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Tales of Hofman

TALES OF HOFFMAN

Tales of Hoffman BY WILLIAM HOFFMAN

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Publishers T. S. DENISON & COMPANY, INC.

Minneapolis

P24 .H699 Tal

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Printed in the U. S. A. By The Brings Press

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 61-18644

ABP GIFT Publisher Copy—

Dedicated To

The sixtieth wedding anniversary of my wonderful parents, and the twentieth of our own.

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and to the health and happiness of my friends and the everlasting memory of the many fine people who once lived in places like the West Side.

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Introduction

These are tales about real people.

Although most of them lived in an area of St. Paul, Minnesota called the “West Side,” these people will surely be familiar to you, too, no matter where you live, no matter where you come from, no matter who you are or pretend to be.

What I have written about my mother and my father, my brothers and sisters, my friends and others, out of love and a compelling concern for them, could just as well have been written about your own too. Where there is sadness and where there is laughter, it is so only because this is the way of life.

The old neighborhoods of immigrants here and all over—first and second generations—never constituted, either spiritually or culturally, a slum. They were often physically and materially poor but always rich in a wonderful culture and fine ethical values.

The West Side and all the other places like it, were really stopping places—almost like a particular Plymouth Rock whence developed a segment of the American people which has made and, God willing, will continue to make a great contribution to our wonderful land.

Some well-meaning friends will take me to task, as they have in the past, because they insist people are not as good, as kind and as gentle, as I picture them. Family escutcheons, they say, are often tarnished and not nearly as bright and clean as I would have them be. Perhaps it is so. I will not argue with them for these good friends of mine have really no malice in their hearts toward most people. It is enough for me that they read what I write. Only I wish to recall for them something written by Thoreau:

“The finest quality of our nature, like the bloom of fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate of handling, yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.” So enjoy this book! —William Hoffman

Foreword

These TALES OF HOFFMAN are truly American stories—they belong to the reader. Similar to the patchwork quilt of the immigrant mother, Minnesota is a state of many colors and cloths. Here the Old World's races and people found a refuge and a home to form a pattern of tolerance and unity. Each story could be retold by German, Irish, or Scandinavian immigrant families. St. Paul, as a great river town, served as democracy's portal.

When my grandparents came to St. Paul one hundred and twenty years ago they carried memories from the homeland, of trees and fields in a far-off place, of family and friends. Some were vivid memories like those associated with the sacred but worn candlesticks in the “Three Bundles.” Others were traditions so ingrained as to become part of their way of life as those of Passover in this book.

Legends and tales are to a people what blood is to a man. As the people herein cherished the heritage of their fathers, so may their children read these stories of love and life.

The ethics of the father's “Pirke Aboth” at the conclusion of the fourth Seder says: He who learns from his fellow a single chapter, a single rule, a single verse, a single expression, or even a single letter ought to pay him honor.

This reader's family has had its “Tannenbaum” and Italian stuffed whitefish on Christmas, turkey on Thanksgiving and wondered little. Bill Hoffman has wondered; thus has learned much from people. Here he honors them as directed by the Talmud. A superb raconteur and historian, he is equally adept as a prophet.

He handles tenderly the old man to whom, like the falling leaf, had come the waning days of summer, till once more he also returned to the earth from whence he came. The Menorah candlesticks which had lost their gold but not their sacred symbolism through the generation, the prodigal son returning home for Passover, and the faithful wife and mother

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keeping “The Long Vigil” are Minnesota history. The little old lady “Alone” is so adeptly enshrined in the poem that she gives radiance to the entire book.

These people are the players but the acting was the same for your grandparents and mine. They lived integrated lives full of tears and sunlight. Bill Hoffman has put the rays of sunlight under his strong lens, brought them into focus and thus has produced a book of love, triumph, and fire.

JOHN K. DONOHUE Chief Probation Officer Ramsey County (St. Paul), Minnesota

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Take Care of Pa

When she opened her eyes slowly, it took her a few moments to remember where she was and then it came back to her.

Through the cellophane oxygen canopy which wrapped her in a life-giving bubble, she saw them grouped silently standing just outside the doorway of her room. There were seven, she counted—her husband, Gabriel, upon whom her eyes rested first, her daughters Mollie and Frumah, and her four sons, Charlie, David, Boris and Max.

They looked for all the world like some little children who had each lost themselves and now having found each other, were still lost and huddling like forlorn lambs waiting for someone to lead them home. She wanted to lift an arm to beckon their way, to call them around her bed. But she was beyond beckoning and beyond speaking. The surge of strength that had opened her eyes receded quickly like the ebb tide of a stream that had run its course.

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The ripples of consciousness touched her Gabriel first. She remembered him straight and erect once, bashful and uncomfortable in the presence of others, but always loving her quietly in his own way. Sometimes he brought her extra large oranges after a weary day's

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peddling because he knew she liked them; once it was a remnant from a colorful bolt of cloth to make her an apron and every so often, a paper bag filled with rock candy or hard candies with jelly centers.

On the holidays and Saturday afternoons when they took a walk, he never walked two lengths ahead of her as did the other men to point out that a woman's proper place was behind her husband. He did so not because he feared a sharp tongue or a dark glance from her, but only because she was his wife whom he loved. Not that he ever spoke a single word of endearment to her—this was only for the younger generation who needed such things from each other because they came to marriage with nothing more than good intentions and a cook book, but he nevertheless made clear his feelings toward her every day of their long life together.

Why, he was a man who was even good to his horse! He was kind and gentle even to a beast. Where other peddlers spurred their thirsty horses on home to save a few minutes for themselves, her Gabriel led his horse to the public trough on Seven Corners for one last satisfying drink. Better bring home a few pennies less and be sure to give him enough to eat and to drink, for even a horse, no less than a human being, is a creature of God's.

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“Gabriel, Gabriel,” she wanted to say out loud, but not even her lips could form the sound and not even her eyes could shed a tear.

She saw Mollie's face framed in the doorway and that her hands were clenching and unclenching. This was the same Mollie—the one she thought would never get married. How she and Gabriel had worried about her—God forbid, “an old maid in the house!” She was never a beauty, but the finest homemaker that could be found—only it seemed for a long time that no one was interested in looking for a good homemaker like their Mollie—much less finding her.

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Instead the boys and the men were looking for buxom curves, for dark flashing eyes like her younger daughter, Frumah, but it was inconceivable that the younger daughter should be married before the older one. Finally, with God's help, a fine boy came along for Mollie. It's true he didn't come—he was pushed a little. It's true he was a little tongue-tied and lisped and it was true, too, that he was lame in one leg, but only when he walked. He was a fine man and they lived a good life. He had a good business, Mollie helped him, and they prospered.

With Frumah it was never really a problem. She was pretty to begin with and a real “flapper.” She was lazy, wore her sister's best clothes and didn't bother to hang them up when she was through with them and for all anyone really knew, probably even smoked a cigarette when no one was looking. And from all the dandies who flitted about her, she picked a dress salesman who was as saucy as she was and who once kissed her even before they were engaged right in front of the whole family. He smoked a big cigar, too, that smelled up the entire house. But as long as they were crazy about each other, there was nothing that could be done, so they got married. In time he added new lines and even bought his mother-in-law some dresses. He twitted her unmercifully about the many loose women on the road, but no one took him seriously—so long as he kept taking his wife along with him on the road.

“My beloved children, my beloved children.” The four boys, Charlie, David, Boris and Max, she saw shifting their stance from one foot to the other. They looked so much like her husband; how good this was. Charlie was the oldest; he had come with them from the old country and before they were even settled, he was selling newspapers on the streets. In the first few months he would often come home black and blue where he had been pummeled by the older boys who teased and tormented him with “greenhorn, greenhorn,” but he always returned with a fist clenched tight around the few pennies he had earned. He picked up the language long before they did and at school skipped from one grade to another. Charlie wanted someday to be a doctor, but there was a great deal of money to

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be earned during the great war, so he quit school to go into a factory. He bought five-dollar silk shirts, a saxophone and had a great time. But never did Charlie forget that his father and mother and the ones who came after him needed his help. Of him there was a time when she worried needlessly that he 15 would marry a non-Jewish girl because he spent so much time at Wildwood Amusement Park, but he did not disappoint them.

“Tsemach, Tsemach, bend over, won't you, and kiss your mother?”

David was a plodder like his father. He finished high school and went to business school at night. He picked a quiet girl for his wife, who lived on the same street, and they had quiet children who someday would have quiet children of their own. Some people thought David was a timid soul because he was such a quiet one, but he had a mind of his own and would not be budged one inch from what he thought was right. He, too, never neglected them and there was not a Sunday when he did not come over to spend some time with them.

“Doovidel, Doovidel, lift up your face and look at your mother.”

If it was right to have a favorite, it was Boris. He was unlike all the others and was always teasing her and kissing her. He was light-hearted, always ready with a joke and the bane of his rabbis with his tricks. He loved to play ball better than anything else in the whole world and spent more time with Gentile boys than with Jewish friends. She remembered how he wore his cap backwards over his skullcap in Hebrew School and how his sisters were swept away by his enthusiasm about everything, but mostly ball playing. It was her Boris who left home for a short time to earn his living as a ball player and she had missed him sorely; but he came back after one season telling her 16 that a “Baby Ruth” he was not. (Whatever that meant, she didn't know and cared less as long as he was back home.)

Boris was the last to get married, teasing her always that nowhere else would he get such cooking. It turned out that way, too, because although he married a rich girl whose father owned a junk shop so big that he spent most of his time looking for workers hiding

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behind the junk piles, Boris' wife couldn't even boil a potato. This in spite of the elegant gas stove her father gave her that could be lighted by pressing a button. So Boris and his wife divided their meals between her parents and his.

“Boorich, Boorich, eat a little more, take another bite!”

Now there was left Max who stood next to his father. He was the youngest. He was born after she and Gabriel were sure there could be no more. She had heard somewhere that a child who is not planned for is one who is loved less and sometimes not at all. A fine thing to say—these people who said things like that, spoke as though you ordered children as you ordered a chicken from the butcher or a piece of furniture from the store. Of course they loved him dearly and their hearts ached when he was a soldier far away from home.

He wrote them regularly and they in turn sent him salamis and pickles which followed him from battlefield to battlefield. They would all have felt badly had they known that unwittingly they had given great strength to the enemy who once overran a front-line 17 postal station and ate the salami and pickles. Better they had choked over it! In all their letters to Max they had cautioned him not to get too close to the enemy and when he came back, they all had shed great tears of joy. Now he was married to a fine Jewish girl who was helping him through his last year of college. What a topsy-turvy world! It used to be the parents who helped their children get through college, now it was the wives.

“Mawteleh, my soldier, take care Of yourself and let no harm befall you.”

She had accounted for all but the grandchildren. No doubt they were all little geniuses like their parents claimed and from them would come a doctor and a lawyer and an engineer, and of course she loved them all. They would grow up unworried, never harassed by any great privations; their backbones would never be tempered and steeled by the hardships their parents had coped with—and because of this she wondered if they would ever be as

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fine as their parents, her sons and daughters. They might even miss their grandmother for a few weeks and soon forget, but who could blame them?

Once more she made an effort to lift a hand and to beckon them all to her bedside, but the tremendous surge of determination brought only a rasp from her throat. They heard it and rushed over to her and Gabriel held her fingers tightly between the palms of his hands.

She wanted to bid them farewell and she wanted to tell them not to weep. She wanted to tell them 18 more than anything else how proud she was of all of them. None of them had ever been in trouble; they gave generously, within and sometimes even beyond their means; they loved their neighbors and they loved one another. They were good to her every single day of her life and they lived their own lives like all decent and honorable people should.

She wanted to tell them to take good care of her Gabriel because he would be so much alone. She wanted to hold each one in a long embrace just once more. And because she had been born into a practical world and from a practical world was leaving, she wanted to admonish them not to spend too much money on a fancy "box" for her burial because after all they needed it more themselves.

But she could not say anything except to gather them closer to her with the sweep of her eyes which closed gently and reluctantly as the last breath left her.

"My children, oh my children, take care of your father."

* * *

They waited until the nurse drew the sheet over her eyes and left the room. The tears came and washed down their cheeks and they clung tightly to each other. After a while they left Gabriel alone for the last time with his beloved wife and for the first time to speak, even though in a muted whisper, the words of love he had always felt but never said.

And when he joined them later at the end of the long hospital corridor, they pressed close to him and heard the low whine of the automatic elevator coming up to the third floor...like seven lambs who had lost their way.

Rivkeh's Operation

My friend Mendel seldom talks about his wife, who passed away some years ago. Let no one think, however, that he does not think of her often, for a man does not live with one woman over fifty years and dismiss her departure lightly.

Mendel and Rivkeh lived a fairly companionable life until the night she went to bed “as healthy as me,” and decided not to wake up the next morning or any other morning. Mendel insists the decision was her own and no one else's. She may have counseled with the Almighty, but no more than that. Somewhere early in her lifetime she had heard of the principle of “self-determination” and took it over completely.

They were married early—she was fifteen and Mendel was eighteen. Mendel never really saw her—that is, he never set eyes on her as a man does when he is looking hard, until shortly before the bride and groom's parents had said “yes” to each other. “By that time,” Mendel said, “it was too late.” It was only 22 some years later, after two children and a trip across the ocean to a new home in America, that they fell in love with each other. Of course, Mendel never spoke of love in so many words, but his eyes said so and the feelings which make words out of an alphabet also said so.

When she passed away—“She was just tired, that's all”—he buried her in a double lot which he had purchased ten years before “with cash.” It was a nice piece of land under a tree, since they both loved trees. Mendel didn't tear his clothes, threaten to jump into the grave or shout pious exhortations at the good Lord—even though such was to be expected and in good taste. He knew better than others, who carried on like professional mourners,

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that Rivkeh wouldn't care for this display. Instead he cried quietly to himself and lingered for a few minutes at her graveside.

After she was gone, he remembered with little twinges of sadness that she had always been right. When she told him to take their few dollars out of the bank, he did so and the bank failed the next day. But, of course, not because of his withdrawal. "Don't buy a suit yet, wait for tomorrow," she would say and the next day, there was a big sale at Mannheimer's. "Order coal today, Mendel," she said, even though it was a warm October and sure enough, tomorrow turned out to be a big freeze and a heavy snow. Although she had never learned to read, he read the Morning Tageblatt to her and she made predictions which President Wilson and his cabinet could have made good use of. So he listened to her, worked for her and loved her.

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Her whole life was circumscribed within a small area bounded by the ritual bath on one side and the B'nai Zion synagogue on the other. She was not an adventuresome spirit, had no sense of curiosity and went about her ways completely oblivious of anything happening beyond the limited boundaries of her life.

But one day, suddenly, all of this changed. It began with a severe and sharp pain under her chest. This was a different pain which did not respond to the usual pharmaceuticals in her medicine cabinet—peroxide, Ex-Lax, liniment, pink pills and magnesia. It was too high for pregnancy ("Thank God for that," said Mendel) and too low for a heart burn, so in the end, but not without considerable self-examination and over-the-fence medical consultation with neighbors, Dr. Winnick was called. His diagnosis, after a cup of tea, was that it was a gall bladder infection, necessitating surgery. Well, everyone knows that two doctors are better than one, three better than two and four, worse than none and too expensive—but the diagnosis and need for surgery remained.

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Now Rivkeh's little world began to crumble. It was not the thought of the knife that bothered her, but more so the frightening prospect of leaving the house. "Who will take care of the children, Mendel? Who will feed you, Mendel, when you don't know the difference between borsht and a herring if you had to prepare it yourself? Who will clean the house; who will prepare for the Sabbath?" But as is the custom with women, she answered each question herself just as soon as she asked it and in no time at all installed her sister-in-law in the house and took the streetcar to the city hospital.

Contrary to the ceaseless admonitions of the staff, she flushed the hospital food down the drain and ate instead every day from the baskets of food Mendel brought along—chicken broth, salami, heavy dark bread and hard-boiled eggs. Medical opinion to the contrary, all this did her good and she suddenly became a shining luminary—the first West Sider to have a "gold blotter" operation. "No, no, madam, not 'gold blotter', it's gall bladder," but it was no use, the doctor had a far easier time when he had been a student in medical school.

Forever, as a matter of fact, it remained "Gold Blotter." When Rivkeh's nephew grew up to be a big boy, he almost failed his comprehensive examinations in medical school because his fingers followed his memories and he wrote "Gold Blotter" instead of gall bladder.

To return to Rivkeh—life took a new turn in the form of a deadly and daily series of oral dissertations about her operation. All the details, gory and otherwise, came back to her vividly and what she missed under the ether, she had no difficulty making up. She recited the names of the nurses and the doctors, and their numbers became legion with each retelling. Her operation had been one in a million. She had been told, she said, that only one other such case had been recorded in medical annals—that of the Czar's second cousin's nephew who had been operated on in St. Petersburg. She wasn't saying, although she became 25 more certain later, but it wouldn't have surprised her if the very same doctor had operated on her.

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In no time, the “Gold Blotter” operation filled every nook and cranny of Mendel and his neighbors' lives. She confounded and embarrassed friends who came in for a visit by outlining with her fingers that portion of her anatomy which the operation had covered. And like a fisherman whose absent fish is measured by the limits of extended fingers and both arms, so grew the length of the incision “from here to here.” It is no wonder that one of Mendel's friends sputtered out loud in sheer desperation: “A pity the incision ended before it reached her tongue.” A zipper would have made Rivkeh's life less complicated, but alas, such had not yet been invented.

On and on she went. Soon the men no longer gathered in the evening on Mendel's porch. In the synagogue the seats on either side and immediately in front and behind Rivkeh's, were lowered in price and assigned to the hard of hearing because no one wanted to sit next to her. In the butcher shop, no matter how many were waiting, she was waited on at once in a vain and futile effort to get her out quickly. In the ritual baths, too, the situation became well nigh intolerable. After all, ladies, how far could one move away from her there? Don't ask. Wherever a group gathered and saw her coming, the tocsin cry was sounded, “run, run!” But Rivkeh just went on and on.

For Mendel, of course, it was worse. There was no escape. The poor man loved his wife and tried 26 hard, but doubts began to assail him and do you wonder why?

As heaven wills it, however, surcease finally came to all, including Rivkeh, who had become by this time a slave to her “Gold Blotter” operation. And from what a strange source—surely heavenly sent.

It seems that one day a traveling charity collector with his little black address book found his way into Rivkeh's parlor. The poor fellow had no chance and in less time than it takes to say “pour me a glass of tea,” Rivkeh was going full steam ahead with her “Gold Blotter” operation. In the midst of this mad recital, the collector's nostrils flared wide, his eyes shone with a luster of battle and in a deep somber and sonorous voice, he declared that

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by the “grace of God” he, too, had such an operation and proceeded to tell about it, even forgetting in his pitch of excitement, to ask for a contribution.

Rivkeh was dumbfounded. She reeled back, but recovered soon and in her wild desperation to quell this “Yankel-come-lately,” she pulled just a tiny bit of her blouse away to show her operation. You may be sure that in her right mind, Rivkeh would have sooner perished than display any part of her anatomy between her chin and big toe—but such was this thing that obsessed her.

Well, as is destined, in walked Mendel and what does he see but his wife all excited, flushed and fumbling with one end of her blouse. Suddenly in a brilliant flash of inspiration, he recognized his salvation. He turned fiercely upon the collector, who made 27 a mad dash towards the door, clutching his little black book and fleeing madly for the nearby sanctuary of the West Side Talmud Torah.

Without a second glance at the fast disappearing collector, Mendel rocked himself on his heels to and fro for a few seconds, drew himself up to his full height of five feet, six inches and in no uncertain terms chastized his wife for her most improper conduct. Inwardly he was having a most difficult time checking his laughter, for he knew full well that his Rivkeh would never do wrong. There was naught to do now, he said to his distraught wife, shaking his head in pretended disbelief, but for him to consult the Rabbi.

Rivkeh was beside herself with consternation. She pleaded with him and all the while she did so, Mendel's insides shook with laughter. Finally, he said to her that perhaps he could forgive her; maybe it wouldn't be necessary after all, to see the Rabbi—but only on one condition. She was never to mention her “Gold Blotter” operation again!

It was a most difficult decision to make. It was not really what the Rabbi might say or do that worried her; it was rather that she feared she would have to contend with the Rabbi's wife, who got all of her gossip and misinformation by “virtue” of the fact that the Rabbi always talked in his sleep. No matter how hard this woman listened all night, she never

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was able to put together her husband's nocturnal summaries, and therefore filled in the missing parts with her own vivid imagination. So Rivkeh gave in, but not before giving voice to a sad commentary—some people snored in 28 their sleep, but this Rabbi of theirs had to talk in his sleep.

* * *

Now if you think for a moment that Mendel had the last word, you have another guess coming. When I saw him the other day sunning himself in front of Engelson's shoe repair shop, I saw that the smile he usually wore had disappeared and a worried look had taken its place.

“Velvel,” he said, “come to think of it, after all these years, how do I know what Rivkeh might have done if I hadn't come into the room just in time?”

Rivkeh, Rivkeh, I thought, wherever you are, you must be smiling with great satisfaction. That's what Mendel gets for not letting you talk about your “Gold Blotter.” Now he will never be sure about you.

Three Bundles

“Be careful, it's icy,” he said to them as they shuffled down the walk with him toward the car.

This time they did not look back as they did several months before when they were leaving their own home for the last time. Now, after living for a while with their son Irving, they were moving into the Old Peoples' Home. It had not been easy for them during the waiting period, nor had it been easy for Irving and his wife and the children. Years back when they had been in the fastness of their own home, they had reigned benevolently as a king and queen might in their castle. But in the last two months in their son's home, they

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had become just two old people who were always in the way. So they marked the slow, creeping of time until the Old Peoples' Home could take them.

When their son had suggested that one of them might sit in the back seat of the car, they shook their heads in unison, determined to sit together. Even though the front seat was crowded with the heavy muskrat coat she wore and her husband's sheepskin 30 ulster, they helped each other in, frosting the window panes and windshield with the huffing and puffing of their efforts. Now, more than ever, they would not permit themselves to be separated as much as a thin inch from the proximity of one to the other and both from their son.

As she looked at her son out of the corner of her eye, she saw him sitting soberly behind the wheel and twinges of memory assailed her. Once when he was a little boy whose nose always needed wiping and she was a busy housewife, she had often pushed him away, gently but firmly, "Run off and leave me be." But who knew then that one day she herself would grow old and be in the children's way instead?

Who had time to think of the future when there had been so much at hand to do for the day? There was cooking and baking and the piles of laundry forever piling up. There was plum jelly to make, pickles to put up, a household to feed and a husband to humor. The children, it seemed, were forever holding on to her apron and always under foot. She hardly had time to learn the names of those already here, before another was on the way.

And not only her own brood, but in addition, there were all the others in the neighborhood who liked her home the best, because it smelled better and there were always sweets to eat. No matter how often and loud their own mothers called out into the streets, "Banish, Nathin, Chiam, Mawtel, Hatkeh, come right home," they preferred to stay with her. A thousand times she waved her apron at them, "Children, children 31 it's time to go home," but they giggled and shrieked and clung to her like chicks to a mother hen.

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As the car jerked to a start, she wondered idly how old her son Irving, was; he was the oldest and the only one remaining in the city. The other children were all over the country, sometimes sending a picture card, a few dollars for a new dress and on one occasion, a long distance call to which she was summoned by the neighbor who had the only telephone. How was she or her husband to know that this call would cost much money? Neither could she understand, therefore, why the neighbors had urged her to talk faster and not to bother with her shoelaces during the conversation. And why did the neighbor scold him for pausing a few minutes to clean his spectacles so that he “could hear his son better!”

Come to think of it, now, she wasn't quite sure about Irving's age. For her children and herself, too, she reckoned time by the special events which had marked their births. Take Irving—he was born the night of the big wind which had blown down the tree over the stable, frightened the horse out of his wits and caused the cow to go dry. Soorkeh, the daughter, came into the world on the very same day prohibition agents had raided a still across the street. A run-away team in the streets marked Max's date of birth and Yankel's appearance coincided with the big snow and blizzard which had buried three local drunks. And so it went with the rest of the family.

The census takers visiting her home had been driven to distraction at the difficulties encountered in getting accurate information. And although the authorities were finally forced out of sheer frustration to fabricate their own convenient dates to save themselves from balding prematurely, she continued to remember and set anniversaries to her own satisfaction. After all, a year here or a year there made no difference.

In the back seat of the car there were three bundles; two were wrapped in newspapers and tied with grocery twine and the third with an old leather belt. In vain had the son pleaded with them to leave this “junk” behind because it did not look good to take along. But again they shook their heads and in the end, the bundles went along with them.

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Only the two of them could appreciate that they could no more be separated from the bundles than from life itself. The candlesticks had long since lost their gold plating and indeed the son would have bought them new solid silver ones if they asked. But it was these and no others which had welcomed the Sabbath for generation after generation. Blessings and prayers without number had been said over them; the majestic nobility of many ancestors had blended with their simple and beautiful artistry. One could never replace them as with another piece of furniture.

There had been a day, she remembered, so many years back, when collectors of old silver, old gold and other antiques had passed through the old neighborhood. They had offered her a substantial sum for the candlesticks, but even when she had been desperately in need of money, she had merely smiled at these collectors and waved them away.

There were a few faded pictures wrapped with some old lace. On one, the best man and the bride's attendant smiled at them over the bridge of many years. These were faces which had disappeared in a pogrom (massacre) along with others who had remained behind in the old country. There were also two tin-types of their own parents who looked out at them with sadness, as if they understood what was happening.

In his own package was a well-worn razor strop and a straight-edged razor with a celluloid handle. There was also a small shaving brush (no hog bristles!), a cracked china cup with shaving soap in it and a small magnifying mirror which helped him cut and trim his beard. Just a year ago his son had given him his own electric razor, but it made crazy noises in his head (he had enough noises already in his head). It pulled his whiskers and the cord nearly choked him, so he gave it back.

He was also taking with him his Machzer and Sidur (prayer books), his tzitzehs, a skull cap, bedroom slippers, his phylacteries, his prayer shawl and a round tin can of Copenhagen snuff. The "Talith" was yellow with years, but it was clean and fresh and

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it was in this “talith” that he wanted to be buried. His son would have been happy to purchase a new one for him, but it would not have been steeped in the flavor of his synagogue and in the companionship of his friends.

34

One large package contained their pillows and bed sheets. They had been asked not to bring all this along, but both thought it would help soften the strangeness of a new bed and new room. These were pillows in which many tears had been shed during many nights and perhaps a few more would be shed in the uncertain days ahead of them.

A heavy and uncomfortable silence filled the car as they drove down Snelling Avenue. No one dared speak his thoughts out loud for fear the emotions held in check would spill over. Irving, the son, had an uncanny feeling that he was driving in a funeral procession and try as he would, he could not shake it off. Everything seemed unreal and a terrible sense of futility and finality almost overcame him.

What a ridiculous way, he thought, for an intelligent person like himself to think! It was not his fault; he could not have continued to let them live by themselves in their old house, could he? Someone had to watch over them and take care of them. Even in his own home, the past two months, they had been in the way constantly and no matter how hard everyone tried, it did not work out. One simply had to face the inevitability of old age and its consequences. Who could say he was not being a good son and doing what was best?

And yet, deep little fears gnawed away at his stomach and his tight grip on the steering wheel drew the blood away from his knuckles. Each time he looked at them, the passive resignation he read in the 35 wrinkled lines of their faces wrenched and tugged at his heart.

Oh Lord, he thought, Oh Lord, he meant them no unkindness; he would visit them every day and all the other residents of the Home would envy his parents the devotion of their faithful son. He would bring them hard jelly candies that they loved to suck on, rock candy

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when they had a cold and both the Forvitz and Morgen Journal to keep them in reading material. Everyone at the Home would shake their heads and say, "Where does one find a son like theirs?"

Suddenly his mother turned her face to him and gently gave him a pat on his cheek. "Don't be so sad, my son, someone might think your partner ran off with your business."

She knew how he felt and this was her way with him as it had always been. He smiled wryly back at her and saw his father smile too.

In a few more minutes they turned right from Snelling Avenue into Midway Parkway and stopped before the Old Home.

Irving opened the door from his side and walked around the car to help them out. They waited hand in hand for him until he had removed the bundles from the back seat. Then they held on to him tightly and walked slowly up the steps. Just one step from the door, Irving's father moved out ahead of them and with a courtly gesture, opened the door for his son and wife.

She looked up to her husband somewhat surprised, but when she saw the light in his eyes, she remembered 36 and understood. No one else but the two of them knew that this was not only a courtesy. It was the courageous gesture of a husband who had never let the adversities of a long, long life stand in his way.

With the very same courtly gesture, he had once stepped off from the ship one step ahead of her to welcome her to a new and frightening land—sixty years ago. Others here might see an old man, but in her eyes, there was only the picture of a noble and loving husband who had conquered a land for her and their family. As long as he was with her, there was nothing to be afraid of.

Once long ago they had come off the boat with three bundles and now they were beginning all over again with the same three bundles.

37

The Long Vigil

During the year that they were at the Old Peoples' Home her husband passed away. As long as he had felt physically able to take the bus occasionally to visit his old neighborhood, he held on tenuously to life, but when his tired limbs failed him, he let go of his grip, relaxed his fingers and closed his eyes in death.

For a long time after he was gone, it was very difficult for her. It was impossible to believe that he was no longer with her. She continued to listen through the nights for his heavy breathing and from sheer habit crawled out of bed wearily looking to cover him with the blanket which, in his restless tossing, always slipped off onto the floor. All his life he had a rasping cough which was relieved only by some rock candy dissolved in water. Half awake, he would always complain and push her away with one hand, while reaching out with the other for her homemade remedy.

All night he made a cacaphony of noises, clearing his throat, snoring, tossing and counting out loud 38 imaginary receipts. But all of these sounds had eventually become as much a part of the night as darkness itself and she worried only on those rare occasions when he slept quietly. On those infrequent nights, the silence would keep her awake and concerned that there was something wrong with him.

But after many nights of finding an empty bed, the inescapable bitter truth struck her that he was gone forever. After that she no longer listened to hear him; instead she seemed to accept her loneliness with a fatalistic shrug of her shoulders. She even managed to contrive some solace and a small measure of comfort from the fact that he had died before her. How utterly helpless and confused he would have been without her attention. She had

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wondered often, when he was alive, how a man who had such great strength to wrench a good living from a hard life in defiance of a multitude of adversities and obstacles, could be as inept as a new-born babe in tending to his own wants.

She had to scratch his back, cut his nails, wash his hair, help him on with his long underwear, cut his meat and even butter his bread. If he had been left to himself, he no doubt would have starved to death waiting for someone to prepare his food while he read the paper. She had enjoyed his helplessness, even when he exploited it as all men are wont to do and she derived great delight and fulfillment in catering to his needs. Yes, it was good, she reflected often, that at least it was she and not her husband whom the Lord had seen fit to leave behind.

39

One morning after he was gone, when she thought she could stand alone again, she suddenly felt his absence more than she ever had before and the pain of being all by herself hurt her like the constant pounding of a migraine headache. In the course of a few days, she wrapped herself within a self-knit shroud of despair and kept to her room. She refused to come down to eat with the others, nibbled in a desultory fashion at the meals which were brought in to her, and spoke to no one.

Some of the younger old people in the Home, those in their early seventies, shook their heads knowingly. This retreat from the living was inevitable, they said. It came with old age and was a companion to hardening of the arteries, loss of memory, impairment of hearing, clouding of vision and so forth. There was really nothing that could be done about it even though they were all too polite to tell the doctor who gave them pills to prevent this, that he was really wasting his time. One day they knew this would catch up with each of them, too, and then it would be time to turn one's face to the wall and wait for the end.

Night after night, she sat near the window in semi-darkness leaving only one small bulb burning. The pale circumference of its illumination became the boundary of her life. Within

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this small circle upon which the blackness of the room encroached, she rocked herself with a deadly rhythm, smoothing her apron in front of her with wrinkled hands and casting a long thin shadow that swung like a pendulum on the opposite wall. And the shadow had no substance and no depth, for it mirrored the muteness and utter loneliness of the person who cast it.

When her vigil of the night was finished, the vigil of the day began. Except to meet the most urgent needs of her body, she sat the whole day through until the night took over again. And with the night came a light frost leaving a moist film on the window, at which she kept rubbing away in a circular motion with the edge of her shawl. But as quickly as she rubbed it away, the film came back and the little grim game went on.

If she was conscious at all of the life about her, she gave no sign. Somewhere in the corridors and in the adjoining rooms, there was the shuffling of slippers, the subdued animation of laughter and restrained whispering. Somewhere there was persistent bickering and teasing, the hum of an evening prayer tendered personally and privately, the timidity of an over-seventy bashful suitor courting an over-eighty prospective (and duly cautious) bride. There were voices raised in anger, the pitter-patter of a little granddaughter exploring the hallways in defiance of her mother who was visiting — but to all of this, she seemed oblivious.

For over fifty years she and her husband had prepared a Passover Seder and now, for the first time, there would be none like she remembered. How wrong some people were when they spoke so knowingly of the infirmities of old age and especially of the loss of memory. The first Seder and every one after that were crystal clear to her; there was not a single one that she could not recall. For the first few years after they were married they had alternated between her parents and his for the first night of Pesach and after the first child had arrived, their own parents had come to them to sit at their table and take delight in the first grandchild.

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With the passing of time, more children had come and more tables were set. There was more food to prepare and more mouths to feed, but it was a great joy to see the whole family around the long table. The Four Questions asked in the traditional way took on new meaning each year and finally, there came a day when there were so many of their own grandchildren that the Four Questions were divided and subdivided to give each child a portion to ask.

Each year her husband conducted the Seder, dressed in his flowing white kittel and reading from the Haggadah (Passover story) and for some reason or another, there always remained in her mind her favorite passage beginning with “a wandering Aramean is my father.”

She remembered the fourth cup of wine which always made her feel giddy. Each year, with the fifth cup for Elijah and the opening of the door to bid him welcome, there came instead their Gentile friend from next door for his annual Seder drink. At least, they reasoned, that if Elijah was too busy to come himself, he sent an emissary to test the traditional hospitality of the Jew. It was never wanting.

The hiding and finding of the prize matzo, the wonderful hilarity of the children and the quickness of sleep which overcame them — none of this was forgotten. But above all, it meant the gathering of all the family under one roof and her beloved husband, lord and master of their home, holding court on his throne at the end of the table — the most noble and gentlest of all men.

She could not help herself. Her grief and loneliness were too much to bear and she knew that neither would leave her until the time of the first Seder had come and gone.

* * *

In the midst of her despondency, the matron came in and urged her firmly but kindly, to the telephone. It was her oldest son who said that all the family would be at his home the next

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night for the First Seder—even Chatzkel, who owned six shoe stores, was flying in from California. Be sure to be ready in a few hours and you can sleep over with us the first two days, he told her.

And he thought like all the others when she asked him to say it over again and over again, that the infirmities of old age had overtaken his mother, for she didn't seem to hear well. But the truth was that she heard him well the first time and the second time although she protested feebly that perhaps it was too much of a bother for them and besides there was a fine Seder being prepared at the Home for all the residents. Come to think of it, too, was he sure his wife had properly prepared their home for this holiday?

43

But, despite all her protests, which were really not protests at all, her heart became light and she said she would be ready.

When he came to call for her, she was ready and although she had been so for two hours, she asked him to wait so she could tell some of her friends (for the second and third time), who were sitting in the lounge that she was spending the first two days of Passover with her son.

“After all,” she said to each of them, “it's really quite a bother for me, but how can I disappoint my children who invited me as far back as six months ago? And who else will make the matzo dumplings?” So the residents, sitting and waiting, shook their heads after her and repeated, “And who else will make the dumplings?”

Her eldest son held her elbow firmly as he guided her down the outside steps to his car. He thought her eyesight was failing too, but if he had looked closer he would have seen that the brightness of her eyes shown even through the tears that welled from sheer happiness.

45

Closed Is the Bank

Now all knew that it was the year of adversity.

The days were pock-marked with hunger for many and with genteel poverty for others.

Under the cloak of the night, there were a few who lifted covers from garbage cans for food scraps. In the uncompromising light of the day, others no less desperate and hardly more affluent, bought five-cent cans of canned mackerel for their “cats,” but in truth, they had no cats to feed — only their own hunger and the need to cling to their little rafts of dignity.

In the West Side it was bad, too, but when had it been good? Here, though, the people did not look into garbage cans or buy canned mackerel, for buffalo and carp could still be had for the catching. But more important, the inhabitants thereof had known adversity before, as they had known terrible pogroms and suffering in little villages thousands of miles away. So they girded their loins for the great depression which cast its shadow over the fair land of promise.

46

These were the proud and stubborn people of the West Side who labored valiantly to hide their despair and fear of unemployment and a lean table from their neighbors and from their children. Real money was scarce, but when had there been plenty? There were a few more patches in the children's clothes, but they were kept neat and clean. No one gave up butter for margarine, but there was less butter; no one gave up coffee, but used more chicory; there were more bread crumbs in the hamburgers, but the hamburgers were just as big as ever. They borrowed from one hand to pay the other. They cashed penny insurance policies originally purchased to provide a “nice box” at the funeral — but they never gave up!

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Cooking oil was six cents a bottle — you bought the bottle and it was filled from a large barrel with a wooden spigot. Hills Brothers coffee was selling for 49c for a two-pound can and Primeau the grocer, would grind a pound of coffee beans for you for fifteen cents. The shoemakers were putting on rubber heels for twenty-five cents, even less for those who couldn't pay as much and nothing for some who had nothing. Bread was five cents a loaf, delivered, unsliced and unwrapped; herring a nickel and a bushel of potatoes from the farmer's wagon was thirty cents. The fruit peddlers were selling Jonathan apples three pounds for ten cents and even less for those slightly spoiled.

The bankers and the economists can tell you how this depression came about; but all I can tell you is 47 when it began, at least from my own point of observation.

It was a day better you shouldn't get up for. My brother spilled hot cocoa over me at breakfast, I couldn't find my prayer philacteries and there was no toilet paper in the bathroom. The teachers were crabby and the sex lecture for “boys only” turned out to be a fraud perpetrated on “alley” experts who knew more than the lecturer.

At three o'clock we were on the corner of South Robert and Concord bumming rides downtown to hustle papers. Most of us hitched onto the sides of cattle trucks returning empty from the stock yards and held onto the tail gates until Fourth and Robert. One fellow named Ben would not demean himself, however, with this kind of transportation. With the aplomb of a diplomat and the audacity of a 14-carat fake stock promoter, or an uninvited guest at a Bar Mitzvah, Ben merely opened the door of the newest car stopping for a red traffic light and inquired solicitously if there was a radio. Thereupon, Ben would comfortably ensconce himself and wave back to the boys. By the time the driver had collected his wits and was ready to make a timorous inquiry about Ben's presence, it was time to get out on Fourth and Robert.

Another of us merely picked up an old transfer-preferably from the same year — turned it in at the beginning of the bridge and was unceremoniously told to get off at the end

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of the bridge, which point fortunately coincided with his destination. But the rest of us “schlemehls” — you could tell then we 48 would never amount to much — hung on precariously to the back of cattle trucks.

On that particular day, I grabbed the tail gate of a truck as usual, but this time fell over backwards into a pile of fresh “fertilizer” — if you would rather have me call it that. There was no time to remove the stuff when I left the truck and so I sold my papers in a stand-offish manner, dispensing both news and smells for the same price.

It was on this same day, too, that Carlson, the traffic officer on Fifth and Wabasha, left his portable stop-and-go platform and came up to me with head drooping. He was my friend and I was sorry for him for I knew something was wrong. All the time I was shouting my fool head off about a stock market crash, but what did it mean to me? There was plenty of nothing at home, but of stocks and bonds, we had even less. But this was Carlson whose authority kept traffic moving — this was Carlson who watched the cigar coin box on my papers when I had to leave the corner this was Carlson, the only policeman in the city who paid his two cents for a paper.

I listened to him and my heart cried out as he recited the rise and fall of Cities Service stock which he had been buying. This day he was a broken man. How could I take his two pennies for a paper? I had more cash in my pocket than Carlson now had to his name.

I was sad — so sad that I didn't have my heart in distributing handbills on my way home — another part-time job. In fact, I had so little heart left that I 49 deposited more handbills in the sewer than usual — for underground distribution.

Thus began that day and thus it ended, for when I finally came home, it was to a quiet table where the silence lay as heavy as the buckwheat groats. The rubber tires and metals in my father's junk shop were also now worth almost as little as Mr. Carlson's stocks. The prices had fallen to nothing during the day and now I understood that what happened in

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the frenzied stock exchange over a thousand miles away was now hanging over our roof and the roofs of our neighbors.

The next day was worse, for on a certain corner downtown there was gathered a silent, fearful crowd who did not speak to each other. It was a most unusual crowd, for although all had one terrible concern in common, none was willing or able to share the dreadful threat which struck them all — the bank had closed because it had failed! On one of the revolving doors was a white sheet of bond paper saying so and it might just as well have been a judicial commitment to poverty.

The people of the West Side were in the crowd; women in shawls, husbands and wives standing close together as though to insulate themselves from grief. Their life savings were gone, the money they had put together coin by coin was no longer theirs. They had added pennies to nickels, dimes to quarters; they had known the individual coins and bills almost as intimately as the furniture in their homes, as well as the clothes on their backs. They remembered where each penny came from and to what it had been joined. They had gathered this money not with the unhealthy greed of a miser and not even for themselves, but for a son's education (who educated girls?), a daughter's dowry, a victrola or a piano for the family and if something was left for their old age — all the better. The blessings of Social Security and Old Age Assistance were only in the mind of a polio-crippled man bathing at Hot Springs, Georgia.

Now one would have to start all over again. So they finally dispersed, walking disconsolately over the Robert Street bridge, singly and in pairs as though part of a long funeral cortege reaching from downtown to their homes. There were hard days ahead and the flame of dreams and ambitions for themselves and their children burned low, but they were never quenched.

In due time the bank reopened and began to pay back regular installments. Money came out of mattresses and stockings to be put back in the bank. Better times hove in sight.

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Sons went to college and daughters married off (some because they went to college and some in spite of that handicap), real pussy cats ate canned mackerel again and there remained a few dollars to save under the mattress.

The red rolls of chicory didn't sell as well, coffee rose to a fantastic price of forty cents a pound and haircuts, fifty cents. But now there were jobs for all, it wasn't going to rain “no more” and there was a rainbow around everyone's shoulder. The long, long days and the months of adversity were gone.

51

It all went to prove, among other things, that the West Siders were made of iron. The pogroms, the floods, the bank closings and the depression—all these were met head-on and sweated out. They remained stubborn and determined while others jumped out of windows. Mendel, the Texas Street philosopher, once said that he might have jumped too, “but with my luck, I would only have broken a foot.”

Anyhow, all turned out well and ultimately all the West Siders moved to Highland Park, where they lived happily ever afterward with nothing to worry about except another mortgage.

53

Too Late, Too Late, Too Late

Once his father had let him hold the reins for a few seconds as his horse and wagon turned into State St. from Indiana Avenue. He had waved to Mr. Primeau standing in front of his store with a white apron and a big cigar and across the street to some of his little friends who waved back in envy.

Now he sat in the car he had rented at the airport and fought back the tears welling from an impossible wish that everything be the same as it was—if only for a second. Instead, Primeau's store windows were covered by shabby drapes hiding the poverty of a Mexican

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family. Through the slit in one of the drapes, a potted geranium bloomed bravely. Across the street stood the B'nai Zion Synagogue where he and his father had worshipped. It leaned like a tired old man looking for someone to help him; mute and sagging, its windows and doors battened down as though determined to contain within it the prayers of all the families who had ever gathered there and to ward off the tides of melancholia. Rose, the butcher, and the building his shop had 54 been in, were gone, leaving a gaping void filled with weeds and no bearded patriarch sat on that sunny porch pointing an admonishing finger at the little boys who played in the street.

In less than twenty-four hours he had spanned the mountains and prairies between Los Angeles and St. Paul, but had come too late to hold his father's hand and give him some measure of comfort. In the movies, he thought ruefully, the devoted son always arrived in the nick of time, just long enough to bend over and embrace his father and watch the soft, gentle eyes close forever and the weary face relax. But not so with him.

He turned the ignition key off suddenly, remembering his father's abhorrence of waste of any kind. He heard him say, "Don't let the water run," "It's a sin to throw away a piece of bread"; "Take care of every penny"; "Wipe up your plate with a piece of bread." Once when he had walked downtown with him, his father had insisted on turning off the public drinking fountain on Fourth and Robert. He was not a penurious or miserly man; he was only trying to instill in others the values his own father had taught him. "Nothing must be wasted," he told him so often, "there is a place for everything."

Why? Why could he not have come in time to sit by his father's bed to tell him the words that crowded inside? "Pa, Pa, was there ever a better father in the whole wide world?" This, at least, he would have told him. He had dropped everything when the telegram arrived at his office and taken the first plane out of the city. He had moved quickly with a growing sense of frustration, unwilling to admit to himself that he might not come in time. On the plane, he smoked cigarette after cigarette, feeling himself caged in. He wanted to shout, "Pa, wait for me, I'm coming."

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His eyes wandered to the synagogue again; he was not yet quite sure what had drawn him to this corner. He closed his eyes hard, trying to wish back, like the colored Kodak slides he showed off at home, sharpframed recollections. He saw himself in baggy knickers and hightop shoes walking down the aisle in the synagogue to their numbered pew, hand in hand with his father. He could almost feel his father's calloused palm and the mysterious wart on his middle finger. He remembered the fervent wish he so often made to himself that some day he would be a grown-up and bid a fantastic price to buy for his father the coveted privilege of singing out the “mafter” (reading from the Torah), so high that all in the synagogue, even the most pious with the longest beards who sat next to the wall, would murmur and shake their heads with wonder and approval. And his father, inwardly bursting with pride, would say calmly to the congregation with his eyes, “So, what is unusual about this? Is this not what a good son will do for his father?” But each time, he would lose his place in the prayer book, carried away by his wishes and his father would remind him to “wipe off your nose and pay attention.” How could he know what dreams his son was dreaming?

He had driven as hard as he could from the airport in response to word left there to come directly to the funeral home. He parked his car at the end of the row of cars on Pleasant Avenue and when he walked in, 56 was reminded to put on a skull cap. At the end of the aisle, he stood bowed in numb grief before the casket and suddenly bits of prayers he had long ago forgotten, came tumbling from his lips in Hebrew. He wept quietly and those behind him knew he cried only because they saw his shoulders shake. Then someone led him away into a side room to join his brothers and sisters.

His eyes wandered back from the synagogue to the potted geranium and the dirty drapes in Primeau's windows—only they were no longer Primeau's. He thought back to the colorful gypsies who came up from the flats in the early spring and rented vacant stores, where they lived and told fortunes behind dirty curtains. Whenever he walked by, he held

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on tightly to his father, for he had heard in the school cloakroom and in the Hebrew School lavatories, that gypsies kidnapped little children.

Then one day he was no longer a little boy and was a student at the University. His father would ask him, "Well, my son, what are you going to be?" And he would answer, "An accountant, Pa." But never, never, could his father understand this deliberate choice of vocation. A bookkeeper perhaps, yes, but to go to college from whence came erudite scholars, lawyers, doctors, dentists and engineers—to become a bookkeeper "This I can't understand." Yet, unlike other fathers, he never pushed him in other directions, having confidence in the ultimate wisdom of his son and the good Lord, mostly the latter.

57

It had been useless to remonstrate with his father. He had tried to explain that "an accountant, Pa, was not a bookkeeper"; accountancy was a profession dealing with intricate finances. He had resorted to all kinds of strategems to bolster his point. "An accountant, Pa, is as different from a bookkeeper as a horse doctor from a specialist," but it never reached home. His father would only shake his head up and down (when he did so from side to side it meant outright approval) in a puzzled way. "So be an accountant, so be a paintner, so be a carpentner, just stay healthy and be a man." But all the while, in his own mind, he knew that figures were figures, you bought and you sold, you profited and you lost, you owed and you borrowed—and so it went—if his son would rather be called an accountant than a bookkeeper, so let it be.

From the side room where he sat in the funeral parlor, he heard Rabbi Raskas say of his father, what a fine Jew he was all of his life. He did not know the Rabbi, but was comforted by his simplicity and his gentleness and the fact that he did not have to search for words to extol his father. It was as though the Rabbi, too, had once walked in a synagogue holding his father's hand and therefore knew him so well. But this should not be difficult for the Rabbi because there was nothing in his father's life but goodness, no matter in which

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direction one might look. How much more satisfying this must be for the Rabbi than with another man whose life might be as sparse of good deeds as dandelions in the winter.

At the cemetery he looked long and hard at his father until the casket was closed. He said the prayers 58 quickly and remained there after all the others had left. He did not want to hurry, for he would not be back again until a stone marker was placed over the grave after a year. He did not cry, standing there with his head bent slightly, thankful that it was warm and the sun shone.

He recalled the evening at the train depot shortly after his college graduation when he was leaving for Los Angeles. His father had walked across the bridge to see him off and wish him well. He had pressed on him a leather briefcase with his name in gold lettering, and as a mark of a great concession and a reflection of his deep pride in his son, he had asked the salesman (who had snickered behind the palm of his hand) to add, A-C-C-O-U-N-T-A-N-T in bold letters. And when both embraced, each at a loss to express the real poignancy of a sad farewell, his father had whispered in his ear, "Don't forget to change your stockings every day and wear a clean white shirt."

And so time had moved inexorably on. In Los Angeles, he prospered and raised a family and in the process of a dull and uneventful life, sent occasional greetings to his father which were translated back home into broken, barbaric Yiddish by other members of the family. Like a dutiful son, he contributed with other brothers and sisters who were able, sufficient money to permit his father to live comfortably in a rented room by himself. Once, when his first son had been Bar Mitzvah, he sent his father a round-trip ticket, but frail health, his father wrote back, had not permitted him to attend. In reality, the rigors and uncertainties 59 of a four-day trip away from his synagogue and kosher food were the real reasons.

Every Father's Day, he telephoned after six o'clock, but the telephone allowed for no intimacy and warmth. After all, it was only a machine and the best it could do for both

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was to call attention to the prevailing weather and emphasize the distance between them. Each time after he hung up, he saw his father walking away from the phone shrugging his shoulders as he went back to his chair near the window in a lonely room.

He had been in that room this very day for a few minutes. It was tidy and sterile and the smothering loneliness assailed and oppressed him. In the dressers were the socks and boxes of unused ties which had accumulated from many Father's Days. On top of the dresser he saw his own graduation picture in the very center of many others—favorite among favorites. He could not bear to stay long for his father's absence filled the room and there was a great longing in his own heart to embrace him and to rest his own head, as he had done so often, in the crook of his father's shoulders.

So, toward the end of the day, he found himself again at the corner of Indiana Ave. and State St. If only he could roll the years back and walk into the synagogue, he would pick up from its leather pillow where it rested, the iron hand that Sexton Whitefield used to quiet the noisy congregation and he would shout out loud for all to hear:

60

“I am the fruit of my father's loins and I have come from far away to stand at his right hand and to pray with him. I wish to buy the ‘mafter’ for him and I shall stay and visit with his friends, too.”

And his father's eyes would shine bright and he might say with a quiet and clear voice, “Now my life is full and nothing is lacking.” Suddenly he knew why he cried. Indeed, he had come from far away, but it was for the dead and not the living. Forever more, he would remember that in death he had let nothing stand in his way to fly across the country to his father. How much better had he taken that time to stand with his father in life!

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The Loan Association

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My friend Mendel pointed him out to me. "Just look at him," he said. "So he's on his way running to buy another apartment, another piece of property, another big deal. He's in such a hurry he doesn't have time anymore to nod to an old friend. I remember when he first began to buy up pieces of the city, he had time to say hello, but now there isn't even room in his mad frenzy just to nod his big, fat head. Maybe he's afraid to do this out of a habit of nodding at auctions. He's worried maybe that someone on the street will think it's an offer he's making."

"You're bitter, Mendel, my friend," I said, "and it's not like you one single bit."

"Who is bitter, who needs his buildings? Better I've got all of my stomach left and not supporting all the specialists in the Lowry Medical Building.

"He should stop for a minute even if his accountant figured out it costs him fifty dollars a minute to stop. He should take a deep breath and be reminded that he 62 still owes me fifty dollars on a note I co-signed for him at the old Workmen's Circle Loan Association. But who can bother him now with small things like fifty dollars?

"No, better he should keep chasing up and down the streets and alleys, buying and selling. If he lives long enough, God help us, at this rate he will own the whole city including the State Street dump and where will he go next?

"Maybe then, he will have time to remember that Mendel paid off his share of the loan he had signed for in his behalf, at a dollar each week, with six per cent interest. Maybe by that time Mendel will have gone to his rest from a full life of many satisfactions and this vulgar fellow will stay on with a miserable appetite, trying to figure out a way to take it all with him."

Now I can tell you quite truthfully that it wasn't the fifty dollars that Mendel was so stirred up about. In Mendel's long life there were many fifty dollars and more, that went down the drain and which Mendel chalked up as good deeds of one kind or another. More than one

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sharp shyster passed through the West Side selling machines that manufactured money, stock in the Brooklyn Bridge and one ingenious scheme to transmute silver candlesticks into gold. And Mendel had fallen for more than one of these. No, it was the fact that this man disclaimed any previous connection with a loan association, that irked Mendel so.

With others who had become “high-toned,” Mendel could vent his irritation in another way. With one 63 in particular who turned up her nose at him whenever they passed, he took special delight in calling out loudly, “So, how is Sophie today?” when everyone knew her name was now “Cherise.” Another who had made the transition from the West Side and now called herself Barbara, he insisted on greeting as “Bashkeh.” He wasn't really mean and meant no harm; he only wanted people at least to remember where they came from and not be ashamed.

And who can blame Mendel at this affront, real or imaginary, not only to his West Side, but to a cherished institution so close to his heart—the loan association—out of which had come dollars to help those who wanted nothing more than to help themselves.

How many doctors, lawyers, dentists and other fine professional men in our community had their tuition fees paid by loans to their parents? And when it came time to set up an office, to buy equipment—it was a loan from the loan association that made it possible.

Wives and families were brought over from the old country with three hundred dollar loans for steamship tickets, sometimes payable in five years by weekly payments at an interest of six per cent. Once having brought a family over, more loans were made to bring over immediate relatives who, as the old familiar complaint went, never appreciated it anyway. And just as soon as these relations who “didn't appreciate it” had a roof over their heads and a thin and precarious livelihood in sight, they in turn sent for other relatives who, of course, also “didn't appreciate.” So, in time, the West Side was populated with nothing but “didn't appreciators.”

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The quickest business to get into, of course, was peddling of one kind or another. But you couldn't peddle without a wagon and a wagon wasn't any good without a horse, and so it was the loan association all over again.

Collateral was unheard of—what could a man give for security—his wife, his children? (Although a few, if pressed, would have been willing to part with the former.) Instead of collateral, which to this day, one of our most affluent tycoons still pronounces “Colorado,” a co-signer was necessary. Invariably this was a relative or friend, who, by signing a note, agreed to assume responsibility for its eventual repayment.

The grocery business also attracted husband and wife teams: one person could never do it alone because the long, long hours necessitated two people to relieve each other. In each little store, a curtain separated the stock from the rest of the family who lived behind. How we envied the children whose parents had grocery stores and who could take all the chocolate soldiers and Mary Jane candies they could eat. They always had their mouths full of candy in spite of a continuous barrage of exhortations and threats from their mothers that they would choke.

To open a little store, the husband would take out a maximum loan of three hundred dollars and his wife would make another loan for the same amount. With this six hundred dollars in cash, it was a relatively simple matter to secure an additional six hundred dollars in credit. With twelve hundred dollars, you could really open up a well-stocked store without fearing a run 65 on case goods. After all, nobody bought more than a dollar's worth on any trip and since it would take twelve hundred customers at that rate to empty the shelves, and since at one time it seemed as though there were twelve hundred little grocery stores, there was little danger of selling out to the bare walls. The prevailing merchandising philosophy of course, was, “So if we don't sell it, the family will eat it”—and many did.

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They were not ordinary little men who founded the loan associations, but, unknowingly, the real heroes of many little Jewish communities struggling to maintain a precarious foothold. The money and the shares they contributed were not skimmed from income tax—for there was no such thing; neither was it money burning a hole in the pocket for a quick turnover. No, it was dollars taken dime by dime and quarter by quarter from food, from rent and the very necessities of life.

More than once they sweated, these men did, hoping and praying that the association would pull through. Upon them depended the peddlers, the shop keepers, the shoemakers and a thousand and one hole-in-the-wall enterprises, while many thousands of miles away, wives and children waited patiently for ship tickets.

If you say to those who still grace our community by their presence, that someone wrote of them as heroes, they will chuckle and shake their heads in disbelief for the passing years have smoothed away the sharp edge of memories. But heroes they were and 66 are, who fought a different kind of battle to preserve and strengthen the dignity and self-respect of many of us, our fathers and grandfathers. There is much for which to be grateful to them.

How good it might be to list along side the names of these men, the names of other men and their successful enterprises which dot this town and others and which in all likelihood would have withered on the dry vines of failure, had it not been for the loan associations. And not all are like the man who Mendel points at. Some indeed still carry in their wallets a passbook showing the last payment made and red stamp mark, “Paid in Full.”

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Brief Encounter

He was gaunt and unkempt. The red stubble on his chin threatened to grow into an ugly beard.

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* * *

There is a place alongside the sandstone cliffs where the river bends gently toward the little town of Hastings. Here the freight trains slow up for the railroad yards and here the tarnished knights of the road drop out of boxcars to travel their own solitary ways...

He found his way up the path and when he had gained the top, he brushed the sand and burrs from his clothes and lifted his head to gaze across the river, looking to the muddy ramparts of the West Side. He was no Moses surveying the promised land—he was a bum returning home. The hate that had turned him away from his family had turned on himself, prodding him to come back.

He rubbed his knuckles on the fresh green sod blanketing the little mounds in the park where Indians 68 were buried and remembered the hot days when he and his friends had paused here on a hike to Battle Creek. He could almost taste the strawberry pop and the big salami sandwich and pickle which his mother had put in his lunch.

Beyond in the distance, flanking the State Street Bridge which had been closed the past twenty years for temporary repairs, lay the old P. Q. baseball grounds. He thought back to one game and two young men arguing loudly and vigorously over an umpire's decision, both mutually reaching common agreement that the other was crazy. In a pique of anger, he remembered, both marched off to see a doctor friend of theirs who listened patiently to each, declared them both “crazy” (with tongue in cheek) and pocketed his cash fee.

The circus, too, came there after the spring floods and he imagined he smelled the tangy odor of the sawdust and the hot dogs which were made of the same. He heard the clacking of the prize wheels spinning and saw the heaping baskets of fruit and the “genuine” Indian blankets given to lucky number holders. Alas, though, the fruit basket bottoms were stuffed with paper and the blankets lost their dubious colors in the first wash.

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He saw a little colored boy with a “monkey's tail” exhibited by the barker as the “African Wonder.” “Ten cents to see for yourself, one and all, that we all come from monkeys—there ain't no arguing with evolution.” But there had been no tail on the little boy when they were swimming in the pond that morning 69 after carrying water for the elephants. It was glue and fuzz that transformed him into a “monkey boy.”

And when it was over and the long, hot night had cooled somewhat, the pop and popcorn, crackerjacks and candy floss, caramel apples and hot dogs united in revolutionary foment in his little belly. But all of this yielded ultimately to the universal panacea of the times—Ex-Lax. His mother administered it for all that ailed the young and old, the hearty and the infirm. She prescribed the little chocolate squares with the same confidence physicians were to give penicillin and sulfa many years later.

Little bits of childhood memories crowded him from all sides and he saw himself back in Hebrew class again. He saw his rabbi, who had succumbed momentarily to the heat and the hypnosis of the buzzing fan, dozing with eyes shut, but one arm rising and falling automatically to guide the sing-song recitation of the Hebrew. Suddenly aroused from his trance by a premonition that all was not right, he had discovered that his beard was fastened to the desk with a wad of gum and in righteous wrath he smote the first student his palm could reach—a poor, innocent lad who, while no little Lord Fauntleroy himself, was in this instance, as pure as the driven snow.

He shook his head as though to shake off these memories which clung so tenaciously. He picked up his battered bag and turned himself in the direction of Seventh Street, walking quickly without looking about. On Seventh, near Wacouta, he walked into a second-hand clothing store, where he purchased a 70 “new” used suit, two white shirts, two striped ties, a flimsy cheap hat and a pair of patent leather shoes. To complete the bargain, an imitation leather suitcase was thrown in “for good measure” and he packed his new purchases into the suitcase. From there, he walked up to Wabasha Street, past Macey's, Bannon's and the Douglas Shoe Store, to St. Peter Street, past Oscar Applebaum's fruit

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store, to Third Street and finally to the Wilder Public Baths on Seven Corners. For three cents, he received a towel, a wash rag, a small cake of Ivory soap and a steaming hot shower. He changed into his “new” clothes, throwing the old into the suitcase and retraced his steps back down Seventh to the Barber college, where he treated himself to a “deluxe” fifteen-cent haircut and an extra pat of sweet smelling hair tonic. From there, he stepped next door to have his suit pressed while he waited and his shoes shined for a nickel. Then he pulled out three travel stickers which read “Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York” and stuck them to the sides of his suitcase.

The walk over the bridge to Fairfield Street took him twenty minutes—past the New Ray Theatre and the old lumber yard. Once he had been to an ice cream social there and Japanese paper lanterns had been strung between the trees to dot the cool darkness with tiny islands of light. But he shook this off, too.

Whether it was coincidence, whether it was deliberate, whether it was destined, who can know, but in a few hours it would be Rosh Hashana and the beginning of a new year. It would have made no difference to him. Rosh Hashana or Christmas—all that ever mattered to him in the string of days and nights of his wanderings was food and a dry place to sleep.

When his mother opened the door and saw him standing there, instinctively the palm of her hand clutched her heart. She clung to him on the threshold of the doorway and when he followed her into the living room where the shades were drawn, it was as he had left it eighteen years ago. The same covers on the same furniture, a bowl of wax fruit on the table, the Singer sewing machine in the corner and a wicker plant box with ferns. In the kitchen, a teapot bubbled over the gas flame; there were newspapers over the freshly washed floor and a blue charity box on the oilcloth-covered table.

They spoke to each other, but she knew he had become a stranger. She poured for him a glass of tea and drank her own from a saucer over which she blew gently. But she was still

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happy for at least he was under his mother's roof—her firstborn was home. Her husband was dead, the other children dispersed over the face of the land, although they wrote to her often—but here was her favorite.

He asked politely about all, with no feeling and no curiosity. He could not stay long, he told her, because he had a great deal of business elsewhere. He could only stay a day and she said she understood and was delighted to see him even for so short a time.

When the sun was low on the horizon, she reminded him that the Holy Days had arrived and when the time came, he dutifully accompanied her to the Fairfield Avenue synagogue. When she left him in the 72 hallway to go up the stairs to the women's balcony, she kissed him lightly on the forehead. He pushed the swinging doors aside and sat down in the very back seat against the wall after donning his father's prayer shawl which his mother had pressed upon him.

He sat and rose with the others like a puppet pulled by strings. He saw no familiar faces and no one looked at him. When the services were over, he met his mother at the door and was awkward and stiff when she pointed him out proudly to her friends. He could not stay long, she told all of them because he had much to do in far away places which crowded his time. He was a busy and important man—her son.

During the night, he woke up many times, pacing the floor as though there was a cage around him. Once or twice he heard her call out in her sleep, “Yawseleh, Yawseleh,” and he remembered this was his name when he was a little boy. In the grey light of the early morning, he slipped into the kitchen quietly and his hands searched out a battered beer mug in a corner of a wall shelf, behind the spice boxes. He reached into it, just as he had eighteen years ago before leaving, and pulled out a tightly rolled wad of paper money tied with grocery string. He took it back to his room and counted twenty-seven dollars in single bills. He opened his satchel and placed the money in the bottom under his old clothes.

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In the morning, he walked to the synagogue again with her and remained there throughout the day. He looked up to the balcony occasionally and each time he did so, her eyes met his and a sad smile wrinkled her 73 face. But his own face was hard, weatherbeaten and fixed, as though set in a bitter mold.

Once more she looked to him just before the services were over and this time she asked silently not for forgiveness for herself and for another year of life, but only that her son suffer no harm. When she turned aside to brush a tear away with the corner of her handkerchief, he was gone.

He walked back quickly as though pushed by unseen hands, pulled his suitcase out from under the bed and took out the money. He laughed bitterly and quietly-mocking himself as his fist opened and closed on the money. Then he went into the kitchen, carefully tied up the money again, replaced it in the mug behind the spices and threw himself on the bed.

He was sleeping when she returned and she knew he would be leaving soon. She spread a moist cloth over the kitchen table, set the iron on the stove and quietly took the suitcase out to iron his clothes before he left.

When she picked it up to place on a chair, it fell open, dumping the miserable rags which he possessed on to the floor. She sat down and held her head between her hands, shaking back and forth with a terrible grief. "Oh, my God," she muttered to herself.

Then she walked to the shelf, took out a tightly rolled wad of money from the mug behind the spices and untied the string which bound it. It was not necessary to count it—she only knew it would never be enough. For just a fleeting second she hesitated, then went into her clothes closet and drew from a dark corner 74 a knotted handkerchief. She untied it with her teeth, took out six dollars which it held and added them to the money she held in her hand. She stuck the whole roll into one of his shirts, fastening it with a large safety pin and replacing everything as it was before. There was no more she could give of money, so

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she cut four large slices of fresh bread, spread them thickly with butter and plum jelly and wrapped them in a paper bag. She held the bag to her lips for a moment, placed it on the top of the rags and shut the suitcase.

When she returned to his room, he was still fast asleep. She bent over to kiss him and for the first time since he was a frightened little boy with knickers, tugging at her sleeves, his face was soft and relaxed as though he dreamed a peaceful dream.

In the morning he was gone without a word and she sat alone. But even in the depths of her loneliness, she was thankful for this brief encounter on the day of Rosh Hashana.

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Mother's Day Present

You simply have no idea how long it took her children to persuade her to make the trip. They weren't wealthy sons and daughters; they all made a comfortable living, lived in a nice neighborhood, minded their own business and managed to put aside a few dollars to send the kids to college. Several even had two telephones in their homes—although they were black ones.

* * *

For almost a year they had all schemed and planned to give her a very special Mother's Day present—a trip to California! Ever since her husband had passed away over a year ago, she had been taking turns living with each of her children for a few months at a time. It was not that she had to; her husband had left her a little insurance money, and that, together with Social Security, was enough to take care of her needs in the little apartment on Selby Avenue, which the children had found for her.

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But she had been too lonesome there. She could not bear drinking a glass of tea by herself. Although she was not afraid to sleep alone, the nights were too long and too quiet.

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During the day she spent hours in front of the window looking down on the street and twisting her apron nervously. The place was so small, it took her only an hour or so to clean it up and she wished silently with all her heart, that there would be someone to clean after.

The day after she had moved in, her children had sent her a cleaning woman to scour and scrub the rooms. She was a nice lady and probably did the best she knew how; but when the day was over, it was she and not the cleaning woman, who was tired out. The poor woman, who was the very soul of integrity, called the children that evening and told them it was an impossible situation. No matter what she did, their mother did it all over again and in the end, she found herself standing by and watching her work being done. She told the children she had protested politely and tactfully, but their mother had just smiled in the most pleasant way and gone about her business as though the cleaning woman was an armless apprentice. So that took care of the cleaning.

Well, one day the silence and loneliness became too much for her to contend with. She packed an old cloth shopping bag with some of her clothing, threw in her old iron and a picture of her husband which she wrapped up very carefully and took the bus to Highland Park to move in with her eldest daughter. She had weighed the obvious disadvantages, but in the 77 depths of her loneliness, clung to the thought that after all, a daughter is always a daughter.

As you might know, this move made no one happy. So it came to pass that in a very short time, the children got together, convened, as the youngest son put it—"for a council of war." They all agreed that it was unfair for the eldest daughter to assume this burden alone and decided with considerable misgivings, to invite their mother to live with each of them for six months. It was their thinking that sooner or later, she would decide for herself that it was far preferable to live alone—no matter how nice her children tried to be. You see, they were really fond of her.

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Need I tell you that it did not turn out to be the best kind of arrangement! The daughters-in-law, who made great efforts, were of course, most unhappy and to say the least, managed to communicate their distress to their husbands without as much as a single audible word of complaint. This kind of non-verbal communicating, as most husbands are so painfully aware of, is by far the most effective and telling.

No matter how unobtrusive the poor woman tried to be, she was still in someone's way. And it was most embarrassing to her sons and daughters when she tiptoed into the children's bedrooms after they were asleep, to touch them lightly on their foreheads and kiss them. Sometimes when she sat at the supper table with them, they felt uneasy because of the lingering possessiveness of her glance at their husbands. Without being aware of it, they were almost jealous because it seemed as though a part of their husbands would never completely belong to them.

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After the third move and just before it was time to make another, their mother decided she would like to find a little place for herself in the old West Side neighborhood where she and her husband had lived so long. The children tried to tell her that no one she knew lived there anymore, but she just shook her head. More to humor her than anything else, the sons drove her down to the old neighborhood one Sunday afternoon.

It turned out to be a cruel thing to do. It would have been far better to have left her with rich memories than to have confused and hurt her with the present—but she had left them no alternative.

In all the streets there was not a single familiar face. No one waved at them from any windows and no one even bothered to glance in their direction. The houses and buildings that were not boarded up sagged from old age and neglect and strangers sat on the porches silently as though afraid to go inside. When they passed the house where most of them had been born and raised, she began to cry to herself and twist her hands; once or

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twice she shook her head in disbelief and moved closer to one of her sons. The window panes that her husband had puttied were broken, the paint was gone and a litter of rusted cans piled up against one corner of the house.

She asked them to stop and although they would have preferred to move on, they did so. It was an eerie thing for them to see her step out, walk into the yard and pause there with her head downcast. She looked up and saw the screen door twisted from its hinges 79 and under the crooked wooden steps, a rusty coaster wagon without wheels. Once she might have wheeled some of the boys in that very wagon. Finally she came back into the car with an air of resignation and finality. It was almost as though she had stopped in front of a grave in the cemetery to pay her last respects to an old and dearly beloved friend. They knew and she knew that she would never come back.

They continued to drive around, hoping to raise her spirits and pretending an interest in this place and that. "This was the saloon, Ma, where we used to buy a pitcher of beer for Pa for a nickel. There's the New Ray Theatre, do you remember, Ma, when we used to push each other in without paying? And there's the old lumber yard where we played in the shade of those trees—do you remember, do you remember, Ma?"

But her eyes lit up only, when at the end of the sad journey, they stopped in front of the big red building on Fairfield, where Kessel's Bakery was still in business. They all walked in with her to buy some fresh bagel and jelly doughnuts and by good fortune, Mrs. Kessel herself, the mother of the proprietors, had stopped in for a moment to "supervise" the operation.

They both ran to each other and embraced, even though they had never been close friends. And for old time's sake, Mrs. Kessel donned an apron and went behind the counter to wait on their mother, rather than to let her sons do this.

For a few moments, the two women turned their backs on time and it was like forty years ago all over again. To anyone else it might have seemed like an 80 ordinary transaction

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with the customer asking the age-old question, “are you sure the bread is flesh, Mrs. Kessel” and Mrs. Kessel in turn giving the age-old reply of all bakers, “it's still warm from the oven, smell it.” But in truth, it was anything but an ordinary transaction; it was not even today—it was forty years ago. And unlike what she would have done with anyone else, Mrs. Kessel didn't ask about slicing the bread on the electric slicer, but just went right ahead and wrapped it in a newspaper, instead of a fancy glassine bag. Then they embraced again and said goodbye to each other with tears.

* * *

So finally they had persuaded her to visit California, making arrangements for their mother to live near an old friend on the beach at Venice. This, they thought, would give them some temporary relief, as well as afford their mother some respite. They rented a room in a kosher hotel overlooking the ocean and fronting on the sandy beach. “Ma,” they had told her (even the daughters-in-law), “stay for as long as you like and enjoy. This is our Mother's Day present.”

She really wasn't set on going. Right up to the very moment when they helped her board the train with a big basket of chicken, pickles and bread—you think she wasn't ready to change her mind? Instead she shrugged her shoulders and thought to herself that she might hurt their feelings if she didn't go—so she went,

Such a place she had never seen before in her whole life. The ocean and the benches stretched out as far as she could see. No matter how early or how late at night, older people like herself promenaded on the walk or sat on the benches. It was really a delight to let the warm sun soak in and to exchange pleasantries with so many nice people who had nothing else to do.

But she soon discovered they all talked about the same things—their children. No matter how she started the conversation, the weather, the price of meat, the effect of sea water

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on the gout, the abundance of men looking for rich widows, the topic was redirected to children.

They all said it in the same way: “My children would send me anywhere in the world just for my pleasure.” It began early in the morning and went on all through the day and into the night: “My Yankel or my Chiam or my daughter Laikeh, calls me every single day. ‘Ma,’ he says, ‘are you having a good time—is it warm enough for you—are your varicose veins better—maybe you want to go better to Hot Springs, Ma? Don't worry what it costs, you just have a good time.’”

It came to her from every side; they spoke endlessly about their fabulous children whose only purpose in life presumably was to please their mothers. But not once, it seemed to her, did these children ever ask when their mothers were coming back.

On the last day of her third week in Venice, she became thoroughly bored with the whole business and decided she had enough. She packed a basket with chicken, pickles and bread and without letting her children know, departed for St. Paul. Within the same 82 day she returned and with grim determination, she got her apartment back from a bewildered landlord, tidied it up and called her children. When they heard her voice and learned what she had done, they rushed over at once to see her. To tell the truth, they were a bit worried about her mental condition.

“Ma,” they cried in unison, “for crying out loud, is this what you do with our Mother's Day present? If you needed more money, why didn't you tell us? Maybe you would like Hot Springs better!”

But she just shook her head again and smiled at them. Then she waved them all in a somewhat imperious manner to sit down and refused to say another word until she was through pouring tea for each of them. Only then did she sit down herself, smooth her apron and take a long look at them.

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“Kinderlich,” she said in Yiddish, “what I really wanted for Mother's Day, I can find only here. Is it a shame, for me to say that for many of your years you all needed me—and now I need you all! I will live here alone without anymore being lonesome and will visit occasionally with each of you as a guest; I will never stay long; I will never bother you and I will not become a burden.

“The beach, the water, the hotel, the benches, California—it's all very nice, my children, and I know how well you mean, but who needs it? All I want and need is to be close and near to all of you. To tell the honest truth, I think all the old people on the beach are lonely and would like to trade places with me. And, 83 if it will help make you feel better, go buy me a nice box of chocolates and some stockings for Mother's Day, but don't send me away to the beach.”

* * *

When they were gone (and relieved) she looked down on Selby Avenue from her room. She saw Rabbi Sillman walking by—a very fine and noble man, she thought; she saw the Mullers closing up their delicatessen store across the way. She saw a car stop and one of her grandsons coming across the way with a nice box of chocolates for her.

The beach, the sand, the hotel, all the lonely old people so far away from where they really wanted to be. “Who needs it,” she said aloud, as she went to open the door for her grandson.

85

My Mother's Pots and Pans

If you have a spare moment or two, please read this to your grandmother. Perhaps she will understand all of this far better than either your wife or mine who have unwittingly become captives of a mechanized kitchen.

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Once a kitchen was to eat in. It was a place where the best smells were born. A Jewish kitchen was steeped in the never forgotten smell of freshly baked Friday bread, Sunday pancakes, Saturday herring, home-made pickles and just everyday garlic-spiced dishes. It was the mixing pot of smells that gave strength and new dimensions to living and afforded real solid sustenance to the ailing.

Here was created chicken soup, the magical elixir never since surpassed by canned and condensed concoctions and here was created the artistry of strudel and other pastries that no one but your mother has ever been able to achieve.

The kitchen was a rallying place for the whole family. “Where’s Ma? — she’s in the kitchen”— 86 “Where’s Pa?—he’s in the kitchen”—“Where did Yankel go?—he went into the kitchen.” The rent was counted in the kitchen, the ironing was done in the kitchen, the day’s peddling receipts measured out in the kitchen—it was the central repository of family life. There were other rooms, of course, but like the dining room, they were only for the holidays and reserved for the privacy of a promising suitor for the oldest daughter. Even this unwary creature, once enmeshed in the snare set for him, eventually found himself in the kitchen, too. By that time, it was already too late for him. All the rooms between the kitchen and the bedrooms were in a sort of no-man’s land—“Don’t play there; don’t bring the crumbs in there; go play in his house for a change.”

But what stood out the most in the kitchen were the tools and utensils of my mother’s talents—her pots and pans. There was a place for the dairy dishes, a place for the meat dishes, for the neutral dishes and away up on the top shelf, covered by layers of newspapers, the Passover utensils. These could be reached only by means of a step-ladder, every step of which called forth some voluble protestations of aches and pains. As my mother reluctantly added years to her rich life, she also added a few extra aches on the way up the ladder, but she would not let anyone climb it for her.

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One day when I was older—long after I was emancipated from my older brother Yankel's long pants, which he had emancipated himself from after Nathan in turn had emancipated himself from them, after my father had passed them on—as a matter of fact, it was 87 after I paid the last installment to the Morris Loan Plan for my wife's ring—after all this, I was moved one day with a wish to replace my mother's old pots and pans with something better.

Several were blackened, dented and battered—veterans of countless successful astronomical, gastronomical forays. Surely, I thought, my mother deserved better. How long indeed was it that she had purchased the original porcelain enameled pots at Gershon's Hardware and later the heavy cast-iron frying pan at Bannon's Department Store (with 50 green stamps) and still later the “aloominoominum” pans at Woolworth's.

I remembered that from time to time, over-zealous manufacturers confronted the bewildered public with successive claims that porcelain pots were poisonous, then in turn cast-iron and finally aluminum. But despite all this poison, we continued to thrive out of sheer ignorance. Because my mother couldn't read English in those days, the poisons affected us and the boarders not one single bit. To tell the truth, even today I continue to eat my mother's chicken and kreplech, being fully informed that not only may they be from poisonous pots, but currently radioactive. All I can say between mouthfuls is that if I'm to be poisoned, is there a better way?

So last Thursday, after swallowing the last cheese blintz, I said, out of the goodness of my heart, “Ma, about your cooking pot.”

“Don't worry, I've got more blintzehs in another pot too,”

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“No, Ma, it's not the blintzehs, it's the pots.”

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“What's the matter, did a fly fall in?”

“No, Ma.”

“Is the pot dirty, perhaps?”

“No, Ma, it's so clean I can see my face in it.”

“So, is your face dirty?”

“No, Ma, I just think you should have some new pots and pans.”

“What's the matter suddenly with the old ones? Did the chicken taste bad, is the pudding sour, is the noodle soup salty? Who tells you to salt it before you taste it?”

“No, everything is fine—it's just that it's time to change a few things.”

“Why?”

“Look, Ma, didn't you finally give the gramophone away?”

“So what's the gramophone got to do with a pot?”

“Well, now you've got a new television set instead.”

“Did I ever cook a chicken in the gramophone? “No, Ma.”

“Did you ever hear Yawseleh Rosenblatt, the great cantor, sing on TV?”

“No, Ma—for crying out loud, all I want is to buy you some nice shiny pots and pans.”

“So, why didn't you say so?”

“Good, Ma.”

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"I'm sorry, I don't want any."

"Ma, do you want your club ladies to see these old pots and pans when they play cards here?"

"Do you think they got better? Besides, only me and Pa eat in the kitchen—the ladies don't come in here."

"But what if they come in accidentally?"

"You mean, accidentally like on a party line?"

"Ma, how about just one little pressure cooker with a fancy copper bottom?"

"You mean the kind that whistles when the meat is done?"

"This one whistles Yankee Doodle."

"I don't care if it whistles Hatikvah." (Hebrew patriotic song)

"Ma, how about a small fry pan—just for eggs?"

"If you're going to buy a small one, why not better a big one?"

"All right, I'll buy a big one."

"I don't want any."

"Ma, I saw a little hole in one of the pots."

"It's just a little one."

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“Maybe I can replace that one with a copper pot.”

“Why should you? I don't use it because it's got a hole.”

“So let me get you one without a hole.”

90

“But if I don't use it, I just don't need it and if I don't need it, why buy another one?”

“So why don't you throw it away, Ma?”

“How can I throw it away—it reminds me of times that weren't so good.”

“So why don't you wear your old dresses too?”

“No, no, Velvel, it's too late for new pots and pans.”

“Ma, you'll live to be a hundred, why do you say that?”

“No, Velvel, out of these pots and pans I fed all my children. The chickens will never come out the same from anything else. Copper pots and pans will look nice and shiny, but this is my kitchen—you want it should look like an operating room? But if you wish, go buy me one little pan and I'll hang it next to the tea pot and the meat-salting board for everyone to see.”

* * *

So in the end, I bought my mother a single copper pan and there it hangs in resplendent but useless glory until this day. Like a medieval alchemist, she has succeeded in transmuting what might otherwise have been prosaic and common foods into wondrous delights that no one else will ever achieve. But could she have done it without her own pots and pans and her love of family?

Now I am older and wiser and would not try to persuade her otherwise.

91

You see, my grandmother has since told me her own mother's last request: "To you, my favorite daughter, in addition to your share of the little gold and silver that I leave for all my children, do I leave my most prized possessions, all my pots and pans."

93

The Old Man

The shadow of a falling leaf spiraling down to the earth caught his eye and it suddenly reminded him of his own life. The waning days of summer had come and so was he in the evening of his life. Like the leaf which cast the shadow and which once was a bud nourished into bloom, giving and taking sustenance from the earth, so was his life. He saw it in the shadow of the leaf, spent and dried and soon to be part of that whence it had first come.

He was an old man with a small skull cap which threatened to slip off from his bald pate, but never did. He wore old-fashioned suspenders with shiny brass buckles upon which the inscription read, "MADE IN HACKENSACK, NEW JERSEY"—as if anyone cared where Hackensack was. His shirt was clean white, opened at the neck as a concession to the heat and on his feet were leather slippers well worn down at the heels and which made "plop, plop" when he shuffled across the floor. There was no crease in his trousers, although they were clean. If you were to look at him, you would say first that here was a nice, clean old man.

94

Ever so long ago he had planted some trees himself. It was so many years ago that he had forgotten it and until this very moment had not once thought back to that day. Now it came back to him with crystal-like clarity, almost as though he were being given a last chance to look back into the past. How strange, he thought, it was so real.

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He saw once again a grove of saplings hugging the river bank, just to the left of a rutted road that meandered across the pasture as if it didn't really care where it went. It was because of his wife that he was there; she had asked for some trees to soften the sharp austerity of the home they had moved into after living with their relatives the first six months. But he had continued to procrastinate, putting it off from one Sunday to the next, failing to understand why such a thing was so important to her. She had asked for the trees almost in the same breath she asked for furniture—as though both were equally important.

Now there were chairs, tables, dressers and beds, enough for all of them, enough even for two boarders who would soon move in. Between the second-hand furniture store, relatives and a few generous neighbors who had third-hand furniture to spare, all the rooms, which had been so frightfully bare, were filled. No matter that nothing matched, the stuff was substantial enough to eat from, sit on and sleep on.

By this time he had acquired a horse and wagon, too, knew how to say “allo” and “goot-bye” and “tenk you.” He had a warm smile that softened the most confirmed anti-Semites on his junk route—at least to the 95 extent that they quit calling him “sheeney.” There were just a few of these bigots who were most uncomfortable with themselves because try as hard as they might, they could find no reason to hate him—so they hated him without any reason and it ate at their guts, until they avoided him.

After awhile, came the time to humor his wife and get the trees; he could no longer put it off, for she was a determined stubborn woman. He knew as all men do that a stubborn woman is a determined one and that a determined woman is a stubborn one. He knew just as well that if he did not get the trees, that one morning she would rise up and shame him by leading the horse and wagon by herself across the meadow. She would not reproach him; she would only look at him straight in the eye, tighten her lips like a vise and be on

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her way. Twenty lashes across the naked back would hurt him less, so he went to get the trees.

He remembered again how cool it was near the river and he heard once more the rustling of the leaves in the breeze and the whinnying of his horse answering a mare grazing nearby. He saw himself digging, pulling and tugging, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and muttering darkly about his foolish wife and her trees. Who did she think she was—the Queen of Sheba?

Finally, he uprooted the reluctant saplings, tossed them into his wagon and paused to roll a Bull Durham cigarette. Then he turned the horse and wagon toward Eva Street. About the trees, he had no doubt—they would grow and they would flourish because his wife would wish it so. She would water them, stake them 96 against the winds which bent them, chase the dogs away and spread manure to nourish the roots.

And the saplings did grow, gathering strength and casting a cool shade over the house; but they meant nothing to him and he cared not a fig for them. A man had far more important things on his mind than to worry about trees and flowers and the little patch of green grass she grew from the oats he fed his horse.

Like the saplings, the family grew and one by one, as though they were seeds dropped from a tree and carried away by the winds, each left and took root in near and distant cities. The years came and went and one day, so it seemed, in just one day when his wife passed away, he was all alone in the world.

After the funeral, the children, who came together from all over the country to mourn their mother, gathered about him and made plans. One daughter insisted that he spend a few months during the next winter with her in California, another said they would look forward to seeing him the following Passover. A son asked him to be sure to visit as long as he wished after the next spring and so it went. Above all, they agreed most emphatically that he must sell the big house which was too much for him and come to live immediately with

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his son here in St. Paul. So concerned were they for their father's welfare, that they sold the house for him before they left and deposited the money in the bank to his account. "After all, Pa," they said to him, "we wouldn't want you to keep on living with the Mexicans and colored people on the West Side."

97

So he lived with his son and family and made every effort to be as inconspicuous as possible. He ate whatever they ate even though some of the food he wasn't used to stuck in his craw and whenever the weather permitted he took the bus back to the West Side, where with nine other cronies who were living alone, they made up a "minyan" (prayer quorum).

But came winter and spring, Passover and fall and no one invited him to visit. A gnawing fear began to disturb him. Suddenly it came to him like a sharp pain in the groin that the children had invited him to come N-E-X-T holiday, but none had asked him to come N-O-W. The hardest blow of all came one day when he overheard his son on the long distance phone say sharply to the daughter in California, that it was her turn to take care of the "old man."

There was no bitterness in his heart—he loved his children too dearly for that; he was even sure they loved him, too, in their own way. No man should live after his wife was gone. To think of all the times he thought that his cronies were stubborn because they preferred to live by themselves, getting by on small pensions, sunning themselves on one porch or another, indulging in the luxury of a leisure they had never in their lives had time to enjoy and which they so richly deserved. Now he could even appreciate Mendel, who in jest had often said that if he had only learned to play golf, he could probably get along fine at his son's home; and he would always add with a sly wink, that if he could play mah jong, he would be a welcome guest at his daughter-in-law's. She would even invite the devil himself in order to make up a table.

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One day soon he went to the same lawyer in the Commerce Building who had sold his house and asked him to buy it back. “No monkey business with my kids,” he admonished him. But the colored people in the old house were in no frame of mind to move; (“where to—maybe to Highland Park, Mr. Lawyer?” they asked). Only the little house between the colored folks and the Mexicans was available. Thereupon he told the lawyer, “Never mind, go buy,” and to the amazement of his children (but not his cronies) he moved in lock, stock and prayer books. And once in there, quite comfortable for the first time, his children came to visit, deploring his decision to live in such a neighborhood, even though they had to admit, he never looked better. They begged him to come and live with them—in New York, in California, in Arizona, in Florida, even in St. Paul, but he only smiled at them and said, “Maybe N-E-X-T year, N-E-X-T Passover, N-E-X-T holiday.”

His neighbors were nice to him, although from the beginning they looked strange to him and he to them. In time, after they had learned that he had once lived in the house they now occupied, they invited him and made him free to sit under the two trees which shaded the yard. He had avoided coming into the house because he thought it would make him cry, but instead when he finally did, a great truth dawned upon him. He saw second-hand tables, second-hand beds, a second-hand stove and a clean and tidy home. The colored man explained they had moved up from a far-away state, that he had a job at the packing plant and while it would all take time, it was going fine.

99

Once, he remembered, it had happened to him and his family the very same way. If he were only a philosopher, he could put the right words together to tell about this to other people, but in truth, all he was, was the tenth man in the prayer quorum, even though each of the other nine also saw themselves as the indispensable tenth.

* * *

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One day sitting under the big trees which he himself had planted, he remembered back to the day when he brought the saplings into the yard. How beautifully cool was this shade! The shadow of a falling leaf spiralling down to the earth was the last thing he saw as his eyes closed and his head sagged slowly on his chest.

“Papa, Papa,” his little Mexican friend shouted to his father as he tugged at him, “El no se mueve” (he doesn't move).

“Papa, Papa, El duerme muy duro” (he sleeps too hard).

The leaf touched the earth and became once more part of that whence it had first come.

101

My Mother's Front Porch

Once long ago, when we were temporarily affluent by virtue of adding another paying boarder to our table, my mother decided it was time to build a “frawntpawtch”—which translated into English, means simply, a front porch.

You see, there were eight of us, not counting boarders. Apparently my mother's rationale for this decision to build was to disperse us over a larger area of house space. However, this is only conjecture on my part, since she never really thought of us as a group of eight. I remember her admonishing a more cautious and therefore less prolific neighbor by saying, “I don't have eight children, I have only one; I have one Annie, one Moonyeleh, one Yankel, one Leezeleh, one Velvel, one Roocheleh, one Devoreleh, and one Moisbelch.”

Well, the die was cast and we were going to have a porch. For my mother, this did not require a set of blue prints, an architect, a building permit, a building inspector, or a conference with the National Association 102 of Mortgage and Builders Loan Associations. All she did was to get an affirmation from my father at a very strategic time—when his

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mouth was filled with cheese kreplech and he could only move his head up and down. She had an uncanny sense of timing, which is seemingly a congenital female sixth sense. Having obtained his permission and even if she hadn't, she would have gone ahead, there remained one more step.

This was to call in the neighborhood drunks, who also doubled in brass as baby sitter and “paintner.” Today we refer to them charitably as handymen. Invariably these inebriated architects and builders were as drunk as they were available. There was no point in waiting for them to sober up, for they never could perform satisfactorily in this unnatural state. They also had picked up enough Yiddish to resolve the problem of communication. You didn't call them on the telephone, because each had a favorite hangout. One always supported a telephone pole on State and Kentucky, another dozed in front of Gerr's butcher shop, one plucked chickens for the schochet and still another was always propped up behind Tankenoff's fish store.

So my mother gathered a few of them and marched them to Texas street to survey the new project. There they stood, the three of them weaving and swaying, supporting one another as best they could while my mother outlined the job. Put a board here, put a board there, put a window here and two over there—and that's all! All the while my mother was drawing the plans in the sky with one outstretched arm, she was 103 chasing us away with the other, giving change to Mr. Lipschitz, the fruit peddler, and hanging the laundry on the line.

Now all this time, as my mother was sketching with invisible ink on her airy drawing board, the unsteady architects were doing some quick but rather hazy estimating. Theirs was the big question of whether this was to be a two-bottle job or a three-bottle job. It was understood, of course, that meals were thrown in for good measure. Alas, however, food was of little importance to these builders. Real, hard cash too, was out of the question, of course, and my mother didn't intend to set a precedent!

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“Go to Gershon's Hardware Store,” she would tell them, “and charge the nails and shingles to my husband.” As far as lumber was concerned, there was always a pile of boards behind the stable. Every yard had a pile of boards, but no one ever knew where they had come from. If they were short pieces, the porch was built short. If they were long, the porch was bigger. Whoever gave even a passing thought as to whether the proportions fitted in with the house?

After all, a porch was a porch. You slept on the porch and the mosquitoes gathered on the porch. It was a place to keep extra dishes and the baby buggy. At night the boarders gathered there with my father and other cronies to fight Wall Street and the Republican party. That's what a porch was for.

Underneath this porch, the chickens roosted and we chased them out in the rain so we could play House, play Doctor and Nurse and other “educational” games. 104 And all this time, the roosters glowered at us and the silly hens clucked away. That's what a porch was for.

The next day, long after the plans had disappeared forever with the passing winds, the drunks returned with a fourth—he was the one who owned a hammer. Come to think of it now, they might have had a “drunkards” union. One owned a folding yardstick, the other a saw and the third, a level. They promptly went to work without a word to each other, hammering and sawing. Each one apparently was determined by design or indifference to keep his own assignment in the job a deep secret from the others.

Every once in awhile the “building coordinator,” (my mother) would run out with a jaundiced eye to “suggest” revisions and modifications (contractors will note that this has never changed) but no one paid any attention to her and the work went on. Fortunately for us, our favorite drunk also owned a level (probably filled with whiskey instead of mercury) and it is to this lucky happenstance that our floor was tilted only thirty degrees instead of

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more. It was useless to protest to workers whose unsteady gait matched the pitch of the floor.

Naturally, the work did not go along at a steady clip. Time had to be taken frequently for building conferences at the nearest saloon. Often workers (also drunks) from other West Side projects got mixed up in the shuffle at these “conferences” and returned to different jobs, protesting in their befuddlement that they were sure it was a porch they were working on and not a stable. This may be the reason some of the 105 porches looked like stables—and why some of the stables looked like porches.

Quite frequently the savory odors from my mother's kitchen would waft outdoors and more than once, my mother fed this motley group who were never quite comfortable in the house, even when she tried to make them so. They twisted their caps in their hands, squirmed uneasily and made strenuous efforts to deport themselves favorably. There was almost a note of sadness in their efforts to be like others instead of the caricatures they really were. The only problem their eating in the kitchen brought on, was the smell of rotgut whiskey which found its way into the taste of kreplech and kashe. This was our first initiation to whiskey and rum-marinated dishes for which we paid extra in fancy restaurants when we grew up.

I remember the matter of a few missing boards necessary to finish the job. This did not perplex them at all; they borrowed a few two-by-fours from the side of our neighbor's stable—the side he never looked at. This was done, of course, without our knowledge (and his). Later when he had a porch built (also by the same “contractors”), our stable suffered the same fate.

I remember, too, the shavings from the lumber which we put in our hair because they looked like curls. Sometimes, too, when pitch had to be applied to the roof, we chewed the soft tar because it was supposed to make our teeth white. We also split the cedar shingles

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and made arrows out of them; for the bows we used the ribs of my mother's broken-down umbrella—which we broke down.

106

Eventually the porch was completed and it became as much a part of our house as the children and boarders. It was a great place for fun and a great place for work. There was a little two-burner gas plate in one corner which was used the whole summer through. On it my mother rendered her chicken fat, prepared her strawberry jam which went so well with fresh, warm bread and put up her pickles. And from the ceilings descending in graceful spirals, were strips of Tanglefoot fly paper to tease and catch the few flies who escaped her fly swatter.

When winter came, the hapless drunkards moved into the saloons to hibernate; the snows drifted through the porch screens and the blustering cold winds blew themselves out in fury against the tar-paper insulated front door, while inside the house, we roasted apples in the oven of the kitchen stove.

What a substantial porch it was, even though it was planned with a finger and written in the winds. It grew up with us, and with the passing of the years, gradually lost a few nails and a few shingles—just as the people who lived in it lost a few teeth and a few hairs. It weathered the seasons no worse and no better than those whom it covered.

It had no jalousies and no insulation, no walnut paneling and no cork floors. It was designed only for utility and not for competition with the neighbors. It was a repository for the food that fed us, for the clothes that warmed us, and for the toys that amused us.

Please don't take offense, Mr. Contractor and your son, who just built ours. We are proud of your craftsmanship 107 and happy it was not built by inebriates. We're delighted that the floor is level and we're happy to know the winter winds will not come in.

But after all, this was my mother's own front porch and there will never be another like it... and pray tell me who will make the payments on mine?

109

“Sprink-Cleaning” and Marbles

Once upon a beautiful spring morning, I was sneaking out of the house with a bag of marbles clutched to my bosom when I heard the clarion call of my mother who has her own built-in radar system:

“Velvel, don't run away! Take out the mattresses and springs.” So I stuffed the marbles in my shirt and dutifully reported to the kitchen. There, in addition to my briefing, I had a cup of cocoa, oatmeal and a warm bagel with shmeer cheese. Then she handed me the big wing feather of a goose and with an outstretched hand said, “Go!”

Thus was ushered in “sprink-cleaning.” Soon it would be Passover. The curtains had to be washed and stretched, dishes scoured with sand and the rest of the house turned inside and out. The marbles had to wait while I pounded mattresses with a wire carpet beater and dusted the “sprinks” with the fleidervisher.

But since my mind was on marbles and not on housecleaning, my mother rushed out shortly and gave 110 impetus (without adding motivation) to my task by a few carefully chosen adjectives, winding up with a finger in the air tracing the dirt, I was so assiduously transferring from the “sprinks” to the mattress and mattress back to the “sprinks.”

All of which today, as I await my wife's call to do the same, leads me to ask wistfully, where are the marble games of yesteryear? Once we “bowled” with steelies, crockeries and pee-wees. Emmies and agates were the targets between outspread legs and all the bowlers lined up the appropriate number of sidewalk squares away. Whoever hit yours

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took your place on the sidewalk with the dirt and all the germs which never bothered anybody until television came along to warn us of the dire peril they threatened us with.

For an emmie, you stood three squares away, for an agate (according to quality) as many as fifteen squares away. Even with glasses, you were sometimes so far away, you couldn't see what you were bowling at. That's where all the squint-eyed West-Siders came from. With everyone pushing and bowling at the same time there was a constant argument over who had hit the emmie first. The decision was usually in favor of the biggest and toughest bowler.

Although emmies, crockerries and agates were sold in the stores, only poor fools bought them with real money. The rest of us acquired them by trading, winning and snatching. A “snatcher” was a borrower without collateral who could run fast. Everybody had a pocketful of marbles; they were ubiquitous and had a 111 most wonderful proclivity for dropping out of pockets in cheder.

During the season they were the bane of the Rabbi's existence. More than one Rabbi was defeated in his pellmell rush to rap misbehaving students on the ears, by having marbles thrown “accidentally” in his way—over which he tripped. These defensive tactics were dealt with by the more ingenious Rabbis who “snuk” around you from the rear.

On the very first day in March just as soon as a single, solitary dry patch appeared on any sidewalk, out poured hordes of kids from alleys, doorways and streets. Everywhere there rose a chorus of mother's complaints, “Sammy, don't sit on the sidewalk; I'll throw away your marbles.” But it was a compulsion that could not be denied any more than the coming of spring itself. To this very day, if you were to examine the list of Las Vegas-goers from this town, you will find among them the biggest and best marble sharks of yesteryear. And where else if not from the West Side comes the expression, “He's got marbles in his head!”

The best place to play was in front of the Neighborhood House where the sun shone the hardest, brightest and warmest. This spot had other decided advantages and

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conveniences like toilets and water fountains. Who could be bothered to run home for either purpose? Anyone foolish enough to risk the trip home would have been grabbed by maternal hands, robbed of his marbles, hollered at loudly for not practicing the violin and worst of all, made to wash up—far better to play marbles and risk wet trousers.

112

There was another marble game in which two or more kids threw their emmies ahead of them and each in turn tried to hit the others. This game could go on for blocks and blocks. One such game started at Neighborhood House, went as far as Humboldt High School and back to the State Street dump. This kind of heroic effort would exhaust today's little children whose physical endeavors are limited to a brisk walk from one car to another. A marble game like this would leave them limp, for it was really nothing less, counting obstacles, than basic training after 1942.

Marbles seemed to materialize out of thin air, but no more so than footballs, kittenballs, bats, gloves and handballs at the appropriate seasons. No real West Sider ever demeaned himself by buying equipment. Whether any correlation existed between the Minnetonka playground equipment inventory and the sports equipment “jointly and privately” owned, is anyone's guess.

Today it gives me a twinge of pain to go out and buy a bat or a ball for Johnny; it's not that I wish to deny him or don't love him, but habit dies hard and such purchases are as alien and foreign to me as walking is to our children. Can you imagine coming to your father or mother with a request, “I want a football”? Of course you can't because the trauma would have scarred all of you for life (“A football! I'll give you a football in the head”). But they loved us and we them, nonetheless!

113

What, too, became of the shacks we all built in the backs of our yards, where the swimming pools are now? The flotsam and jetsam of alleys and dumps were incorporated in these ingenious structures which forever defied all known and unknown principles of

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architecture. They were amazing fabrications which automatically (it seemed) adjusted themselves to anyone's height. The reason for this was the fact that no one ever dared to stand up—a shack was to stoop in. All of them had secret trap doors in the back to crawl out of and you couldn't get in without a very secret password which everyone in the neighborhood knew.

They were wonderfully suffocating inside, what with a fire burning for the roast potatoes and everyone puffing away at corn silk cigarettes which were definitely not for “thinking” boys. And while everyone was hilariously choking to death in this junior-sized black hole of Calcutta, someone was on duty peeking through a knot hole to give “jiggers” the moment your mother, who was hanging laundry on the line, made up her mind to chase all of you next door.

And when she finally rushed the door with a broomstick, out through the secret door tumbled yourself and your friends. I shall never forget that her battle cry had a biblical ring, although she knew it not herself. It went like this:

“For six days you got to play only in my yard—at least on the seventh you shall play next door.”

115

Portrait of my Father

A chill, wet wind sent the curled-up leaves racing down the street, tumbling over each other in their haste to join other little piles gathering along the curbs. Inside, in the comfort of my home, the cozy warmth and lethargy of a peaceful Saturday afternoon nudged me gently into a half-slumber and for some reason or another, my thoughts turned to my father, as they do so often. I saw him in my mind's eye thus:

At this very moment he is probably sitting at the kitchen table in his apartment on Holly Avenue, warming his hands over a glass of tea which stands in a saucer before him. His

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hands are cupped over the glass almost in the same way my mother's hands are when she prays over the Sabbath candles. At his elbow there is sure to be a copy of the Forvitz turned to the Yiddish cross-word puzzle which he does not fill in, of course, because it is Shabus, and on the far corner of the table lies his Pentateuch opened to the Torah reading for this day.

116

Once when he and my mother were living in their own big home, where life was not circumvented as it is in a tiny apartment, he would have been in his cellar, puttering around. There would be the great and deep pride of ownership reflected in his eyes as he took in with one single sweep, the solid foundation and the heavy basement beams. Like a deep draught of clean pure air, he would feel the full satisfaction and security of a cellar filled to the brim with food and coal to feed and warm his family. There were the shelves fairly groaning from the weight of jars of pickles, strawberry and plum jam, and sauerkraut. Canned plums and peaches filled one whole section and several gallons of homemade wine the other. In one corner were the bins overflowing with potatoes, onions, carrots and a wooden box of paper-wrapped Jonathan apples.

His eyes would take in the full coal bin, buttressed by solid planks which kept the torrent of coal from cascading over the earthen floor. Each year about this time the coal wagon backed up to the basement window and a black stream of Pocahontas coal or briquets flowed down the tin chute. Not too far away, the whine of a circular saw cutting cord wood for neighbors could also be heard. What matter if the coal had not yet been paid for? Koppers Coke Company had good reason to know it would be paid for before the next year rolled around again.

To be sure, back in his own home, his cellar, like a king's treasure house, contained all that man required for the comforts of his home. Let the wild winds howl 117 and the swirling snows cover his home, but nature's conspiracy against his family and for that matter, against the West Side, was doomed to failure.

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And finally, when he left his cellar, I could imagine him walking up the stairs, dusting off the piece of dill which clung to his Shabus pants with a flick of a finger and looking back, satisfied and at peace with the world.

But this Saturday afternoon, with the children having been gone for years and the big house long since sold, I thought of him sitting over his glass of tea with his eyes half closed wishing back a cellar and a house and all his children around him. Now there was no room to putter around, no paint brushes to clean, no windows to putty, no laundry to help hang, no stove pipes to blacken and put up, no pickle jars to dust, no storm windows to hang. If a wistful smile crossed the valleys of his face, it was because he thought that here in this tiny apartment one could not even escape an argument with his wife, and look for refuge in another room. To open a door meant you were in the hall—so you had to remain and therefore bear the brunt of a woman's complaints—even if petty and as transitory as the dew under a hot sun. In the old place, it was so easy to take the Forvitz and hide in another room, even the cellar if it was necessary.

Well, no matter my conjuring up a vision of my father. Thank God, he is very much alive and no vision, so I bestirred myself from this Shabus reverie, persuaded my dear spouse to put aside her Better Homes and Gardens Magazine, whence comes her 118 grandiose schemes for fabulous kitchens, two bathrooms and multi-colored toilet paper, and drop me off at my father's. And so it was that I found him, just as I had left him in my thoughts. There was the tea, the Forvitz and the Pentateuch (Bible). Although I was happy to visit with him, as he was with me, the conversation always began with a very impersonal observation.

“Pa,” I said, “it's too hot in here.”

“Son, is it my coal in the furnace?”

“No, Pa. What's new this week?”

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“What can be new, Velvel, one just goes in circles and drags himself around, so what can be new? Maybe you want a glass of tea and some poppy seed cookies your mother made?”

“O.K., Pa, I'll pour myself. Where's Ma?”

“Where's Ma? Where should she be? Don't you know, since she got rid of her six boarders thirty years ago, she doesn't want to stay home. She's downtown with your sister to see what to buy when she goes next week to buy for real.”

“Pa, can you blame her for wanting to go?”

“Who's blaming her? I only wish I had her strength to get around.”

“And if you had, Pa?”

“I would still be sitting here with my crossword puzzles. Velvel, now tell me what's with you.”

“Nothing, Pa. Suzie is in Junior High School now. You know, she takes horseback lessons.”

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“Hah, what a stroke of good fortune for you. How much does it cost, this foolishness?”

Pa, it costs \$2.50 per week.”

“Son, you haven't got any more holes to stuff your money in—I don't see it coming out of your ears. By the way, where's your car?”

“Ruth took it downtown to pick Ma and Devoreh up.”

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“Hoo hah! Maybe Suzie can take you home on her horse.”

“Pa, all the girls take horseback lessons. Why should I deny this my daughter?”

“So when she learns to ride, you'll buy her a horse, maybe.”

“But, Pa...”

“All right, all right, what else did Suzie learn in school?”

“Pa, in her home economics class...”

“I don't hear you, my son, let me put my glasses on— what's this now?”

“Pa, in her home economics class, she...”

“What is this—what means home economics?”

“Pa, that's where they're taught to cook and sew and bake.”

“Hah! And where do you think she will learn to scrub the floors and make buckwheat groats like your sisters did?”

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“Look, Pa, Suzie already learned to darn socks this week.”

“Do you have holes in your stockings?”

“No, Pa.”

“Why not?”

“Because my wife throws them away when there is a hole.”

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“So where does Suzie get the holes?”

“She cuts them out with her scissors.”

“Oh, oh, Velvel, you must have headaches often.”

“Pa, shall I turn off the heat from the radiator?”

“What for? The rent includes heat.”

“But why sweat, Pa?”

“For this kind of rent, the heat should be on in the summer, too. Stir the jelly in your tea and take another cookie.”

“Pa, the heat isn't good for you.”

“A Turkish bath doesn't hurt anybody.”

“Pa...”

“Look, son, for fifty years I worked in the cold outside all day. It will take another fifty years to get the chill out of my bones.”

“All right, Pa, at least take your jacket off.” “It's not nice to sit in my underwear.”

“Are you expecting the president of the U.S., maybe, Pa?”

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“Who knows—maybe the rabbi's wife will come in. That's all I need.”

“Pa, what's new in the Forvitz?”

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“How can anything be new in the Forvitz when it's three weeks old by the time I get it?”

“So, Pa, you read it already in the Dispatch, so why spend money on the Forvitz?”

“I don't believe it until I read it in Yiddish.”

“Pa, did you have a good fast over Yom Kippur?”

“Son, to a good Jew, what's so hard about a fast? Thank God, in America, we fast only by choice. Tell me, son, do they fast at your fancy Temple?”

“It's not fancy, Pa, just the dues, and besides, the Rabbi asked that everyone fast and does so himself.”

“That's good. Your rabbi is a fine man. Just think how much nicer he would look with a beard.”

“So why haven't you got a beard, Pa?”

“On some people, it looks better without.”

“Tell me, Pa, is it true Mrs. got married last week to her sixth husband?”

“Yes.”

“And how is this one, Pa?”

“So good to her, she told me the other day, she hopes the seventh will be half as nice to her.”

“But, Pa, is this one sick already too?” “No, Son, but with her there will always be a seventh—a pity they couldn't have lived to form a prayer quorum—but we shouldn't make fun.”

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“Say, Pa, do you know we just put in a shower upstairs?”

“Like in the Wilder Public Free Baths! I knew you would be a success.”

“Pa, don't fool. Everyone in Highland Park has a built-in shower.”

“Maybe so, son, but everyone in Highland Park didn't have to go to the Wilder Baths. Don't forget at least to throw something in the charity box for it.”

“I will, Pa. I've got to go now. Stay well.”

“So, who's pushing you? But go in good health.”

“Good Shabus, Pa.”

And with that, I left him sipping his glass of tea, straining each sip through a cube of sugar he held in his teeth.

I wish I could tell him in plain talk how much I love him, instead of my complaining about the heat, but I guess he knows it himself.

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At the Seder Table

A light haze which marked the timid approach of a cautious spring and the reluctant retreat of a brazen winter, crept in from the river over the West Side “flats.” The evening was not a cold one and it was not a warm one, and it was not like any other, because this was the night of the first Passover Supper.

The unwary traveler, even under the pale circles of light cast by the street lights, did well to watch his step; for wherever there was a patch of soft earth, grubby fingers had scooped out shallow holes to be used for playing nuts. Like pock marks, these holes

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dotted the ground in all directions, stopping abruptly before the gates of the synagogue and beginning again suddenly on the other side. It was as though an invisible hand kept this little area inviolate. But in reality, it was not the mystery of an invisible power, but rather the children's compromise with the stern admonishments of parents not to play nuts near the synagogue.

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The synagogue had long since closed. The streets were quiet and deserted, for all Jews were at home gathered around the table for the Passover Seder. The extra boards had been brought down from the attic during the noon and the creaking dining room table stretched to its full length to accommodate all the members of the family...

When the Seder was over, he and his wife Malkeh were grateful because no one had been missing. Next year, perhaps, one of their sons who would shortly be married, would probably be away to eat with his in-laws, but on the other hand, one of their daughters might bring along a new young man to take his place at the table. No matter, as long as there were not less at the table than the year before.

His grandson had asked the age-old Four Questions with great and unhurried dignity, having mastered them between Hebrew school and marble playing sessions. He had sung them out as countless numbers of other grandchildren had done before, but none had done so like his own. How proudly everyone had looked to him and great things were destined for that little head under the skull cap.

The wine was never so good and the Passover story was never read so beautifully. The food was beyond description and everyone had eaten his fill and even more. Each time he had lifted his hands and said "enough, enough," his wife had put more on his plate. Who in his right mind could resist the tasty matzo dumplings, the spicy gefilteh fish which 125 had been chopped and cooked to perfection and the roasted chicken swimming in a sea of gravy.

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This year, like all the rest, there had been the same friendly arguments over whether the soup should be served first or last—and, of course, resolved as usual by his Malkeh, who believed in pleasing all. Forever and ever, it seemed to him, she had listened to both sides of an argument and told both with a wise shaking of her head, that each was right. And each time, the participants left in peace, knowing right was on their side because Malkeh had said so. And so it was with the soup, some ate theirs first, some ate theirs last and a few had soup both at the beginning and at the end.

“Dear, dear Malkeh,” he mused. Her goodness, charity and talents made possible a miracle in the pot, changing its contents into all things for all who asked. Whoever wanted white meat got white meat; whoever wanted dark meat got dark meat. If you wanted a neck, there was a neck; if you wanted another one, there was still another one. There was fish with pepper, fish without pepper and so it went.

In her own quietly determined way, she ran her kitchen and her house with disorganized organization. She anticipated requests before they were uttered sometimes before they were thought. She defied all the natural and physical laws of motion and space by being in ten different places at the very same time.

She ate on the run, nibbling a bite here and taking a bite there—all the while politely ignoring the protests of her family that she sit down to eat. Instead, 126 she said, “later, later, I will sit down to eat,” and later, later, it always was. How well she knew that there would be no one to serve in her place, if once she sat down. How well she knew too, that once she sat down, she would not find the strength to get up again.

He reflected on his reading of the Haggadah and hid a smile with the palm of his hand. Tonight, as before, there were the same good-natured attempts to hurry him on with his deliberate reading, “a little faster, Pa, a little faster.” But he continued to resist this gentle pressure, measuring his words carefully, rolling them around in his mouth like the first sip of new wine. This was not a story to be hurried along. Just as Pharaoh had taken his

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own sweet time in releasing the ancient Israelites, so would he too savor and dwell on the reading. To him it was a message to tell, not an old wives' tale to hurry along with. And so, each year, the protests continued in a half-hearted way and each year the Haggadah reading took longer.

And there were the two boarders, Enoch and Gabriel, who had accompanied him in the reading and were humming softly with a far-away look in their eyes. They were as members of his family sharing room and board and sitting in on family councils. One day they would be gone to sit at a Seder with their own loved ones, when, God willing, they could be brought to America. He remembered so vividly the three years he had been separated from his own wife and children. Always, he felt a pain in his stomach when he thought of the struggle to feed himself and to save enough to pay for their transportation.

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The loneliness he recalled had been unbearable—hunger and deprivation had been no stranger to him in the little village he came from, but there was nothing as terrible as being alone. During the day at work, his eyes used to blur as he thought of his family, constantly and in the nights he called out their names from a troubled sleep.

He remembered, too, how he had treasured the infrequent letters; he kept them in a trunk with his prayer shawl and phylacteries and read them every evening before turning down the wick in the lamp. How odd it seemed to him now, that young people would not believe that their parents could know the depths of love and romanticism which they felt belonged exclusively to youth. How often as a boarder himself, his heart had wept when he saw the children of his landlord climbing on their father's knees while his own were half a world away. He could not comfort their aches and pains and share in the few joys which might fall their way.

His boarders, too, received letters. They, too, he thought, must cry quietly as he had so many times. Like himself they saved and they scrimped a coin here and a coin there

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and Malkeh helped them by doing her best to fill their stomachs with wondrous and tasty meals.

His eyes rested for a moment on his mother-in-law, who was rocking herself, hands folded in her lap, catching a nap before it was time to wash the dishes. Like her daughter, Malkeh, she had a heart of gold, wanting only to give to everyone. One day she had 128 come to see him in his junk shop with fifty dollars tied in her apron. She had heard that business was bad, so she pressed the money in his hands, closed his fingers into a fist and said quietly and with determination, “take it, take it, I don't need it.” Later he learned that she had sold some of her own silverware to an itinerant peddler in order to help him.

Often she was in the way, either in the kitchen or at the wrong time in the parlor, when Rivkeh's fancy suitor from Lincoln Avenue came to visit with a pound of Fanny Farmer chocolates. Sometimes she would be admonished for this little thing and that little thing, even though she tried so hard to be unobtrusive. Even as he watched, she opened one eye and a smile spread over her wrinkled face, joining all the other wrinkles which also turned into smiles. They understood each other and he would rather cut off his tongue than say an unkind word to her.

He thought again of himself in the early days—the jibes of the street urchins who called out, “Rag Sheeney, Rag Sheeney.” And it was their parents who weighted their bags of rags with bricks. But in the end he conquered and defeated them. He brought the bricks back the next day, returning them to some of his “customers” with a penny for each brick and a penny for their children. They did not know what to make of this and finally they came to respect this little Jew with the beard. They learned that he had no horns, that he took good care of his horse and that he worked tirelessly for his family.

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There was a time, too, when he felt that his children were ashamed of him as they were growing up. In school, when they were asked what their father did, they invented

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new vocations. He was never a peddler, never a junk man, he was in turn a metal expert, a salvage expert, a precious alloy expediter and finally in a tremendous burst of respectability, had obtained the pinnacle of acceptance as Executive Director of Salvage Operations. He laughed inwardly because he understood his children—but the truth remained that he was never anything but a good junk man—and not a bit ashamed of it.

In the end, it was all good; and in the eyes of his community and his children, he was a decent and proud Jew and wonderful father. And tonight the true measure of his achievements were to be found gathered around the Seder table.

But the best of all was his Malkeh, tired, footsore and sleepy. As his own eyes felt the heavy weight of slumber, his lips moved silently in prayer:

“Malkeh, Malkeh, never leave my side.

Without you I shall be lost.”

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Chiam Laib Gets a Raise

Once upon a time, ever so long ago when teachers had the temerity to fail students and when “trauma” was just a fancy word in Webster's dictionary, there lived in the West Side a man and his wife, Chiam Laib and Chikeh. These are not their names, of course, but they did live in the West Side somewhere between Robert St. and Texas St. You may guess from today until tomorrow who they were, but it will help you none. Even if I tell you that Chiam Laib was, in his early thirties, a great Talmudic scholar and by necessity and circumstances, a common laborer in a junk shop, you will not know enough to recognize them.

It is enough to assure you that Chiam Laib and his wife Chikeh were both faithful Jews who observed all of the 600 or so laws prescribed, minded their own business, put aside

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a few pennies for a rainy day and wished for nothing more in life than to have a child of their own. Alas, however, the good Lord did not seem to see fit that this should happen, despite 132 the intervention (by prayers, of course) of the West Side Rabbi and I might add, Chiam's own efforts too.

Now Chiam, as I told you before, was a great scholar. In the old country he had studied under learned rabbis and aspired some day to follow in their footsteps. But as fate would have it, Chiam-Laib was barely fortunate enough to escape from his homeland by the fringe of his prayer garment and found himself resigned to working as a manual laborer for an employer who was indeed the most ignorant of scholars, but rich in material possessions. As you might have guessed yourself, he secretly envied Chiam Laib his learning, but outwardly lost few opportunities to make light of Chiam's intellectual talents.

But no matter, Chiam Laib continued to work hard and although his muscles grew large and his hand rough and calloused, he spent the few leisure hours he had in the study of the Talmud. And in the synagogue where he was held in high esteem, everyone knew of his true worth and measure. But no matter again, even a synagogue must be paid for and certain expenses met regularly. So who do you think sat in the front seat and bought most of the religious honors? None other than Chiam Laib's employer.

Now there would really be no tale to tell had it not been that one day Chiam Laib's employer threw a light remark his way which Chiam Laib took as a reflection on his masculinity and his inability to produce a child—even a girl. He went home and told his good wife Chikeh about this and since both were 133 very sensitive, they began to brood. And the more they brooded, the more determined they became to punish Chiam Laib's employer. Into their peaceful minds came harsh thoughts like intruders slipping in through a gate which had been left ajar.

Perhaps a piece of iron scrap dropped accidentally on a toe—just enough for a little fracture, maybe a loose hammer flying out of his hands to strike his employer in the back,

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maybe a little fire in the rag storehouse for which he did not carry insurance. But as they pondered over these evil thoughts in their despair, they knew they would not do such things, so in the end they went to bed after having their tea and lemon.

One night soon after, Chiam Liab jumped out of his bed and cried out “Eureka” (or whatever the Yiddish equivalent is), “I have it!” He woke up Chikeh who put her wig back on, lit the kerosene lamp with the little glass chimney and sat down with him. Chiam Laib told her of his plan and as their eyes met each other in the half darkness of the room, one might have taken them as conspirators plotting the overthrow of the government itself.

It was simple! They would save as they had never saved before and come Rosh Hasbona they would have enough to outbid Chiam Laib's employer who traditionally bid the highest price for the privilege of saying a portion of the Torah. Never had this been done before and best of all, it would strike him in the only sensitive spot he had—the area of his pocketbook!

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So they saved and they saved and they saved. Every penny went into a big bag under the mattress. They gave up the few pleasures they had indulged in—no more vaudeville shows at the Orpheum, no more strawberry ice cream and no more pitchers of beer. Chikeh patched and repatched her husband's clothes and with ingenuity matched only by determination, concealed the patches in her own dresses. They neglected the charity box on the wall and Chikeh went so far as to cheat herself by using fewer eggs in the noodles. In the synagogue, Chiam Laib's friends noticed that he was even quieter than usual, he looked thin and wan and seemed preoccupied with other thoughts and when they spoke to him about this, he waved them away somewhat imperiously.

Well, to shorten this story to give you time to get to synagogue yourself tonight, soon came the day of reckoning for all Jews. Even those few who pretended they weren't and hid from themselves all year, came flocking into the synagogue to pray. But Chiam Laib only went

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through the motions of prayer and Chikeh in the women's section in the balcony did the same.

Finally the moment came to sell the privilege of reading the Torah. As usual the bid was opened by the one named Yitzchok who never intended to buy in the first place; some desultory bidding ensued and after a respectable time had elapsed, Chiam Laib's employer raised his fingers toward the sexton who had been looking his way and made his price. "For the first time, for the second time"—but as the bid was 135 about to be closed for the third time, a tremendous voice from the back of the synagogue offered more. The sexton shook his head in disbelief. Not only did someone have the audacity to break with tradition, but of all people, that somebody was a real nobody—Chiam Laib.

The buzz that arose from the congregation was almost drowned out by Chiam Laib's employer (whom we shall call Beryl) who as though brushing away an annoying fly from his nose, doubled the bid and sat back waiting for the sexton to quickly end the sale.

But Chiam Laib looked up to his wife in the balcony who with a grim smile and an almost imperceptible nod prodded him on. They were not to be put off and in a few minutes the price of the reading had reached a record high. Chiam Laib was sweating, but not as much as Beryl. By this time even the old patriarchs against the wall whose faces were always covered by their prayer shawls and who seemed forever removed from the secular world, began to mutter amongst themselves. "This Chiam Laib of ours must have changed his name to Rothschild."

"What audacity!"

Suddenly something stuck in Chiam Laib's throat. He looked up again to his wife and saw something he had never seen before—a granite-hard face, a thin tight mouth and piercing eyes. This was no longer his Chikeh but rather a predatory bird. And in the same quick look Chikeh, looking down on her husband, saw a pinched bitter face with not a single 136

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trace of compassion. It was as though they had become like two other people who are strangers to each other.

Like a flash of lightning which sometimes woke them in the night and made them cling to each other, the enormity of their sacrilegious scheme struck them simultaneously. Suddenly they were afraid and full of shame. Chiam Laib bid no more and hung his head while Chikeh opened her prayer book and buried her eyes in it.

Never, never, was there such a silence in the synagogue as when Beryl moved toward the Torah to sing out the Mafter. And when he was halfway up the steps he looked back to Chiam Laib and up the balcony to Chikeh and what he saw caused the triumphant look to fade from his face. He stopped, motioned to the Sexton and after whispering in his ear, the Sexton walked down the aisle and tugged at Chiam Laib's prayer shawl while talking to him in a low voice.

Chiam Laib shook his head several times, but when he saw finally that Beryl would not move any further toward the Torah, he got up slowly and went up to the Torah. As he passed Beryl, he saw a tear in his eye, a companion to the one that hung precariously on his own eyelid.

They will tell you even today that never, never was such a Mafter sung. Even the old patriarchs turned away from the wall to hear it better.

* * *

Now you might think this was the end of the story, but it is not. No sooner were the High Holidays over 137 than Chiam Laib's employer greeted him one morning with the following:

“Mr. Chiam Laib Rothschild Rockingfeller, don't come back here anymore,” and turned his back on him. Nobody was going to make an ass out of him any more.

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So Chiam Laib, despondent and bewildered at the frailties of human nature, returned to his home where he sat by the window brooding. He hardly noticed when Chikeh came in shouting at the top of her voice, “A miracle, a miracle! Chiam Laib, Chiam Laib, the doctor at the dispensary told me I was pregnant, and what are you doing home?”

And he, from sheer frustration cried out bitterly, “You couldn't have a miracle while I had a job: you had to wait until I lost my job. Besides, my dear Chikeh, it's enough I have no job, why make me feel worse by calling this a miracle? At least give me some credit.”

Well, just like this was a drama on the Yiddish stage, who should walk in, contrite and humble, none other than Beryl.

“I'm sorry, Chiam Laib, I was foolish and headstrong. I need you. Please come back at once.”

But Chiam Laib, for once in his life not a complete nobody, said firmly:

“I am not sure I can come back now. My wife is carrying a child and I must look somewhere else for more money.”

Whereupon Beryl clapped a hand on Chiam Laib's shoulders and a broad smile spread across his face,

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“Congratulations! Who am I to deny that a bigger family must have more money and I shall see that you get it. But Chiam Laib, only one promise—next year let me say the holy portion.”

...the moral of this story being that your good deeds must last the whole year through, because if they don't, it will cost you more in the end.

139

The Hanukah Bush

If your parents lived anywhere between Robert Street and the Minnetonka playground, your family might very well be the one in this Hanukah story. For all that I know, all of this might have happened to other families too, no matter where they lived.

The reason this could be possible is quite clear. One day several years ago, I wrote a little tale about an impoverished lady, now the mother of one of St. Paul's affluent families, who bought her children's shoes from the odd-lot table at Mintz's shoe emporium on Fairfield Street. She got these shoes at a bargain price because their mates were missing. Therefore, she often came home with only lefts or rights. Subsequently, and to this day, her children's feet were marked by bulging bunions which originally came from wearing a left shoe on a right foot or a right shoe on a left foot.

Lo and behold, that Friday night after the story was published, just as I had swallowed the last delicious 140 morsel of my wife's chopped liver and was about to lift a spoon of chicken soup to my trembling lips—the phone rang. Now who would call a good Jewish family at supper time on a Friday night? Only an inconsiderate ignoramus who might say, “We are calling to inform you that you just won a perfect diamond stone which is yours for free—just come down here tomorrow and have it mounted” (for fifty dollars) or, “We have just chosen your child's picture to be sent to Hollywood. Please come down immediately to look at the proofs.”

So I wasn't going to answer. Diamonds I don't need and my children aren't Shirley Temples. It was none other than one of our leading citizens who said he wanted me to know how grateful he was to be reminded that once upon a time things hadn't been so good in his family and that it cheered his soul to know that the bunion on his left toe wasn't there by chance. In fact, he was so deeply moved that he was going to attend synagogue services that evening. He was appreciative, too, that I hadn't mentioned names. So I wished him a good Sabbath and went back to my noodle soup.

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No sooner had I lifted my spoon when the phone rang again. It was the same story coming from another pillar of the community, again grateful and humble and almost sorry that most of the bunions had disappeared. "Such a mark of distinction," I muttered to myself. To him, I also wished a "Good Sabbath."

Well, it happened once more and although the soup was cold, at least three synagogue seats were warmed 141 up for the first time since the last Holy Days. For this I was happy.

The truth is, however, that the three (with bunions) who called me, I didn't even know very well. The one person about whom I wrote never called. I care not one single whir, for my story was only written to be read and enjoyed with no lesson in mind. In retrospect though, I suspect that the one who didn't call will never truly be a happy man because the bunion on his left toe will keep on hurting as long as he is unwilling to recognize it for what it is and was. It matters not that today he can afford to wear custom made shoes, and does.

In a way this is like the football game I wrote about which took place many years ago between the Minneapolis Mogen David team and our own West Side scrubs. It is a well-known fact that the complement of a football team is eleven men. Granted that in the confusion which generally prevailed, that there might have been fourteen or fifteen players, including one or two disguised as referees—granted there were three or four complete changes of rosters—granted all that, it hardly seems possible that the five hundred people who have called to complain that I left their names out, could all have played in that game. This becomes even more dubious, since on the basis of my computations, thirty-three and a third percent couldn't have been more than four years old at the time and an equally large number were over fifty-five the day the game was played.

So, if the shoe fits, wear it in good health. But I tell you for the last time that I am not writing about 142 YOU in this story, but about another very real West Side family whose children have moved a long, long way since their Pa borrowed money from the Maccabees

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Loan Association to buy oats and hay from Mr. Katzowitz to feed his horse. Believe me, this was not a riding horse—it was a pulling horse.

* * *

It was the week before Hanukah when she discovered what she had already known. Her crockery bank was empty save for three pennies, four nickels, a Chinese coin with a square hole in the middle and five hair pins.

There was no other money anywhere in the house. There was enough to eat and enough to wear, there was coal in the cellar and a stack of kindling wood piled against the outhouse. No one would go hungry and no one would be cold even though peddling was most difficult during the winter. There was love and there was comfort and there was comfort because there was love. But in the whole house, there was no more money.

As a matter of fact, she didn't even know they were poor. It would only be many years later when she had time to look back, that she would realize for the first time how desperately impoverished they had been. But now, since no one else had any more and a few even less, there was no yardstick to measure neighbor against neighbor.

She held the bank in the palm of her hand reflecting sadly that it was not a cruse of oil which might replenish itself in some miraculous way. One miracle 143 they had already found in America and for this they were truly grateful—the miracle of having enough to eat and the great promise the land held for their children.

It was only the children who mattered though and now it was a week before Hanukah and there was no Hanukah money in the house. This year she wanted each of the four to get a silver dollar. It was a fabulous sum to be sure, but she was grimly determined. A dollar was almost the measure of a full day's pay for a man and she knew not why the four silver dollars obsessed her, but they did.

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The next morning when the children were at school, she drew out from the depths of a big black trunk up in the attic, a silver Menorah (candle holder) and wrapped it in an old newspaper. She put it under her arm and walked across the Robert Street bridge where the icy wind stung her cheeks and pulled at the paper wrapping. On Seventh Street she turned to her right and walked down four blocks to a little shop over which hung three balls.

You might have expected, as she should have, that no respectable Jew would deal with this kind of merchandise—not a Menorah and just a week from Hanukah! Finally she found a place where the proprietor had stepped out for a few minutes and left a Gentile boy in charge. He knew no better, so when she held up five fingers, he knew it was worth ten and offered her four silver dollars, which she took. When the proprietor returned, it was too late. He was furious with his helper and then very sad and he slept 144 poorly that night because his helper had accepted of all things—a Menorah.

But on the first night of Hanukah, the children received huge silver dollars, as large and heavy as a carriage wheel, it seemed to them. The candles burnt brighter than ever, although instead of casting their flames from the Menorah, they stood upright stuck in potatoes sliced in half.

In due time their mother redeemed the Menorah and in due time the children grew up and prospered greatly and as one might expect, they all moved out of the West Side. In due time, too, the children had their own children and they too gathered around beautiful Menorahs to hear the blessings and sing Hanukah songs. That is, all but one of her sons who preferred to live at some distance from his Jewish friends and compromised by buying his children a “Hanukah Bush”—which was neither a Christmas tree or a Hanukah symbol.

This galled his old mother and without thinking of herself as another Hannah, she came over one night uninvited and unafraid and marched her son, his wife and their children into the recreation room where she told them all the story of the four silver dollars.

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And there came a miracle of a sort. For the son was ashamed and rushed out to the nearest delicatessen, even though the icy winds stung his cheeks, and there he bought Hanukah candles and a very elaborate Menorah. But when it came to light the candles, he had forgotten the traditional blessings and of course his children didn't know them because he had never thought it was important for them to know! Well, light them he finally did and instead of a prayer, moved his lips with a silent promise that next Hanukah it would be different.

Then he did a strange thing. He took the candles out of the Menorah, which stood on the dining room table, and placed them by the picture window where the neighbors could see them and stuck them in potatoes which were sliced in half. As for the "Hanukah Bush" which neighbors and his children might have mistaken for a Christmas tree, he threw it out in the backyard. When the neighbors came in for a cocktail that evening as they usually did at this time of the year, they saw the candles stuck in the potatoes and said, "How quaint!" And the son answered, "Quaint, my eye, this is the way my mother does it and this is the way all good Jews do it."

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"Lei Mir"

Breathes there a man or woman who, scrummaging around in the dusty corners of his storehouse of memories, cannot recall the most familiar words in the West Side lexicon.

Lei mir."

"Lei mir" means "lend me." That opening was invariably followed by "several eggs, a cup sugar, a piece of celery or a cup of coffee."

"Lei mir" usually came early in the morning after the kids had been pushed out of the house to go to school. There was a knock on your door which meant, "ready or not, here I come inside," and there stood your neighbor lady with a scarf on her head and an empty

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cup in her hand. If it wasn't a cup, it was an empty jar for a little chicken fat or cooking oil, or a towel to wrap a few eggs in.

It always just so happened that she was baking a cake and suddenly remembered that she had used up her last two eggs the day before and besides, how 148 were you feeling? So you “leied” her a couple of eggs and steeled yourself for the next request which you knew was due in a few moments. This time, however, she sent in her youngest child to “lei” a cup of sugar which her mother had forgotten to ask for. And while you were filling up the cup of sugar, this little beggar who would someday be a big beggar like her mother, ate up two buttered bagels which you were warming up for your own breakfast. About this time, you gave her the sugar and vented your spleen on the fat little monster with a “Maybe I should bake a cake for your mother.” Nothing daunted them, however—they were impervious to any kind of insults.

It was one of these “leiers,” God rest her soul, who had the temerity to come in with a request that, for sheer audacity, almost floored my mother.

All she wanted this time was to “lei” my mother's false teeth for a trip out of town. My mother got out of that one by telling her we were having meat all week and that she needed them for her own chewing. In the end, though, she had to part with a used corset.

But not a bit dismayed, our “leing” friend found her way to Dr. “Peg” Green's office, where she made the same request. After all, it was only for a few days and she would bring them back as good as new. This was too much for the good dentist, but he finally convinced her that all of his plates were spoken for, so she left for her visit with no teeth but with my mother's corset.

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I recall seeing her one day years later when she called me into the little dry goods store she operated on State Street near Ward's butcher shop and not too far away from Macarofsky's smoked fish store. She led me to the cash register and opened it to show me

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a set of teeth resting in the section reserved for paper dollar bills which she would never take—only silver. She told me she wore the plates only to the synagogue and that she didn't use them for eating because they didn't fit her. "But they do look nice on me, Velvel, don't they?" With that, she put them on and spent a moment before the mirror admiring herself. "Ai, Velvel," she said almost to herself, "if they would only fit."

I do not mean to be disrespectful, but one day much later when I paid my last respects to her at the funeral parlor, I couldn't help but think of how good she looked with her teeth which she had insisted were to be buried with her. And I have never ceased wondering even to this very day:

Who did she "lei" them from?

151

Tonight Comes Hanukah

The first heavy snow of the late winter fell quietly and thick through the long muffled night. With the snow had come a wind which played a game with the door of the outhouse, opening and slamming it shut as though determined to awaken everyone who slept in the dark house. Each time the door with the little half-moon opened, a flurry of paper orange wrappers skittered out and danced on the snow before the winds lifted them high in the air.

The narrow path from the house was completely covered over and deep drifts which moved with the whims and caprices of the wind, piled up around the stable and porch. As the night wore on, the snow continued to fall and the winds died down to a tired breeze, disappearing by early morning.

From all the chimneys in the West Side rose little spirals of smoke circling lazily above the housetops and reluctantly dissipated in the cold air. The broad arteries of Indiana Avenue, Fairfield, State and 152 Filmore street, were deserted and covered with a thick blanket of

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snow which clung tightly to all it touched. The little capillaries of side streets—Eaton, Eva, Texas, Kentucky, Fenton and Chicago—also lay quiet.

Here and there long tapering icicles hung precarious and threatening from the eaves and gutters, to be brushed away later in the day by broomsticks and little boys with long boards who loved to suck on them—little boys and little girls who were at this moment still lost in dreams under quilted comforters. On the window panes, the frost gathered in layers and Jack Frost himself was busy etching original designs on a tapestry of glass.

Away off on the fiats near the river, beyond the city dump, an engine and a solitary caboose crossed the wooden trestle, scaring the pigeons and black crows out of their roosts among the timbers into nervous flight. And to call attention to this solitary passing, the engineer pulled a cord and a shrill whistle pierced the break of day.

The whistle woke up Joe-Joe, a little man with a big white beard who lived in a shack. He looked out of his window, shook his head and snuggled deep under the cover. The whistle woke up Rosenblum, the baker, who had worked all night and was enjoying a catnap. Now it was time for him to load his bakery sleigh and cut sharp parallel furrows in the snow with the runners as he delivered warm bread, bagel and cinnamon rolls.

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Shortly the people in the houses would wake from their sleep and trace new paths through the snow, first from the house to the outhouse; the second would be to the stable to feed and water the horses and the third, one that converged from a dozen homes to the path leading to the synagogue.

The children would wake up in cold rooms not quite reached by the heat from the isinglass windowed stove which squatted in the dining room on a large square tin. Their next rendezvous was in the big kitchen to warm their stockings and underwear over the black and nickle-trimmed coal stove. Then came breakfast; hot cocoa, oatmeal, buttered bagel with creamed cheese and a ripe banana. No one was in a hurry to leave this warm

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oasis for the biting cold which stole in under the door and left a hoary frost mark on the threshold.

This was a great day—for it was Sunday and in the evening, it would be Hanukah. No Hebrew lessons, no school, no piano lessons, no violin lessons—just the sheer joy of living and the expectations of Hanukah money—silver coins from Pa and Ma, from bawbeh and a zadeh and from each boarder.

After the breakfast, into the dining room where they would flop on their bellies to read the funny papers—to join Jiggs as Maggie chased him, to laugh with Mutt and Jeff, to chase the Katzjammer Kids with the frustrated Captain and foil that supreme villain, Rudolph Rassendale, with Hairbreath Harry and Belinda Blinks. Always, right prevailed over might in the funnies and virtue was its own reward.

154

The kitchen was out of bounds for a few hours because your mother and sister had scrubbed the wooden floor. They scrubbed until it shone and then covered it with the want ad and society section. Who knew anyone in the society section anyhow? Who went to Florida? Nobody! If the more affluent among us went anywhere during the winter, it was to the mud baths for gout and rheumatism.

The rest of the newspaper was spread on the floor leading from the kitchen through the halls and in and out of every room. The cry we heard was a consistent one: “Don't step on the floor with your wet over-shoes, step on the paper.” Coming into the house from the outside was like going through the air locks in a space ship or decompression chamber. It was done in stages.

The first warning you heard on the porch: “Wipe off your feet.” When the first storm door had closed behind you, another cry assailed you: “Take off the overshoes.” With the second door, came another shrill penetrating blast: “Take off the coat and mittens and shake off the snow.” Finally, in the hallway just before the kitchen door: “Take off your wet

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shoes and stockings,” and once across the threshold of the inner sanctum, came: “Don't step on the floor—step on the papers—Why did you bring all the snow inside, why didn't you leave a little outside?” Then came the inevitable cry of sheer desperation and futility uttered by all mothers: “My luck! Other children like to play outside all day, but my little monsters prefer to stay in the house.” Our next door neighbor used to say, “Some children get lost, but mine always come home.”

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There was no point in arguing. What made mother angrier than usual was the fact that in her frantic hurry this day, she had put Castoria in her cake instead of vanilla. Well, that wasn't our fault and no one knew the difference anyhow. We were tired of playing cut-the-pie in the snow and making angels by lying flat in the snow with arms outstretched. We were hungry, too, and the potato pancakes smelled wonderful.

So inside again, back to the newspapers to join the rest of the family down on all fours reading. A story might be continued from the kitchen, to the living room and into a closet. You didn't dare lift the paper from the floor, so you followed the news crawling from room to room. It might be said that perhaps here originated the expression of a “nose for news.” The papers remained on the floor even with the coming of linoleum. The only newspaper never used on the floor after scrubbing was the Jewish Daily.

Now at long last it was time to light the Hanukah lights. We were all gathered in the dining room where my father had placed the Menorah on a small table near the stove. The square little windows shown bright red from the flames inside and a warm glow radiated through the semi-darkness of the room.

I remember the little box of yellow candles which the sexton had trudged through the snow to deliver. There was an inscription on the box which read, “Standard Oil Company of Indiana,” which I thought seemed somewhat incongruous. I smelled the potato pancakes in the kitchen. I saw the boarders, Enoch, Abraham and Levi, standing quietly against the

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wall 156 with a dignity and composure I had never noticed before. There was a faraway look in their eyes and I knew they were thinking sadly of the families they were waiting to bring across the ocean to America. I saw my mother with a shawl drawn over her head and my grandmother at her side.

Then my father lit the special “shamus” candle and used it to light the first candle as the blessings were recited.

For the moment I almost forgot the Hanukah money and the chocolate Halvah candy which Enoch, the boarder, had promised. I saw instead Antiochus Epiphanes, the wicked king, leering at us through the window, but he melted away quickly with the Hanukah blessings. Suddenly my tired father became Judah Maccabee, the great hero and my mother, brave Hannah. Enoch, Abraham and Levi were no longer sad boarders, but resolute soldiers of a brave little army.

And I remembered reading with great pride that all of the people of the kingdom accepted the king's edict except the Jews—they would not bow to any idols. And I knew neither would my father nor mother nor grandmother and boarders, nor even us—not for all the Hanukah money and chocolate Halvah in the whole world.

157

Mendel Is Stubborn

I was looking for my friend, Mendel.

I couldn't find him in Stein and Hoffman's Butcher Shop where this West Side Bernard Baruch sometimes dropped in to settle the affairs of our country. So I looked in at his room and found him in his rocking chair.

As usual, the door to his single room was ajar. If he kept it closed, someone would immediately circulate a story that a rich miser lived behind that closed door. And before

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you knew it, a burglar would be breaking it down. Now, if a crook, Mendel reasoned, went to the trouble of trying to break down a door, he would get mad at Mendel twice; once for the trouble to break in, and twice because he wouldn't find anything to steal.

Mendel's room was on the second floor beyond a narrow hall in which he kept two antiquated "ize"boxes; one, he used to say dryly, he didn't use for meat and the other, he didn't use for milk, Mendel 158 waved me in with one hand, while rolling a Bull Durham cigarette with the other. It was a puny product he manufactured, neither round, smooth, nor fully packed and twisted at both ends to keep the tobacco from spilling out. Then he bent over the gas stove to light it from the burner, but without removing it from his mouth. Why he never singed his beard was both a mystery and a miracle.

Mendel will never move from the West Side. He will be there when the bulldozers come around to level the houses and he will still be there when they leave, because he is the most stubborn man in the world. He knows his rights and you can argue with him until you're blue in the face, but he won't be budged. When it comes to leaving this world, he will go only on his own terms. Such is Mendel.

He doesn't want anyone to feel sorry for him. He doesn't need much and has enough for himself. He gets a few dollars of old-age pension, although he had a bit of trouble proving he was 65. The only paper he had to help him qualify was an insurance policy he had bought many years ago for burial expenses. Unfortunately, the policy made him twenty years younger, because when he bought it, he said he was much younger in order to make the premiums cheaper, but the old-age people who finally decide these things knew they had met their match and gave in to Mendel. It was either that or an appeal by Mendel to the Supreme Court, which he would have undertaken himself, if his friend, Mr. Sam Lipschultz, the lawyer, was too busy.

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Mendel also gets a little help from his children, who would give him more if he would take it and they had more to give him which he wouldn't take if they had it. On Friday, he cooks a chicken for himself, a little chicken soup and buys a fresh warm twist bread at Kessel's Bakery. Three butcher shops are within four blocks of his room and a kosher grocery is just a few steps away. And, of course, there are two synagogues nearby, which have become desegregated and allow Lithuanian and Russian Jews to pray together. So you can plainly see that he lacks nothing.

Mendel drew a long puff from his cigarette, put it aside and proceeded to polish his spectacles with a huge white handkerchief. Then when he finished cleaning them, he put the glasses back into his shirt pocket where they got dirty again immediately from the lint and tobacco. I knew better than to ask Mendel why he did this—and why? Because he was the kind of person you didn't ask because he already had a good answer and was waiting for you to ask. So why give him the satisfaction? If there was anyone who could make an intelligent person look like a stupid idiot, Mendel was the one.

“Just in time, Velvel, for a slice of fresh bread and a slice of onion,” he greeted me.

“Never mind, I just brought you an old Forvitz.” (newspaper)

“Tell me, Velvel, how's the mortgage in Highland Park?”

“Can't complain. I'm making payments.”

160

“Is it true, Velvel, taxes went up so high, it takes 16 monthly payments just to pay 12 months' taxes?” “Never mind the jokes. What's new?”

“What's new? It's time for a new president at our synagogue.”

“What's the matter with the one you have now?”

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“He prays too loud.”

“And this is a reason for a new election?”

“Why not?”

“In the middle of the year?”

“If we wait six months, we'll all be deaf.”

“You think your president is going to like that?”

“What's the difference? He will still be a president even if he loses. He'll open up a new synagogue.”

“Mendel, where will he ever find another synagogue?”

“Where there's a president, there's a synagogue.”

“And do you think the new president will chant the prayers softer?”

“Who cares, none of us hears very well.”

“So if you can't hear, how is it you complain he's too loud?”

“Because we don't like him anyway.”

“Mendel, Mendel, this is not the American way.” “So, go tell this to Chaim.”

“What's Chaim got to do with this?”

“He's going to be the next president.”

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“Who said so?”

“His wife said so.”

“Since when does a wife pick a president of a synagogue?”

“First, she picked him for a husband.” “It's too much for me, Mendel.” “It's too much for Chaim, too.”

“Tell me, what's new in the old Forvitz I gave you?”

“I'm afraid to say.”

“What do you mean?”

“By the time I read it in the Forvitz, our worst enemies have become our best friends.”

“You're making a joke.”

“In truth, a fine joke—I read that the Germans are opening a Jewish Theological School.”

“Let's change the subject. How's your granddaughter?”

“Pretty as a picture, but always complaining.” “What is it this time?”

“She wants braces for her teeth.”

“So she needs braces?”

“But she doesn't need braces.”

“If she doesn't need them, why is she crying?”

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“Because all her girl friends have crooked teeth and wear braces and her teeth, just for spite, are straight.”

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“Mendel, you're pulling my leg.”

“I should only live so long. Velvel, do you notice what's happening to children these days?”

“What's happening to children these days, Mr. Professor Mendel?”

“Their feet are getting shorter and their arms longer.”

“And what causes that?”

“They don't walk anymore and always their arms are stretched out for a ‘gimmee, gimmee.’”

“You talk like a cynic.”

“All right, so I'm a sink, whatever that is; anyhow, how are your own children?”

“Suzie is taking flute lessons.”

“What is a flute?”

“If you don't know, it's a stretched out piccolo.”

“What's the matter now with violin lessons?”

“Nothing; what's the matter with a flute?”

“Did you ever play ‘apos;Eli, Eli’ on a flute?”

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“Mendel, Mendel, wake up to the times.”

“Such times it's better to sleep through. Tell me, is it cheaper for lessons on a little flute?”

“No, it's the same price.”

“So, why don't you give her lessons on a big piano?”

“Never mind the lessons. Did you hear that the Russians shot a spaceman around the world?”

163

“Bah, a bunch of Bolsheviks.”

“They're not Bolsheviks, they're Russians.”

“So if you want, go call pork, kosher salami, but it's still pork.” You should at least give them credit for this.“

”I wouldn't believe it if I saw it with my own eyes.“

“Look, if the President himself congratulated them, who are you not to believe it?”

“And what makes a President such a big authority? Better he should watch the price of chickens.”

“Don't be disrespectful.”

“I didn't mean him any disrespect. A president always deserves respect even if you don't vote for him—but a Bolshevik, never.”

“You've got a big prejudice, Mendel.”

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"Who says I haven't? It's only the ignorant and those who don't care about anything who haven't got prejudices."

"So why do you care, then?"

"Because I know they shot a spaceman around the world."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" "Why should I give them credit?"

"You know they'll feel bad if Mendel doesn't give them credit."

"To the devil with them, I've got my own troubles." "What's wrong?"

164

"They tell me the West Side is going to be torn down soon, maybe next year."

"No, it won't be for several years yet. And when it happens, so you'll move."

"No, I'm too old to move."

"You're strong as an ox, thank God."

"Ai, you don't understand, an ox has no feeling and any pasture will do."

"There will be a hundred rooms you can find -all near synagogues."

"You mean well, Velvel, I know. Do you see the big trees across the street? I planted them as little saplings. I can walk here in the streets in the dark without my eyes. When I move again, it will be to the cemetery."

"Don't talk that way. Is there anything I can bring you the next time?"

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“A little schnapps wouldn't hurt. Please try to talk to the Governor, too, and tell him to hold off on the West Side for a little while. After all, nobody here bothers nobody. Just tell him for Mendel, ‘Here do I wish to live, here will I die.’”

“Goodby, Mendel, and don't worry.”

“Don't forget to kiss the Mezzuzeh on your way out.”

* * *

For one more time, dear Lord, let the politicians and planners and the board of realtors and all the wise men of this city, take their own dear time to deliberate 165 and deliberate and deliberate and procrastinate and procrastinate and procrastinate; let the wheels of progress be stayed a little longer and the levelling of the West Side put off a while—for Mendel's sake. He's really not S-T-U-B-B-O-R-N—just tired and frightened like so many other old people.

167

Mendel and The Turkey

I hadn't heard from friend Mendel for quite some time so I drove down to the West Side to find him. Naturally I stopped for a minute in Kessel's bakery which has now become a specialized operation; for example, bagels come hard and soft, medium and large sizes. So I bought a half dozen soft bagels from a fine looking Mexican boy who was taking care of the store. Joe and Bernie, he told me, were out delivering—probably to the rich capitalists in places like the Minnesota Club, where a bagel has a better chance of becoming a member, than one of us.

The bagels were for Mendel, if I could find him. There is always a tight little fear in my heart that he might be sick all alone in his room, or God forbid, something worse. But

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thank God, Mendel, the indomitable and indestructible cynic, was sitting outside on his favorite apple box under a tree.

I looked at him softly, the neatly-trimmed white beard, his skull-cap perched sideways on his head like 168 a beatnik, and halfway down the bridge of his fine nose, tied, glued and taped together—his glasses. There was a beatific smile on his face, as though he had just won an argument with a Saint and I am not a bit ashamed to say that I felt like crying, first out of relief at seeing him there and secondly at the sad thought that one day he would not be there, that day or any other day after that. But even as I watched the lines of his face with my eyes, this old reprobate opened one eye and then the other as though he had been watching me during all this time.

“Now, Velvel,” he said, “how did you found your way to the West Side all the way from Highland Park?”

“Mendel,” I said, “it's good to see you sarcastic and complaining as usual. I didn't have anything better to do so I came here with some baglich.”

“Hard or soft?”

“Soft.”

“Good, I'm missing another tooth from my plate.”

“So what's new in the West Side, Mendel?”

“You won't believe it, Velvel.”

“All right, so I won't believe it.”

“A miracle has happened in the West Side.”

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“You're getting married, maybe.”

“No, no, I said a miracle, not a catastrophe.”

“So tell me.”

“For fifty years the Litvaks, Rumanians, the Polishers and the Russian Jews wouldn't be found dead 169 in the same synagogue together; they wouldn't even be buried in the same cemetery. They had to have their own synagogues, their own mortgages, their own presidents—for every ten people there was a synagogue and for every ten people, ten running for president.”

“So?”

“Today in the West Side, Velvel, we've got barely ten people left for a minyan. And in these ten are Litvaks, Rumanians, Polishers and Russians. Now we must pray together or not at all. What's more, since all the synagogues are closed but two, we take turns praying at each. Ai, Velvel, God moves in mysterious ways to unite Israel.”

“Fine, Mendel, but why don't you close all the synagogues but one, instead of trying to keep up two? That would really be a miracle.”

“Have patience; you can't push miracles.”

“So enough of miracles, why don't you get new glasses? How can you see with the ones you have?”

“Who sees with them?”

“So why do you wear them?”

“Because I'm used to wearing them.”

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“Mendel, how can you be so stubborn?”

“Don't worry, Velvel, next month I'll go to see a doctor and get a new pair. It's not like the old days when I could pick out a good pair in the ten-cent store. Remember they had all kinds of glasses and a card for you to try them on and read. I can't read English so I took my prayer book to read. One day a Gentile next 170 to me was trying on glasses and the card was missing, so I gave him my prayer book to read.”

“But, how can you expect a Gentile to read your prayer book?”

“He couldn't—he turned it upside down and over, but he couldn't make heads or tails out of it. In the end, he tried every pair of glasses and even then he couldn't read it.”

“So why didn't you tell him it was written in Hebrew?”

“He didn't ask me.”

“You know, Mendel, it's not for you, but they've got now tiny pieces of glass which fit over your eyeballs instead of spectacles.”

“What's not possible in America—maybe I should get some.”

“And what would you do with them?”

“I'll tell you, Velvel, I could put them on in the morning to help me find my glasses.”

“So why would you need glasses?”

“To find the pieces of glasses to put on my eyeballs.”

“Mendel, Mendel.”

“Say, Velvel, you won't be ashamed of me if I ask you a foolish question?”

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“Why should I be ashamed?”

171

“All right, Velvel, the other day in the butcher shop, they showed me an American paper advertising ‘Turkeys, parts missing, twenty-nine cents a pound.’”

“So it's cheap, Mendel; no one has to pay the extra expenses for making kosher.”

“What do you mean, cheap? It's not cheap even for a nickel a pound.”

“Why not?”

“Velvel, if the parts are missing, how can they be worth anything? What kind of a game is it? First, you have to look for the parts that are missing after you've paid twenty-nine cents a pound for parts you haven't even found. At least, they should tell you where to look.”

“Mendel, you don't understand.”

“What's to understand? Why don't they tell you first how much the turkey is a pound that isn't missing? This I could understand. How would it look, tell me, if the West Side kosher butchers would try to sell me a chicken for fifty cents a pound for missing parts? Who in his right mind would buy such a chicken even for ten cents a pound? Bad enough it isn't kosher, it's worse that it isn't even there.”

“Mendel, hold on, don't get excited.”

“Who's excited, am I sweating, or you?”

“Look, my obstinate friend, it's this way. It could be that a wing or a foot might be missing from the turkey, the twenty-nine cents a pound is for the rest of the turkey that's left over.”

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“Listen to me, Velvel, you're a good boy with a college education. What's a turkey, or a goose, or a duck, or a chicken without all of its parts together? It doesn't sound right to me.”

“So it doesn't sound right to you. You don't have to listen to it, you only eat it.”

“Velvel, you're getting excited.”

“Who wouldn't get excited from you?”

“All right, when you asked your ma for a wing, did she even once tell you it was missing? When you asked her for a leg or a neck, did she ever tell you it didn't come with the chicken? You think for a minute she would pay the butcher for parts that were missing—she had enough trouble, I remember, paying for the parts that were there. Believe me, if anything was missing, it was only because some other glutton at the table ate it up.”

“Mendel, I'm not telling you to buy chickens with missing parts. Let's just forget about the whole business and please don't bother me with chickens or turkeys any more.”

“And if you did tell me to buy such a chicken, what kind of a crazy butcher would handle such merchandise?”

“Please, just eat the baglich I bought you.”

“Can't you see me coming into Aaron Goldberg's butcher shop and asking how much a pound is a chicken for the missing parts. Do you know what he would say?”

“I don't even care any more.”

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“All right, I'll tell you. He would say, shaking his arm at me, ‘Mendel, go home and put your missing head back on’.”

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“For the last time, have pity on me. You don't pay for the missing parts, only for the parts that are there—and can be felt—and can be weighed on a scale—and can be eaten.”

“You're right, you can't eat what's missing, but tell me, what happened to the missing parts? Did the turkeys have an accident or maybe they were born that way. And besides, how much a pound would it be for the missing parts if they weren't missing?”

“Mendel, I'm sorry I even came here today. Why don't you find the Rabbi and ask him all these questions yourself? For my part, you're obstreperous, obstinate, pertinacious, persistent, perverse, mulish and unreasonable.”

“At, Velvel, only in college comes such fine words. I like you, too.”

* * *

So, I love him.

In a few weeks I'll drive down again to see him. Without question, he will find another topic to utterly confuse me. But worst of all, is the uncomfortable fact that not only does he succeed so well in mixing me up, but he also manages to plant a tiny kernel of doubt.

Otherwise, why would I take my Ruth to task for a missing neck last Friday night, when it was really at the bottom of the pot?

175

I Married a Litvak

I wouldn't give up my old army jacket for the rummage sale, so my wife said I was stubborn. She said I take after my father, who is also stubborn. If I did something nice, she would probably say I take after her mother. What would the Council of Jewish Women do

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for rummage sales if everyone held on to their old clothes like I did, she asked, shaking her head in desperation?

She wanted to know how much longer I was going to hang on to my G.I. jacket. The war has been over for many a year, she was careful to point out; she had no objection if I kept my discharge button and good conduct medal, but the jacket—it had to go. Why didn't I buy a car coat instead?

“Who needs it?” I muttered darkly under my breath, but not loud enough for her to hear it. How could she know how much trouble I had begging it from a sour supply sergeant with bitter tears and rationed cigarettes. Always it had kept me warm and 176 dry and there was a day when I looked trim and fit in it—almost like an officer. No matter that today my stomach muscles bulge out a bit in front.

And if I should get a new car coat, it wouldn't go with my old car, and in the end, I would have to buy a new car to go with it; so not for all the rummage sales in the world will I give up my army jacket. An old shirt, yes, some old clothes, yes, but complete surrender? NO!

Maybe it's all because of my father's “Peltzel.” A “peltzel” is a short, sheepskin-lined ulster made of a fabric that seemingly wears forever. It had a thick collar which could be drawn over one's head and although you couldn't see where you were going, it kept you warm and besides, your horse already knew how to get you there. In very cold weather frost formed from your breathing around the collar and under your chin and therefore everyone who wore a “peltzel” had a red chin. In addition, each “peltzel” had two deep, leatherlined pockets each large enough for a baby kangaroo.

Now, this “peltzel” or ulster, if you will, was never new to begin with. No one knew the original owner. My father's probably was handed down from a long line of “peltzel” owners, the first one probably having won it in an early Siberian Bingo game. But there was nothing

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better to brave the blustery winds, to bring in buckets of coal, to harness the horse and to shovel the snow from the front steps.

The sad truth of the matter, however, is that my father seldom wears it. Since my mother joined her Tuesday Ladies Club (on Friday she bakes, on Monday, 177 she washes, on Wednesday, she is too tired and on Thursday she rests), she decided that it was time for my father to buy a new coat. But since I take after him, he's stubborn too and won't give it up. Naturally, some day (I pray it will not be for a long time) I will fall heir to it and just as inevitably, so will my small son someday find in my will a G.I. jacket and a "peltzel." And if he's like his father, he too, will hold on to both for dear life.

There were other accoutrements that went with the "Peltzel." Take those big, heavy, high-top boots laced with three feet of leather. Some oldtimers didn't take them off for weeks because their removal was a major operation. When a bath was strongly indicated, especially when the wind blew the wrong way, they would merely strip down to their woolen long johns with the flaps in the back and wash around the exposed areas.

Stockings came in three-foot lengths, over your knees. Then you fastened the top to your union suit with a large safety pin. Above all, I would not want you to think that bathing was not a regular procedure. The use of the public bath on Filmore and Robert Street by so many would attest to the fact that cleanliness was truly next to Godliness, especially since the synagogue was just a few doors away. The fact still remains, however, that there were a few of the oldtimers, particularly the bachelors, who looked unkindly on water for drinking or washing. But you never did see, did you, an elderly Jew whose beard was not snowy white?

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To get back to clothes—remember, your grandma was always knitting mittens; you helped her often by holding your arms straight out in front of you so that she could unwind the ball of wool twine around them. Mittens were always red and when I asked my grandma

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why, she simply said it was because they were mittens and besides, she added, how could black mittens keep your hands warm? It was useless to remonstrate with her. These mittens came in three sizes—too small, too big and much too big. Their only semblance of uniformity was the fact that each had a thumb and four fingers, with the thumb looking like the fingers and the fingers like thumbs.

My grandma also knitted “bawmbi” hats; these were pulled down over your ears and were wonderful for skating. There was a tassel on top and of course, they were always blue. When I asked my grandma why they were always blue, she would say it was because they were “bawmbi” hats, besides, how could a red “bawmbi” hat keep your ears warm?

Sweaters—sweaters! She knitted more than the Red Cross during war time. They came in two styles, long sleeves and short sleeves, but the long sleeves were too short and the short sleeves too long. So there grew up a generation of sweater-sleeve-pullers, who pulled all day long in public schools. Half of that generation spent their time in school rolling up their sleeves; so between the pullers and the rollers, they drove the poor teachers to distraction. These sweaters were always brown. If you want to know why, go ask my grandma. By this time, you should know yourself 179 that only a brown sweater can possibly keep you warm.

Next came the knitted suspenders. After a few generations of being passed from fathers to sons, they began to sag from sheer weariness and slowly but inevitably began to let your pants down. So there grew up, too, a generation of pants-puller-uppers to drive teachers frantic. You knew the danger point was reached when your shirt tails began to show. The suspenders, I remember, came in striped colors, but for the life of me, I can't remember why. I do know, however, that there were two schools of thought and fashion; one wore suspenders under the shirt, the other over the shirt. A few, after pulling their suspenders over their heavy underwear, considered themselves fully dressed even without shirts. In more recent years, suspenders came factory made with “union made” stamped on the brass metal clasps.

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In the back pocket of the trousers, there was usually a large “handkief,” a white piece of cloth about three feet square. In those days it was polite to blow your nose out loud in public, instead of sniffing around all day with patches of tissue paper. This “handkief” was strictly utilitarian, designed functionally and with no need for initials. All that was necessary to know about its ownership, was that it came from the same family. Every family zealously nourished their own familiar strains of germs and viruses in their own laundry.

Neckties were worn only to weddings and to synagogue. When not otherwise in use, they also served to hold up pants and to fasten hot compresses to the head. About half-way down the tie, there usually was a chicken soup stain, but this was covered up by the vest under the jacket.

At the bottom of all this was the heavy woolen union suit. One was never certain which was worse—to wear it and scratch, or not to wear it and freeze. But perhaps for no other reason it was worth wearing because it felt so good when you took it off. Do you remember how ludicrous these long johns looked, frozen on the laundry line in winter? The wind flapped and tossed them about like crazy acrobats.

A word, too, about the dandies who always wore a long, long white silk scarf and the inevitable buttoned spats over their shoes. Whatever happened to the spats?

Now, in the ladies' department, I can't do as well. What they wore was a mystery to me and I'm told, even a mystery to the men they married. But one fascinating and intriguing discovery I did make many long years ago. Once we gave a show in our back yard for which we charged three pins—and the feature attraction, for which I was not responsible but enjoyed, nevertheless, were some brazen girls in big, black bloomers.

To tell the truth, I had no intention whatsoever to write about clothes, I began this morning to tell you about the old neighborhood, but was diverted by the rummage sale and my

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wife's insistence on giving away my G.I. jacket. What really bothers me is the ending of this little tale—the jacket finally went to 181 the rummage sale. Can you blame me if I take umbrage at what has happened? But I have no one to blame but myself—if my mother told me once, she told me a hundred times not to marry outside of my faith! So it serves me right because I didn't listen to her and went right out blindly and married...a Litvak.

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Kreplech And Wine

If you have never eaten cheese kreplech like my mother makes, then your life on earth has been singularly devoid of one of the best things in life. So when my mother called me at the office the other morning and asked, “Velvel, would you like some kreplech for supper tonight?” I hastened to say yes. I could just see her rushing over to the delicatessen for some fresh cottage cheese. In savory anticipation I didn't go out for lunch for fear of dulling the edge of my appetite and spent the rest of the working day chasing flying kreplech from my desk.

Finally the office clock struck five kreplech and I bolted out of the building towards Holly Avenue. As you may very well imagine, I did myself justice at the supper table, putting away a little mountain of kreplech dripping with butter. All the while my mother hovered over my shoulder, worried lest I miss a single bite; “Eat, eat — just a bit more.” Maybe it's because 184 like the rest of our mothers, she still believes our own wives feed us nothing but green salads, wieners and canned vegetable soup.

But, like with all good things, I had to say I had enough and with it the wonderful and comforting thought that surely I must be a favorite son to deserve this kind of attention. However, this notion was quickly dispelled, for no sooner had I staggered away from the table, than my mother put another heaping plate before my empty chair. I should have known she has no favorite son or daughter—or for that matter, any favorite sons or daughters-in-law. Who came in, but my brother Yankel and my brother-in-law, “Ace.” I

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was tempted sorely to bid them welcome thus: “Who invited you?” or something equally friendly, like “I suppose you smelled the kreplech all the way to Highland Park.” But instead I looked both gluttons squarely in the eye and said something about the kitchen being too small for a free banquet. Favorite son, indeed!

On my way out, I filched a few more kreplech while the two “guests” were washing up and wrapped them hurriedly in the Daily Forvitz—between the garment maker's strike and the lovelorn column. As it turned out later, I was punished for doing this. Although I meant to bring a few home to Ruth, I forget them in my briefcase. The next morning at a conference, I opened up my briefcase and out tumbled the kreplech. Well, it didn't turn out too badly after all, even though this was the first kreplech conference I have ever attended. As for the other gentlemen who were there too, they agree that this was a tasty meeting.

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What I really started to tell you about was the gallon of Kosher wine I bought for my father as a token offering on my way to my mother's for the kreplech. He always bemoaned the fact that he had to give up his wine making when they moved into an apartment. It seemed that the saddest thing he had ever done was to leave behind his wine barrel which he had purchased thirty-five years back from the barrel factory on St. Lawrence Street. He had wished to bring it along, but the landlord insisted it would be out of place in the laundry room with the gleaming white automatic washers. What does he know about my father's wine?

My father looked at the label with a sad glance and shook his head, “made without hands and without feet.” The label read that this wine was made “untouched by human hands” and my father said again, “it is not possible to make wine without using hands and feet. What kind of machinery can give proper flavor to wine? Who can make wine for Pesach like I did?”

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Every year he had Yankel bring home ten baskets of Concord grapes from the Robert Street Market, where he worked. The grapes had to be ripe enough to stain the basket. Then my father washed the grapes in cold water, removing as many of the stems as possible and dumped them into the barrel. Then he rolled up his sleeves in earnest, stuck his hands and head into the barrel and squeezed, mashed and pummeled each grape. When he emerged for a breath of air, he had a happy puckish smile on his face and looked for all the world like another grape himself. He punched 186 and lashed out at the quavering mass of pulp as though he was taking sweet revenge on every Cossack and Bolshevik in Russia, but before long, the heady odors got the best of him and he began to soften and forgive his enemies.

The next step involved boiling a gallon of water, *letting it cool and mixing in two pounds of sugar for every basket of grapes. After this mixture was poured into the barrel, it was left in a cool place for two days. The coolest spot in the cellar was always marked by the wine barrel which was raised off the floor and rested on an old apple box. Every other day after my father came home from work, he stirred up the mixture with a baseball bat which I once got with a suit of clothes from Bannon's Department Store. At the end of a week or so, he removed a mysterious conglomeration which had gathered at the top and was now ready to draw the first wine from the wooden spigot that stuck out near the bottom of the barrel. It was the same kind of spigot from which the grocer used to fill milk bottles with vinegar from another barrel.

It was this first draft which was the very best and of course, "Kosher for Pesach." This he saved for himself, his family, his dearest friends and for happy occasions. The second draft was never as good and this he offered to guests who were wont to come too often and stay too long. The third and fourth draft was for those who shouldn't come at all. Often when observing through the window, people coming to visit, he would call out, "Velvel, bring the number three wine—or the number four wine," and so it went.

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It was this first draft and the first draft only, which was fit to grace the Pesach table and fill the Kiddush cup. No matter what may have fallen into it, in the end it came out ruby red, sparkling and zestful and no taste buds could resist saying out loud, “tasty, tasty.”

There were some of our neighbors, however, who preferred something stronger. Because they believed wine was only for gargling, you might have guessed that they were not of our own. One day, some brothers three, some neighbors whom I will not identify, of course, were thirsty, dry and unwilling and unable to face the horrible prospect of a sober weekend. Now saloons in the West Side were not lacking; there were three on the corner of Fairfield and State Street and one next to the ritual baths on Filmore. However, in this instance, there was a lacking of the wherewithal to keep their tongues wet. As we say, once a “shicker” (drinker) always a shicker, so in their desperation they hatched an ingenious scheme. In the West Side it was ever that necessity transported even the dullest and least imaginative to great heights of invention.

If nothing else, these brothers three knew of the frailties and the weaknesses of their Jewish neighbors. Frugal, these Jews might be, sobriety, they worshipped and for indolence, they had no sympathy. But underneath this crusty exterior, lay an everlasting mother lode of compassion and tenderness. So the brothers schemed in the frustration of their terrible dryness to tap this vein of pity and compassion.

Thereupon, in the basement of their store, they quickly fashioned a rough coffin of pine boards, laid 188 it out just inside the entrance to the doorway and drew lots to determine who would lie “dead” in it. He who lost was promptly bedecked in his best Sunday suit, his hands folded over on his chest and laid to rest, waiting to be “buried.” Then the brothers wailed mightily and beat their breasts for all to hear that there was no money to provide for a decent burial. They went from one Jewish neighbor to another and, of course, everyone gave—for what better charity could one give, they said.

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The one or two West Siders who were skeptics and wouldn't recognize Moses himself if he came in a golden chariot carrying the Ten Commandments written in neon lights, had to go see for themselves. They looked and were satisfied; the truth is that the "corpse" looked just as "dead" when he was alive, so it was no wonder they were taken in and parted from their money. They clicked their tongues sadly, taking care to leave with a passing reference to his good deeds in life.

By this time, a sizeable collection had been gathered and the brothers two departed at a fast gait for the nearest saloon. The third brother they left in his coffin to wait until the last Jewish neighbor had left, before he too could join them. In the meantime, the "corpse" died a thousand deaths from thirst and apprehension that his burial money would be soon guzzled away and he would have "died" in vain.

Finally he was left alone, but as he was getting out of his box, a late neighbor approached to pay her respects. Seeing the "dead" come to life, she threw up 189 her hands and ran down the street clutching her shawl and shrieking out at the top of her voice, "help, help."

Well, as destiny would have it, the first person she ran into was the priest from St. Michael's. He happened to be walking down to the store to ascertain why he hadn't been called to administer the last sacraments. Finally, this poor woman, who ordinarily would have been afraid to speak to him, was able to tell her story after being calmed by the good father. But he was a wise priest, too, and served his parish well, so he knew his parishioners.

He strode off straight to Blair's saloon on the corner across from Gershon's hardware store, where he found the brothers deep in their cups and all very much alive....Well, to end a long story, the next day was Sunday and all three went to church and the next week, too, and the week after.

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What a fine temperance story this would be if it could be said that this harrowing experience taught at least one never to drink again! And if one must draw a moral from this tale, it might be this—that those who eat kreplech and drink wine in moderation will be laid to rest only once.

* Editor's note: This is not a recipe nor is it to be construed as such. Rely only on your local winemaker for purity, taste and legal compliance.

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Long Distance

Something had troubled him all week and now he knew what it was. Every year at this time it was the same and he could not escape it. This year it was even worse. He remembered seeing just that afternoon in the delicatessen window a poster calling attention to Cantor so and so, who had been hired at considerable cost, to chant the High Holiday services. It brought back to him immediately a picture of bearded Jews striking their breasts with closed fists and crying out: "I have sinned, I have sinned."

It would serve them right, he thought cynically and because he was mad at the world, if he were to slip in among them and sing out loud as fist met breast, "Pepsi-Cola hits the spot, Pepsi-Cola hits the spot." They might look at him as though he were crazy, but more likely, he knew they would ignore him as they had ignored others for as long as people can remember.

He was almost envious and for the first time he fought off a compelling thought that what he had so often ridiculed as weakness was in reality a great strength. But although he was not ready to accept this, a sense of shame overcame him and he was filled with remorse.

He looked into his wallet and apparently satisfied with what he saw, put it back into his pocket and walked across the street into the telephone sub-station building. He closed the

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door of the booth behind him, drew a last drag at his cigarette and nervously dialed the long distance operator. It had been a year to the day that he had done the same.

It took a few minutes to make the connection and while he waited, he bit his thumb nail and spit it out between his teeth. What if his mother wasn't home? What if she was too sick to answer?

"Hallo, who is it?"

"Ma, it's me, Yawsel, finish your tea and honey cake."

"Who? Just a minute, the pot is boiling."

"Me, Ma, Yawsel."

"Oy, Yawsel, what's the matter? You're sick, maybe?"

"No, Ma, I'm fine. I'm calling you long distance from California. I want to wish you a good New Year."

"The same to you, my son, and don't talk too expensive. How did you know I was drinking tea and eating honey cake?"

"I thought you didn't hear me."

"I heard you—I was just excited."

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"Ma, how are you feeling?"

"As good as I can feel, Yawsel. I'm no spring chicken no more."

"You're sure everything is all right, Ma?"

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“Why shouldn't it be all right?”

” “Ma, I can't hear you—talk louder.”

“Just a minute, the water is running.”

“So let it run, Ma.”

“So you'll pay the bill, Son. Tell me, how is your job?”

“It's fine. I'll send you a few dollars next week.”

“Never mind, I can manage. There's still a few dollars Pa left over. Tell me, maybe you need it for the business?”

“No, Ma, thanks. What's with the rheumatism?”

“The doctor says it's better—it doesn't hurt him.”

“Who is your doctor, Ma?”

“You remember Chiam with the crippled foot, it's his boy Laibel.”

“Tell me, isn't it lonesome for you all alone?”

“So, one gets used to it.”

“Ma, Ma, if only I could walk to the synagogue with you tonight.”

“Yawsel, so goes the world. Oh, how I would like to see you today. Tell me, do you get enough to eat in the restaurants?”

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“Eating, there's plenty, Ma, but a good piece of your chicken isn't to be found. Maybe you could put some in a letter and send it to me.”

“Ai, Yawssel, I would send you a whole chicken, with soup and noodles and pudding and a big, fresh twist bread—enough for a year.”

“I can't hear you too well, Ma. Don't talk so fast.”

“This is no time to talk slow—I can say twice for the price of once. Another thing, have you found a respectable Yiddish girl?”

“Who's got time, Ma?”

“Yawssel, don't fool, you're talking to your mother.”

“Ma, there's plenty of nice Jewish girls, don't worry.”

“Why shouldn't I worry? I'm not interested in plenty of girls, just one for you as long as she comes from a nice family—anyhow a Yiddish family.”

“And what if she's rich?”

“Ai, Yawssel, no more of your jokes, do what you want.”

“All right, I'll find myself a rich Rabbi's daughter with a college education, who has a big dowry from her grandfather, who is bosomy and beautiful, who can make a chicken like you do, who is a good housekeeper like you, and who is looking all over for just a bum like me.”

“Yawssel, you're not a bum; you're my son who a girl should be lucky to have.”

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“Ma, I'm a bum, what else? If I wasn't a bum I would be taking you to the synagogue tonight and you wouldn't go alone. I would hold your elbow and help you up the stairs and into your seat so your ladies could see the both of us. Remember, Ma, remember? I don't hear you.”

“You don't hear me, Yawsel, because I'm not listening, that's why.”

“All right, I'm sorry, I don't want you to feel bad. I only want you to feel good. So I'm not a bum.”

“That's better. Tell me, do you have enough white shirts and clean underwear?”

“For crying out loud, do you still think I'm a baby? I got plenty shirts and plenty stockings. I change every day—sometimes twice a day.”

“Twice a day!”

“All right, at least once a day.”

“Ai, that's good. When a man wears a clean pressed shirt, people think better of him. If only I had a few of your shirts to press.”

“You need shirts to press, Ma. Didn't you wash enough and press enough for Coxey's army?”

“I only wish I could do it all over again.”

“What's the matter, Ma? How many times did you say if you could only catch up with the laundry and the pressing, you would sit and rest for twenty years.”

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“So I said it, but it's not the same. As long as I pressed, I was too busy to think. If I didn't think I didn't worry and if I didn't worry, that's the best rest 196 of all. Now I have time only to worry. And if i didn't worry, that's something to worry about too.”

“What about your lady friends, Ma? Can't you play cards with them?”

“Yawsel, Yawsel, most of the ladies are gone. If they're not gone, they've moved away. If they haven't moved away, they're sick; if they're not sick, they can't see too well, and can't see the cards and if they do see all right, they don't know how to play cards and if they know how to play cards, they can't hear and if they can't hear, what's the use of playing?”

“Ma, my head hurts from all this.”

“Yawsel, when you're old and lonesome, it's all a big headache, but I shouldn't talk like this because I'm so happy to talk with you. Maybe you'll even come for a visit this year.”

“Maybe, Ma.”

“Is it warm in California?”

“It's warm, Ma.”

“You have a nice place to stay?”

“I have a nice place to stay, Ma.”

“Your business is all right, Yawsel?”

“My business is fine.”

“You're going to the synagogue tonight, my son?”

“I'm going to the synagogue tonight.”

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“Yawsel, I'll pray to God to give you a good year and nothing should happen to you in California.”

“Yes, Ma.”

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“Maybe it's enough we talked now. Only a fine son would make his mother feel so good. I'm saying goodbye, Yawsel. Be a good boy, my own dear son.”

* * * * *

When he hung up, she pressed her lips tightly to the mouthpiece. The tea was cold and the day was coming to an end. She hesitated for just a moment and then pulled out a neatly folded prayer shawl from a chest of drawers. When the iron was warm, she spread a moist towel on the table, unfolded the shawl (which was a young man's) and ironed it with great care. Then she folded it carefully, kissed it and returned it to the drawer. She spread a clean white tablecloth over the table, placed two silver candlesticks in the center and lit the candles. When the flames burned steady and bright, she bowed her head, arched her hands over the light and said the blessings—first those she owed to God and another for her son.

* * * * *

When he hung up, he pressed his head against the glass pane of the booth for a moment and then walked out and closed the door behind him. He walked across the street and into a pool hall where he picked out his favorite cue stick and broke the racked balls with a sharp clean stroke. It was a good shot born from long practice. The eight ball was a cinch shot. Instead he laid the cue stick on the table, threw fifteen cents on the counter and walked out—in the direction of the synagogue.

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Independence Day

Little kids and big kids drawn by a Pied Piper who dispensed free street car tokens, flocked to the playgrounds. This was the morning of the Fourth of July, the day of the city playground department's free picnic at Phalen Park.

Once the free street car tokens were dispensed, there was a mad rush to the trolley line on Indiana and Robert Street to board the Hamline-South Robert street car. You pushed your little brother past the conductor who made a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to collect tokens. You protested loudly that your little brother was under five (and whose wasn't) and therefore needed no fare. As a matter of fact, everybody's little brother remained five for years until each took his own turn in pushing ahead another little brother, who was also under five.

Small wonder that the conductor on the West Side run never fully appreciated the Colonial Revolution.

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Bedlam reigned supreme on the street car; seats, built to hold two, sagged under the weight of six, all crying out at the top of their voices, "I was here first—gowan, sit on me until we get to China and see if I care, but I ain't going to move." And so the bulging cargo of noises and smells moved on over the bridge toward the transfer point at 7th and Wabasha.

Those incorrigibles who sat in the front of the car spit out through the open windows in fiendish delight, depending on the wind and speed of the trolley to deposit their little expectorations in the faces of those struggling in the rear windows. In the aisles, pickles and salami which had fallen out of a hundred soggy lunches littered the floors. Others, who were more enterprising, ate their lunches rather than lose them, reckoning on the largess of their friends to feed them again later.

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Long before the car completed the first stage of the desperate journey, a dozen torpedoes on the tracks had exploded under the wheels and hundreds of smaller (but lethal) Chinese firecrackers and larger (and even more deadly) “salutes” had been shot off under the seats. A blistered posterior was the battle scar of many on such trips.

Finally this black hole of Calcutta spewed forth its motley cargo of legs and arms, pickles and “vursht” sandwiches, bananas and cookies and a frenzied rush ensued to board the Dale-Phalen Park street car on 7th and Wabasha. This time the West Siders were not alone and were jelled into a conglomeration spewed out from all the playgrounds in the city. However, undaunted 201 and unafraid, they plunged into the melee all over again. Once more seats were bitterly contested, little brothers hitting little brothers and big brothers hitting and jabbing big brothers. Once more the aisles filled knee deep with food, but this time, ham loaf sandwiches from the other end of town and “goyishe” (non-Kosher) baloney mixed with “Vursht” and corned beef.

Caught in this squirming mass was the poor, harassed conductor; he cranked the little black coin and token receptacle, wondering how it could be singularly devoid of coins with so many passengers. He, too, had occasion each year to wish the Boston Tea Party had never happened. What desperate thoughts entered his mind, we can only guess.

Since there must be an end to all things, the trolley finally stopped near the Phalen Park pavilion. The few, and they were very few, timid souls who were conformists in all respects, left by channels specially designated for entrance and egress; the rest, however, clambered out through the windows, dragging screaming little brothers after them. Then like bees to the hive, they sped to the free Cracker Jack and root beer lines.

These refreshment lines wove in and out through the groves of trees and flowed on to the golf greens. Like a huge snake the lines writhed and wriggled, hugging the ground, turning and bending, never ending. On each side, clad in white duck pants and white caps with green visors, the playground directors were stationed together with their assistants. Theirs

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was to maintain a semblance of order and to prevent anyone 202 from returning to the line for a second helping—an impossible task. Hats were exchanged, shirts changed—disguises of all kinds and all descriptions. How many innocent little Cracker Jack smeared faces looked up squarely into a director's accusing eyes and plaintively retorted, “Who, me? This is the first time I've been in this line. I just came here—what do you think I am, a pig?” And so it went.

In the root beer lines, it was the same. The kids were saturated; they sweated root beer all day and the rest of the week. They absorbed liquids like sponges; they drank and drank with glazed eyes and gurgling little bellies. As with the Cracker Jacks, it was not a matter so much of eating, but the accomplishment of getting, of accumulating and of outwitting the hordes of directors and supervisors who fought a losing battle. To this very day some of our community leaders are remembered less by their philanthropic and communal contributions, and more by the number of Cracker Jack boxes they brought home. How I wish so often, during a dull and pedantic civic meeting presided over by one of these gentlemen, to shout “Cracker Jacks” and watch him instinctively run from the platform. But I suppose I won't because it is just not proper.

These kids were really no longer little children—they had become walking bellies stuffed with alternate layers of salami, root beer and Cracker Jacks, topped by a head full of ingenious brains dedicated to finding short cuts in the food lines.

When the supply was finally and completely exhausted, although the length of the lines had not shortened 203 one inch and the same faces were found in the same places, everyone rushed to the beach. Off came clothes covering the bathing suits underneath and changes were made behind every bush and every tree. One could say of all these kids, that they were prepared for any eventualities—“spare a locker and save a nickel” was their motto.

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Later in the afternoon, the parents came out to the park and like homing pigeons, inevitably found the same spot under the same tree where they and the bugs had eaten the year before. Out of the long 'wicker basket came the white tablecloth which was spread on the grass, followed by mountainous heaps of boiled eggs, sauerkraut, salmon salad, fried chicken, strawberry nectar, chocolate finger cookies, pickles, green tomatoes, green onions; a veritable market of produce covered the green sod of Phalen Park. And always the last thing that came out of the seemingly bottomless basket, were the green grapes, mashed to a pulp. Every year it was the same—mashed grapes. No matter where they were packed or unpacked, someone would sit on them.

Each year, too, when the parents finally unpacked and sat down to eat, they would give silent thanks that the children had not yet found them and would let them eat in peace. But such respite was not destined, for no sooner had a morsel touched their lips, than was heard the heart-chilling, agonized cry, "Ma, I'm hungry—let's eat." And in a thousand mothers' minds ran the same whispered fruitless wish, "Why couldn't you get lost for just this one day, until four o'clock at least?"

204

But the best was yet to come. There was loud and wonderful music in the outdoor pavilion for the parents and races and prizes for the children on the athletic field. A patriotic speech welcomed the new citizens and the stirring martial music of John Philip Sousa filled everyone with the true and unvarnished spirit of the day. A new flag high over the bandstand dipped and unfurled in the breeze from the lake. Not too far away canoes floated gently over the water and from the portable gramophone in one, came the strains of "The Sheik of Araby."

All too soon, the night crept in and in a short time the slopes leading down to the water's edge were covered with people brushing away the mosquitoes with rolled up newspapers and waiting for the great display of fireworks to begin. The first star bomb exploding high above in the darkness evoked "aahs" and "oohs" and squeals of delight. Next came a

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cascading waterfall blazing in a brilliant flow and after a time, to wind up the evening show, came the flag etched out in sputtering, fierce colors and surrounded by whirling pinwheels.

So ended the long, but still too short, day of the Fourth of July. A day of sparklers, firecrackers, cap pistols and Cracker Jacks and the long ride home, cuddled up to your mother. What a most memorable and wonderful day for all—even if for you, little boy, it always ended up with a bellyache—and no wonder!

205

Alone

I saw you, little old lady, sitting in the corner

With your hands folded in your lap,

Staring with dulled eyes into empty space.

Some kind people put you in this place,

Although you don't know who they are.

When your neighbors hadn't seen you for some days,

They called the agency to look into the situation.

The social worker found you on the floor of your bare room on the third floor; she couldn't be sure you were still alive.

While she waited for the ambulance,

She looked around your miserable room,

And remembered the clean white spread on her own grandmother's bed.

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She tried hard not to cry, but she did.

One more day would have been too late.

You would have closed your eyes forever and stopped breathing.

There would be no more hunger, no more pain in your life.

206

I saw you, little old lady, when I visited a friend

After they had brought you here.

Now you are clean, your hair is combed,

And there are people to look after you.

But you recognize no one and you are quiet.

You give no trouble; you let them bathe you

And feed you and take you to and from your room.

All the rest have visitors, you have none.

The record in the office says "senile."

I wondered, little old lady, who you were,

So I looked about our city to find out.

I am not sure why.

Could it be because your eyes seem to follow me?

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Was it to break through your silence

Or perhaps to remind someone to come to see you?

I cannot be sure why.

So I looked through old newspapers

And the American Jewish World

And some files at Neighborhood House;

Through the society pages and

All the synagogue and Temple Bulletins

And talked to some old-timers;

Some waiting impatiently for life to end,

Others still buoyant from a full life and pleasure from children,

And there were some things I began to remember myself.

* * * * *

Once there was a day so long ago

When you and your husband came to St. Paul—

Young, spirited, arid maybe a little afraid too.

207

You both found a small place on Eaton Avenue,

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Went to the B'nai Zion synagogue and made friends.

Some said of you that you carried yourself like a queen.

But it was not said with malice or with envy;

It was just the way you behaved and talked,

Gently, quietly and with a quality of tenderness.

Both of you must have prospered, for the city directory

Notes a change from Eaton Avenue to Lincoln Avenue.

Stop to think what a change

From the West Side fiats almost to the landed aristocracy.

But not to show off really,

Just a wise property transaction by your husband.

There is a picture of you, little old lady, in the paper;

Underneath it reads that you are the Belle of the Ball

To raise funds for a most worthy cause.

You are smiling and dressed beautifully.

Many people on Eaton Avenue and elsewhere saw this.

They were proud of you and so was your husband.

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The record in the office says you are “destitute.”

A Temple bulletin reads one day that you and your husband gave one thousand dollars

Without any strings attached

And in a day when such was not deductible.

You never could turn anyone away from the door.

Every “meschulach” (charity collector) in the country visited your home,

And the parish priest and minister was equally welcome.

I spoke to a very old man

208

Who has never left the West Side except to visit the Wilder Public Baths.

He knew your husband well.

He said he was a hard working man with few social graces—

Who knew only to work and make money

And never learned to enjoy himself;

But he never begrudged you anything.

The stories in the World identify you with many children's institutions.

You had a great love for children.

Some pictures show you at camp with them;

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One has you dancing around a Maypole holding one tightly in your arms.

Oh, how you loved them.

The record in the Public Safety building notes a birth.

It is your child.

No one remembered this, so I looked further,

And found in the obituary column

That your baby died at three months of diphtheria.

There is nothing written about your grief

Or your husband's.

There were no more children.

The welfare worker records "no assets"

Except a straw purse with three old-fashioned dollar bills.

There is no previous home address listed.

Yet you had a beautiful home once upon a time;

The Temple bulletin says that the flowers on the altar

Came from your garden.

There is a clipping that tells of a lawn party

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At your home—with Japanese lanterns, many flavored
Ice creams, fancy chocolates and little cakes
With all the proceeds going to many places—
To the West Side Talmud Torah, Sophie Wirth Camp,
The Salvation Army and Neighborhood House.
You ordered your groceries from Ramaleys and Schochs
And the delivery boys loved you.
You washed your milk bottles before returning them
And the grocer remembered that fine Jewish lady.
In the evening you and your husband sat on the porch
Reading the paper and listening to the Victrola.
You heard the children playing under the arc lights
And one or two hiding in your shrubbery,
Waiting to dash out in the street to kick the can
Or to rescue their comrades from the magic circle
That might imprison them forever unless another
Childish hand grasped their's to pull them out.

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And maybe you both wondered to yourselves

What your baby might have been doing this evening.

* * * * *

The neighbors where you were found knew very little about you.

You walked quietly down the stairs every so often

To go to the corner grocery store.

The grocer said you must have eaten sparingly—

One tomato (in season), two slices of cheese, some crackers.

Once a small chocolate cake, a year ago some ice cream.

You took your time, he said, but he really didn't mind

210

Because you were such a fine lady

And he knew old people well enough

To understand they had to fill in the vast emptiness of time.

Once he slipped a jar of marmalade in your bag.

But you came back the very next day

And said there must be a mistake.

So he took it back wishing so very much

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That your pride might have been tempered by hunger

And yet knowing it would never be.

On such and such a date, I read

That you visited the Home for the Aged

And contributed money quietly as you did so often.

Another story tells that you were honored

By a group of Christian ladies for your interest in their orphans' home and in their poor.

All the membership lists of so many organizations—

Hadassah, Mizrahi, Sisterhoods—

All carried your name, and each of these knew

That you had more than a passing interest in all.

But in the end they seemed to have forgotten you.

* * * * *

It started when your husband passed away.

The local papers noted the loss of a pioneer citizen

And a great many people came to the funeral

And afterwards to your home.

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Later the lawyer told you how little there was left,

And a big mortgage on your home.

Your husband never bothered you about such things.

211

After a decent interval you moved into a small apartment

And told your friends that the old place

Was much too big for just one person.

Then you moved again, and again, and again,

Much too fast for the directory to catch up with you.

Each time you called the Salvation Army and Goodwill

To take some of your things until

Suddenly one day there was nothing left but a terrible loneliness and a creeping fear.

And so the springs and the summers and the falls and winters came and went,

And here and there one or two wondered

Whatever had become of you.

They were all so very busy

With luncheons, and meetings, and

Plans for more luncheons and more meetings

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That they just couldn't find the time

To look for you—not a single one of them.

You tried so hard to get up that morning

But you fell back across the bed,

With the sagging springs and the worn-out mattress,

And the sleazy thread-bare carpet and the shriveled

Apple core on the dresser and the rusted pot on the two-burner hot plate in that miserable,
miserable, miserable room,

And the clock that stopped last week.

They thought they had found you in time,

But in truth they were just too late

212

For there was no more spirit, no more pride, no more wish to live.

They lifted you gently into the ambulance

And the neighbors looked at each other

Almost ashamed and if not that,

Stricken by a quiet fear for themselves.

I saw you, little old lady, sitting in the corner

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And I am happy at least that you are here.

But now that I know your story I am almost afraid,

And I wish out loud holding your hands in mine

That there are no more like you, alone

Somewhere in a miserable, miserable, miserable room.

* * * * *

You ask me who she is

Or where is the place where she sits

With her thin hands folded in her lap.

I will not tell you

For it is much too late for your concern,

Although I know you mean so well.

213

Once Upon a May Afternoon

It was just a case of tonsils and adenoids although Dr. Siegel, who passed by in the corridor, thought out loud from the look on my face that Ruth might be having a baby and Ruth, who overheard him, knocked on wood three times.

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I thought back to many years ago when my mother brought her little brood of three into City Hospital to have their tonsils and adenoids removed too. She wasn't coming in to have her baby. That event would take place a few days later.

As I paced the floor this morning, it came to me how hard this must have been for her. She must have had a thousand and one worries! Who would take care of supper for the boarders at home? Who would go to the market? How much was there left to spend for food? Would her baby wait a few extra days? And, if she had any concern for the three little ones clustered around her, and she did, it had to take its place in line along with so many other pressing problems.

214

Then in my mind's eye emerged a hazy picture of a May afternoon so many, many years ago. I saw a little girl with a big bow tied in her hair, who stood stiff and awkward on the wooden steps of the old LaFayette school. She gulped nervously several times, swallowed air and twisted the hem of her dress until she saw her mother smile at her. Thus reassured, she opened her mouth and out came the clear and haunting lines, beautiful and poignant:

“In Flanders Fields, the poppies grow
Between the crosses row on row...”

Following her on the platform, also facing the crowd of parents gathered on Fenton Street to celebrate “Decoration Day,” came her little brother who was shy and quiet until he found the eyes of his father which shone with great joy. Then this little boy shifted from one foot to the other and bravely recited the Gettysburg Address. He knew neither his father nor mother would understand the words, but he knew, too, that it made little difference to them as long as they heard him and as long as they saw him and as long as he was their own.

When it was all over, the children went back to their classes, the children's mother went back to her kitchen and their father went back to work at the junkshop just a few blocks

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away. But before he turned his back on the school, he took in with a lingering glance the flags fluttering in the breeze, the paper flowers pasted on the classroom windows and the three potted geraniums left on the school steps.

215

He knew life would go on in the same way in the West Side that day and every other day, although to him the pride and glory of the past hour would forever make it different. He passed the Widow Schwartz on the corner of State and Kentucky, who was, as usual, cursing passersby in her usual blistering manner he felt sorry for her. He heard the popcorn wagon whistling, he saw patrolman Charlie Silverstein walking his beat and because this had been a great day, he stopped for a minute to buy a three-cent glass of seltzer water at Tankenoff's soda fountain.

All the rest of the day the fierce hot sun beat on his shoulders as he labored mightily in Goldberg's junk yard. Time after time his thoughts returned to his children on the LaFayette School steps and as the long day wore on, he became sad and despondent. There was no surcease from this interminable labor, but far more frustrating he saw no hope to help his children as he wanted to help them. At the end of the day as he walked toward his house on Texas Street, he was tired and beaten to the earth, but he had made up his mind in a lonely moment of decision.

It was one-thirty at night when he looked at the kitchen clock. He cocked his ears for any sounds, but those he heard were familiar ones and reassuring; they came from the bedroom where the children jockeyed around in their sleep for more room in the bed. There was the measured snoring of his mother-in-law. God in heaven, he thought, it's a wonder she didn't wake up the Czar's army when his family was stealing their way over the border. He heard the scratching of a mouse 216 somewhere in the house, cautiously wary of the trap which had finished another the night before.

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Someone coughed. He recognized it immediately as his wife. He was more comfortable that she slept. If she were awake, she would continue to shake her head sadly because she was afraid and ashamed, although she would never criticize him out loud.

Except in the kitchen where the gas light was turned low, the rest of the house was dark. He had drawn the window shades down tight and over them, had tacked newspapers to trap any ray of light from filtering into the street. The door was bolted fast, after he had first opened it slightly as a last precautionary gesture, to make sure no one watched from the street.

Out of the closet where he had hidden it a few evenings previously, he drew forth a contraption made of coiled copper pipes, a funnel and some kettles. A few days before, he had been shown by a persuasive friend how simple it would be to operate. All the sugar and all the ingredients which were needed for the cooking were his for the asking. All that was required of him was to brew it, funnel it off into a five-gallon can which would be collected and paid for in cash the next evening.

“Why should you be a fool and work so hard,” his friend had told him. And when he remonstrated that this was against the law, his friend had winked, nudged him playfully in the ribs and reminded him that in Russia, the Czar's laws were made to be broken—were they not? Could a Jew have lived a day, could he have fed his family a week without deliberately breaking 217 the cruel laws which made a travesty and mockery of trying to live like a decent human being?

So he had said he would do it and the West Side moonshine syndicate thought it had enlisted another moonshine cooker.

But they were wrong, for as he put the machine together, it came to him that this was not the Czar's law he was flouting. It was the law of the country which gave to his children the chance to speak out in a public place just as though they were the children of a high

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official. Oh, how much he wanted to do for them! It was not for himself that he wanted a second-hand piano and maybe later a phonograph and who knows, even a telephone some day. At nine dollars a week, even with three boarders, none of these material possessions could he ever achieve for them.

And when he was ready to set up the still, he remembered listening to his children at the school, speaking strange words which he did not understand. But one thing above all he knew—that they were talking with a freedom he had never enjoyed. This was a freedom he should not violate and suddenly it became that simple. He gave the coils a tremendous kick, threw all the apparatus down into the basement, ripped the papers from the window and let the shades up. Even when he turned off the gas mantle in the kitchen on the way to bed, it still seemed lighter to him than before.

How happy his wife would be in the morning, and some day in exactly one thousand, seven hundred and twenty-five days, he would become a citizen with a 218 free conscience. The piano and the phonograph and even the telephone would somehow be his.

* * *

All this that I remembered and some that was told to me, came back as we waited for our son to come up from the recovery room. And when his big black eyes which look like black olives, opened and he saw us there, he smiled and all was well.

Then I thought back to a month ago when my son and I and my father went for an automobile ride. My father, who talks very little, said he could see I loved my little boy a great deal. He wished, he said, that he could have had the time to show as much affection for me when I was little. How could he, he said, almost to himself, when one worked from six to six every day for nine dollars a week? Once he had wished he could become a capitalist—not for great wealth—but to make sure that all his employees could go home early and hold their little boys' and little girls' hands, to take a walk with them and to have

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time to love them—and never be tempted to break the law to be able to provide better for them.

My father was sad when he said this and I wanted to make a fine speech like they do in books, but which nobody really does in real life. I just said to him that even though he wasn't leaving me a business or a paid-up duplex, I was proud of him because he never broke a law, because he was a fine Jew and a good American citizen. "And what's more, Pa, how could I love my own son so much if I hadn't received love from you first?"

219

You know what? When he got out of the car and thanked me for the ride (through the West Side, of course), as though I was doing him a favor instead of the other way around, he had a big smile and I knew he was pleased.

Just as pleased, I bet you, as the day he heard his children recite from the steps of the old LaFayette school!

221

My Friend Johnny

When I was a very little boy, I had a friend Johnny who was a "shagitz." Now a "shagitz" for those of you who don't know the word, is a Gentile boy. Some people who are very sensitive about such things may take umbrage at my reference to anyone as a "shagitz," because they feel some other appellation would be less offensive. It is quite true that very often in the past and particularly in the old country, this term was used in a derogatory manner almost in the same way as the word "goy" which simply refers to a Gentile again.

In any event since Johnny was my very best friend, you may be sure that I do not use that term in any unkind way. You must all remember too that there are good "Schgootzim" (plural) as well as mean ones—just as there are kind "goyim" as well as the few who are not. Why, there are those among us who will point to a newborn nephew

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or grandchild and say with considerable pride, "The little dear he looks just like a cute 'shagitz,' doesn't he?"

222

Now that you know what my feelings are, let me tell you a sad tale about Johnny who had a wide impish Irish smile, twinkling blue eyes shaded by thick eye-lashes, and a pug nose that made him look like a toy boxer. He was a good boy as little boys go, and would never think (like some of us did) of tying a tin can to a cat's tail. There were other non-Jewish little boys we played with too when we were innocent children completely unaware of Brotherhood Week and the perils of Inter-Faith mixers, but it's Johnny I want to tell you about.

Before I tell you more about my once-upon-a-time friend, Johnny, you must know what a "dehorn" is. This is very important for you to understand. A "dehorn" is a person who has slipped to the lowest rung of the ladder of acute alcoholism. Indeed, he has already lost his grip completely and has sunk into a miserable, damp and deep pit where other dregs of humanity huddle together in an alcoholic stupor to fend off the chill of the autumn nights.

These poor wretches, the flotsam and jetsam of the stream of life, can no longer afford palatable alcohol, wine, or even Bay Rum; they have no money except the few pennies panhandled during the day along the downtown streets. And such pickings are mighty slim these days what with an alert police force, withholding taxes and pressing mortgage payments. In desperation, therefore, the dehorn turns to the cheapest source of alcohol, and this he finds in a can of Sterno which is the source of canned heat. If you open up such a can, you will see that it is a red gelatine-like substance.

223

Somehow, somewhere, the progenitor of all dehornes learned to coax out the alcohol contents of the canned heat by straining it through a loaf of stale bread. The drippings that are squeezed out of this soggy mess become the dubious sustenance of an even more dubious existence for the dehorn. So they gather in little clusters, these dehornes do, in

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alley-ways and under bridges and behind fences to pool their pennies, and loaves of bread begged from a bakery, and the cans of Sterno.

And there did I find my kindergarten and second grade and third grade friend, Johnny, the other day-with three other dehornes under the Kellogg street viaduct, each waiting his turn with trembling hands to get at a foul mess of stale bread. But it would not be correct to say that I "found" Johnny, because I was not really looking for him. It was just that he suddenly dropped back into my life although I had wondered from time to time what had become of him.

This sudden confrontation was almost as though I had deliberately conjured him up from the past, and although I didn't of course, perhaps such things are part of a scheme none of us can explain. I was, during the hot and languid days of this past summer, remembering Johnny quite often. My thoughts went back to the times he and I walked barefooted, arms around shoulders, down dusty Texas Street, past the wire fence around the Minnetonka playgrounds, and through the swinging gate of a big white house where the wind moaned through empty rooms, whispering the mournful story of the owner who had cut his throat.

224

Sometimes we took longer trips, taking time to thumb our noses at the playground's wire-woven fence. We would wriggle our way on our stomachs like chubby garden snakes under the fence with the contemptuous disdain of all little boys towards fences with regular entrances and exits. These latter were only for sissies, girls, and grown-ups who always walked upright and could never stoop to fun and the sheer joy of living every single day.

But no matter which way we went, no matter how long we took to wrestle and to pick the cockle-burrs out of our hair and from between our toes, we always wound our way in the end along a curved path leading down to the river's edge. And just as often, we would find the Lemanski boys fishing there, lying on their backs with knees up, waiting with infinite patience for the hungry carp to bite. We didn't bother them and they didn't bother us.

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Johnny and I didn't come for the fishing. We didn't like to see the fish flopping on the dirt when they belonged to the river. We came only to feel the cool wind sweeping up the river, to watch the swift flow of the current, and to dream of a raft to take us down to the Gulf of Mexico—even to China. We had wonderful dreams, we did, Johnny and I sitting on the river bank tossing pebbles into the water and wriggling our dirty toes.

Sometimes when we were lying down, side by side, shading our eyes from the blazing sun, we shared our dreams, and they were remarkably the same. We were going to be rich and pass out heavy silver dollars to everyone living on Texas Street. People would come 225 out on their porches and cry out. "Here come Johnny and Velvel who used to live here." And we would each take one side of the street and distribute the silver money from our big leather bags. If we had any left over, we might even think of distributing some money as far as Robert Street which was, after all, at the very very end of our tight little universe.

The priest at St. Michael's was going to get a good share of our money, and of course so would the chief rabbi. Both we knew would make an equitable and fair distribution to the needy Jews and Catholics. Johnny and I, you see, didn't know there were any others.

Mind you, our own families weren't going to be neglected in this magnanimous outpouring of riches. Johnny's mother was going to get two gingham dresses, some clean white bed sheets and white curtains from Goffstien's Department Store and new shoes for herself and her children at Mintze's. As for me, I was determined to see that my grandmother got a new leg to replace the one that caused her so much pain when the weather changed.

I would not want you to think for even a moment that our spirit of philanthropy and unselfishness ran so deep as to eliminate ourselves completely. To tell the unvarnished truth we began this distribution by starting with ourselves; we were going to buy Chase's candy store on Kentucky and Minnetonka and throw out all the groceries—nothing but candy, candy, candy, and cream soda pop.

Johnny was our “Shabbus goy” too, as well as for the other neighbors; he came in to light the gas mantel for Friday night, brought chickens to Mr. Meckler, the shochet, for slaughtering and “flicking,” and ran a thousand and one errands. Every so often he received a penny for his endeavors and just as often he shared the candy he bought from his labors with me. But above everything, Johnny loved to sit around the table with our family when my mother made French toast and drenched each slice with butter and freshly prepared strawberry jam.

We were so close, my mother said often in jest, that I was becoming a “shagitz” too. But she really didn't worry about that nearly as much as the more realistic possibility that I might eat something at Johnny's house made of lard. She would wave her finger under my nose and threaten to chop off my head if I ate “trephe” (unkosher) there. Of course she was fooling—I think. And whenever she made that threat, Johnny and I just looked at each other and winked knowingly.

My mother liked Johnny so well she would have preferred to believe that he had once been a Jewish baby kidnapped by some “Irishers,” baptized secretly and ultimately adopted by his present parents. More than once she ran her hands through his hair, and there was nothing he wouldn't do for her. But even my mother couldn't really have believed that part about the adoption. Johnny's mother already had eleven children and needed adoption like she needed a hole in her head. She had children as often as biology and physiology permitted and they seemed to come even faster than that. Of her husband's full cooperation as 227 well as preoccupation in this area, there was never any doubt.

Oh, we fought too, we did, Johnny and I. In kindergarten it was over sand castles and swings and toys, and in the second and third grades over marbles and tiles and pop caps. We called each other names, but never very mean ones like adults are apt to. There were times when we pummeled, scratched, and even bit each other. Once we drew blood. But these battles were as transitory as a gust of wind, and as brief as a moment of hesitation.

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In the end we were always friends united against all and anything that might threaten the world of two little boys.

And I remembered, Johnny, I remembered, the rainy day when we played Doctor and Nurse under our porch with the breath of pure white innocence—when we snatched slivers of sawdust covered ice from the back of the ice wagon—and we were not thieves! We smoked corntassel cigarettes behind the barn and coughed ourselves blue in the face and swore never again. We shrieked and howled in unbridled delight at the New Ray with Harry Langdon, Ben Turpin, Chester Conklin, Fatty Arbuckle and Charlie Chaplin.

But through it all—through the times we played and schemed and dreamt dreams, there ran a vein of hurt and deep misery in Johnny's life, and he knew I was aware of it all the time. We never spoke about it, but we endured it together in tight-lipped silence even while I clenched my fists with desperate frustration. Whenever I saw Johnny's black and blue shoulders, a bruised eye, and the dry course left by tears cried 228 somewhere alone, I knew his drunken father was home and on the rampage again.

I almost felt with my friend Johnny the agonies of his own pain and the pain his mother suffered until her husband left the house again to give them a brief respite. I hated his father as much as I could stand and when I asked my mother to tell the police, it was impossible for me to understand why she put a finger to her lips and shook her head hopelessly. I could share my French toast with Johnny and my candy and my pop, and take care of his physical hunger, but there was nothing I could do or say to him about this. I did not even say that I despised his father, for if I would ever have spoken about this to him, I would have hurt him even more.

So my shagitz friend and I woke each other up in the morning and were indispensable in our friendship. We went to school and sat across from each other, shared our penny candy and chum-gum and waited impatiently to enjoy the freedom of the outside. And then one

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day suddenly, at least so it seemed to me, Johnny's father came home after a mercifully long absence and moved his family across town.

It might just as well have been to the other side of the world for all that it meant to Johnny and to me. For those were the times when few had automobiles, and even fewer had telephones, and small boys were bound to their neighborhoods by the limits of their feet and the insistence of their parents. Those were the days, too, of our childhood when people remained close to their homes, and except for a picnic at Phalen Park, or a downtown sale, or confinement in the hospital, 229 there was no habit of traveling far. So Johnny and I lost each other and missed each other.

Occasionally, into adolescence, and into adulthood we met on the street and paused to talk for a moment, and always we promised each other to have coffee somewheres—but of course we never did. One day I noticed in the obituary column that Johnny's father had died—a pity I thought bitterly—that it could not have been earlier. I sent Johnny a fine card of sympathy, but there was no acknowledgment. It was a long time before I saw my friend again.

It was one day not so long ago when I drove slowly through the West Side as I so often am wont to do. Sometimes I think it would be so nice to have time move back, and I almost expect it will, but I know how silly this is. It was on this day that I saw a familiar figure leaning against the telephone pole on Eaton and Fairfield Streets. For just one second I could have sworn it was Johnny's father—sodden drunk and miserably sick—as I had good reason to remember him. But it was Johnny himself looking out at me with bleary eyes and just as drunk and miserably sick as his father ever was. That day the old haunts of mine had no more magic or fascination for me—only heartbreak.

* * * * *

I was walking down the iron steps leading from the Kellogg Street viaduct to the parking lot below. I saw the four of them huddling almost motionless like four grotesque gargoyles.

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Near them was a litter of broken wine bottles, sardine cans, some crumpled bread wrappers 230 —and from among the four, the flash of color from a Sterno can.

I would have avoided them, but one of the four detached himself from the group and turned to stand in my way holding out a shaking hand for a “cup of coffee.”

The grey dirty stubble clinging to an emaciated face and the blood-shot bleary pin-point eyes couldn't hide the miserable caricature that once was Johnny. Then there was a flicker of recognition in his eyes, and I wished with all my heart that I had not come this way.

I fumbled with words and out of the dryness of my mouth came forth a feeble hello. The recognition in his eyes became veiled and he dropped his outstretched hand, muttering under his breath. Like a fool, but with such good intentions, I put an arm on his shoulders and asked if he could “use a buck” for old times' sake. The stubble bristled and he shook violently as he turned away from me saying in a hoarse, rasping voice, “What do you think I am—a bum!”

* * * * *

Soon comes the cold, the rebuking sting of the sharp wind, and the drifting snows. The bread wrappers will blow across the parking lot like tumbleweed and the red labels on the Sterno cans will be faded by the icy slush. There will be no warmth and no more shelter under the viaduct and the dehornes will have to move. They will file slowly down Kellogg to the Salvation Army for an old Army coat and heavy shoes. And some 231 with half-closed eyes, cavernous hollows in their cheeks, and pinched lips—suffering deep inside from a perpetual hunger for alcohol—will shuffle their long way to a bed at the Gospel Mission.

Keep him warm, dear God, keep my friend Johnny who built sand castles with me, warm, for he is among them.

233

Camping

Our little son is back from camp and we're happy to have him home. Downstairs there are three little mounds of clothing sorted and waiting for the washing machine—a dirty pile, a dirtier pile, and the dirtiest, and from them emanate a delightful warm smell of genuine boy which to my prejudiced way of thinking is one of the most wonderful smells on earth.

There's nothing comparable to it, because if you like children even a little bit, it brings back tantalizing and delightful memories. Even most cynical adults can't help in spite of themselves to think back to the feel of green grass on small bare feet, prizes in Cracker Jack boxes, the whistle of the pop corn wagon, candy buttons on a licorice strip, and the smoke from a real bonfire burning at dusk.

It makes me think about the first time I went to camp and how things are different today. To begin with, we went to a camp which was strictly for “underprivileged” children. These were children whose parents ²³⁴ loved them, fed them, clothed them and worried about them just as much as any other parents; they just couldn't afford to indulge their children the luxury of a camping experience.

The truth is, however, that neither I nor my friends were even a bit sensitive to this classification. We never even thought of ourselves as poor and therefore felt neither stigma nor trauma as these words are so often used today. The only real “underprivileged” kids we knew were those poor kids whose parents could afford to pay for them—and for this reason they weren't eligible for camp. We felt a deep sorrow for them because they suffered from the dubious privilege of sweating through the hot summer at home.

I couldn't help, too, looking at the gear and clothing which had tumbled out of my son's duffle bag and suitcase, but to compare this with what I once brought to camp. Everything I took along in my father's old satchel which was secondhand even when he bought it new, belonged to the whole family. My brothers as well as my sisters had a proprietary interest

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in the contents of the satchel including the package of sunflower seeds which was mostly mine.

There wasn't anything like the cascade of socks, underwear, tee shirts, handkerchiefs, shirts, boots, blankets, radio, and trousers which poured out of my son's bags. The marine who once owned that surplus duffle bag had never been so well equipped. I had been naive enough to think that my son and his friends were going to attend camp, not invade it. We didn't have too much to take along, and from sheer necessity we made it do longer. After a few days at camp, I remember 235 turning my socks inside out when they were just about ready to walk off by themselves. It was the same with underwear. I don't pretend this was sanitary, and it certainly wasn't the way my mother brought us up; it was just that we weren't concerned with the niceties of camp living. I don't defend this; I only state it as an expression of what once was a fact.

I recall saying to my mother, "Ma, I'm going away to camp for two weeks." As usual, of course, she was busy and with her back to me. She was always, it seemed, doing something with her back to me, like chopping liver, pressing, cleaning fish, and a thousand and one other little tasks. In fact, she was always so thoroughly preoccupied with one thing or another (with her back to me) that it was only under my wedding canopy that I saw her face to face, and for once relaxed. But even then, I knew she was busy thinking, "Ai, he's much too good for her, my boy is!"

Well anyhow, when I told her that I was leaving, she turned halfway and without missing a single chop at the liver, she sung out, "So go, but stay away from the water." Then, just as I was about to leave, she turned from her work again and kissed me quickly on the forehead. She wiped her hands quickly with her apron and from somewhere in the depths and folds of her dress, she drew forth a dime; this was for spending money at camp. She could have said, "Don't spend it all," and it would not have been a facetious remark. I know it was not a dime easy come-by.

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There wasn't much nonsense involved in going to camp. Vaccinations and inoculations were for the birds; a physical examination meant a quick glance 236 down your throat by a doctor who was always a board member giving his time free, and was primarily concerned with whether your tonsils were in or not. If they were out, he always seemed happier.

Neither were there any orientation lectures, or a battery of psychological tests to ascertain our readiness for a camping experience. "Readiness" was not a meaningful psychological condition. To us it simply meant that we were "ready" to jump on the bus to camp and "ready" to crawl out of the window when we got there. Today such an expression on the part of the examining psychiatrist who is too busy a man to serve on the board means something quite different. For example, does this lad share a bedroom, how many siblings (nobody has sisters or brothers anymore), did he ever fall out of the highchair, was he breast fed and if not, why not? He might just as well ask too, "Why does your mother really want you to leave home?"

Today, of course, most parents have already read the proper psychology books in their Temple Sisterhood Study Circle and therefore know the answers: his mother wants him to go to camp (1) in order that he should enjoy a meaningful group living experience; (2) to wean him from too close parental ties; (3) to learn about outdoor living. With my mother, although no one bothered us in those days with such stuff, she would have made short shrift of the psychiatrist with her direct, no monkey-business answers: "so he should learn to tie his shoe laces and wipe his nose alone for a change" or "to make room for the other eight."

We didn't have much of a fancy fare either at the camp dinner table, but it was good. We ate with the 237 lusty appetites of hungry kids; we ate like horses, and for all we knew or cared, it might have even been horse—so unconcerned were we about anything but quantity. And at the end of our two-week period every camper had gained weight—even

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those few who didn't. It was a cardinal sin to come home without having put on several pounds; it made not the slightest difference whether you needed it or not.

Camp tradition had it that a successful camp experience could be best measured by good cooking, and of course good cooking could only be measured by extra pounds. The dear ladies in the kitchen were dedicated to their mission in life and would not have had it otherwise; they were mothers as well as cooks and took their jobs seriously. Lest there be any possibility of an affront to these wonderful women, the camp scale was conveniently set before weighing-in to give every camper at least a two-pound head start.

And the counselors, God bless them! Today our camps have a counselor for every boy and a counselor's counselor for every boy's counselor. Each counselor must have at least one advanced degree which probably accounts for the fact that some get worse by degrees. These leaders of youth must be carefully selected and must be highly motivated—none of this pure nonsense about doing something like this for the sake of monetary gain.

Ah, what a far cry indeed from our own underprivileged counselors for underprivileged boys at our underprivileged camp. Those young men were usually poor struggling medical students who were of necessity interested in fattening themselves up for the lean 238 college years ahead of them—and an internship for twenty-five dollars a month. They were the first to sit down at the camp table and the last to leave; they were always lean, always hungry, always sun-tanned and not a single one (because of their rich camp experience) ever became a pediatrician. But they were of the same proud stubborn breed that we were and we loved them because they were one of us.

Come to think of it, why shouldn't our children have portable TVs, transistor radios and electric blankets like all the other campers have today? And why shouldn't he have specially ground-to-a-prescription dark glasses just in case he ventures out of his steamheated cabin some sunny day? And let's not forget the Bermudas and the dress

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uniforms, and the snake bite kits (in case he bites a snake) and the climbing boots and tennis rackets, and a roll of his favorite toilet tissue. After all times have changed, haven't they?

After all it is not for naught that he has gone and returned. He has acquired skills which will forever be useful to him in the attainment of adulthood. He has learned those things which will stand him in good stead to face up courageously to the vicissitudes and tribulations of life—to-wit:

He can weave a beautiful basket, he can send the Morse Code in Esperanto and knows how to keep score in a polo game. All this and more he brings home to enable him to lead a well-balanced life and contribute to the welfare of his parents and community. What's more he comes home with a trophy for composing a thrilling prayer to the Great Spirit of Kamp Kickapoochie, 239 but in Hebrew school he still can't find the right place in his prayer book or memorize a single sentence.

Well, my son is back home and so is yours. I wish, though, that what I gave my son before he left made him feel the same surge of love I felt when my mother drew forth that dime for me—this even though when I came home from camp just in time to sit down at the supper table with the rest of the family, she looked at me and said, “and where were you for lunch today?”

God bless them all anyhow, although who among us who are still so much a part of another era isn't ready sometime to volunteer his own for the first oneway trip to the moon—with comic books, of course?

241

B-a-r-b-e-c-u-e

The pastoral quietness of yesteryear's Sunday is a thing of the past. It has forever disappeared along with the five-cent ice cream cone and the evening convocation of

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philosophers on the front porch. It is as irrevocably gone as the ten-cent can of Alaska salmon and three-for-a-dime cans of sardines.

Now you may wish to blame many things for the vanishing pastoral Sundays. But in truth, one of the culprits is the automobile and the other, the charcoal broiler. It is the latter and its dire consequences which prompt me to dwell on the past and reflect on the current scene.

Once upon a time we all looked forward to the Sunday afternoon picnics. It was an occasion planned for all week, but alas this is no more. Instead, Sunday has become a rather grim kind of time when gather all the family, their relatives (near and distant), inlaws, friends, neighbors, and a few bewildered strangers as yet unidentified, for a B-A-R-B-E-Q-U-E.

242

A barbeque is an occasion where people may (and do) stab madly at each other with knives and forks and other sharp cutlery, venting their spleen on others in the spirit of good, clean fun. It is an occasion to have eyeballs seared by smoke, get squirted with soda pop, suffer from horse flies on your face and relatives on your back. My pa describes it succinctly: "murder and mayhem over a piece of burnt meat."

This is the way it starts in our family. My sister feels sorry because her husband has nothing to do but rest on Sundays, so she calls my mother who last year would have been at my brother's cottage by the lake (and who wasn't?). He and his wife have since grown wiser and greyer and have moved back to the relative peace of city living. "Ma," she says, "come over with Pa and enjoy a little sun in the backyard." No sooner said than my mother picks up the phone and beats the tribal drums with the following message to her other sons and daughters, "Leezeh, Yankel, Velvel, Moonyeh, Roocheleh, Moisheleh, Chawneh, come over with your little children and enjoy the sun in Dorothy's backyard." The invitation of course was directed to my father and mother only, but anyone who is a member of a

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large family can easily guess what happens. Before the hour is up, the inexorable tides set in motion by my sister will soon inundate their little house and lot and the little waves of children will lap at (and wet) the bastions and dikes of their neighbors' walls.

The first to come are Ma and Pa with a “little” basket of food—enough cold kreplech to feed Coxey's army; my mother is taking no chances on the possibility of non-kosher wieners and hamburger contaminating 243 the broiler. What a Geiger counter is to uranium, my mother's sense of smell is to anything nonkosher, no matter how disguised, labeled, and wrapped. With the kreplech comes a roasted chicken which she roasted in her spare time, some chunks of “gefilteh” fish which she had prepared in her spare time and a basket of plums (squashed, of course).

After her comes my pa who really wanted to stay home in the first place with his crossword puzzle, but my mother had said to him, “What's the matter, do you want to hurt your daughter's feelings—what will your son-in-law think of you—it's a shame if you don't come along.” So he comes, having been promised a high priority for a seat in the single sliver of shade in the whole yard. And there he sits with his Daily Forvitz, peering out occasionally over the top of the page, wondering how he could make everybody disappear suddenly for the rest of the day—but, of course, with no malice—well, maybe a little.

Quicker than you can say “no one deserves this,” the rest of the clan (and their friends who “dropped in” to see them) have gathered—a noisy determined lot—with folding tables, folding chairs, filing claims to every available spot as if they were taking up permanent residence.

Soon the sacrificial charcoal smoke wafts high in the clear skies—a beacon for all those who have received the message. Bumper to bumper, the cars come and the same can be said for the guests. Around the table, elbow to elbow, sit little groups grimly determined to hold on to their spots. “You go and broil me 244 a wiener, I'll save your space—go away, little boy, I'm not your mother” (bless your fat little head).

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From just ten feet away, if it were possible to get that close, the whole thing takes on the appearance of an impressionistic painting done in pastels of ketchup and mustard, flecked with watermelon seeds.

And near the back door, wincing with pain and a glazed look in his eyes, stands my brother-in-law, who pays his taxes and Temple dues and therefore deserves far better— opening and closing the door for a constant stream of a hundred pairs of little feet who always wait “to go” in someone's else's bathroom. Not too far away my sister carries on bravely, waving a staunch greeting to the still oncoming guests, assuring them there is plenty of room in the back. Who knows of the tears that are held back, the resolute and dogged determination to face and feed this foraging army. (Hers is never to say die, but to wonder silently, “Why must it be I?”)

Aloha, my dear sister and brother-in-law. Next Sunday and several more we shall be gone and unless you get rid of your broiler, there will be room for four more who are waiting for us to leave.

I love my relatives and I love my friends, but a plague on charcoal broilers. Lift me up and carry me back, smoked, broiled, blistered and bloody, back to the old couch on the front porch, where nothing threatened the quiet and peace of a Sunday noon, except the broken springs that stuck out of the upholstery and the squeaking of the swing.