

EXCERPT FROM *THE PASSION OF TASHA DARSKY*  
A novel by Yael Goldstein Love

I am sitting in my living room, and the reporter is eyeing me nervously, tapping his foot out of synch with the salsa beat drifting down the stairs. He looks as though he's raced here straight from the offices of a high school newspaper, Adams apple jumping in his delicate neck, large blue eyes set wide with earnest curiosity in a smooth, egg-white oval of a face, though I understand (he's brought me a collection of clippings as proof) that he's more established than he looks: recent arts editor of the *Yale Daily News*, minor freelancing assignments everywhere from *The Village Voice* to *People* since he graduated college last June. His specialty is arts profiles, as he let me know the moment I opened the front door, pushing into my hands the two quarter page jobs he's done for *Entertainment Weekly*. I'd pretended to recognize the names; we share some tenuous connection, this boy and I, and I'm anxious to put him at ease. He is the son of the cousin of the brother of God knows who, a line which eventually traces back to my college mentor, Robert Masterson. But, more than that, I like him. I like his youth and eagerness, his undisguised excitement. I like him for not noticing – at least not visibly – what a dull and tired woman Tasha Darsky has turned out to be.

And so I've been trying for nearly an hour to show a hint of the dazzle he's come here expecting. Sometimes I can catch it from the mere anticipation, scoop up some of the phosphorescent run-off from a reporter or a fan's unrealistic idea of me. But today it isn't working.

“And that was 1998?” he asks. He’s good at this – incisive, thorough – and I can’t help thinking he deserves a better subject for an interview that marks – he’s told me this twice – “the most awesome day of his career.”

I nod, noticing a ring of something sticky on the coffee table.

It’s then that he shifts a certain way in his seat, a funny, aborted wiggle like a child impatient with a heavy diaper, and I realize that he’s got a question he’s been holding back, his clincher, his killer. It’s possible this question is going to be dopey – the supposedly trenchant ones often are – but I find that I have faith in this boy. I find, moreover, that sometime in the past fifty minutes I’ve decided that we’re in this together, poised at the start of a brilliant career. It’s a nice place to be, and I don’t want to blow it. God knows I’ll never be here on my own again. And now, finally, I start to feel that slow prickle of warmth under my skin, that trickling creep of sparkle that once came out of me as something singularly – puzzlingly – crowd-pleasing.

And so I’m a little disappointed when, after a long pause, he says in an overly-loud voice: "Would you say there's been any single aspect to your life" – he's biting his pencil between words – "an aspect, or an event, or a ... well, the aspect that's the pivotal one? The one that, you know, made you what you are, the most famous violinist since Paganini?"

"I'd hardly compare myself to Nicolo Paganini," I say, because it’s true but also because the tone of his voice has set off a vague sort of alarm. I hear a burrowing, wheedling edge there, and it makes me think, just for a moment, that I’ve been reading this man all wrong.

"Oh, but haven't people been making that comparison for decades? Since Vienna, in fact?" he stammers, pushing the blunt-cut bangs off his forehead. When he returns his hand to his lap, I can see beads of sweat have appeared on his wrists, of all places. The sight makes me think, quite suddenly, of a penguin with a shock of spiked hair we saw in a Budapest zoo fifteen years ago; Alex, all of two years old, had insisted that she knew its name to be Mr. Levin for reasons that never became clear to me. The memory makes me briefly giddy.

"No, not since Vienna. Certainly not that early," I relent, feeling a new protective swell along with my burst of silly, hopeful joy.

"So what was, you know, what would you say it is, the pivotal thing, if there is one? Would you say there is one?"

I look at the beads of sweat, the leg tapping now on the downbeats, the floppy bangs fallen back into eyes fixed onto mine, and I want to throw him something he can use, something good.

"Maybe the people I've loved," I say.

"Love." He repeats the word like it's revelatory, but not in a good way; as though I've said that cars run on happy thoughts. His eyes have gravitated away from mine, and I can't catch his gaze. I'd tried to throw him a line and now he's floundering, and so am I.

But we're saved by a voice booming down the staircase, mingling with the salsa music. "That's a weird thing to say," the voice – like a bell trying hard to sound grumpy – calls. "It's so weird that if I didn't know better I'd say you were actually being honest. That'd be wild."

"Is that Alexandra?" the reporter asks, swinging his head around.

Just then she slouches to the bottom of the stairs.

"I didn't know she was here," the reporter exclaims, looking back and forth between us. "Could we possibly? Would it be possible to speak to her as well? I'm such a big fan. Of both of you."

Usually I'd leap at the chance to pull Alex into an interview – reminisce about our performance of the Van Rhee duet in Brussels back when she was twelve, or the London concerts when she was fifteen, set loose some nostalgia in the air between us and see if it catches – but because Alex is looking at me with narrowed eyes I'm quick to say, "I don't think so. We don't have much time. I have a lunch date, as I mentioned earlier?"

"Just a few more questions to you, then." His voice is petulant, aggressive, but I notice this the way you'd notice a slightly stale smell in the bathroom of a four star restaurant, a skimming, shallow jolt. All my real attention is turned to Alex, to the very unpromising look she is giving me.

"I wanted to ask about Jean Paul Boumedienne," I hear the reporter say, as I mentally tick through the ways I might have pissed Alex off since breakfast. I stop ticking at the sound of the name, surprised but not yet stunned. The words "Jean Paul Boumedienne," spoken in the reporter's high-pitched voice, echo in the room with us, but I'm certain he didn't really say them. *One too many sleepless nights*, I think, a little amused, even, at what a messy mind will throw at you. It's true I've barely slept in the weeks since Alex showed up at my doorstep, unexplained and furious. Out of habit, I turn to look at her again; it's when I see her eyes gone hot and white and ghastly that I know.

“Your relationship with him,” the reporter is pressing, and his face, staring intently at Alex, not at me, no longer strikes me as young. “Do you think, perhaps, that *that* could be the singular thing that made you who you are?”

I want to say, “Where’d you learn to link that name to me?”

I want to say, “What makes you think you have the right to know?”

Most of all, I want to shout, “Alex, why’re you looking at me like that?” but the reporter is already answering the less urgent of these questions, saying, “It was Robert Masterson who suggested I ask. He told me that Boumedienne was how it all began.”

I watch him long enough to see his thin lips form the words, then whip my head back around just in time to catch sight of Alex’s left foot as it follows the rest of her swiftly out the door.