## ISAAC AND MAE

(Los Angeles, 1955)

He: You are perfect in all ways, but one.

A model Jewish wife, sweet-natured, modest—when have you ever preened in a mirror? And how the children *kvell* from you! All six have your delicate good looks—alright, mine too, my deep-set olive eyes you love to stare into as if transfixed.

She: How am I imperfect? Tell me.

He: Darling, yesterday you forgot again—
you always forget—the Yortzeit candle.

Mother died two years ago today, blessing you
who made her last home a heaven. Her word.
"Isaac," she would say, "Mae is heaven-sent,
she brings the gift of life wherever she goes."

She: I loved your mother too. How she cooked! and made the kids choke down all that greasechicken fat, chopped liver. Poor things! I never liked it either. Nor did you! We're happier now I rule the kitchen, aren't we? I have hundreds of recipes, and the whole Imperial Valley to furnish me peaches, lemons, grapes, those purple plums you favor, and the tart Granny Smiths from up north I bake into pies, strudel, sauce for your latkes look, your mouth is watering like before a meal! Your mother didn't always love me. On the crossing she cursed me for a Delilah: "Keep away from my son, shiksa!" "Go somewhere else on the boat! Go!" My vows of conversion changed her mind.

He: More than that, Mae. You charmed her with German lullabies, and that eerie ballad of the storm on Venusberg. Charmed me too. Jews are not deaf to the sorcery of love though instructed in the cost of it, so often and wrongly instructed, as you proved, didn't you? You melted her heart. I was all she had left.

She: At the border she wanted to name me Ruth.

I said No, I would be named for the month.

We recommenced our lives in famous Hollywood, raising my first babies while you went back into the Black Forest, this time with a gun.

He: Do you remember that actress from Lost Horizon?

After the war she stopped you in our deli and said,

"Are these your four children? You look like a girl."

Our wayward life has been like a movie, nothing romantisch, me selling dead meats on credit,
but think how many in our family had it worse.

Often I dream of my sisters, how the Nazis . . .

She: Let's forget the past. This is America.

He: And you never light the candle for papa.

Don't turn away—I'm trying to be helpful.

I mark the day on the calendar. Listen,
this is a small matter. Let's not quarrel.

She: I didn't know your father.

He: Such a gentle man . . .

She: Possum's birthday is next Sunday, remember.
She wants a day at the beach, a picnic.
I told her she could invite six. "Oh mom,"
she said, "three brothers and two sisters,

so I get *one* friend?" "Hush," I said,
"you're too fair for summer heat, too blond.
You'll burn. Not even oil will protect you."

He: All day I've been thinking about my father. I guess it's my *Halfte des Lebens* this year, the crossroads. How he wanted to survive.

She: Killed by the Nazis. I've heard the story.

He: Nobody knows the story but me. I've lived a lie. Or say, I chose to forget the truth.

Why should it drum and drum at me all day?

She: I have things to do. Shopping. Skippy needs a ride to skating practice—no, it's Tuesday—he needs a ride to . . . O, it's on the calendar! Go look!

He: We fled from the Nazis, yes.

How it all comes back to me. 1939,
January. We got news of another sweep.
Papa and I set out for the Schwarzwald,
some refuge so dismal even the Nazis
would let us two helpless Jews alone.
A snowstorm like you could never imagine,
dearest, or none of our children, or anyone
in this temperate part of the New World.
Snow more deadly than bullets, our bones ice-cold.
Lost, we staggered forward like golem.
We came to a river, and no way to cross.
No ferryman, but his hardwood hut
stood open for us to die in. We lay down . . .

She: I will honor your father. I will light the candle!

He:

... and we slept without hope of waking up. Yet I did wake. The storm blew open the door and a woman appeared. Don't stop me! I haven't told this to anyone for half my life! A snow maiden, pale as the blondest Walküre, robed in white with a belt of twisted steel. She glided to my father and breathed into his face till he turned blue, then ghastly. Her swan's neck swiveled and suddenly her face was bending down to give me the kiss of death. I gazed into her eyes and she into mine. She said, "You are too handsome to kill, far too handsome. I will not end vour life now. But if you tell anybody, even your mother, what you have seen this night, I shall return and slay you." Was it a dream? At dawn the ferryman came and hid me three weeks more. Mother and I passed safely to Italy, and a boat to America. You approached us on deck, as beautiful as the apparition who gazed deep into my eyes . . .

O God! O God of my fathers! The way you look . . . Mae, it turns my blood cold. Why are you so angry?

She:

It was I, I, I!

I told you I would kill you, I breathed death into your Jewish father. And I would take my revenge, except for the children. Now you had better take very good care of my motherless Kinder. If they ever complain, I will come back—I swear it with my eagle's heart!—and turn you into nothing more than dust.

(She fades into mist that flies through a window. He stands in the silence of the house, listening to the wind shriek once, then become calm.)

after Lafcadio Hearn