it."

We stare at the first stars, the sun now completely gone. "Why would somebody deliberately do that to people, to kids?" he asks. "We caught him. But even when he explained, I couldn't understand. You know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean," I say.

*(end of excerpt)*