

JAKE WOLFF

Please Explain Me

In the spring of 1951, I lived with my wife and daughter in Augusta, Maine, where I worked for a daily newspaper known as the *Sentinel*. My category—the *Sentinel* called them categories—was politics. In March, our governor approved a two percent sales tax, and I wrote about that, and in April, congress voted to remove asbestos from the capitol building, and I wrote about that. I remember a lot of pleasant days, a cool breeze, a sun the color of goldenrod. It felt, as May arrived, like an unimportant year.

“So let’s make vacation,” said my wife, Illya, who was not born in Maine but in Poland. She said this in the kitchen of our home, which I’d inherited from my parents and where I’d lived since I was born. Illya had moved there before the start of the Second World War. The marriage was arranged through my synagogue, which was now her synagogue—everyone admired her there. She was a good wife, but she didn’t love me.

“That’s a swell idea,” I said, pleased at the chance to make her happy. Illya had a high voice, dark eyes, and caterpillar eyebrows that threatened, erotically, to connect with each other. Before she arrived in America, she received no fewer than ten offers of marriage, and I’d won her hand only because of my bum left one: it doesn’t open or close. I would not, like her other suitors, be sent to war. At the recruitment office, I said, “What kind of work is there for a one-handed man in Germany?” And the officer just stared at me, blank as paper, until he startled as if from sleep and said, “Oh, sorry, I thought that was the start of a joke.”

Now, Illya slid a copy of my own newspaper across the table to me. She’d circled in pencil, several times around, an advertisement for a summer beach resort in York Harbor. I imagined Illya in her floral beachwear and felt my insides buckle. Even after a child, her breasts were so perfectly round they’d be impossible to draw freehand.

So I told her I would call after dinner, and when she raised her eyebrows, I called right that moment. A friendly voice, a man's voice, answered the phone.

"Say," I said, when prompted, "I'm interested in staying at your resort."

"Great," the guy said. "We're interested in having you stay here. When are you thinking?"

I told him the July dates I'd discussed with Illya. Hearing them come out of my mouth, she nodded.

"Should be no problem," the man said. "Let's get your name on the books."

So I gave him my name, which was my father's name, and before that, my great grandfather's, and before that, the third king of Judah's.

There was a long pause, during which I watched my daughter, Rebecca, strip the cushions from the couch and stack them on the coffee table. She looked more like me than she did Illya, but when she was born, and I first saw her little hands, both of them, curl into perfect fists, I removed myself to the bathroom and had a secret cry.

I heard a jostling of the receiver as the man on the other end nestled the phone between his shoulder and cheek.

"Those dates won't work," he said, his voice suddenly crisp.

"Oh," I said. "What's the next available?"

Illya's eyes narrowed.

"We're booked solid," the guy answered.

"The entire summer?" I asked.

"Look," the guy said. "You aren't the center of the universe." And then he hung up.

I stared wounded at the telephone, which was now reporting a loud, insistent dial tone.

Illya had gotten the gist of it. "Entire summer?" she said. "No way."

"It's odd," I conceded.

"It is *suspicious*," Illya corrected.

I saw Rebecca peer over the tower of cushions, awake to her mother's mood.

"We'll find somewhere else," I said. But later, in bed, I kept thinking about the man's words, annoyed at myself for letting him get to me. I've never, not once, considered myself the center of the universe. Every idea I've ever had, somebody else has already had it.

I didn't think of the resort again until the following week, at the office, when I overheard Bob Regan, whose category was sports, discussing summer plans with the staff photographer. Our office at the *Sentinel* was long and narrow, like a train, and you could judge a man's station by his proximity to the conductor, or in this case, to

our editor. My desk was right in the middle—the same amount of people in front of me as behind.

“York Harbor,” I heard Bob say, and listened harder. Bob’s desk was only two in front of mine, but it was a noisy place to work, with typewriters clacking and carriage returns being slammed into place. It was very easy, in those days, to sound busy.

Sure enough, he was staying at the same resort Illya had circled. Something about the idea that Bob, a notorious lotus-eater, had beaten me to the punch was more than I could stomach. I asked him when he made those reservations.

Bob measured the distance in his mind. “Friday,” he said, which was two days *after* I had called.

When I arrived home, I found Illya reading a magazine on the couch, her bare feet tucked into the cushions. Rebecca sat on the carpet playing dominoes, or a version of it, by herself. Our house was small, but it overlooked a pond known as Greeley, and through the living room windows I could see the sun setting over the water. Illya had not expected this, a waterfront view, and I took pride in remembering her first reaction to it. She had not even known what to say.

But when I told her about the resort, and Bob’s better luck, she had plenty. “This is discrimination!” she said. “Illegal.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, glancing nervously at Rebecca, hoping she wouldn’t understand. “I have no reason to think so.”

Illya looked at me like I, and not Rebecca, was the child. She had seen things in Europe that made me seem eternally, hopelessly naïve. “You don’t always have to be so *objective*,” she said, sneering out the word. “What else could it be?”

I confess I couldn’t answer. I’d seen discrimination, of course, though less so after the war. In 1932, when I was fifteen years old, my mother and father died together in an automobile accident—the first double-fatality car crash in all of Maine. Before their deaths, my parents had owned and operated a kind of early recycling business, taking people’s old things and repurposing them, selling them, scrapping them. They did well enough to buy our house and the car they died in. They were charitable and kind. When the *Sentinel* reported their deaths, the article referred to my parents as “a pair of Jewish junkers.”

Rebecca’s dominoes fell in a clatter. “Papa,” she said, looking up at me, “what is discrimination?”

I sighed. “It’s being not nice to someone,” I said, my heart breaking at how she’d waited, since hearing the word, to ask about it. She’d been trying her very hardest—just as Illya taught her—to solve it on her own.

“So what are you going to do?” Illya said, watching me hard.

“If it’s true,” I said, “we don’t want to stay there anyway.”

In response, she rose, kissed my cheek, and went to the kitchen to make dinner. She knew her anger would only upset me, that a demand for action would only cause me stress. Her silence was a form of pity, and I stood in the living room, choking on it.

That night, in bed, as Illya lay on her side reading, I kissed the back of her neck. She rolled over and patted my shoulder.

“Not tonight,” she said. “In four days.”

Now that Rebecca was older, Illya wanted another child. She was only interested in intimacy for that purpose, and she kept a calendar by her side of the bed, to know when the odds of conception were highest. The calendar was in Polish. I remembered when Illya was pregnant with Rebecca, and the doctor first held his stethoscope to her stomach and allowed us to hear the little heartbeat. Illya had cried and recited the *shehecheyanu* blessing, right there in his office, and she had never seemed more beautiful to me, or more far away.

I settled against the pillows. The curtains were parted, and I could see the moon hovering above Greeley. It looked like a pearl resting on a thin sheet of ice. At the other end of the hall, Rebecca was sleeping in a smaller bedroom, which was painted in a hideous, puce-like color she selected herself. Illya had insisted we allow her to make that mistake, and as usual, she was right to insist. It took Rebecca only a day to realize her own folly, another day to admit it, and just like that, I watched her change into a wiser, more careful girl. We told her she’d have to live with it for a year, and then we’d repaint.

Eventually, the sound of Illya reading unsettled me. In English, she read so slowly that a single magazine would last her for a week. The anticipation I felt, waiting for her to turn the page, was like water torture. To break the silence, I said, “I’m sorry I’m a disappointment to you.”

She stretched, the elegant esker of her spine flexing, before turning to face me. She smiled. “You are a wonderful man,” she said. “If I choose again, knowing everything I know now, I still come here and be with you.”

She’d said all this before. “But?” I offered.

“But you have a weakness,” she said, and what she meant was, *you are weak*.

I looked at my hand.

“I do not care about the hand,” she said. “I do not mean the hand. I mean in here.” She tapped me on the chest, near the heart.

I nodded, knowing she was right, and watched in silence as she crossed another day off the calendar.

I woke up early the next morning, kissed my girls goodbye, and drove to work with my headlights on. The newspaper said it would be the hottest day of the month.

When I got to work, the office was empty. I sat in Bob's chair, just for the thrill of it, and then I fixed myself a cup of coffee and returned to my desk. I picked up the phone and dialed the resort. The phone rang for quite a long time until the man answered, his voice thick with exhaustion. I'd woken him.

"Hello," I told him. "I phoned there a week ago. You said there were no vacancies for the summer, but I've since learned that a colleague of mine booked a stay with you long after I called."

I had thought this would be enough information to elicit a reaction, but instead we sat in hard, uncomfortable silence.

"So I'm looking for clarification," I added, slightly rattled now, "as to the situation."

"Name, please," the guy said through a yawn.

I gave him my name again. There was no indication that he did anything with it.

"Things open up," he said, "and then they close up. Your friend has better luck than you."

"He's not my friend," I said stupidly.

The man sighed. "Hold the line. I'll get the number for the resort across the street. It's just as good."

I was prepared to agree to this, but then the line went dead—he'd hung up on me, again—and I had no way of knowing whether he'd made an honest mistake or a fool of me. I put down the receiver, my good hand shaking. I thought of what Illya would say if she could see me like this. The first time I'd felt truly bullied was grammar school, second grade, when a group of boys rolled pennies down the hallway in front of me, laughing so hard their backpacks slammed against their lockers. I had thought they were making fun of my hand—my limited ability to pick things up—but my parents explained, no, it was a deeper hatred. They told me those boys were *chatta*, sinners, and they told me to be proud of my heritage. Every night before bed, they would read me another Jewish fable—the Palace and the Pigeons, the Banquet of the Jews—and I would pretend, for their sakes, that these stories gave me easy dreams. In truth, I came to believe I'd been born with two disabilities, and not one.

As I sat there at my desk, I wondered if I'd ever stopped believing this. I knew how Illya would answer, and maybe she was right. It was true that I rarely prayed, and at synagogue, our rabbi had taken to calling me *dutiful* in a way that sounded less like a compliment every time he said it. I could hear Illya's voice in my head: *You don't always have to be so objective*. I must have sat that way for a long while, thinking, because when

I came to senses my editor was standing above me, surveying the office with a faraway expression. The newsroom hummed around us. I stood, nearly spilling my coffee, and told him I would need tomorrow off.

We followed the turnpike south. Rebecca lay in the backseat, singing, counting, naming things as she saw them. Illya sat in the passenger seat, as happy as I'd ever seen her. Her smile was like the sun. I steered the car through Bowdoinham, through Topsham. Near Cumberland, we smelled ocean.

After talking with my editor, I'd driven home excited—so excited, Illya had pointed out, that I'd left the car running in the driveway, as though I was ready to leave right then, that moment, for York Harbor. "Pack your bags," I told Illya, once I turned off the car. "We're going to the beach." When she realized what I meant, she threw her arms around me and planted one, two, three kisses on my cheeks and lips. And in the hours that followed, as we made our preparations, I carried that moment with me like a song.

Illya's anger with the resort people and her happiness about the chance to confront them created a strange dissonance between her words and her mood. "It's unforgivable," she said, smiling wide. "These people."

"We'll see," I said. "We'll see."

When I had first explained my reason for taking the day off, my editor thought I was pitching a story. "That's not your category," he'd said, his head tilted. I didn't give him the chance to say what he would have said next, which was that there were forty, maybe fifty Jews in all of Augusta, and less than a third of them subscribers. No one would be interested in such a story. "And you're sure this is discrimination?" he asked, before I left for the day. "They're not just busy?"

"I'm sure," I told him, though I wasn't.

If Illya picked up on my uncertainty, she said nothing. If she'd asked, I would have told her that I didn't doubt the existence of people who hated us, only that it seemed unlikely that such practices would go unnoticed before now. In the years after the war, people had become highly sensitive to these sorts of things. A few years prior, the actor Alec Guinness had donned a large prosthetic nose—enormous, truly—to play Fagin in a film adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. At first, I was horrified, but then the public reacted so swiftly, and so harshly, that by the time the controversy reached its peak my general feeling was, *Oh, let him wear it*. Illya, of course, had felt differently. She would have arranged a boycott, and talked of doing so, but our one movie theater showed no interest in the film. They were making too much money with *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

It was almost noon by the time we reached York Harbor. The sun sat directly over the car. We could feel it, but we couldn't see it. Rebecca practically stuck her head out the window, like a golden retriever, as we followed the road along the coast. The beaches in Maine are mostly rocks, beautiful and inhospitable, and I could hear the water hitting the shore even over the sound of the engine. Restaurants and inns lined the ocean, supported by stilts. We passed a candlepin bowling alley and an ice cream shop, neither of which Rebecca failed to notice. Illya made her certain promises, based on her behavior at lunch.

Lunch was lobster in the shell for Illya, lobster out of the shell for me, and macaroni and cheese for Rebecca. Illya frowned when I placed my order, but it's too much trouble, cracking those shells with one hand. We sat in a booth near the window and watched as people with red, wind-kissed faces carried their lunches back to work. These were natives, not vacationers. Even with the sun out, it was too cold for swimming.

Illya used her thumbs to break the lobster's ribs and then asked Rebecca to try some of the meat, which she did, her eyes wide in horror. Illya laughed and ate the rest. She was not delicate, like the other woman I'd known. When she came to America, I met her at Coburn Gore, on the border of Maine and Canada. The first time I saw her, she was lugging her bags toward my car as her driver walked behind her, shrugging in a loud, performative way, to let me know that he'd offered unsuccessfully to carry her suitcases. I met her halfway between his car and mine, my lungs growing small in my chest. We'd exchanged letters, but I wasn't prepared to really be there with her, in the cold. She embraced me—a bit collegiately, like an old friend, not a new lover—and I could feel the shape of her even through our coats. When she pulled away, and I saw her eyes, I knew how much trouble I was in.

After lunch, the three of us found a payphone in the back of the restaurant. We had agreed, much to Illya's satisfaction, that she should be the one to call. The man at the resort already knew me, and unlike Illya, I was no good at doing voices. She would call and book a stay under a gentile name, and then we would go in person and see how they treated us. The man would know me immediately as a Jew; that wasn't a question. In the letters I exchanged with Illya before she arrived, I remember telling her, *I look exactly how you're picturing me*. Among my own people, my appearance is a benefit: it makes them trust me. At synagogue, I'm always being asked to hold important things.

Illya dialed the phone as I read her the number. As she spun the final digit, she winked at me, her eyes shining. Rebecca held my hand, confused but fascinated. I heard, faintly, the tinny echo of the man answering Illya's call.

"Hello to *you!*" Illya said into the phone, her voice flattened into a perfect American accent.

Hearing her mother's new voice, Rebecca immediately started to giggle. I tried to shush her, though I, too, was fighting laughter.

"Oh, I'm swell," Illya said. "Say, my family and I would be keen to book a stay with you this summer." Illya stuck her tongue out at us, miming disgust at her own friendliness, and Rebecca doubled over in delight.

Illya continued to exchange details with the man, including her agreed-upon sobriquet, which we'd taken from a former neighbor. "So what dates do you folks have available in July?" she asked.

I waited, a part of me still believing that we'd wasted our time in coming here.

As she listened to the man, Illya's eyes hardened, but her voice remained unctuous, smooth. "Gee," she said, staring at me, "that many options? What to choose?"

I sighed and nodded, signaling for Illya to end the call.

Illya told the man she would call him back. "Have a blessed day!" she said, flinching slightly, as though that final line surprised even her.

The resort lay on a corner of coastline, hooked around the ocean like a bent elbow. Along the eastern edge, a low fence surrounded a patch of sandy beach, reserved for guests, and from the parking lot I could see the tip of the pier, where sailboats and dinghies sat waiting for warmer weather. The building itself was white and handsome, with Juliet balconies dotting the upper floors. On the western side of the grounds, the water moved inward, toward the river.

Rebecca had grown sleepy after lunch, so Illya pulled her from the car and carried her to the porch in front of reception, where they would wait for me. There, I kissed the top of Rebecca's soft, cool hair and pushed the double-doors open. As I approached the desk, I felt Illya's eyes on my back, and I knew she would be interpreting, as best she could, every moment of my conversation with the man inside.

I had to ring the bell before I saw that man, and so I did, tapping it with my good hand. When he emerged, I was surprised not by the size of him—though he was quite large—but by his relative youth. His nametag identified him as the owner, but he was younger than me by at least a decade. I wondered how he'd come to own this place, whether he'd inherited it from his parents. I wondered what else he'd inherited. As he smiled, adjusted his tie, and made his way toward me, I had time even to think of my own parents, who had died much too young, their bodies so disfigured I wasn't allowed to see them.

"Happy Wednesday," the man said. "How can I help?"

"We were just driving through," I said, "and I thought I'd check on your availability in July."

If the man recognized my voice, he showed no indication of it, but upon my use of “we,” he peered over my shoulder, looking for my family. I turned, too, to see them. Behind me, Illya was framed beautifully by the glass panels of the doors, her thick, dark hair pulled to one side and spilling over the deep blues of her dress. She was still holding Rebecca, who was asleep, but in her sleep she reached a small hand to her mother’s face and touched her eyebrows, as if to be sure, yes, this is Mom, I am safe.

When I turned back to the man, my heart full, he was shaking his head and tapping the eraser-end of his pencil against a ledger I couldn’t see. “I hate giving bad news,” he said. “It’s going to be a busy summer.”

I did my best to meet his eyes. “Strange,” I said. “Because my wife called ten minutes ago, and you had a different story.”

The man blinked. I could see him try to process the difference between the voice he’d spoken to and the dark eyed, clearly European woman at the door. “What’s the idea?” he said, stepping back from the desk.

I steeled myself. “Care to explain your refusal to book Jewish guests?”

“*Jewish?*” he said, like it was his first time hearing the word. “What?”

I explained to him, for the second time, his inconsistencies regarding July availability. It felt absurd to say it out loud. More, it felt petty. I began to wonder, yet again, if I’d made a mistake in coming here.

When I was done, the man fixed me with his dull eyes. “Look,” he said. “You aren’t the center of the universe.”

Even before I went over the desk, I knew this was not a fight I could win. I’d never been in a proper skirmish, but I’d seen enough—I covered politics, remember—to know they weren’t like in the movies. In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Humphrey Bogart knocked out his boss with a series of clean punches, landed at a distance. All you needed to win a fight like that was a bit of stamina and one working hand. No, in real life, a fight between men was mostly grappling—one hand tugging on a wrist, another clasped around a shirtsleeve. You needed all ten fingers, and you needed them to close.

I didn’t have a choice: Illya was watching. I lunged at the man, grabbing his collar and using it to pull myself over the desk. As I went, my knee hit the bell, and the feeble *tink* of it announced the beginning of our scrap. We went hard to the ground, our knees knocking against each other. Once there, I tried to leverage my weight, to pin him beneath me and land a solid blow. But the man had my good hand strangled in his far larger one, and all my bad hand could do was slap at him, paw limply at his snarling face. When he realized he could ignore my attack on that side—he must have thought I was a fool, oblivious to the importance of fist-making—he redirected his energies to

the offensive. I watched his hand find my neck, and then my view of the world flipped as he threw me onto my back.

I won't pretend that in the middle of this fight, with the man's fist tightening on my throat, I thought of anything other than my own safety. The man was trying very hard, with his other hand, to punch me, and I wanted very badly *not* to be punched. That was the extent of my thinking. But it's also true that now, years later, as I remember the weight of his body and how it starved me for air, I can't help but think of a legend my parents told me, before bed, about the great Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki. They said that when the rabbi was only a seed in his mother's stomach, the woman traveled with her husband to Germany. There, one morning, she found herself trapped in a narrow alleyway as a knight on horseback galloped toward her. She knew he would not stop—no one stopped for Jews—and that she would be crushed under the hooves. There was no escape. And yet, at the last moment, when she could feel the horse's breath on her cheek, a crevice appeared in the wall, and she was saved. In a land where there seemed to be no place for Jews, the world made room for her.

I was starting to lose consciousness when the man landed his first real shot—a heavy blow to my cheek. The shock of it had the unintended effect of waking me up, restoring just enough of my strength to see the world again. It's for this reason I was awake to hear Rebecca's crying, from the other side of the desk, and to hear Illya's footsteps pounding toward us on the hardwood. It's for this reason I was awake to see Illya appear over the man's shoulder, her beautiful face hardened into hate. It's for this reason I was awake to see her throw herself at the man, clawing at his eyes, screaming my name.

It's for this reason I'm alive: When I couldn't breathe, my family made room for me.

The man tossed Illya aside and jumped off me, holding his bleeding face where she'd scratched him. He ran from the room, stumbling over his own feet, into the back office. "Mom!" he shouted as he ran. "*Mom!*"

Illya pulled me standing. While I gathered the breath into my lungs, she gathered our terrified daughter into her arms—and we fled that place, the three of us, for good.

Back home, in the safety of our small living room, a kind of giddiness swept through us. We'd stopped for ice cream, and that was smart, and now Rebecca was endlessly delighted by the frozen steak I was pressing against my cheek. In the car, I'd told Illya at least three separate times that I was sorry, and each time she'd said, "Never be sorry for fighting for us."

Now, Illya clapped her hands together, signaling bedtime for Rebecca and the end of our night. "We had a great adventure," she said, by way of closing. "Family adventure."

“Wait, Mama,” Rebecca said, laughing, “do Papa’s voice one more time.”

Illya’s face went blank, and she shook her head quickly no.

“What?” I asked.

“Do Papa’s voice,” Rebecca pleaded.

“What?” I said again. “When was Mama doing an impression of Papa?”

Illya moved toward the kitchen, but she didn’t leave.

“On the phone!” Rebecca told me. “At the mac and cheese place.”

It took me another moment, but then I realized: that voice Illya had put on when she called the resort. That weak, sniveling, slobbering voice. That was me.

Illya stared at her feet. “It was only a joke,” she said softly.

Rebecca was still smiling, and I wondered if she thought Illya’s current posture, her submissiveness, was another impression of me. I studied the floor, remembering Illya’s voice on the phone, how we’d all laughed. I thought again of the day Illya entered my life. The first time I saw her, I swear to God I felt my fingers. All ten of them.

Illya knew my thoughts. She came to me and touched my swollen cheek. “We care for each other,” she said. “Can’t that be enough?”

I knew if I stayed in that room, looking at Illya, I would cry. To spare her the sight of my tears, I squeezed her hand and went to our bedroom alone. I closed the door and sat on the bed, watching as the wind sent ripples through Greeley.

When, a few moments later, the door cracked open, it was not Illya who had come to check on me, but my daughter. Rebecca grabbed my leg and pulled herself onto the bed, her two good, perfect hands stretching the fabric of my pants. She settled against me with her head on my arm.

“Why is Papa sad?” she asked. “Please explain me.”

I smiled down at her. “Explain *to* me,” I corrected.

Rebecca nodded, her face serious, as though my grammar lesson also explained my mood. She didn’t ask me again why I was sad. She only sat with me, fighting sleep, enjoying every stolen moment before bedtime. Eventually Illya came and swept her away.

If she had asked me again, I would have told her that you can’t stop people from hating you. You can’t make them love you, either. I would have told her that it’s the hardest part of living—this desire, this need. From the moment we’re born, we look for someone to love us fully and freely, exactly as we are. People call that kind of love *unconditional*, but I prefer to think of it as love without category. It’s the kind of love you wish for when the world is dark and narrow, when your enemies have found you and are close. I would have told her that I’m not sad—not truly, not ever—when I’m with you.

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