

DAD

A novel

By Tzvi Fishman

Chapter One

It was Aunt Peachy on the phone. She was calling from Florida.

“Joseph,” she said, “I think you had better come down to Boca. Something is happening to your mother.”

Joseph held the kitchen phone to his ear without answering. For a moment, the world seemed to stop.

“Joseph? Do you hear me?” Aunt Peachy asked.

“I hear you, Peach. What’s the matter?”

“I don’t really know. She isn’t herself. She gets angry all of the time. She curses for no reason. Your father says she runs away from the house, and he has to go searching for her. I don’t think he can deal with it alone. He has his own health problems, you know.”

Joseph knew very well. Five months earlier, he had flown from New York down to Florida to visit his aging parents. Dad’s anxieties and Parkinson’s were worsening, and Mom was apparently suffering from what her neurologist called a short-term memory loss.

“You know you have always been Mom’s favorite,” Aunt Peachy said. “I’m sure you can help. Besides your father, you’re her whole life.”

“Thanks, Aunt Peachy,” Joseph said. “I appreciate your calling. I know how much the folks mean to you. I’ll phone Dad right away.”

“Don’t tell your mother I said anything. I don’t want her getting angry at me. You know that beside my cousin Betty, your parents are the only family I have down here.”

“Don’t worry, Peach. I won’t say a word to Mom. How are you feeling yourself?”

“I have no complaints, thank God. I try to keep busy. Nothing seems to help my arthritis, but I’ve gotten used to it. There is a wonderful program of adult education classes not far from my home, and I try to attend twice a week.”

“You’re a fighter, Peach,” Joseph said. “We all love you. I’ll phone you back after speaking with Dad.”

Down the hall from the kitchen, Joseph could see his pregnant wife, Rivka, knitting a *kippah* in the salon. Upstairs, little Avi and Moshe bounced around on their pogo sticks, transforming the ceiling into a nerve-wracking drum.

“Joseph,” his wife called out. “Who was that on the phone?”

“My Aunt Peachy.”

“Oh? That’s nice. How is she?”

Joseph walked to the living room so he wouldn’t have to shout at his wife. Even after giving birth to five children, she had retained her pretty, youthful appearance. In Joseph’s eyes, her current pregnancy lent her an added charm and attractiveness, even though she had recurring bouts of nausea and all types of aches and pains.

“She says that my Mom has been acting strangely lately. I’m going to call my Dad to see what’s going on.”

Rivka grasped a thread between her teeth and gave him a look, wanting him to elaborate. The skullcap, or *kippah*, as it was called in Israel, was almost half finished. Hanging on the wall above her was a framed oil painting of golden Jerusalem which they had purchased on a trip to the Holy Land.

“Apparently, my Mom gets angry for no reason,” Joseph answered. “Hey, that *kippah* looks nice. Is it for the baby?” he joked.

“I was thinking more of Avi,” Rivka answered. Just then there was another loud banging noise upstairs. “Can you tell them to play outside,” she asked. “I can’t take their pogo sticks on top of my head.”

“Sure thing,” Joseph answered.

Whenever his wife was pregnant, she was super sensitive to all kinds of things, especially noisy children. Her last pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage after three months. So Joseph was spending more time at home from work to act as a buffer between her and the kids. Their eighteen year old, Zev, their oldest, had graduated from yeshiva high school with excellent grades, and was now in his freshman year at Yeshiva University. In contrast, his sixteen-year-old brother, Shimon, was a rebel, not interested in religion or going to school. Introverted by nature, the moody, guitar-playing teen kept his feelings inside, or expressed them via the Dylan-like ballads he wrote. Danny was the sandwich of the family. He had to fight for attention amongst his brothers, and could be a small tornado when riled. Now that he was going to be bar-mitzvahed, he was getting more attention than usual, and was blossoming because of it. Then came Avi. The energetic eight-year-old was so hyperactive, he made Denise the Menace look like he was standing still. And little Moshe, their five-year old, tried his best to keep up with Avi, so there was rarely a dull moment in the house.

Thank God, they were finally going to have a girl. If the ultrasound was accurate, she was due right after the bar mitzvah and just before the Passover holiday, the busiest time of the year, so it looked like Joseph was going to be helping at home at lot.

Suddenly there was a burst of wild screaming from the kids.

“Oh, damn, I missed a stitch!” Rivka exclaimed, tossing away the *kippah* in frustration. She glared at her husband, as if he were to blame. “Can’t you tell them to stop, or do I have to go upstairs?”

Joseph straightened. He didn’t like his wife yelling at him, especially after trying so hard to help her out around the house.

“Hey guys, cut out the racket,” he called upstairs.

Little Moshe started to scream bloody murder. Feeling a rush of anger surge through his veins, Joseph bounded up the carpeted staircase.

“Relax,” he remembered to tell himself. “Count to ten,” their family therapist had advised. “Remember that they are just little kids.”

When Avi's behavior had gotten completely out of hand, Joseph and his wife had gone for a series of appointments with an expensive family counselor whom had written a popular book about bringing up hyperactive children. They had come to the conclusion that whenever the kids fought, their shouts triggered memories from Rivka's past, causing her to react with long suppressed feelings of rage. This, in turn, would trigger off anger in Joseph toward the kids for upsetting his wife, and his "violence" in disciplining the kids further exacerbated the unresolved emotions she had from her childhood, growing up with a tense and angry father of her own. Even though Joseph had never given any of the children more than an authoritative slap on the *tush*, his wife experienced his peacemaking as "aggression" and "violence." So Joseph had learned to take a deep breath, and stay outside the explosive cycle of screaming and nerves. For him, it was a delicate balancing act, like treading on eggs without rattling the skeletons in his wife's closet.

"He hit me with a hammer!" Moshe yelled, holding his head as if he were mortally wounded. "Ayyyy! Ayyyy!" he cried.

Joseph glared at his little terrorist of a son, Avi, as he streaked into the bathroom and locked the door. "Liar! Liar! Liar!" he screamed, again and again at the top of his lungs.

A toy plastic hammer was lying on the floor. Joseph picked it up, threw it into his bedroom and bent down to comfort his crying boy. In the past, he probably would have pounded angrily on the bathroom door, demanding that Avi let him inside. But he had learned, "Why bother?" Why put more embers on the flame? Usually, Avi's rages lasted only five or ten minutes. If you left him alone, the volcano that erupted in his brain would pass on its own, and the chemical imbalance would return to normal. But if he, or his wife, tried to overpower the invisible demon inside him with force, or even try to reason with him, the resulting tantrum could drive even the patient Talmudic sage, Hillel the Elder, out of his mind. Locked in the bathroom, the boy couldn't harm anyone, and he had never done anything physically dangerous, so leaving him alone to calm down by himself was the most sensible thing at the moment.

"Hello, slugger," Harry Friedman said when he heard his son's voice on the phone.

“How is everything, Dad,” Joseph asked, as his wild son, Avi, continued to scream out curses from the bathroom upstairs.

“OK,” his father answered. “Pretty much the same. Your mother is working in the garden now. Hold on and I’ll call her.”

“Wait a minute, Dad,” Joseph said. “How has she been feeling? Don’t tell her, but Aunt Peachy called and told me that Mom has been freaking out lately.”

His father didn’t answer right away. “I was afraid to tell you,” he finally admitted. “I was hoping it would pass. I know you have your hands full at home.”

“What is it, Dad?” Joseph asked.

“I don’t know. We were supposed to see the neurologist but your mother refused to go. She threatens to divorce me. Whenever she gets angry she runs off. Sometimes she disappears for hours. I can’t keep up with her anymore. Last Thursday, they called me from Wall Mart saying that your mother was there, acting all confused. I had to go get her. She wouldn’t talk to me and locked herself in our bedroom when we got home. I haven’t gone to the hospital to do my volunteer work for two weeks now because I am afraid to leave her alone in the house.”

“You want me to come for a visit?”

“I think maybe you should, son. I know you have your own headaches, but maybe you can persuade your mother to go to the doctor. She listens to you.”

Joseph assured his father that he would come right away. Surprisingly, when he spoke with his mother, she sounded fine, exactly the same as always. She asked about his health, the health of the kids, and how the pregnancy was proceeding. She even remembered that he was waiting to hear about a promotion at work, as the head of the film and multi-media department at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan. When he told her that he was coming down to Florida to visit for a few days, she was thrilled.

“Your father and I will go out shopping right now and buy all the things you like to eat,” she said.

“We will eat out in restaurants,” he heard his father say in the background.

“I hate kosher restaurants,” his mother retorted. “They’re filthy places and the food is awful. I’m still his mother, and I can still feed my son at home. We’ll get paper plates and everything else that we need.”

What battles Joseph had gone through with his parents when he had become religious! Among other things, they hadn’t been happy when he had married an Orthodox Jewish girl. Nevertheless, they had paid the rental on their first apartment in Manhattan, to help them get started, and then bought them a house in Riverdale after their third child was born. Still, it took years for his mother to get used to the fact that when it came to eating, he was strictly OU kosher, and that the Sabbath was really Sabbath for him, and that he wore his *tzitzit* prayer-shawl fringes on the outside of his pants, even though it made him look different from everyone else. Still now, she hated his beard, even though it was short and neatly trimmed. But outside of an occasional barb, like still calling him Joey, when he preferred the more Hebrew sounding Joseph, they left him to live his own life.

“*Nu?*” his wife, Rivka, inquired when he sat down in the salon, wanting to know what was new.

“My Mom sounds great,” he answered. “But my Dad says that her behavior has been a little off the wall. I told them that I would come for a visit, if you think you can handle the kids.”

“Why shouldn’t I be able to handle the kids?” she asked. “Don’t make me into a cripple.”

“I know how hard the pregnancy is, that’s all,” he said.

“I’ll manage, don’t worry. If your parents need you, they need you.”

“Maybe your parents can come for a few days to help with the children,” Joseph suggested.

Rivka made some quick stitches in the colorfully patterned *kippah* that she had resumed knitting. The truth was that his wife didn’t get along with her parents. They had a polite, cordial relationship, but it couldn’t win any awards. After her

father had been crippled in a car accident when Rivka was just a little girl, he had been confined to life in a wheel chair. Filled with bitterness and self-pity, he had been a terror at home, getting angry at the slightest disturbance, especially the innocent playing of Rivka and her sister. According to the family therapist, Rivka had grown up with an allergy to nervous and angry people, including her own kids. Shortly after their wedding, Joseph had discovered that living with her was like walking in a field filled with underground explosives. She had built-in radar that rotated 360 degrees, picking up the slightest tension around her. Raising five children hadn't been easy, especially with the genes that the kids had inherited from both sides of the family. Their eldest son, Zev, was a saint, but with the ever moody Shimon, the over-sensitive Danny, super hyperactive Avi, and his clone, little Moshe, the Friedman house in Riverdale hadn't turned out to be Rivka's marital dream. After Shimon was born, she would often say that she had left one nightmare behind for another. Joseph had learned to release his tensions during his daily mile jog, in order to be a relaxed husband and father at home. But especially during the first years of his marriage, when he had worked in the high-pressured world of TV editing, he hadn't always succeeded in leaving his vibrations behind in the studio.

So the idea of asking Rivka's parents to come and help out for a few days while Joseph was away in Florida wasn't a serious consideration. In fact, she didn't bother to answer her husband's suggestion at all.

"Are you going to call your sister?" his wife asked instead.

"I suppose I should," Joseph answered. "If I can reach her."

His younger sister, Ilene, was forever out of touch. To her brother's way of thinking, she lived on a different planet. Not only because she lived in L.A. Ilene was married to husband number three. She was a journalist by profession and had made a name for herself by interviewing weird and famous people. It was almost impossible to reach her directly. Either she was traveling to some far off location for an interview, or her phone message tape was always full. To contact her, you had to leave word with her answering service, and if you were lucky, she might call back the next day.

“Oh, darling,” she said when she returned Joseph’s call during the middle of the night. “They only just now told me you called. What time do you have in New York?”

Joseph glanced sleepily at the clock. “It’s three in the morning,” he said.

“Sorry,” she giggled. “I’m in Australia doing a story about an Aborigine tribe. Would you believe it? Today, they taught me how to throw a boomerang, isn’t that something? Guess who’s with me? Billy. You wouldn’t recognize him, he’s grown so tall.”

Billy, her eldest son, had been journeying solo around the world for the past several years. To Joseph, she sounded a little tipsy, but his sister was always a little bonkers.

“How is everything with you?” she remembered to ask. “How are Mom and Dad?”

“That’s the reason I’m calling. Something is the matter with Mom.”

Joseph’s wife groaned from her side of the bed. “Who is it?” she asked, half asleep.

“My sister,” Joseph answered.

“What time is it?”

“Three in the morning.”

“*Meshugenah*,” Rivka muttered. “She’s crazy.”

Joseph took the mobile phone to the hallway and sat in his pajamas at the top of the stairs.

“I can’t hear you,” Ilene called out from across the Pacific Ocean.

“Mom has been having irrational outbursts of anger that she forgets about the moment she calms down,” Joseph explained. “I spoke to a doctor at my synagogue, and he thinks it may be the beginning of Alzheimer’s Disease. I am flying down to Florida on Sunday, and I think you should come. Dad can’t deal with it alone. We

may have to find them some kind of assisted living arrangement, or maybe I'll have to bring them back to New York."

"Oh, poor Father," Ilene said.

It was typical of Ilene to think about their father when it was their mother who was freaking out. The two women had never gotten along. If Joseph was their mother's favorite, Ilene was the father's great love. Even when she screwed up her life with her marriages and divorces, in her father's eyes, she couldn't do wrong. Besides, she was famous. She made a good living. And for years, Joseph, with all of his religious fervor, had just managed to make a living.

"Oh, Joey," she said. "This is just terrible. I don't know what to tell you. I am in the middle of my trip. I'll have to phone my agent and see what he has scheduled for next week. Of course, I'll try to come as soon as I can. Some kind of top name institution in Florida is probably the best thing for them. They can afford it. I certainly can't look after them with all of the traveling I do, and there is no reason with your big family that you should *shlep* them back to New York. Besides, Herbie is there. And they're accustomed to Florida weather."

Ilene was referring to Uncle Herbie, their father's only brother. He had pioneered by moving down to Florida some twenty years earlier. When Joseph's father retired from his successful lawnmower business, Herbie had encouraged him to retire to Boca Raton, where he could spend the rest of his years, "Looking out at endless green lawns and never have to mow one." That's what had prompted their relocation from New Rochelle, New York, down to sunny South Florida, even though Joseph's mother was very unhappy about moving away from her one and only son.

"Herbie has his own problems," Joseph reminded Ilene.

"I suppose so," his sister said. "Don't we all?"

They left the conversation at that. Ilene promised she would phone Dad and let him know when she would be arriving in Boca.

Joseph sat in the dark, quiet house, savoring the silence. The peaceful moment was something that didn't transpire very often in his home. He wondered how Billy had

gotten to Australia. Once upon a time, before he had decided to give up bohemia for a path of Orthodox Judaism, he himself had a wanderlust for travel, journeying to all sorts of exotic places. Then, after his spiritual revolution, he had dreamed of living in Israel, the land of the Jews. But his mother had been adamantly against it, so he settled in New York City, an easy drive to his parents' home in New Rochelle.

Joseph went back to the bedroom, put on a bathrobe, and walked downstairs to the kitchen where he washed his hands and said the blessings that are recited before studying Torah when one awakens in the middle of the night. He felt too agitated to go back to sleep. Instead, he sat in the dining room, opened a Hebrew-English *Chumash*, and started to read over the week's Torah portion. But his head couldn't concentrate on the text. His gaze wandered to the other painting which they had bought in the Holy Land – a mystical rendition of the Western Wall in Jerusalem with lively brushstrokes portraying Hasidic dancers and Hebrew letters flying into the sky. How wonderful it would be to visit there again, he mused, but his heart was too heavy to make even an imaginary journey. He kept imagining his father sitting alone in the darkness of the big Florida house, filled with a fear of the future, wondering what was happening to the woman he had lived with and loved for nearly sixty years.

Chapter Two

Joseph knew it wouldn't be easy – not for his mother, not for his father, not for him, and not for Rivka. That's why he decided to take Avi along on the trip. The energetic eight-year old had been expelled from school for two weeks for driving his teacher crazy, and Joseph didn't want the same thing to happen with his pregnant wife. Already at Kennedy Airport, he regretted his decision. The boy disappeared while Joseph was checking in their luggage. After a frantic half-hour search through the terminal, Joseph found him riding on a make-believe motorcycle in a clamorous video-game arcade. Luckily, they just made the final boarding.

Once again, on the aircraft, God was with them. The Master of the World made sure that Avi had an in-flight movie to keep him quiet all the way. Movies and computer games were just about the only things that held his attention for more than five minutes. Up till now, both Joseph and Rivka had been adverse to putting the child on Ritalin for fear of side effects, but it was beginning to look like there was no other solution. They had tried reflexology on the boy, art therapy, a sugarless diet, natural herbal relaxants, but nothing had succeeded in lowering a manically high energy level that caused him to bounce around like an atomic particle during a nuclear fusion. Their reflexologist compared the child's nerves to the cocked spring of a sub-machine gun ready to fire. The principal of Avi's school had suggested that the parents start looking for a more flexible framework for the boy.

During the first half of the flight, Joseph read through some articles on Alzheimer's Disease that he had printed out from the Internet. His mother's outbursts of anger and unexpected wanderings certainly matched the signs of the disease's early stages. He read up on the medications available, and about the recommended treatments that didn't seem to offer much help. There was an interesting essay called "10 Ways of Helping Your Loved One," and he browsed through a few true life stories that broke his heart, thinking about what lay ahead for his mother.

When he couldn't take it anymore, he stared at the mini movie screen and the hack action film that was being shown on the flight. As a filmmaker and editor, he had made dozens of movies and seen thousands more. He didn't need earphones to tell if a film was good or bad – he could tell from the pacing of the action. And this one was a slow-moving, box-office loser for sure. To check out his professional appraisal, he glanced down at his son. If Avi's legs weren't shaking a mile a minute, it was a sign that the movie was a winner. Sure enough, the boy's legs were twitching as if he needed to pee, an unmistakable sign that the film was a stinker that the airline had landed for peanuts.

Joseph's mother had her heart set on Harvard or Yale for her son, but he decided to study filmmaking at NYU. He spent his four college years in the dark, watching every film classic that had ever been made. After graduating, he wrote a screenplay that one of his teacher's gave to an up-and-coming director, who sold it to MGM. After that first early success, Joseph packed up his belongings and drove across country to Los Angeles, to make a name for himself in Tinsel Town, and to get away from his over-protective mother who still wanted a profession more respectable and stable for her special boy.

It turned out that his mother was right. Hollywood proved to be just like the sets on the back lot of the MGM studio, big fake façades of Dodge City and Main Street, pretty on the outside but empty within. The people were exactly the same. Of course, Joey didn't know this at first. In the beginning, he tried his hardest to play the Hollywood game and be a winner, working out at the sports club with the up and coming stars, hitting the discos at night, blowing his brains out with reefers and hash, and filling up his address book with names that he never phoned back.

While he was living in LA, he sold a few more scripts, each time for more and more money, but it didn't make him happy very long. He bought a little MG sports car, and rented a dream apartment by the sea, but it didn't fill up the emptiness he was feeling inside. That was the beginning of his religious awakening and his move back to New York, where he worked as a TV news editor before landing a job with the Jewish Museum. Joseph had moved back to New York, not to be closer to his parents, but to get away from the emptiness of Hollywood. At least New York felt a little Jewish, not like the homogenized, pasteurized, and

cowboyized California. True, The Big Apple wasn't the Jewish homeland, but it was a lot closer to Jerusalem than L.A.

Feeling stiff, Joseph stood up to stretch and take a little stroll to the bathroom himself. The airplane was experiencing some turbulence, but he walked down the aisle, even though the fasten-your-seatbelt sign was lit. Waiting for a vacancy, he flipped through the pages of a People Magazine. Not surprisingly, his sister, Ilene, had one of her interviews published there, under her pen name, Ilene Freed. This time, the sensational story was about a rehabilitated child molester who had won a court battle for the right to adopt a child.

Washing his hands in the tiny lavatory sink, Joseph glanced at the neatly bearded figure staring back at him. The day before, his mother had finished their perfectly normal phone conversation by saying, "If you really love your mother, you will shave off your silly beard. The rabbi of our temple doesn't have a beard, so why should you?"

Ever since his religious transformation, his beard had broken her heart.

"You have such a beautiful face – why hide it?" she would say every time she saw him. She insisted that it made him look dirty. She wanted him to be clean and attractive, just like she kept her "House Beautiful" home in Boca. On a few occasions, he had tried to explain to her the religious significance of growing a beard, but she couldn't have cared less. He was her baby, and she wanted him to stay that way. What kind of baby had a beard?

When Joseph came back from the lavatory, Avi wasn't in his seat, sure proof that the still-running film was a loser.

"How lost can a kid get on an airplane?" Joseph thought, as he continued along the aisle looking for his son. When he didn't find him in economy class, he slid the curtain aside and stepped into the business section. Immediately, a steward popped protectively out of his serving station and asked if he could help.

"I'm looking for my son," Joseph told him.

"Avi?" the steward ask.

“That’s right.”

“He’s flying the plane with Captain Roberts,” the steward informed him. “Come with me and I’ll show you.”

The steward knocked on the cockpit door, punched in a security code of numbers, and waited for it to open. Sure enough, Avi was inside, sitting by the captain and navigator. He looked up at his father with a proud and mischievous grin. “Quite a boy you’ve got here,” the captain said. “If you ask me, he’s a born pilot.”

“He has thousands of hours in flying time on his computer,” Joseph answered.

“Sure acts like it,” the captain said. “If it wasn’t against the rules, I’d go take a nap and leave the flying to him.”

“Florida here we come,” the navigator announced, checking out his flashing panels.

“I’m sorry, Avi,” Captain Roberts said. “You’ll have to get back to your seat. Official regulations. We’re beginning our descent.”

“Yes, sir, Captain,” Avi replied with a salute. Satisfied with his big achievement, he ran back up the aisle toward their seats.

Outside the baggage claim at the Miami Airport, a limousine driver was waiting with a sign reading “Joseph Friedman.”

“Who is he, *Abba*?” Avi asked, using the Hebrew word for father. In the boy’s Jewish day school, Hebrew was a part of the curriculum.

“He’s the driver that Grandpa sent to pick us up.”

“Why didn’t Grandpa come himself?” the boy asked.

“Grandpa doesn’t like to drive long distances anymore,” Joseph answered. “He’s getting old.”

The boy fell asleep on the way. Like his grandfather, he didn’t relish long car rides either. Like lots of hyperactive kids, being cooped up in a car made him feel nauseous. After a few minutes, he woke with a start.

“If you see Batman, wake me up,” he said before crashing back to sleep.

On their last trip to visit Grandpa and Grandma, the kids had spotted a guy dressed up as Batman driving a motorcycle out of a shopping-mall parking lot. Ever since then, Avi was convinced that Batman lived in South Florida.

Sure enough, when the limousine reached Boca Raton Manors, with its dramatic waterfall entrance, manicured gardens, and Mediterranean villas, his mother was waiting in the driveway to greet them. She probably had been waiting there for hours just to see her favorite son. Her still pretty face was one bright happy smile. At least until she saw his beard. Even though it was short and trimmed, she reacted as if it were as bushy as the beard of Ulysses S. Grant.

“Who is it? Who is it?” she exclaimed. “Where’s my Joey? Why do you want to break my heart?”

Beyond her vociferous disapproval of his beard, and his passion for Judaism, Joseph knew that she loved him, maybe even as much as she loved his Dad. She would have given her life for him - so how could he not try to do the best for her when she needed his help?

“Don’t worry about the kitchen,” she said, after giving him a long, loving embrace to make up for the months that she hadn’t seen him. “We still have the plates you koshered in the canal, and we stocked up on tuna fish and a whole shopping cart of food with the little OUs that you like.”

His mother was referring to the OU symbol stamped on food packages to attest that the kashrut of the product had been certified by the Orthodox Union.

“I want to go swimming!” Avi said, jumping out of the car. He broke away from his grandmother’s hug and repeated, “I want to go swimming!”

Harry Friedman came out the front door with a glass in his hand. “Don’t worry, it’s only diet Coke,” he said to Joseph. “But I can sure use a good drink.”

Joseph kissed his father. At eighty-three, he was still a handsome man. But he looked older now. He was bent over, and his hands were shaking more than Joseph remembered. Harry Friedman’s own father had died of Parkinson’s Disease, and

no doubt he was worried about his own steadily degenerating condition. The suspenders he was wearing heightened his octogenarian look. But Joseph could tell that he was happy to see him. He knew that his father loved him in his own way, even if he didn't display it outwardly. That was the way he had been ever since Joseph could remember. A father who was on the road all the time, selling his lawnmowers like the famed salesman, Willy Loman, coming home tired on weekends, and taking off once again come Monday morning, leaving little Joey behind to take care of his wife.

"Give Grandpa a hug," Joseph commanded his son.

The boy ran into his Grandpa's embrace, then slipped free like a skilled halfback. "Where's my bathing suit?" he wanted to know.

"There is no water in the swimming pool," his grandfather told him. "It's under repairs."

Later, he told Joseph the real reason. He was in the process of having the swimming pool drained and boarded up so that Mom wouldn't fall in during one of her wandering spells.

"Can I watch TV?" the boy asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he ran off through the front door. It was an elegant, Spanish-style house, similar to the other picturesque villas on the palm-lined cul-de-sac, with stucco walls, carved wooden door, and large orange tiles on the roof. When they moved to Boca Raton, Joseph's parents had chosen a retirement village on a golf course, even though Joseph's father didn't play golf. Uncle Herbie always quipped that Harry Friedman liked looking out on the long green fairways that he didn't have to cut, now that he was retired from over forty years in the lawnmower business. Whenever he saw a lawnmower, he could tell you everything about it, even if you didn't want to know.

"The garden looks beautiful, Mom," Joseph said. "You could win a contest."

"Let me show you around," she said, taking his hand.

She seemed perfectly normal to Joseph as she led him around on a tour of the grounds. She certainly wasn't agitated the way Aunt Peachy described. She asked about Rivka and the kids, apologizing for not remembering all of their names.

Joseph knew that she loved the house for its front yard and gardens, where she would work for hours on end, planting and replanting flowers and bushes that she bought at the Dayton Beach Mall, which was cheaper than the landscaping store at the fancier Boca Mall, even though it was further away. Gardening had become her pastime, therapy, and artistic expression, an outlet for her emotions, now that she lived far from her children, and ever since her retired husband had retreated into himself, and put up a wall, plagued with a steadily growing anxiety and depression that advanced with his Parkinson's. In a way, it seemed to Lizzy Friedman that her husband was still on the road, away from the house most of the week, even though he was sitting out on the terrace, or dozing in his favorite chair in front of the TV.

When they reached the back yard, she stopped him and whispered, "I'm worried about your father. He sleeps all the time in his chair. I can hardly get him to do anything anymore. He hates to go shopping. He has no interest in the movies. He doesn't want to go out with friends. He just worries all the time. The only thing he thinks about is doctors and his health. It's good that you came. Maybe you can cheer him up. I certainly can't anymore."

Joseph was amazed. His mother was absolutely lucid. But come dinner time, everything changed.

They were eating bagels and lox from the kosher deli. His mother had gone to the kitchen to bring everyone some orange juice when Dr. Jeckl turned into Mr. Hyde.

"How's your spoiled bitch of a wife?" she suddenly asked.

Joseph choked. Over the years, his mother had come to love his wife, and to pamper her by buying her jewelry and expensive clothes.

"Does the princess still think she is holier than everyone else?"

Joseph was startled. His mother's pretty brown eyes suddenly flashed like a wolf's.

"Lizzy," his father warned.

“Oh, you shut up,” she snapped. “Isn’t it enough that you are waiting for me to die, so you can steal my money?”

“Lizzy, keep quiet,” Harry Friedman ordered. “Not in front of Joey and the boy.”

“Don’t give me your shit!” she flared back. Her eyes flared with rage. Her jaw turned into a snarl. Joseph had seen his mother angry before, but never like this, as if some animal had possessed her from within.

Joseph’s father glanced over at him with a sad, “I’m sorry” expression.

“Go watch some TV in the guest room,” Joseph told Avi. In a flash, the boy was off and running.

“He can stay here,” his mother said. “It is all right with me if he knows that you two are plotting to steal all of my money. I know. That’s why you came.”

“No one is plotting to steal your money, Mom,” Joseph assured her.

“You are on your father’s side,” she answered. “Everyone is against me. That’s the way it has been all of my life.”

Irrationally, she threw the plastic bottle of orange juice at the wall. Joseph had to duck. His father stood up from the table. “Stop this now!” he yelled.

“Oh, drop dead!” his mother screamed back. “I’ve had it with you. I am not going to spend the rest of my life taking care of a sick old man. I want to go home.”

“You are home,” Joseph tried to reason.

“You stay out of this,” his mother shot back. “Go back to the witch you married. Who asked you to come here in the first place? I know it was your father with all his whispering. I saw him on the phone.”

Like a little girl with a temper tantrum, she turned away and headed out of the TV room toward the front door.

“Lizzy! Where are you going?” his father called out.

“I’m going home,” she answered.

“This is your home!” his father yelled after her.

A few seconds later, they heard the front door slam closed.

“I’m sorry, son,” Harry Friedman said with a defeated expression. “I didn’t want to involve you, but I don’t know what to do.”

“How long do these things last?” Joseph asked.

“Half an hour. One hour. Two hours. It’s hard to say.” His father collapsed back down in his chair. “I can’t keep up with her,” he said. “You go after her. Please.”

Joseph gazed at the sad broken figure of his father. Harry Friedman covered his face with his trembling hands, so his son wouldn’t see his pain. “I’m crazy with worry,” he said. “I love your mother so much. She’s everything to me.”

From the sound of the TV, Joseph could tell that his son was watching some kind of super hero, cartoon adventure. He hurried out the front door and ran to catch up with his mother, who was walking at a very brisk pace along the deserted, lamp-lit street.

“Mom, please,” he called out, catching up with her.

“I’ve had a lifetime of his torture,” she answered. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“Where are you going? It’s nighttime. You can’t just take off like this.”

“Why can’t I? It’s a free country. Look how beautiful it is around here. You and your sister dumped us here to get us out of your lives. Get away from me. I hate you.”

Her words were like daggers in his heart. Even though he knew it was the Alzheimer’s, even though he had read that outbursts like these were common, still her words, and their vehemence, pierced through his soul.

“How can you say that, Mom?” he stuttered. “You know how much I love you.”

“You love that bitch of yours and my money,” she answered. “That’s all.”

Like an Olympic marathon walker, when she reached last villa on the dead end road, she kept on going, crossing a lawn and continuing down a dark descent toward one of the canals that surrounded the retirement community. Joseph's heart was pounding. He kept himself in good shape, but he hadn't been expecting this emotional chase.

"Mom, watch out for the canal," he called.

"I don't care about the canal," she said.

"There are alligators," he reminded her.

"Oh, leave me alone," she answered. "So what if I die? What do you care? That's all you want anyway. Then you can have all of my money, you and your Orthodox bitch."

Joseph sprinted to catch up with her as she rushed closer to the water. When he grabbed at her arm, she turned and scratched wildly at his face. It was times like these when Joseph's life turned into a movie. No doubt from having seen thousands of films, and from his work as an editor, life turned into a moving picture show at twenty-four frames per second.

CUT TO:

CLOSE-UP OF HANDS SCRATCHING AT JOSEPH'S FACE

CUT TO:

JOSEPH RAISING HIS HANDS TO WARD OFF THE ATTACK

CUT TO:

FEET TRIPPING OVER THE STUMP OF A TREE

CUT TO:

ANOTHER ANGLE AS JOSEPH LOSES HIS BALANCE

CUT TO:

SLOW MOTION – FLAILING HIS ARMS, JOSEPH FALLS BACKWARDS THROUGH THE AIR.

The splash could have been the sound of a giant frog jumping into the canal. It was the month of February in Florida, and the water was unexpectedly cold.

“This is just great,” he thought, remembering that there were indeed migratory Everglade alligators in Boca’s picturesque canals. Quickly, he swam to the closest dock and hoisted himself up out of the water. His clothing and shoes were drenched, and his mother was nowhere in sight.

“Mom!” he yelled out. “Please, Mom, we love you! Mom, do you hear me? Come back, Mom, please!”

The Florida night was silent, save for some crickets and the hopped-up motor of a distant car motor. A gentle wind rustled through the branches of a towering willow. Lights shone in the windows of the elegant homes along the canal. Joseph ran along the bank, calling for his mother, but she was nowhere in sight.

“Please, God, watch over her,” he said, figuring there was nothing to do but go home, change his clothes, and call the police.

He ran all the way back to his parents’ home. At first he got lost, not remembering which way he had come. To him, all of the houses looked almost the same, and one street was just like the other. Finally, he spotted the Friedman mailbox and the marble fountain in front of the house.

“Hey, *Abba*, did you go swimming,” his son asked with a curious look when he walked in, careful not to dirty the expensive living-room carpet.

“Mom took off,” he told his frightened father. “I don’t know where she is.”

“She’s here,” his father answered. “She came back. She’s locked herself in the closet of our bedroom.”

“Thank the good Lord,” Joseph said.

“What happened to you?” his father asked.

“I took a dip in the canal,” Joseph answered.

“Hey, cool,” Avi exclaimed. “Why didn’t you take me? I want to go swimming too!”

“Please, honey, open the door,” Joseph’s father called to his wife. “Joseph is here. He came all the way from New York just to see us.”

“What’s the matter with Grandma?” Avi asked after his father had changed into dry clothes. “She looks really angry.”

“Do you want a drink of scotch instead?” Harry Friedman asked, as Joseph heated up some water for coffee. The former AA-goer held up a bottle of Chivas. “I’m having one,” he said.

“Do you think you should?” Joseph asked. A decade back, his father had had a problem with booze, but with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous and a lot of support from his wife, he had managed to kick the habit.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to have any alcohol in the house,” Joseph said.

“It’s for guests. It’s a part of entertaining. You have to do it here. Don’t worry. I can handle it.”

Not wanting to encourage his father, Joseph passed up the offer and walked into his parent’s beautifully decorated bedroom. His mother not only had a green thumb in the garden, she had a flair for interior decorating as well. Not knowing what to expect, Joseph knocked on the closet door.

“What’s the matter with Grandma?” Avi repeated, following his father into the room.

“Go watch a little more TV, OK?” Joseph said.

“I’m tired of TV,” the boy answered. “I want to hide in the closet with Grandma.”

Once again, Joseph knocked on the door.

“Go away,” the angry voice said.

“Mom, it’s me, Joey. I’ve come for a visit.”

“It’s me too, Grandma,” Avi added.

“Go away all of you. Leave me alone.”

Harry Friedman appeared in the bedroom doorway. Joseph looked at his father, not knowing what to say.

“It’s been this way for weeks,” his father confided. “I’m afraid to leave her alone, even to go out to buy milk. She can be fine for hours on end, sometimes even days, and then, all of a sudden, she becomes a different person.”

Joseph sat down on their bed. On top of the dresser was a framed photo of his father and mother taken during their honeymoon. Dad was in his army uniform, getting ready to be shipped off to the war raging in Europe, and his pretty eighteen-year-old bride was dressed in a flashy, movie-star outfit. Another framed photo pictured Joseph and his mother together at some party, before Joseph had grown his beard. And there was a photo of Ilene, winning some kind of award.

Joseph waved his hand bye-bye at Avi, not wanting him to hear about his grandmother’s illness. This time the child obeyed.

“Mom may have Alzheimer’s disease,” Joseph told his father.

Harry Friedman put a silencing finger to his mouth and motioned his son to follow him out of the bedroom. At the entrance to the beautifully furnished living room, he stopped, as if obeying an invisible NO-TRESPASSING sign. The elegant, high-ceilinged room was only used when special guests arrived. Otherwise it was like a beautiful museum display, cordoned off to visitors, with a rug as white and virgin as newly fallen snow, and paintings and furniture imported from Italy and Spain. Father and son stood in the semi-dark room near the bar, facing the uncertain future ahead.

“Why did you say Alzheimer’s?” the father asked. “I don’t want your mother to hear.”

“From things that I’ve read, Mom has all the symptoms. But the neurologist can tell us when we see him. When is your appointment?”

Luckily, their semi-annual appointment happened to fall during the week of Joseph’s visit. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to see the busy doctor.

“If it is Alzheimer’s, what does it mean?” the father asked.

“It means that unless God does a miracle, things are not going to get a lot better. According to what I read, the period of anger will pass. There are drugs that can reduce the intensity of the attacks, and after that, the person becomes quiet and withdrawn.”

Joseph didn’t have the heart to tell him that a person with Alzheimer’s gradually loses connection to his or her surroundings, until they need help with even the most basic things like eating and getting dressed.

“With some people it happens quickly,” he said. “With others the decline can be gradual over years.”

Harry Friedman once again reached for the bottle of scotch. “I can’t live without your mother,” he said.

For a minute they stood in silence, each man consumed with his own private thoughts. Then Joseph’s father turned toward his bedroom. “I think I hear your mother,” he said, sensitive to every sound in the house.

Joseph poured himself a shot while his father went off to investigate.

“Your mother is in bed, sleeping with all her clothes on,” he related when he returned. “I’m going to join her. I feel pretty pooped myself.”

A little out of his nature, he stepped forward and gave Joseph a kiss. “Goodnight,” he said. “Your mother made your bed already. And thanks for coming, son.”

Joseph found Avi asleep in the double bed in the guest room, where he and Rivka stayed on their visits to Boca. He had fallen asleep in the middle of a wrestling event on TV. Just like his grandmother, the boy had crashed out with his clothes on. Joseph quietly covered him, switched off the noise box, then he went back to

the kitchen, where the bagels and lox remained half eaten on the table. There were no synagogue prayer *minyans* in Boca Raton at that hour of the night, so he prayed the evening prayer alone, adding the Hebrew names of his parents in the blessing for health.

Uncharacteristically, he poured himself another shot of Chivas and collapsed down on the couch to phone his wife. On a shelf of the library unit was a framed photo of him accepting an Emmy award for a documentary film he had made about illegal Mexican immigrants. Next to it was a portrait photo of his family with all of the kids. Always a believer in equal time, his mother also had a picture of Ilene's two kids posing on some Colorado ski slope.

When he phoned New York, Rivka filled him in on what was new with the boys. Zev was cramming for upcoming tests. Shimon had been to the optometrist and apparently needed glasses, which was going to be a big blow to his ego. Daniel had had another bar-mitzvah lesson, little Moshie had broken a string on Shimon's guitar, and the baby had been quiet in her womb all day. "How is Avi?" she asked.

"Sleeping for a change," Joseph answered.

"And your mother?"

Joseph described the day, playing down the intensity of his mother's bout of anger and leaving out the curses that had been directed at his wife.

"It doesn't sound like a very happy welcome," Rivka responded.

"We have a meeting tomorrow with their neurologist, so I hope to know more after that."

"What are the options?" she asked

"I don't really know. I don't think my Dad can handle the situation alone. Either we have to get him a live-in helper to look after my Mom, or find them some kind of protected living arrangement down here in Florida, and I'll fly down more often to visit, or else I can bring them back to New York."

"What does your father want?" Rivka asked.

“We haven’t discussed it yet.”

“And your sister?”

“She’s arriving tomorrow.”

“You are doing a big *mitzvah*,” his wife told him, praising him for the good deed he was doing.

“And you are an *eshet chayil*, a real woman of valor, for letting me,” he complimented back, referring to the famous song of the Sabbath, “A woman of valor who can find?”

They blew each other kisses and said goodnight, leaving Joseph to stare at the blank TV screen. Very often, he stayed up late watching old movies, but tonight he didn’t have the urge. Tomorrow was going to be another long day, and he felt that he needed the rest. Plus he had to get up early to catch the morning *minyan* at the *shul*. Turning off the lights in the house, he walked toward the guest room. With Pavlov-like obedience, he side-stepped the fluffy white carpet in the living room so that he wouldn’t leave any tracks.

Chapter Three

In the morning, Joseph drove his father's leased Buick to the Boca Raton Synagogue and prayed in the seven o'clock service. When he returned home, a variety of cereal boxes were waiting on the kitchen table, along with two long pill boxes whose seven compartments contained the tablets that his parents took each day of the week. One of his father's main tasks was keeping track of their assortment of pills for cholesterol, high blood pressure, angina, arrhythmia, osteoporosis, prostate, constipation, hay fever, Parkinson's, memory loss, anxiety and depression. Harry Friedman called himself "the pill man."

"All the cereals have your little OUs on them," his mother assured. "I almost went blind finding them. Why do they write them so small?"

She gave him a loving, motherly squeeze and a happy smile, as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired the previous evening.

"You aren't angry anymore?" Joseph asked.

"Angry? Angry about what?" she asked, as if she didn't remember a thing. "Who can be angry when her baby boy comes to visit, even if he has a beard that makes him look like a dirty bum?"

"Can't you shave it off?" his father asked. "It would make your mother so happy."

"I didn't know I was in for an ambush this morning," Joseph said with a patient smile.

"You're right. We won't say anything more about it," his mother said. "It's your business. You're a big boy now. And if your wife likes it, she's the one who decides. When I heard you were coming, I went out and bought her a sweater. I put it on the chair near your bed, so don't forget to take it. She's such a sweetheart to put up with a bearded Charles Manson like you. But why did she have to get pregnant again, can you answer me that?"

"Charles Manson?" Joseph exclaimed. "I look like the murderer, Charles Manson?"

“To your mother, you do,” his father answered. “Shave it off already, will you? I’ll give you a thousand bucks.”

Joseph sighed. Some things never changed.

“You bought Rivka two sweaters,” Harry Friedman reminded his wife.

“That’s right. I couldn’t decide which color would look the nicest on her, blue or beige, so I bought them both.”

“You’re great, Mom,” Joseph said, giving her a kiss.

“You know I love her like my very own daughter. Why didn’t you bring her along?”

“The doctors don’t advise air travel in the later stages of pregnancy, and, anyway, someone had to stay home to look after the rest of the kids.”

“I suppose so,” his mother agreed, “but for your next vacation, I want you all to come here to be with us in Boca.”

After breakfast, Joseph took Avi on an alligator safari through a marshy finger of the nearby Everglades. He knew that the kid would love the high-speed, wind-propelled boat. He hoped that the adventure would keep the energetic child content for the rest of the day. His mother seemed in good spirits, so he figured he could leave her alone with his Dad until they returned from their touristy excursion. Later in the day, they had a meeting scheduled with the neurologist. Joseph was hoping that the doctor would prescribe some type of medicine that would prevent his mother’s violent outbursts of anger.

The neurologist indeed wrote out a new prescription for her memory problem, but said that a psychiatrist had to decide how to treat her mood swings. He maintained a jocular, unconcerned manner so long as Mr. and Mrs. Friedman were in his office, but he wasn’t very optimistic when he spoke with Joseph alone. He said that the new pill might slow down the rate of memory loss, but that he couldn’t offer any miracle cures.

“There is no sound and sure test for Alzheimer’s,” he said, “But from your description, it seems pretty certain that your mother has entered its early stages. In some patients, medication works in slowing the process, but in other patients, it doesn’t seem to have much effect. I understand that Dr. Ellis, your father’s psychiatrist, is going to see her. I’ll write him a note. He can play with the types and levels of tranquilizers to make things as easy as possible on your mother and the people around her, but we don’t want to overdose her and turn her into a zombie, just to avoid the unpleasant episodes that all Alzheimer’s patients and their families experience. For your mother, the best medication is a lot of understanding, patience, and love. You have to always remember that when outbursts of anger or dementia overcome her, it isn’t your real mother who is talking, but a severe chemical disorder in the brain. You shouldn’t blame her, and never blame yourselves for the difficulties and resentments that you are bound to encounter and feel. Your father has shown a noticeable decline in his own overall physical condition, so I am upgrading his Parkinson’s medication. I think he should speak to Dr. Ellis as well about changing his anxiety and depression medications, which don’t seem to be helping him at all. From talking to him, it sounds that he may also have some type of compulsive fixation syndrome that could possibly be chemically treated.”

“You mean his constant worrying?”

“That and things like getting up repeatedly during the night to make sure the front door is locked.”

Joseph felt a bit overwhelmed. He had heard that there came a time when parents turned into children, and their children turned into their parents. Part of the Jewish liturgy for the High Holy Days was the request, “Please do not abandon us in the time of old age.” Joseph knew that the commandment to honor one’s father and mother was not only during the time of their prime, but, more importantly, during the years when they were no longer capable of doing things for themselves. While he had had plenty of battles with his parents over the years, they had always been there for him when he needed them, and he wanted to reciprocate now with the same caring and love that they had shown him.

“Should we tell my mother that she has Alzheimer’s?” Joseph asked the doctor.

“That’s up to you,” the neurologist answered. “You know your mother the best. Some people want to know the truth, even if it is painful, so that they can put their affairs in order before they lose their competence completely. For other people, the knowledge can break them and ruin whatever quality time they have left.”

“Let me ask you, Doctor, if I may. What would you recommend for them in their situation? I live in New York, and my sister lives in Los Angeles. Should we get someone to live in with them, or put them in some kind of home, or maybe I should take them back with me to New York?”

“That’s a family decision,” the doctor answered. “I know it can be a very painful and difficult one. Live-in help can be a solution. And there are some excellent living arrangements for elderly people, especially here in Florida, that you should look into, but as your mother’s disease progresses, I am not sure that you will find a retirement home that will allow your parents to live together. Alzheimer’s patients are usually separated into their own private wards, so that’s a consideration that probably has to be taken into the picture.”

For Joseph, that option was out of the question. His parents had lived together for sixty years. They had had their ups and downs like everyone else, but compared to modern standards, their marriage was a Hollywood love story. Plus, Joseph feared that his father would fall apart without his wife at his side. He had become so dependent upon her, it was almost pathetic to see his great neediness, especially since his own combination of ailments and anxieties were not getting any better.

Back at home, his mother went outside to water the garden, so Joseph had a chance to be alone with his Dad in the TV room. From there they could keep an eye on Joseph’s mother, through the sliding glass doors that looked out at the swimming pool and back yard. His father listened to the doctor’s diagnosis in stoic silence. His hands trembled, but his face was like stone. Joseph recalled the very same expression on his grandfather, who had died of Parkinson’s himself. When Joseph was eight years old, the same age as Avi, the family had driven to Brooklyn to visit the sick old man. Everyone said that he hadn’t smiled for months, but when he saw little Joey, his rigid, face muscles melted, and he gave the boy a broad, loving smile. “An angel,” he said.

“Your Uncle Herbie thinks we should move into a golden age community,” his father said. “He has a list of places for us to look at. If you ask me, the golden years suck. But maybe the new medicine will help your mother. I think we should give it a shot.”

“Of course we’ll try the medicine,” Joseph answered. “The question is can you handle Mom alone? Maybe we should get someone to move in with you to help out.”

“Your mother won’t agree. She likes her privacy. She likes doing things her own way. She doesn’t want someone coming in and taking over her house.”

“The helper doesn’t have to take over. It’s like a live-in nurse, that’s all.”

“Herbie has a list of places,” he repeated.

“The doctor mentioned that your psychiatrist is going to see Mom,” Joseph said.

“I’ve been going to Dr. Ellis for my anxiety and depression. It was another one of Herbie’s ideas. He’s been going for years. If you ask me, it hasn’t helped him, and the medication the psychiatrist prescribes for me doesn’t do a damn bit of good for me either. Lately, I seem to have what he calls a compulsion disorder. At night I get up to check the front door three or four times to make sure that it’s locked. Or I check to make sure that I set the security alarm. I’ve told his secretary about mother’s anger, and we have an appointment with him in another two weeks.”

“Maybe we can see him while I’m here,” Joseph suggested.

“You have to make appointments months in advance with these guys. It’s easier to get an audience with the Pope.”

“Maybe he’ll make an exception. At least we can try.”

Their conversation was interrupted by honking from the driveway. A few moments later the doorbell chimed. Mr. Friedman stood up from his chair very slowly.

“I’ll get it, Dad,” Joseph said.

The guest was his sister, Ilene. She was wearing an Australian rancher's hat, tight-fitting jeans, and a denim jacket and shirt. No spring chicken anymore, she tried to look and act like a swinging thirty year old.

"Hi brother," she said, giving him a sisterly kiss. "Oops," she said. "I forgot. Am I allowed to kiss the rabbi?"

With a teasing giggle, she strode into the living room and brazenly trekked over the immaculate white carpet. Dramatically, as if she were walking out onto a Broadway set, she threw her bush jacket onto a chair, and sprawled out on the elegant couch that no one ever sat on. Its billowy cushions were probably as startled as everyone else in the room.

"Am I beat!" she exclaimed. "I traveled twenty thousand miles to get here. You got any beer?"

"I think there is a Lite in the fridge," their father said with a big loving smile. She was his baby and clear favorite. If Joseph was his mother's sunshine, Ilene was Daddy's little joy. Even with all of her screw-ups and unending adventures, in his eyes she could do no wrong.

"I hope you don't have any outback mud on your shoes," Joseph quipped. "Things are tense enough here without you ruining Mom's carpet."

"Carpets can be cleaned," she answered. "Is this a living room or a model showroom?"

"Leave your sister alone," Harry Friedman said, immediately taking her side.

"Ilene, Ilene!" Avi screamed, racing across the room and taking a flying, Power Ranger leap at his auntie. The boy didn't see her very often, but he had a natural affinity for her, as if they were two of the same kind - aliens from outer space.

"What did you bring me?" he asked her.

"Authentic Aborigine boomerangs for you and your brothers," she answered. "They're in a bag in the backseat of the car."

"Why didn't you tell us when you'd be coming?" their father asked.

“I didn’t have time between flights,” she answered.

“You rented a car at the airport?”

“It was the easiest thing to do.”

“With your credit card or mine?”

“When in Florida do as the Floridians do. With your card, of course, but I’ll pay you back if you want. Unlike my museum employee of a brother, I’m rolling in cash.”

“That’s all right,” Harry Friedman answered. “I’m glad that you charged it to me. And thank you for coming from so far away.”

“Well, look what the cat brought in!” Lizzy Friedman exclaimed, walking in the front door with her gardening gloves in her hand. “This must be my lucky week. Having my two children home at the very same time. It’s a miracle.”

Even though his mother was truly happy to see her long lost daughter, she didn’t walk over her prize white carpet to greet her. In her world, there were priorities and rules. A daughter was a daughter, but a carpet was a carpet. And a living room was to be looked at, not lived in.

At first Joseph thought that the object was a bird and didn’t pay any attention. But when the bird flew straight toward the large, arched skylight high above the living room’s sliding glass doors, Joseph looked back up at the swirling projectile.

CUT TO:

EXT. AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK. DAY

A HALF-NAKED ABORIGINE HURLS A BOOMERANG.

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON THE BOOMERANG FLYING THROUGH THE AIR.

CUT TO:

THE BOOMERANG HEADING FOR THE FRIEDMAN SKYLIGHT.

“Watch out!” Joseph called.

The swirling smashed into the skylight with a crash. Everyone let out frightened cries, as if surprised by a terrorist attack. Luckily the skylight was made of hurricane safety glass. It cracked in a thousand tiny pieces but remained miraculously intact. Avi’s boomerang stuck in the middle of the glass, like a sword sticking out of a rock in a King Arthur legend.

“What the hell!” Harry Friedman exclaimed.

“Amazing!” Ilene said, realizing what had occurred.

“What is it?” Mrs. Friedman asked.

Avi appeared outside the terrace window, looking frightened, guilty, and mischievous, all in one.

“I threw it in the other direction,” he shouted.

“It’s a boomerang that I brought for the kids,” Ilene explained to her mother.

Joseph tried to open the terrace door, but it was locked.

“You need the key,” his father said. “I’ll have to turn off the security alarm.”

Slowly, with a difficult effort, he rose out of the chair. Ilene and Joseph exchanged a sorrowful glance. Neither of them had seen their father so aged. “My balance isn’t so good,” he said, seeming to read their minds.

Their mother walked over to the skylight and gazed up at the damage.

“It’s only money,” she said. “Thank God no one was hurt.”

“Maybe you can leave it there,” Ilene remarked. “It looks like a modern sculpture.”

“I’ll call Freddie,” their father said.

“Who’s Freddie?” Ilene asked.

“The repair man. He can fix anything.”

“Which is a good thing for us,” Lizzy Friedman said sarcastically. “Because your father can’t fix a thing.”

“You want me to get up on the ladder and fix the skylight, sweetheart?” he asked her.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to do something around the house for a change,” she said.

Joseph suspected that their amiable sparring was just their usual George Burns and Gracy Allen way of communicating, and not a sign that his mother was heading for another Alzheimer’s attack.

Harry Friedman frowned at his son and daughter with his best George Burns impersonation, as if to say, “I’ve had to put up with her abuse for the last sixty years.” His hands trembled as he unlocked the terrace door. Joseph helped slide it open.

“What’s the matter with the swimming pool?” Ilene asked, noticing the boards that covered it up.

“Your father is afraid that I might fall in,” their mother responded.

Her answer surprised them all. Everyone seemed to hold their breaths, waiting for what would follow, but Lizzy Friedman continued on calmly with no sign of an impending outburst. “Anyway,” she said. “We never go swimming anymore.”

When Avi stepped into the room, his father motioned him away from standing under the shattered skylight. The adults stood facing the boy like a tribunal.

“I threw it in the other direction,” he explained. “Really. It came back on its own.”

“I told you it was an authentic boomerang,” Ilene said with a raucous laugh.

Lizzy Friedman reached out her hands toward the boy. He ran into her forgiving embrace. “What a treasure,” she said. “You can break all the windows in the house if you promise me you’ll stay here and live with us.”

“Is it OK, *Abba*?” the boy asked. “Can I live with Grandpa and Grandma?”

“You have school.”

“They kicked me out of school.”

“They didn’t kick you out. You are temporarily suspended, that’s all.”

Just then, the phone rang.

“Who can that be?” their mother asked.

“Maybe it’s my brother,” their father said.

Neither of them moved toward the phone. Rather, they let the answering machine record the call. “We get tons of junk calls soliciting charity,” their father said. “I don’t bother answering anymore.”

It was Peachy’s familiar voice. “Hi, guys,” she said into the tape. “Just calling to say hello. I’d love to hear from Joseph if he’s there. I’m going out to my class in art history, but afterward I’ll be home for the rest of the day, so please give a call.”

“You want me to call her back now?” Harry asked his wife.

“You do whatever you want,” she answered.

“She’s your cousin,” he said.

“Call back later,” Ilene told them. “We have an appointment in another hour. We have to go.”

“Go where?” her father asked.

“What kind of appointment?” her mother wanted to know.

“It’s a surprise. I’ll explain on the way. Mom, get ready. Wear something nice. Whoever has to go to the bathroom, like me, it’s time to go now.”

Joseph gave his sister a frowning, skeptical look. This wasn’t the time for her crazy whims. But she gave him a quick nod of reassurance, as if to say, “Trust me.”

“Sis, we have important things to attend to,” he told her.

“That’s why I came,” she answered.

“What about me?” Avi asked. “Can I come too?”

“Sure thing,” his aunt replied.

“Where are we going?” their father repeated, demanding an answer.

“Deerfield Beach,” Ilene answered.

“That’s a good half an hour away.”

“That’s why we have to leave now. Please, Dad, get ready. I have to go to the ladies room. Ciao.”

There was plenty of room in the spacious Buick for all of them. His father drove cautiously, leaning forward over the wheel, as if to get a better look at the road. Joseph was amazed to see how slowly his father navigated the car out of the garage, down the driveway and onto the road. At intersections, he automatically slowed down, even if the light was green.

“Please keep quiet while I’m driving,” he said to Ilene in a voice filled with nervous irritation. She was talking a mile a minute about her recent trip to Australia, and the non-stop chatter was getting on her father’s nerves.

“Want me to drive, Dad?” Joseph asked.

“I can drive. I drive every day. I have been driving for more than sixty years. But I don’t like being distracted by noise. People drive like maniacs down here in Florida, and I don’t want to be another highway statistic, if it is all right with all of you.”

“Your father has turned into a nervous wreck,” their mother said.

Harry Friedman frowned, as if to say, “Look who’s talking.”

“Did you see any kangaroos?” Avi asked his aunt.

“Tons of them,” Ilene answered. “Here, take a look. I have hundreds of photos in my camera.”

She took her digital camera out of her safari shoulder bag and showed the boy how to move the pictures along. Except for an occasional “wow!” the slide show kept him quietly occupied, for a few minutes at least, just like his Game Boy.

“Where are we going?” their father asked irritably. “I have to know. I can’t just drive without a direction.”

“Once we get to the Deerfield Beach Mall, we have to drive south another five miles,” she said. “That’s what they told me.”

“Can I know what’s going on?” Joseph asked.

“I don’t want Dad to have to call Freddie every time he needs something fixed,” Ilene explained. “Our parents don’t need such a big house at this stage of their lives. I had my agent check out retirement places in South Florida, and this one is the very best. He made us an appointment with their sales manager, and he’s going to show us around.”

“Show us around where?” her mother asked.

“Before I leave Florida,” Ilene continued, “I want to know that Mom and Dad are set up in the best place available with professional people to take care of them around the clock.”

“It’s not for me,” their mother immediately decided. “This is some kind of trick, and I won’t have any part of it. I’m not a baby that I need my children to tell me where I am supposed to live.”

“You’ll love it, Mommy, just give it a chance,” her daughter said.

“Harry, turn the car around now,” Lizzy Friedman ordered. “I want to go home.”

“Oh, shit,” their father answered. “We are in the middle of the frigging highway. I can’t turn around now.”

“Come on, Mom,” Joseph said. “We’re almost there. Let’s check it out. Just for curiosity. I’d like to see one of these places myself.”

“Then drop me off here, and you can go with your father and sister to look at it. If he wants to make a cripple of himself already and check into an old age home, that’s his business. I’ll get a new husband, and don’t think I can’t.”

Joseph feared that the devil inside her was going to awaken. He tried to remember some of the tips about handling loved ones with Alzheimer's, but he was feeling so nervous himself from all of the vibes around him that he couldn't think straight.

"Here's the Deerfield Beach Mall," his father said. "We come here sometimes and have a Nathan's hot dog in the food court."

"Let me out of the car," Lizzy Friedman repeated.

"Mom, it's for your own good," Ilene insisted. "At your age, you can't keep up a big house like yours. It's crazy."

"I have help with the cleaning once a week. A nice young married girl. That's all that I need. What's her name, Harry?"

"Sandy."

"She's very good."

"Nonsense, Mother." Ilene argued. "You work too hard at home, and you nearly kill yourself in the garden."

"It's the garden that keeps me alive."

"We'll get you a little garden of your own," Ilene promised, trying to placate her. "I'm sure it can be arranged. They have everything here: a health club, swimming pool, golf course, movie theater, beauty salon, post office, grocery store, housekeeping, and a restaurant plan so you don't have to cook. You can live like a queen."

"Your father and I don't play golf," their mother said. "It's a total waste of money."

"What's the difference" her husband countered. "We have golf at the club where we're living, and we pay monthly dues whether we use it or not."

"What's this?" Avi asked, holding the camera up for his aunt to see.

"A koala bear. They're so adorable. I wanted to take one back to L.A."

“What’s this place called?” Dad asked.

“The Meadowlands,” Ilene answered. “It’s considered number one in the area.”

“I think Herbie told me about it,” Dad said. “It’s one of the places on his list.”

“What list?” their mother wanted to know. “Is this some kind of conspiracy against me? Are you in on it too?”

“Here’s the sign,” their father said, dodging her question.

“Welcome to Meadowlands,’ the sign greeted motorists. “Your Garden of Eden on Earth.”

He slowed the car and carefully veered over to the right lane to make a turn at the upcoming intersection.

“You are all sons of bitches, you know that?” Lizzy Friedman said in a more threatening tone.

Sitting in the front seat by his father, Joseph had to turn his head around to look at his mother. Her eyes were starting to get wild like they had been the evening before.

“Please, sweetheart,” Harry Friedman appealed to his wife. “Don’t start up again.”

Avi saved the day. “Grandma, look at the koala bears,” he said, showing her a picture. That seemed to momentarily distract her. With a sigh of relief, Harry Friedman carefully guided the car into the Meadowlands visitor’s parking lot.

“You can drive back home,” he said to Joseph. “I can’t handle the tension.”

The place looked huge, fancy, and very expensive. The grounds were meticulously kept, but that was the case everywhere you went in South Florida.

“This place must cost a fortune,” their father remarked.

“Herbie says that when you consider the mortgage you’re paying on your house and your dues at the club, it comes to about the same,” Ilene answered.

“When did you talk to Uncle Herbie?” Joseph asked.

“From Australia. After you called me. Before I leave for an assignment, I like to do my homework.”

“That’s right, you are quite a professional,” Joseph remarked, irked that his sister considered helping their parents “an assignment.”

“I don’t have God to rely on like you do,” his sister quipped back.

Their father opened the driver’s door, made a motion to get out, then halted.

“Maybe you should help me, Joey,” he said.

“What’s this? A new act?” their mother said. “Since when do you need help getting out of the car?”

Joseph hurried around the Buick, grabbed onto his father’s arms, and pulled him up on his feet.

“My balance is lousy,” his father explained.

“I’m staying here,” Lizzy Friedman said. “You all can do what you please. I’ll stay and watch the boy.”

That was a possibility, Joseph thought. But leaving grandma in the car to watch over Avi was about as smart as leaving Avi in the car to watch over grandma. Both of them could take off at any moment, and Joseph didn’t want to have to go searching for them in different directions.

“Elizabeth, you are coming with us,” his father ordered, uncharacteristically taking command. “We are here, and we are going to have a look around, and you are going to behave like the charming, lovely woman you are. Our children have both come a long way to see us, and they both have our welfare in mind, so we should at least humor them and go along with this, even though we aren’t going to make any changes so fast. We have spoken about this possibility ourselves, so it isn’t such a big surprise. Now that we are here, we are going to see what the place is like, that’s all.”

It was a very good speech, but his wife wasn’t sure she could trust him. “You promise me that you won’t make any decision unless I approve?” she asked.

“I promise,” he said.

“What about you two?” she asked.

“I promise you, Mom,” Joseph said.

“Scout’s honor,” Ilene chimed in, holding up her hand as if she were taking an oath.

“OK,” their mother agreed. “But no funny stuff, or else you’ll all be very sorry.”

She got out of the car and straightened her clothes. “How do I look?” she asked her husband.

“As beautiful as ever,” he answered.

Indeed, Joseph thought. His mother was still a beautiful woman. True, she looked a little South Florida kitchy in her white pants, Lacoste golf jacket, sunglasses, and cap, but she still possessed the kind of female attraction that could make a man look twice. Ilene took her by the arm and escorted her toward the hotel-like entrance of the main building of the spacious Meadowlands estate.

“Do you have to wear that stupid-looking *yarmulke*?” she asked Joseph, referring to his skullcap.

“Yes, Mom, I do.”

“It looks like such a respectable place, why draw attention to yourself?”

“I’m not ashamed to be Jewish,” he said

“Either am I, but I don’t have to parade my religion. Why do you?”

“Joey likes to pretend he’s better than everyone else,” Ilene said with a sisterly barb.

“Let’s not start a fight here,” Mr. Friedman requested.

“At least let him stick those ridiculous strings inside of his pants,” his mother insisted, referring to Joseph’s *tzitzit*. “Avi too. We have lived in Florida, I don’t

know how many years now, and I have never seen a child with the stings of a prayer shawl sticking out of his pants.”

Joseph sighed. Some things would never change, he reasoned. To make his mother happy, he stuffed the long white threads of his *tzitzit* into his trousers, and did the same with Avi.

“How come, *Abba*?” the boy asked.

“To please Grandma,” he said.

“When in Rome do as the Romans do,” Ilene added with a wide, winning smile.

In addition to all of the things that Ilene had mentioned, Meadowlands also boasted two bedroom apartments, a 24-hour medical alert system, weekly physical therapy, arts and crafts, assisted living, three dining rooms, a private party lounge, laundry pick up, fishing in stocked lakes, an activities program including bingo and cards, gardening, a lending library, massage therapy, nutritional management, and scheduled bus transportation to shopping malls and doctors.

Paul Winston, the assistant sales manager, spewed out the list with a proud and lively enthusiasm, as if it were the first time he was meeting with clients. He was young, maybe twenty years younger than Joseph, polished, skillfully trained, and out-going in a relaxed and friendly way that didn’t make you feel that he was trapping you into signing an agreement.

“The main thing about Meadowlands is that the extended Meadowlands family cares about the lives of the people who live in our wonderful community,” he asserted.

Joseph felt that the likable fellow could probably have sold used cars with just as much sincerity and caring. Let’s face it, what did this guy care about old people? But a job is a job, and he did his job well. Joseph’s father, himself a lifelong salesman by trade, took an immediate liking to Paul. He seemed to forget his anxiety and regained some of the easy-going sociability that had characterized him in the past, during his own salesman days, especially when he had been drinking. Though his wife shot him a warning glance, he told Paul that money wasn’t a problem, and that they were only interested in seeing the nicest and biggest

apartment they had, so that there would be room for all of the visiting grandchildren.

“How many kids do you have?” Paul asked Joseph.

“Five,” Joseph answered, “and the sixth is on the way.”

Paul whistled. “I’m not even married. I’m looking for a nice Jewish girl, if you know one. A *Yiddisha* mamma, if you know what I mean. Like they sing here on Friday night, ‘*Eshet chayil me yimtzah?*’ Pretty good Hebrew, huh? I’m not Jewish myself, but I’ve picked up the language since working here. Most of our residents are Jewish, so I am sure you will feel right at home. At Meadowlands we are one big *mishpoochah*, so I think that the Friedman family has found a perfect home here.”

“Do you know the joke about the Jewish American serviceman who was stationed in Hong Kong when the High Holy Days arrived?” Harry Friedman suddenly asked him.

“I don’t think that I do,” the young man replied.

“Harry, we didn’t come to hear jokes,” Lizzy Friedman said in a reprimanding tone.

“Just this one,” her husband requested. “Anyway, he sees what looks like a synagogue with Hebrew writing outside, so he walks in to pray. Suddenly, all of the Chinamen stop *davening* and praying and turn to stare at him. The Chinese *shamesh* who takes care of the *shul* approaches him and asks if he can help him. ‘I’d like to pray here,’ the soldier says. ‘You a Jew?’ the Chinaman asks in surprise. ‘You no look like Jew.’”

Paul laughed loudly. Anything to make a sale, Joseph figured.

“I’m ready for a tour of the facilities,” Ilene said, standing up and cutting things short. “I’m sorry, but I have some work to do this evening and I can’t be late.”

“My pleasure,” Paul agreed. “There is nothing I enjoy more than introducing nice people like you to Meadowlands. Just follow me.”

For some reason, for a movie buff like Joseph, the name Meadowlands reminded him of Scarlett O'Hara's plantation, Tara. Visually, Meadowlands reminded Joseph of a wax museum. Though all of the residents of the place were elderly, they all seemed to have an Academy-Award winning make-up man who made them look twenty years younger than their age. The whole of South Florida was a little like that, Joseph reflected, as if the peninsula had undergone a geographical facelift. But here, at Meadowlands, the effect seemed more highlighted, because he wasn't used to seeing so many elderly people crammed into one place.

Once upon a time, at the beginning of his career, he had worked on a documentary expose about California nursing homes. Meadowlands, in comparison, was like the Fountainsbleu Hotel in its height. But the sudden realization that his parents were reaching the end of the line, no matter how well decorated and staffed the carefully planned environment seemed, shocked Joseph. It was hard for him to imagine that this was the place where his parents would live for the rest of their lives.

"Isn't it nice that they have gardening?" Ilene said to their mother, as they walked along following the men. "I'm sure you and Dad would be very happy here."

"Over my dead body," their mother answered. "I just wish your father would shut up. All of his life he has been trying to get people to like him with those stupid jokes of his, and by making them think that he's a millionaire."

"How do they know that Jesus wasn't Jewish?" Harry Friedman asked their tour guide.

"I don't know," Paul said. "How?"

"If he was Jewish, he would have gone to a bargain-priced, early-bird special, not the last supper," Harry Friedman replied with a laugh.

"That's a great one," Paul said. "Maybe we can sign you on here as one of our evening entertainers."

The assistant sales manager showed them the dining rooms, and the smaller, beautifully furnished party room for private family affairs. They took a short walk across the terrace to the busy shuffleboard corner, around to the heart-shaped pool, and over to the practice putting green of the golf course.

“I love the smell of freshly cut lawns,” Harry Friedman confided. “I used to sell lawnmowers. Before I retired, I had sixteen of my own outlets in four states, and three traveling salesmen of my own covering the entire northeast.”

“Does your father have to tell him our entire life story?” Lizzy Friedman whispered to her daughter.

After a tour of the library, health club, and indoor pool, they rode in an elevator up to the second floor to see a two-bedroom apartment. The residents who lived there were obviously expecting them, even though Paul made it seem like an impromptu call. They looked like the perfect Meadowlands couple, smiling, well-dentured, healthy and happy seniors, faces you would expect to see on a Meadowlands brochure.

“I was hoping to show you a vacant apartment,” Paul confided, “but we are completely booked at the moment, and the Meadowlands waiting list is pretty long. Luckily, the Levis are wonderful people and they are always happy to have perspective new residents take a look at their place.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Levi echoed. “We are always happy to have perspective new residents take a look at our place.”

Mr. Levi, you were a salesman too, like Mr. Friedman, weren’t you?”

“Over forty years in the furniture business,” the amiable fellow answered on cue. “Macy’s, Gimbels, Bloomingdale’s. I sold our line to all the top stores.”

“Lawnmowers,” Joseph’s father said, extending his hand.

The Levi’s graciously invited the visitors for cake and coffee, but Ilene said they were in a rush. So Mrs. Levi gave them a quick, gracious tour of the clean and tastefully decorated apartment.

“Look how much room there is on the terrace,” Ilene said with an overdose of enthusiasm. “Mom, you could have a little garden right here.”

“This was very kind of you,” Liz Friedman said, courteously thanking their hosts when the tour was over.

“Hope we’ll be neighbors,” Mr. Levi told them with a friendly wave.

“They’re a great couple,” Paul explained as they walked back toward the elevator. “They’ve been with us for over six years. Their kids come to visit at least twice a year from Chicago. We also have guest cottages on the grounds for big families like yours, so there is always plenty of room for the grandchildren.”

On the way back to the office, they passed by a building that Paul called the Alzheimer’s wing.

“I’d like to see it,” Joseph said. “I once made a film about nursing homes in California, and I’d like to see how Florida fares in comparison.”

“Well, this isn’t one of the planned stops on the tour,” Paul said with some hesitation, “but I suppose it would be OK. Maybe just you and your sister can have a look. I don’t want to startle our residents with such a big crowd.”

“We’ll stay here with Avi,” Mr. Friedman volunteered.

“Are you sure, Dad?” Joseph asked.

“We’ll be waiting.”

Paul led the way toward the building. He rang a security bell and waited until someone came and opened the door.

“Only staff members have the code to open the door,” he explained. “We don’t want any of our Alzheimer clients going for unaccompanied walks.”

The entrance led to a lobby with chairs, couches, and artificial palms, similar to the typical lobby of a small Miami Beach hotel. Aside from the security guard at the front desk, no one was around. Paul explained that at this hour, a lot of the people were up in their rooms resting. For others, it was time for their afternoon snack and activity. He kept talking as he led them into the dining room where clusters of elderly people sat at tables attended by both male and female nurses.

“One of the unique attractions about Meadowlands is that we offer the full gamut of retirement living. For people like the Levis, the couple we met, we have completely independent living. For others who need assistance, we have assisted-

living arrangements on a variety of levels. If someone reaches a stage of mild dementia in one form or another, we have a wing equipped to deal with almost any non-hospital situation, and for people with Alzheimer's disease, we have an experience and highly-trained staff to cope with their special problems. This way it works out that residents can stay at Meadowlands for the rest of their lives, moving from one stage to the next, as the case may be. They don't have to shop around for other nursing homes or assisted-living communities. If a husband or wife develops Alzheimer's for instance, we simply transfer the affected partner to our Alzheimer's wing when the need arises. That way the loved ones can still be together, able to see one another every day, even though they may be living in different quarters."

Joseph and Ilene nodded. What was there to say? The picture told the depressing story. The dining hall itself was attractive with plenty of windows, potted ferns and pretty floral wallpapers and curtains. The staff looked ample and diligent. The patients, or residents, were generally well dressed and groomed. Only the looks on their faces were heartbreaking. By and large, they looked like they had been lobotomized, with frozen expressions and spaced-out stares. A few chewed on the cookies that nurses held up to their mouths. Others sat listlessly as attendants guided their hands to put rings over pegs. An old man sat clutching a doll.

"I get the picture," Ilene said, turning away towards the door.

"Let's hope your parents never have to get to this stage," Paul said. "But if they do, Meadowlands has the very best solution for them."

When they got back outside, only their mother was waiting.

"Your father had to go pee, and Avi went with him," she explained.

"Why don't the two of you head back to the office, straight through the back door of the main building," Paul suggested to the brother and sister, pointing out the way. "One of my colleagues will give you all of the papers and medical forms that you will have to fill out as part of your application. I'll wait here with your mother."

“Let’s make it quick,” Ilene said on their way back to the office. “This place depresses the hell out of me.”

“You don’t like it?”

“It gives me the creeps. Especially the whacko ward. All it needs is Nurse Ratshit and Jack Nicholson to be complete. But for Mom and Dad, I suppose a place like this is just what they need. Like he said, it’s one-stop shopping. The big advantage is that once we get them here, we won’t have to fly down to Florida every week to take care of them. They have here whatever they need.”

With application papers in hand, brother and sister headed back outside where the others were waiting. This time only Avi was missing.

“He disappeared while I was in the bathroom taking a whizz,” their father reported. “With my damn prostate, I have to go all the time. I even have an empty bottle in the car in case I have to pee while I’m driving.”

“Harry, shut up,” their mother said. “Whatever-his-name-is went to look for him.”

“Do you like the place, Momma?” Ilene asked.

“Absolutely not,” her mother answered. “I only kept quiet because I promised I would. I have my own beautiful home, thank you. I don’t know about your father, but I won’t need a nursing home for a long time to come.”

Paul found Avi in the health spa, working out on a running machine, while watching an overhead TV.

“Maybe we should get Avi a set up like in the basement,” Joseph told his wife later when he spoke with her on the phone after driving everyone home. “A running treadmill with a TV sounds like the perfect combination for him.”

“Did your parents like what they saw?” Rivka asked.

“I think Dad can be sold, but we’ll have to drag my Mom there in chains.”

“I don’t blame her,” his wife answered. “What woman wants to give up her home?”

Joseph said he would call her later when they got back from having dinner with Uncle Herbie. When he returned to the living room, his parents were standing together at the front door, waving goodbye to Ilene.

“Where is she off to?” Joseph asked.

“She has an appointment in Fort Lauderdale to interview some rock star,” his father answered. “She says she’ll be back later tonight after the concert.”

“Want to bet?” Joseph commented.

“We’ll have dinner with Herbie without her,” his father replied. “Right now your mother and I want to rest. It’s been a draining day. I’m setting the alarm clock for another hour, not that I ever really sleep. I keep checking it to see if it’s set. But just in case I doze off and I don’t hear it, we have to leave here at exactly five o’clock to catch the early-bird special. I don’t like to be late.”

That was another one of his father’s compulsions – getting to appointments on time. He was an absolute stickler about it. If he had to get to the airport for a flight on Sunday morning, he would pack his suitcase on Friday and not sleep all Saturday night. And even though Florida doctors were invariably at least an hour late, Joseph’s father would get to the doctor’s office a full hour before his appointment. Maybe that was one of the things that had driven his wife crazy.

They met Uncle Herbie for dinner at a *glatt kosher* Chinese restaurant not far from Herbie’s exclusive “Everglades Estates.” After ordering a combo dinner for three, Herbie said he had something for his nephew in his car. Outside, he confided that it was just an excuse to speak with Joseph alone. Uncle Herbie and his father had a definite brotherly resemblance, only Herbie was a little taller, wider, and five years younger. Before retiring, he had been a successful corporate lawyer in Manhattan. He had one son, Eddie, whom Joseph saw occasionally in the city, who worked as a lawyer in his father’s old firm. Uncle Herbie handed his nephew an envelope containing a thousand dollars, saying, “Buy some presents for your wife and the kids.” Then he asked about their visit to Meadowlands.

“It seems like a decent place, but Mom isn’t interested,” Joseph told him.

“In my opinion, it’s the best place there is for them,” Herbie said. “It’s expensive, but so is their house and the club. Your Mom, God bless her, is a wonderful wife, but she’s not a well woman, and my brother can’t handle her alone. To tell you the truth, I’m not getting any younger myself, and I haven’t been the same since your Aunt Marsha died. I can’t handle your father either. He loves your mother very much, and he wants the best for her, but he is a nervous wreck. The last hurricane we had down here, he was afraid to be alone in the house, so they came over to my place, and he drove me crazy with his anxiety and worry. Finally, I had to ask him to leave, I couldn’t take his *meshugas* anymore.”

Joseph nodded in silence. He remembered the hurricane and the sound of his father’s terrified voice on the phone.

“I don’t know why five kids weren’t enough for you,” Herbie continued, “Even with all your religious nonsense, you still behave like a horny teenager, and with six children, you don’t need the aggravation of having your folks with you in New York. And your *meshuganah* sister, God bless her, with her *goyisha kop*, doesn’t know where she is living, or with who, from one day to the next, so California certainly isn’t the answer for them either. Meadowlands is the best solution. I was there to check it out myself. It’s a clean, well run place with good management, and solid owners, so it isn’t going to go out of business, and they’ve got all the staff and facilities you need. I know that putting parents into a home isn’t easy, no matter how fancy it is. I had to put your grandmother into a nursing home and it broke my heart, but that’s the way it is. Life is like a roll of the dice – whatever comes up, that’s what you have to live with. I know how much you love your mother, we all do, but when a person’s time comes, there’s nothing you can do to turn the clock backwards.”

Suddenly, Joseph heard his mother screaming from inside the restaurant. When he ran back to the door, she was standing by their table, yelling at the bewildered Chinese waiter. Avi and his father sat in stunned silence.

“This isn’t what I ordered!” she yelled. “I ordered Chinese food and this is some kind of dog food. I know someone is trying to poison me, but I’m smarter than all of you. I’m not eating this shit, none of it.” Then she turned on her husband. “Why

don't you defend me? Why don't you make them take it away. Do you want to poison me too?"

"Mom, please," Joseph said, hurrying over. He grabbed at her arm, but she shook herself away.

"Leave me alone, all of you," she yelled and hurried away toward the door. The other customers in the restaurant were speechless.

Joseph hurried out of the restaurant, almost knocking into Uncle Herbie. Once again he began chasing after his mother. Avi raced after him, and they both ran through the parking lot until they caught up with the her. Across the street, beyond a picturesque fountain and pond, the sun was beginning to set with a climaxing glow. "It's the witching hour," Joseph recalled. According to several articles he had read, the passage from daylight to night was a time of agitation for Alzheimer sufferers, often triggering a sudden a fit.

"I'm taking you home, Mom," he told her. "I want you to get in the car."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Joey, your son."

"You're not my Joey," she said. "My Joey doesn't have a beard. You're an imposter."

"Then let me take you to Joey. Please, Mrs. Friedman, get in the car."

"Where's my husband?" she asked.

"He's coming with us too. Come," he said coaxingly. "You'll see. Come with me to the car."

Joseph walked her back to the car, as if he were placating the temper tantrum of one of his little children. He nodded his head to Avi, signaling him to fetch Grandpa.

"*Mah habaya im safta?*" the boy asked in Hebrew, wanting to know what was the matter with his grandmother . "Why'd she yell at the waiter?"

“I’ll explain to you later. Just get Grandpa.”

His mother glared angrily at him and silently climbed into the back seat of the Buick. His father was already waiting outside the restaurant. Joseph waved goodbye to Uncle Herbie.

“Wait a minute,” he called.

A gloomy silence filled the car as they waited. In another minute, Herbie walked over holding three doggy bags of aromatic Chinese food. “At least take the food with you,” he said. “I asked them to throw in a bunch of fortune cookies for the kid.” Bending over, he kissed his brother on the cheek. “Be strong, Harry,” he said. “I’ll give you a call later after Hollywood Squares.”

Once again, Joseph took over the driving. The silence continued all the way home. Both he and his father were afraid to speak lest the smallest remark trigger another explosion. Avi broke open a fortune cookie and read, “Difficulty at the beginning brings complete success.” That must have been the cookie intended for him, Joseph thought. When they reached home, his mother hurried straight to her bedroom and locked the door.

“I’ll sleep in the TV room,” his father said, after she refused to respond to his pleas to let him into their bedroom.

Joseph put the Chinese food into the refrigerator. He didn’t have an appetite anymore. While he was speaking on the phone to his wife in Riverdale, he heard his father pleading with his mother to unlock the bedroom door.

The sound of his father’s sobbing broke Joseph’s heart.

“My dad’s a shattered man,” he told Rivka.

“I can imagine. It sounds just awful,” his wife sympathized.

“Maybe you should help him and call me back later.”

“*Tov*,” he said in Hebrew. “I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

“Please, Lizzy,” his father whimpered as he leaned in exhaustion against the door of their bedroom. “Please, sweetheart, please let me in.”

Joseph heard the noise of the television coming from the guest room. Too bad that Avi had to be a witness to all of this sadness, he thought.

“I don’t know what to do, son,” his father said to him. “Should I call the police?”

“Do you want me to break down the door?” Joseph asked.

“Maybe you should. I can get Freddie to fix it.”

Joseph stepped over to his father and put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Mom, can you hear me? It’s Joey. Come on, Mom. Please open the door.”

His entreaty was answered with silence. What other choice did they have? He shook his head in bewilderment and knocked on the door. “Mom, do you hear me?”

Finally, he asked his father to step back out of the way. With a karate yell, he concentrated his energy and gave the door a kick. Wood shattered, the lock smashed, and the door swung open. His mother was lying on the big double bed with her clothes on, fast asleep. As if sensing that people were staring at her, she stirred and opened her eyes.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Nine o’clock at night,” her husband answered.

She sat up in bed and looked around, getting herself orientated. “I felt so tired after that meal, I must have fallen asleep with my clothes on. Chinese food does that to me. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s all the chemicals they put in it. It’s funny. Even though they give so much, I still feel hungry.”

She stood up and looked at herself in the mirror, straightening her hair, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Noticing the door, she asked what had happened.

“The lock was jammed, so Joey had to break it.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“We tried to.”

“We’ll have to call Freddie,” she said.

Leaving his parents alone in the bedroom, Joseph returned to the TV room and once again phoned his wife.

“Mom was sleeping,” he reported.

“What do you think you should do?”

“Ilene thinks the retirement home is the easiest arrangement. Uncle Herbie feels the same. My father is so confused, he doesn’t know what to do. And my Mom isn’t in a position to make a rational decision.”

“What do **you** think?” his wife asked him.

“On paper, the place we saw is a possibility, but if Mom’s condition worsens, they won’t let her live with Dad. They’ll put her in a separate Alzheimer’s wing. He’ll be able to visit her every day, but otherwise he’ll be all alone. Sure, there are lots of other people around, but she’s his whole life. If he loses her, I think he will just withdraw into himself and give up, or go back to drinking.”

It was as if Joseph could hear his wife thinking about the dilemma in their house back in New York.

“Herbie won’t see them that much,” Joseph continued. “And Peachy certainly can’t be expected to help look after them at her age. And with six kids, we won’t be able to visit that often. If there is a serious health problem, it won’t be easy for me to commute from New York. So I think the best solution is to take them back with me, and set them up in a place nearby, so that I can watch over them. That’s unquestionably the best thing for them. The question is – is it the best thing for us? Do you think we can handle it?”

As if orchestrated from Heaven, at that very moment, Avi rushed into the kitchen, opened the fridge door, grabbed a Coke in a hurry, and raced back out of the room, not bothering to close the fridge door, so he could get back to the TV before the

end of the commercial. Joseph knew that his decision had to be shared by his wife. It had to be her decision as well. If he brought his parents back to New York, a lot of the burden was going to fall upon her. He understood that. Even without his parents to look after, Joseph and his wife had plenty of their own challenges at home with five growing boys and a baby girl on the way.

“Whatever you feel is right, Joseph,” she answered.

“No,” he said. “You have to agree too. Otherwise, if things get difficult, the whole thing will fall apart, and we will find ourselves in a super quarrel.”

“What are you worried about?” she asked.

“Let’s face it, sweetheart. With the kids and a new baby, you have your hands full already. And Mom and Dad are not the calmest people in the world. On top of everything else, I can’t expect you to put up with their problems. It wouldn’t be fair unless you agreed.”

“I am willing to try it, for you,” she answered. “Your parents have always been good to us. It’s the right thing to do to return their kindness to us. We can’t look after them by telephone if they are in Florida. If this has fallen into our laps, then it must be what God wants, and I think we should do it.”

Joseph breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s why I love you,” he said. “So that’s what we have decided? I am going to pack up their things and bring them back to New York?”

“It sounds like the best thing for them,” she answered.

“I think it’s the right thing to do,” he concurred.

“I’ll get the guest room ready tomorrow,” Rivka said. “Your parents can stay with us until you can find them some other arrangement.”

“Thanks, Rivka. You are the greatest wife in the world.”

He blew her a kiss and hung up the phone. His own hands were trembling. He sensed that bringing his folks to New York was the right thing to do, but he didn’t

know how his wife would stand up to the test. Lost in his thoughts, Joseph didn't notice his mother when she appeared in the doorway. She was dressed in a housecoat and had a happy smile on her face.

"How's my baby?" she said. "Can I make you something to eat? That Chinese food was awful. Let me pamper you a little. I hardly get to see you anymore. What do you want? A bagel? Some scrambled eggs? Let your mother be a mother for a change."

She came over and gave him a kiss. "My sunshine," she said. "Next to your father, I love you more than anything else in the world. Let me spoil you a little. Talk to me. Your father is sleeping. How is your wife and the kids? Do you like the sweaters I bought her? How are the boys? How is your job? Tell me what's new."

Obviously, she didn't remember at all what had transpired in the Chinese restaurant.

"Danny is going to have his bar mitzvah very soon," Joseph told her. "So you and Dad are going to have to come back with me to New York."

"When?"

"This week."

"So soon?" she asked. "Why didn't you tell us before?"

"I thought that I did. Maybe it slipped my mind with all the arrangements. That's why I came down to Florida. To help you and Dad pack."

"Well, it doesn't seem like much forewarning. I don't even know if I have a dress. I can't show up at a bar mitzvah wearing some ordinary rag."

"I'll buy you a nice dress at Bloomingdales in the city," he promised.

"My rich Bill Gates of a son," she said. "Thank God, your father can afford to buy me a dress. He would have squandered our money, trying to get people to like him, but I made him invest our savings so that we would never have to be a burden on our children. That's the last thing I want. You have your own life to live. You don't need our problems."

She opened the fridge door to make him something to eat. “Oh, look,” she said. “There’s a whole bag of Chinese food here. I guess we didn’t finish it all. How about letting me heat some of it up in the microwave for my favorite baby? That’s funny. There’s soup and egg rolls and chicken and meat dishes and rice, and even some fortune cookies, as if nobody ate anything at all.”

“They give big portions,” he said, walking over to her to give her a hug. Next to his wife and his children, he loved her more than anything else in the world.

Chapter Four

After speaking with his wife on the phone, and talking with his mother, Joseph was unable to sleep, he had so many things on his mind. How do you pack up two people's lives in a matter of days, he wondered? He had to get his parents' medical records in order, sell the car, put their house up for sale, pack their belongings, alert the post office of a change of address, make flight reservations, transfer their bank accounts, and who knew what else? He found a pen and paper and started making a list, figuring that Uncle Herbie could do all of the major follow up, like dealing with the real estate agent who would sell the house.

After praying the evening prayer alone, he walked to the guest bedroom to get his book of Psalms, hoping to read a few chapters to calm his nerves. Avi had fallen asleep during the movie "Citizen Kane." Joseph had seen the renowned masterpiece a dozen times in film school, studying it over and over again to master all of the revolutionary cinematographic and editing techniques that had helped make the Orson Welles film an all-time classic. Even now, with so many other things on his mind, he was captured by the director's mastery as he watched the famous walk down the mirrored Xanadu corridor. As if in sync with the movie, Joseph's father appeared in the hallway in his pajamas and walked, just like the old Charles Foster Kane, to the front door of the house. Checking to make sure that he had fastened the lock and set the alarm, he stood staring outside through the narrow window by the elegant mahogany door.

"Hey, Dad," Joseph said quietly. "It's after midnight. Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I'm worried about your sister," he said.

"If she went to a rock concert, she won't be coming back so soon."

"She doesn't have a key."

"I'll let her in," Joseph volunteered.

"You don't know how to turn off the security alarm," his father said.

"So leave it off."

“No. Not at night. There have been burglaries around here.”

“You go to sleep, Dad. I’ll wait up for her.”

“I don’t really sleep,” he said. “Either I’m up checking the locks, or taking a pee, or making sure that your mother is still in the house.”

Joseph gave his father a hug. It seemed strange that his Dad still had the same fatherly aroma that Joseph recalled from his childhood. In the whole world there wasn’t any other fragrance like it. It was simply the smell of his Dad.

It was the middle of the night when Joseph’s cell phone rang.

“Sorry to wake you,” Ilene said, “I didn’t want to call the house and wake up the folks.”

It was three o’clock in the morning. Like Avi, Joseph too had fallen asleep in the middle of “Citizen Kane.” Now an old Marx Brothers movie was playing on the insomniac screen of the television.

“What?” Joseph asked, having a hard time hearing her amidst the loud, rock music in the background.

“I know how Dad worries until we get home,” she said.

“That’s very considerate of you,” he answered sarcastically.

Ilene ignored his barb. “Listen,” she said. “I have a good chance to interview this superstar creep, but he insists that I join him on a cruise to the Bahamas tonight. He’s rented an incredible yacht, and we are sailing in another few minutes. So I’ll call you when I get back to Fort Lauderdale.”

“I thought you flew here to help me with Mom and Dad,” Joseph protested.

“Who set up the meeting at Meadowlands?” she answered. “I think it’s the ideal place for them. What more is there for us to do?”

“Plenty. I’ve decided to take them back with me to New York.”

“Don’t be a jerk,” she said. “That will totally screw up your life.”

“You’ve screwed up yours already, so I guess it’s my turn,” he answered.

His sister let out a scream as if someone had snuck up behind her and pinched her in the rear. “I’ve got to go,” she said, ending their conversation with an attack of the giggles.

Boca Raton wasn’t known for its miracles, but a miracle occurred in the morning. After hearing that Joseph was planning to transplant his parents that very week to New York, the psychiatrist’s secretary agreed to squeeze them in for a short, emergency meeting that very day.

Dr. Ellis seemed like a down-to-earth kind of guy, younger than Joseph had imagined, and genuinely sympathetic to Joseph’s predicament. Unfortunately, he had little to add in terms Mrs. Friedman’s prognosis. From Joseph’s description of the changes in her behavior, Dr. Ellis confirmed that it was probably Alzheimer’s. He explained about the mood-swing medications that he recommended, adding that it might be a week or more until they had an effect. He advised Joseph to find her a psychiatrist in New York to continue the treatment, to adjust medication levels if need be, or to experiment with different tranquillizers, since all people reacted differently, and because new medications were always appearing on the market. Kindly, he gave Joseph the name of a psychiatrist he knew in Manhattan. He advised that Mr. Friedman also find someone who could be in charge of his follow up, admitting that the psycho-pharmaceutical treatment of mental disorders like anxiety, depression, and compulsive fixations was largely a crap shoot, playing with different drugs and dosages until discovering the right combination. Finally, he wrote out some refill orders so that his parents would have a sufficient supply of medication during their transition to New York, and he included a prescription for a powerful tranquillizer for Joseph’s mother in case she became anxious or rowdy on the airplane.

“Good luck,” he said, shaking Joseph’s hand goodbye. “You are taking on one hell of a burden.”

Over the telephone, the secretary of his parents’ internist promised to send their medical records to Joseph’s address in New York. Their cardiologist, and his father’s urologist, agreed to do the same. So that end of things was taken care of.

Uncle Herbie, like Ilene, was skeptical about the decision to take the folks to New York, saying, “Why do you need the headache?” But he agreed that separating Mom from Dad would be a devastating blow to his brother, so he said that he wasn’t going to argue. He agreed to deal with the car leasing agency and find a real estate agent to put the house on the market.

Joseph made all of the phone calls on his cell phone while he was out of the house so that his mother wouldn’t hear. As far as she knew, they were merely packing some things to go to the bar mitzvah in New York, which was partly true since his son, Daniel, was only a month away from his thirteenth birthday.

Leaving Avi at home with his parents, Joseph drove to the closest Wall Mart pharmacy to pick up a month supply of medicines. He loaded up the car with empty cardboard boxes that he found in the store’s garbage bin, and stopped by the local post office to fill out a change of address, so that all of his parents’ mail would be forwarded to him. When he returned to the house, he found his mother working contently with Avi in the garden. His father was asleep in his easy chair. Suddenly feeling hungry, he put a plateful of unfinished Chinese food into the microwave. Noticing the fortune cookies, his curiosity got the best of him, so he opened one and slipped out the fortune. “Smart man with serious problem won’t find solution in stupid cookie,” it read. Crumpling up the paper, he tossed it into the wastebasket, remembering that a Jew was supposed to rely upon God for guidance, and not on the chefs of Chinese restaurants, no matter how kosher the egg rolls might be.

Both Joseph and Herbie agreed that the easiest thing was to sell all of the furniture with the house. His mother truly had done a masterful job with the interior decorating, so why break it up? And, as Herbie reasoned, they could ask for a higher price by selling it lock, stock, and barrel. His parents wouldn’t be needing expensive imported furniture in New York, and Joseph wasn’t interested in any family heirlooms, except for an old silver *Kiddush* cup and the *Shabbos* candlesticks that his grandmother had always lit, even though she hadn’t always observed the rest of the Torah commandments. As far as his sister went, she wasn’t the sentimental type to want any of the furniture herself, but Joseph figured he’d ask her all the same whenever she returned from her junket. The main things to

pack for the move were his mother and father's clothing, his mother's jewelry, and the boxes of old photographs, home movies, slides, and albums that he found in their bedroom closet.

He sat down on his parents' bed and started to rummage through the boxes. Among the discoveries were a tiny pair of his first baby shoes; another pair of circa 1920 black-and-white baby shoes that must have belonged to his father; his father's Boy's High School and Brooklyn College diplomas; and several bound volumes of U.S Army V-Mails that his father had written to his mother during World War II. At one time, before a flood in the basement of their New Rochelle house had destroyed four cartons of the neatly penned epistles, there had been over three thousand letters. Harry Friedman had faithfully written his newlywed wife three army V-mails every day during the three-and-a-half years that he had been stationed overseas in North Africa and Italy. What a love story, Joseph thought, opening one of the bound volumes.

They had eloped soon after Harry, a twenty-one-year-old college graduate, had been drafted. The ceremony was performed by a justice of the peace in South Carolina, where Harry was stationed in boot camp, waiting to be sent overseas to fight the Germans. The wedding album was filled with dozens of pictures of the eighteen-year-old bride, posing coquettishly in different locations around the army base, in the cheesy, glamour girl poses of the day - in front of a tank; saluting the flag; holding hands with her skinny, smiling, baby-faced husband in front of the Columbia County court house; and sitting atop a 1940 Buick with a flower in her hair. Though the newlywed couple didn't have a penny of savings, Joseph's mother seemed to be dressed in a different outfit and different shoes in almost every pose. It was easy to understand why Harry Friedman wrote his beautiful young wife three letters a day all the three long years that he was overseas. She was every soldier's dream. In his army uniform, Harry himself was a good-looking man, but judging by the number of pictures, his wife was the camera's clear favorite.

To please Harry's parents, on the soldier's last leave before shipping out, the young couple returned to New York to be married once again in a traditional religious service by an Orthodox rabbi. This time the ubiquitous camera caught

them happily embracing on a rooftop in Brooklyn. In this much smaller album, there were pictures of Lizzy Friedman posing on the beach in Coney Island, and strutting down the Boardwalk with Peachy, whose flowing blond curls rivaled her cousin's dark brown.

Lizzy Friedman spent the three-and-a-half years of the war working in a sweat shop on the Lower East Side, sewing army uniforms. Men consistently chased after her, but immediately after work, she would ride the subway home to Brooklyn where she lived with her mother. She filled her evenings writing letters back to her husband, and saved all of her earnings so that they would have a little financial nest to help them get started when he returned from the war. At the beginning of his service, Harry was working as a medic in a field hospital in Tunisia, so he wasn't in any real danger, but she worried about him all the same – he looked so skinny in the pictures he sent. “I look sick, but I feel swell,” he scribbled on a photo of himself in his medics outfit and backpack, adding, “I look like a jerk, don't I?”

After the war, Harry got a job selling cars with his wife's father who was a jack of all trades. Then, wanting to be independent, they moved away from Brooklyn and relocated in Syracuse, New York, where Joseph was born, and where Harry started to work for Sears Roebuck. Most of the photos from that period were pictures in the snow, the same glamour girl shots of Joseph's mother, this time bundled up in winter clothing, throwing snowballs, riding on sleds, and strolling proudly with a baby carriage. After a few years, the family moved to Hamden, Connecticut, where Harry Friedman started selling lawnmowers for Sears Roebuck. His area included Connecticut, New England, and all of New York. Lizzy Friedman found herself alone for most of the week with a growing boy and new baby girl, while her husband was on the road, peddling his lawnmowers, sleeping in a different motel every night, in some other town on the map.

It was when they were relocated to Massachusetts that his mother got sick. The Friedman's tried to keep the thyroid cancer a secret from the kids, leaving Nana at home as a babysitter during their more and more frequent trips to New York to see doctors. After exploratory surgery and trial medications slowed his mother down, Joseph stayed home after school to look after her, while his father was away,

traveling around New England and Upstate New York. The always outgoing Ilene shielded herself from problems at home by having a busy life with her friends, so Joey was his mother's main helper. "My sunshine," she called him. In compensation, when his father came home on Friday afternoons, he always brought home a present, sometimes a whole box of baseball cards, sometimes a new ball, or a professional glove. Joseph would always wait down the street in anticipation for the very first glimpse of his father's arrival and the decade-old Sears Roebuck car. After months of fear and uncertainty over the cancer, a new surgery technique miraculously succeeded. But it took his mother more than a year to recover, and every day after school, her angel of a son, Joey, was right by her side in the house, or playing by himself in the backyard, a close call away. From that time on, all the pictures of his mother showed her dressed, either in a very high neckline, or with a scarf covering up the scar of the operation. Wherever she went, even to the beach in a bathing suit, she always wore a scarf so that people wouldn't see what, in her eyes, was a horrible disfigurement.

In a vacation album, Joseph found photos of places he forgot he had ever visited. As the children grew older, and as their mother grew stronger and more confident that the cancer wouldn't return, and as his father's lawnmower franchises began to prosper and expand, the family took vacations to places like Lake George, the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame, Washington D.C., Miami Beach, and Puerto Rico. After Harry left Sears Roebuck completely and started his own successful lawnmower business, there were also second-honeymoon vacations for Harry and Lizzy in Paris, London, and Venice, and photos of Joseph's mother posing on hotel terraces that looked out over famous views. In line with the family's financial prosperity, instead of a scarf, she now covered the scar on her neck with thick strands of sparkling jewelry.

The last box that Joseph opened was filled with birthday and anniversary cards that his mother had saved. One was a big, oversized Valentine's card that his father had given his wife every Valentine's Day, over and over again, for the half-dozen years. On the cover was a happy heart, and on the inside was a poem:

"When we first fell in love, you made my life complete,
I remember love's excitement when the two of us would meet.

And the special joy of having you at my side.
You have been my helper, my inspiration, and pride.
With the passing years, my love for you has grown.
Even though it hasn't always been shown."

The words "my love for you has grown" were underlined in blue. The card was signed, "With love and kisses, your Harry," in shaky, unsure letters that betrayed his father's developing Parkinson's. It was a love story spanning 60 years.

"Joey, Aunt Peachy is here," his father called. "The security man just phoned from the guard house. She'll be here in a minute."

Everyone gathered in the driveway to greet her. Her Cadillac was equipped with a special crane to remove her wheelchair from the trunk. Joseph volunteered to do it instead, but she wanted to show them how the contraption worked. Like his mother, Aunt Peachy had retained her youthful looks. Every since Joseph remembered, Peachy had worn a flashy blond wig, so she looked closer to sixty than eighty. Nevertheless, the years had caught up with her, and a bad case of arthritis made strutting along the Boardwalk a very distant memory. But she was a fighter and didn't let her aches and pains keep her at home, where she lived alone with her two poodles ever since her husband had passed away, years before.

Right away she started crying. "I'm sorry, Joseph," she said, giving him a big squeeze. "I can't help it."

"It's OK, Peach," he said.

"I'm so glad you came to Florida. You've always been your mother's favorite. I'm sorry to say it, but your sister's a bitch. She never gives me a call."

"We are just getting Mom and Dad packed for the bar mitzvah," Joseph said, giving her a wink. "I'm taking them back with me to New York."

"Oh, I wish I could come," Peachy said, winking back. "A bar mitzvah! How wonderful. But my airplane days are over. And it's too big a *shlep* to drive by myself. You'll forgive me, won't you, sweetheart?"

“Of course, Peach, we understand,” Joseph told her. “We’ll send you a bunch of pictures.”

“Oh, I’d like that,” she said.

Joseph’s parents led the way into the house. Aunt Peachy declined the use of her wheelchair and walked up the driveway with the help of a cane. At the door, she paused and once again broke into sobs, holding Joseph by the sleeve.

“This maybe the last time I see your folks,” she said in a whisper. “I can’t fly anymore, so I won’t be able to visit them in New York, and who knows if they will ever come back here.”

She hugged Joseph and sobbed in his arms, then took a deep breath to regain her composure.

“I grew up with your mother, you know. We were like sisters. I was the one who introduced her to your father. I was with her at the playground the first time she saw him. He was playing handball with some friends. Your mother was only fourteen years old at the time, but she said right then and there – that’s the boy I am going to marry. She had me talk to him later to set up a meeting. They were sweethearts ever since. I don’t know how I am going to continue to get along without them.”

Once again she started to cry. Removing a tissue from her purse, she wiped away the tears. Joseph felt like he was going to cry too.

“You are such a wonderful child,” Peachy said. “Your mother and father were blessed.”

Apparently, Aunt Peachy wasn’t the only one who thought that Joseph was an angel, for God made another big miracle for them on the flight to New York. After packing up what he could, he stuffed a portion of the blouses and dresses and skirts and jackets and robes that were hanging in his mother’s spacious walk-in closet into two jumbo suitcases that he had bought for the journey. He filled another two smaller suitcases with his father’s clothing, and they were off. They rode to the Miami airport in the longest limousine that Joseph had ever seen in his life. Avi contentedly watched TV all the way on the portable Sony. But Joseph’s father was

nervous as hell, worrying that he wouldn't be able to breathe on the airplane. It was a phobia that Joseph hadn't encountered before.

"There's less oxygen at high altitudes," he insisted.

"You've flown before, Dad," Joseph reminded him. "The cabin is pressurized."

"What if something happens to the cabin pressure?" his father asked.

"They have oxygen masks, Dad, that pop out of the overhead compartment," Joseph assured him.

"I hate putting things over my nose," his father replied. "It makes me feel like I can't breathe."

Typically, Ilene phoned while they were cruising down I-95.

"I'll be at the house in an hour," she said.

"Don't bother," Joseph answered. "We are on the way to the airport."

"What a bastard," she cursed. "How could you steal them away without letting me kiss them goodbye?"

"You can kiss them at the bar mitzvah in New York," he said. "If you plan on coming, that is."

"Of course, I'll be coming. Just let me know when it is, and I'll have my agent keep my calendar clean. Can I bring my *shagetz* along?"

Ilene was talking about her third gentile husband, a successful real estate broker out on the Coast.

"As long as he doesn't mind eating kosher food, you can bring whomever you like – except your new rock star boyfriend."

"He isn't my boyfriend. For your information, I didn't let him touch me, and I got the interview anyway."

"Let me speak with your sister," his father said, reaching out for the cell phone.

"How are you, sweetie," he asked. "We are on the way to New York for Daniel's

bar mitzvah. I sure hope you can come. Please try to make it. Here, say hello to your mother.”

He held out the phone, but Joseph’s mother didn’t want to take it from him. She shook her head no. He responded with an angry, insisting look and held it out closer toward his wife, unintentionally pressing on the speaker switch.

“Hello, mother,” Ilene began. “You would have loved it in the Bahamas. What a yacht we were on.”

“I hate boat rides,” Lizzy Friedman said. “On our way to England on the Queen Elizabeth, I was seasick most of the way.”

“The interview I did will be in People Magazine,” her daughter informed her. “My agent will send you at copy to Joey’s house.”

“Why don’t you do an interview with your brother?” their mother wanted to know. “He works in films.”

“Joey is only an editor, and for a Jewish museum,” Ilene answered. “Nobody cares about that. It’s boring.”

At the airport, they got through check-in without any problems. Joseph’s mother was well behaved as they passed through security, but Joseph was apprehensive as hell, as if he were walking around the airport with a time bomb in his carrying case.

Because of his father’s anxiety over possibly missing the flight, they had left Boca Raton for Miami ridiculously early, so they had several hours to kill in the terminal. Avi conned his grandfather into buying him a new “Advanced” Game Boy, so the boy was content with the wait. In the meantime, Joseph followed his mother around the shopping arcade. On one of their passes down the main drag, he spotted his father at a bar, sipping a beer. “I hope it’s just his first one,” he thought.

The time bomb exploded when they were cruising over North Carolina.

“I want to go home,” Lizzy Friedman informed her husband.

They were sitting in the relatively empty, first-class cabin. Joseph and Avi had gotten seats in economy class, just on the other side of the curtain.

“We’re going to Joey’s home,” Harry Friedman answered in a placating voice.

“I want to go home to my home,” his wife countered in a threatening tone. “Now.”

“Please, Lizzy,” he pleaded. “Don’t start up on the airplane.”

“Don’t ‘please Lizzy’ me,” she said. “Let me out of this seat or I am going to scream.”

His wife was sitting by the window, precisely so she couldn’t wander off if he took a nap. “There is turbulence outside,” he lied. “No one is allowed to leave their seat now.”

“I’m going home,” she insisted.

“You can’t go home. We’re on an airplane.”

“You are a liar!” she said.

“Look out the window.”

She turned to the window, lifted the plastic shade, and stared out.

“HELP ME!” she screamed. “HELP ME! I’M BEING KIDNAPPED!”

“Oh, crap, stop it, will you?” her husband begged.

“HELP ME! HELP ME!” she yelled.

A steward, a stewardess, and Joseph arrived at the very same time. Passengers gazed over in alarm. The obviously troubled woman climbed up on her seat, stepped over her helpless husband, and dropped down to the aisle. Joseph grabbed her to cushion her fall.

“LET ME OUT OF HERE! I WANT TO GO HOME! TAKE ME HOME!” she demanded.

“It’s all right. My mother has Alzheimer’s,” Joseph whispered to the jittery flight attendant.

“Where’s the exit?” his mother wanted to know. “I’m getting out of here. I want a taxi.”

“We’re on an airplane, Mom,” Joseph reminded her. “We’re flying to New York. To the bar mitzvah, remember?”

“I don’t care about any bar mitzvah. You’re lying to me anyway. I don’t want to go to any New York. I want to go home.”

“Does she have some medication you can give her?” the steward asked.

“She took it already. It was supposed to sedate her for several hours. Maybe the trip has got her more uptight than usual.”

“Maybe another dose will calm her. Is it a pill? I’ll bring you some water.”

“I don’t want a pill!” his mother protested. “Why is everyone trying to make a sick person out of me? And you’re the worst of them,” she flashed angrily at Joseph.

“You are nothing better than a kidnapper. And your father is a bastard for going along with it. Well, I’m fed up with your schemes. I wasn’t born yesterday. Either you tell the pilot to turn around and take me back home, or I’ll open a door and jump out.”

With a burst of energy, she hurried toward economy class, shaking off the tacklers who tried to prevent her. Luckily, a stewardess was pushing a beverage cart up the aisle, blocking her way. Joseph caught up with her and grabbed an arm. “Please, Mom,” he said.

For the first time in her life, she spit at him.

CUT TO:

JOSEPH - HE STANDS FROZEN.

CUT TO:

CLOSE-UP ON JOSEPH LOOKING STARTLED AND AMAZED.

CUT TO:

EXTREME CLOSE UP - CRYSTALS OF SPIT GLISTEN ON HIS FACE.

Passengers forgot about the movie they were watching and gazed at this more exciting show. It was written in Jewish law, Joseph remembered, that if a son were giving a speech to a crowd of people, and one of his parents came up to him and rent his garments, hit him in the head, and spat in his face, it was forbidden for the child to react with anger. He had to remain silent and fear the King of Kings who had brought the distressing situation about.

“Maybe Grandma wants to fly the plane,” Avi said to his father. “I can arrange it. The pilot’s my friend.”

That was the miracle. Coincidence of coincidences, it turned out that the same captain who had allowed Avi to sit in the cockpit on the flight down to Florida was their pilot on the way to New York. They had encountered him in the terminal, and Avi had greeted him with a happy hello. Now he walked down the aisle, looking like a policeman in his captain’s uniform. With an air of authority, he immediately took command.

“Is everything OK?” he asked.

Joseph’s mother calmed down immediately. She had always had a great respect for police officers, doctors, lawyers, and everyone else who had a position of authority.

“Can my Grandma fly the plane?” Avi asked. “I think she’s bored.”

“Sure thing,” the captain answered with a smile. “Why don’t you all come up front with me?”

“Come on, Grandma,” Avi urged. “The pilot wants us to fly the plane.”

Captain Roberts reached out and gallantly took her hand. Maybe his mother thought he was Clark Gable and she was Vivian Leigh. With an almost shy look of embarrassment, without offering any resistance, she let the airplane’s commanding officer lead her back to the first class cabin. Everyone on the plane was staring at

them, as if they were a bride and groom walking down the aisle on the way to the wedding canopy. Graciously, the captain invited Mrs. Friedman into the cockpit.

“Would you like to fly the aircraft?” he asked.

The long panel of the complicated dials and instruments, with its myriad of flashing lights, seemed to have a sedating affect on the agitated woman.

“I haven’t driven a car in years,” she said.

“I’ll help you,” he said.

“That’s all right, captain,” she answered, regaining her composure and feminine charm. “I’ll leave the flying to you. Thank you for the offer and for the tour. It looks like a beautiful airplane, but I think I’ll go back to my seat.”

Returning to her usual self, Lizzy Friedman started back down the aisle. It was as if her demon took a parting bow, grabbed a parachute, and jumped off the plane.

“What about me?” Avi asked. “Can I be the pilot?”

“Sure thing,” the captain answered.

Joseph breathed a sigh of relief. That made it two miracles in one – his mother returned quietly to her seat, and his hyperactive son had something to keep him busy for the rest of the flight. It was also a miracle that his father hadn’t had a heart attack. And it was going to be a miracle if Joseph didn’t end up with an ulcer before this saga was over.

Chapter Five

The weary travelers arrived at Joseph's Riverdale home early Thursday evening. There were a few inches of dirty snow on the sidewalk, but a path had been cleared to the house. A snowman that Danny and Moshe had made had melted with the late winter thaw and was little more now than a carrot, a few pieces of charcoal, and one of Joseph's old hats.

"It's freezing here," Harry Friedman commented. "Who needs it?"

"We should have stayed in Florida," his wife agreed.

Joseph's oldest son, Zev, helped to *shlep* the suitcases in from the private van that met them at the airport. Yeshiva University was only a short subway ride away the Riverdale house, so it was easy for the boy to come home from school to give Grandpa and Grandma a festive welcome.

In contrast, the moody Shimon stayed in his room. Joseph heard him playing a Bob Marley song on his guitar in his bedroom upstairs. The delinquent youth hadn't been to school in a month. Not because he had been suspended like his younger brother, Avi – he simply didn't want to go. He said that his teachers were boring, that they didn't understand him at all, and that they didn't know anything about education or the psychology of the creative personality. He slept late in the morning, not bothering to go to synagogue. To Joseph's chagrin, he had even stopped putting on *tefillin*. Already, a year before, he had dropped out of yeshiva high school, and after many battles, his parents had reluctantly enrolled him in a regular co-ed high school, so that he wouldn't waste his days on the street. But that didn't turn him on either, so he stayed at home a lot, going out in the early evening and coming home late at night, if at all. He said he hung out with friends in the Village. Joseph had never caught him stoned, or talking to a girl on the phone, but he suspected that his son was no stranger to both. Joseph himself had been a young man in Greenwich Village, not so many decades ago, while he had studied film at NYU, so he knew firsthand what hanging out in the Village was like.

Joseph wasn't a psychologist, but you didn't have to be Sigmund Freud to surmise that Shimon's chip on the shoulder stemmed from a jealousy over his older

brother's success in school, and the happiness that Zev's Torah scholarship brought to his parents. Not able to compete with his brother in academic achievement, and not living up to his parent's religious expectations, the sensitive youth had declared an unspoken rebellion, as if to say, "Love me for who I am, or leave me."

Perhaps, Joseph reasoned, it was Shimon's negative way of attracting attention. At first, when the boy had showed a lackluster interest in being religious, Joseph had argued with him. Their heated encounters had caused his son to rebel even more, and to withdraw more and more from the family. Instead of joining them for *Shabbath* meals, Shimon would stay in his room and play his guitar. Or simply not come home for the Sabbath at all.

When all of Joseph's scolding and religious pontification hadn't yielded fruits, he took the advice of a friend who had a teenage son like Shimon.

"Leave him alone," the friend, a successful lawyer, counseled. "God willing, his cloud will pass, and he'll come out of it. But right now, as long as he's rebelling, if you say black, he'll say white and do the very opposite of what you want. Sure, it breaks our heart when our kids turn their back on religion, but a kid is a kid, and everyone has their own path to travel. Sure, we want to hand the Torah to them on a silver platter and teach them from our mistakes, but it doesn't work that way, at least not in this generation. They have to discover the truth for themselves."

Joseph immediately sensed that his friend was right. You can't force medicine down someone's throat when they don't want to take it. While Joseph had been an obedient child, he had experienced his own teenage rebellion too, wanting to break free from the shackles of expectations that his parents imposed upon him. That's what had led him to abandon the path of graduate school and to become a film major instead, taking off for Hollywood as soon as the opportunity arose, in order to put a continent between him and his parents. He wanted to live his own life and not have to be his mother's "sunshine" all the time. But it had taken a long time for him to apply that lesson to his own rebellious son, and the wounds of the conflict between them hadn't yet healed.

Daniel, the bar-mitzvah boy, rushed outside to give his grandparents a welcoming hug. He was a good-natured kid, generally quiet and un-demanding, and now that it was his turn in the spotlight, he was happy that his Grandpa and Grandma would be around to add to all the attention he was getting.

Only little Moishe found reason to complain. When Avi showed him the new Game Boy that Grandpa had bought, he wanted to know where his was? Right away, he started yelling and carrying on.

“Grandpa will get you one too, won’t you, Dad?” Joseph asked.

“Not if he acts like that,” his father answered with a tough expression.

“Then I’ll smash the one he gave Avi,” Moshe threatened, making a grab at the toy.

Avi gave his smaller brother a whack on the head and pushed him down into the snow. Embarrassed by the spoiled behavior of her children, Rivka grabbed Avi’s arm and pulled him away.

“Hey, I was only teasing,” their Grandpa said. “Of course, I’ll get you one too. I’m sorry I didn’t think of it at the airport.”

That quieted things down. Slowly, worried about them slipping on the snow, Joseph guided his parents to the house. He kept a watchful eye on his mother, worried that all the excitement might trigger an outburst. He had read that people with Alzheimer’s reacted adversely to change. Moving to New York, to a new home, to a different bedroom, and to a house filled with kids, wasn’t going to be easy. But, at least for the moment, his mother seemed happy to be with family.

Joseph quietly instructed his oldest son, Zev, to hang up the clothes that were in the jumbo-size valises. In preparation, Rivka had emptied the closet of the downstairs guest room, which she had cleaned spic and span. Zev returned and reported that there weren’t enough hangers.

“I think I packed hangers too,” Joseph said. “Look again.”

But his son couldn't find any. "I'll get some more tomorrow," Joseph said, feeling a little annoyed with himself. He wanted everything to be ready in place for his mother, so that the transition would be as smooth as possible. If her clothes were already hanging in the closet, it might make her feel more at home. In the morning, he had to rush off early to work, and he didn't want to ask his wife to go out and buy hangers, because she had to get ready for the Sabbath. Plus, Joseph wanted to involve her as little as possible in the care of his parents.

Joseph sent Daniel upstairs to call Shimon. The boy took his time, as if the arrival of his grandparents was no big deal. When he appeared, looking like a modern-day hippie in his sandals, Bob Marley robe, scruffy beard and Rastafarian curls, he wished his grandparents an indifferent hello.

"Give Grandma a kiss," Joseph ordered.

"Are you sure I won't catch fleas?" his mother quipped.

The youth walked over to his grandmother and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Your father had hair like that when he was your age," she revealed. "Whatever the hippies did, he had to copy. He wasn't always as holy as Moses, like he is today. I can tell you plenty of stories about him, oh yes I can."

Joseph snuck an embarrassed look at his wife. He had never told her details about his unholy adventures during his pre-Orthodox years. Now that his mother mentioned it, there was a similarity between his son's teenage rebellion and his own, when he had demanded the freedom to find his own way in life, refusing to blindly accept the life of bourgeoisie materialism that his parents had chartered for him.

"Why can't you cut off that mop?" his mother asked Shimon. "It makes you look like a horse."

After receiving a loving hug and a secret hundred-dollar bill handshake from his grandfather, the boy disappeared back upstairs to his music and cloud of burning incense.

Rivka set crackers and fruit juice on the dining room table and announced that dinner was on the way. Lizzy Friedman told her husband to bring the sweaters she had bought for her daughter-in-law.

“I don’t know where they are,” he answered, sitting down in a comfortable living room chair.

Wanting to make a good impression on his wife, Joseph hurried off to the guest room to fetch them.

“The house looks lovely,” his mother graciously told Rivka. “You have such wonderful taste. The first chance we get, I want to go shopping to buy you a house gift. We didn’t have the opportunity before we left Boca. Your husband packed us up in such a hurry. When is the bar mitzvah? Next week?”

“In another month,” Daniel, the bar-mitzvah boy answered.

“A month?” his grandmother remarked in surprise. “I had the impression that it was right away. What are we going to do in New York for a month?”

“We’ll be tourists for a change,” her husband answered. “There are plenty of Broadway shows and museums we never went to. What are you worried about?”

“I’m not worried, darling,” his wife answered calmly. “But you have never taken me to a museum in your life. And unless you hire a golf cart to drive you around, I don’t see you doing it now. I don’t want us to be a burden on our children, so we can stay for a few days now and come back in a month for the bar mitzvah.”

“I can’t fly every day,” Harry Friedman protested.

“Here are the sweaters,” Joseph announced, returning to the room. He had overheard the conversation and wanted to change the subject. Hopefully, his mother would forget that the bar mitzvah was still a long ways off, so it wouldn’t remain a point of contention.

Rivka was happy to receive the lovely cashmere garments. As if trying them on, she held them up over her big pregnant belly.

“I hope they aren’t too small,” Joseph’s mother said. “I forgot about your belly.”

“Did you need another baby?” Harry Friedman asked. “Catholics have six kids, not Jews. If you ask me, it’s crazy. After all, it’s not like you’re making the greatest salary to support them.”

“God will provide,” Rivka answered.

“Up till now, we have been the ones who have been doing the providing,” her mother-in-law replied. “I’m not complaining. I am glad we can help. But you two have to show a little responsibility.”

“Go blame the stork,” Joseph said, trying to make a joke out of the sensitive subject.

“Don’t feed us the stork crap,” his father said. “You’ve always been oversexed.”

Blushing, Rivka retreated into to the kitchen. “I’ll get dinner,” she said.

“Come on, Dad,” Joseph appealed. “If this is going to work, you have to use some tact.”

“Sorry, son, I was only trying to be funny.”

“I’ll go help in the kitchen,” Joseph’s mother volunteered, but Joseph grabbed her and guided her toward a chair. “Relax, Mom,” he said. “You’ve had a long trip.”

“You know I can’t relax,” she answered.

“That reminds me – it’s pill time,” his father chimed.

“Danny, bring two glasses of water,” Joseph called to his son.

“I’ll get it, Dad,” Zev volunteered.

Joseph walked into the kitchen, praying that the tranquillizers would keep his mother calm. The witching hour had passed in all of the tumult, but who knew when her dybbuk might strike again? His wife gave him a small perturbed look.

“Someday I want you to tell me about all of the girlfriends you had,” she said, sounding hurt.

“Give me a kiss,” he requested. “I haven’t seen you for almost a week.”

She slid away from his outstretched arms. “I don’t feel like it now,” she said, lifting a hot serving dish and carrying it off toward the dining room. “Grab some of the other stuff if you want to help.”

While they were getting dinner organized, a battle broke out between Moshe and Avi over the Game Boy. Zev had to break up the fight.

“He won’t let me play with it,” the little one complained.

“Why should I? It’s mine.”

Joseph grabbed his littlest son and dragged him away from his brother. “Grandpa’s going to get you one tomorrow,” he assured him. “But only if you behave. Don’t you remember what we learned about jealousy from the story of Yosef and his brothers?”

Avi answered first. “Yaacov gave him a coat with many colors and the rest of the brothers were jealous.”

“I wanted to answer!” Moshe protested, trying to break free of his father’s grasp.

“You can tell us what happened next,” Joseph said, giving everyone a turn.

“The brothers threw Yosef into a pit and then sold him as a slave.”

“That wasn’t a very nice thing to do, was it?” Joseph asked. “All because of jealousy.”

“It’s encouraging to know that we are not the first Jewish family with over energetic children,” Rivka observed. “Why don’t we sit down and eat dinner before it gets cold?”

While they were eating, Uncle Herbie phoned. He wanted to know that they had all arrived safely. Cutting the call short, he wished Joseph good luck and let them return to the meal.

Dinner passed without any mishaps. Harry Friedman told some jokes, and his wife politely asked Rivka about her parents, and applauded her on her delicious cooking. Like a polished lecturer, Zev gave an erudite *dvar* Torah on the holiday of

Purim which was only a week away. Shimon chose to stay in his room. After dinner, Joseph's mother insisted that Rivka rest while she and Joseph did the dishes. Grandpa watched TV with the kids, and Zev said good night and went off to study with a friend from the neighborhood. Shimon had already slipped out of the house without saying goodbye, undoubtedly heading off to Greenwich Village.

"What do you think?" Joseph asked his wife when they were finally alone in their bedroom.

"I'm already exhausted," she answered. "But I suppose I'll be able to manage."

"Hey, let's forget about my parents," Joseph said, getting romantic. "Right now I only want to think about you."

He switched off the light and gave his wife a kiss. "You know how much I missed you?" he whispered. "All the time I was away, I kept thinking about you. I get all of my strength from you. You're everything to me."

She let his words sooth her like a relaxing massage. She didn't know how much of his ardor was true, or how much of it was the Hollywood actor in him, but she wanted to believe his loving proclamations, so she let herself be swayed. But the romantic moment was ruined by the ringing of her husband's cell phone. It was Joseph's father, calling from downstairs. He wanted to know if he could leave on some lights in case he had to get up to pee in the middle of the night.

After the interruption, Rivka wasn't able to relax. She had the uneasy feeling that they weren't alone in the house. Their children were one thing, but parents were something else. Plus, with the baby kicking in her belly, she felt surrounded on all sides by strangers in her very own home.

"I'm going to shower and put on something more comfortable," she said. "Maybe that will relax me."

But when she returned to the bedroom, Joseph was already snoring, crashed out on the bed, flat on his back, looking like a beach mattress that had lost all of its air. Physically and emotionally drained, he had fallen asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, leaving his wife wide awake with only her thoughts to embrace her.

Chapter Six

The next morning, right after the early morning *shacharit* prayer, Joseph drove down the Hudson River Parkway to Manhattan and his job at the Jewish Museum on 92nd Street and Fifth Avenue. One of the benefits of working at the museum was that its employees were all dedicated, idealistic people, interested in Judaism and Jewish culture, and not out to make a name for themselves like everyone he had known in Hollywood. When he had left for Florida, he had been in the middle of editing a documentary film on the history of Russian Jewry. Since the head of the film department was scheduled to retire, there was talk that Joseph was in line for the position. He was the most senior editor on the staff, and it was unlikely that the museum would look elsewhere for a replacement. Joseph was hoping to get the nod, not only for the raise in salary, but more importantly for the creative freedom it would afford him. As head of the department, he would be deciding what projects to undertake, and for a long time, he had wanted to give a new, more dramatic Hollywood look to the museum's otherwise staid audio-visual section.

Back at the "editing table," which had transformed into a computer over the years, he was absorbed in building a sequence on the work camps in Siberia when the telephone rang.

"Get your mother out of my kitchen," his wife's angry voice ordered.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'll tell you what's the matter," she said. "I was feeling a little nausea this morning, so I went up to the bedroom to rest, and your mother took over my kitchen. When I came downstairs, she had already made the chicken soup for *Shabbat* in my best dairy pot. God knows how many *milchik* pots and silverware we will have to make kosher anew."

"I'm sure she was just trying to be helpful," Joseph tried to explain.

"I don't need help in the kitchen, and I don't need anybody cooking chicken soup for my family for *Shabbat*."

"It sounds like you're over-reacting, sweetheart," he said.

“Don’t sweetheart me. My feelings are my feelings, and I don’t have to apologize for them. I should have known that you would take your mother’s side the minute there was a problem.”

Joseph kept silent for a second or two, trying to figure out how to respond. He felt his wife was being irrational, but maybe that was due to her pregnancy. Or maybe that’s just what happened when there were two women in the same house. In the meantime, his computer screen “popped” and the computer went dead before he had saved his last half hour’s work.

“Oh crap!” he exclaimed.

“What’s the matter?” Rivka asked.

“My computer just crashed.”

“It serves you right for getting angry at me,” she said.

“Maybe you’re just over-tired,” he suggested.

Rivka hung up the phone.

“Uh oh,” Joseph mumbled.

“Computer problems?” a co-editor asked from his work place.

“My system just crashed,” Joseph answered. “Maybe it’s a coincidence, but it’s happened to me a few times when I was in the middle of an argument with my wife.”

“That ain’t no coincidence, brother. It’s happened to me too.”

“Well, Friday is a short day anyway,” Joseph reflected, starting to close up shop and go home.

“Thank God for *Shabbos*,” the other man said. He looked over from behind his computer, his face as black as the ace of spades. His name was Wally, a true lover of the Jewish people, a fierce supporter of Israel, with a Jewish wife and two Jewish kids who learned in the same Jewish academy as Joseph’s son, Danny.

“I’ve got to bolt,” Joseph said, grabbing his winter coat. “My parents are visiting, and you know how hectic things are before *Shabbat*.”

“I dig it, brother,” the black man said. “*Yom shishee* is the toughest day of the week. Maybe that’s why it’s called Friday. Cause that’s the day that husbands get fried. Even with Adam and Eve, the shit hit the fan just before *Shabbat*. You don’t have to say anything more.”

Joseph was so uptight, he forgot to buy extra hangers in the nearby hardware store before racing home. Luckily, because he left early, he missed the late afternoon traffic and made excellent time.

“Please God,” he prayed out loud as his Audi streaked along the picturesque riverside highway, “Please give me the wisdom of Solomon in knowing how to handle my mother and my wife. Give me the patience and understanding to remember that everything that happens to me in this world comes from You, and that everything is for my own good.”

Joseph bought flowers for his wife before he got home, like he did every Friday afternoon, in honor of the holy Sabbath. And just like every Friday afternoon, the house smelled like chicken soup, but his wife wasn’t in the kitchen. Instead he found his mother, wearing a kitchen apron, cleaning up the counter. Joseph had to admit, the kitchen looked a lot tidier with his mother in charge. But she had always had a fetish for cleanliness, whereas his wife had her hands full with the laundry, and ironing, and making sure all the kids bathed before the holy day. Even if they screamed bloody murder in protest, for his wife, bathing on Friday was an unbreakable rule, like a law that had been handed down at Mount Sinai – “Thou shall bathe the children before *Shabbat*.”

“I gave your darling wife a day off from the kitchen,” his mother said proudly. “I’ve got the fish baking in the oven and I already made the roast. Believe me it wasn’t easy. Your father and I have gotten used to TV dinners. I can’t remember the last time I cooked. But you know I’ll do anything I can to help out my son and his family. Here, give me those flowers and I’ll put them in a vase. Aren’t they lovely!”

Before Joseph could tell her that he had brought the bouquet for his wife, his mother swiped the pretty floral arrangement out of his hand.

“Go be with your wife,” his mother said. “I’ll finish up here.”

The door to his bedroom was locked when Joseph tried to open it. “Uh oh,” he thought, not knowing how he was going to cope with two door lockers at home.

“It’s me, sweetheart,” he said. “Open up.”

After a few seconds, the locked clicked and Joseph opened the door. His wife had retreated to the easy chair at the other side of the room. She was sewing what looked like a baby sweater to help calm her nerves.

“Come on, sweetie,” he said, hoping to cajole her. “It won’t happen again. I’ll tell her in the future that the kitchen is off limits. In her mind, she was only trying to help.”

“Avi drove me crazy this morning,” she answered, as if to explain why she had been so edgy. “We have to get him back into school.”

“Where is he?” Joseph asked.

“I don’t know. After I yelled at him, he ran out of the house.”

Joseph certainly had a temperamental family. Someone was either getting angry or running away. The main thing, Joseph told himself, was that he remain calm. Otherwise the whole ship would sink.

“I guess he got me started,” his wife confessed. “His craziness is just what I don’t need on Fridays. Then your mother. I suppose she meant well, but she does it in a nervous way.”

“Please, honey,” Joseph implored, trying to woo her. “You know I love you. Come on downstairs and let’s get ready for the Sabbath. Didn’t I race home the minute you called?”

Reassured that her husband still loved her and that she was Number 1 in his life, Rivka managed a small smile and shook off her cloud. What encouraged Joseph

was that even though his mother had succeeded in irritating his wife, it wasn't because of any abnormal behavior or outburst, but out of a genuine desire to help her out in the house. Maybe the new tranquilizer and mood swing medication were working, he hoped.

A look of surprise filled his wife's face when she entered the spic and span kitchen and saw the finished roast and baked fish sitting on the counter alongside the aromatic soup. With a woman's intuition, Lizzy Friedman had retreated from the line of fire to her bedroom, leaving the flowers neatly arranged in two separate vases.

"I'm going to take a quick shower," Joseph announced.

"Once your mother learns the difference between meat and dairy, I don't mind if she does some cooking, but please tell her to leave the flowers to me."

"You know how much she loves to garden. I suppose she couldn't resist."

"Instead of defending your mother, maybe you should go look for Avi," his wife suggested.

Joseph's father was sitting in the living room, reading the newspaper. "Hi, son," he said. "Getting ready for *Shabbos*? You know your grandmother, Shoshana, always lit candles on Friday. She kept kosher too. In fact, I put on *tefillin* until I went into the army. Did you know that?"

"You told me, Dad. Too bad you gave it up."

"It wasn't possible in the army, not that I was crazy religious like you. Sure, there were other Jews, but I don't think any were religious. We always had a nice Passover *Seder* with *matzah*, even when we were overseas. And there was always some kind of prayer service on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. I remember, the day before *Yom Kippur* in Tunisia, where we were stationed to stop Rommel's drive into North Africa, I went into town to buy a baguette with a buddy so we would have something tasty to eat after the fast. All of a sudden, a jeep flying the five-star flag of a brigadier general speeds by. It was Eisenhower. We held the baguettes to our shoulders like rifles and saluted as his jeep passed us. Eisenhower

looked at us in surprise, did a double take, and returned our salute.” His father laughed at the memory. “I told you that story, didn’t I?” he said.

“I think so, Dad. But it’s a good one all the same.”

“I want to thank you, son, for bringing us here,” his father said with a change of tone. “We enjoy being with the family. It gives your mother and me a sense of security having you around. Your wife is wonderful. I know it isn’t easy for her. Tomorrow, I want to drive into the city and buy her a nice gift.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Joseph replied. “I’m sure she will appreciate that.”

The *Heder* school bus brought Moshe home as usual. Daniel showed up with his backpack of books a few minutes later. Joseph told him to bathe his little brother and asked Zev to take a look around the neighborhood for Avi.

“Why should I have to bathe him?” Daniel protested. “He’s old enough to take a bath by himself.”

“I’ll do it,” Rivka said.

There was another missing son. Shimon. He hadn’t returned from his foray to the Village, if that was where he had gone. He hadn’t come back all night, and he wasn’t answering his cell phone. “Maybe he needs a shrink,” Joseph said to his wife.

“He probably needs more love from his father,” Rivka answered. “You give all of your attention to Zev.”

“Can you blame me? Zev listens to me and values my guidance. Shimon rejects every word that comes out of my mouth.”

“Maybe you should search for a different way of saying things.”

“I’ve tried a dozen approaches. He’s got a wall around him with a NO TRESPASSING sign on it that doesn’t allow me to enter.”

“You were a teenager once upon a time. Try to remember what it’s like. If you ask me, Shimon is a lot more like you than Zev. He’s your carbon copy.”

It was too heavy a discussion for Joseph, especially just before the Sabbath which was supposed to be a joyous day.

Normally, getting ready for *Shabbat* at the Friedman house was a big *balagan*. The word *balagan* was Hebrew for a crazy disorder. Friday afternoons were sort of like the old TV game show, “Beat the Clock,” where contestants had to perform a certain task before the time limit ran out. That was because when the time for the Sabbath arrived, a little before sundown, a whole list of activities was forbidden by Jewish Law. You couldn’t bathe. You couldn’t turn on a light. You couldn’t cook. You couldn’t do laundry or iron. You couldn’t write, or make a phone call, or travel in the car. So you had to prepare everything before the Sabbath arrived. All of the cooking and house cleaning and laundry and bathing had to be finished before Sabbath candles were lit.

From the beginning of their marriage, Joseph had advised his wife, in a very common sense way, that in order to get everything done without pressure and yelling, it was a wise idea to start Sabbath preparations on Wednesday, when the laundry could be done. Thursday could be devoted to cleaning the house and shopping for food. And Thursday night and Friday morning could be set aside for cooking. That way there wouldn’t be a thousand things to do come Friday afternoon. But for some reason that Joseph was never able to fathom, his wonderful, wonderful wife, saved everything for the very last day. With all of the yelling, and screaming in the Friedman house on Fridays, it was a miracle that their oldest son, Zev, had stayed religious. Shimon, on the other hand, had once remarked during a pre-Sabbath shouting match between his father and mother, “If this is what it means to be an Orthodox Jew, then I don’t want any part of it.”

So, whether his wife wanted to admit it or not, it was a big help when Joseph’s mother did all of the cooking. First of all, Rivka had a chance to rest in the morning, so she wasn’t overtired and edgy. Second, she had already done the house cleaning two days before to get the house ready for his parents’ visit. So she only had some ironing to finish and to make sure the little guys were bathed and dressed in their *Shabbat* finery. While she was attending to that, Joseph raced around in FAST MOTION, like Charlie Chaplin in the film, “Modern Times,” setting up the silver candlesticks, arranging the dining room table with a clean

white tablecloth and their fanciest dinnerware and crystal glasses, a decanter of sweet red wine, and two loaves of *challah*. He turned on all the lights that were needed for the next twenty-four hours, set the Sabbath clock to automatically turn them off at midnight, and heated up the evening meal on the electric hot plate, called a “*plattah*.”

Not that his wife had an easy job in bathing the kids and shampooing their heads. By the sound of Moshe’s screams you would think that someone was trying to peel off his skin.

“It isn’t a sin if the kids miss a *Shabbat* without bathing,” he had told her on several occasions, but she wouldn’t listen. That was the way it had been in her house, and, to her way of thinking, in the houses of the Jewish People for the last three thousand years.

A few minutes before candle lighting time, Zev came home, dragging Avi by the arm.

“I caught him in the park throwing stones at the ducks in the pond,” he reported.

“Go straight to your room!” Joseph yelled at the boy, raising his hand, threatening to give him a whack.

“Don’t just punish him,” his wife said. “Explain to him why throwing rocks is wrong.”

“What’s there to explain?” Joseph asked her. “You don’t have to be Talmudic scholar to know that cruelty to animals isn’t allowed.”

“Maybe he hasn’t learned that part of the *Shulchan Aruch* yet,” his wife said. “He’s only eight years old. Try not to be so nervous.”

“Me nervous?” he barked. “What about you? What about the hysterical phone call I got at work telling me to rush home?”

“I didn’t tell you to come home and don’t yell at me,” she warned.

Instinctively, he glanced at her belly. He took a deep breath. “I guess I am a little uptight,” he admitted.

“We both are,” she said. “With plenty of good reasons. So let’s try counting to ten, like we learned.”

He smiled and gave her a hug. It didn’t seem to him that the superficial tips they had learned in family therapy had any lasting effect, but to make his wife happy and to get by without an explosion, he played along.

“Maybe it’s because of last night,” she said with a feminine glitter.

“I was exhausted,” he answered. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s *Shabbos* tonight,” she said, hinting at the special joyous intimacy between husband and wife on the holy Sabbath night.

Seeing his wife and his mother standing side by side, lighting the Sabbath candles, brought a feeling of happiness and thanks to Joseph’s heart. Even though his mother hated his being religious, she had agreed to start lighting Sabbath candles to please him. The blessing was one of the few things in Hebrew she knew. Out of respect for the sanctity of the occasion, she had placed a white napkin over her head. Joseph kissed them both and wished them a “*Shabbat shalom*,” before hurrying off to *shul* with the boys. His father stayed at home because he didn’t feel secure about walking on the snowy sidewalks in the dark. Joseph didn’t press him, figuring it was better to have someone at home to act as a buffer between his mother and his wife, especially if it turned out that witching hour demons had the power to penetrate the peace and tranquility of *Shabbat*.

Things were still quiet when Joseph returned home from synagogue. His mother was in the kitchen, wiping the kitchen counter with a cloth. Rivka said she had been doing it for almost an hour, as if she were in some kind of trance. Joseph sighed, but it was better than an outburst, he reasoned. Some article which he had read mentioned that Alzheimer’s patients could sometimes be kept peacefully occupied by giving them simple chores to perform – something to keep in mind in the future, he thought.

His parents watched with smiles on their faces as Joseph’s family stood around the Sabbath table and sang the traditional song, “*Shalom Aleichem*,” welcoming the Sabbath angels to visit their home. Harry Friedman joined in, recalling all of the

words from his youth. Then Joseph put his two hands on the heads of all of his children, blessing them one by one. When he finished, he walked over to his father and bowed his head so that his Dad could bless him. He gave his father the honor of reciting the *Kiddish* blessing over wine, which he also still knew by heart. During the festive meal, Zev gave a lesson about the Torah portion of the week, and the family sang a medley of the traditional Sabbath songs. His mother sat contently, enjoying the rare family atmosphere, and the compliments that Joseph and even Rivka extended over her cooking.

In the morning, before going off to morning prayers, Joseph took out a stack of photo albums and gave them to his mother, telling her to pick out the pictures that she would like to have framed. He was hoping that the simple chore would keep her busy until he got home. In the synagogue, he found it difficult to concentrate on the prayers, worrying all the time about the delicate situation at home. To his surprise, he was called up to the Torah for one of the blessings. It was an honor that he hadn't received for almost a year in the large, over-flowing congregation. So he took it as a Divine sign that God was pleased with him for trying so hard to assist and honor his parents.

When he returned home, he found his mother in the living room, surrounded by dozens of photographs that were scattered all over the floor. With a vacant expression, she stared at a photograph that she was holding. When Joseph stepped closer, he realized that she was holding it upside down. Then slowly, in some kind of catatonic state, she dropped the picture to the floor and lifted up another. The photos that she had removed from the albums were discarded around her, like flower petals that had been torn off a daisy, as if she had been playing, "He loves me; he loves me not."

Quickly, before his wife could discover the mess, Joseph gathered the family pictures and stacked them neatly on a bookshelf, planning to return them unobtrusively to their albums after *Shabbat*. Gazing at her pathetic figure, he wondered if the medication that his mother was taking was too strong, turning her into a zombie. Joseph didn't want her freaking out with uncontrolled rages, but, on the other extreme, he didn't want her falling into an over-drugged lethargy. Dr. Ellis had said that when it came to mood swing medication, it was a game of trial

and error until the proper balance was discovered, so it was important that Joseph find her a local psychiatrist as soon as he could.

After the big morning meal, Joseph learned Torah for half an hour with each of his sons, so that each one would feel that he was getting his father's undivided attention. When he finished, he sent the little kids outside to play to make sure that they wouldn't disturb Rivka, who went upstairs to take her Sabbath nap. When his father and mother decided to take a Sabbath snooze also, Joseph fell asleep on the couch. When he awoke, his mother was putting on her coat and heading for the door, her handbag strapped over her shoulder.

"Where are you going, Mom?" he asked.

"I'm going home," she answered.

He sat up, groggy from having woken up in the middle of his slumber.

"Want me to go with you?" he asked, humoring her, afraid that if he tried to prevent her, he might trigger an angry outburst that would wake up Rivka.

"I know the way," she replied.

"Do you know the name of the street you live on, Mom?" he asked her.

"Don't try to embarrass me. You know I have a short term memory problem."

"Well what city do you live in? I'm sure you remember that."

"New Rochelle," she answered.

His parents hadn't lived in New Rochelle for more than ten years.

"I'll get a jacket," he said.

His mother didn't wait for him. He caught up with her as she was heading down the block. It was a sunny day with a chilly, brisk wind blowing in from the Hudson.

"Let's walk this way," he said, guiding her toward the nearby park. He figured that the exercise would be good for her, releasing whatever pent up frustrations she

had. She walked in a determined manner, as if she knew where she was headed. “You want to sit on a bench and watch the ducks in the pond?”

“I don’t have the time. I want to get home before dark.”

“What about Dad?” he asked her.

“He’ll drive home when he’s ready,” she said.

He followed her along the main path that cut through the verdant park. Non-Jewish kids from the neighborhood played football on a clearing of grass. As they reached the far end of the park and the adjoining boulevard, a friend of Joseph, Artie Waldman, stood up from a bench where he was sitting with his wife and a baby carriage.

“*Mazel tov!*” Joseph greeted him. “Sorry I couldn’t make the *brit*. I was away in Florida.”

“I was looking for you,” his friend replied. “Rabbi Kepinsky was the *sandek*. I wanted to get you a blessing.”

Rabbi Kepinsky was a well-known Rabbi from Brooklyn. It was truly an honor that the elderly scholar had come out to Riverdale to hold the child in his lap when the circumcision was performed.

“Here’s the little star,” Artie said. “We named him Lev Aryeh, after my wife’s great grandfather.”

Artie lowered the hood of the carriage to let Joseph see the baby.

“Watch out for the wind,” his wife warned.

The only thing Joseph could see was a tiny blue ski cap sticking out from a bundle of blankets. When he straightened up, he noticed that his mother was missing.

“Oh, shit,” he thought to himself in a panic.

Gazing around, he spotted her walking along the street at the far end of the park.

“Got to catch up with my Mom,” he said, racing off.

“*Shabbat shalom*,” Artie called. “My brother sends his blessings from Israel!”

His brother had just moved to Israel with his wife and three kids. “Lucky guy,” Joseph thought, running as fast as he could after his mother. To his horror, he watched as she stepped into line at a bus stop and boarded a bus. Joseph screamed out and raced with the wind, but the bus door closed and the vehicle resumed its journey.

“Stop the bus!” he hollered, holding up his arm in a futile gesture. Like an Olympic sprinter, he ran along the sidewalk and bolted through the red light at the intersection as horns blared and car brakes screeched around him. He felt his skullcap fly off his head, but he didn’t stop to retrieve it. The next bus stop was another full block away. Ignoring the pounding in his heart, he ran after the bus with all of his might. With a final burst of adrenaline, he reached the bus stop just before the last passenger boarded. Joseph jumped onto the vehicle just before the door closed. Grasping on to a handrail, he realized that he was riding on a bus on *Shabbat*! It was the first time he had committed a glaring infraction like that since he had turned religious. Now wasn’t the time for a Talmudic inquiry, but since his goal was to rescue his sick mother, his action could be considered a matter of “*pekuach nefesh*,” of saving a person’s life, which made violating the Sabbath, not only permissible, but even a necessity. Luckily, his *kippah* had blown off his head during his sprint, so no one could tell he was an Orthodox Jew. The driver looked at him, waiting to be paid, but, of course, Joseph didn’t have any money.

“My mother,” he began to explain, too out of breath to talk.

“Hey, you didn’t pay!” the driver called as Joseph walked down the aisle.

His mother was sitting by the window, next to a black man. “Come on, Mom,” Joseph said to her. “We’ve got to get off.”

“Get away from me, you monster,” she shot back with that wolverine glare in her eyes.

“Please, Mom,” Joseph pleaded. “I’m taking you home.”

“Police!” his mother shouted. “Someone call the police!”

“Do you know this guy, lady?” the black man sitting next to her asked.

“He’s been chasing after me, that’s all I know,” his mother answered.

The black man stood up, all seven feet of him. “Let’s go, midget,” he said, grabbing Joseph by the back of his collar. As if they were working together, the bus driver pulled over to the side of the road and opened the rear door as Joseph was being dragged to the exit. Passengers stood up to watch. “Pervert!” a woman yelled out.

“She’s my mother!” Joseph tried to explain.

With a no-nonsense shove, the basketball player sent Joseph tumbling out of the bus down to the sidewalk.

Sitting up on the pavement with a bunch of bruises and bangs, Joseph watched the bus disappear down the boulevard on the way to Manhattan.

“Oh shit,” he groaned.

His first thought was to call the police, but he didn’t have any money on him, because carrying money on the Sabbath was forbidden. So he decided to make the long jog to the nearest police station. When he got there, he reported the incident, informing them of his mother’s Alzheimer’s and the number of the bus line, so that they could track the route it had taken. He provided whatever information he could about her appearance and told them that he would bring a photograph to the station after the conclusion of the Sabbath. The woman officer offered to have one of his men drive Joseph home in a police car, saying that the sooner they got the picture the better. Once again, Joseph was faced with a halachic dilemma concerning the fine points of Jewish law, but since his mother’s life could possibly be in danger, and since he himself wouldn’t be driving the car, he decided that it was proper, given the circumstances, to violate the prohibition against driving on the Sabbath. So after making sure that a city-wide alert went out on his mother, he let an officer of the New York City Police Department drive him home in a blue and white cruiser, the colors of Israel, he thought.

When the police car slowed to a stop in front of his home, Joseph let the policeman open the driver’s door first, so that Joseph wouldn’t be the one to turn on the light

in the vehicle. Avi and Moshe came running when they saw their father emerge from the vehicle.

“Did you get arrested, *Abba*?” Avi asked.

“*Abba* got arrested!” Moshe shouted.

The neighbor from across the street looked over with a curious glance as he hurried off to synagogue for the afternoon *mincha* prayer.

“*Emma, Emma!*” Avi yelled, calling for his mother as he raced toward the house.

“*Abba’s* been arrested!”

Rivka stood in the hallway with a bewildered look on her face as her husband entered the house with a policeman.

“I wasn’t arrested,” Joseph informed her.

“What’s happened to your mother?” his father asked with a frightened, trembling look.

“She took a bus ride into the city, that’s all,” Joseph answered in a calm, reassuring tone.

Unsteadily, his father lowered himself into a chair. “A bus ride into the city? She’ll get lost.”

“That’s why I called the police. They are looking for her, don’t worry. I just want to give them a photograph, that’s all.”

“That’s all?!” Harry Friedman exclaimed. “To you everything is ‘That’s all.’ How the hell did you screw up and let her get on a bus?”

Joseph grabbed the stack of photographs that his mother had pulled out of their albums earlier in the day and searched for a picture of her.

“How come you drove in a car on *Shabbat*, *Abba*?” Avi wanted to know.

“It’s *pekuach nefesh*,” Danny told him.

“What’s that?” Moshe asked.

“My heart’s beating a mile a minute,” their grandfather said. Indeed, Harry Friedman looked paler than normal.

“It’ll be OK, Grandpa,” Zev assured him. “I’m sure this kind of thing occurs every day, isn’t that right, officer?”

“Sure thing,” the cop answered. “We’ll have her back here in no time. No sweat. But you’re gonna have to keep a better eye out for her in the future.”

Joseph handed him a recent photograph of his mother, and the cop promised to be in touch.

“It’s time for *mincha*, Dad,” Zev reminded him.

“I’ll pray at home,” he said, wanting to keep an eye on his father, who kept repeating, “Oh my God. Now what are we going to do?”

Joseph noticed that his wife was staring at him with an expression that said, “Don’t you think this is getting a little out of hand?”

Before praying, he sent Danny off to the synagogue, telling him to have Zev ask the Rabbi if they could answer the phone, in case it was the police calling about Grandma.

“You bet your sweet ass I’m going to answer the phone,” his father said. “I don’t need any rabbi’s permission.”

As it turned out, Zev returned from the synagogue with the Rabbi’s OK, but the phone didn’t ring until after *Shabbat* had ended. The police informed Joseph that a taxi driver had brought an elderly woman identifying herself as Elizabeth Friedman to the Mount Sinai Hospital emergency room in a confused condition. Physically, she was fine.

Joseph’s father insisted in coming along to the hospital, which was located a short walk from Joseph’s work at the Jewish Museum. “Thank God, she’s OK,” he said as they drove through the night toward the magical Manhattan skyline. “I’d be lost without her.”

Joseph was deep in thought. First thing, he had to find a new psychiatrist for his mother, and do some homework about hiring live-in help. Both in Florida and New York, he had seen lots of old people with Philippine or Haitian workers. At least that way, he wouldn't feel that he had to watch over his mother twenty-four hours a day.

After parking the car in the hospital's lot, Joseph started to rush toward the emergency room, but he remembered he had to wait for his father. Seemingly overnight, his Dad had turned into a frightened old man. Instead of walking, he shuffled. It occurred to Joseph that a round-the-clock companion might be good for his father too.

Mount Sinai was certainly a fitting name for the hospital, Joseph reflected, taking his Dad by the arm. It was on Mount Sinai that God had given the Torah to Moses. On the Tablets of Law, the fifth commandment stated, "Honor thy father and thy mother." Commandments between man and God were written on one of the Tablets, while commandments between man and his fellow man were written on the other. That being the case, the Sages of the Talmud asked the question, why does the commandment of honoring parents appear on the Tablet pertaining to man's relation with God? And they answer, because it is precisely through honoring one's parents that a person comes closer to his Maker.

Joseph spotted his mother across the busy emergency room. She was sitting restlessly on a chair, looking like she was ready to bolt. Standing next to her was a uniformed security guard. Seeing her husband and son, she stood up and began to walk their way.

"It's about time you got here," she said with a look of vexation. "I'm being held like a prisoner. This is the most outrageous thing that has ever happened to me in my life. Where do they get the nerve?"

Harry Friedman gave his wife a joyful hug. "Thank God, you're all right, honey" he said. "Thank God you're all right."

For the time being, it seemed that her demon had fled. The young internist on duty at the desk told Joseph that his mother's pulse and blood pressure were fine. The

EKG was within standard limits for her age, with a little arrhythmia that they knew about already. “She’s just a little disoriented, that’s all,” he concluded.

“I just brought my parents from Florida to live in New York,” Joseph told him.

“That could explain her confusion,” he said.

“And she has Alzheimer’s.”

“That explains a lot more.”

“I want to get out of here already,” his mother called out.

“We’re going, honey,” her husband assured. “Joseph is just finishing up with the doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” she answered. “I need a psychiatrist for having agreed to come to New York when the bar mitzvah is still a month away. Let’s go, or I’ll take a cab by myself,” she threatened.

Joseph noticed that her handbag was missing. When he asked her about it, she said that she didn’t remember.

“We will have to cancel her American Express card as soon as we can,” Harry Friedman noted.

“What else did she have in the bag?” Joseph asked him.

“Her identification, her driver’s license which she hasn’t used for years, maybe some cash. I have her jewelry in my briefcase at home.”

“Did she have a check book?”

“No, your mother doesn’t write checks.”

“Your father keeps me dependent upon him like a baby so that he can control what I do,” his mother injected.

It turned out that a taxi driver had spotted her on a street corner in Harlem. Sensing that she was lost, he stopped and helped her into his cab. “Harlem isn’t the safest place in the world for an old lady like your momma,” the cabbie told Joseph later,

when they spoke on the phone. He said he didn't remember seeing her with a handbag. "When I asked her where she wanted to go, she couldn't give me an answer. Finally, she said the Boca Raton Manor Club, and some street address that I never heard of. When you drive a cab in New York City for as long as I've been driving, you get to know personalities. I sensed that something was a little strange with your mother, if you will pardon my French. So I drove her to Mount Sinai and walked her into the emergency room."

Joseph thanked him profusely and told him to phone him at the museum during the week so that he could pay him for the fare. The cabbie told him to forget it, saying he was happy to do a good deed. "Just keep a better eye on your momma," he said.

Before they left the emergency room to take care of the payment at the cashier's, the internist suggested that Joseph get a special ID bracelet for his mother with all of the necessary information on it in case she got lost. He said that they even had bracelets on the market with radar tracking devices to locate wandering loved ones. Joseph wanted to ask him some more questions, but his father interrupted their conversation.

"We have to cancel the credit card," he insisted nervously. "If someone stole it, he could be running up a fortune."

"OK, Dad, we'll take care of it," Joseph assured him.

"When?" his father wanted to know.

While they were still in the emergency room lobby, Joseph pulled out his cell phone.

"Who are you calling?" his father anxiously asked.

"Rikva. I want to tell her that everything is all right."

"What about American Express? I think you should call them first."

Joseph could sense his father's increasing irritability. It certainly seemed out of proportion to the situation. True, the card had to be canceled, but his father's whole body was shaking, as if there were some immediate threat to his life. Maybe all of

the uncertainty and tension had triggered his compulsive obsessive anxiety syndrome, or whatever it was called.

“OK, Dad,” he said. “We’ll take care of it now.”

He sat them down on a bench in the hospital lobby and pulled out his own American Express credit card, which was on the same account as his parents, a situation his father had set up as a back-up if Joseph ever ran out of cash.

“What are you doing?” his father wanted to know.

“I’m going to phone them. Their customer service number is written on the card.”

“We can do it from your home,” his mother said. “Cell phone calls cost a lot of money.”

“It’s a toll free number,” Joseph replied.

He navigated through the automatic answering system until he reached a human being, then handed the phone to his father.

“You talk to them,” his father insisted.

“You’re the account holder,” Joseph said.

“I can’t deal with it now. I’m too uptight. Tell them that you are me.”

His father’s anxiety was making Joseph nervous himself. As if they hadn’t had enough excitement for the day, just then an ambulance screeched to a stop outside with its siren blaring. In a matter of seconds, a team of medics rushed by with a stretcher and a man punctured with bullet wounds.

Before accepting the request, the credit-card agent sitting in Mexico City said she needed to ask a few questions for security purposes.

“Speak up,” Joseph told her in a cranky, octogenarian voice . “I’m an old man.”

“We need to know your social security number, Mr. Friedman,” she said in her Spanish accent.

“My social security number? You think I remember?” Joseph replied, motioning to his father to provide the information. He repeated the number as his father reeled off the numbers by heart. “The date of my birth?” Joseph repeated loudly, giving his father the clue. “My street address? What is this, an FBI investigation?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Friedman, this is just company rules to protect our clients.”

Joseph repeated the Florida address that his father told him. Passing the test, he reported the stolen card and had it canceled. The agent promised to send out a new card immediately. Joseph thought to tell her not to bother, but he didn’t want to get his mother started on a new tangent, so he figured he simply wouldn’t activate it when it arrived in the mail.

“How would you two like to go to a movie?” Joseph asked his parents when they were pulling out of the hospital parking lot. He was hoping to keep them busy for a few hours before taking them home.

“Your mother and I don’t like movies anymore,” his father answered. “They’re too noisy.”

“Then how about catching a Broadway show?”

“It’s a waste of money,” his mother replied.

“I think Jackie Mason’s one-man act is still running.”

“I’ve heard all of his jokes,” his Dad responded.

“He’s got some new ones, I’m sure,” Joseph insisted.

“I don’t have the patience anymore to sit in a theater,” Harry Friedman said.

“We can drive down to the Village and listen to some jazz,” Joseph suggested, thinking he might spot his son Shimon in some bar or cafe. “You used to like doing that.”

“Years ago maybe,” his father answered.

“Ever since your father’s stopped drinking, he’s become a real bore,” his mother chirped from the back seat.

“That’s the girl I love,” Harry Friedman countered. “Back to your old sweet self.”

It was George Burns and Gracy Allen all over again, Joseph thought, accustomed to his parents’ sarcastic marital banter.

“Maybe there’s a night game in the Bronx,” he suggested.

“Baseball doesn’t interest me anymore either,” his father answered.

“Nothing interests your father anymore. Now do you see what I have to put up with?”

They drove a block in silence. As if by osmosis, Joseph could tell that his father was getting more and more uneasy.

“Let’s just go home already,” his father said. “I’m drained.”

That was the exact place that Joseph didn’t want to take them. He could tell that his wife was growing uptight with the new situation, and he wanted to give her a breather. If she were to blow up, the whole arrangement would be over before it began. So he called her on his cell phone and told her to get ready. He was taking her out to a movie. His parents would babysit for the kids.

“You think your parents are up to it?” she asked him later, after saying goodnight to the kids and heading outside to the car.

“Zev is at home,” Joseph assured her. He had given the boy twenty bucks on the sly to make sure he stayed around to watch over his brothers and his grandparents. He was a good kid, and he would have volunteered to babysit anyway, but Joseph wanted to make double sure.

“Can’t you at least take off that stupid beret?” Rivka asked her husband. “You’re always the only one in the theater with a hat.”

He wore the beret to hide his *yarmulke*, so that people wouldn’t know that he was an Orthodox Jew, considering there weren’t many holy movies on the market. To humor his wife, Joseph still took her out to the cinema, but he far preferred watching DVD’s at home. Because he had discovered religion in such a sudden, joyous manner, he was more zealous than his wife, who had grown up in a

religious environment from her birth. Plus, Rivka's upbringing was what they called "Orthodox Lite." Along with his body, her father's faith had been damaged by his car accident, something that influenced all of the family.

For the first time in his life, Joseph fell asleep in a movie theater. Rivka gave him a poke in the side after his very first snore. "Please don't become an old man like your father," she whispered.

The film was the kind of silly romances that she adored and he abhorred. Once upon a time, when movies were still movies and not merely special effects, actors like Spencer Tracy, Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, and Gary Cooper could make a love story seem real, but, in Joseph's opinion, the paperweight actors of today were a bore. Plus lead actresses invariably had a problem with staying dressed, causing Joseph to keep closing his eyes during the immodest scenes in the movie. So not having enjoyed his full *Shabbos* nap that afternoon, the emotionally drained husband simply drifted off to sleep during one of the film's intimate episodes.

Rivka gave him a kick to wake him.

"I've seen enough," he whispered in her ear. "I'll meet you in the lobby when it's finished. Anyway, I want to call home to see what's going on."

Standing up, he edged his way out of the crowded row and followed the tiny lights on the floor up the aisle to the cinema's exit, leaving his wife to watch the romance alone.

Chapter Seven

There were two very large Orthodox synagogues in Joseph's Riverdale community, both in easy walking distance of his home. During the week, in the *shul* where he was a member, the first morning *minyan* started at six. After that, there were prayer services at six-thirty, seven, and eight, alternating between the main synagogue and the smaller, downstairs worshipping hall. Morning *shacharit* services in the other, somewhat smaller synagogue, were held on the half hour until eight-thirty. On Sundays, both synagogues had a late morning *minyan* at nine, followed by a lavish bagel and lox breakfast.

Over the next two days, Joseph had a chance to ambush a handful of physicians as they were folding up their prayer shawls and *tefillin*. According to his list, he had to find an internist, a cardiologist, a urologist, a neurologist, a dermatologist, a gastro man, a dentist, and a shrink. Since there were literally dozens of doctors in the neighborhood, many of whom he knew on a first name basis from *shul*, he was able to make considerable progress. Each physician told him to leave word with his secretary, saying that the doctor had stipulated that Mr. and Mrs. Friedman be given an emergency appointment that very week. When it came to the psychiatrist, Joseph decided to contact the one that Dr. Ellis had recommended during their brief meeting in Boca.

When he got home Sunday morning, he went straight to the kitchen to make sure that Zev had brought fresh bagels and lox from the local bakery. Opening the refrigerator, he had a spooky surprise. Sitting on the top shelf was his father's electric shaver. His mother must have absentmindedly placed it there, without any rhyme or reason.

"Hi, honey," Rivka said.

Joseph jumped in surprise, as if she had purposely snuck up behind him.

"What are you doing with an electric razor? Are you thinking of shaving?" she asked.

"It's my father's," he said, closing the refrigerator door.

“You’d probably agree to shave of your beard for your mother, but you would never do it for me.”

“Do you want me to?” he asked.

“Sometimes. Just to see how you’d look.”

“Well, I’m not going to shave off my beard for either of you, so like the song says, ‘Nobody wins.’”

“You know, whenever your mother is here, I feel I have to compete for your attention.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said.

“That’s the way I feel,” she insisted.

“Look, they just came all the way from Florida. I have to get them set up with a thousand new things. Right now, it’s a big hassle, I know. And I have to give them a lot of attention, because they are going through a difficult time in their lives. But I took you out to a movie last night, didn’t I?”

“You fell asleep in the middle,” she reminded him.

“So what? People don’t talk to each other in the middle of a movie. What difference does it make?”

“It’s just a lousy feeling when your date falls asleep on you.”

“Your date? We’ve been married almost twenty years.”

“What’s the matter with a little romance?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Would you like a little now?” Setting the razor on the kitchen counter, he grabbed her and gave her a loving hug.

“*Abba’s kissing Emma!*” their five-year old yelled out in the middle of their kiss.

Avi ran into the kitchen blowing a toy horn as loud as he could. “Woohooo,” he screamed out. “Woohooo!”

“Quiet!” their father yelled, letting go of his wife.

“It’s OK,” she told him with a smile. “I feel better now.”

Avi and Moshe hurried out of the room still screaming in laughter.

“You’ve got to take the monster to his swimming lesson,” Rivka said to her husband.

“Don’t call him that,” he reprimanded. “It isn’t his fault he’s the way that he is.”

“I know,” she said. “Now I am beginning to understand why he is the way he is. He gets his super wiredness from your family.”

Joseph wanted to remind her that her father wasn’t the calmest person in the world. There were even nights when she had nightmares that her father was chasing after her in his wheelchair. But Joseph kept quiet, not wanting to get into a fight. Ever since his parents had arrived, there was electricity in the air. It was always that way when his parents came for a visit, and now, with his wife’s pregnancy, and his mother’s Alzheimer’s, the reading in the house was 10 on the Richter scale.

That was one of the reasons that Joseph made sure to get Avi out of the house to his Sunday morning Hebrew school. The hyperactive child had a way of triggering Rivka’s nerves to such an extent that everyone in the house could feel the vibrations.

After dropping the boy at the synagogue, Joseph stopped by the local greenhouse to buy a half dozen geraniums that his mother could plant in the garden of their tiny back yard. When he reached home, he found her standing on a chair, dusting the shelves of the living room library. She had taken down all of the books and piled them neatly on the sofa and dining room table.

“Mom, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Cleaning,” she answered. “Your father is allergic to dust, and these shelves are filthy.”

“We dust them once a year before Passover,” he explained.

“That’s no way to keep a home,” she answered. “Look.” She opened a book and smashed it closed. A small cloud of dust, like a dirt bomb explosion, burst out from between the covers.

“Is it her house or mine?” his wife glared at him when he set the box of flowers down in the kitchen.

“She’s just trying to be helpful,” Joseph answered. “Look at the positive side. We’ll have less cleaning to do when Pesach comes around.”

“I’ll manage the cleaning myself, thank you.”

“With Pesach, and the bar mitzvah coming up, and the baby being due around then, you have your hands full as it is.”

“So we’ll get someone to help with the cleaning like last year. Joseph, be reasonable. There’s no room for two women in this house, do you understand?”

Angrily, he wife strode out of the room. The moment she was gone, his mother walked in from the other kitchen door. “Maybe Zev can help put the books back,” she said. “I’m kind of tired. Oh, what lovely geraniums. Where did you get them?”

“We have a landscaping center not far away. Maybe you can plant them in our garden when you feel up to it.”

“When I feel up to it? You know I love gardening. Get me a spade and some fertilizer and I’ll start right away. You remember how we used to go out to the forest together with a shovel and wheelbarrow and dig up ferns to plant in the yard in New Rochelle?”

Joseph remembered. Their split level home in New Rochelle was one of the first houses to be built in a new residential community adjacent to a forest. During their first summer, Joseph had helped his mother dig up wheelbarrow loads of small saplings and ferns and transplant them around their one acre grounds.

“Where’s Dad,” Joseph asked.

“Taking a nap.”

“It’s only eleven o’clock in the morning.”

“You’re father is turning himself into an old man,” she said. “He even gave up his volunteer work in the hospital, which was his one and only joy. You know how he likes to be a big shot with people. He would always bring little gifts to the nurses and tell jokes to the patients. Then all of a sudden, he stopped.”

His father had stopped doing volunteer work in the hospital because he’d been afraid to leave his wife alone in the house, but Joseph didn’t tell her that. “Go wake him, Mom. We’re going to have some brunch.”

Rivka didn’t want to join them. She said she wasn’t hungry. She sat in their bedroom pouting like a hurt little girl.

“Why don’t the two of us go out for a drive afterwards,” Joseph suggested to her.

“What about your parents? Who will babysit for them?”

“Zev is here. He can look after them,” Joseph answered, ignoring her wisecrack.

“We can’t turn Zev into a babysitter for them. And what about Avi and Moshe? What will they do?”

“They have plenty of videos to watch. And Avi has his swimming class later that’ll keep him busy for two hours.”

“And Danny?”

“He has a bar mitzvah lesson.”

“Where do you want to go?” she asked, softening.

“You name it. Only not another movie. I see an overdose of films at work.”

“I need a new dress. I’m getting fatter, and if you want to go to that affair tonight, I have nothing to wear.”

“What affair?” Joseph asked.

“The Bonds dinner.”

Joseph had forgotten completely. That evening, Israel's ambassador to the United States was the scheduled guest of honor at the annual Israel Bonds fundraising dinner in the ballroom of their synagogue. Joseph has bought tickets well in advance. To his way of thinking, if he couldn't live in the Jewish homeland, at least he could support it from afar.

"I'll take you to Bloomingdales," he promised.

"I don't need Bloomingdales. There are stores a lot cheaper."

"My Dad said he wanted to buy you something nice."

"I don't want your Dad to buy me a dress, thank you. We have our own money, you know."

"What do you care? It gives him a good feeling."

"I'd like us to be more independent, that's all."

Joseph figured that to please his wife, he could risk a two-hour shopping jaunt to Manhattan or New Jersey. Leaving the ever good-natured Zev to watch over his parents, they cruised along the George Washington Bridge in Joseph's Audi. Rivka wanted to go shopping at Loehman's, which was known for its fine quality clothing at close-out prices. It was actually Joseph's mother who had introduced her to the chain, just after their engagement, when Lizzy Friedman had decided to win over her soon-to-be daughter-in-law by buying her a small wardrobe of clothes. Of course, while they were at Loehman's, to take advantage of the sales, they ended up buying two maternity dresses, a larger bathrobe, slippers for her hospital stay, and some underwear and bras.

"Your father told me to buy some nice things," Rivka reminded her husband when he began to look impatient as their shopping cart began to fill.

When they returned home, Rivka waddled upstairs to see which one of her hats would look the nicest with her new dress. According to Jewish law, a married woman was supposed to cover her hair. While Rivka, and most of the other women in the modern Orthodox community, were somewhat lax in this matter, when she

prayed in *shul*, or attended an affair at the synagogue, she wore a hat, or a Israeli-style kerchief to please her husband.

Joseph's mother was napping. Zev reported that she had tired herself out in the garden. Since she was resting, Joseph decided to go for a jog. When he got back, his wife was fuming.

"Where are my hats?" she wanted to know. "I can't find my hats."

"What are you talking about?" he asked her.

"If you expect me to go to the dinner tonight, I have to wear a hat, right? Well none of my hats are in the closet where I keep them."

"Are you sure your searched everywhere?" he asked.

"I don't have to search. I know where I keep my hats," she replied.

"Maybe the cleaning girl stole them" he said.

"Why would a twenty-five-year old Spanish girl steal a bunch of stupid looking hats?"

"I don't know. Maybe the kids took them. But if they're so stupid looking, what do you need them for anyway? Just wear a *mitpachat* tonight," he suggested, referring to the colorful kerchiefs she usually wrapped around her head.

When he said it, he had a visual flash of his father's electric shaver in the refrigerator. "Oh no," he moaned.

"What?" his wife wanted to know.

"Look, you have some wigs," he answered, avoiding her question. "Why don't you wear a wig?"

"Because you don't like me wearing wigs."

"Just for tonight, OK?"

It was true that he didn't like wigs. Some of them were more attractive than a woman's natural hair, and, in his mind, they defeated the whole purpose of the

Jewish law that taught that a woman's beauty was to be safeguarded for her husband and not paraded out on the street.

"Try on the fanciest one you have," he said, trying to sidetrack her anger.

"Where are you going?" she asked as he walked out of the room.

"To get something to drink," he told her. "I'll be right back."

Down in the kitchen, his suspicions proved true. "Heaven help me," he whispered.

Three of the geraniums that he had bought in the morning were sitting on the ledge outside the kitchen window. But instead of being planted in a planter, they were sprouting out from three of Rivka's hats. The heavy aroma of fertilizer greeted his nostrils as he slid the window aside. His mother had filled each of the hats with soil and a few soup spoons of cow dung. Rivka's blue hat, and black hat, and beige hat had turned into flower pots. Liz Friedman had planted the other three geraniums outside by the backyard fence, where they placed the kids' small plastic swimming pool during the summer. Rivka's hats were almost completely buried in the ground along with the flowers. Only their colorful brims could be seen above earth.

When he turned toward the house, Rivka was staring at him from the kitchen's back door. In her hands, she held one of her hats that had a geranium sticking out of it, gently swaying in the breeze. Though his wife's face was contorted in a dumbfounded expression, Joseph had to admit that she looked darn attractive in the curly wig which covered her head.

"I don't believe this," she said.

"It's the disease," he answered. "When my mother blacks out, she doesn't know what she's doing."

His wife was speechless.

"You have to admit, she's creative," Joseph quipped.

"Creative?" Rivka answered, not appreciating his humor. "She's dangerous. She's crazy. She belongs in a mental institution."

‘We’ll find the right medication to help her.’

“No, Joseph. I don’t want this. I can’t take it. I’m sorry that I agreed.”

“Please, Rivka. It’s just till I can get them set up in a different arrangement,” he promised.

“How long is that going to take?” she wanted to know.

“I’m working on it. You know that. Just give me a little time.”

He bent down, grabbed the rim of one of the hats and yanked it up out of the ground.

“Catch,” Rivka said.

CUT TO:

RIVKA’S WIG AS IT SAILS THROUGH THE AIR LIKE A FRISBEE.

CUT TO:

THE KITCHEN DOOR SLAMMING ANGRILY CLOSED.

Chapter Eight

Sunday night, the telephone rang at one o'clock in the morning. Joseph was sure that it was his sister calling from Timbuktu, or some other distant time zone, where she had flown to interview some new international weirdo. But it was his son, Shimon.

"I won't be coming home tonight," the sixteen-year old told him.

"You haven't been home for the past three nights," his father replied. "Why are you calling now?"

"I didn't want you and Mom to worry."

Joseph heard music and laughter in the background, as if the boy were calling from the hallway telephone of some discotheque or bar. Rivka opened a sleepy eye and fell back to her dreams. At the gala fundraising dinner, she had finished a full glass of prize-winning Golan wine, something which always knocked her out the minute she hit the pillow.

"Where are you?" Joseph asked.

"In the Village with friends."

"What kind of friends?" his father wanted to know.

"Good friends, Dad, don't worry."

"Good friends finish high school. Good friends go to college."

"I didn't call to hear a lecture."

"Smoking dope?" his father asked him.

"Once in a while. Just like you did."

"Like father like son."

"Seems that way."

"At some point, I smartened up," Joseph told him.

“When you were thirty. For me, that’s another fifteen years away.”

“Maybe you can learn from my mistakes and save yourself some time.”

“I’m not in a hurry. Anyway, right now, I gotta go.”

“Your grandfather and grandmother are here. It would be nice for you to show up one day and spend some time with them.”

“Groovy,” was the boy’s only answer.

“Stay out of trouble,” his father told him, not certain that the boy had heard before the line went dead.

The Sages of the Talmud taught that the Torah wasn’t passed down by inheritance. Each child had to earn it for it himself. Joseph had hoped that his sons would have a love for the religion just the way he did, the way it had been with his eldest son, Zev. But Shimon was different. He was more of a rebel. He had to experience things for himself. Hopefully, when his teenage journey ended, he would return to the path of his forefathers, just as his father had. But for the moment, Joseph was disappointed. And worried. The world of rock music, drugs, and casual sex was a pit easy to fall into and hard to climb out. Only a miracle had saved Joseph, and who could be sure that the same Divine salvation would happen to his son?

First thing in the morning, Joseph and Rivka had a meeting at Avi’s school. Joseph brought his mother and father along, afraid to leave them unattended at home. Rivka sat in stormy silence during the drive, displeased with having to take his parents along wherever they went.

“I feel like your parents are taking over our lives,” she had complained to him in the morning.

“What can I do?” he asked, feeling he was caught between the hammer and the anvil.

“Put them in a home,” she said.

“I’ll work something out, I promise.”

Joseph didn't blame her for feeling the way she did. It was turning out a lot tougher than he had expected. That morning, his mother had appeared in the kitchen, looking like her old self, neatly dressed in a nicely matching skirt and high-collared blouse. She always took special care to dress smartly when she knew that she'd be meeting new people. Her hair was combed and sprayed so that not a hair stuck out of place. Her gold necklace sparkled expensively. The only thing abnormal was that one of her earrings was missing. When Joseph pointed it out to her, she returned to the guest room to look for it. After a few minutes, his father called him to help.

"Get up, Lizzy, will you?" he pleaded, as she crawled on the floor, searching under the bed. "Joseph will look for it."

"Your father hasn't done anything physical for years," she said, standing up. "If anything needed to be fixed in the house, either I had to do it, or he would call Freddie."

"I played some shuffleboard," he responded.

"Once, at a Fourth-of-July barbeque."

"What about going to the club pool with Joe every week? Doesn't that count?"

"You didn't swim. You just walked in the shallow end."

"That's very good exercise," he retorted. "My cardiologist recommended it. One of my carotid arteries is closed completely," he disclosed to his son. "And the other one has a closure of seventy-five percent."

"I didn't know that," Joseph said.

"It's all in my medical records. I sure hope they get here soon."

"What do you need them for?" his wife asked him.

She walked over to the dresser and looked for the missing earring, even though she had searched there before. "It must have fallen off somewhere," she said.

“Forget it, Mom,” Joseph said nervously, not wanting to be late for the meeting. “We’ll find it later. Put on another pair. We’ve got to go.”

But his mother couldn’t find her jewelry bag either. It wasn’t in the top draw of the dresser. It wasn’t in the second drawer. It wasn’t under her pillow.

“You had it just a few minutes ago, Lizzy,” Harry Friedman said to his wife. “Try to remember. There must be twenty-thousand dollars worth of jewelry in that bag.”

“You know me and my memory. Are you sure that I didn’t give it back to you?” she asked

“I’m positive,” he said.

Joseph was getting edgy. He knew that his wife was waiting. “We’ll find it later,” he assured them.

“Thank God your ring can’t fall off,” Harry Friedman remarked.

“We’ll stay here at home,” his mother said. “You go with your wife. I don’t know why we have to go along anyway to a meeting with Avi’s teacher.”

“To see the school,” her husband said, not wanting to have to guard her alone. “Aren’t you interested?”

“Not really. I’ve seen schools before.”

“Come, Mom,” Joseph said, taking her by the hand. “Rivka is waiting.”

His mother took off the one earring and gave it to her husband to hold.

“I feel naked,” she said. “I’d rather you go without me.”

“I’ll get you a pair of Rivka’s,” Joseph said, hurrying out of the room.

When he explained the new predicament to his wife, she just looked at him and glared.

“Please, sweetheart, don’t make a big deal out of this. What about the pair my mother gave you for our twentieth anniversary? That should look nice on her.”

“They’re mine,” his wife said.

“I know they’re yours. She’ll just borrow them for an hour. What’s the big deal?”

“I don’t know why they have to tag along at all. If your mother has a fit there, we’ll never get Avi back into his class.”

“And if we get there late, they’ll think that Avi’s parents are irresponsible and that his problem stems from us.”

Without waiting for his wife’s permission, Joseph hurried upstairs, found the earrings in their hiding place in the closet with the rest of her jewelry, and hurried back down to his mother.

“What if she loses them too?” his wife asked him as they were walking out to the car.

“I’ll buy you a new pair, twice as expensive,” he said.

When they got to the school, Joseph left his parents waiting outside the principal’s office. He told his father to knock on the door if his mother took off. A tribunal of four judges was waiting for them – the principal, Avi’s teacher, the school’s counselor, and a consulting child psychologist. In the eyes of his teacher, Avi was a miniature terrorist. The boy refused to keep still in his chair, made crazy faces, spoke out whenever he felt the urge, bothered the other children, provoked fights, and refused to do what the teacher asked. According to her, he was totally unmanageable, a disruptive influence, and a candidate for some type of framework for troublesome children.

All the time she spoke, the counselor nodded her head, as if she were in total agreement. When the teacher had finished her diatribe, the principal turned toward the consulting expert, Dr. Lewis, who asked about Avi’s history, if there were health problems, if he displayed similar behavior patterns at home, if he had been tested for ADHD, if the parents had ever been in couple’s or family therapy? Joseph tried to answer the interrogation as calmly and objectively as he could. He sensed from his wife’s silence that she felt that they were being attacked. In the middle of his rebuttal, they were saved by a knock on the door. It was his father. Seeing the nervous look on his face, Joseph stood up.

“Excuse me,” he said to the Nuremburg panel. “My parents are outside waiting. I’ll be right back.”

“My mother-in-law has Alzheimer’s,” Rivka informed them.

“Alzheimer’s!” the counselor exclaimed, as if that explained all of Avi’s problems.

Joseph never made it back to the meeting. He caught up with his mother as she was trying to hail a taxi out on the street.

“Mom, please,” he appealed. “I’m in the middle of an important meeting.”

“I want to go home,” she said.

“We’re going home soon. I’ll take you.”

“I want to go now,” she said. “I have something cooking on the stove.”

Impulsively, she started to cross the street, without checking to see if any cars were coming. It was obvious that she didn’t know where she was going, but that didn’t stop her. After waiting for a car or two to pass, Joseph caught up with her on the opposite sidewalk as she was getting into a taxi. Quickly, Joseph yanked open the door and pulled her back out.

“Let go of me,” she hollered.

“What the hell is going on here?” the taxi driver asked.

“We’ve changed our mind,” Joseph told him.

“I already put on the meter,” the driver protested.

Harried, Joseph reached into his pocket and pulled out a few dollar bills. At the same time, he dragged his mother to a bus stop and sat her down on the bench. Then he ran back to the taxi and threw a couple bucks in through the open window.

“Where is your father?” she asked when he returned.

“He’s coming,” Joseph assured her, taking her by the hand and leading her back toward the school. Rivka and his father were already on the way out. The meeting had been cancelled.

“Thank God,” his father said with a smile of relief, seeing his beloved wife with Joseph.

Rivka was peeved, but, at least for the moment, not at Joseph or his mother. “That teacher is a bitch,” she steamed. “I don’t blame Avi. I wouldn’t be able to sit still in her class either. If you ask me, she doesn’t have any understanding at all about children. And that psychologist reminded me of Boris Karloff. Who the hell does he think he is blaming us? As if we are the reason for Avi’s behavior.”

“He wasn’t blaming us,” Joseph responded. “He was just asking questions.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Lizzy Friedman said from out of the blue.

A line from Hamlet flashed through Joseph’s brain. “Though this be madness, there is some wit to it.” Or something like that. The Sir Laurence Olivier film version was a flick he had seen a half dozen times on the late night movies. He glanced at his mother’s innocent expression, not knowing how plugged in she was to their conversation.

He led the way to the family’s spacious Space Wagon van, which his parents had generously bought for them after Moshe was born.

“We’re going to have to get a little stool I can step onto,” his father said, as Joseph helped him into the high front seat.

Getting in the rear seat, Rivka gave her husband a dirty look, unhappy with being relegated to the back of his life, having to take second place to his father.

“This doesn’t look like Florida,” Lizzy Friedman said, gazing out the car window.

“Not all of Florida looks the same,” Joseph replied.

“Don’t be a wise ass,” his father said, reprimanding him. “This isn’t Florida, Lizzy,” he told her. “We’re in New York. Remember? We flew here on an airplane.”

“We did?” she asked.

“That’s right. We’ve come for Danny’s bar mitzvah.”

“Who’s Danny?” she asked.

“My kid, Mom,” Joseph said.

“Oh, how am I supposed to remember? You have so many children.”

“Your mother has a short-term memory problem,” Harry Friedman reminded them, as if that were the only problem.

“Do you know who I am?” Rivka asked her.

“Of course, I do. You are my son’s lovely wife. Don’t you all try to make me out like I’m crazy.”

Rivka sat in broody silence the rest of the drive. “Maybe some more family therapy is a good idea,” she said when they returned home. “This house is becoming like a loony farm with your parents here, and I’m not sure that I can take it.”

“Please, sweetheart,” Joseph said. “My mother’s sick. How about a little compassion?”

“How about a little compassion for me? I’m your wife. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

Changing subjects, Joseph asked her what had happened after he left the principal’s office.

The gist of the meeting was that Avi would continue to be at home until the parents had a proper psychological profile prepared, including additional testing for hyperactivity, and the opinion of a child neurologist regarding possible medication. “Add another doctor to the list,” the beleaguered Joseph thought.

Filled with apprehension, he drove off to work at the Jewish Museum. He tried to get back into the documentary he was editing, but his mind kept reeling in reverse to the list of things he had to do in order to get his parents set up in New York. Rivka phoned and said that she had found the missing jewelry bag in the guest-room shower. Inside the bag, in addition to his mother’s jewelry, were a bar of

soap and a tube of Head and Shoulders shampoo. When Joseph finally got through to the psychiatrist that Dr. Ellis had recommended, he was told that the doctor was on vacation for two weeks and could only see the Friedmans a month after he returned.

“He’s that busy?” Joseph asked.

“Would you like me to switch you over to one of his colleagues?” the secretary asked.

Joseph declined, figuring he’d tried to find someone through the *shul*. Being a shrink must be a good business, he thought. After all, everyone was a little crazy. His parents certainly had their share of psychiatric problems. His wife wasn’t the most normal person either. The truth was, except for Zev, his own kids seemed to be growing up with their own case histories. And if he himself wasn’t yet crazy, he felt he was on the way. Given the screwball world around them, with atom bombs, mass murderers, Islamic terrorism, round-the-clock news, presidents with sex hang-ups, football heroes who took bribes, and temptations on every street corner, it wasn’t a wonder that psychiatrists were booked up months in advance. Judaism was like an oasis in comparison. But with the stormy sea of modern living, where a tsunami of permissiveness could rise up and inundate a family in the wink of an eye, even the sturdy walls of Jewish tradition had been shaken.

Joseph worked through his lunch hour without taking a break. At two o’clock, he had an appointment down on Lexington and 48th Street, at a manpower agency specializing in foreign workers. The agency had been recommended by one of the synagogue’s members who also had a parent with Alzheimer’s. Joseph figured that to ease the burden on his wife and himself, they could employ a live-in helper who could keep a constant eye on his mother and take care of her as her condition deteriorated. If Zev were to double up in the same room as Shimon, they would have a free room for the worker. Or, if his moody son, Shimon, vetoed the arrangement, then Danny could move in with Avi and Moshe. If that was too crowded, they could convert part of the basement into a spare room by throwing up a few simple walls. There was a sink downstairs, so it wouldn’t be hard to install a bathroom, and with the kids getting older and grandchildren not far on the horizon, an extra room and a half would be a welcomed bonus. There already was a spare

free room upstairs, but that was being reserved for the new baby. Of course, Rivka had to agree to any new arrangement, and the way things were going, it looked like the Israelis and Arabs would reach a peace agreement before Joseph succeeded in convincing his wife to let his parents stay on at their house.

The agency seemed like a trustworthy, professional operation. It was loaded with foreigners, like the terminal of the Bangkok International Airport. There were faces from China, India, Thailand, Burma, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Joseph couldn't help but notice that the agency employees tended to be young, attractive women, not very modestly dressed. In fact, he had to make a concentrated effort not to topple into the cavern-like cleft of the interviewer facing him on the other side of the desk. She wrote down his request, jotted down a brief medical history, handed him some forms to fill out, explained the procedure in a quick, polished fashion, and waited as he wrote out a check. She said it was cheaper to bring in a new overseas worker, but the process of securing a visa could take up to six months. The other possibility was to hire someone who was already legally in the country, looking for a job. Workers who had previously been employed in the United States cost more money, depending on the number of years of employment. Though their monthly salary was more than a greenhorn's, they had the advantage of being familiar with the country. Plus, they spoke better English, and they could be hired immediately. And there were many workers who had experience working with elderly people who had dementia, and who were available because their employers had died. When the agency worker finished her long explanation, she gave Joseph a smile he remembered the rest of the day. She promised him that the minute he returned the forms, and the agency got a clearance from the Department of Welfare, she would line up suitable candidates for him to meet.

Leaving the building, Joseph checked off another item on his long list of things to do. On his way home, he stopped at the synagogue to say the evening prayer and to speak with the accountant who had recommended the manpower agency. He suggested that Joseph bring his parents to a senior citizen's "memory club" that his own father had been attending on a regular basis.

Right away, Harry Friedman balked at the idea. Joseph found him in the kitchen, sorting out the small pharmacy of pills that he and his wife took every day. His

hands shook when he had to cut pills in half, but using a small plastic cutting device, he managed to do the job. Joseph told him that instead of giving Mom one tranquilizer and one mood swing pill two times a day, the new schedule would be one of each in the morning at breakfast; one of each at lunch; a half of each at four in the afternoon; and a half of each after dinner.

“Did the psychiatrist tell you this?” his father asked.

“Yeah,” Joseph lied. Actually his accountant friend had suggested the gentle increase, and Joseph thought it a good idea until he could find a new psychiatrist. When he mentioned the memory club to his father, Harry Friedman said, “Who needs it?”

“Mom does, that’s for sure,” his son answered.

“What do they do there?”

“It’s like a social club for senior citizens,” Joseph explained. “Most of the people have problems like Mom’s. They do a lot of memory games, play Scrabble, talk about current events, sing songs, and my friend says there’s even dancing. His father has been going for over a year.”

“Your mother never had the patience for Scrabble,” his father noted.

“It sounds like it would also be good for you. Give you a chance to be with other people. A new audience for your jokes.”

“My memory is fine,” his father argued.

“I know, Dad. But the social activity may help cheer up your spirits. And I think it is important for Mom. Maybe it can help her. Exercises can help people concentrate better. There are studies that prove it.”

“If it means being with a bunch of couch potatoes like me, I’m not interested.”

“Give it a try, Dad. For Mom’s sake.”

Harry Friedman took a moment to absorb the idea. “I’ll do anything to help your mother,” he said. “She’s my whole life.”

The memory club was held in the meeting hall of a nearby Jewish Community Center. There were about twenty-five elderly people present, many of them accompanied by a foreign worker or some family member. From what Joseph could tell, his parents were the only married couple. The rest were widows or widowers, all suffering from some sort of memory problem, or dementia, or simply old age. Three of them sat in wheelchairs. The staff consisted of two energetic group leaders, and a cadre of smiling volunteers who helped with activities and served juices and snacks.

The same way that Joseph persuaded his father into coming by saying it was for his wife, he conned his mother into coming to the senior citizens meeting by telling her it was for her husband, to get him out of the house. In a way, it turned out to be true. The retired salesman seemed to get a lot more out of the social interaction than his wife did from the simple memory exercises. After a skeptical, uptight beginning, Harry Friedman told some of his jokes to the gathering, and stole the show by knowing all of the words to a medley of tunes from “My Fair Lady.”

“We saw the stage play fifty years ago at its try-out in New Haven before it moved on to Broadway,” he proudly told the group.

But just when things started looking a little hopeful, the Heavenly Tribunal decided to test Joseph’s stamina once again. Immediately after the memory club meeting, as Joseph opened the car door for his mother, his father slipped on the sidewalk, smashed his nose on the side-view mirror of the car, and fell with a groan to the pavement.

“Oh, no!” Joseph cried out, seeing his father’s blood splattered face.

Not knowing what to do, Joseph bent down beside his father, and gently rolled him onto his side. Harry Friedman’s eyes were wide with fright. He was breathing heavily, but he didn’t lose consciousness.

“Harry, are you all right?” his wife asked in alarm.

“Where does it hurt, Dad?” Joseph inquired.

“My nose and my head,” his father answered. He was bleeding profusely, from his nose, from his forehead, and from his chin. Just under his left eye was another

open gash. Quickly, Joseph stripped off his shirt. With hands that were shaking as badly as his father's, he wiped away the bleeding. Joseph had never served in the army, nor received training as a medic in any first-aid course. In fact, most of the blood he had seen in his life was in the movies, so he had to keep telling himself not to panic. Gently, he pressed his shirt against his father's wounds in order to stop the bleeding.

He felt awful. Negligent. Why hadn't he helped his father get into the car first? At least physically, his mother was in far better condition, so he should have watched out for his Dad.

Fortunately, one of the drivers who chauffeured people to the memory club had his wits about him. He helped Joseph lift up his father and get him into the car.

"Where are we going?" his mother wanted to know.

"To the hospital."

"Nnnnn," the frail octogenarian protested.

"You're going to be OK, Dad," Joseph assured him. "You broke your nose, that's all."

"I knew we shouldn't have come to this stupid meeting," his father said.

"It had nothing to do with the meeting," Joseph replied. "People sometimes slip and fall, that's all."

"Keep your head back, Harry" his wife said, reaching forward from the back seat to hold the blood-soaked shirt over her husband's face.

It took no more than ten minutes to reach the nearest hospital. Joseph sped through traffic, honking the horn all the way.

"Please be careful," his mother warned. "Florida drivers are terrible."

Two hours later, Joseph escorted his father out of the hospital with a broken and bandaged nose. He had received six stitches in the forehead, two just under his eye, and four in his chin.

“You look like you’ve been through a prizefight,” Joseph quipped, trying to cheer up his Dad.

“Shut up, will you,” his father responded. “If you would have been more careful, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“It isn’t Joey’s fault that you fell down,” his wife told him.

“You shut up too.”

“You only have yourself to blame for turning into such an old man,” Lizzy Friedman insisted.

“I am an old man. I’m eighty years old.”

“A person is as old as he feels,” his wife insisted.

“Take us to the airport,” his father suddenly demanded. “I want to go back to Florida.”

“We are in Florida, Harry,” his wife said.

“No, we’re not,” he shot back. “Will you get that into your head already?”

“We’re in New York, Mom,” Joseph reminded her. “You came for Avi’s bar mitzvah.”

“In that case, I want to go back to Florida too. Who is taking care of my garden?”

“Maybe I should take them back,” Joseph ruminated silently. Maybe his decision had been a mistake. Maybe Pleasant Valley Estates, or Harmony Haven, or whatever that fancy old-age home was called, was truly a better solution. After all, he didn’t have the resources and training to take care of sick parents.

“Grandpa looks like a bald eagle,” Avi said when they arrived home.

“What happened, Grandpa? Did you get into a fight?” Moshie asked.

Indeed, the bandage protruding from Harry Friedman’s nose looked like the big white beak of an eagle. With the other bandages on his face, he looked like he was wearing some kind of tribal mask to ward off evil spirits.

“What happened?” Rivka asked in alarm when she saw her wounded father-in-law.

“I’m OK,” he told her. “I tripped getting into the car. I’m sorry that we are causing you two so much trouble. I am very grateful for all that you are doing for us. Right now, I need to lie down and rest. Afterward, I want to do something for you two to show our appreciation. Instead of all the bother of celebrating Pesach at home, why don’t you let your mother and I take the whole family away to a kosher hotel for the holiday. I’m sure you will be exhausted from the bar mitzvah and the pregnancy, so what do you say?”

“Thanks, Dad, that’s very nice, but we have to think about it,” Joseph answered.

“If you want to go, you have to make reservations now. In Miami Beach, hotels are booked up a year in advance.”

Joseph looked at his wife.

“We’ll discuss it,” she said.

“Thanks, Dad, it’s a very thoughtful offer.” Joseph told him, escorting him down the hall toward the guest room. His father shuffled his feet slowly, looking down with extra precaution, as if he expected to trip over something each time he took a step. Trembling, he grasped Joseph’s arm with an iron grip for added support.

“I have to get a cane,” he said.

“Why not a walker, like the old ladies at the club?” his wife goaded him.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “It will probably give me more balance.”

Joseph sighed. In the beginning, when Aunt Peachy had phoned, he had thought that his mother was the number one problem, but now he was beginning to realize that his father needed a lot of attention too. Over the years, after his father’s retirement, his mother had complained that he was turning himself into an old sad sack whom she had to take care of, and Joseph was beginning to see why. The cycle of life was incredible, he thought. At first, parents have to take care of the children, and then children have to take care of the parents.

After helping his father get into bed for a nap, Joseph went to look for his wife. He found her packing a suitcase in the bedroom.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m leaving,” she said. “I’m not built for this. You can take care of your parents alone.”

“Don’t be silly,” he said.

Rivka didn’t answer. Instead, she stuffed some blouses into the valise without even folding them.

“What about the kids?” he asked.

“You can take care of them too.”

“And my work? When I’m busy taking care of everyone in the world, who’s going to do my work for me?”

“That’s your problem. The Torah says that a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. Apparently, you never learned that.”

“The Torah also says that a person should have compassion for others.”

His wife grabbed a handful of underclothes out of a drawer and threw them into the suitcase.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Somewhere. To a hotel. To the seashore. To a place where there is peace and quiet.”

“And who’s paying for your vacation? Could it be my parents, with the credit card they gave you?”

“It isn’t my fault that you are financially and emotionally dependent on your parents. Why don’t you get a real editing job instead of being a lackey at a Jewish museum?”

“You want me to go back to Hollywood?”

“I want my husband to be an independent grown up, and not his mommy’s little boy, that’s what I want,” she said, letting out a gusher of pent-up anger.

“How about a little gratitude for all the things my parents have given us,” he retorted. “Like this house.”

“You and your parents can have the house,” she said, throwing more clothes into the suitcase. “I’m leaving.”

“Maybe if you had a job, we wouldn’t have to be so dependent on my parents,” he shot back accusingly.

“Oh sure,” she answered. “Raise five crazy children and go to work at the same time. Get some other superwoman if you want.”

“Don’t blame us because you can’t handle pressure,” he continued.

Infuriated by his response, Rivka picked up a bottle of perfume and hurled it at him. Joseph ducked and the bottle smashed into pieces against the far wall.

“Mommy’s hyperactive! Mommy’s hyperactive!” Avi screamed out from the doorway.

“Get out of here!” she yelled, letting another bottle fly. It was an expensive bottle of Givenchy that his mother had given her, which she had never used, not being a lover of cosmetics and heavy perfumes. This time, Avi had to dodge out of the way. When it hit the wall, the pressurized atomizer exploded like a grenade.

Joseph closed the bedroom door, so the children couldn’t witness the spectacle. Suddenly, his wife collapsed into the reclining chair by the window. She put her hands over her swollen belly and grimaced.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Her back arched as a sharp pain raised her two inches up from the chair.

“What is it?” he repeated, alarmed.

“Pain,” she said in a whisper.

“Maybe she’s kicking?”

Rivka shook her head no. “It’s time,” she said.

“It’s just the eight month.”

“I feel it coming.”

“Maybe it’s Braxton Hicks,” he said, remembering the name for false contractions from the first pre-delivery course they had taken.

“It’s not Braxton Hicks, and you’re not a doctor, and I want to go to the hospital now.”

Another pain raised her out of the chair. Before Zev was born, they had rushed to the hospital three times with false alarms. With Shimon, it had been twice. When Daniel’s turn came around, Rivka checked into the maternity ward with contractions two days before the delivery. For Avi and Moshe, they had acquired the services of a private midwife who specialized in holistic techniques, including Jacuzzi baths, foot massages, and floor pillow exercises to help Joseph’s wife get through the traumas of childbirth. To Rivka’s credit, for someone who had a low threshold for pressure and pain, she had never resorted to an epidural injection. In the beginning of their marriage, at the end of her pregnancies, Joseph had gotten almost as hysterical as she had, but now, with the experience of five births behind him, he figured that this seeming emergency was another false alarm like all the others.

“At least you are already packed for a hospital visit,” he joked.

“I hate you,” she said.

“Relax,” he told her. “Think about the sea. Hear the sound of the waves. Feel the warm water wash over you. Take a deep breath like we learned. Concentrate on the healing energy and direct it down to the womb.”

“Will you please shut up,” she snapped. “If you don’t take me to the hospital, I’ll take a taxi.”

“Do you want me to call Marsha?” he asked, referring to the midwife.

“Yes,” she said. “Now.”

“We will have to pay her you know, even if it’s a false alarm,”

“You cheap lousy bastard,” she seethed, grimacing from another contraction.

“OK,” he said. “Let’s go. But I promise you that we will be back in another two hours.”

Joseph told Danny to watch over his grandparents and to call if there were any problems. On the way to the car, just to make sure, Joseph phoned Zev and asked him to come home to babysit until they got back from the hospital.

“Are you taking *Emma* to a hospital for hyperactive mothers?” Avi asked. “Maybe you should just give her Ritalin.”

That’s what happens when parents talk about things in range of their children, Joseph thought. Kids pick up everything.

“Listen, Rivki,” he said, sweetening his tone on the drive to the city. “Instead of going to the hospital, why don’t we go see a movie together? Maybe you’re just uptight and need to take your mind off of things.”

“Don’t play psychiatrist with me,” she said.

“You still feel contractions?” he asked.

“Not for the last few minutes,” she admitted.

“You see. It’s just tension, that’s all.”

“Now you’re an obstetrician. Tell me, just how did you become such an expert about women?”

“I’ve gone through five pregnancies with you,” he reminded her.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said. “Maybe the time hasn’t come. But I don’t want to take any chances. Just take me to the hospital. You don’t have to come upstairs with me. I can handle this alone.”

“Don’t be silly,” he told her. “Of course I’ll be with you.”

For Joseph it was déjà vu. He had just been in Mount Sinai Hospital with his mother a few days before. Riding up in the elevator, he felt a little like Moses going back up the mountain to receive the Tablets of Law.

As Sholom Aleichem, the famous Yiddish writer, would say, “To make a long story short,” the pains were a false alarm, not even Braxton Hicks. Her cervix was unopened, the ultrasound was normal, there was no sign of bleeding, her blood pressure was a little high, maybe due to stress. The doctor advised her to drink lots of water and try a few days of bed rest.

On their way out of the birthing center, while they were waiting at the elevator, Rivka said, “I bet you are dying to say, I told you so.”

“I’m just happy that everything is OK,” he answered, genuinely relieved by the outcome of their visit.

“You make me out to be some kind of monster, but on top of everything, it is difficult for me to see your parents suffering the way they are. They have been like a mother and father to me.”

“I know,” he said.

Without speaking any more about it, they rode in the crowded elevator down to the lobby. Passing a gift shop, Joseph told his wife to wait. He came out holding the string of a big helium balloon in the shape of a heart that said, “I Love You.” Rivka blushed. She was naturally shy and didn’t enjoy public displays of affection. But her husband, for all of his religious fervor, was a bit of a movie actor too, so she had to suffer through his occasional Hollywood flares.

“Listen, sweetheart,” he said when they walked out of the hospital. “I’ve got to jump over to work for a few minutes. We are right here by the museum, and I haven’t been there for two days. I had better let them see my face so they don’t forget I still work there. You can sit in the coffee shop in the lobby and have a snack until I finish. Five or ten minutes, that’s all.”

Rivka agreed, but she had to walk slowly. Joseph felt like he wanted to run on ahead, but he put on the brakes for his wife. With the chance for a promotion in line, he was nervous about his work, which he had neglected for almost two weeks.

At the same time, he had to look after his pregnant wife, his ailing parents, and his hyperactive children. It was as if the Almighty had tied his arms and legs with ropes, fastened them to four wild horses, and given each one a slap on the rump to gallop off in four opposing directions. So, walking at a snail's pace with his pregnant wife along upper Fifth Avenue, he said a silent Psalm by heart, like a mantra, to help calm him down.

Leaving his wife in the kosher coffee shop in the lobby, Joseph hurried upstairs to the offices of the museum. Stepping out of the elevator on the multimedia floor, he bumped into his editing partner, Wally, who was walking down the hall.

"Got here just in time, brother," the friendly black man said. "The big powwow has already started."

"What powwow?" Joseph asked.

"The annual report."

"Oh, man," Joseph moaned. "I forgot all about it."

The yearly meeting was a colossal bore. The museum curator always gave a long and winded introduction, followed by the finance director, then the heads of important departments, and the endless speech of a guest of honor. There was usually an award presented to an outstanding donator, and a short film reviewing the preceding year's activities. The meeting was held in the spacious auditorium of the museum, and it could last an eternal two hours. Before Joseph could bolt, he was surrounded by other co-workers, and found himself back in the elevator, riding downstairs to the meeting.

"Rivka will kill me," he thought.

"What's happening with you?" Wally asked as they were waiting for the crowd of employees to enter the auditorium. "You looked really bummed out."

"I'm having a big headache taking care of my parents," Joseph answered.

“You’re lucky, man, that you have such a problem. Both of my parents are dead. I wish I had the *mitzvah* that you have. Instead of bitching, you should be thankful that your folks are alive.”

Joseph knew that his black friend was right. He felt ashamed of himself for complaining. Everyone else was in a relaxed and jocular mood, so Joseph had to act the part of a happy employee too. He walked around before the meeting started, saying hello to as many people as he could, to give the impression that he had been in attendance like everyone else. But he was planning to bolt the minute he could, in order to get back to his wife. He shook hands with the curator, stood by the finance director as he joked with some of the executive officers, waved to the head of his department, who was scheduled to receive a certificate of excellence on the eve of his retirement, and started to head up the side aisle toward the rear exit when Wally locked his arm in his like a football, and led him back toward a seat in the front of the hall.

“You’re one of the stars of the show,” his buddy said. “You made the movie.”

“You think it will win me an Oscar?” Joseph asked, sitting down with the other employees.

The master of ceremonies asked everyone to take a midweek Sabbath and switch off their cell phones. Then he turned the podium over to the museum curator for what seemed like a never-ending speech. Joseph kept track on his watch without hearing a word. Even if Rivka had eaten a sandwich and salad, she had surely finished by now. Joseph had told her ten minutes tops, and a half hour had already passed.

“I’ve got to go,” Joseph whispered to Wally. “My wife is waiting for me in the coffee shop.”

“It won’t look good,” his co-editor told him. “You can split after the clip.”

“Really, I have to go,” he insisted. But his friend wouldn’t budge from his seat on the aisle. His knees stretched out to the seat in front of him like a barrier. To exit from the other direction, Joseph would have to disturb ten or twelve people and draw a whole lot of attention to himself. Luckily, the short, five-minute video

retrospect was next on the agenda. Creatively speaking, it was a nothing, straight forward presentations of the year's main exhibitions, with a few attention-getting effects, and a montage of slick dissolves that he had comically intercut with shots of museum visitors touring in fast-motion throughout the museum. Fortunately, everyone laughed in the right places and applauded when the film ended, so for the purposes of the meeting and Joseph's career, the screening was a success. He was even asked to stand up for a bow.

"Now you can disappear," his friend told him, moving his legs aside.

"What about my Oscar?"

"You'll get it in the mail."

As the guest of honor was being introduced, Joseph stood up and made his way to the aisle. Instead of making the long walk to the rear exit, he mounted the steps to the stage and walked along the line of museum dignitaries, shaking all of their hands, as if it were a part of the program. Then he bolted off stage and rushed upstairs to the museum proper. Rivka wasn't in the coffee shop. She wasn't in the lobby. She wasn't waiting outside on the street. He tried to call her cell phone, but she didn't answer.

"I know you must be pissed off at me," he said, leaving her a voice message. "But the annual meeting was today, and I forgot all about it. So call me if you hear me and try to understand."

Outside on the Fifth Avenue sidewalk, Joseph sighed, closed his eyes, and leaned against the museum wall. He felt exhausted, and emotionally drained. The security guard walked over and asked if he was OK.

"Sunbathing that's all," he answered.

On the way back to his car in the hospital parking lot, he received a text message on his phone. It was from Rivka. "We have an appointment with the Rabbi at 8pm if you want to stay married," it read.

When he got home, he found his wife in bed.

“You are a bastard,” she said.

When he tried to explain, she stopped him. “Save you explanations for the Rabbi tonight.”

“What’s the Rabbi have to do with this?” he asked.

“Either you are screwed up completely, or your understanding of marriage and Judaism is all wrong. I know you won’t listen to me, so you are going to hear it from him. I am not going to make myself sick and lose the baby because of your parents, no matter how good they have been to us over the years. Is that clear to you?”

Joseph shook his head yes.

“Good,” she said. “Now leave me alone. I want to rest and keep my blood pressure down.”

“Have you been drinking water?” he asked her.

“See you at eight,” she replied, turning away from him onto her side.

Joseph went downstairs and opened the liquor cabinet. Usually, the only time he allowed himself a shot of scotch was when making a “*L’chaim*” on *Shabbat*. He heard a pair of slippers shuffling down the hallway and looked up to see his father appear in the living room door.

“Pour me one too,” he said.

Harry Friedman shuffled over to an easy chair and fell into it as if he couldn’t control his balance. With the bandages on his face, it looked as if he had been beat up in Harlem. Joseph thought that with all of the changes that were taking place in his father’s life, that was probably the way he felt inside too, all battered and aching.

“Sure you can handle it?” Joseph asked.

“Who’s the father of whom?” the old man responded.

Reluctantly, Joseph poured him a shot. “What’s Mom up to?” he inquired.

“She’s napping.”

“How do you feel, Dad?”

“Like shit. What can I tell you? I’m sorry we are turning out to be such a pain.”

Joseph slipped a Sinatra disc into the living room system. The sweet melodic voice spread through the room like a soothing massage. Old Frankie had been his father’s favorite ever since Joseph could remember. In fact, Joseph knew most of the lyrics by heart.

“Remember when we saw him perform in Forest Hills. In the tennis stadium?” his father nostalgically recollected.

“I sure do, Dad.”

“You know, I saw him sing sixty years ago in Italy during the war.”

Joseph nodded.

“Not only that, but I took your mother to hear him sing at the Paramount when she was just fifteen years old. I was afraid they wouldn’t let us in, but your mother looked like twenty. She was a beauty. When your Uncle Herbie got married, Bugsy Siegel, the gangster, came to the wedding. He danced with your mother and gave her a pinch on the ass. That’s what she wrote me. I was away in the war.”

“Lucky for Bugsy,” Joseph quipped.

“I want to thank you again, son, for having us here. I feel I’m at home. The way things are with your mother, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

“I would,” Lizzy Friedman said from the living room entrance. “I want to go home.”

“This is our home now, darling,” her husband told her.

“Who are you?” she asked, staring at him.

“It’s Dad,” Joseph said.

“What happened to his face?”

“I fell down. That’s why it’s all bandaged. Don’t you remember?”

“Maybe I do, and maybe I don’t. Right now I want to go home.”

“I’ll take you there, Mom,” Joseph said.

Their walks had become a part of his game plan. Come the witching hour in the late afternoon, he would take her out of the house for a marathon walk until she was too exhausted to continue. Being engaged in some activity outside seemed to keep her devils at bay. As long as she thought she was on the way home, she stayed calm. But if you tried to persuade her otherwise, that she was already at home when she was certain she wasn’t, the frustration it caused brought on a violent fit.

The trouble was that Joseph would pucker out before she did. His mother walked and walked and walked, as if possessed by a demonic energy. Even though Joseph was in good shape from his jogging, he had trouble keeping up with his seventy-five-year-old momma.

In the early evening, Joseph and Rivka met with the Rabbi Marcus in his synagogue study, after walking over to the *shul* in silence. The congregation was large and wealthy enough to be able to afford two rabbis. Rabbi Marcus, the senior rabbi, was a respected Talmudic scholar with years of teaching experience. He was also a judge on the High Rabbinical Court. The congregation’s other spiritual leader, Rabbi Jacobs, was twenty years his junior, in charge of the day to day running of the *shul*, weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs and the like. While he was learned himself and gave inspiring sermons, he was in a different league than the renowned, elderly scholar. Rivka knew that her husband had great respect for Rabbi Marcus’s wisdom and would listen to his advice.

The bookshelves in the Rabbi’s study were filled with Talmudic tomes from the ceiling to the floor. Joseph started out the conversation by telling the Rabbi about Aunt Peachy’s phone call and his subsequent trip to Boca Raton. He described his mother’s behavior, the diagnoses of the doctors, the visit to the senior citizen’s home in Florida. Summarizing, he emphasized that his wife had agreed with his decision to take his parents back with him to New York, and even encouraged him to do so on the phone.

“I never intended that they stay with us forever,” she explained.

“How long has it been?” the Rabbi asked.

“Two weeks.”

“And it’s already too difficult?” the seventy-year-old scholar inquired.

“Impossible,” she said. “We have a hyperactive child at home, and I am expecting in another month, God willing.”

“May you be blessed with an easy birth,” he answered. “And a lot of *naches* and joy from your children. May they all grow up to be lovers of the Torah.”

Joseph thanked him, happy to have gotten such a blessing.

“There is no question that the situation is very difficult,” the Rabbi began. “I know from my own experience. My mother, may her memory be for a blessing, lived with us for fifteen years, while we were raising our eight children.”

Joseph glanced at his wife, as if to say, “How can you make a stink over ten days when the Rabbi did the very same thing for fifteen years?”

“Often the presence of grandparents has a stabilizing effect on children,” the Rabbi continued. “It gives them a sense of past, not only of the here and now, which is the illness of modern Western culture. In fact, it could be that their presence in the house might help calm down your boy.”

Joseph noticed that the remarks of the Rabbi triggered a worried reaction in Rivka’s eyes, as if he were siding with her husband.

“My wife has an allergy to nervousness and pressure,” Joseph explained. “Even before I met her, the matchmaker who made our *shidduch* warned me that Rivka doesn’t like to be pressured.”

“Pressure?” the Rabbi asked for clarification.

“Hyperactive kids, and a mother-in-law with Alzheimer’s, an uptight father-in-law with compulsive anxieties, a nervous husband, and a bar mitzvah and baby on the way,” she explained.

“I’m a nervous husband?” Joseph asked.

“And how!” she said.

“Maybe because of your super sensitivity, I have to walk around on eggshells,” he answered, defending himself.

“Rivka, what do you think is a proper solution?” the Rabbi asked, interrupting their argument.

“I want him to get his parents out of our house.”

“And you, Joseph, what do you think?”

“I need more time to get them set up, whether it’s on their own in an apartment with a live-in assistant, or in a nursing home that will let them live together.”

“How long do you think that will take?”

“I don’t really know. Another two weeks. Maybe a month.”

“We have Danny’s bar mitzvah in another month, remember? And a new baby, and *Pesach*.” Rivka said, remembering the Passover holiday was coming and all of the preparations that had to be made.

“My father offered to put us all up at a hotel for *Pesach*,” Joseph told the Rabbi.

“There’s no question that honoring one’s father and mother is a very important *mitzvah*,” the Rabbi began, “And for all that you are doing, Joseph, you are certainly worthy of praise. Honoring them when they are young and healthy is not the true meaning of the commandment. Taking care of them when they are old is the real test. On the other hand, a man’s first duty is towards his wife and his family. And certainly *shalom bayit*, the happiness of the home, personified by the loving relationship between husband and wife, is a consideration that supersedes everything else. I think that you, Rivka, understand your husband’s predicament, and that you, Joseph, understand the very justified concerns of your wife. The question is, Rivka, can you give Joseph the time he needs to find a suitable arrangement for his mother and father?”

Joseph waited for his wife to answer. She looked surprised, as if her plan had backfired. From her point of view, having started out as the complainant, she had become the accused. With all of the Rabbi's sound judgment and fairness, it seemed to her that he was indeed siding with her husband. It was as if Judaism was a man's world, and that when push came to shove, a dutiful wife was supposed to serve her husband, sacrifice herself, and be his devoted helpmate in life.

"I'm not sure," she answered.

"Maybe if we can agree on a fixed time," the Rabbi suggested. "Let's say another three weeks. That way you'll know that there is a definite end in sight."

"Three weeks is a long time," she replied.

"Then two. Do you agree to give your husband another two weeks to find another arrangement?"

"I suppose," Rivka said.

"Is that all right with you, Yosef?" the Rabbi asked Joseph, using his Hebrew name.

"I'll do my best," he answered, knowing the fright that the decision was going to cause his father.

"That's not good enough," the Rabbi said. "This is an agreement that I am going to write up and ask both of you to sign. You have to do whatever you commit yourself to do, not just to try your best."

"What if I don't succeed?" Joseph asked. "Do I have to throw my parents out on the street?"

"You know I won't make you do that," Rivka answered. "I'm not a monster."

"Well, Yosef?" the Rabbi concluded, waiting for his reply.

"OK. I agree," Joseph said.

The white-bearded arbiter smiled at both of them.

“Then we’ve reached a mutual understanding that both of you can live with. Thank God. I am sure things will work out for the best. You are both worthy of abundant blessing. Continue to love each other without letting anything get in the way, pray for God’s help, and your family and house will be blessed.”

They had reached an agreement, they had received the Rabbi’s blessing, they both signed the terse document, but husband and wife still walked all the way home in silence without exchanging a word.

Chapter Nine

Joseph decided to postpone telling his father about the agreement until he was able to make new living arrangements for his parents. He knew his father's anxiety would skyrocket when he learned that he was being ousted from the security of his son's home to live in some strange new place. As it was, the eighty-year-old man looked so frail and beat up because of his fall, Joseph didn't have the heart to deal him another blow. In the meantime, his father agreed to attend the memory club three mornings a week, for the sake of his wife. Reluctantly, his mother agreed with the decision, for the sake of her husband, to prevent him from sleeping all day in the easy chair opposite the TV. But she didn't like the idea at all. To her way of thinking, the women at the memory club were too old, and the place was too Jewish.

Immediately, Joseph began searching for a vacant apartment in the neighborhood, as close to his home as possible. He looked through the newspapers, entered relevant Internet sites, and registered with all of the local real-estate agencies. At the same time, he faxed back the forms to the employment agency and kept phoning them to see if they had set up any interviews. He spoke to people at the synagogue whose parents had helpers, hoping that he would find someone through the foreign worker grapevine. He even spoke with a few Filipinos, while they were walking in the neighborhood park with their elderly employers, hoping that maybe a friend was looking for work.

Wally called from the museum, reporting that the head of the department was beginning to ask questions about Joseph's disappearances. The next day, after bringing his parents to the memory club, Joseph made a special effort to show up at work in order to explain his absences to his boss, but the head of the department was out of town for a meeting. Unable to concentrate on his work, Joseph took a taxi down to the employment agency and hung around like a pest until they arranged a meeting with a slight and aging Haitian woman whom Joseph felt was too old for the job. According to the employment agent, the next candidate, Michelle, was "just off the dock." She looked around thirty years old, with jet black hair, a curvy figure, and dark, confident eyes that caused Joseph to flinch. "Uh oh," he thought, frightened by his masculine reaction.

“Master of the World, how much testing can a mortal man bear?” he silently wondered.

It seemed that no matter how harried and troubled a man might be, the sight of a pretty woman could make him forget everything else in the world. Cutting the interview as short as possible, he thanked the young woman and told the agent that he was looking for a more mature and experienced candidate. While he was waiting to interview some other worker, Rivka called with the distressing news that their son, Danny, had lost his temper at school. In his anger, the soon-to-be bar-mitzvah boy had smashed another student in the head with a hockey stick, and cursed out his teacher. The school principal insisted that Joseph come immediately to take the boy home.

“Great,” Joseph mumbled, thinking that’s just what he needed, a new war on a different front, this time from his thirteen year old.

“And another thing,” his wife added. “The driver never showed up to pick up your parents from the memory club, so I had to get out of bed and go get them myself.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“At least I don’t have any more pains.”

“Thank God for that,” Joseph replied.

“There’s more good news,” she told him. “Shimon came home. He barricaded himself in his room without speaking, but at least he’s back.”

That was a load off his back. Not that everything was going to hunky dory with Shimon from then on, but at least he was back at home and not hanging around the Village.

Joseph was already in the hallway, heading for the elevator, when one of the agents called out, “Mr. Friedman?” She said that they had another candidate whom he could meet if he had the time. Figuring he could do it quickly, he followed the agent back into the office where a Philippine woman sat waiting. The agency worker introduced her as Tess and left them alone in a room. She was maybe a little younger than Joseph, with plain features, not stocky in build, but not a model

either. She acted in a shy and modest fashion, looking down when she spoke. In unpracticed English, she explained that she had been in America for a little less than a year, that her elderly employer had suddenly died of a heart attack, and that she was looking for a new family to hire her before her visa expired.

“Are you married?” Joseph asked, trying to learn a little more about her.

“Yes,” she said with the tone of a poor servant girl before her master.

“Do you have family here in America?”

“No, sir. Only in the Philippines.”

“How many children do you have?” he asked.

“Three.”

“Are you looking for live-in work?”

“Yes, sir. That’s what I had.”

“Where was that?”

“Ninety-Second Street and Broadway.”

He made an effort not to look at her directly, but he was relieved that he didn’t feel any sexual attraction to her whatsoever. She looked energetic enough to keep up with his mother on her afternoon sprints, and she seemed strong enough to be able to help out his father, if it became difficult for him to get along on his own.

Briefly, Joseph told her about his parents, about his wife and children, and about his plans to move his mother and father into an apartment near his house.

“How does that sound to you?” he asked her.

“It’s OK. The lady I worked with had Alzheimer’s too. Toward the end, she was very weak in bed, and I had to bathe her and feed her and do everything, so it’s OK.”

They agreed that he would come back in two hours to pick her up from the agency, so that she could come to his house to meet his parents and the rest of the family.

He wrote down her cell phone number, and said that he would call from his car when he was downstairs on the street. Then, after summarizing the interview with the agency worker, he hurried off to Danny's school, a short taxi ride uptown to East 85th Street. Ramaz was a modern Orthodox school that combined traditional yeshiva learning with secular study. The well-endowed institution had excellent teachers, a fine reputation, and a strong connection to Israel. Because it was close to the Jewish Museum, Joseph was one of the drivers of the car pool that shuttled Riverdale students back and forth to the school. Because of that, he felt he kept a pretty close eye on Danny's progress. While his sandwich son wasn't an outstanding student like his older brother, Zev, he was more motivated than Shimon and got by with respectable grades and generally good teacher reports.

In a way, Danny reminded Joseph of his own youth. The boy was introspective, sort of a loner, and spent a lot of time at home, rather than going out to play with friends. He had a passion for the computer and could play "airport controller" for hours on end. He had discovered a website that recorded all of the arrivals and departures from LaGuardia and Kennedy airports, and when planes flew overhead, he would be out on the lawn with his binoculars to announce, "There goes the 5 o'clock Continental to Detroit," and "Here comes the 8PM Air France to Kennedy." All in all, Danny was a pretty well-behaved kid, so Joseph wasn't prepared for the teacher's complaints.

"He's been a different boy the last few weeks," he told Joseph in the classroom, while Danny sat waiting in the hall. The teacher was young, with a neatly trimmed beard and a black *kippah*. "Lately, he doesn't pay attention in class, he bothers others students, and he has talked back to me with *chutzpah* on several occasions when I have had to discipline him. I've noticed that he doesn't hand in his homework, and today, he got into a fight in the gym and whacked a classmate with a hockey stick. Maybe you can explain the sudden change in his behavior?"

Joseph sat pensively. The big change in the last few weeks was that his parents had arrived in town, but Joseph didn't want to get into that.

"Maybe he's uptight because of his bar mitzvah. It's only two weeks away," he said.

“It could very well be,” the teacher admitted. “But I’ve gone over his Torah portion with him, and he seems well prepared.”

“I’ll have a heart to heart talk with him,” Joseph promised.

“Good. Maybe he needs to feel your involvement more intimately at this very important stage of his life. Sometimes we think that by getting our son a tutor to get him ready for the big day, we have done our share in the bar mitzvah. But it is only natural that a boy wants to feel that his father is taking an active interest in his journey into manhood. A father’s role has to be more than paying for the catering hall. Maybe you can go over his Torah portion with him yourself.”

“I never learned the *‘taamim,’*” Joseph admitted, referring to the cryptic signs of Hebrew pronunciation that allowed for a true reading of the Torah.

“Then maybe learn about *tefillin* together. The main thing is for him to feel that you are with him. To feel your support.”

Joseph nodded his head. In truth, he tried to give each of his boys individual attention, but with five sons, a pregnant wife, and a job, it didn’t always work out that way.

“I understand your parents have come to live with you,” the teacher added.

“Until I can get them set up in the some other arrangement,” Joseph said.

“It’s a great *mitzvah* you are doing, and a wonderful example for your children, but right now Daniel has to feel that he is the pride and focus of your attention, and not feel second place to anyone else, including his grandparents.”

It made good sense, but if Danny was first, and his parents temporarily second, then that put his wife a distant third. For all of the young teacher’s wisdom, Joseph wasn’t certain that Rivka would be happy with that.

The two men shook hands. Danny was waiting in the hallway with an innocent expression on his handsome, boyish face, as if it were all a case of mistaken identity. Without speaking to Danny, the teacher walked away.

“When’s your next class?” Joseph asked.

“They’re in the middle.”

“How about a Coke?”

“Sure thing,” the boy said.

Joseph led him out of the building, past the security guard, and through the gate to the street. He bought two sodas at a corner grocery, and father and son stood drinking on the busy sidewalk as New York City’s buses and famous yellow cabs streaked by.

“*L’chaim*,” Joseph joked, as if making a toast. “To life!”

“*L’chaim*,” Danny mimicked.

“Why a hockey stick?” the father asked.

“He started bullying me around,” the boy replied.

“So bully him back. Why did you have to smash him with a hockey stick?”

“He’s two years older than me.”

“So tell your teacher.”

“He never does anything.”

“OK. We’ll talk more when you get home. Maybe you’ll come jogging with me, and I’ll show you some sparring tricks in the park – how to nail a guy who’s bigger than you with a sneak punch, without having to whack him with a hockey stick or baseball bat.”

“Really?” the boy asked.

“Yeah, it’s about time you learned how to defend yourself from an amateur boxing champ.”

“You used to box?”

“In high school. A little. Until I got knocked on my ass.”

With a choke of laughter, the boy spit out his last mouthful of Coke. Joseph patted him soothingly on the back.

“What about Grandma? You’ll have to take her out for a walk when I get home,” his son reminded him.

“So you’ll come with us.”

“Nah.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll work it out. We’ll go after I get back with Grandma, or before. We’ll spend some time together. And tonight I want to learn with you about *tefillin*, all right?”

“Sure, Dad.”

“And I want you to check out high-powered binoculars on the Internet and find out where Grandpa can buy you the most professional pair on the market for your bar-mitzvah, not some toy, but the kind they use at NASA, not just so you can read the name of the airline, but so you’ll be able to make out the color of the pilot’s eyes.”

“You mean it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Wow, that’s colossal. You’re the greatest *Abba* in the world, and Grandpa is the best *Saba*, that’s for sure.”

When they finished their drinks, Joseph gave him a loving jab goodbye. Retrieving his car from the museum lot, he sped downtown to pick up the Philippine worker. When he pulled over to the curb, the pretty, young Michelle, was standing there, waiting for a bus. For some silly reason, the old Beatles song rang in his ears, “Michelle, my belle, these are words that go together well.”

No matter how hard he tried to replace the old, polluted cassettes in his head with new, holier ones, the Hollywood garbage stuck in his mind the way that refuse gathered around a stick in the Ganges River. Generally, Joseph was happy with his wife and didn’t think about other women. Here and there, he would feel an attraction, like with some of the women at work, but it didn’t last long because he

was content with the wonderful woman he had at home. But now, maybe because Rivka was beginning to get down on him, his eyes and his mind had started to wander. What could he do? Even with the Torah, *Shabbat*, and synagogues prayers three times a day, a man was a man.

The honk of a bus freed him from his daydreams. He drove forward past the bus stop and watched in the rear mirror as Michelle boarded a Lexington Avenue local. A minute after he phoned Tess, she appeared on the sidewalk. Joseph was relieved when she got into the back seat of the car. He had thought of it himself, that it was important to establish a proper code of behavior from the very beginning, making it clear that he was the employer and she the employee, and not some equal who could sit with him in the front seat of the car - but he had felt too embarrassed to tell her straight out. Fortunately, she had the sense to sit in the back by herself. Just to be polite, he engaged in some harmless small talk, describing his family and his parents, and asking her a few simple questions about her work experience. Then, to relax his overworked brain, he inserted a disc of Shlomo Carlebach songs into the disc player and sang quietly along with the words of the Hebrew songs, trying not to think about all of his problems.

Rivka at first seemed surprised when he walked in with the strange Philippine woman, eyeing her the way a woman checks out a rival, with an instant CAT scan from head to foot. Sensing that the plain looking woman wasn't her husband's type, she became very welcoming, feeling that her husband was taking steps in the right direction. Joseph heard the sound of Reggae music blasting upstairs, a sure sign that his wandering son had come home. His mother was sitting in the living room, watching TV. His father reclined in the easy chair beside her, holding onto his new aluminum cane. Since his arrival, he had taken possession of the chair the way an army takes over captured territory, draping his Lacoste golf jacket over its back like the flag the marines had planted at Iwo Jima. But, in a way, the chair really was his. His father had bought it for them as a gift, the way he had bought them the house and the rest of the furniture.

Harry Friedman waved his son over and motioned for him to bend down so he could whisper something in his ear. "Have her mop up our bathroom floor and scrub the toilet bowl. It's filthy."

“She’s not a cleaning girl, Dad. I’m thinking of hiring her to help us watch over Mom.”

Maybe Joseph was imagining things, but it seemed that his father gave her a glance as if he were still in the prime of his life. Even at eighty, the evil inclination, known as the “*yetzer*,” doesn’t subside, he mused, just as an aged scotch didn’t become diluted with time.

“Sleep in?” his father inquired.

“That’s right.”

“You have enough room?”

“We’ll make room,” Joseph replied, still keeping from his father the plan to move his parents out of the house.

The doorbell rang, and Avi and Moshe both raced to answer it, to see who would get there first.

“It’s the police! It’s the police!” Avi yelled in excitement.

Sure enough, two undercover policemen stood at the door. An unmarked sedan was parked outside on the street. One of cops showed Joseph an ID and said that they were from the narcotics department. They had a warrant for the arrest of Shimon Friedman and a warrant to search his room.

Joseph was stunned. A feeling of fear filled his stomach, as if someone had stuck a gun in his ribs.

“What’s the matter?” Rivka asked her husband startled. His father, his mother, and the Filipino all waited to hear Joseph’s answer.

“They have a warrant for Shimon’s arrest,” he told her.

“Arrest for what?” she asked.

“Drug trafficking,” one of the detectives answered. The way he said it sounded very serious. Selling a little dope was one thing, but drug trafficking was a major offense.

“Where is he?” the other cop said.

“Upstairs in his room,” Rivka answered.

“Are they really policemen?” Avi asked.

Without further small talk, like trained commandoes, they drew out their handguns and bounded up the stairs. Joseph ran after them. The cops threw open the doors of all of the rooms until they found Shimon, sitting on his bed, playing his guitar.

While one cop kept cover with his gun pointed at Shimon, his partner grabbed the startled boy, twisted his hands behind his back and slapped on handcuffs. Shimon groaned out in pain. His eyes flashed wildly. A look of panic filled his face.

“What the...” he started to say, but the cop shoved him back down on the bed and started to frisk him.

“Lie on your stomach!” he ordered. “We have an order for your arrest.”

“You’re full of shit!” Shimon shot back. “I haven’t done anything.”

“You can tell it all to the investigators at the station. We’re not interested in what you have to say. So shut up.”

The other cop started to open drawers and spill their contents onto the floor. He swept books off their shelves, threw the guitar case across the room, and started to empty out the clothes closet.

“Why all the violence?” Joseph protested.

Rivka, with her big stomach, stared at the scene without saying a word. In less than a minute, Shimon’s room was a mess.

“What’s this all about?” Joseph asked.

The cops didn’t answer. One searched through the boy’s pockets and confiscated his wallet and phone.

“Shimon, what’s going on?” Joseph demanded to know.

“It’s bullshit,” Shimon answered. “They don’t have diddly on me. I didn’t do anything.”

“Let’s go,” a cop ordered, pulling him up from the bed.

Shimon looked ruffled, but now that the shock was over, his composure had returned. “Don’t worry, Dad. They’re crazy. It’s all a mistake.”

They pushed him toward the door. Joseph and Rivka made way. “Where are you taking him?” Rivka asked.

“Twenty-First Precinct, Manhattan. First Avenue and Fourteenth Street.”

Rivka stared at her husband. “I’ll follow them,” he told her. “You go lie down.”

“Shimon, don’t worry,” she said to the boy. “We’ll get you a lawyer.”

“Don’t say a word to them until you speak with him,” Joseph ordered him. “He’ll advise you what to do. You do whatever he says.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I didn’t do anything. You’ll see.”

The cops led him downstairs like a handcuffed convict. Joseph’s parents were waiting there with Tess. When Lizzy Friedman saw that the police were taking her grandson away, she leaped at them.

“Leave him alone!” she screamed, scratching at an officer’s face.

The cop shoved her away, but she was determined to stop them. With the supernatural strength of one of her outbursts, she grabbed one of the cops by his collar and wouldn’t let him go.

“Lizzy!” Joseph’s father screamed out.

When the other cop shoved her violently against the hallway wall, Harry Friedman swung out with his cane and gave him a crunching whack. The cop held up his arm too late. The cane came down on his head with a CRACK. His partner grabbed the cane and gave the old man a judo kick that sent him tumbling to the floor. Rushing forward to defend his parents, Joseph lashed out and punched the cop in the face,

putting all of his weight into the blow. Rivka screamed. The startled policeman wavered, toppled over, and joined Joseph's father on the floor.

"That a way, Dad!" Danny yelled out proudly.

"Run away, Shimon!" Avi screamed out, giving the cop on the floor a kick.

Outnumbered, the cop who was still standing pulled out his gun and fired a shot at the ceiling.

"Calm down everyone," he barked. "Before someone really gets hurt."

Pointing his gun at the Friedmans, he told them to stand by the wall. He pulled out a mini walkie-talkie and called for a back-up car. When his partner rose to his feet, he grabbed Shimon and pushed him out the front door.

"Are you OK, Dad?" Joseph asked, bending down beside his father.

Now it was his turn to be grabbed by the collar. With an unfriendly jerk, the cop he had punched yanked him up to his feet.

"You're coming with us," he told Joseph. "For assaulting an officer."

Giving Joseph a no nonsense shove, he backed out the door, keeping a careful eye on Lizzy Friedman.

"You are going to hear from my daughter about this," she threatened. "She's a reporter. You'll see your picture in all of the papers for beating up two helpless old people."

"Get in touch with Aaron Blackman from the synagogue!" Joseph yelled to his wife, reminding her of the name of a lawyer as handcuffs cut into his wrists.

A paddy wagon pulled up to the sidewalk with a screech. Two SWAT officers jumped out, just like in the movies. Before they shoved Joseph inside, he got a glimpse back at the house. The Philippine worker, Tess, was standing between his mother and father, holding them both by their arms. At least he had found someone to look after his parents, he thought.

Chapter Ten

In the police station, Joseph reminded his son to keep silent until he spoke with an attorney.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” he said. “I should have listened to you. But I was only doing a favor for a friend.”

Father and son were led off to two different interrogation rooms. Joseph was photographed and fingerprinted. He refused to speak with his interrogators, and he refused to sign any kind of statement.

“I demand to be released,” was all he said. “I have sick parents that I have to take care of.”

“You assaulted an officer, buddy,” one of the cops told him.

“The officer assaulted my parents,” he answered.

“He’s lying,” the arresting officer claimed.

Luckily, Danny had filmed the entire episode with the family’s digital video camera. But it took the lawyer a few hours to make a copy and bring it to the station. In the meantime, Joseph was handcuffed and shoved down a flight of stairs to a lock up. A cop pushed him into a jail cell with a colorfully dressed Puerto Rican, who looked like the stereotype of a pimp. An East Village derelict slept on one of the barren cots. Shimon was sitting gloomily on the cot beside him.

“What is this all about?” Joseph asked him.

“Be smart, brother,” the flamboyant dresser said. “There are microphones all over this dungeon. You can be sure our friends are listening in upstairs.”

“He’s my son,” Joseph told him.

“Then I’ll sing you a song for a little background music, if you get my drift.”

To drown out their conversation, their cellmate started to sing an old Otis Redding song, “Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay.” The prisoner on the cot drunkenly told him to shut up, then drifted back to sleep. In a whisper, Shimon told his father that he

had been alone at a friend's apartment in the Village when the guy called and asked him to bring an ounce of grass to someone who would give him eighty bucks in return. The buyer would be standing under the arch in Washington Square, wearing a green beret. Unbeknownst to both of them, the buyer was an undercover cop.

To Joseph, it sounded like entrapment, but he wasn't familiar with the law. Anyway, an ounce of grass was nothing, certainly in his day, and probably even more so now.

"Sounds like they were out to get your buddy, not you," he whispered back to his son.

Their cellmate was still singing a loud rendition of the old, once-popular ballad. His voice wasn't bad, but he wasn't Otis Redding. Maybe he was an undercover cop too, Joseph thought, deciding they had spoken enough.

"Why are you here?" Joseph asked him.

"Beats me," the jailbird answered. "I've never done anything against the law in my life."

His smile said otherwise, a grin that spread from one side of his face to the other, highlighted by missing teeth and sparkling gold fillings. When two jailers came by to take the pimp upstairs, Joseph told them that he wanted to speak to his lawyer.

"Shut up, Jewboy," one of the cops shot back.

"Sorry I got you into this mess, Dad," Shimon said when they were left alone with the drunk.

"At least we have a chance to talk," Joseph answered. "It's something we haven't done for a while."

He remembered his conversation with Danny teacher's earlier in the day. Maybe Shimon had gotten lost in the pack, just like his sandwiched brother. Maybe Joseph had neglected to give him the quality, one-on-one time that every son needed. To be truthful, he couldn't remember anything special they had done together as father

and son. Sure he had taught him to ride a bicycle, and they had played some tennis together, and a few rounds of golf. They had gone bowling a few times. Maybe a game of chess now and then. For years, Joseph had studied Torah with his oldest son, Zev, on a regular basis. He had attempted the same with Shimon, but the boy had never shown an interest. There just wasn't the same chemistry between them as there was with his oldest son. Maybe because of Joseph's feelings of frustration and failure, and because the three younger kids were more demanding, he had lost touch with his sensitive, creative child.

"Let's hope the mess we're in is just a warning," he said, "And a stepping stone toward a better path. Maybe now you'll think about going back to school. You don't have to be a rabbi. If you don't want to be religious at this stage of your life, sure I will feel bad, but that's your decision to make. I'll love you just the same."

"Maybe I can find some kind of private school with a dorm and a more laid back style, where I can concentrate on my music while I learn."

"I'm sure there are places like that," Joseph replied. "I'll help you look for one if you want. You can find anything on the Internet these days. Maybe we'll take a few days off, just you and me, and visit some schools."

"Sounds cool. But what about Grandpa and Grandma? Will we have to take them along with us?"

"I'm hiring a worker to take care of them. That way, I won't have to be with them so much."

"Mom is probably glad about that."

Before Joseph could answer, a familiar voice caught his attention. With their cellmate's snoring, it was hard to make it out, but there was no other voice like it in the world.

"I want to see my son! I want to see my son!" Lizzy Friedman yelled out upstairs in the police station. She and her husband had come with Aaron Blackman, the lawyer, and Tess. "Why did you arrest him?" she shouted. "He was protecting his mother and father. You should have arrested the policemen instead the way he carried on like madman, attacking an old woman."

“It’s true,” the lawyer affirmed. “Only after the two officers assaulted my client’s aging parents, did he attempt to intervene.”

“That’s nonsense,” the arresting cop replied.

“We have a video that recorded the whole incident,” the lawyer retorted, handing the disc over to the precinct commander, who had already heard about the footage. Within the last twenty minutes, he had received phone calls from ABC News, the New York Post, People Magazine, and the Manhattan Borough Commander. In addition to burning a disc for the lawyer, Danny had e-mailed a “flash” file to Ilene, who had immediately sent the scoop out to some journalist friends in high places, telling them about the sensational video which captured a flagrant case of New York City Police brutality against the aged.

After the precinct boss viewed the two-minute clip, he nodded with a sorrowful expression. The two arresting officers were red in the face.

“My daughter is a top reporter,” Lizzy Friedman threatened. “She is going to air this video on all of the most popular news shows from New York to Los Angeles. Maybe you’ve heard of her. Ilene Friedman.”

“Ilene Freed,” her husband corrected.

“I’ll deal with you clowns later,” the head honcho said to the cops. Then he stood up and walked into his office. After a minute, he called the lawyer inside for a private powwow.

“What about my Joey?” Lizzy Friedman hollered. “Where’s my son? I want to see him now.”

Just then, a photographer and news reporter hurried into the station. Without asking permission, the photographer started snapping photos of the Harry Friedman’s heavily bandaged face.

“Look what the police did to my husband!” Joseph’s mother exclaimed, even though her husband’s bandages were a result of his fall by the car, and not from the incident with the cops.

Without the need of any further persuasion, the district chief agreed to immediately release father and son, tear up the boy's arrest warrant, and drop all charges, in return for the lawyer's promise that the video would not be released to the media.

Lizzy Friedman gave her son a bear hug when he was brought into the room with Shimon. Their handcuffs were unlocked and they were free to go home.

CUT TO:

EXT. POLICE STATION. DAY

HARRY AND LIZ FRIEDMAN, JOSEPH, SHIMON, AND THE LAWYER
WALK OUT OF THE STATION.

CUT TO:

JOSEPH – HE GLANCES UP TO HEAVEN

JOSEPH

Nu? What do you have in store for me next?

Harry Friedman looked up at the sky to see what his son was gazing at, but there was nothing but clouds. "I think you should call you sister and thank her," he said.

"You're right, Dad, but first I want to call Rivka and tell that everything is all right."

While Joseph was comforting his wife on the phone, he noticed how his father called Tess over to help him climb up into the front seat of the lawyer's GMC. First he gave her his cane, then he grabbed onto the hand hold and had her raise up one of his legs up into the van, then waited for her to give him a hydraulic lift from behind. It was a whole operation. Finally, after reclining in the seat, he reached out for his cane, seeming to enjoy his new helper, even though Joseph had gotten her for his mother, not him.

"I don't like the way your father looks at her," his mother whispered in Joseph's free ear. "You should have gotten a man to help him."

"She's not for Dad, Mom, she's for you."

“For me? I don’t need a helper. It’s a waste of money.”

When they got home, Joseph had a chat with wife in their upstairs bedroom. After describing his two hours in jail and the hopeful reconciliation that he had had with Shimon, he asked her the million dollar question:

“What do you think of the Philippine worker?”

“She seems all right,” she replied.

“Do you think she can handle both my parents?”

“You mean you are thinking of hiring two helpers?”

“No. But it’s really taking care of two people, not just my mother.”

“How much will it cost?” Rivka asked.

“A live in worker starts at \$1,800 a month, not including Sundays and Philippine holidays.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“On Sundays, she can take the day off, or we can pay her overtime to stay.”

“Your father seems to like her.”

“That’s half the battle,” Joseph answered. “My Mom will get used to the idea of having a stranger around, I’m sure.”

“Most of the time she seems to blend in with the wallpaper, as if they taught her camouflage,” Rivka noted.

As if right on key, their conversation was interrupted by screams from downstairs. It was Joseph’s mother. The front door slammed shut with a no-nonsense goodbye.

“Witching hour,” he said.

Danny knocked on their bedroom door. “Grandma’s flown the coop again,” he reported. “The Filipino went after her. Grandpa wants you to come help.”

“What are you going to do?” Rivka asked.

Joseph could feel their stares like lasers. “This is a good test for the new worker,” he answered. “Let’s see how she does.”

He wanted to give his wife the feeling that things had really changed, now that they were hiring a caretaker - that he wouldn’t have to go running after his mother every time she took off.

“Does that mean you can give me a boxer lesson now?” Danny asked.

“Sure thing, pal,” Joseph said, with a casual air, even though he was full of apprehension inside about how Tess would handle his mother.

Winking at his wife, Joseph took his son down to the basement to show him a few trick punches. Harry Friedman was angry at his son for not chasing after his mother, but Joseph didn’t succumb to his pleadings, in order to show his wife that he meant business.

“Will you go look for your mother, already?” his father called down to the basement from the top of the stairs. “Damn it. Will you listen to me? What the hell’s the matter with you? Don’t you care about your mother? Do you want me to drop dead with a heart attack?”

“It’ll be all right,” Joseph reassured him, even though it wasn’t easy for Joseph to withstand the avalanche of guilt that was pouring like lava down the basement stairs. After all, his father wasn’t in the best of shape. Who knew what his skyrocketing anxiety might cause. Plus, Joseph remembered that his father’s carotid arteries were almost closed, and Joseph didn’t want to think what a build-up in pressure might do to his father’s heart. But he had promised his son to spend some time with him, and he didn’t want to disappoint him and bring about a breach in their relationship like the one that had led to Shimon’s rebellious behavior.

“Thank the good Lord,” Joseph said aloud when Tess came back with his mother. She looked happy and smiling, as if her devil had decided to find some other hapless victim. The Filipino was wearing her usual calm expression too. She didn’t seem tired or out of breath. Harry Friedman hugged his wife with a grateful sob, like a child who had gotten lost from his mother.

“You’re a bastard,” he said when Joseph returned upstairs.

Joseph sighed. He couldn't win. If he was good to his parents, his wife and children were angry; and if he was good to his wife and his kids, then his father got angry at him for not helping enough.

During dinner, Tess remained in the kitchen. Joseph invited her to join the family, but she shyly refused, as if it would be an infringement of the proper employer-employee relationship.

"She certainly doesn't speak very much," Rivka noted after the meal. "Do you think it is because she doesn't know very much English, or because that's the way they are trained?"

"Probably both," Joseph answered. "But we aren't hiring her to give speeches. What's important is that she has the patience to put up with my parents."

"She's seems to be trying."

"So we'll hire her?"

"I don't see why not. If it doesn't work out, we can always look for someone else."

Joseph was relieved. Now, all he had to do was find his parents a nearby apartment. Wanting to give his wife the feeling that she was his number one partner, and not anyone else, he invited Rivka to come along as he escorted Tess to the bus stop, where she could board a bus heading into the city.

"Where does she live?" Rivka asked.

"In Chinatown. After her last employer died, she says she moved into an apartment with other Philippine workers."

"I can't imagine how they do it," Rivka reflected. "Leaving a husband and three children to work thousands of miles away in a completely strange country."

"I guess they need the money."

"It must be terribly lonely for her."

"There are plenty of other Filipinos around," he noted.

Joseph had enough family problems already without taking the Philippine worker's sorrows upon his shoulders too. It was nice that Rivka sympathized with the plight of a fellow human being, but priorities were priorities. Tess agreed to travel every day to Riverdale until Joseph could rent an apartment. Then she would move in with his parents. In the meantime, Joseph would finalize all of the paper work and legal permits, so that her visa could be reassigned to his mother. It meant getting a letter from a psychiatrist, securing approval from the Social and Welfare Department, and registering the agreement of employment with United States Immigration, but the manpower agency promised they could facilitate the hassle, for the customary fee.

It turned out to be the same bus that his mother had boarded the *Shabbat* she had run away. Joseph paid for Tess's fare and gave her some travel money for the coming week. On the way home, he noticed that his wife was puffing from the uphill walk across the park, so he suggested they sit on a bench and rest. Her belly had rounded to the size of a mid-summer watermelon, and it looked like that her water was ready to break at any moment. It was a pretty early spring night with an invigorating breeze blowing in from the river. You could actually see stars in the sky.

"Peaceful, isn't it?" he said.

"Why don't we do this more often?" she asked. "The park is so close, and exercise is very important."

"You're right," he agreed. "Let's make it a point to go for a walk together a few nights a week."

"You really mean it?" he asked, as if it were a dream come true.

"Why not?"

"Your work, the kids, now your parents."

"We have to find time for ourselves," he told her. "Otherwise our batteries will run down."

"I'm glad you understand that, Joseph," she said with a happy smile.

He told her that he loved her. She told him that she loved him too. They sat holding hands, enjoying their island of togetherness. In the distance, a freighter blasted its horn as it made its way down the Hudson. Or maybe it was a cruise ship setting sail for a voyage across the sea. Their heads rested together. They really had to do this more often, he thought, happy that she was his wife, and grateful that God had brought them together.

Chapter Eleven

In the morning, Joseph met with a real estate agent to see an available apartment in the neighborhood. It was a small, dark, one bedroom flat that faced the side wall of the adjoining building in one of Riverdale's older, rent-controlled complexes. Joseph knew right away that it wasn't for his mother. After their beautiful house in Boca, with its airy, sun-filled rooms, this dump looked like a walk-in closet. Plus, Tess would have had to sleep on a convertible sofa in the living room. When his phone rang and he heard Wally's hello, Joseph knew that it was either going to be good news or bad. He and his editing partner were friends, but not in the sense of playing tennis together, or getting together with the wives. So if he were calling, he was calling about work. And since Wally never disturbed him about some editing problem when Joseph was out of the office, Joseph sensed right away that it was about his hoped-for promotion. Excusing himself, he walked away from the real estate agent so he could speak in privacy in the vacant apartment's small, barren kitchen.

"Yo' brother," the black man said. "I'm sure sorry to be the one to break the news to you."

"I didn't get the promotion?"

"Not only that."

Joseph waited to hear the rest.

"Your employment at the museum has been terminated."

"What?" Joseph asked, buckling over, as if he had been punched in the stomach.

"Sorry, brother. I got a call from the boss's secretary asking me to let you know. She said that you'll be receiving a letter in the mail."

"Why?" Joseph asked. "Why didn't he talk to me first?"

"I don't have an answer for you on that one, but, if you ask me, you haven't been punching the clock so regularly lately, if you know what I mean."

"I've been helping my parents," Joseph protested.

“I told her that.”

“And?”

“She said she was just passing on the word from up top.”

“The word from up top! I thought it was supposed to be a Jewish Museum. Where the hell is their compassion?”

“You’re right, brother. But they’re also running a business. And you know that Jews like to keep a close watch on the till.”

His comment was another unexpected slap in the face. Wally was a great guy, as honest and sincere as could be. But there was something backhanded in his remark that made Joseph think of Shakespeare’s character, Shylock the Jew.

“Anything the matter?” the real estate agent asked, seeing Joseph’s dejected expression.

“I think we need a bigger place with a lot more light,” he answered.

“The problem is that there aren’t a lot of vacancies on the market in this area, and you said you were in a big hurry.”

“We’ll have to keep looking,” Joseph told him.

Not only did he feel angry at the museum and despondent for being laid off, the festive holiday of Purim began that evening, the happiest holiday of the year, when a Jew is commanded to be joyous. It would be a catastrophe at home if he spoiled the day for the kids by being in a rotten mood. If that happened, Rivka would surely blame his parents, and that would make things even worse. In addition to finding them an apartment of their own, he would have to move them out of the neighborhood completely. Maybe even to a different borough to appease his wife. That would turn him into a yo-yo completely, having to travel back and forth between his parents and his home, like a conductor on the Times Square-Lexington Avenue Shuttle.

Besides dressing the kids up in costumes and taking them to synagogue to hear the cacophonous *Megilla* reading about how Mordechai and Esther had saved the Jews

from the wicked Haman, the *mitzvah* of the day was to get joyfully drunk. Not sloppily drunk, but merrily tipsy, to help experience the miraculous turn-around of events that had left Haman hanging on the very gallows that he had constructed to kill Mordechai the Jew. Like they did every year, Joseph and Rivka had invited lots of company for their festive afternoon meal, and Joseph had already stacked up the bar with an assortment of scotches, bourbons, and wines.

Whether because of the pressure he was under, or because of his despondency over losing his job, or because the freezer-chilled vodka he was drinking went straight to the back of his brain, in the middle of the raucous Purim party at home, he stood up from the table and drunkenly announced that he was going to visit the Rabbi.

“But, Joseph, everyone is here,” Rivka protested.

“Who cares?” he replied. “I’m sick and tired of caring about everyone. I want to have some fun by myself.”

“Joseph, you’re drunk,” Rivka said, disapprovingly, hating to see her husband rambunctious and out of control.

“You bet your sweet you know that I’m drunk,” he answered, grinning at her like a Cheshire cat.

He pushed himself away from the table, fell over his chair, toppled to the floor, and somersaulted back to his feet.

“What about your parents?” Rivka called after him.

“Give them something to drink,” he answered.

“At least take the Rabbi a *mishloach manot*,” she said, referring to the traditional Purim gift given to friends on the holiday.

Without waiting for Rivka to wrap something up, Joseph headed for the door.

“Zev, go with your father,” Rivka ordered, handing him an already prepared basket of homemade cakes, a bottle of wine, and a package of “*Bislee*” munchies from Israel.

“He’ll be all right on his own,” the youth answered. “It’s Purim.”

“I know that it’s Purim. That’s why I don’t want him to drive.”

Reluctantly, their obedient eldest son got up from the table. Joseph disappeared out the door. Outside, he let out a wild, happy scream of liberation and headed off in a wobbly zigzag toward the house of the elderly Rabbi Marcus, with his faithful son, Zev, glued to his side to make sure he didn’t wander into the street.

The Marcus family was enjoying their own Purim party when Joseph burst into the house. The long table was crowded with married sons, daughters, grandchildren, and students of the well-known Talmudic teacher. Joseph headed straight for the white-bearded Rabbi and started to sit, even though there wasn’t a vacant chair in sight. Miraculously, as if out of thin air, a chair appeared and slid under him, preventing him from landing on the floor.

“Why did God fire me from my job?” Joseph wanted to know.

The Rabbi’s eyes twinkled. The respected Torah scholar may have had a glass of wine or two, but he certainly wasn’t drunk.

“Why do you think that God fired you?” he answered Joseph with a question, as rabbis were wont to do.

“Because I didn’t come to work.”

“There’s your answer,” the Rabbi said with a grin.

“I was taking care of my parents,” Joseph protested.

“Taking care of one’s parents is a very important *mitzvah*,” Rabbi Marcus agreed.

“But showing up at work is an important *mitzvah* too.”

“I didn’t come here to hear that kind of prattle,” Joseph declared.

All of the chatter at the table had been silenced by Joseph’s theatrical intrusion. But since it was Purim, everyone took it in stride. Zev was more embarrassed than everyone by his father’s behavior. But a chair appeared for him also, and plates of hot food, and glasses filled with red wine for him and his father.

“Would you like to wash your hands for the meal?” the Rabbi asked them.

“We are in the middle of our meal at home,” Zev answered.

“Why is God stepping on me like an ant?” Joseph insisted on knowing.

“Obviously, He loves you very much,” the elderly Rabbi answered.

“That’s love? Getting fired, and having your wife threaten divorce, and having your mother curse at you, and your father tell you that they were better off in Florida, and getting arrested and thrown into jail?”

“God chastises those whom He loves,” the Rabbi said.

“Oh, that makes a lot of sense,” Joseph replied. Suddenly, he looked around, as if realizing for the first time that there were other people in the room.

“When a man commits a sin, he creates a spiritual enemy,” the Rabbi explained to everyone, using the occasion to teach a small lesson. “Like a destructive angel. Let’s call it a snowball. If he commits a lot of sins against the Torah, he creates lots and lots of snowballs. If he is a person like you, Yosef, who only discovered Judaism in a later stage in life, chances are that all of the little snowballs of your past had accumulated together in a gigantic snowball as big as an avalanche. So, instead of burying the penitent under an avalanche of retribution, what does God do? In His kindness, He breaks up the huge snowball into tiny little snowballs, which He throws one at a time at the penitent to purge him from his sins. Every argument with your wife, every problem you have with your children, or with your job, or your health, God forbid, they all come to cleanse you and wash away the blemishes of your past. So if you are getting hit with a lot of little snowballs, know that it is all an avalanche of love.”

Everyone at the table was quiet, listening to the lesson. Even the little children seemed to enjoy the story-like explanation.

“Thank you very much, Rabbi,” Joseph said. As impulsively as he had come, he stood up, bent down and kissed the Rabbi. Then, looking up at the ceiling, he called out in booming voice, “God, do me a favor and hold off on the rest of Your snowballs until I can climb out of the snow.”

Heading back toward the door, Joseph tripped over a toddler, but Zev grabbed his arm and saved him from falling. The Rabbi's wife was waiting at the door to hand them a neatly wrapped and ribboned Purim gift of their own.

“Purim *samaoch!*” the Rabbi called, wishing them a happy holiday.

Now that he was unemployed, Joseph could devote more time to finding an apartment for his parents. When another real-estate broker called, inviting him to see an apartment on the other side of the park, Joseph asked his wife if she wanted to come along, to let her see just how seriously he was trying to abide by the agreement. It turned out to be a modern, airy, three-bedroom apartment with a commanding view of the park. The rental price was high, but Rivka thought that it was the ideal solution. The Philippine worker would have her own privacy, and the extra bedroom could be used for the grandchildren, if they wanted to stay overnight, or for Ilene, if she ever came to visit.

“Don't you think a furnished place makes more sense?” Joseph asked. “Uncle Herbie is selling all of their stuff in Boca with the house, and it will be a super hassle to fill up an apartment this big with completely new furniture.”

“A furnished place in Riverdale is hard to find,” the real-estate agent said. “It's not like Manhattan where people are always shooting off to other places and want to sublet. Plus, with a view like this, you can sit for hours and watch what's going on in the park. And it's the only building in the neighborhood with a 24-hour doorman. That's an important security feature, especially for elderly people like your parents.”

“Furnishing the apartment can be a great therapeutic project for your mother,” Rivka added. “She loves interior decorating.”

It was true. His mother was an interior decorator at heart.

“It's going to cost a lot of money to fill up a place this big,” he replied, finding it difficult to make a decision.

“They are going to get a lot of money for their house, Joseph,” his wife reminded him. “And thank God, your parents also have savings. And maybe it isn't too late

to have Uncle Herbie ship some of their stuff to New York. That way, they will have furniture that they are familiar with and the transition won't seem so drastic."

"That's a good idea," the agent said in agreement.

Finally, Joseph said yes. He knew from the beginning that the apartment was perfect. But just thinking about his father's reaction gave him cold feet.

He broke the news to his Dad that night.

"Do you want to kill me?" his father responded, looking terribly frightened and pale. "How can you do this to us?"

"You can't expect to stay with us forever," Joseph explained.

"Why not? It's a big house. There's plenty of room. Your mother and I both feel so comfortable here."

"I know you do, Dad, and I'm glad. But you know what it is to be married."

"Your wife doesn't want us?" his father inquired, putting two and two together.

"It isn't that. Rivka loves you both very much. But you can't have two women in a house, you know that."

"How can you just throw us out on the street and leave us all alone?"

"No one is throwing you out on the street. It's a beautiful three-bedroom apartment with a twenty-four-hour doorman. And you won't be alone. You have Tess. She's going to be living with you."

"I can't handle your mother by myself."

"That's why we got Tess. She'll take care of Mom."

"Why didn't you tell me this before we left Florida. I never would have agreed."

"Dad, be reasonable. The apartment is just across the park from here. It's two minutes away. It's almost like you'll be living with us. I'll be there every day, and you'll have the kids for company all the time. They can even spend the night in the extra bedroom."

“Your mother isn’t going to like this,” he said.

Joseph felt like a monster. Kicking his parents out of his house, especially the house they had bought for him, was against his better nature. But what could he do? He had to think about his marriage and keeping his wife.

The following day, after Joseph handed over a security check and two months rent in advance, he took his parents to see the nearby apartment.

“What do we need an apartment for?” his mother wanted to know. “We already have a beautiful home.”

“While you’re here for the bar mitzvah,” Joseph explained. “It’ll be more comfortable.”

Joseph’s father had a frown on his face all the time. He stood in the empty living room as Joseph gave his mother and the Filipino a tour.

“Come on, Dad,” he said, inviting his father to join them.

“I’m not interested,” Harry Friedman answered.

Joseph showed his mother the master bedroom, and the room where Tess would be, and the spare guest room for Ilene when she came for the bar mitzvah.

“It needs a lot of furniture,” she remarked as they stood in the vacant dining enclave.

“You’ll have a wonderful time furnishing it. They have some super furniture stores around here. The project will keep you busy.”

In the kitchen, the always fastidious Lizzy Friedman opened a cabinet and ran a finger along a shelf. “It’s not very clean,” she observed.

“We’ll give the whole place a cleaning before you move in,” Joseph promised.

“It’s seems like a lot of unnecessary work for the short time we are going to be here,” she noted.

“Please, son,” his father pleaded. “Let us stay with you.”

“It’s going to be OK, Dad, don’t worry. You see how close it is to us. You can almost see our house from your living room window.”

He led his father to the large picture window that looked out across the park. Sure enough, not very far away, you could see the street where Joseph lived.

Shopping began right away. Uncle Herbie didn’t want to bother with sending their furniture to New York. The real estate broker was selling the villa, lock, stock, and barrel, and he had a live prospect from South America who was in love with furnishings.

Every day, they visited another furniture store. When his mother had her wits about her, she still had good taste, and she knew exactly what she wanted, and where each rug and chair and lamp would be. At other times, when her dybbuk returned, she would look around the store and ask, “What are we doing here?”

Gradually, his father came to terms with the situation. He wasn’t happy about it, but he realized he had no choice. “This is costing a fortune,” he repeated time and again. “Joseph, please reconsider.”

When Joseph wasn’t shopping with his parents, buying pots and pans and dishes, lighting fixtures, bath towels, wastebaskets, vases, and imitation masterpiece paintings, he had to hang around the new apartment and wait for deliveries. It was a full time job.

And here he was, doing it all for Rivka, and still his wife complained.

“I’m preparing a big bar mitzvah, and you’re busy running around with your parents all day.”

At night, he was so exhausted, he would crash out in bed with his clothes on, while his wife was busy in the kitchen baking cakes for the upcoming celebration. When the day finally arrived to move his parents into the now furnished apartment, he felt that he had run out of strength. Tess was an incredible help, always present, always on the move, helping wherever she could, but the brunt of the responsibility still fell on him.

His mother, he had to admit, had done a super job of decorating. To be sure, he had helped with his own suggestions, but she had made the major decisions. Each room had its own unique look, and the place really felt like a home. His Dad had a big color TV and an easy chair similar to his old recliner in Boca. Joseph hung up the pictures of the family that he had brought from Florida, and they looked like they had been there forever. There was even a white, living-room carpet that was strictly off limits, and an expensively upholstered sofa that was reserved for special guests. After heating up their first night, kosher TV dinners in the new microwave, Joseph popped open a bottle of kosher champagne to enliven everyone's spirits.

"May old acquaintances be forgotten," his father gloomily said, still not pleased with the arrangement. When the time came for Joseph to say good night and leave his parents alone, his father looked at him with frightened eyes and asked for him to stay. It reminded Joseph of his first night in boarding school. How scared and lonely he had felt watching his parents drive away.

"I can't, Dad," he said.

"Just tonight," his father pleaded. "You can sleep in the guest room. That's why we have the extra bed."

"The extra bed isn't for me, Dad," he said. "If you need me, I'm only two minutes away, but I have to go home."

"It's more than two minutes," his father insisted.

"Oh, let Joey go home to his wife," his mother said.

Feeling a hole in his heart, Joseph rode down to the ground floor in the elevator. Both his father and Tess had his phone number. The numbers of the police and ambulance service were written by the phone. And Joseph had installed an emergency medical intercom system that you could speak to from any spot in the apartment. All you had to do was press a button and a medic would immediately answer, ready to send out a doctor or professional emergency squad. So in terms of health and security, his parents had everything they needed. But his father had become a chronic worrier, so no matter how many precautions Joseph took to make them feel safe, his father made it seem like he hadn't done anything at all.

As Joseph was crossing the park, heading home, his cell phone rang. Sure enough, it was his father.

“Can you see me?” he asked.

“See you where?” Joseph inquired.

“In the window.”

High up the building, he could make out the figure of his father, waving in the living room window.

“I see you, Dad,” he assured him.

“Goodnight, son,” he said. “I’m sorry that we’re such a bother.”

It wasn’t easy, but Joseph turned his back and kept walking. Incredibly, he made it home. He even managed to sit down beside Rivka on the living room couch before his phone rang again.

“Your mother is threatening to jump out the window,” his father informed him.

“Oh, shit,” Joseph mumbled. He stood up from the couch. “I’ve got to go,” he told his wife.

“You just got here,” she protested.

“It’s because it’s the first day, that’s all,” he said without explaining more.

He didn’t even think about taking the car. Instead, he started to jog. When he reached the park, he could make out the figures of his mother and father standing by the sixth-floor window. In getting his parents established, he had thought about everything, but not about his mother jumping from the window. Since the apartment was on an upper floor, its windows didn’t need bars against burglars. And his kids already knew better. With so many other things to attend to, it hadn’t occurred to Joseph that, come some witching hour, his mother might decide that jumping out of the window was the fastest way home.

When he got back to the apartment, no one was in the living room and the window was still in place. His mother had locked herself in the bathroom. In the morning,

he would call someone to install some kind of bars on the windows, and a locksmith to remove the locks on the rooms. But right now, he had to cajole his mother to open up the door and get her peacefully to bed. Tess, for all of her helpfulness, didn't know what to do in situations like these, and his father would get so uptight that Joseph worried he might jump out a window himself.

“You see why you have to be here,” he said to his son.

Twenty minutes later, his mother was still barricaded inside. Rivka called, wanting to know when he was coming home. The kids were driving her crazy, she had a headache, she still had to write out the seating cards for the bar mitzvah dinner, the baby was kicking up a storm, and she was afraid that she her blood pressure would rise if she didn't rest right away.

“You get into bed, and I'll be there in five minutes,” Joseph promised.

His father stared at him with an expression that said, “I told you this arrangement never would work.”

“Mom, do you hear me?” he called. “It's Joey. If you don't open the door now, I am going to have to break it down, and it's going to cost us a lot of money to fix it. Be a good sport and open up. I came all the way here to see you, so open up and give me a hug, will you please?”

After a few moments, the door opened. “It must have gotten stuck,” she said. Joseph could tell from her expression that the storm had passed. One thing about the new medicine – it didn't prevent the outbursts, but it cut down their duration by half.

Tess escorted his mother into the bedroom to get her ready for bed.

“She'll be OK, now,” Joseph said to his father. “I'll come back a little later just to make sure.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Thank you, son. I appreciate it. I know it must not be easy for you and your wife. But it’s not easy for us either.”

“We’ll all get through it,” Joseph assured him. “Why don’t you get to bed too?”

“I’ll watch some TV for awhile. Who can sleep?” his father answered.

Joseph sure felt like he could. He rode back down the elevator, said goodnight once again to the doorman, and ran all the way home. Already, as he opened the front door, he was prepared to start yelling at the kids. But Shimon met him in the hallway, holding a hushing finger to his lips.

“Shhh,” he said. “They’re already sleeping.”

“So why did your mother call me in such a panic?”

“They were making a racket, but I got them to bed by singing them some songs. Mom’s sleeping too.”

Sure enough, his wife was fast asleep on her bed, still wearing her kitchen apron. Tiptoeing over to the bed, Joseph flicked off the switch of the nightlight. Quietly, he backed out of the room. He had promised his father that he would return to make sure that everything was OK, and with Rivka conked out in bed, this was the best chance he had to sneak away without getting yelled at. So once again, he headed off across the park in a jog, figuring he would count all the back and forth yardage as his daily exercise run. The doorman held open the lobby door, as if he had been expecting him. Upstairs, his father was asleep in his easy chair. Tess asked if she could go out to the all-night grocery to buy some milk for the morning. Telling her that he’d wait until she came back, Joseph wandered into the dark guest room and collapsed down on the new convertible couch. In a minute, he was snoring.

Chapter Twelve

His cell phone woke him at five in the morning. At first, Joseph didn't know where he was. Then he remembered that he had sat down to rest in the guest room of his parent's new apartment. It was Rivka.

"Where the hell are you?" she asked.

"I guess I fell asleep at my parent's apartment," he said.

"You're a stinking liar," his wife shot back.

"Lying about what?"

"You're having an affair with the Filipino."

"What?" he exclaimed.

"I see the way she looks at you."

"You're crazy," he said.

"It's either her or me," Rivka threatened, and she hung up the phone.

His wife had flipped. She was truly out of her mind, Joseph thought. Maybe because of the approaching bar mitzvah and all of the arrangements that had to be made, like the *Shabbos* morning *Kiddush* for 600 people, and a dinner party for over 200 guests. Or maybe it was because of her fears surrounding the upcoming birth. Whatever the reason, the day had hardly begun and Joseph found himself running across the park again to his home.

"Honey," he said, before waking the kids. "I love you. I don't want anyone else in the world."

"Don't come near me," she said, backing away to the other side of their bedroom.

"I don't want to hear your Hollywood speeches. Now I know why you're with your parents day and night. It's not to help them. It's because you're having an affair with that woman."

His wife's face was wild with jealousy – a little like his mother's when she was having a fit.

“I'm not even attracted to her,” he swore.

“Don't play the innocent with me. A man is a man. She's got a lot nicer figure than mine.”

“Oh, come on, Rivka,” he said to his pregnant, expecting wife. “Don't be ridiculous.”

“Then what were you doing there all last night?”

“I was exhausted. I fell asleep there in the guest room. That's all.”

“You are a liar,” she maintained. “I can see it on your face. I wasn't born yesterday. You don't have to be with your parents every minute. It's because of that Japanese whore.”

“She's not a whore, and she's from the Philippines.”

“I don't care where she's from. You see, you're defending her already. Well, I don't want another woman around my husband day and night. Either you get rid of her today, or I'm leaving you.”

“Oh that's just great,” Joseph said. “I'll fire her and move in with my parents as their helper. At least that way I won't have to look for a new job.”

“Don't be facetious with me. I know your games. You bullshitted me into marrying you, and you are bullshitting me now.”

Joseph remembered what the Rabbi had said about getting hit on the head with snowballs. Maybe, he was getting pummeled now for all of his past girlfriends and bohemian behavior before he had met his wife. He remembered he still had to pray. And get the kids off to school.

“Rivka, I love you,” he repeated. “Please, try to believe me. I'm not having any affair. I've never touched her. I never even thought about it. But if you keep on like this, I may start to think about it now.”

“If you mean what you say, then you’ll fire her. You can talk till you’re blue in the face, but I see how she looks at you. Maybe you haven’t slept with her yet, but if she keeps looking at you that way, you will. I can just imagine what will be when I’m in the hospital after giving birth. I’ve heard of plenty of stories like that.”

Joseph didn’t know what had happened to his wife. He didn’t know what look she was talking about. Maybe he had been too busy with his parents to notice. Not that he was such a saint that he didn’t glance at a pretty woman now and then. Like his wife said, a man is a man. But the truth was, as opposed to the physical attraction he had felt in the employment agency toward the eye-grabber, Michelle, he wasn’t attracted to the plain looking Tess at all.

“Give me time to find some other worker,” he said.

His wife thought before she responded. “All right,” she finally said. “But if you don’t get rid of her this week, you can move in with your parents for all that I care.”

Rivka remained in their bedroom all morning. He got the kids off to school by himself, excluding Avi, whose punitive suspension was continuing until a pharmaceutical solution could be found. Then Joseph went to pray, deciding not to inform Tess that her employment would be ending until he had hired someone new. And he was hoping that his wife would come to her senses and change her mind.

For the rest of the morning, Rivka didn’t talk to him. He drove his parents to the memory club, then took them home for lunch. Neither of them wanted to nap, so he drove them to a mall in New Jersey to buy some more things for the kitchen and to tire them out. When he got home, his wife still gave him the silent treatment. She wasn’t going to talk to him, she told Danny, until he did what he promised to do. So the next day, feeling embarrassed and stupid, he sat down across the desk from a lady agent at the foreign worker division of the Lexington Avenue employment agency and said that he wanted to replace the worker that he had hired for his parents. Given the situation, he would have preferred speaking with a man, but all of the customer agents were women.

“Not satisfied with her performance?” she asked.

“It isn’t that,” Joseph answered, not wanting to get Tess into trouble. “She’s a very good worker, but you see, well, to be frank with you, my wife is the jealous type. We need someone fat and ugly.”

The agent looked at Joseph and nodded.

“I don’t mean to discriminate,” Joseph said. “Usually, it’s the other way around, I presume. Most people want to hire attractive workers. So maybe this will balance things out.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” the agent said. “I’ve had requests like yours in the past. It’s perfectly understandable. The question is - will an overweight worker be able to do the job?”

She glanced down at the Friedman application on her desk.

“Mom has Alzheimer’s,” he said, trying to cut things short.

“What stage of the disease?” she asked.

“Generally, she’s OK. Only she gets angry a lot and takes off. You need to be a marathon runner to keep up with her.”

“That’s the problem. I’m not sure an overweight person would be right for the job. How about a man?”

“That’s out of the question. My mother can take care of her personal needs right now, but I don’t know what will be in the future.”

“Of course,” the agent said. “It shouldn’t be a problem to find you another worker. We’ll line up some interviews and see what we can find.”

Next stop was the child neurologist. Avi had scored high on the ADHD test, and to get him back into school, they had to put him on Ritalin. They couldn’t keep him at home any longer. Between wasting his time watching TV and driving his mother crazy, the boy certainly wasn’t learning. So Joseph drove back to Riverdale, picked up his wife and his hyperactive son, and they all went to the doctor together.

“You look uptight,” his wife observed with her feminine radar.

“I want to get to the doctor on time, that’s all.”

“Please don’t become like your father,” she said

“Lay off my parents, will you for a change?”

“Touchy, aren’t we? I wonder why. Is it so hard to fire Tess?”

“Stop it already,” he said. “I’m anxious because after we finish with Avi, I have to take my parents to their new cardiologist, and I don’t want to be late for that either. You know how my father gets when he has to be somewhere on time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me they had an appointment today?”

“What difference does it make?”

“We have a bar mitzvah next week, remember? I want to go over the dinner menu with you. The caterer wants us to fax him our preferences by tonight.”

“Whatever you decide is OK with me,” he told her.

“I want you to be a part of this too,” she answered. “It isn’t enough that I had to arrange for the photographer, and the video, and the band, and the caterer, and the hall, while you were in Florida, now I have to decide on what kind of appetizers and dessert we are going to serve?”

“Get a little of everything,” he suggested.

“I want ice cream,” Avi shouted. “Ice cream! Ice cream! Ice cream!”

Angrily, Joseph raised a threatening hand. “Don’t scream when I’m driving!” he yelled. Seeing a dog jump into the path of the car, he swerved to avoid killing the creature.

“Maybe you need Ritalin too,” Rivka observed.

“And maybe you need a muzzle to shut up and to get the hell off my back,” Joseph retorted, losing his cool.

“I’m not going to take any drugs,” Avi announced. “I won’t swallow them. I’ll spit them out. I’ll throw them away.”

“Ritalin isn’t a drug,” his mother assured him.

“Yes it is. Two of my friends take it, and they say it makes them feel like throwing up.”

“Everyone reacts differently,” his mother answered. “Many people have no side effects at all.”

“Why should I have to take medicine if it’s because you two are always fighting,” their son wanted to know.

Joseph glanced at his wife, wondering where the boy had come up with that pearl of wisdom. From some television program? From one of his friends? From his teacher?

“It isn’t because of us,” Rivka told the boy. “You were born with a lot of energy, that’s all. When you learn how to channel it, you’re going to be something special, like Napoleon, and Winston Churchill, and Albert Einstein, and a lot of other people who had ADHD.”

“Does Michael Jordon have ADHD?” the boy asked.

“Sure thing,” Joseph answered.

“Then having ADHD is cool.”

After the child neurologist, Joseph hurried to the new apartment and took his parents to their new cardiologist, an Orthodox Jew who prayed at Joseph’s *shul*. Harry Friedman was his usual nervous self whenever he had to see a physician, as if he expected to receive terrible news. But the doctor didn’t discover anything abnormal, so he kept them both on their old medications. By the time Joseph drove them back to their apartment building, he was drained. He wasn’t planning on going upstairs with them, but his mother insisted, saying that she needed his help to move the microwave oven to another spot in the kitchen. He had marked the cabinets “Meat” and “Dairy,” and had given Tess a lesson in keeping kosher, which he was going to have to repeat for the next foreign worker.

“I want it on that side of the counter,” his mother told him.

The advantage of the jumbo microwave was that it could heat up three TV dinners at once. It was stuck into a built-in cabinet unit, above the new oven and grill.

“It’s up too high,” his mother said. “I can’t reach it to clean it.”

“You don’t have to clean it,” Joseph told her. “That’s why you have a worker. She’ll do all of the cleaning for you.”

“Ever since I’ve been married to your father, I’ve done all the cleaning,” she said.

“We had a cleaning woman in Florida,” her husband reminded her.

“We certainly did not,” she replied.

His father gave Joseph a look, rolling his eyes in their sockets. The delivery men had installed the kitchen appliances, so Joseph wasn’t prepared for the sudden weight in his arms when he lowered the microwave from its perch. First he felt his lower spine pop out of place, then a piercing pain seized his neck. With a cry, he managed to swing the machine through the air and set it down on the kitchen counter. He grabbed a hold of the startled Tess to keep himself from falling. Again he screamed out, sounding like a woman in labor.

“Joey, are you all right?” his father asked.

“ARRRRGH,” he groaned. Paralyzed, he held onto Tess’s outstretched hands, like two mannequins posing in a store window display.

“What’s the matter?” his mother asked in alarm.

“Do you want me to call a doctor?” his father wanted to know.

“Hit the emergency intercom button,” Joseph whispered, afraid to take a deep breath.

There was a small box in every room. With a shaking finger, Harry Friedman hit the red button. Ten seconds later, they heard a calm, male voice.

“Hello, Mr. Friedman,” it said.

“Hello,” he answered.

“How can we help you?”

Liz Friedman glanced all over the kitchen, trying to find out where the invisible, incorporeal voice was coming from.

“My son pulled out his back lifting the microwave, and now he can’t stand up straight.”

“My neck,” Joseph painfully whispered.

“And it looks like he twisted his neck,” his father reported.

Suddenly, Joseph heard the sound of his kids. They rushed into the kitchen followed by Rivka, who held out a cake in her hands.

“Surprise!” she called out. “Happy house-warming!”

When she saw her husband holding hands with the Philippine woman, as if they were dancing a waltz, she gasped out in horror.

CUT TO:

THE CHOCOLATE CAKE – IT FALLS WITH A SMASH TO THE FLOOR

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON RIVKA’S HORRIFIED EXPRESSION

CUT TO:

JOSEPH AND TESS HOLDING HANDS:

THEY STAND FROZEN, AS IF CAUGHT IN THE ACT

With a scream, Rivka ran out of the apartment.

“Is everything all right?” asked the voice from the emergency medical service.

“Just get the hell over here!” Harry Friedman yelled. “You got a big enough down payment. Get the hell over here fast!”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Friedman,” the calm voice reassured. “There’s a medical team on the way.”

“Who’s speaking?” Avi wanted to know.

“Where is he?” Moishe inquired.

“Son, can you move?” Joseph’s father asked.

“It hurts like hell,” Joseph replied with a grimace.

The pain was so sharp, it took his breath away. It hurt so much, he couldn’t even begin to think about how he was going to explain things to Rivka.

“You have to sit down,” his mother advised.

“Avi, go into the bedroom at the end of the hall,” Joseph told his son. “Bring me the wheelchair.”

The two boys ran off. Joseph had purchased the wheelchair, just in case, for an emergency like this, as part of a “senior citizen’s, assisted-living, security package” that was recommended by the memory club. Avi returned in a jiffy, wheeling his brother in a bumper car ride as they took the sharp corner into the kitchen.

“Easy,” their grandfather shouted. “Bring it over here.”

Taking a hold of the chair, he placed it behind his son.

“I can’t sit down,” Joseph said.

“Try.”

“I can’t.”

When he breathed, the pain in his neck made him tremble. His head tilted to the side on an angle of 180 degrees.

“Straighten your head,” his father told him.

“I’m afraid to,” Joseph said.

“What happened, *Abba*?” little Moishe wanted to know.

“Your father hurt himself lifting the microwave,” his grandfather explained.

“Guide me over to the counter,” Joseph whispered to Tess. “I want to try to stand on my own.”

Slowly, Tess backed up toward the kitchen counter. Joseph followed with short, scraping shuffles.

“Put my hands on the counter.”

Carefully, the Philippine assistant lowered his arms. With a groan, Joseph let go of her hands and leaned his weight on the counter. With his arms stretched out, his head down, and his butt sticking up in the air, he looked like a golfer lining up a long putt.

“Now what?” his father asked.

“I don’t know,” Joseph answered.

“You can’t stay like that forever,” his mother said. “Try sitting down in the chair.”

She wheeled it over behind him.

“Where the hell are they already, damn it?” his father swore, walking anxiously to the window, as if his staring down to the street would bring the ambulance faster.

Joseph’s arms were trembling from the strain of holding onto the counter while most of his weight was behind him.

“Hold me under my arms,” he commanded.

Tess rushed over to grab him. Squeezing his face into a prune, he let go his grasp and fell backward into the wheelchair, where he landed with an “UUUPH!”

“Water,” he said. Feeling like he was going to faint.

“What kind of glass?” Tess asked, not wanting to make a mistake. “Meat or dairy?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

She filled up a glass of water and held it up to his lips, as if feeding an old man. Joseph sipped at it slowly. But with his head slanted to the side, most of the water spilled out of his mouth.

“Try a straw,” Avi suggested.

With his fingers, Joseph motioned his son to come closer. “Call your mother and tell her that I twisted my neck lifting the microwave and that an ambulance is on the way.”

“They’re here,” his father announced as the sound of an ambulance grew closer. In a few minutes, the emergency medical squad burst into the apartment. One medic carried a large valise filled with medical equipment. Another opened a portable stretcher on wheels. The third team member introduced himself as a doctor.

“What happened?” he asked.

“My son lifted a heavy microwave oven and his back locked up on him.”

Joseph pointed to his crooked neck.

“His neck too,” his father added.

Overwhelmed by all of the commotion, Liz Friedman stepped out of the way and let her husband handle things. It wasn’t like her at all, Joseph noticed. Normally, she was a tiger when it came to protecting her son. He remembered once when he was eight, a snarling German Shepherd had jumped over a fence and started chasing him home from school. Racing as fast as his little legs would carry him, he managed to make it to the front yard, where his screams brought his mother to the rescue. With a broom, she gave the canine a violent thrashing, chasing him off with his tail between his legs. But now, all of the activity was too much for her damaged brain to handle.

The doctor asked Joseph a few questions to assess the situation. The pain, he assured him, would lessen. He didn’t think it was worth a trip to the hospital. The ride in the ambulance might even make things worse, he said. For slipped discs,

muscle pulls, pinched nerves, and neck sprains, bed rest was often the best medicine. “I’m not an orthopedist, or a chiropractor,” he said. “But if you want, I can try to release some of the tension.”

Joseph gave his hand a little shake, as if to ask “How?”

“You’d be surprised, but we see these things often,” the doctor continued. “A lot of times, a little on the scenes treatment and massage can do the trick. Are you game?”

Because of the excruciating pain, Joseph couldn’t nod his head to answer. Since, he was sitting bent over with his neck askew, he could only glance up with his eyes to see the doctor, whose head remained out of sight.

“It’s worth a try,” his father answered.

That was easy for him to say, Joseph thought.

The doctor stepped behind the wheelchair. “I’m just going to put my arms under your arms, and then slowly lift you up.”

Rivka reappeared in the apartment. Receiving Avi’s call, she had made a u-turn and hurried right back, suspecting that it was some kind of ploy. But seeing the medics and the doctor, and the stretcher ready to wheel her husband away, she felt genuine concern.

“Fold your arms over your chest,” the doctor ordered.

Like a good soldier, Joseph complied. Suddenly, with an “OOPH” and a yank, the doctor raised him up out of the wheelchair. Like the keys of a piano sacle, Joseph heard his vertebrae click back into place one by one.

“You OK?” the doctor asked.

“I think so,” Joseph answered, his forehead covered with sweat.

“Easy,” the doctor cautioned. “Get your balance. See if you can stand on your own.”

Slowly, he released his hold on Joseph, who swayed, but managed to stand erect.

“How do you feel?”

“Like the Leaning Tower of Pisa,” he said, reaching out to the counter for balance.

“If you can joke about it, you’re fine,” one of the medics remarked.

“My back feels a lot better,” Joseph admitted. “But my neck still hurts like hell.”

“I’m not so experienced with necks,” the doctor confessed, “But I can give it a try.”

“That’s OK,” Rivka said, butting in. “I think that we’ll first try a hot compress and heating pad to loosen up the muscles. If that doesn’t work, we know a chiropractor.”

“I’ve heard that acupuncture can help in really bad cases,” the other medic said.

“Maybe if you’re Chinese,” the doctor replied skeptically.

“My neck froze up on me once,” the first medic related. “I walked around in a brace for two months. Finally, I found a physiotherapist who gave me exercises to do. He put me through a series of spine-stretching treatments on some kind of pulley machine. After another few weeks, I felt a lot better. I think I still have his card in my wallet if you want.”

“It’s all a lot of crap,” Harry Friedman cut in. “I had a pinched nerve for years from driving all over New England and New York State when I was a traveling salesman. You remember, don’t you, honey,” he said to his wife, who had retreated into her own private world.

“I remember, Dad,” Joseph said.

“Sure, you were a kid. I wore a brace for almost a year. Scotch was the only thing that drowned out the pain. I had to get pickled at night so I could fall asleep. That’s how I got started on booze.”

“Maybe I should sit down,” Joseph suggested. “I still feel a little unsteady.”

“Sit in my recliner,” Harry Friedman said. “Watch some TV. Feel at home.”

As Joseph took a tentative step toward the living room, Tess instinctively rushed forward to help, but Rivka beat her to it, clutching her husband by his arm.

“You’ll do your resting at our home,” she said. “A hot shower will do you more good than anything else.”

“Take him down to the car in the wheelchair,” his father advised.

While the medic wrote out the physiotherapist’s phone number, his partner helped Joseph sit down in the wheelchair.

“You know, your mother and I were in Pisa,” Harry Friedman said after the emergency team had left. “I took a picture of your mother there, as if she were holding up the Leaning Tower.”

“I remember it, Dad,” Joseph said, as his wife wheeled him away to the door.

“That emergency team is a pretty slick operation,” his father remarked, with rare words of praise. “I’m impressed. For fifty bucks a month, it’s worth it. They had something like that in Boca, but we never signed up. Anyway, let’s hope we’ll never have to call them again.”

“Can we stay and watch TV with Grandpa and Grandma?” Avi asked.

“Sure thing,” their grandmother answered.

“How will they get home?” his father asked.

“They can walk,” Joseph said. “We’re just right across the park.”

“Maybe we will all take a walk over to your place a little later,” his father said.

“You’re going to go for a walk? In the evening?” Liz Friedman asked her husband in sarcastic surprise.

It was amazing, Joseph thought as they left the apartment. One minute, his mother was out of things completely, and the next minute she was just as sharp as could be.

“We are the only family I know who has two foreign workers,” Rivka said, employing a little of her own sarcasm, as she wheeled her husband into the building elevator. “Me and the Filipino.”

“Stop it,” he groaned. “It hurts when I laugh.”

“It serves you right,” she said, revealing that she was still feeling jealous.

“Stop it already, will you. She isn’t my type at all.”

“But if she were your type, then I’d have reason to worry -is that what you mean? Have I gotten so fat and ugly?”

“You’re beautiful,” he assured her, not able to lift his head and give her a loving look.

At the second floor, the elevator came to a halt. When the door slid open, a beefy, oversized bulldog jumped in, followed by a beefy, oversized man, holding the dog on a leash. They looked so similar that both Rivka and Joseph wanted to giggle. Just seeing the hilarious pair caused Joseph to grimace in pain. How much could a man endure, he thought, when it even hurt to laugh?

“Goodnight, Mr. Friedman” the doorman said, opening the lobby door so that Rivka could wheel him out.

“Thank you,” she said to him with a smile. For the first time in days, she felt truly happy. True, it felt a little strange wheeling her husband home in a wheelchair, but at least he was all hers for the night.

Chapter Thirteen

Years later, when Joseph looked back on that trying and painful period of his life, the picture of his mother that he liked to remember was of her standing at the bar mitzvah party, a glint of the old beautiful light in her eyes, smiling proudly over her brood. It was the *nachas* of a *yiddisha* momma. The formal dress she had bought for the evening fit her perfectly. After a visit to the beauty parlor, every hair was in place. At least for the first part of the evening, if someone hadn't know about her Alzheimer's, he never would have guessed. Only, Joseph, who knew her so well, could detect that there was a slightly different look to her face, a trace of underlying tension which betrayed that something was taking place inside her brain that she couldn't control.

And there was one other detail that only Joseph noticed. His mother wasn't wearing a high-necked dress to cover up her old surgery scar, nor a scarf, nor a thick, multi-strand necklace. It had haunted her for years, but now, she wasn't conscious of it at all.

To Joseph's great surprise, his father took her by the hand and led her out onto the dance floor. At Harry Friedman's request, the band switched from its medley of Hasidic tunes to a nostalgic rendition of "I Could Have Danced All Night," from "My Fair Lady." His mother and father had been dancing together for over sixty years, and they looked it. All of the eyes in the catering hall were focused upon them as they waltzed effortlessly around the dance floor.

Since it was forbidden for men and women to dance together at an Orthodox celebration, Joseph shot a nervous glance at the Rabbi. The abrupt head movement caused a sharp pain in his neck which traveled down his spine. The neck brace that he was wearing didn't help to relieve the pain. Nor did the pain killer that he took four times a day, nor the valium, or the scotch. Ever since the fifth and sixth vertebrae in the back of his neck had slipped out of place lifting the microwave, he had been in constant agony. It was as if a miniature Joseph was screaming in angst inside of his body. The slightest movement of his head caused him to wince. Hot showers were the only temporary relief that he had.

The distinguished Rabbi responded with a discreet tilt of his head and a diplomatic wave of the hand, as if to say, “Don’t worry about it.” While a husband could dance with his wife in the privacy of his home, it wasn’t allowed at a social gathering, where a man might then also dance with someone else’s wife, and everyone knew where that could lead. But the learned Torah scholar didn’t seem concerned. Most of the guests knew the rules, and the non-religious side of Joseph’s family had already learned that at Joseph’s affairs, the men danced in dizzying circles with the men, while the women danced the *hora* on the other side of a folding partition, called a “*mechitza*,” that separated between the sexes.

For those few minutes of the song, Harry and Liz Friedman were the stars of the evening. Liz Friedman followed her husband’s leads with a smiling, easy grace. For those few minutes, they were like honeymooners. As they stared into each other’s eyes, it was as if they were the only ones at the party.

“I could have danced all night; I could have danced all night,

and then

have begged for more.

“I could have spread my wings, and done a thousand things,

I’ve never done before.”

Tears welled up in Uncle Herbie eyes. Ilene and Rivka were teary-eyed too. A soft expression spread over Rivka’s father’s usually solemn face as he sat in his wheelchair viewing the performance. Even Avi stopped running around like a wild Indian to watch his grandpa and grandma swirl around the dance floor. Wally applauded.

In Joseph’s memory, from that dance on, his mother was never the same. Her moments of lucidity became more and more rare. Gradually, over the ensuing months, her rages and outbursts subsided as she withdrew into her own private world. The time even came when she could stare at her loving son, Joseph, and not recognize who he was. Not a sign of outward recognition would appear on her face. Whatever she might be thinking inside, Joseph never knew. But that night, for one magnificent hour, she was the loving mother he remembered from his youth.

And that was the mother he wanted to remember, with the happy smile on her face, shining with contentment and pride as she gazed at her family.

Up until that moment, the bar mitzvah had been a wonderful success. On *Shabbat*, Danny had read flawlessly from the Torah. Outside of the *kugel* being a little burnt, and Ilene's skirt a lot too short, the gala morning *Kiddush* had kept everyone in high spirits. Uncle Herbie seemed to be having a good time, and Ilene managed to get through the entire day without answering her cell phone, at least not in public, in accord with her brother's request. For a few minutes, Rivka kept clutching her bursting belly, as if she were going to give birth right then and there, but the convulsions lessened and waned. And the Saturday night dinner celebration with over two hundred guests had been a grand festive affair until Joseph got up to deliver his speech. Because his stiff neck-brace kept his head facing forward, like a workhorse with blinders, he didn't notice his mother sneak up from the side. When she grabbed at his beard and gave it a tug, a torturous pain seized his whole body until he thought he would faint.

"Why can't you shave it off?" she said. "You used to be so good looking."

Because she was standing right by the microphone, her words were heard by everyone. A loud roar of laughter spread through the hall. People probably thought it was a funny bit of staging, like the juggler who had performed earlier in the evening, and the boy's choir that had featured Danny in the lead.

"It makes you look so dirty," his mother continued. "What do you need it for?"

Again, she affectionately tugged at his beard. For a dizzying moment, Joseph felt that he was going to pass out from the pain. Uncle Herbie let out a loud guffaw. The photographer snapped photos. The video man rushed forward to capture the scene. Everyone was laughing as if they were watching a hilarious Laurel and Hardy routine.

Once again, Joseph reminded himself of the *halachah* in Jewish Law. In enumerating how a son is supposed to perform the commandment of honoring and fearing one's father and mother, the Rabbis taught:

“To what degree shall parents be feared? If a son, attired in costly garments, were to preside over a meeting, and his father, or his mother, came and rent his garments, and struck him on the head, and spat in his face, he should neither insult them, nor show distress in their presence, nor display anger towards them; but he should remain silent and fear the King, who is the King of kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He, who decreed that this distressing incident should come about.”

So even though the photos taken at that moment showed his eyeballs popping out from their sockets, Joseph didn't let out a peep. Obviously, he had it coming to him. Like the Rabbi had told him on Purim, rather than punishing a man for his sins with one devastating blow, God, in his mercy, executes the judgment in small installments. “Snowballs,” the Rabbi had called them. Oh, how sad Joseph was now for all of those wasted drunken nights in Hollywood.

His mother finally let go of his beard. “This has been a very nice party,” she said into the microphone, “But now I have to go home.”

Instead of walking back to her table, she headed off toward the door to the catering hall kitchen, thinking it was the exit. Tess hurried after her. Joseph was in too much pain to continue his speech.

“My Mom is a tough act to follow, so I'll hand the spotlight over to Danny,” he said.

Trying to look as normal as he could, he walked stiffly back toward the table of honor.

“You look white as a ghost,” Rivka noted.

“I think your mother and I should call it a night,” Harry Friedman said. “It's been a long day.”

Indeed, it had been a long day, but for Joseph and Rivka, the day was just beginning. Before they had finished bringing the car load of presents into the house, Rivka doubled over with a long contraction that left her shaking.

“It's coming,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Joseph asked. Exhausted, he didn’t want to rush off to the hospital on another false alarm, like they had so many times in the past.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she answered.

“Did your water break?”

“Stop trying to be my doctor. If you won’t take me, I’ll drive myself.”

“Sure, I’ll take you honey,” he said. “Relax. I just wanted to be sure.”

Another contraction made his wife hold her breath.

“Let the air out,” he reminded her. “Breathe.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, you idiot!” she retorted. “Just get the car.”

“The car’s right outside.”

“Then let’s go.”

“What about your bag?” he asked, referring to the small valise that she had prepared for a three-day hospital stay.

“Go get it.”

As quickly as he could with his pinched nerves, he hurried upstairs and grabbed the suitcase. Since it was too heavy for him to lift in his condition, he dragged it down the stairs, shouting out orders to the kids in case he had to spend the night at the hospital. Luckily, the carry-on suitcase had wheels and an extendable handle for easy pulling.

“Mommy is going to have a baby!” Avi yelled.

“I want to come! I want to come!” little Moishe shouted.

“Take care of them,” Joseph told Zev.

Fortunately, Ilene had already taken a cab back to Manhattan with Uncle Herbie and Eddie, his son. She was staying in a suite at the Plaza, where she was scheduled to interview an aging rock star before an upcoming Central Park concert.

“I think you are doing a fabulous job with Mom and Dad,” she had told him before leaving the bar-mitzvah party to rush back to her busy life.

Sure enough, his wife still had a long way to go. After examining Rivka, the delivery-room nurse told them in a very calm and unexcited voice that there had been a slight opening, but that they could come back in the morning if they preferred, instead of hanging around the hospital the whole night. Rivka insisted on staying. She was certain that her labor was underway.

“Call Marsha,” she said.

Marsha was a private midwife they had used in the past to help Rivka through the birthing of Avi and Moshe. She was a tall, athletic looking woman who exuded strength and confidence. She used massage, reflexology, meditation, and other creative techniques to ease the pain of labor.

“I’ll call her in the morning,” Joseph replied. “No sense ruining her night too.”

“Call her now, you bastard. I’m getting close. I don’t care what they say. I want her here now.”

“Look, let’s sit in the waiting room and go over some of the breathing exercises we learned. I’ll be your coach. If the contractions continue, I’ll call her.”

“She doesn’t get paid by the hour, if that’s your concern.”

“I’m not worried about the money. I just think it’s silly to jump the gun like we always did in the past. After five deliveries, I think I know you, that’s all.”

“You don’t know me. You talk like a complete stranger. I hate you,” she said.

Joseph grimaced as another nerve-shattering seizure screamed up and down his spine. He stood stiffly until the pain abated.

“Maybe they have a Jacuzzi here for you,” Rivka suggested, referring to the Jacuzzi bath that was used to sooth pre-labor contractions.

“I’ll be OK,” he said. “Why don’t we go for a pre-labor walk?”

“I’m not leaving the hospital.”

“We can walk up and down the stairs. That’s supposed to be good, remember?”

“What about you? How are you going to walk up and down stairs in your condition?”

“I’ll take the elevator.”

Just then, a wild scream filled the hospital corridor. A clan of Arabs hurried into the ward in a noisy commotion, shouting in Arabic and English at once. There were three women in the entourage, all wearing long Mediterranean robes and the head coverings of religious Moslems. The pregnant woman in the center howled at the top of her lungs like a wounded animal. The men scattered in all directions, calling out for help. A bunch of children followed along, as if it were some kind of family pilgrimage to Mecca.

It was going to be a long night, Joseph thought. “Why don’t we go down to the coffee shop and get something to drink?” he suggested.

“I had enough at the party,” she said.

“It was a lovely affair,” he reflected. “You really did a wonderful job. Daniel seemed very pleased. Even your mother and father looked happy.”

They walked away from the riot in the hallway to the waiting room where a young, expecting father stood staring out the window toward the East River. A Hasid sat reading Psalms. Noticing Joseph’s skullcap, he nodded. At least if an Intifada broke out in the maternity ward with the Arabs, Joseph wouldn’t be alone. They walked over to a vacant bench near a Coke machine. Holding on to the armrest for support, Joseph lowered himself onto the hard metal seat. It reminded him of the way his father sat down. Between the screaming Arab woman, his wife’s anxiety, and the hard bench, it didn’t look like he was going to get a lot of sleep that night.

Rivka walked in circles while she spoke to Marsha on her cell phone. The three Arab men appeared and looked around the waiting room, as if scouting out territory to graze their sheep. Seeing the Hasid and Joseph, there was a brief, hostile flash in their eyes that spanned all of history, from the time of Isaac and Ishmael to the conflict over Israel today. Joseph slid his pack of pain killers out of his pocket, popped out two pills and swallowed them down without any water.

“Marsha will be here soon,” Rivka reported, sitting beside him.

“Good,” Joseph said. “How are you feeling?”

“A lot more confident now that I know she is coming,” his wife answered. Indeed, her face looked a lot calmer, and the light had returned to her eyes.

“I don’t know if I am going to be able to stick it out here all night,” he confided. “I feel pretty lousy. Maybe when Marsha comes, I should go home.”

“To go home? Or to go your parents, to be with Tess?” she asked.

“Tess?!” he exclaimed, astounded that his wife was still worried about the Philippine worker.

“Why haven’t you fired her already? It’s been almost two weeks.”

The Hasid was still engrossed in his prayers. The younger, expecting father was nowhere in sight.

“The agency hasn’t found a replacement,” he answered.

“Then find a new agency. There must be a dozen. I’m sure everyone at the party saw how she stares at you with love sick eyes. It’s humiliating. I don’t know why you do this to me. If she is still with you parents when I leave the hospital, then I’m not coming home.”

“But, sweetie, please. Try to understand. I can’t help you with the baby and take care of my parents at the same time. And *Pesach* is less than two weeks away.”

“Then find someone new. There must be thousands of Filipinos in the City. I’m sorry I agreed to let you bring your parents back with you to New York. They are ruining our lives.”

Suddenly, his wife’s face turned red with embarrassment. . Water flowed down her leg onto the floor forming a little puddle. Quickly, she hurried toward the nurses’ station.

“Our sixth child,” Joseph said to the Hasid.

“*B’ shaah tova v’b’breut*,” he answered in Hebrew, wishing that it be a speedy and healthy delivery. “*Blee ayin hara*, ours will be number ten. A *minyan*.”

“*Mazel tov*,” Joseph wished him. Stiffly, he stood up and shuffled off after his wife who had disappeared with a nurse into the delivery-room theater.

To make a long evening short, the baby was born at six o’clock in the morning. It was Rivka’s easiest birth. The little girl weighed just five pounds and eight ounces. The midwife, Marsha, came out of the delivery room to deliver the good news to Joseph who had slept through it all on a vacant bed he had discovered in the storeroom at the end of the corridor.

His wife looked exhausted, but she was smiling. If her husband had been a bum in her eyes just hours before, now he was a hero. He had given her a girl. What woman doesn’t want a girl? Especially after giving birth to five boys? Marsha lifted the tiny baby and handed the swaddled bundle to Joseph. What a miracle of creation, he thought. Joyfully, he recited the “*Shecheyanu*” blessing over the birth of a girl, and over reaching this long-awaited milestone. How wonderful was God in all of His ways!

On the way out of the maternity ward, Joseph ran into the Hasidic Jew.

“Number eleven,” the veteran father said. “We had twins.”

All in all, a good day for the Jews, Joseph thought, wondering what had transpired with the Arabs.

Joseph was just in time to catch the last morning *minyan* at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, on Sixty-Second Street, where he borrowed a *tallit* and pair of *tefillin*. Then he bought an Entenmann’s cake for breakfast and washed it down with a small bottle of orange juice and his valium and pain-killing pills. Not wanting to test Rivka’s threats, he took a cab down to the employment agency, where he was the first on line. But the agent had nothing new to tell him. They were still searching for a fat and ugly helper for his mother. Sure enough, in the waiting room for foreign workers across the hall, aside from the men, all of the interviewees could have been contestants in a Miss Universe beauty contest. Downstairs at the newspaper stand of the lobby, he borrowed a phone book and

found the name of another nearby employment agency specializing in foreign workers. He walked the few short blocks, and after waiting forty minutes to see an agent, he went through the same story, requesting an unattractive worker for his Mom. By the time he reached home it was nearly noon. But he still had an hour or two to catch up on some sleep before the kids came home. Avi was back in school after starting his new Ritalin treatment. His parents were in their memory club, and a driver from the Jewish Community Center would take them back to their apartment. Rivka's mother was at the hospital visiting her daughter, so Joseph was free to remove his neck brace, take a long, hot shower, swallow another valium, and crash thankfully into bed.

Chapter Fourteen

A day before the Passover holiday, the Friedman family rode up to the Catskill resort in two cars. Zev drove the Audi with Shimon, Danny, and Avi, and Joseph drove the Space Wagon with Rivka, Grandpa and Grandma, Moshe, and their new baby, Rachel. Keeping the two younger boys separated insured that the drive up north would be as serene as possible. Although serene was the last thing that Joseph was feeling. For one thing, driving with the neck brace wasn't the most comfortable adventure. And to placate his wife, he had fired Tess.

The employment agencies hadn't yet found a fitting replacement, so in the meantime, he was the new Filipino. That meant he was going to have to shuttle back and forth between his parents and his family all during their stay at the hotel. To complicate matters, Rivka was still knocked out from the birth and from getting up in the middle of the night to breast feed. And she was always a nervous wreck when she had to pack for a trip, never knowing what to take along and what to leave behind at home. Since the Passover holiday lasted a week, she ended up taking half of the house, just to be sure that no one ran out of underwear, or socks, or toothpaste kosher for *Pesach*.

And then there was Dad. Ever since Joseph had fired Tess, his father's anxiety had soared off the scale.

"Please, son, don't fire her," he had begged.

"I'm sorry, Dad, but I have to."

"Why?"

"Because my wife wants me too."

"Why? Tess is wonderful. We can't get along without her."

"Sure you can. We'll be getting a new helper soon."

"It isn't fair," he said.

"I'm giving her a full month's salary in compensation," Joseph told him.

“It isn’t fair to your mother and me.”

“It’s just for a week, Dad. Right after the holiday, we’ll get someone else.”

Losing Tess also exacerbated his father’s depression. And his compulsive anxiety disorder shattered the Richter scale. For days now, in anticipation of the Passover holiday, when bread was forbidden and you had to eat *matzah* instead, he was terrified that he was going to be constipated. He spoke about it constantly. After an extensive search, Joseph had found a fiber laxative kosher for *Pesach*, but his father was certain it wouldn’t work.

“What am I going to do?” Harry Friedman asked once again during their drive up to the Catskills.

In deference to his age, his standing in the family, his fragile health, and the fact that he was paying for their very expensive holiday, Rivka had insisted that her father-in-law sit in the front of the car beside Joseph. She and Joseph’s mother sat in the middle seat with the baby between them, and Moshe sat, or rather bounced up and down, in the back of the family van, wearing earphones, listening to a Passover cassette for children about the Exodus from Egypt.

“What am I going to do?” Harry Friedman repeated.

“What are you going to do about what?” Joseph inquired.

“About my constipation?”

“Who says that you are going to be constipated?”

“I know I will be.”

“Try thinking positively, Dad. Tell yourself you won’t be, and you won’t be. Isn’t that right, Rivka?”

His wife didn’t answer. She was tired of hearing about her father-in-law’s constipation, or, in her own words, “I’m tired of hearing about your Father’s crap.”

“I’ve eaten *matzah* before,” Harry Friedman said. “For eighty years now. Even in the army overseas, during the Second World War. I was constipated then, and I am going to be constipated now.”

“You survived until now, Dad. You’ll live through it. Trust in God. He is the best doctor there is. If he prescribed *matzah* for the Jews during *Pesach*, then you can be sure it’s a good thing. Besides, you can eat prunes and dried fruit during the holiday to counteract the effect.”

“They get stuck in my dentures,” he answered.

“You don’t have to eat *matzah* the whole week,” Rivka spoke up. “Only on *Seder* night. If you don’t want to eat it the rest of the holiday, you don’t have to.”

“Sure, I can starve.”

“You won’t starve, Dad,” Joseph promised. “There’s going to be so much food at the hotel, you’ll complain it’s a waste when you can’t eat it all. Anyway, they have all kinds of potato cakes, and almond cakes, and coconut cakes. Worse comes to worse, you can eat ice cream the whole week. You like ice cream, right? What’s the matter with that?”

His father grumbled. “I know I am going to be constipated,” he said. “There’d better be a good hospital nearby.”

Just in case there wasn’t, he had Joseph buy suppositories, a Fleet enema, and a couple bottles of prune juice, kosher for Passover, just to be sure.

All the time, his mother sat in a spooky silence. Normally, she would have cracked some sarcastic remark. But ever since her new psychiatrist had doubled her daily sedation schedule, she had become more and more withdrawn. For part of the day, she was still OK, but at other times, she turned off to her surroundings completely. The doctor had warned Joseph that a listless lethargy might follow a course of heavier medication, saying that it usually took several months to find the right balance of pharmaceutical treatment. Changes in her mood swings might also appear due to the expected deterioration in her condition, which was characteristic to Alzheimer’s. Sometimes, he said, the deterioration was a slow decline that

gradually worsened over several years. In other cases of dementia, a zombie-like state came upon the patient relatively swiftly, without any pre-warning.

After checking in to the five-star kosher hotel, Joseph told Rivka he was accompanying his parents to their room on the second floor of the garden wing, adjacent to the main building. His wife gave him a nasty look, as if he were abandoning her to get along on her own. But she had Zev and Shimon to help with the little kids, and a bellman with a push cart wheeled their luggage to the large family cottages at the other end of the twenty-acre resort.

“I’ll bring your parent’s luggage to their room on my way back,” the bellman told Joseph. Figuring he could manage the shoulder bag containing his mother’s make-up kit and jewelry, Joseph lifted it by the strap and swung it around his neck. It was the movement itself, and not the weight of the bag that set off the rockets.

The pain was excruciating, like the pain he had felt at the chiropractor’s.

“How many chiropractors does it take to screw in a light bulb?” the muscular-armed healer had asked Joseph, in order to distract him from the savage maneuver he was about to perform.

Until then, he was just moving Joseph’s head very gently back and forth, as if it were a cantaloupe that he was weighing.

“I don’t know,” Joseph answered. “How many chiropractors does it take?”

“One,” the chiropractor continued. “But you will have to sign up for a series of ten sessions at two-hundred dollars a session.”

When Joseph chuckled, the muscleman gave a yank, trying to gorilla the slipped disc into place. Luckily, Joseph’s head hadn’t come off from the force of the tug.

“AYYYYY!” he had cried out in anguish.

“Sorry,” the professional wrestler said. “Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t.”

True to his joke, he recommended a series of ten treatments. From then on, he promised, he would just stretch Joseph out on his “miracle” table that moved up

and down, and from side to side, gently exercising the spine. But Joseph never went back. Instead, he had gone to the physiotherapist that the emergency medic had recommended, to have his head hooked up to a pulley machine that gently stretched his neck back and forth for twenty minutes. With one session behind him, Joseph still had five to go in the series.

Harry Friedman took the shoulder bag from his son, and Joseph led his parent's to their quarters. They were staying in a clean, comfortable room, with a terrace that looked out over a beautifully manicured garden. In the distance, Joseph could hear the steady crack of tennis balls from the hotel's dozen courts.

"Look at this garden, Mom," Joseph said enthusiastically, leading her to the terrace. "Isn't it beautiful?"

His mother gazed catatonically out past the garden toward the wooded Catskill Mountains.

"You're going to have a great time here," he assured her.

"Look at these terrace chairs," his father said. "They're covered with bird shit."

His father was exaggerating. There were some white droppings on the seat and arms of the chairs, but nothing that a wet cloth wouldn't clean up immediately.

"I'll wipe them off," Joseph told him.

"Why should you do the cleaning?" his father said. "Let them send someone from housekeeping. We're paying enough for the room."

"I'll tell them when I go back down to the lobby. Afterward, we'll go for a walk in the garden. OK, Mom?"

His mother didn't answer. She continued to stare silently off toward the mountains. True, her catatonic condition was a lot more manageable than her outbursts, but it ate Joseph up inside to see what the disease was doing to her. Since her sudden bouts of anger hadn't subsided completely, Joseph told his father to lock the door from the inside so she couldn't take off if she had a sudden urge.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

“To my wife and kids,” he answered.

“What about us?”

“Watch some TV for a while. I’ll come back after I get everyone settled.”

“How far away is it?” his father asked.

“Two minutes,” he assured him.

“Why the hell did you have to get rid of Tess?” his father asked for the hundredth time. “Everything was going so well.”

Joseph left the room and waited in the hallway until he heard his father lock the door. Then, like in some old Cary Grant movie about a guy that had two wives, he hurried off to get back to his family.

CUT TO:

FAST MOTION – JOSEPH RUNS DOWN THE HOTEL CORRIDOR

CUT TO:

FASTER MOTION – JOSEPH RACES OUT OF THE BUILDING HOLDING HIS NECK

CUT TO:

SUPER FAST MOTION – JOSEPH RACES ACROSS THE HOTEL GROUNDS, CUTTING DANGEROUSLY THROUGH THE BOW AND ARROW RANGE

CUT TO:

FACES TURNING TO WATCH THE STREAKING FIGURE

CUT TO:

ARROWS FLYING OVER HIS HEAD

CUT TO:

JOSEPH REACHES THE FAMILY COTTAGES. RETURN TO NORMAL SPEED

Joseph found his wife sitting in an easy chair, breastfeeding the baby, looking as depressed as could be.

“Why such a sad face?” he asked her. “Isn’t this a beautiful place? This cottage looks super too. Plenty of room for everybody. And Avi and Moishe are already having a great time outside with a dozen other kids.”

“If this is what it’s going to be like, with you racing back and forth between us and your parents, we might just as well go home now,” she threatened.

Joseph collapsed onto the couch in the sitting room of the cottage. Gently, he unfastened the scotched strap of the hot and strangling neck brace.

“Please, Rivka,” he pleaded. “Try to be fair. I fired the Filipino because of you. What more do you want from me?”

“I want you to be my fulltime husband, just like you were supposed to be when we got married.”

“Life isn’t stagnant. Situations change.”

“I know they do. I just had my sixth child. Have you noticed? It’s called a baby. But what do you care? You have your parents to take care of.”

“You’re not being fair.”

“I don’t want to be fair!” she answered emphatically.

Startled, the baby started to cry. Shimon came down the stairs, gave his parents a frowning expression, and headed for the door.

“Where are you going” Joseph asked.

“To smoke a joint in the woods so I can’t hear you fighting,” he said.

“Don’t get caught,” his father told him.

Without answering, the petulant youth walked out the door, giving it a healthy slam in goodbye.

“You’re going to let him?” Rivka asked angrily.

“What do you want me to do? Frisk him? Fight him? Call the police? Let’s hope he was kidding.”

“It’s just his way of saying that he doesn’t want to hang around and listen to you two arguing about Grandpa and Grandma,” Zev explained, walking into the cottage from the back patio where he had been studying the tractate of Talmud that he was holding.

When the phone rang, they all looked around the cottage to locate the source of the ringing.

It was Joseph’s father. “Where the hell are you?” he asked. “Your mother wants to go for a walk. Get your ass over here on the double.”

“In another ten minutes, Dad,” Joseph told him.

“She’s getting impatient.”

“Ten minutes,” Joseph repeated.

“Can’t you come over now?” his father’s voice almost begged.

“Go,” Rivkah said. “It doesn’t matter. I’m going to put the baby to bed and try to catch up on some sleep myself.”

“I’ll go over and be with Grandpa and Grandma for a while,” Zev volunteered.

“Why don’t you take a nap too, Dad? You look like you could use one.”

A nap, Joseph thought. What a luxury.

“I need you to look after Avi and Moishe,” Rivka told her eldest son.

“They’re fine,” Joseph insisted. “They have people from the hotel taking care of the kids. It’s an organized thing that’s part of the package.”

“You know Avi and Moishe. They could get lost, or fall in the pool, or hijack a golf cart. If Zev doesn’t go watch them, then I’ll go myself.”

Joseph sighed, but he didn’t have time to argue with his nervous wife, or to feel sorry for himself. This time his cell phone rang. Again it was his father, sounding anxious as hell. “Where the hell are you? Get over here already! Your mother is driving me crazy.”

“I’m on my way, Dad,” the dutiful son answered. Just reaching down to pick up his neck brace from the couch caused him pain, but he tried not to show it. Rivka walked off with the baby, slamming the door to a bedroom.

“Some vacation,” he mused.

“Mom’s just tired, that’s all,” his oldest boy said in consolation. “She’ll get over it.”

Once again, Joseph set off in a fast walk. Outside the cottage, he was happy to see that Danny had already made friends with some boys his own age. He was letting them take turns looking through his new super, high-power, military binoculars. Joseph hurried across the spacious grounds of the resort hotel back to his parents. He opened their door with the extra key he had kept for himself. Harry and Lizzy Friedman were outside on the terrace. His poor father had his back to the railing, holding on to his wife.

“If you don’t unlock the front door, I’ll jump,” she threatened.

“Please, honey,” he begged.

“Hi, everyone!” Joseph called out, trying to sound cheerful. Hurrying over, he came to his father’s rescue, grabbing hold of his mother. Exhausted, his father collapsed into a terrace chair, too emotionally and physically drained to complain about the bird crap.

“Let go of me, you miserable bastard of a son!” Joseph’s mother growled, breaking free from his grip. “The both of you are bastards. Do you think that I’m stupid? I know you are trying to kill me. But you won’t get your hands on my money. I hid it, and the two of you will never discover where it is.”

It was the witching hour, when all the medication she took didn't seem to have any effect at all. If Joseph were making a movie, he would have once again flipped the action into FAST MOTION to keep up with his mother's sprint down the stairs, through the parking lot, complete with screeching brakes and honking horns, in and out of the golf clubhouse, onto the practice driving range, where Joseph had to raise his hands to protect his head from angry shouts of "four!" and golf balls streaking by in every direction, as he followed his mother around the beautifully manicured, nine-hole golf course, as she tried to find her way home to Florida, or wherever she imagined that she lived. By the time Joseph got her back into the hotel room, an hour later, his father was a nervous wreck.

"I think that we had better go back to Riverdale," he said.

"It's going to be OK, Dad," Joseph assured him, trying to sound positive.

He wanted to fall down on the couch and rest, but he had to get back to his wife before she woke up from her nap. Telling his mother to get dressed for dinner, he hurried back to the family cottage, but no one was there.

"Am I gonna catch hell," he murmured.

By the time Joseph reached the crowded dining room, his family had almost finished dessert. Without speaking, Rivka stood up, and started wheeling the baby carriage toward the exit.

"Hey, Mom, we haven't paid," Avi reminded her.

"We pay at the end of the vacation, not now," Zev informed him.

"This is a neat place, Dad," the boy told his father. "Why can't we live here all the time?"

"Where's Shimon," Joseph asked, noting that the moody boy was missing.

"I haven't seen him," Zev answered.

"Let's go, Moishe," Avi said to his brother. "I want to get front seats for the movie."

Without asking permission, and without saying the blessing after the meal, the two little bandits took off with happy cries, oblivious to the other guests, as if their parents owned the hotel.

“Why don’t you go back to the cottage with Mom?” Zev suggested. “I’ll stay with Grandpa and Grandma for a while.”

“They haven’t eaten supper yet,” Joseph told him.

“I’ll bring them here, don’t worry. You better spend time with Mom.”

“I’m not sure I have the strength for another battle,” he confessed.

“*Al tid’ag*,” Zev answered in Hebrew. “Don’t worry. Everything is for the best.”

“Everything is for the best,” Joseph repeated to himself. “Everything is for the best.”

He remembered that the Talmud told a story about the famed sage, Rabbi Nachum of Gamzu, in order to teach the value of suffering. He was blind in both eyes, both his arms and legs had been amputated, and his entire body was covered with boils. He was lying in a dilapidated house, and the feet of his bed were standing in bowls of water so that ants couldn’t crawl onto him. When his students found him this way, they cried out and asked how this could have happened to such a righteous man. He answered them that a poor man had begged him for food, and he told him to wait until he could finish with some other chore, and in the meantime the poor man dropped dead. So he had thrown himself over his body and prayed that he suffer punishment for not having given food to a poor man, saying, “May my eyes which had no pity upon your eyes become blind; may my hands and legs that didn’t rush to help you be cut off; and may my whole body be covered with boils.” Thereupon his students exclaimed, “Alas that we see you in such a sore plight!” Why was he called Nachum of Gamzu? Because whatever befell him, he would declare, “This is also (*Gamzu*) for the best.”

But Joseph wasn’t Nachum of Gamzu, and he didn’t have the strength to face another argument with Rivka. So he walked out to the parking lot and climbed into their Space Wagon. Reclining the front seat, he leaned back to rest. Somewhere in the distance, he could still hear the nonstop popping of tennis balls. As the twilight

receded and darkness fell over the parking lot, a deep Catskill Mountain silence settled over the country resort. Soon even the incessant chirping of crickets didn't impinge on his Rip Van Winkle slumber.

This time, it was Rivka who phoned. "Where are you?" she asked in a tired and angry tone.

"In the car," he said.

"What are you doing in the car?"

"Just making sure there aren't any pretzel crumbs," he answered. It was the night before *Pesach*, when everyone checks their houses and cars for "*chametz*," things like bread and cake crumbs, which a Jew is not allowed to have in his possession during the week-long Holiday of Freedom.

"I thought you already checked," she said.

"Just making sure."

"Well your children are waiting for you to search here. Remember, you're not just a son. You're a father too. A pretty lousy one, if you ask me."

He told her that he'd be right over. On the way, he called Zev to make sure that everything was quiet with his parents, who were getting ready for bed. He told his son that after he made the search for *chametz* in the cottage, he'd come over to replace him. His three youngest boys were waiting for him with candles they had brought along from home. They had already wrapped up ten pretzels in tin foil, and Rivka had hidden them around the cottage while they were watching television. Joseph recited the appropriate blessing, and Avi and Moishe ran off to search every nook and cranny, as if they were searching for a fabulous treasure. Whoever found one of the small tin-foil balls let out a cheer. In a matter of minutes, they had uncovered all but one.

"Where did you hide it?" Joseph asked his wife.

"I forget" she answered.

"I hope you're not becoming like my mother."

“God forbid,” she said.

Luckily the missing pretzel was discovered.

“Where are you sleeping tonight,” Rivka asked, after the kids had returned to the TV in their bedroom upstairs.

“I guess with my parents. I don’t have much choice.”

“Do they have an extra bed?”

“There’s a couch.”

“What about your neck?” she said softly, with a touch of true concern.

“I’ll be OK,” he assured her.

“Don’t sleep close to the air conditioner,” she cautioned. “The draft is deadly.”

She stared at him with a look of genuine caring, a sign that her anger had waned. He wanted to kiss her, but he wasn’t allowed. According to Jewish law, after the birth of a child, a husband had to wait a certain period of time before he could embrace his wife. It was similar to the laws that regulated marital contact surrounding the wife’s menstruation. At intimate moments like these, the distance was frustrating, but what could you do? That was God’s will, and they both wanted to live a life of Torah.

“I’m sorry about the situation with my parents,” he told her. “But it’s just till we find a new worker. Let’s not let it spoil the holiday.”

“I’m sorry too,” she told him. “Maybe I over-reacted about your connection with Tess. When you’re pregnant, you think all kinds of crazy things.”

The intimacy of the moment was shattered when the door of the cottage swung open. Shimon appeared and went upstairs without speaking. Soon they could hear the sound of his guitar. For a while, they sat outside on the patio, enjoying his singing and the cool mountain air. Firebugs lit up the darkness between the cottages. Stars like you never saw in Manhattan stretched across the sky, looking like stardust that someone had scattered. A full, round moon began to appear over

the treetops. The very same full moon had lit the way for the Jews some three thousand years before, at the time of the Exodus, when God had miraculously liberated them from bondage in Egypt. Life wasn't easy, Joseph thought to himself, but there was still a lot to be thankful for.

Once again, his ringing telephone intruded on the peace.

"Why don't you turn it off?" Rivka suggested.

It was his father again. "When are you getting here?" he asked.

"What's the matter?"

"Your son has been here long enough. When are you coming?"

"Do you really need me, Dad?"

"Of course, I need you. What if your mother wakes up in the middle of the night and wants to go home to Florida? I can't go through another episode like that. I'll have a heart attack."

Assuring his father that he was on the way, Joseph went upstairs and got the boys to switch off the television and get into bed, warning them that they needed their strength to stay up late the following evening for the Passover *Seder*. Sensing the importance of the occasion, they all complied without a fight. After reciting the bedtime *Shema* with them, slowly, word by word in Hebrew, Joseph knocked on Shimon's door and wished him goodnight, without questioning him on his lengthy disappearance.

"I didn't bring any weed with me, don't worry," was all the boy said.

Too bad, Joseph wistfully thought, thinking that a good joint might help him relax.

Once again, Joseph made the trek back to his parents' room. He kissed his oldest son goodnight and thanked him for being a saint. His mother was already sleeping.

"Why don't you call it a night?" he said to his father, who was sitting and watching TV.

"I can't sleep," he answered, slowly getting up from the chair.

Joseph wasn't sure that his father really needed the help of a cane, but ever since his fall, he didn't take a step without it. Compulsively, he walked across the room to make sure that the door was locked after his grandson had left.

Joseph treated himself to a long hot shower, put on pajamas, and took a valium to help relax the muscles in his neck. Afraid to open the convertible couch and risk the chance of straining his back, he decided to sleep on it the way it was. Once again, after turning off the TV, his father checked that the door of the hotel room was locked. In the course of the night, he got out of bed twice to pee. Another three times, he made his vigil to the door, like a soldier on guard duty, verifying that the lock was secure.

Joseph himself had a hard time getting to sleep. The couch was too short and narrow, the pillows were flat, pain followed him wherever he moved, and his father had left a light on by the door to lighten the path of his nocturnal routines. With its glow in his eyes, and a stream of thoughts in his mind, Joseph tossed and turned like the Egyptians of old, drowning in the turbulent waters of his worries, wondering when and how he would ever make the miraculous crossing back onto dry land, the way his life had been before bringing his parents to New York.

Ever since he had turned religious, the Passover *Seder* had become the highlight of the year with its joyous recounting of the Exodus and the symbolic partaking of *matzah* and the bitter herbs of *maror*. Even though this *Pesach* he was trapped in a bondage of his own, Joseph looked forward to the holiday like a child who can't fall asleep on the night before his birthday, in anticipation of the coming day. That's the way it was back then also, on the eve of the Exodus, Joseph reflected. The Jews hadn't gotten much sleep either. They had to pack for the voyage to Israel, put the blood of the circumcision on the doorposts, bake their *matzot*, and eat the Pascal Lamb – who had time to sleep? And with the screams of the Egyptians every time another firstborn was stricken - who could get any rest?

Once upon a time, he himself had dreamed of making his own Exodus from America in order to start a new life in Israel. The idea had made his mother crazy. Not crazy like Alzheimer's, but almost, he thought. Who knows? Maybe that's what started it all.

Joseph recalled the incident as his eyes flickered and closed. It was a year after he had become religious. Visiting Israel and falling in love with the country, he decided to extend his trip to study in a Jerusalem yeshiva. The only problem was that his parents were approaching their fortieth wedding anniversary, and they wanted him to come home to New York for the party. On the one hand, he knew that the commandment of honoring one's parents was one of the foundations of Judaism. On the other hand, he had never been as happy as during those two months in Jerusalem studying Torah. But his mother was insistent. It was to be a lavish, gala party at the Tavern on the Green in Central Park, with all of their family and friends. His sister, Ilene, was going to be there with her first husband, Aunt Peachie, and Uncle Herbie from Florida, and his aging grandmother. How could he let them down?

"If you don't come you will break your mother's heart," his father had warned him.

Thank God that his mother had a strong heart. Somehow, it seemed that no matter how many times he and his sister broke it, it continued to pump just as before. Finally, he gave in to the pressure, and, like a good Jewish son, he came home for the party.

"But I am only staying three days," he told his parents when he arrived in New York.

"Three days?" his mother responded. "After coming ten thousand miles, you are only staying three days?"

"I'm sorry, Mom, but I am going back to Israel," he said. "I love it there."

The very next day, when he came back from morning prayers at the local Orthodox *shul*, he found a note from his father on the kitchen table. "I rushed your mother to the hospital with a heart attack," it read.

When Joseph got to the emergency room, he told a nurse at the admission desk who he was. She disappeared inside, leaving him to pace the hall and read some Psalms from the prayer book he had brought along with him. After a few minutes, a young doctor emerged. "Are you Joey Friedman?" he asked.

“That’s right. How is my mother?”

“Do you realize what you are doing to her?” the emergency-room physician inquired.

Joseph was stunned by the question. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“She is sick with worry that you want to live in Israel.”\

“I am thirty years old,” Joseph answered, meaning wasn’t it his life to live?

“I’ll tell you the truth,” the doctor confessed. “Once upon a time, I wanted to live in Israel too. But my mother was against it, and I didn’t have the nerve to make the break. If you really feel it’s for you, then go for it. Your mother will be all right. She had some heart palpitations, that’s all. A small bout of angina. But her heart is as strong as a lion’s, don’t worry.”

The truth was that Joseph hadn’t had the nerve to make the break either. Not only did his mother lay on the guilt as thick as *shmaltz*, his father made things worse. “We are not getting any younger,” he said. “You know how much I love your sister, but she is a wild bird that flew the coop long ago and makes a new nest every other day with whatever jerk that comes along. If you move to Israel, who is going to take care us when we need help?”

Like expert violinists, they played on his heart, binding him to them with strings of guilt.

“You’re supposed to be a religious Jew now, aren’t you?” his father continued.

“Isn’t honoring your parents one of the Ten Commandments?”

It was a powerful speech coming from his father, who usually let his wife do most of the talking. Joseph never went back to Israel. Not until he was married and had two children, but that was only for a vacation. He found a yeshiva in New York and learned there for half a year, but it just wasn’t the same. Then he went back to work. First as an editor for CBS News, and then as a film editor at the Jewish Museum, which was a lot holier work than the kind of junk TV shows and movies he had been doing in Hollywood. Not long after that, he had met Rivka, and she became his new love. While he never forgot Jerusalem, his passion for it grew

lukewarm, like a pot of *Shabbos chulent* left to sit overnight on the kitchen counter.

Once again, just about every hour on the hour, his father got up to check the lock on the door. Joseph pretended to be sleeping. How sad it was to see the shuffling figure, cautiously inching about the strange hotel room, like a blind man in the dark. Not only was Joseph's mother suffering from a terrible illness, the golden years were eating away at his Dad. As if in reaction to his heavy ruminations, Joseph felt another painful click at the base of his spine. The wheel of fortune had revolved full circle. Instead of his father supporting him, he had to support his father. Instead of his mother taking care of him, he had to take care of his mother - and his wife and six children as well.

When he finally fell off to sleep, his father's heavy snoring woke him. His mother stretched out her hand and gave her husband a punch in the shoulder.

"Harry, shut up," she commanded, as coherently as could be.

Instantly, he obeyed. He stretched out his arm to hug her, and they slept in each other's arms, just like they had for the past sixty years. They wouldn't be able to do that in Meadowlands, he thought, wondering how his own wife was doing alone in the cottage with the kids.

Chapter Fifteen

After breakfast, the Friedman family burned their last remnants of *chametz* with the rest of the guests of the hotel. A small mountain of rolls, cakes, donuts, noodles, cookies, breakfast cereals, pretzels, and crackers went up in the bonfire. One very religious vacationer poured a bottle of Chivas Regal into the flame.

“*Putz*,” Harry Friedman said as he watched the aged and expensive scotch whiskey disappear in the pre-Pesach conflagration. “What a fool.”

Then, to be a good father to his children, Joseph led his sons to the tennis courts.

“Do you think you are up to it?” Rivka asked him.

“I’ll take it easy,” he promised. “The physiotherapist said that exercise was good for my neck, so don’t worry.”

“You haven’t played tennis for years,” she argued.

“Once a tennis player, always a tennis player,” he answered.

He was, in fact, a pretty good player. He had taken lessons as a youth in their New Rochelle country club, and for a couple years running, he had played almost every day of the week. In high school, he had won a varsity tennis letter. So he wasn’t worried about over exerting himself. He knew how to get by with the least amount of effort and the maximum results. Plus it was only hitting some balls back and forth with his kids. Rivka always urged him to do more with them, and she was right. One of his fondest memories of his own father was a foot race they had had when he was thirteen. Harry Friedman put all his heart into the 100-yard dash and just managed to win. It may have last only twenty seconds, but Joseph remembered that race with his father all of his life.

They had brought their rackets from home, and white tennis shorts and shirts. Joseph wore a floppy hat and sweat band, mimicking the style that Arthur Ashe had made famous. His parents and Rivka sat in the shade of the sidelines to watch as he hit balls fluidly back to Zev and Danny on the other side of the court. Avi and Moishe acted as ball boys for their father, chasing after stray shots until they could have their turn on the court. To show off a little for Rivka, Joseph even sent a few

graceful serves rocketing into the server's box on the other side of the net. Each time, Rivka applauded. His parents even seemed to enjoy the outing as they sipped on fruit drinks in the shade of patio umbrellas.

It happened when Joseph was bending down to pick up a ball. He heard a small click and felt something slip out of place in his lower back. As if frozen by an off-court "Star Wars" ray gun, Joseph was unable to straighten up. The pain wasn't any worse than the pain in his neck, but he was paralyzed. He thought that if he could stand straight, then the pain would go away, but he couldn't budge. Like a bent over flamingo, he remained with his head down by his knees, waiting for someone to help.

"Are you OK, Dad?" Avi asked.

"Call your mother," he said.

"I told you we would pick up the balls for you," his small son said.

"Call your mother," Joseph repeated, feeling the pain increase.

"You OK, Dad?" Zev called out, jumping over the net and running over to his father, who looked like an orchestra conductor taking an extended bow.

No matter how hard Joseph willed, he couldn't straighten his back. He could barely shuffle his feet. The longer he stayed bent over, the pain got worse, spreading up to his neck.

"Why God?" he wondered. "What did I do in LA to deserve this?"

Obviously, this latest dose of suffering was also for the best, though he didn't know why.

"It will loosen up in a couple of minutes," the tennis pro assured the crowd that had gathered around Joseph. "It's a muscle spasm, that's all."

Rivka was practically crying. She wanted her husband to lie down on the court, but he couldn't even do that. His mother came over, but didn't seem to understand what was going on.

“Shimon says, stand up straight,” Avi joked, not realizing how serious the problem was.

“Shut up, you jerk,” Danny told him.

Finally, a dozen hands lifted Joseph onto a golf cart, and the assistant golf pro drove him off to the guest cottage at the other end of the resort.

“Stay with Grandpa and Grandma,” Joseph told Zev as they whisked him away.

The spasm didn't un-spasm. During the bumpy ride to the cottage, Joseph passed out from the pain. Two hotel bellboys managed to lift him out of the golf cart and carry him into bed where he lay curled up like a fetus until the hotel doctor could be summoned from the neighboring town. After poking Joseph here and there in the back, the country doctor said that it looked like a slipped disc. He wanted to call an ambulance to take him to the nearest hospital for an x-ray, but Joseph refused. With the Passover *Seder* just hours away, and with his parents to care for, a trip to the hospital was out of the question.

“I'm sure I'll feel better in no time,” he insisted, trying to make light of the unrelenting pain. “That's what the tennis pro said.”

“What does a tennis pro know?” Rivka asked.

“Of course he knows. Back problems are a part of his job.”

“You've just had a baby?” the doctor asked, when little Rachel started crying in the other room.

“Ten days ago,” Rivka replied.

“*Mazel tov*,” the doctor wished them in an accent that sounded a lot more upstate New York than Jewish. “You know it's funny, but a lot of times after a new baby is born, it's the father's back that goes out, not the mother's.”

“My husband is also taking care of his two sick parents,” Rivka told him, hurrying off to pick up the baby.

The doctor left him with some pain killers that he had in his bag and told him to double up on the valium that he was already taking for his neck.

“Back problems can take a day, or a week, or a month,” he said. “Usually, the best thing is rest. There are all kinds of therapies, but nothing beats good, old fashion rest.”

Rivka thanked him and escorted him to the door, carrying the crying baby in her arms.

“Sounds like she wants to eat,” the doctor advised.

After the pain killer started to work, Joseph was able to roll over and semi-stand up from the bed, bending over like a monkey. It helped when he sat in a chair. But all the time he felt like his spine was a fragile column of dominoes that could topple to the floor at any moment.

Through sheer will power alone, he made it to the Passover *Seder*. True, his son, Zev had to bring him into the crowded, hotel dining room in a wheelchair, but he made it all the same, neck brace and all. How could he not? Along with *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the Passover *Seder* was the highpoint of the year.

The dining hall was packed to overflowing. Families sat around beautifully set tables, laden with bottles of Israeli Concord Wine and stacks of *matzah*. There was a buzz in the air like before a championship heavyweight prizefight. Kids were running around everywhere. Men wore suits, and women were dressed in their holiday finest. Many of the women wore colorful hats. Rivka was the only one in the room with an Israeli style scarf covering her head. There were some scholarly looking Rabbis, grandfather *zaidas* and grandmother *bubbies*, baby carriages and strollers. Joseph’s mother also arrived in a hotel wheelchair, bent over just like her son. Joseph had ordered Zev to give her an extra sedative, to make sure she sat passively throughout the *Seder* and long evening meal. It broke Joseph’s heart to see his once beautiful mother in such a sorrowful state. He knew he shouldn’t alter the dosages that her psychiatrist prescribed, but not every evening was Passover, and he didn’t have the strength for one of her outbursts in the middle of the celebration.

The guest Rabbi was a well-known educator from Israel. A former American, he had learned at Yeshiva University and served as a popular rabbi in Long Island for almost twenty years before moving his family to Jerusalem. His opening speech was inspiring and funny, but Joseph felt a gnawing pain in his neck and lower back whenever he laughed.

The first part of the *Seder* was a group experience, with the Rabbi reciting the *Kiddush* over the first glass of wine, and the head of each family repeating the blessing after him. Since the use of a microphone was forbidden on the *Yom Tov* holiday, the Rabbi had to shout to be heard over the tumult in the hall. In a booming voice, he began to recite the *Haggadah* that the Jewish People had been reciting year after year, generation after generation, for over three thousand years, recounting the Exodus from Egypt. It was a cherished *mitzvah* that every father was commanded to perform, in order to teach the lessons of the Exodus to his children on Passover night, so that the heritage of the Jewish People would never be forgotten. When Joseph was growing up, even though his family was never super religious, they always had a festive *Seder*, reciting the Passover story out of an illustrated Hebrew and English *Haggadah*, singing “*Dayenu*” and other Passover songs, while munching on *matzah* and *maror*.

“This year we are here,” the rabbi called out. “Next year in the land of Israel!”

The enthusiastic congregation repeated his words, echoing the age-old wish and longing.

Then it was time for the kids to ask the Four Questions, known as “*Mah Nishtanah?*” in Hebrew. Joseph’s grandfather had called them “The *Fir Kashas*,” in Yiddish.

In noisy unison, all of the kids in the dining room yelled out the singsong chant:

“*Mah nishtanah halaylah hazeh mikol halaylot?*” Meaning, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”

“Did I ever tell you the joke about the Jew in England who was knighted by the queen?” Harry Friedman asked his son.

“You must have, Dad,” Joseph said, not wanting to interrupt the Four Questions. As best as he could, he leaned over in the wheelchair to show Moishe what he was supposed to read in the *Haggadah*, but the five-year old had already learned the passage by heart in *Heder*. Happily, he screamed out the words with the rest of the jubilant children.

Their thunderous cry echoed through the hall, as if resounding from the mountains of Sinai. The volume of the roar penetrated Lizzy Friedman’s doped slumber, awakening her with a start. Holiday or not, it was still the witching hour on her neurological clock. She looked around startled, surprised by the shouting and the size of the crowd. Disoriented and frightened by the unfamiliar surroundings, she stood up from her wheelchair.

“I want to go home,” she said. “It’s too noisy here.”

Without further ado, she started walking away from their table. Instinctively, Joseph stood up to follow her, but with his very first step, he tripped over the footrest of her wheelchair. He felt his vertebrae shift out of place like a pack of playing cards being shuffled through the air. With a suppressed scream, he crashed face down onto the floor. With all of the yelling and noise in the room, it is quite possible that only Rivka heard the thud and her husband’s agonized cry. Zev was the first at his side.

“Go get your grandmother,” Joseph whispered, feeling like his head was about to explode.

Suddenly, everyone noticed the commotion. The children finished singing the last question, and a hush spread over the hall. Within seconds, Joseph was surrounded by at least a dozen Jewish doctors. There were three internists, two dermatologists, a pediatrician, a cardiologist, a surgeon, two gastroenterologists, an ear, nose, and throat man, an anesthesiologist, and a shrink. As his luck would have it, only an orthopedic specialist was missing.

“Stay in your seats, stay in you seats,” the Rabbi repeated, as curious hotel guests rushed forward to see what was happening.

Harry Friedman stood up from his chair. It looked like his son was being well taken care of by an entire medical clinic, so he hurried off after his wife.

“Lizzy!” he called. “Lizzy! It’s Passover. Will you get the hell back in here!”

Rivka told Shimon to follow his grandfather.

“It’s OK. I’m OK,” Joseph said. Slowly, he rose to his feet, like a boxer at the count of nine. His forehead was sweating and a trickle of blood dripped out of his nose.

Gradually, the crowd of doctors stepped back to give Joseph room to breathe. Danny helped his father back to his wheelchair.

“Where’s Grandma?” he asked.

“Zev went after her,” Danny told him.

“What about you? Are you OK?” Rivka asked.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Where’s my father?”

“Don’t worry,” Rivka assured him. “Shimon’s with him.”

People returned to their tables. The Rabbi took charge once again and told everyone to hold up the *matzot*.

“I’ve got to go help them,” Joseph said.

“What about the *Seder*?” Rivka asked.

“I’ll be right back. In the meantime, the kids can follow along with the Rabbi.”

Joseph navigated the wheelchair away from the table. But he was an inexperienced driver and ended up crashing into a lady sitting across the way.

“Next year in Jerusalem,” Danny said, quoting the last sentence of the *Haggadah*, as he hurried to grab the handles of the renegade wheelchair. With a tug and a push, he shoved his father in the direction of the lobby. Not wanting to miss out on the action, Avi and Moishe jumped out of their seats to race off after them. Even

before the Rabbi reached the parable of the Four Sons, Rivka was all alone at their table with the baby. “Some happy holiday,” she thought.

Chapter Sixteen

In the morning, after the holiday prayers, Joseph hurried back to the cottage to gather Rivka and the kids and bring them to *Kiddush* and the morning meal in the dining hall. But Rivka didn't want to come. She didn't want to talk with him either.

"Tomorrow night, as soon as the *Yom Tov* is over, I'm going home," she said.

"But my father paid for another five days," Joseph reminded her.

"I couldn't care less. I won't be bought off."

"Bought off?" her husband protested. "He's treating us to this vacation to help you out after the birth, so you won't have to do everything on your own."

"Come on, Joseph. Do you think I'm an idiot? He brought us here because he knows all of the trouble they've made, and he's trying to cover his bases."

"That's a rotten thing to say."

"Maybe, but it's true. If you want to stay here with your parents, that's fine with me, but I'm fed up."

Suddenly, Joseph's attention was diverted by the sound of music upstairs.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Your son and his guitar," his wife answered.

"It's *Yom Tov*," he protested. "Playing music isn't allowed."

"Apparently, your son isn't as holy as you are."

Losing his cool, Joseph hurried up the stairs of the cottage, angry at his wife, at his parents, at the Master of the World for getting him into such an impossible mess.

"What the hell are you doing?!" he yelled, venting all of his frustration on his free-spirited son.

"Playing my guitar," the boy coolly responded.

“On a Jewish holiday?” Joseph exclaimed. “It’s forbidden.”

“Maybe it’s a holiday for you. It isn’t for me,” Shimon replied.

Enraged, Joseph grabbed the guitar and yanked it away from his son. In a temper, he smashed it against the wall, breaking it in half.

“Oh, what a great father,” the boy said, removing the *yarmulke* from his head and throwing it away. Then he started to cry. “And getting angry like a wild man, I suppose that’s OK on a Jewish holiday? Well to me, it’s even worse. You’re a big phony, that’s what you are!” Standing up from the bed, he stormed out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Joseph wanted to know.

“Back to Greenwich Village,” Shimon called.

Still trembling with anger, and with his back screaming in pain, Joseph shuffled to the top of the stairs. “The next time you end up in jail, don’t expect me to come get you out!” he yelled.

Downstairs, the door slammed shut. As if on cue, the baby woke up and started to cry.

“Why are you angry at him?” Rivka asked. “You are the one who brought your parents to New York – not him. Now look what you’ve done. Who knows what other commandments he’ll transgress now in rebellion against his crazy father?”

“As if you didn’t agree to their coming,” Joseph shot back, limping down the stairs, feeling that his life was slipping out of control.

“I never would have agreed if I had known that it was going to be like this.”

Suddenly, the telephone in the cottage began to ring.

“Who can that be?” Rivka asked. “It’s a holiday.”

Joseph knew who it was, but he didn’t want to tell her. “Maybe it’s the wrong number,” he said on his way to the door.

“Where are you going?” Rivka called after him.

“To look for Shimon,” he answered, but he was really heading back to his parent’s room. Shimon was old enough to take care of himself. Joseph would apologize to him later. Right now, his parents came first. Sure it wasn’t easy on his wife, he reasoned, but she would just have to learn to get over her resentment and jealousy.

To Joseph’s relief, everything was OK with his parents. His father merely wanted to know what time lunch was being served, that’s why he had phoned. Last night, they hadn’t eaten anything at all and he was starving. So was his mother. She looked rested and relaxed, a little like his old mom, but who could tell how long it would last?

With Joseph shuffling back and forth between his parents and his family, everyone managed to survive the first two days of the holiday. When he finally turned on his cell phone after the *havdalah* ceremony, which marked the distinction between the first two days of the holiday from the intermediary days, known as *Chol Moed*, there was a message from the employment agency – they had found a new candidate for the job. So, first thing the following morning, Zev drove back to the city to pick her up and bring her to the hotel.

“Thank God,” Joseph said when he saw her. Compared to the trim-figured Tess, the new Philippine worker had the build of a sumo wrestler. She appeared to be about forty-five, stocky, almost muscle bound, and not pretty in the least. Dressed in blue jeans and a denim work shirt, she had a distinct masculine appearance. Joseph was so happy, he could have hugged her.

“Welcome!” he greeted her. “Welcome to the Friedman family. My name is Joseph. Who are you?”

Her first name was Delialiora, but she said that people called her Delia. She had worked with families in the United States for three years, so her English was pretty good. Never having married herself, she sent her salary home to Manila support her aging father, her sisters and brothers, and their families. After Zev lifted her suitcase out of the car, she picked it up with ease, as if she could handle three more under her sturdy arms. While she was built more like a decathlon champion than a sprinter, she looked like she had the athletic stamina to keep up with Joseph’s

mother. And if meant pushing Lizzy Friedman around in a wheelchair, she looked like she could handle two wheelchairs at once.

“Don’t you think she’s a little too butchy?” Rivka asked after meeting her.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Joseph replied. “The first one was too pretty, and this one is too ugly. Make up your mind.”

“She’s built like a man. It’s creepy, that’s all. How come she never married? She could be a lesbian for all we know.”

“What do you care? She has to take care of my parents, not our kids.”

“I suppose it will be all right,” she concurred.

That was a weight off his back, Joseph thought with relief. Unconsciously, he straightened up a full two inches in height. It turned out that Delia was just as hard a worker as Tess, and she took the job in stride, not letting Mr. Friedman’s anxiety, or Mrs. Friedman’s mood swings, shake her calm, easy-going nature.

Now that he had someone to watch his parents around the clock, Joseph was able to relax more and enjoy the rest of the holiday with his family. Maybe it was all psychosomatic, but almost immediately, his back and neck felt much better. To Joseph’s regret, Shimon never came back after their misunderstanding, when Joseph had smashed the boy’s guitar. But Rivka seemed to calm down and didn’t speak about leaving him anymore. Instead, she insisted that they start couples therapy as soon as they returned to the city.

“What do we need couples therapy for?” he asked.

“To learn how to communicate,” she answered.

“What’s the matter with the way we communicate?” he wanted to know.

“You think that we do, and I think that we don’t. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Yeah. It tells me that maybe you should be in therapy by yourself. There’s nothing the matter with me.”

“Is that so? And I suppose it’s normal for a grown man to be attached to his parents like a nursing baby.”

“They need me now, that’s all,” he insisted.

“Maybe it’s the other way around. You can’t seem to manage without them. It’s been that way ever since we’ve been married. Well, I’ve had enough. In my book, it’s time you cut the umbilical cord and stood on your own without being so dependent on your parents. I can’t seem to make you understand that – maybe a therapist can.”

The couple’s therapist was a woman psychologist who had written two popular books on how to get the most out of marriage. Ironically, she herself was divorced. She worked out of her Central Park West apartment, which reeked of some rotted Age of Aquarius incense. To Joseph, the style of the apartment was so purposefully bohemian, as if to proclaim, “See how artsy I am.” Hanging on the wall in the hallway was a pop-art lithograph of a nude that made Joseph blush. In the living room where they sat, there were all kinds of little statues and figures which she had collected from her trips around the world, researching the behavior of couples in different cultures and climes. There was a drum from the Congo, carved coconut faces from the Caribbean, Hippie style pillows spread on the floor, wall-length hangings from India portraying Buddhist goddesses, colorful Madras sheets hanging from the ceiling, and what looked like a shrunken head in a jar. The sixteen-floor window had a sweeping view of Central Park and the East River beyond that attracted Joseph’s attention whenever he became annoyed by the proceedings.

The truth was, he didn’t have much faith in psychology and secular counselors. During his time in Los Angeles, chasing after the empty Hollywood dream, a long bout of depression had seized him when life seemed void of meaning, leading him to read dozens of psychological classics, from Jung and Freud to Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, Karen Horney, Rollo May, and “I’m OK, You’re OK,” to name but a few. Before he had discovered the more enlightened, spiritual path of Judaism, he had even tried a psychologist and a shrink. It was interesting, but it didn’t get anywhere because it didn’t reach down to his soul, and that was where his feeling of emptiness was lurking. But to save his marriage, Joseph agreed to try couple’s

therapy to placate his wife, in order to show her that he truly cared about the things that were driving her crazy.

Rivka started off by denouncing her husband in a diatribe that lasted twenty minutes. Joseph was startled by the intensity of her wrath. Or maybe it just sounded worse hearing it all in front of a stranger. The counselor nodded her head, occasionally glancing at Joseph to see how he was reacting. If Joseph had had a piece of paper, he probably would have folded it into a paper airplane and tried sailing it out the window to accompany the jets that were flying through the sky on their way to Kennedy Airport. In the meantime, his wife complained about his parents, about his being a little boy unable to support the family, about having to take second place to his mother and father, about his yelling at Shimon and destroying the guitar, and how he let his father pull him around by the nose at the expense of his health and the wellbeing of their marriage. When she finally paused for a breath, the psychologist gave Joseph a chance to respond.

“How do you react to all this?” she asked.

“Well, to tell you the truth, it hurts me very much to hear all the rotten things that my wife feels about me. I love my wife very much. It’s true that the last month or two with my parents has been a difficult experience for everyone, but it is a temporary situation that she herself agreed to, and I was hoping to get more support from her. The truth is that while she accuses me of being overly dependent on my parents, I feel that she is overly dependent on me. If I can’t give her all of the attention and help that she needs at present, why all the hysteria? She’s a big girl. She’s free to fill up her life with whatever she wants. She can go to school to learn a profession, she can take up a hobby, she can get a job, she can hire a cleaning woman and a nanny to take care of the baby. Why does she have to take out all of her frustrations on me?”

His unexpected rebuttal caught Rivka off guard, shifting the focus to her.

“Do you understand what Joseph is saying?” the psychologist asked her, employing a simple verifying technique.

“I’m not really sure,” she answered uncertainly, now that the psychologist’s zebra-skinned carpet had been swept out from under her feet.

“He wants to know why you can’t be more independent? Instead of blaming him, he is suggesting that you can use this opportunity to build yourself. Is that correct, Joseph?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“Do you have a profession?” the counselor asked her.

“No, not really,” she replied.

“It must be very frustrating being at home with the kids,” the accomplished therapist said.

“Sometimes. But it is also very rewarding,” Rivka answered in defense.

“I’m sure it is,” the counselor agreed. “But don’t you have any personal aspirations or creative channels that you would like to develop?”

“Sure I do,” Rivka insisted.

“Like what?”

Rivka was flabbergasted. She felt like everyone was staring at her, the therapist, her husband, the mounted antelope head on the wall.

“You bastard,” Rivka said to Joseph when the session was over and they were down on the street, walking back to the car. “You took all the heat off yourself and dumped it on me. Aren’t you clever!”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t do anything,” he claimed, with a look of total innocence. “The psychologist ran the meeting, not me.”

“And you led her around like a dog on a leash.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that you think that I’m such a genius, but believe me, I didn’t try to lead her anywhere. Just because it turns out that you’re the one who has a problem with dependency, don’t get angry at me.”

The meeting only made things worse between them. All the drive back to Riverdale, Rivka was silent. “I’m not going back to that bitch,” she finally said. “She sided with you completely. We’ll have to find somebody else.”

Chapter Seventeen

“You picked the therapist, not me,” Joseph reminded his wife when they got home. “You said she was famous, and that you respected her for her books.”

“You twisted her around on your little finger, and besides, the stink of that incense in her apartment made me nauseous. I still smell the stuff on my clothes.”

“I love you, Rivka,” Joseph told her. “I don’t think we need counseling, but if you want it, I’ll go to whomever you pick.”

“Sure, and bullshit your way out of really dealing with things. What a wonderful guy you are. Just like your father. The funny man who everyone loves.”

Joseph sighed. His life had come to resemble a heavyweight prizefight with clashes of frantic activity and blows, followed by brief, two-minute rests between rounds. As if he didn’t have enough worries at home, his rebellious son Shimon had taken off on his own, journeying all the way to California, where he had turned up on Ilene’s doorstep in LA. After hanging out at his auntie’s pad for two weeks, he found his way to Venice Beach where he was shacking up with “friends,” playing the new guitar he got Ilene to buy him, and working at odd jobs. Joseph learned all of this from his sister. The boy refused to speak with him on the phone.

Little by little, taking care of his parents fell into a manageable routine with the memory club in the morning and shopping junkets to fill up the afternoon. For the time being, Rivka stopped talking about therapists. She hired a cleaning woman once a week to help her get the house ready for *Shabbos*, and agreed to a nanny two mornings a week, so she go swimming and take an art class, which she always wanted to do. Now and then, Joseph spent some time surfing the net, looking for a new editing job, but he knew it really wasn’t relevant, since, for the time being, he had a fulltime job with his parents. Thank God they had found Delia. She proved to be a devoted worker like Tess, and Rivka was no longer suspicious every time he was away from the house. In his heart of hearts, he knew he wasn’t being fair to his wife, but right now, his parents needed him more than she did. In their fragile condition, it was a matter of life or death, and that made it, in his eyes, an even greater *mitzvah* than pleasing his wife.

But whenever things seemed to be working out, there was invariably another new crisis, whether with his mother getting lost, or with his wife's unpredictable outbursts, or with the kids at school. And with his father's skyrocketing anxiety, Joseph was never truly at ease.

"You're absorbing your father's worry and depression like a sponge," Rivka told him. "Maybe you should try some of his medication."

That didn't seem to be a viable solution, because the different medications his father was taking for his compulsive obsessions, for his anxiety, and for his melancholy, seemed to have no helping affect at all. Almost every week, they had another doctor's appointment, and that made Harry Friedman nervous as hell. If any type of medical test was taken, no matter how routine, he was a basket case until they received the results. All in all, his physical health was a lot better than he made it seem. Except for his Parkinson's tremor, hypertension, insomnia, prostate, partial carotid occlusion, and an assortment of complaints shared by many old people, he was getting along OK. He avoided the dentist, and put off the sigmoidoscopy recommended by their gastroenterologist, but compared to men his age at the memory club, he was in pretty good shape.

Along with all of his own problems, Harry Friedman's number one worry was the deteriorating health of his wife. Whether it was the outcome of his compulsive obsession, or plain stubborn denial, or real old-fashioned love, he refused to accept the sobering fact that the medical world had not yet discovered a successful treatment for Alzheimer's.

"There must be something that can help her," he insisted.

When their neurologist in Manhattan didn't propose any change in treatment, Harry Friedman insisted they find another doctor.

"I want an expert," he said.

"There are no Alzheimer's experts," Joseph told him. "There are geriatric neurologists who have lots of Alzheimer's patients, but the treatment is pretty much the same."

“I want a specialist for your mother,” his father insisted. “The best there is. I don’t care how much he costs.”

Joseph made an appointment with another physician, but he could only offer the same donepezils, galantamines, and memantines as everyone else. The Friedman’s tried them all. Joseph’s poor mother had to suffer though the headaches, constipation, dizziness, nausea, and loss of appetite which they caused, in one form or another. But none of them seemed to work. If they slowed down the progress of the dementia, it was impossible to tell. The same thing was true with the tranquilizers and anti-depressants that her psychiatrist prescribed. Large doses could knock her out, but they couldn’t make her better.

To make his father happy, Joseph did his own research, hoping to find some alternative treatment that would cure the disease. One of their kitchen cabinets looked like a homeopathic pharmacy with bottles of co-enzyme Q10, coral calcium, vitamin E, ginko biloba, Omega-3, and “Brain Builder Formula” manufactured by some Korean herbalist who lived in Nevada.

One day his father saw an ad in the newspaper for “Natural Energy Therapy,” picturing a young Houdini with electricity flowing out of his hands. So they tried that. Joseph was sure it was a fake, but his father wouldn’t be swayed.

“Look, son,” he said. “I’m no jerk. I wasn’t born yesterday. Remember, I was a salesman all of my life, and I can smell a bull shitter a mile away. I don’t want to tell you how many lawnmowers I sold to people who didn’t even have lawns. But we’ve got nothing to lose. There are people in the ad who swear that this guy has cured them from all kinds of things. So what the hell? Maybe he can help your mother, and if not, it’s a good excuse to get the hell out of the house.”

They went for five visits at \$200 a pop. Either the faker’s hands were uncharged during the treatments, or his mother’s brain was irreversibly unplugged from the world. The healer tried to sell them his three-month plan, but Harry Friedman’s gullibility had a limit, no matter how much he loved his wife. They also tried acupuncture, reflexology, and two weeks of “magnet therapy” before Harry Friedman called it “a lot of crap.” But, like he said, at least it got them out of the house.

That was Joseph's new job – getting his parents out of the house. First of all, they had the memory club, which filled up their mornings, and gave Joseph time to study a daily page of *Gemara* and learn a few chapters of Jewish Law in the library of the *shul*. When they first started going to the memory club, his mother would take part in the activities with the other senior citizens, drawing pictures, making simple handicrafts, singing songs, and playing “Simon Says.” With a smile on her face, she would listen to the group leader, Suzanna, read the day's top newspaper stories. When it came time for a question-and-answer review of the headlines, Harry Friedman was the group wiz, showing he still had his wits about him. To be fair, Suzanna gave the others a chance to answer first, knowing she could always count on Harry for the right answer. Whenever Suzanna called on Joseph's mother, she would say, “I'm sorry, I don't remember. I have short-term memory loss.” At the beginning, her association skills were still intact. Hearing the word black, she would respond by saying “white.” Hearing the word night, she would say, “day.” If you said the name Frank, she would fill in Sinatra. But as the months passed, her answers wouldn't have any connection at all. Similarly, in the beginning of their time at the memory club, she could conclude any nursery rhyme after hearing the first verse. But as time passed, if you said, “Mary had a little lamb,” she would stare back at you blankly, as if someone had taken an eraser and wiped away the children's song from the chalkboard of her mind.

Since his father complained that the memory club lunches were lousy, Joseph either took them home to eat, or drove them into the city for a kosher pizza, or for a more balanced meal in one of the better kosher restaurants in Manhattan. But his father wasn't happy with the food wherever they went. At home, the Empire TV dinners were too salty. In Manhattan, the pizza was too chewy, and the kosher chicken nuggets were invariably overcooked and too crispy for his upper row of dentures to handle.

“It's not like MacDonald's in Florida,” he reminded Joseph time and again.

“MacDonald's isn't kosher,” Joseph would answer.

“Just because you keep kosher, why should I?” his father wanted to know.

“If you want me to come with you, we have to eat in a kosher place,” Joseph explained.

“In Boca, food was never a problem. We ate wherever we liked, didn’t we sweetheart? The nuggets were delicious. And pizza tasted like pizza. The fried chicken melted in your mouth – I didn’t even have to chew it. Isn’t that right, darling?”

Even after his mother no longer answered, his father kept turning to her for confirmation, just as if nothing had changed. After a while, he started to ask Joseph to cut up his food into little pieces for him, to make it easier on his dentures. He said his hands shook too much for him to do it himself. At first, Joseph obliged like the dutiful son that he was, but when it started becoming a habit, he let the Philippine worker take over, not wanting to play an active part in his father’s own heartbreaking regression.

After lunch, Joseph would take them to a department store or supermarket to make sure they did a little walking. Sometimes they went to the Central Park Zoo, and some days they sat on a bench along the East River. On other days, he would drive them all the way to Brighton Beach or Coney Island to walk along the Boardwalk and listen to his father’s stories about the good old days in Brooklyn with his brother, Herbie, Aunt Peachy, and the rest of the gang, when a Nathan’s hotdog was only a nickel. After a while, his mother needed a stool to climb into the Space Wagon, and Joseph’s father switched from a cane to a walker, like some of the other men at the memory club, because it gave him a greater feeling of stability. And it wasn’t long before a wheelchair became a part of their outings, for times when one of them became too tired to walk.

Joseph chauffeured his parents around to help them pass the day, and to keep them away from his dear wife, Rivka, who had developed an allergy to them. Plus by tiring out his mother and keeping her distracted, he was able to outfox her demons and keep the witching hour at bay. By the time they returned home in the early evening, his parents were drained, and so was he, far more than he had ever been in his regular job as a film editor. Most nights, he was too tired to go for a jog, and he no longer had the patience to sit and learn with his children. There were nights

when he didn't even bother to go to the synagogue to pray in a minyan, opting for a condensed, five-minute speed version at home.

While he wouldn't admit it, the romance that had been an energizing part of his marriage became a thing of the past. Usually his wife was annoyed with him for spending too much time with his parents, or for ignoring her and the kids. And unless she wanted to hear about the pizza he ate for lunch, the boats he had seen in the harbor, the specials at Macy's, his mother's recurring constipation, and his father's battles with his dentures, she had no one to talk to at night. Often they watched videos together without exchanging a word.

"You've gotten to be a big bore," she told him. "At least in the past, you used to talk about the films that you saw. Now you don't even say a word. You've become like a mummy in a coffin."

Not wanting to get into an argument, Joseph had learned that it was best not to answer her accusations at all.

"Can't you ever forget about your parents?" she asked. The bitter tone in her voice invariably triggered a denial in her husband.

"I wasn't thinking about my parents at all," he would answer defensively.

"They have their round-the-clock helper. Why do you have to worry about them day and night?"

"What do you want from me? I'm here with you, aren't I? We're enjoying a movie together. What the hell do you want?"

"I want a husband whose head is here with his body and not a thousand miles away."

"Stop exaggerating, will you? Why don't you get a job and stop expecting me to fill up your life?"

"Me get a job? Why don't you get a job? You're the man in the family."

"I have a job."

“Driving your parents? That’s a job?”

“Right now it is. They need my help, can’t you see that?”

“No. I can’t see it. I see a grown man who is afraid to stand on his own and cope with life, that’s what I see. You’ve been hiding behind that same lame excuse for almost a year. You have a wife who needs a husband, and six children who need a father. They should be your first priority. If you don’t believe me, then go ask the Rabbi.”

That’s how it went, night after night. Until his father would call, begging him to come over. That would really tee her off.

“Aren’t you happy?” he asked his wife, after telling his father that he would see him in the morning. “I told my father I’m not coming over. I’m staying here with you.”

“Thanks a lot,” was her typical answer. “But I am tired of living with a zombie of a husband and a couple of ghosts in my house. If you’d rather be with your parents, then go move in with them already.”

“Maybe I will,” he would answer in growing frustration.

Their nightly arguments created more of a wall between them. More often than not, he ended up sleeping on the couch in the living room. It got to the point where if he went back to their bedroom to say he was sorry, she wouldn’t unlock the door, just like someone else he knew.

“Please, sweetheart,” he’d beg.

“Come on, honey, open the door.”

“Please, Rivka. I’m sorry. Give me another chance.”

“Starting tonight, I’ll spend more time with you and the kids, I promise.”

“Please, Rivka, I love you. Don’t be this way. We can start again.”

At first, his entreaties broke down her resistance, and she would open the door. But when his behavior didn’t change, and he continued to jump at his father’s

every call, Rivka refused to let him into the bedroom. As a last resort and warning, she stopped going to the *mikvah* at the conclusion of her monthly cycle, and then he couldn't touch her at all.

Chapter Eighteen

When Rivka stopped going to the *mikvah* at the end of her monthly menstrual cycle, in opposition to the tenets of Jewish Law, Joseph packed his belongings into two suitcases and moved out of the house to go live with his parents in their apartment across the park. As far as he was concerned, her flagrant defiance of the laws of family purity, which the Jewish People had held sacred from the beginnings of time, was a declaration of divorce. As long as a wife did not immerse herself in a proper ritual pool at the conclusion of her period and the precautionary clean days that followed, it was forbidden for her husband to touch her, let alone engage in marital relations. Rivka wouldn't budge from her position, and he wouldn't budge from his. At this point, there was so much anger between them, they didn't even talk.

On her side of the coin, Rivka was very hurt, and rightly so. Joseph, for his part, understood in his heart of hearts that he wasn't being fair to his wife, but he felt like he was being pulled apart on a rack in two directions. He wasn't about to give in to his wife as long as she held a gun to his forehead. Their once loving relationship had deteriorated into a prize fight, and at this precarious point in the battle, it was time for a referee to step in between them and pull the fighters apart. But Rivka refused to see another couple's therapist, fearing that Joseph would once again flip things around in his favor. And she was certain that the Rabbi would tell her to stop trampling over the holy foundations of Judaism and to find some other way to express her displeasure toward her husband. So their cold war continued with no solution in sight.

It was precisely at this point that the toddler, Rachel, and Joseph's father became sick at the very same time. Harry Friedman stopped eating and drinking. He refused to leave the house. All day, he sat in his chair in front of the TV, spitting dribble out of his mouth. Kleenex after Kleenex, saliva ball after saliva ball, until the waste basket was full to overflowing and balls of crumpled Kleenex were scattered all over the floor, as if a popcorn machine had exploded at the movies. The Philippine worker, Delia, could hardly keep up with the litter. Before the morning was over, she had to run down to the nearby grocer to buy a dozen more packets of tissues to keep up with the demand.

“Dad, what are you doing?” Joseph asked him.

“Shut up,” his father irritably barked.

“Will you stop spitting up every minute.”

“Mind your own business!”

“At least eat something, will you?”

“I don’t want to eat anything.”

“You have to eat.”

“I don’t have to eat.”

“At least drink something.”

“Just shut up already. Go back to your wife.”

Joseph figured that the repeated spitting up was some new kind of compulsive disorder.

“Do you want me to call a doctor?” he asked.

“No,” Harry Friedman replied. “Don’t you dare call a doctor. I’m sick of doctors.”

“Then at least eat something.”

“I don’t want to eat anything,” his father shot back angrily. “Stop telling me what to do. Why don’t you get yourself a job already? I’ll eat when I feel like it.”

Joseph’s mother smiled through the whole scene. She was out of it, in a world all her own. When Delia came back from the grocery, Joseph went to speak with her in the kitchen. She knew his father better than anyone now. She walked him, helped dress him, bathed him, and cut up his food. Dutifully, she woke up a several times during the night to help him walk to the bathroom and check that the front door was still locked.

“Why isn’t Dad eating?” Joseph asked her.

“I think he is afraid to?” she answered.

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid that if he eats or drinks it will make him spit even more.”

“Why is he spitting?”

“I don’t know?” she replied. “Maybe we should call a doctor.”

“What the hell are you two talking about?!” his father yelled out. “Joseph! Where the hell are you!?”

“I’m right here, Dad,” he answered, returning to the living room, where his father was watching the news. The crumpled balls of tissue scattered over the floor looked like giant white flower petals left behind by an undecided lover, “I love you, I love you not.”

“Did Delia buy more Kleenex?” he asked.

“A dozen packs,” Joseph answered.

“It isn’t enough. Let her go buy some more.”

“She can go later if we run out.”

“I don’t want her to go later. I want them now. The store may be closed later if we need them.”

“You can use toilet paper instead,” Joseph told him. “It’ll be a lot cheaper.”

“Since when are you worried about spending my money?” his father asked.

The telephone rang. It was Danny. He had stayed home from school to take care of the baby. The child had colic for the past two days and hadn’t stopped crying. Finally, Rivka had gone crazy. Unable to bear the child’s screaming, she had simply taken off.

“Took off to where?” Joseph asked his son.

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me. She left with a suitcase and told me to let you know.”

Joseph told him that he'd be right over.

"Great," he mumbled, after he had hung up the phone.

His father told him to make the TV louder.

"I'm going home for a while, Dad," Joseph told him.

"What for?"

"The baby isn't feeling well."

"Come back in a hurry."

"I will," Joseph told him.

Without further discussion, he hurried down to the lobby of the building and hopped into his car to make the quick drive back to his house. Danny was rocking the colic, one-year old girl in her carriage. Her little face was all red and swollen from crying. You didn't have to have a degree in psychology to know that the problem was psychosomatic. The child was crying out her mother's tears. But Joseph called the family doctor anyway and made an appointment for the end of the day.

"Maybe she's getting a new tooth," Danny said. "I remember how much it hurt me."

That's right, Joseph remembered. Baby teeth could hurt. But who the hell did his wife think she was, taking off without any warning when the baby was sick?

The only thing that seemed to quiet the baby was incessant rocking, so Joseph rocked and rocked the carriage back and forth all morning. He couldn't take her to his parent's apartment, because his father would go bananas with her crying. When Avi and Moishe came home from school, Joseph let them watch a Walt Disney video. When the movie was finished, he let them watch another one, and then let them play on the computer, overlooking the family rule that limited the children's movie and computer time to two hours a day. Danny kept himself busy tracking the flight patterns of the passenger jets overhead with his super high-powered

binoculars. Joseph called the apartment to say that he was taking the baby to the pediatrician. Delia relayed the message, saying that his father didn't want to talk.

Rachel screamed out when the doctor poked at her stomach, which he said was hard as a rock. "Probably a little constipation, that's all," he concluded. The doctor lived in the neighborhood and was a member of Joseph's synagogue. He prescribed a mild laxative, and syrup to ease the pain, and assured Joseph that the child would probably be back to herself in no time. "I'll also give you a suppository for kids in case she doesn't have a stool by tomorrow morning," he added, sending Joseph off with a reassuring grin.

"How is your brother doing?" Joseph asked him. His brother had moved to Israel with his wife and kids.

"Great. He really seems to love it there. I think he's crazy, but thank God that he's happy."

"Lucky guy," Joseph said.

When he got home, he put the baby to sleep, told Danny to feed the kids, and hurried off to his parents. Delia was feeding his mother her dinner of blended food. At least she had an appetite, he thought, watching her gulp down spoon after spoon.

"Did my father eat anything?" Joseph asked the worker in a whisper.

She shook her head, no.

"Did he drink?"

Another shake of the head was the answer.

His father still sat in his easy chair, watching the news. Every minute, he took a new tissue from the box and wiped the spittle from his mouth, as if it were a fountain that had no end.

"What can I get you to eat, Dad?" Joseph asked him.

"I don't want to eat."

“How about some ice cream? We’ve got chocolate marshmallow and chocolate chip.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’ve got to eat, Dad, if you don’t want to get sick” Joseph insisted.

“When did you become a doctor?”

“At least have something to drink.”

“Will you shut up? I’m trying to hear the news.”

“You’ve been watching the news all day.”

“Help me up,” his father said. “I’ve got to take a pee.”

Joseph bent down and reached out his hands, grabbing his father’s shaking arms. Harry Friedman didn’t make any effort to rise, as if he were waiting for Joseph to do all the work himself. “Delia,” Joseph called, not wanting to risk straining his back. With the help of the muscular woman, they managed to get Joseph’s father on his feet. He wavered unsteadily, as if he wasn’t used to standing.

“Dad, you can’t sit in your chair all day watching TV,” Joseph told him. “You know what the doctor told you. He wants you to walk.”

“Get me my stroller,” he commanded.

“Come on, Dad, don’t turn yourself into an old man.”

“I am an old man,” he said.

Suddenly, he reached out his hand in a floundering spasm.

“What’s the matter?” Joseph asked.

“Get me a tissue!” he barked.

Quickly, Joseph fetched his father a fresh tissue which he used to wipe his mouth. Coughing, he brought up a thick wad of green slime. With a trembling hand, he

threw the wet Kleenex to the floor. Joseph wondered where all the phlegm was coming from?

“Delia!” Harry Friedman shouted out like an army sergeant.

Knowing what he wanted, the Philippine woman gave him his walker and accompanied him as he shuffled slowly down the hallway toward the bathroom. Physically and mentally exhausted, Joseph sat down at the dining table next to his Mom.

“Where’s your father?” she suddenly asked, breaking hours of silence.

“He went to the bathroom,” Joseph answered.

“I have to go to the bathroom, too,” she announced.

“You can go in your diaper,” Joseph said.

“I’m not a child,” she answered.

It was the longest conversation that Joseph had had with his mother in months. Somewhere, deep inside her brain, she still had her senses, at least for rare moments, without rhyme or reason. “Please God,” he thought. “Let them hurry and find a cure for Alzheimer’s, or grant us a miracle that she be healthy again.”

Impulsively, his mother stood up, as if she were off to the bathroom too.

“Delia!” Joseph called.

“One minute!” the Filipino hollered back from down the hall. “I’m with your father.”

“I want to go home,” his mother said.

“You are home, Mom,” Joseph assured her.

“This isn’t my home,” she answered looking around.

“This is your new home. It’s been your home for over a year. God willing, it will be your home for another 120 years to come.”

“I don’t want to live that long,” his mother said. “Where’s Harry? He’s supposed to take me to my mother.”

“He’s coming, Mom, don’t worry. Dad’s on the way.”

As if reassured, she nodded her head and stood frozen, as if someone had turned off the switch. She stared into space. Joseph took her arm and led her slowly toward the couch. “Come on, Mom. Let’s walk over to the sofa. Easy, easy. That’s my girl. Now sit.”

Gently, as if she were a piece of fine porcelain china, Joseph lowered her onto the couch. His father appeared in the hallway, inching his walker along until he was back by his chair. With a shaky finger, he pointed to his box of Kleenex. Joseph hurried to hand him a tissue, and once again his father spit up a wad of dribble and cast the tissue to the floor.

“Delia!” he barked.

“I’m coming,” she called, hurrying over to help lower him back into his chair.

“I gotta go, Dad,” Joseph said. “I’m spending the night at home.”

“Nu?” he asked. “What for?”

“Rivka’s away.”

“Good,” he said. “She needs a vacation.”

“So do I,” Joseph quipped.

“How’s the baby?” his father asked, ignoring his son’s subtle sarcasm.

“The doctor says she’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad. Give everyone our regards.”

Joseph kissed both his parents and hurried back home. The kids were still watching TV. “Okay guys,” he said. “Off to bed.”

“When it’s over,” Avi argued.

Chapter Nineteen

Joseph's father telephoned at five o'clock in the morning to find out what time he was coming over. Given the fact that Joseph had risen twice in the middle of the night to calm his crying daughter, he was groggy when he answered the phone. Two hours later, the alarm clock woke him with a start. It was time to get the kids off to school. Danny had woken on his own and had already gone off to pray. Now that he had been bar mitzvahed, he had the same religious obligations as an adult, which meant attending prayer services three times a day. Getting Avi and Moishe out of bed was more of a problem. Super active Avi was a little slow in the morning until the chemicals in his brain woke up from their slumber. No matter how much his father threatened and yelled, the boy didn't budge from his blankets. Finally, Joseph lost his temper and ranked his covers off the bed.

"Emma gives him a piece of chocolate to wake him up," little Moishe reported.

That was news to Joseph. It seemed a bit surprising since chocolate was known to be problematic for hyperactive kids. But if that's what it took, then that's what it took. Sure enough, it worked. A minute after he placed a piece of chocolate on the boy's tongue, he bounced out of bed, ready and looking for action.

Then suddenly at breakfast, while Joseph was scrambling some eggs, for seemingly no reason at all, Avi went crazy. He started screaming and shouting and banging his head on the table.

"What's the matter?" his father asked, bewildered.

"I asked for one piece of toast, not two."

"So I gave you two? What's the big deal?"

"I only wanted one," he shouted.

"So give one of them to your brother," Joseph reasoned.

In a rage, with a sweep of his arm, the boy sent the plastic dish flying off the table. Like flying saucers, the two pieces of toast soared through the air, hovered, and crash landed on the floor.

“Why did you do that?” Joseph asked.

“Because I wanted to. That’s why,” the boy shot back. Crying, he stood up and ran out of the room.

“Get the hell back here!” he yelled, running after his son, who raced out the front door.

Joseph glanced at the kitchen clock. He had another ten minutes before the van showed up that drove them to school. He still had to make them sandwiches and find their coats.

“Emma hates you and so do we,” little Moishe announced.

“Is that so?” Joseph replied, out of breath with rage. “Then you can forget about using the computer for a week.”

“Who cares?” the boy responded. Like his older brother, he ran out of the house.

“What about your sandwiches?!” Joseph called after them. They ran off down the street without looking back.

“What’s up?” Danny asked, coming home from *shul*, holding his *tefillin* bag under his armpit like a football.

“Your brothers took off. I made a mistake and gave Avi two pieces of toast and he went bonkers.”

“What else is new?”

“They’ll miss their ride.”

“They’ll catch it, don’t worry. They probably went over to David Heller’s home. He rides with them too.”

Back in the kitchen, the baby had started crying in her carriage. Feeling pulled at in all directions, Joseph decided to phone his wife.

“Where the hell are you?” he yelled when he got her on the phone, forgetting about not losing his cool.

“I’m sorry, Joseph, I can’t take it anymore,” she said. “It may be a simple thing for you to break up our marriage, but it isn’t for me. My nerves are shot. I can’t deal with you and the kids anymore.”

Something in the tone of her voice told him to put on the brakes and speak to her more softly.

“Yeah, well, everything is OK,” he said. “I’m taking care of the baby.”

“What about Avi and Moishe?”

“They just went off to school.”

He walked into the dining room to get out of range from the screaming baby. Seeing the painting of the Wailing Wall, he offered his own silent prayer.

“I took Rachel to the doctor yesterday, and he gave her some medicine for her belly,” he told her.

“Good,” she replied.

“Take as long as you need,” he said.

His wife didn’t answer. Joseph could sense her trembling on the other end of the line.

“Would you like for both of us to get away together?” he asked her. “I need a break too.”

“How can you with your parents?” she inquired.

“I can work something out for a few days,” he told her.

Rivka didn’t respond right away. “Maybe my folks can stay with the kids. I’m here with them now,” she revealed.

If she went home to her parents, she must really be in rough shape, Joseph thought, not able to recount the last time Rivka had spent any time alone with them since their wedding.

“Let’s see how Rachel reacts to the medicine,” she said, sounding a lot calmer now.

“I love you, honey,” he told her. “I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused.”

“We’ll talk later,” she said, hanging up the phone so he couldn’t hear her sobs.

“Emma’s been carrying on like a crazy women for the last few days,” Danny told him when he returned to the kitchen. “Screaming at everyone for no reason at all. Even worse than the baby.”

“Your mother’s under a lot of pressure,” he said.

The baby was still crying. It was as if she still had an invisible umbilical cord attached to her mother, even though Rivka was miles away in Staten Island. Joseph picked her up and held her in his arms. Her small face had an uncanny resemblance to her mother. No wonder they were emotionally like Siamese twins as well.

Joseph’s heart jumped when the phone rang, thinking it was Rivka. But it was only his father.

“Where the hell are you,” he asked, beginning their conversation as usual.

“I’m with the baby, Dad.”

“When will you be here?”

“Soon,” Joseph promised him, without making a commitment.

“Pick up some boxes of tissues on the way,” Harry Friedman commanded. “I’m going to need them.”

Ending the conversation, Joseph figured that he could ask his oldest son, Zev, to spend a few hours a day with his parents, so that he could get away with Rivka. He had enough sense to recognize that the vacation might be the last chance to salvage his marriage. Sometimes good things could come out of a crisis, he reasoned. Of course, it all depended on the baby’s health, and the willingness of Rivka’s parents to spend a few days in Riverdale, taking care of the kids, something that Rivka’s handicapped father had never volunteered to do.

But it looked like their *mazel* was with them. For a change, Rivka's parents agreed to play babysitter, so that their daughter could have a mini vacation. And Zev agreed to pinch hit for his father. By the early afternoon, the syrup had calmed the baby's stomach. Come evening, Rivka immersed herself in a *mikvah* on Staten Island in preparation for their reunion. Even Joseph's father gave them a green light, saying "You two deserve a little time by yourselves. Find a nice hotel. Take your wife out to dinner. Buy her a nice present from us. And get some things for the kids. I have some cash in my wallet in the bedroom. Take five hundred dollars."

"I have the credit card," Joseph reminded him.

"Whenever you use the credit card you pay interest. Use the cash instead."

There was over a thousand dollars in the wallet. His father always liked having cash in the house, to feel more secure. The only thing he was worried about was running out of Kleenex, so before taking off, Joseph bought him a month's supply to help calm his nerves.

"Promise me that you'll eat?" Joseph asked him.

"Yeah, I'll eat. I'll eat a roast turkey with stuffing and gravy, just for you."

"And you'll drink?"

"I'll get myself pickled on a bottle of scotch. So just get lost, will you? You're getting on my nerves."

After a few minutes on the Internet, Joseph found a hotel in Atlantic Beach that catered to a kosher clientele. The next morning, Rivka returned home with her parents, and with everything under control, they drove off together on a second honeymoon.

Rivka's parents waved goodbye by the front door, her father in his wheelchair, her mother standing behind him, clutching its handles.

"Do you think they can handle it?" he asked.

"We'll only be gone two days."

For several long minutes, they drove in a cumbersome silence. It was a bright sunny day and lots of pleasure yachts were out for a cruise along the Hudson River as the car headed down the Manhattan bypass toward Battery Park.

“How did you find the hotel?” Rivka asked, keeping the conversation light.

“On the Internet.”

“What is it like?”

“The pictures look nice. Four stars. On the ocean. They have a small casino if we want.”

“Are you certain it’s kosher?”

“That’s what they advertise.”

Again there was an uncomfortable silence between them.

“Rachel looked all right this morning,” Rivka observed.

“Thank God,” Joseph answered. “She was up a few times last night crying, but the medicine seems to be working.”

“My parents are a little apprehensive. They haven’t taken care of children in years.”

“Are you sure that they’re up to it?” she asked.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” he answered, knowing that Avi and Moshe were sure to test them.

“It’s nice of them to pitch in.”

“My mother asked me why we don’t call on them more often.”

Joseph remained silent, not wanting to open an old can of worms. Rivka’s relationship with her parents had never been the greatest, and she still harbored a lot of resentment towards her wheel-chair ridden father.

“When was the last time we went away alone?” she wondered aloud.

“I can’t remember.”

“Certainly not since your parents moved to New York.”

Once again he didn’t answer. His strategy was to sidestep every sensitive issue. At least for the first day of their trip. But apparently, his wife has a load on her chest that she needed to release.

“You do realize that your obsession with your parents isn’t normal,” she said.

“I guess you’re right. Just the way that your avoidance of your parents has been abnormal ever since we got married.”

“I’ve had a reason for that, and you know it,” she countered.

“It says, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ whether they are good parents or bad.”

“Oh, so that makes me a lousy person?”

“I didn’t say that. The opposite. I think you are a wonderful person. That’s why I married you. I know you had a crummy childhood. I didn’t. My parents have always been good to me. That’s why I want to pay them back.”

“Well, you’ve paid them back already. So have I. In spades. Can’t you see how they are ruining our marriage? It makes me furious, that’s all.”

Luckily, they had reached the tip of Manhattan. Joseph guided the car into the lane that turned off the West Side Highway to Battery Park.

“What are you doing?” Rivka questioned, assuming they were going to drive through the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and drive to New Jersey via the Verrazano Bridge.

“I thought we’d take the ferry. We did it before we got married, remember?”

“A second honeymoon,” she said, in a voice ringing with pleasant surprise. “Well aren’t you romantic?”

It turned out to be a great choice. They paid the toll, drove the car onto the boat, and walked upstairs to the open deck of the ferry. Once the whistle blared and the

craft got underway, the sturdy sea breeze seemed to whisk all the bad thoughts out of their heads. Joseph had to hold onto the brow of his cap so it wouldn't blow off into the river. Jokingly, he did his old Gregory Peck impersonation of peg-legged Captain Ahab. He leaned over the railing, pointed out toward the harbor, and called out, "There she blows! There she blows!" as if he had spotted his nemesis, Moby Dick, in Hudson Bay.

Rivka laughed. Embarrassed by her husband's uninhibited antics, she gazed around the deck of the ferry to see if anyone were watching. When they had first started dating, Joseph had pulled crazy Hollywood stunts like this all the time. To the young and somewhat timid Orthodox girl, his archive of movie impersonations was a bit overwhelming, and twenty years later, she still wasn't comfortable with his public displays. Not that they occurred with any great frequency anymore. In fact, since his parents had moved back to New York, she hadn't seen him behave with his old lighthearted spontaneity. That was one of the things that was missing in their marriage, she mused. The romance and the fun.

Joseph knew it without having to hear her say it. That's why he had chosen the ride on the ferry. His mother's and father's condition hung over their marriage like a suffocating cloud.

It wasn't long before the Statue of Liberty rose up off the starboard side of the ferry, looking close enough to reach out and touch. Without a word passing between them, their hands came together, as they stared out at the symbol of American citizenship and pride.

Probably, if they hadn't been so religious, they would have kissed. But that was an intimacy that they never allowed themselves in public. Holding hands was a rarity as well, but the combination of their recent quarrels, and the nostalgic ferry ride, and their hopes for a better, more loving future, overcame their usual inhibitions.

"My grandparents landed on Ellis Island when they arrived in America," Rivka recounted.

"So did my grandfather, Zev" Joseph said.

“Where was he from again?” Rivka asked, not remembering the details of the very same conversation they had about their grandparents when they went out on their first date twenty years before.

“Austria. He came over by himself at the age of fourteen. Ellis Island was his first stop in America with a wave of other immigrants. At first, he worked in a sweat shop in Brooklyn. Dad’s mother was already a second generation American. After they got married, Grandpa got a job in the garment district in New York. They made him work on the Sabbath. As time went by, he drifted further away from the Torah. My Dad and his brother got a little Jewish education, but it wasn’t enough to fortify them against all the temptations of America. And my Mom didn’t have any Jewish schooling at all.”

Before they knew it, the ferry made it to the Staten Island side of the harbor. The whistle blasted again, the motor died, and the captain guided the boat smoothly into its dock, as if it were gliding on ice.

Joseph was tired from awakening to the cries of the baby in the middle of the night, so he let Rivka take over the wheel. He even dozed off as they headed along the Jersey coast toward Atlantic City. Their first stop was a discount clothes store for children in Ashbury Park. Rivka had heard that they were having a fabulous sale, and she wanted to stock up on clothes for Rachel, who hadn’t inherited any hand-me-downs, being the first girl in the family.

While Rivka was busy shopping, Joseph was tempted to call his parents to see how things were going, but he didn’t want to take a chance of upsetting his wife, so he fought off his desire, trusting that Delia and Zev had everything under control. They reached the resort town by late afternoon. Their hotel turned out to be a dump at the end of the strip of showplace hotels and casinos. It was a lot smaller than it look in the pictures on its website, with a shabby looking lobby and furniture that hadn’t been renewed or re-upholstered for years.

“It’s a Jewish hotel all right,” Rivka quipped.

“At least it’s kosher, which is a good thing, because I’m getting hungry. I hope you’re not disappointed.”

“It’s fine,” his wife answered. “I wasn’t expecting the Waldorf. I’m just happy we can spend some time alone.”

For some reason, the front desk hadn’t received the reservation that Joseph had made on the net, but they had spare rooms, so it wasn’t a problem.

Religious or not religious, Joseph was still a man, and now that they were riding up to their room in the elevator, his mind starting thinking a mile a minute. After all, because of the tension between them, and his wife’s refusal to go the *mikvah*, he hadn’t touched her for ages. Normally, they made it a practice to wait for the night, after the children were sleeping, but the kids weren’t with them, and they were on vacation, and Joseph sensed that his wife wanted a little added romance. So the minute they locked the door and put their bags on the floor, they were in each other’s arms, kissing. They didn’t even wait to take off their coats. Or to take a look at the room. Before getting carried away completely, Joseph lowered a hand, removed his cell phone from his pocket, and shut the thing off, to make sure they wouldn’t be disturbed.

“I thought you were hungry,” she said.

“I am,” he replied, not letting her go.

For both of them, it was like the first time they kissed.

“Oh, no!” he moaned, when the hotel telephone rang in the room.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

It rang another ten times, then stopped.

But their rendezvous just wasn’t meant to be. With an urgent insistence, Rivka’s cell phone began to ring.

“Do you want me to answer?” she asked.

“No.”

“Maybe it’s your father.”

“I’ll call him back later.”

“Or it could be the kids. Or my parents. Maybe they can’t find something they need, or maybe Rachel is ill.”

With a sigh, Joseph released her, so that she could answer the phone. It was Zev. He wanted to speak with his father.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Let me speak to *Abba*,” he insisted.

Rivka handed the phone to her husband. He listened stiffly, silently nodding his head. Zev had telephoned the emergency medical team. In addition to not eating or drinking, and constantly spitting up phlegm, Joseph’s father had complained about pains in his side all day. The last time he had gone to the bathroom, his pee had been a very dark yellow, and Delia started getting afraid. Not wanting to take any chances, Joseph’s nineteen-year-old son had phoned for the emergency ambulance. In the background, Joseph could hear his father arguing with the medics.

“He doesn’t want to go to the hospital,” Zev said on the phone.

Joseph started to shake. His wife stared at him, waiting to know what was going on back in Riverdale.

“Let me speak to the medic,” Joseph told his son.

“What’s the matter?” Rivka asked.

“My father’s gotten worse,” Joseph answered.

“Hello,” the strange voice said on the phone. “My name is Dr. Ralston. I’m speaking with Mr. Friedman’s son?”

“That’s right, Doctor. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“Without extensive testing, I can’t really pinpoint the problem,” the doctor replied.

“You understand that?”

“Of course,” Joseph said. Feeling uncomfortable under the microscope of Rivka’s scrutiny, he turned away toward the window. Beyond the hotel swimming pool and the beach, the ocean stretched out toward fairytale places where there were no pressures or problems.

“It could be that your father is dehydrated from not eating or drinking. And the pains in his side could be appendicitis, which isn’t the most common thing in older people, but it happens. All things considered, I recommend that he go to the hospital for intravenous feeding and a more comprehensive examination.”

Joseph sighed. For a moment, he felt as if the floor were swaying, as if he were on a boat.

“What is it?” Rivka repeated.

“Dad’s dehydrated from not drinking. And he may have appendicitis.”

“That’s not the worst thing in the world,” she said.

“The emergency team doctor wants to take him to the hospital. What should I tell him?”

“That’s your decision. But I don’t see that it has to interfere in our vacation.”

“Are you crazy?” Joseph blurted out.

“What do you want me to do?” the doctor asked on the telephone.

Joseph’s mind was racing a mile a minute. To stay with his wife, or hurry back to his father? That was the question. To send Dad off to the hospital, or keep him at home to see what developed?

“If it is appendicitis, we shouldn’t let it wait,” the doctor advised. “And even if it is only dehydration, even in a younger person, dehydration can be dangerous. If he refuses to drink, we’ll have to get fluids into him as soon as we can.”

“Oh shit,” Joseph mumbled, feeling like the game was up.

“If you go back, I am not going back with you,” Rivka warned him.

“Oh, for God’s sake, my father’s a sick man,” Joseph exploded. “Can’t you stop thinking about yourself for a change?”

“I stopped thinking about myself for over a year,” she flashed back. “I’m not going to sacrifice myself for your parents anymore.”

“I’m waiting for your answer, Mr. Friedman,” the doctor said.

He was damned if he did, and damned if he didn’t. It was either his marriage or his father. Maybe his pains were nothing. Maybe they would pass. But Joseph couldn’t take a chance.

“Of course,” Joseph answered. “Take him to the hospital. I’m in New Jersey now, but I will get there as soon as I can.”

“I hate you!” Rivka cried. In a temper, she picked up an ashtray from atop the hotel-room dresser and hurled it at her husband. Joseph ducked. The angry projectile smashed through the window and sailed out through the night toward the beach. “I hate you!” she yelled once again, as she hurried out of the hotel room and slammed the door behind her.

“I’m afraid we are going to have to put him in a straightjacket,” the doctor said. “He doesn’t want to go.”

“Let me speak to him,” Joseph requested. He sat down on the bed. A chilly ocean breeze blew in from the broken window.

“I’m not going to the hospital,” his father shouted over the phone.

“You have to, Dad.”

“No I don’t. It’s a free country. I know my rights.”

“You may be having appendicitis pains,” Joseph told him.

“I have a pain in the ass for a son, that’s what I have,” Harry Friedman answered. “You just mind your own business.”

“Dad, be reasonable,” Joseph pleaded.

“I’m not going to the hospital. I’m not leaving your mother alone.”

So that was the reason, Joseph thought. “You don’t have to leave her, Dad. She can go with you. Zev will take her and Delia in a cab.”

“What about you?” his father asked.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

“I don’t want to ruin your vacation,” his father added.

“It’s OK, Dad. We’ll just postpone it for a day or two, until you are feeling better. Rivka doesn’t mind.”

“All right, I’ll go, but get back here on the double.”

Now what was he going to do? Rivka was nowhere in sight. The corridor outside of their room was empty. And she wasn’t down in the lobby either. He couldn’t call her because he had her cell phone in his hand. Returning to the room, he waited for another five minutes, hoping that she would return. Then he got angry. She was being a bitch. He realized that things were hard on her, but this was a matter of life and death. Didn’t she realize that? Didn’t she care? If that was how she felt about his parents, after all they had done for them, than their marriage wasn’t worth the effort. What did she think life was – a picnic? Just because she was a cold bitch to her own parents, that didn’t mean he had to be a bastard to his.

He lifted his valise and headed for the elevator. Hurrying to the car in the parking lot, he half hoped to hear her call out and come along with him, but there was no sign of her anywhere. Driving over the speed limit all the way back to New York, he made it to the hospital in under two hours, taking the bridge instead of the far slower ferry. His father was still in the emergency room, dressed in a hospital gown and propped up in bed. He was receiving fluids intravenously from a bag which hung on a tall metal stand. His mother, Zev, and Delia sat at his bedside.

“Hey, Dad,” Joseph greeted him, forcing a cheerful smile. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel like shit,” he answered. “You picked one hell of a time to go on vacation.”

“Where is Emma?” Zev asked his father.

“She stayed in Atlantic City. How’s Mom doing?” he asked Delia.

“She’s doing fine.”

His mother didn’t show any sign of recognizing him. Joseph couldn’t tell if she knew where she was. For the moment at least, she had her spaced-out look on her face.

“Where’s the doctor?” Joseph asked.

Zev shrugged. “He comes and goes. He wants Grandpa to drink some kind of fluid so that they can do a CAT scan. But Grandpa doesn’t want to.”

“I want to go home,” the old man said crankily. “Now that you’re here, take me home. Everything is all right. I’ll drink at home, I promise.”

“I want to go home, too,” his mother suddenly said, standing up from her wheelchair. Delia held her arm.

“That’s all I need now,” Joseph thought. One of her episodes. But at least he was at the hospital, so if he went crazy, he could simply check in alongside his father.

“Come on, Grandpa, drink the medicine,” Zev said, trying to persuade him. “After the test, we’ll go home.”

It turned out that they wanted his father to drink two full quarts of some special dye that would enable them to photographically trace what was going on in his digestive tract. When Joseph grabbed a hold of the emergency room doctor, he explained that the chances were zero.

“He’s here because he stopped drinking, and you want him to drink two big bottles of that syrup? Forget about it.”

“We have to know what’s going on inside,” the doctor explained with a look of impatient disdain. “His lower abdomen is swollen and very hard. The pains may be from an infection, or an appendicitis, or from something worse.”

“Like what?” Joseph asked with a sudden hollow feeling in his stomach.

“He may have a growth or some kind of cancer. We have to find out as soon as we can. If your father can’t drink the CT fluid, we’ll have to force feed him.”

“With a tube down his throat?” Joseph asked. “That’s out of the question. My father’s terrified about not breathing. It will give him a heart attack. One of the arteries in his neck is closed, and the other is half closed. I don’t think he can handle the strain.”

“First of all, the feeding tube is inserted through the nose, and it isn’t so bad. I’m sure you are concerned for your father. But there are some decisions you just have to leave to the doctors. When was the last time he had a sigmoidoscopy, do you remember?”

“I don’t know,” Joseph replied, recalling that his father had refused to visit a gastroenterologist when they were making rounds of doctors upon the move back to New York.

Joseph said that he would talk to his father about getting ready for the CT. The doctor promised to return in a few minutes for his answer. In the meantime, Joseph told Zev to take his grandmother and Delia home. It was getting late in the evening, and he didn’t want his mother to get overtired and have an outburst of dementia in the emergency ward.

“Why are you sending them home?” his father asked.

“It’s late, Dad.”

“Who’s going to stay here with me?”

“I am,” Joseph said.

“What about your wife?”

“She’s still on vacation.”

A rattle shook through his father’s throat and a thick glob of spittle poured out of his lips. He raised a hand, signaling to Joseph to help him. Looking around, Joseph saw a paper towel dispenser attached to the wall. Grabbing a handful of towels, he wiped the saliva away from his father’s mouth.

“They want you to drink some kind of fluid so that they can take an X-ray,” he told his father.

“I can’t,” his father answered, as if he had run out of strength. “I’m sorry. I can’t. If I could drink I would, but I can’t.”

When the emergency room doctor returned, Joseph told him that they would have to wait with the CT until his father regained his strength. Once the dehydration was under control, hopefully his father would be able to get down the fluid, but at the present, swallowing such a large amount was out of the question, and Joseph said he wouldn’t give permission for any intrusive measures like sticking a tube down his father’s nose.

Annoyed that an outsider had challenged his authority, the doctor walked angrily away.

For the first part of the night, Joseph sat at his father’s bedside, wiping away the dribble that he spit out every twenty seconds. In response to Joseph’s question what was causing the steady flow, the next emergency-room doctor on duty said that it might be due to some gastric infection, or some possible growth, or from a worsening of his father’s Parkinson’s which could interfere in the body’s natural metabolism.

Joseph thought to phone Rivka, but since she didn’t call him, he didn’t call her. Around midnight, he spoke to Zev, but he hadn’t heard from her either. Her parents had already gone to sleep and the kids were all in bed. A little later, a resident from the surgery floor of the hospital came by with an orderly to move Harry Friedman out of the emergency room.

“Why the surgery floor?” Joseph asked apprehensively.

“There’s an open bed,” the tight-lipped doctor said.

His father was wheeled to the bed by the door of the hospital room. Joseph couldn’t see the patient in the bed by the window because a curtain was drawn around it. A muscular Black teenager slept in the bed in the middle of the room. His chest was swathed in bandages as is he had been operated on for some kind of wound. Joseph had to wait outside the room while the nurses accepted the new

patient and inserted a catheter so he wouldn't have to get up to go to the bathroom. Joseph seized the opportunity to find a quiet corner inside the ward's vacant kitchen and prayed the evening prayer. When he finished, he discovered a message on his cell phone. It was from Rivka. "I want a divorce," was all it said.

At about two o'clock in the night, his father began to shake with chills and his temperature grew warmer. His breathing became troubled and rapid, and his pulse started to race. Joseph hurried to the nurse's station for help. A disinterested, annoyed looking nurse was speaking on the telephone.

"In a minute," she said.

"My father is having trouble breathing," Joseph insisted. "I want a doctor to see him now."

"I'll be right in," she repeated.

Frustrated, Joseph hurried back to his father, who was sweating and red in the face. A heavy cough racked his body, and he spit out a thick green phlegm. His eyes looked up at Joseph, frightened.

"It's OK, Dad," Joseph assured him, wiping away the viscous saliva.

Finally, the nurse came in, felt around for his father's pulse, and stuck a thermometer into his mouth.

"He's spitting up green phlegm," Joseph told her. For Joseph, it was a scary thing, but the overworked and underpaid nurse had seen it a hundreds of times before.

"Lift up his arms like exercise, up and down," was all she said, walking back out of the room.

It was obvious that the night resident had been awakened from sleep. With his stethoscope, he listened to the wheezing patient's chest, then left the room without saying a word. A few minutes later, he wheeled in a cart with test tubes and needles, and asked Joseph to step out of the room while he took a sample of blood. Over and over again, Joseph repeated the three Psalms which he knew by heart.

"Please, God, let my father be healthy," he prayed.

Twice, the nurse entered the room and left. Then she wheeled in a machine that measured pulse rate and the oxygen level in the blood. Joseph tried to read the expression on her face, to glean a clue what was happening, but she didn't betray any emotion other than bored nonchalance.

"What's going on?" Joseph asked.

"The doctor is examining him, that's all."

While Joseph was waiting by the nurse's station in the darkened ward corridor, an elderly man shuffled out of the room, pushing along his infusion stand in front of him.

"Got a cigarette?" he asked.

Joseph shook his head no.

Watching the old man shuffle off in search of a cigarette, Joseph could hear his father coughing and spitting up phlegm. When the examinations had finished, the doctor strode into the corridor, talking on his cell phone. A few test tubes of blood were sticking out of his jacket pocket. Before Joseph could speak with him, he rushed off to deal with another problem. Joseph ran after him, catching up with him at the elevator.

"What about my father?" Joseph asked him.

"On top of everything, he may have pneumonia," the doctor said, stepping into the elevator. "We'll start him on antibiotics to be sure."

Joseph wasn't a doctor, but it didn't seem to him that his father had been suffering from pneumonia at home. True, he was spitting up a fountain of phlegm, but he hadn't been coughing. If he had contacted pneumonia, he had contacted it in the hospital. Joseph hurried back to his father's bedside and began lifting his arms up and down as the nurse had directed. The bed sheet was splattered with blood, as if the resident had had a difficult time extracting blood from an uncooperative patient. The thick green phlegm had turned blacker. It filled Harry Friedman's mouth, causing him to choke. Unable to clean it away with a paper towel, Joseph inserted his fingers into his father's mouth and tried scooping it out. But it was

sticky like glue. Joseph had to probe deeply in order to scrape it out. A glob looking like a long, black strand of bubble gum finally came out. The more phlegm he pulled out, the more the bile flowed up from somewhere inside his father's body, like a long endless snake that had no tail. Quickly, Joseph raised the head of the bed, so his father wouldn't choke.

"Cough, Dad!" he urged.

When his father coughed, he reached his hand into his father's mouth and seized at the monster.

"Cough!"

The force of the cough drove the saliva up his father's throat to the back of his mouth where Joseph was able to latch on to it and pull it out. Trembling, Joseph hurled the serpent toward the floor, feeling like he was wrestling with the Angel of Death.

"Can't you do something?" he asked the nurse who looked in from the doorway.

"Keep up the exercising," she said.

"Sure, I'll take him to play tennis," Joseph answered sarcastically. "Can't you see that he's choking!"

"I'll do a suction," she reluctantly assented. "Wait outside," she told him.

This time Joseph lingered in the doorway to watch. The nurse slipped on a pair of sheer plastic gloves, removed a long paper envelope from a container by the bed, tore open the seal and pulled out a long sterile tube. She hooked the thin tube to some kind of glass container that was attached to the wall behind his father bed. The contraption made a noise like a vacuum. When she inserted the tube into his father's nose, his father arched his back and started flailing at her with his arms. Warding off the blows, she forced the tube down the nasal passage. The vacuum sucked up the phlegm with a loud shlurping noise. It was painful for Joseph to watch. The blackish green vile shot up the tube and splashed into the glass container. When the nurse extracted the tube from his father's nose, she shoved it into his mouth and moved it all around to suck up the phlegm. Once again, his

father groaned and tried to resist. When the procedure was finished, the nurse flicked off a switch, and the vacuum died with a lingering sigh. Throwing the used tube and her disposable gloves into a garbage can, the nurse strode out of the room.

“Keep lifting his arms,” she said.

His father stared up at him with the eyes of a frightened baby. “Sorry, Dad,” he said. “They had to do it. You’ve got a lot of phlegm.”

Harry Friedman squeezed his son’s hand, as if he wouldn’t let go. For an old man who was sick, his grip was like steel. Joseph gave him an encouraging smile, but there was no respite in store. Once again, a murderous cough racked his father’s body. The killer saliva returned with an even more venomous force. For an hour, Joseph battled it non-stop. His back was hurting him from bending over the bed, but what could he do? Putting on a pair of the disposable gloves like the nurse, he continued to scoop out the gluey excretions from inside his father’s mouth, pausing now and again to lift his father’s arms up and down, as if he were working a pump. “Up and down, up and down,” he repeated aloud. When the plastic gloves proved too slippery to get a hold of the phlegm, Joseph threw them away and continued to battle the evil force with his bare hands, feeling that he was engaged in mortal combat with an untiring enemy.

“I don’t deserve a son as good as you,” his father told him, during a rest in the battle.

“Sure you do, Dad,” Joseph answered, feeling like he wanted to cry. It was the first compliment his father had given him for as long as he could remember.

“Try to sleep a little, Dad,” Joseph told him.

His father shook his head. “I can’t sleep,” he answered in a voice empty of hope.

A technician appeared in the doorway, tugging a portable x-ray machine on wheels. Once again, Joseph was requested to wait outside.

“They are going to take an x-ray,” Joseph informed his father. “They want me to wait outside.”

Harry Friedman refused to release his son's hand. Joseph had to pry open his father's fingers, one at a time. He didn't know if it was the rigidity of the Parkinson's, or just the stubborn unwillingness to be alone.

"What is it?" Joseph asked the white-jacketed technician.

"A chest x-ray," he said.

Joseph took advantage of the break to get a drink of water from the cooler at the far end of the corridor. When he glanced up at the clock on the wall, it was past three o'clock in the morning. That meant it was around midnight in Los Angeles, certainly not too late to call his night bird of a sister.

"You've reached Ilene Free's answering service," a strange voice said. It was the hip, sing song voice of a Black woman, probably some aspiring singer or actress who was waiting for her big chance in Hollywood, along with the thousands of others just like her. Joseph left word for his sister to call him.

"Isn't that nice," the woman said. "I didn't know that Mrs. Freed had a brother."

"Yes, she does," Joseph answered. "And a father and mother too."

When Joseph returned to the room, his father was gazing with big round eyes toward the doorway, waiting for him to appear. He was getting oxygen from a mask over his mouth, and he was hooked up to two additional plastic bags of antibiotics hanging on the intravenous stand. Joseph dragged over a chair and sat down by the bed. His father reached out for his hand.

"The doctors think you may have a small case of pneumonia, that's all," Joseph related, trying to comfort him. "Try to get some sleep, Dad. Everything is going to be OK."

His father managed a tiny, sad Jewish smile. He looked exhausted. Almost immediately, his eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep. Even so, his grip on Joseph's hand didn't cease. Exhausted himself, Joseph leaned over and rested his head on the guard rail of the bed. Soon, Harry Friedman's faithful son was sleeping too, with his hand securely locked in his father's.

Chapter Twenty

Zev showed up at the hospital in the morning with his father's *tefillin*. It was too late to find a *minyán*, so Joseph prayed in a quiet corner in the waiting room on the floor. Fortunately, his father had responded immediately to the antibiotics. All of his vital signs had stabilized. The pain in his side had subsided, he no longer needed the oxygen, and the latest blood report showed that his dehydration was under control. For the time being, he was being nourished intravenously. The chest x-ray revealed a mild pneumonia, but his white blood cell count indicated that he had a more serious infection in his body, but without a CT, the doctors didn't know where it was located or what was the cause. Joseph discovered that getting information out of the doctors was next to hopeless. Busy with his morning rounds, and with the medical students that followed him around like groupies, the chief physician on the floor responded to Joseph's questions as if he were a leper. Joseph sensed that the doctors were annoyed with him for interfering in their kingdom by having refused to allow the forced-feeding procedure the day before.

Zev said that the boys had gotten off to school on schedule, and the baby, thank God, wasn't crying anymore. Joseph didn't want to take a chance of his mother catching any germs in the hospital, so he told Delia to keep her at home. No one had heard from Rivka. To Joseph's way of thinking, she was behaving like a little girl. If she wanted a divorce, so be it. He was fed up with her constant nagging. How could anyone live with a woman who was dissatisfied all of the time? If she didn't understand that this was a real emergency, and that he had to take care of his father, then what kind of wife was she?

The truth was that Rivka was miserable. Eating breakfast alone in the hotel dining room didn't enlighten her spirits. She replayed what had transpired the past year a thousand times in her head. She didn't know if she really wanted a divorce. She had sent the SMS out of frustration and anger. She knew that she couldn't continue with Joseph the way things had been. She was too hurt and bitter. But she didn't know how to change him into being a normal husband and father. A divorce was a drastic step, she knew. The impact on the children would be awful. And what would she do, at her age, with six children? Who would want to marry her? For a man, it was different. Joseph could probably con a hundred different women into

marrying him. Maybe that's what he wanted, she thought. After all, she wasn't the same skinny, attractive girl he had married. Religious or not religious, that's all that Hollywood types like him thought about, she reasoned, letting her imagination get the best of her. Even a walk along the beach didn't help cheer her spirits. It only made her feel more alone. But she wasn't going to call him. And she wasn't going to answer her phone. Let everyone try getting along without her. Maybe someone would appreciate her for a change, instead of taking her for granted like the welcome mat in front of the door.

Angry at her husband and God, she went for a walk without wearing a kerchief or hat, for the first time since her marriage. She was gathering shells on the beach for the kids when she noticed a jogger running along the seashore. He glanced her way, kept running, then circled back in her direction. Sure enough, he headed straight for her and collapsed theatrically down in the sand on his knees exactly where she was standing.

"Hi there," he said with a big friendly smile. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Yes," Rivka agreed, still very much startled.

"Collecting shells?" he asked, scooping a few into his hand.

"For my children," she replied.

"Oh yeah? I've got kids too. A boy and a girl. They're teenagers now and not very interested in shells."

Standing up, he reached out to hand her the shells.

Rivka felt embarrassed taking them from his outstretched hand. But she didn't want him to know. As incredible as it seemed, she had a feeling that he was making a pass at her. He had a pleasant appearance, looking trim and sporty in his jogging outfit. He seemed about her age or a little younger.

"I'm a widower," he disclosed. "Before my wife died, we used to take walks on the beach together. The doctor said the salt air would be good for her health."

Why is he telling me all this, she wondered?

“On vacation?” he asked.

“Yes. I suppose so.”

“Which hotel?”

“The Sands,” she answered, not knowing why she had told him.

“Hey, isn’t that something!” he beamed. “Talk about coincidence. I’m the hotel manager. How do you like it?”

“It’s OK. Very nice,” she said, thinking that she had better be going.

“Not like the big gambling joints, that’s for sure. We try to keep a more *mishpocha* atmosphere. Are you Orthodox?”

“What makes you think that I’m Jewish?”

“Well, it is a kosher hotel.”

“I guess that does give it away,” she said uncomfortably, beginning to walk back toward the hotel.

“I’m Orthodox myself,” he said, walking along side of her. “My name is Shmuelik Kramer. What’s yours?”

“I’m sorry,” Rivka said, feeling nervous inside. “I don’t make it a habit to speak with strangers.”

“Hey, no problem,” he said. “I was just trying to be friendly. It’s a part of my job.”

“Yes. Well, it was nice meeting you, but I have to go. My husband is waiting for me back at the hotel.”

“Enjoy your stay,” he said with a wave. “And have a great day.”

Rivka quickened her pace. She was shaking. On the one hand, it was nice to know that she still attracted attention, but she hadn’t been intimate with anyone but Joseph for twenty years and the encounter shook her up. Still, she was flattered. Maybe there was a chance for new life after divorce, she thought.

Back at the hospital, Harry Friedman managed to eat a little breakfast. With every bite, he made a face and complained about the taste of the food.

“The minute you get out of here, I’ll treat you to the best pastrami sandwich in town,” Joseph promised him.

“I want a lobster,” his father answered. “Like in the good old days before you forced your mother and me to move to New York.”

“I didn’t force you, Dad,” Joseph reminded him. “You agreed to come. You didn’t want to be alone in Florida with Mom, remember?”

“We made a mistake,” his father replied. “We should have taken an apartment in that classy retirement home, like my brother Herbie advised. Then none of this would have happened.”

Talk about a pie in the face, Joseph thought.

The youth in the neighboring bed asked Joseph if he could help him get to the bathroom. He moved slowly, wincing in pain as he slid down from the bed. He reported that he had been stabbed in the back in a bar fight. The old cigarette smoker by the window was scheduled for lung surgery later in the day. He called Joseph over and asked him if he could go down to the street and buy him a pack of cigarettes before his wife arrived. Opening his wallet, he pulled out a ten dollar bill. But Joseph refused, saying he had to guard his father.

Joseph ordered a TV rental to keep his father busy. He was still coughing up spittle, but the snake had retreated back to its cave, and his father was managing on his own with his pile of paper towels. Toward the end of the morning, the chief of the surgery department stopped by to see the new patient. After a cursory look at the medical chart that was hooked to the end of the bed, he called Joseph outside to the corridor.

“We have to do the CAT Scan to see what’s going on,” he said, in the no nonsense tone of someone who was accustomed to getting his way. “We can wait till tomorrow until your father feels stronger, but that’s the limit.”

“Yes, sir,” Joseph said, controlling an urge to salute the arrogant bastard.

Toward evening, Rivka returned by bus to Manhattan and took a taxi home to Riverdale, without stopping off at the hospital to visit her father-in-law. She had decided that she wasn't going to speak with her husband until he apologized and promised to change his ways. Either he undergo some kind of therapy or counseling to work on his unresolved hang-ups, or he could continue to live with his parents. Otherwise, she felt that things would never get better. If he insisted on blaming her, and if he was going to jump through a hoop every time his father cracked his whip, then there was no hope for their future together.

While Zev kept watch over his grandfather, Joseph went home to his parent's apartment, slept for two hours, showered, and drove back to the hospital. When his sister, Ilene, finally called, he filled her in on what was happening. She promised to be in touch with her answering service every few hours, and she said that she would fly to New York if the situation got any worse.

In the meantime, his father seemed to be getting stronger. In response to his grandson's urging, he ate some apple sauce and chocolate pudding at lunch. At dinner time, he complained that his hands were shaking too much to eat the unappetizing looking mush on his tray, so Joseph had to spoon feed him like a baby. It took a half hour of strenuous persuasion to get him to swallow a few reluctant spoonfuls of soup. He wouldn't open his lips to even try the blended chicken, but he managed to put a small dent in the mound of mash potatoes on his plate. All the while he kept spitting up saliva, but he seemed to take it in stride now, not letting it interfere with his watching TV.

In the evening, after visitors vacated the ward, and lights were dimmed in the corridor, Joseph looked around for a spare mattress that he could lay beside his father's bed. Luckily, he found one in a storage room in the orthopedic ward a floor below. But when he carried it upstairs, the nurse on duty made him return it at once. "You'll have to sleep in a chair," she told him.

During the night, his father's condition took a turn for the worse. His temperature rose, his eyes rolled around in his head, and he was convinced he saw faces on the ceiling above his bed.

"Who are they?" he asked.

“Who are you talking about?” his son asked him.

“The faces on the ceiling.”

“I don’t see any faces, Dad.”

“Don’t bullshit me. I see faces. What are they doing there?”

When Joseph mentioned it to the nurse, she said that the visions were a mild form of dementia that happened a lot in hospitals, especially with older people on heavy doses of antibiotics.

Around midnight, Harry Friedman started calling for his wife. Joseph told him that she was at home.

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

“She’s with Delia.”

“Who is Delia?”

“The Filipino.”

“What Filipino?”

For an hour straight, he called out for his wife. “Lizzy! Lizzy! Where are you?”

Joseph felt exhausted, but his father never became tired, as if possessed of superhuman strength.

“Is the front door locked?” he wanted to know.

“Yes, Dad,” Joseph replied, humoring him.

“Are you sure?”

Yes, I’m sure.”

“Go check. I want to be sure.”

Dutifully, Joseph stood up from his chair and play acted that he was locking the door. Over-tired and emotionally drained, Joseph finally nodded off to sleep, but his father woke him, saying he had to go to the bathroom.

“No you don’t, Dad. You have a catheter. You can just pee in bed and it will be OK.”

“What are you talking about?”

Joseph tried to explain, but it was hopeless.

“If you don’t help me, I’ll go myself. What are you doing to me? What kind of rotten human being are you? What are these wires? What are they doing to me here? Where’s my wife? I want my wife! I want to get out of here!”

In a rage, he pulled out his infusion. Then he reached down and tugged at his catheter tube. Joseph tried to stop him by holding down his hands, but his father was stronger than he thought. He didn’t want to use too much force and hurt him - that was totally against Jewish law. The wounded Black youth slid off his bed to help, but Joseph’s father overpowered them both. Joseph had no choice but to run and call the nurse. By the time they returned, his father had yanked out the catheter.

“His bed’s all wet,” she said. “I’ll need someone to help me.”

Joseph had to wait outside the room while the nurse and an orderly attended to his father. At one point, the nurse left the room and came back with a doctor. When Joseph was allowed back in the room, his father was staring deliriously up at the ceiling, his eyes rolling in his head, his chest heaving up and down, his hands tied down to the rails of the bed.

“Oh my God,” Joseph said.

“We gave him a sedative injection,” the doctor on night shift reported. “It should put him to sleep.”

It didn’t. His father stared up at the ceiling the rest of the night, watching a merry-go-round of faces come and go. But at least he was quiet. Joseph would have liked

a sedative himself. At some point, he dozed off, but he couldn't really sleep in the chair. It was still dark outside when nurses appeared and ushered Joseph out of the room so they could get their patients ready for the coming day. Unable to keep his eyes open, Joseph stretched his aching body across three chairs in the waiting room and fell instantly asleep. An hour later, he awoke with a start. For a few seconds he didn't know where he was. Getting his bearings, he walked groggily back to the hospital room. But his father wasn't there.

At first he thought he had made a mistake. The first bed in the room was empty. But the number outside the door was correct. Disoriented, as if he were taking an overdose of medicines, he walked into the room and pushed aside the curtain that hid the second bed. Sure enough, the wounded bar fighter was there, catching a little more sleep before the doctors came by on their rounds.

“Oh shit,” Joseph mumbled. Where the hell could he be? Maybe they took him for an x-ray. Or surgery without his permission. He ran out of the room and started yelling for the nurses.

“My father's gone! My father's gone! Where the hell is my father?”

The nurses looked equally startled – as startled as nurses could be. After all, it was Joseph's father who was missing – not theirs. To Joseph, the sick old man might have been the most important person in the world, more important than the President of the United States, but to them, he was just another runaway patient, a statistic that happened every day.

“Did you check the bathrooms?” one asked.

The bathrooms, Joseph thought. There must have been forty bathrooms on the floor. Just to be sure, he rushed back to the two bathrooms outside his father's room, but no one was there. In the meantime, the head nurse picked up the phone and alerted security.

At least the hospital guard had had his wits about him. Not that you had to be a genius to realize that an eighty-year-old man had no right to be walking out of a hospital wearing a hospital gown. He collared the runaway patient by the taxi stand

and dragged him back inside. Joseph encountered them as he was running toward the elevators.

“I want to go home! I want to go home!” his father shouted as the guard wheeled him back to the surgery ward in a wheelchair. “They can’t keep me here against my will!”

When Harry Friedman saw his son, he started screaming at him.

“Where the hell have you been?! Praying in *shul* or sleeping your lazy ass off? Go get the car. I want to get out of here.”

Joseph didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t very well take his father home while he still had pneumonia. And if he had a cancer, or who knew what, he couldn’t just let him die without treatment at home. According to Jewish law, a person didn’t have the right to commit suicide. Life was holy. Every moment of it. Even if you were sick. Even if you were suffering. G-d gave it, and G-d, in His wisdom, took it away, according to His timetable and plans. You weren’t allowed to shorten your life by rejecting all medical treatment. Joseph wasn’t expert in all of the details and possible exceptions to the rule, like there were with every Talmudic issue, but he had read enough to know that, under the present circumstances, leaving the hospital was out of the question.

Instead of a tray of breakfast, a nurse brought a two-liter bottle into the room and said that Joseph’s father had to drink the contents by noon, when he was scheduled for an abdominal CAT scan.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s just some kind of dye, Dad,” Joseph replied, “So they can take an x-ray.

“Don’t worry. It probably tastes like Dr. Browns black cherry soda.”

“Don’t try to con me. It probably tastes like shit.”

“You have to drink it, Dad. In order for the doctors to help you, they first have to know what’s the matter.”

“Nothing’s the matter. I feel fine. I don’t have any more pain. I don’t have fever. I want to go home.”

“If everything were fine, you wouldn’t have to spit up phlegm every half a minute,” his son tried to reason.

“I’ve got a cold that’s all. You don’t have to be in a hospital for a cold.”

“You have to drink the stuff, Dad.”

“I can’t. Even if it tasted like beer. Look how much there is.”

“A little at a time. It’ll be all right. You’ll see.”

His father stubbornly shook his head no.

Joseph glanced around the room to make sure the nurse had left. He leaned over to his father and whispered in his ear. “If you drink half of it, I’ll throw the other half away.”

A long, rattling cough racked his father’s body, and he spit out a wad of saliva. Joseph hurried to catch it in a paper towel. “I can’t,” his father said. “I’m sorry.”

Joseph left off arguing with his father to inform the head nurse, who, like usual, was busy with three things at once.

“My father isn’t up to it yet,” he told her.

“Then we will have to use a nasogastric tube,” she said.

“Isn’t there some other kind of x-ray where he doesn’t have to drink all this liquid?” Joseph asked.

“It’ll be all right,” she assured him. “Let us handle your father. We do this all the time.”

When Joseph returned to the room, he caught his father standing at the sink by the door, pouring the colored liquid out of the bottle.

“I’m not going to drink it,” he said.

“Then they will have to put a tube down your nose and get it into you that way,” Joseph informed him.

“No way,” his father stubbornly answered. “I won’t let them.”

True to his word, his father fought off the nurse with the strength of a bear. At first, she had tried to persuade him. But after ten minutes, she gave up and tried to force the long narrow tube down her cantankerous patient’s nose. Shouting, Harry Friedman flailed out with his arms, driving her back.

“Hold him,” she commanded Joseph.

Joseph shook his head no. He was trembling. Not to be bested, the nurse lunged forward to try again. This time she got the end of the tube into a nostril.

“Swallow! Swallow!” she barked.

Shaking his head back and forth, the old man flailed away with his arms and yanked out the tube. Exasperated, the nurse retreated from the bed.

“The doctor will have to do it if he wants,” she said, giving up the battle.

Joseph was trembling. He never was a lover of violence, but when it was directed at his father it was even worse.

“Please, son,” he appealed. “Take me away from here before they kill me.”

“They are trying to help you, Dad.”

His father was breathing heavily. Once again, a cough shook his body.

“I don’t want their help. I want to go home to be with my wife.”

Like a frustrated school teacher who runs to the principal to punish unruly students, the nurse returned with the chief of the surgery ward. Joseph hadn’t liked him yesterday when they met, and he didn’t like him now. He was an arrogant looking son-of-a-bitch, with the cold, ice blue eyes of a professional killer. Maybe you had to be that way, Joseph thought, to saw open people’s heads and chop off their legs, but that didn’t mean you had to treat a patient’s family like dirt.

“You’re the son?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Joseph replied.

“Any other siblings?”

“In California.”

“Is there a wife?”

“She has Alzheimer’s.”

The physician turned toward Harry Friedman.

“Mr. Friedman. I’m Dr. Mannings, the head of the surgery department. Do you know why you are here?”

“Yes, because I have a stubborn son who won’t take me home.”

“Your son is worried about your health, just as we are. According to your blood tests, you have a very high-grade infection in your body. To find out exactly where the problem is, we have to take a CAT scan. To do that, you have to help us by drinking a perfectly harmless fluid that acts as a dye so we can’t get a proper image. If you are unwilling to drink it, we can give you a feeding tube straight into your stomach, which will take just a few minutes. You may feel a little uncomfortable at first, but it’s really an unobtrusive procedure that we perform all the time. What do you say?”

Harry Friedman looked at his son, then back to the doctor. For most of his life he had been a salesman. To be a good salesman, you had to know people. You had to know how to read them, to sense their weaknesses and strengths. The doctor might have been an excellent surgeon, but when it came to concern and empathy for his patients, his fake, crooked smile gave him away.

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON HARRY FRIEDMAN EYING THE DOCTOR

CUT TO:

WHAT HE SEES: THE WOLF IN THE “LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD”
FABLE, DISGUISED AS THE SWEET GRANDMOTHER.

“I want to go home to my wife,” Harry Friedman replied.

Without a blink, the doctor nodded his head, glanced disapprovingly at Joseph, and strode out of the room. Joseph caught up with him in the corridor.

“Maybe my father will agree in another day or two when he’s feeling stronger,” Joseph suggested.

“According to my nurse, he is as strong as a horse. I want an answer now. If not, there are other people waiting on line for his bed.”

“I’ll try to convince him.”

“You should know, that given his symptoms and his age, the statistics suggest that there is a growth hiding under his infection. Judging by my experience, I’d bet that he has a malignancy in his colon. But I don’t have the time to argue with him all day.”

“What’s the bill of goods he’s trying to sell me?” his father asked when he returned to the room.

“He wasn’t trying to sell you anything, Dad. He doesn’t work on commission. He gets his monthly salary whether he treats a patient or not.”

“And a nice juicy bonus for everyone he brings into surgery, I bet. I saw a story about it on TV. It’s a big corrupt racket, didn’t you know?”

“Look, Dad. No one is talking about doing any surgery at this point. No one knows what you have. All they want to do is take an x-ray. But you have to drink that glop, that’s the way it goes. If you do, you’ll be back at home with Mom in a few hours. Otherwise, you may have to stay here for days.”

That seemed to convince him. The possibility of getting home that day, instead of being cooped up in the hospital with the nasty nurses, needles, and floating faces on the walls, shattered Harry Friedman’s resistance.

“OK,” he said. “I’ll try to drink the poison. But right after the x-ray, you have to promise to take me home.”

“I promise,” Joseph said.

What could he do? It was important to find out what the problem was. Hopefully, his father didn’t have cancer at all, and they would be able to go home in a few days, once the antibiotics knocked out whatever infection there was. In that event, Joseph’s promise would turn out to be only a little white lie.

A nurse brought in a replacement bottle of the contrast agent, and with a grimace on his face, his father started to drink it down. At best, he could only handle a few sips at a time. After an hour, he had barely managed to drink a cup of the liquid. To help encourage him along, Joseph poured out a fresh cup, winked at his father, and when no one was looking, dumped it out into the sink. Drinking two liters of the stuff was going to be impossible, so a little less here and there wouldn’t hurt.

In between sips, his father looked up at the portable TV that was suspended over his bed. All the time his dribble continued, and Joseph had to keep a fresh supply of paper towels at hand. Then he asked Joseph to telephone home so that he could speak to the love of his life. Delia held the phone to her ear.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he said. “Everything is fine. I will be coming home soon. I miss you very much. Do you miss me? Remember when I was away on the road selling lawn movers? How I would bring you a gift when I came home? Well I’m going to bring you a gift today. What do you want? Flowers? A box of chocolates? You know your Harry loves you. To me you are everything in the world. My special Valentine. You hear that, sweetheart? It’s your Harry. I’ll be coming home soon.”

It took him another hour to finish the next cup. Now and again, a nurse would come into the room to check out his progress. Whenever he was ready, the CAT scan people would squeeze him into their busy schedule, she reported. Joseph poured the fourth cup down the sink, and his father fell asleep during the fifth. The old man looked totally exhausted. Curious to see what the fluid was like, he took a taste, made a sour face, and spit the bitter concoction out into the sink. He threw away the rest of the glass. But the pregnant, two-liter bottle still was filled with the stuff.

When Harry Friedman woke up a half hour later, he didn't want to continue.

"I'm sorry, son," he said, shaking his head in surrender. "I can't."

"Be a soldier, Dad," Joseph urged.

"I was never the greatest soldier. All the time that I was overseas I just wanted to get back to your mother. I wrote her three V-mails a day. I think we still have them somewhere in a closet. She saved them all and made books out of them. You've seen them, right? Some of them got ruined in the flood we had in New Rochelle. Or maybe it was in Florida. I don't remember."

Joseph handed him another cup of the dye, and he managed to swallow half. When his trembling hand held it out toward his son, Joseph pushed it back in his father's direction.

"Finish it, Dad."

His father shook his head, weary with the ordeal.

Remember, Dad, the sooner you finish it, the sooner you get out of here."

Reluctantly, his father grimaced and drained down the cup.

"What do you call it when you do repentance?" he suddenly asked.

"*T'shuva*," Joseph answered in Hebrew.

"Yeah, well this is *t'shuva* for all of the booze that I drank when I was a lush."

This time, the nurse almost caught Joseph as he was pouring the seventh cup down the drain.

"You aren't drinking enough, Mr. Friedman," she told the stubborn patient. "You have only three hours to finish the bottle. After that the solution doesn't work."

"I can't anymore," he moaned.

"Of course you can," she retorted. "I'll help you."

With a nod of the head, she ordered Joseph out of the room. In the doorway, Joseph watched her fill up another cup and walk smiling toward her father, looking like a witch bringing a potion to an unsuspecting victim. Joseph needed a break. A shot of scotch wouldn't hurt either, he thought, feeling totally drained.

“Come on, Mr. Friedman, be a good boy and drink,” he heard the witch say.

Joseph plopped himself down on a chair in the corridor. When his father called out in protest, he didn't have the strength to get up. Another nurse and an orderly entered the room and shut the door. Joseph remembered that he hadn't drank or eaten anything for breakfast himself. He stood up, and walked to the two vending machines by the elevator, finding enough change in his pocket for a small bag of potato chips and a soda. When he returned to the surgery ward, he was greeted by the sound of a commotion.

“Joseph! Joey!” his father called out.

Hurrying, Joseph pushed the door open. The chief doctor stood in his way, blocking his path. Behind him, an orderly and a nurse forcefully held down the battling patient while the head nurse shoved a feeding tube down his father's nostril.

“We have to do it,” the chief doctor insisted.

“I didn't give permission,” Joseph protested.

“Your father did,” the physician said. “Please leave the room.”

The last thing Joseph saw was the frightened look of his father, appealing for him to help.

“This is bad shit,” the wounded Black youth said, walking out of the hospital room with Joseph.

Then the commotion grew worse. His father screamed. The doctor's voice boomed out over his father's. A minute later, a red light began to flash atop the door, a siren sounded, and an emergency call went out over the hospital loudspeakers, with a code calling doctors to the sixth-floor room. Suddenly nurses and attendants were

rushing in and out. Doctors came from all directions. Emergency monitors and resuscitation equipment were wheeled in from nowhere.

“They’re going to aspirate him,” Joseph heard a nurse say. “The CT fluid has filled up his lungs.”

Standing by the doorway, Joseph could see the chief doctor standing by the bed, pounding his father on the chest.

“You have to wait outside,” another nurse said, closing the door.

Joseph prayed. What else could he do? Fight the whole hospital? He said all of the prayers he knew. When he finished, he said them all over again, then added prayers of his own, asking God to save his father. But his father’s *mazel* had ended. The doctors tried valiantly to save him, but his entire system had crashed. A massive heart attack finished him off.

“I’m sorry,” the chief doctor said an endless half hour later when he emerged from the room.

“You can save it for the court,” Joseph answered, wanting to slug him in the face.

How could it be, Joseph wondered? A half hour ago, his father was living, and now he was dead. Joseph was stunned. He was shocked. He watched nurses and orderlies wheel the emergency equipment out of the room, unable to come to terms with what had happened. If only they had waited another day. If only he had listened to his father. If only, if only, if only.

The doctors and nurses dispersed. The monitors were removed from the room. No one stood in his way anymore from going to the bedside, where his father lay, covered up by a sheet.

“Dad,” he said, fighting back his tears.

The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, blessed be the Name of the Lord.

He had the phone number of the assistant Rabbi from the *shul*. He called him and told him what had happened. Rabbi Jacobs promised to make the necessary phone

calls. “Where do you want the burial?” he asked. “In Westchester, Suffolk County, Passaic, or Queens?”

“In Israel,” Joseph answered. He didn’t know why. He hadn’t thought of it before. But he wanted his father to be buried in Israel. In the Holy Land. That was the best place for a Jew to be buried, and he wanted the best for his Dad.

“In *Eretz Yisroel*?” the Rabbi asked, making sure.

“Yes,” Joseph said.

“In Israel?” his sister asked in bewilderment from L.A. “Have you gone crazy?”

It was their second phone conversation. The answering service had found her immediately. She had burst into tears during their first call. So she had to call him back.

“Why in Israel?” she wanted to know. “Dad never spoke about Israel. That may be your dream but it never was his.”

“It’s a *mitzvah* to be buried in Israel,” he told her.

“I don’t know about *mitzvahs*,” she said. “Maybe it’s a *mitzvah* to live in Israel, but to be buried there, what difference does it make?”

Joseph wasn’t in the mood for a philosophical discussion. Nor was there time. He had a thousand details to attend to. He had to notify people, and fill out papers, and make travel arrangements, and the like. While he was still on the phone with his sister, he had an incoming call. It was the assistant Rabbi. He wanted to know how many plane reservations to make?

“Three,” Joseph told him. “For me, for my mother, Elizabeth Freidman, and for her Philippine worker, Delia.”

“Delia what?” the young Rabbi asked.

“I’ll get back to you,” Joseph said. “I forget.”

“You’re going to take Grandma to Israel with you?” his son, Zev, inquired when he met up with his father in the Jewish mortuary, where the body was taken for ritual purification according to Jewish law.

“That’s right,” Joseph answered, still in a daze. “Do you want to come?”

“What about school?”

Joseph didn’t answer. There was another phone call from the Rabbi.

“There’s a problem with the Philippine worker,” he said. “She doesn’t have a visa to enter Israel. I don’t know if it’s possible. It could take a few days.”

That made things more complicated, but Joseph wasn’t going to be dissuaded. He was taking his father and mother to Israel and nothing was going to stand in his way.

“What about Mom?” Zev asked. “Is she going with you?”

“I haven’t spoken to her yet. She’s angry with me. I can’t deal with her now.”

Instead, he called up the family pediatrician and asked if he could speak to his brother who lived in Jerusalem. Joseph wanted him to contact an employment agency in Israel and arrange for a worker to take care of his mother. Preferably someone who had experience with Alzheimer’s, he said.

“To help me with her, I’ll need somebody to be at the airport when we arrive,” Joseph told him.

The people who worked for the Jewish Burial Society, the *Chevre Kadisha*, called Joseph into the freezer room to symbolically put his hand over his father’s eyes before Harry Friedman was placed in a special bag for air travel.

Rivka called while he was reading Psalms in the funeral parlor. Zev volunteered to stay through the night and watch over his grandfather, so that his father could get some rest, but Joseph didn’t want to abandon his Dad, even if it meant staying awake another night. He felt responsible for what had happened in the hospital, and while he knew that everything that transpired in the world came about through the

will of the Almighty, he wanted to accompany his father every minute now on the final stretch of the journey.

“I’m sorry,” Rivka said over the phone.

“So am I,” he answered.

“Aren’t you coming home?” she asked.

“No, I’m spending the night here at the funeral parlor.”

“Zev said he’d do that.”

“It’s my responsibility,” Joseph answered.

“You’re really going to take him to Israel?”

“That’s right.”

“With your mother too?” she inquired.

“That’s right.”

“Why do you need her with you in Israel?”

“It’s the land of miracles, isn’t it? Maybe just by being there she’ll recover her senses.”

“Joseph, I think you’ve gone a little crazy. How long are you planning to spend there?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” he repeated. “I have to sit *shiva* for a week. Maybe I’ll do it there. Maybe I’ll stay longer. I’m fed up with America.”

“You may be mad at the hospital and the doctors, but why is America to blame?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it isn’t. But I’ve always dreamed of living in Israel. Maybe this is my father’s way of making my dream come true.”

“You have a family. What about us?”

“You can come if you like. I’ll need help with my mother. I can’t change her diapers by myself.”

“If it is only to change your mother’s diapers, you can find someone else,” his wife answered. “I married you to be your wife, not to be a Philippine worker for your mother.”

“*Tov*,” Joseph said in Hebrew. “You’re right. Have a good night.”

He ended the call. He was tired of their accusing conversations. If she couldn’t put her grudges aside and give him her unquestioned support on the day of his father’s funeral, then there was nothing to discuss. He was ready to start a new life in Israel, with or without her.

Ilene arrived from California the following morning. His wayward son, Shimon, was with her, not wearing a *kippah*, or a baseball cap. Carrying his new guitar over his shoulder, he looked like some raggedly dressed rock star.

A few dozen people attending the funeral service at the Manhattan burial chapel - neighbors, friends from the synagogue, the two Rabbis, Wally from the Jewish Museum, Rivka’s parents, and whatever family they had. Uncle Herbie said he was feeling too lousy to make the trip to New York.

“Besides, ever since 9/11, I get too nervous flying in airplanes,” he said.

Aunt Peachy cried and cried on the phone. She was so sorry she couldn’t make it, but she had health problems herself and needed a wheelchair to get around. “I loved your father so much,” she said. “And your mother is like a sister to me. Take care of her, Joseph. She always loved you the best.”

The elderly Rabbi Marcus stood by the podium and waited for the noise to settle. He spoke about the great *mitzvah* and honor to be buried in the Holy Land, how it atoned for all sins, as if the deceased were being buried under the altar of the holy Jerusalem Temple of old. And he praised Joseph’s extraordinary self-sacrifice in taking care of his parents and performing the difficult and exalted commandment of honoring one’s father and mother.

“You can tell the nature of a tree from the quality of its fruit,” he concluded. “The greatest legacy of Harry Friedman is his children. Their great love for him tells us that he was indeed an extraordinary man.”

Joseph made a short eulogy, emphasizing his father’s sixty-year love for his wife, and his great intrinsic kindness, which extended to helping beggars in the street. “Go to your rest in peace, Dad,” he said. “Don’t you worry that you forgot something behind, or that you left something undone, or that you left the gas lit on the stove, or that you forgot to lock the front door. And most of all, don’t worry about Mom. We promise to take care of her, just like you did all of your life.”

Ilene asked if she could say a few words, but all that came out were sobs and “Dad, Dad,” as she stared down at the coffin. Then they performed the traditional “*Kriah*” tearing of the garment and recited the blessing, praising God as the true Judge.

His mother sat quietly in her wheelchair with a peaceful smile on her face as if she were at a bar mitzvah. Joseph didn’t speak with his wife. Rivka blended in with the crowd, keeping an eye on Avi and Moishe, who both seemed to sense the solemnity of the situation. Danny kept close to his father, quietly holding his hand. Joseph thought that maybe he should take his small children aside and say something to them about this first encounter with death, but with the demands of the memorial service and all of the people wishing their condolences, he missed the opportunity and didn’t find the time.

His hands were shaking when he read out the *Kaddish*. Zev helped him hold the book steady. “*Yitgadal v’yitkadash Shemay rAbbah.*” It was the first time he had said the mourner’s prayer in his life. The ceremony ended at two o’clock in the afternoon, and they had to be at the airport at three to make the six-o’clock El Al non-stop departure to Tel Aviv. So with the assistant Rabbi hurrying things along, it was all a big rush, with handshakes, and hugs, and goodbyes. Joseph looked around for his wife but he couldn’t find her in the crowd.

“Where’s your mother?” he asked Zev, but the boy didn’t know either.

When he hugged his son, Simon, goodbye, a sob shook his body, and all of the terrible pain of his father’s sudden passing, and of the ordeal in the hospital, and

the tensions and pressures of the past year, trying to be a good son, and a good father, and a good husband at the same time, all swelled up inside him, threatening to overwhelm him.

“I’m sorry I got angry at you and smashed your guitar,” he apologized to his son.

“That’s OK, Dad,” the youth answered. “I got a new one, so it isn’t such a big deal.”

His mother’s suitcase was packed and ready. A special van was waiting to transport the coffin. The assistant Rabbi told him that the tickets were at the airport.

“Thanks,” Joseph told him. “You took care of everything.”

The elderly Rabbi blessed him with the blessing of a *Kohen* and wished him Divine success on his way.

For some reason, a limousine was waiting out on the street to drive them to the airport. After endless handshakes and condolences, Ilene was the last one in line. Delia helped his mother into the car, the driver folded the wheelchair and lifted it into the trunk, and Avi and Moishe jumped into the limo, as if they were coming along on the trip.

“You’re crazy,” his sister said. “

“It seems to be a family trait,” he retorted, true to their fraternal sparring.

“How can you take Mother along? There’s always a war there.”

“Mom will never notice,” he answered.

“Don’t you remember how adamant Dad was about your not going to Israel. ‘You’ll move to Israel over my dead body,’ he said.”

“Well, he must have been a prophet, cause it’s coming true.”

Taking one last look around for his wife, Joseph got into the elegant car. Could it be that God had a deal with some limousine service on earth, he wondered, recalling the limousine that had driven them from Boca to the Miami Airport when

he had taken his parents to New York. From the other side of the car, Danny opened the door and dragged out his brothers. “We want to go to Israel with *Abba!* We want to go to Israel with *Abba!*” they shouted.

“Zev’s riding in the van with Grandpa,” Danny told his father.

On the sidewalk, Delia waved goodbye with the others as the elegant car drove off down the street.

“Well, Mom, it’s just the two of us,” he said, collapsing back in the roomy seat with his mother.

Liz Friedman smiled contentedly, as if that were the most wonderful thing in the world.

In front of them was a portable bar with clean glasses and bottles of booze.

“Help yourselves” the driver said cordially, looking at his passengers through the rear-view mirror.

The truth was that Joseph needed a drink.

“What do you say, Mom? Let’s make a ‘*L’Chaim*’ to Dad.”

He poured himself a good shot of scotch and downed it with a grimace.

“Remember, Mom, before I got married, you said that Rivka was a bitch. Well you were right.”

His mother nodded her head in agreement.

Exhausted, Joseph fell asleep on her shoulder. When they arrived at the airport, he reached into his pocket for his wallet. “It’s all been taken care of,” the driver said.

A bellman took their luggage out of the trunk. Joseph got his mother into the wheelchair and wheeled her into the terminal for El Al departures.

“Where are we going?” she suddenly asked, as if startled into cohesiveness by the noisy crowd of passengers all around them.

“To Florida,” he told her.

Almost immediately, they were confronted by an El Al security agent.

“Tickets,” he said.

“I don’t have them yet,” Joseph answered. “I have to pick them up at check-in. I’m flying with my father’s coffin.”

“*Atah midaber Ivrit?*” the security guard asked in Hebrew, inquiring if he spoke Hebrew..

“*Kitzat,*” Joseph replied. “A little.”

Nodding, the Israeli allowed them to pass into the noisy and crowded hall. There were overflowing baggage carts, piles of luggage, shouting people, and lines of impatient passengers everywhere. When Joseph located the ticket-purchase counter, there was a small crowd in front of him.

CUT TO:

THE LINE AT THE TICKET COUNTER

CUT TO:

JOSEPH DOING A DOUBLE TAKE

CUT TO:

FROM BEHIND – THE WOMAN PASSENGER AT THE COUNTER

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON JOSEPH – HE RECOGNIZES HER

CUT TO:

THE WOMAN – IT’S RIVKA!

CUT TO:

ANOTHER ANGLE – WITH TICKET IN HAND, RIVKA WALKS AWAY FROM THE TICKET COUNTER AND MEETS HER STARTLED HUSBAND.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“You can’t handle your mother alone,” she said.

“What about the kids?”

“My parents are with them.”

Like in a movie, the imaginary CAMERA in Joseph’s mind began to circle around him and his wife in a dizzying swirl. Then it lifted up on a CRANE and moved away, isolating the reunited lovers in the crowded terminal. All that was missing was the MUSIC.

A short time later, the powerful aircraft rose off the runway and soared toward the heavens. In the front yard of their Riverdale house, Danny peered up at the sky through his high-powered binoculars.

“There goes the six o’clock El Al nonstop to Tel Aviv with *Abba* and *Emma* aboard!” he announced.

“And Grandma,” Moishe added.

Avi grabbed at the binoculars. “Let me look!” he shouted.

Up in the passenger jet, Joseph waved from his window, knowing that his children were watching. Rivka also stretched over to look.

“I see *Abba*!” Avi happily shouted. “And *Emma*! They’re kissing!”

CUT TO:

CLOSE UP - AS IF THROUGH BINOCULARS - ON THE AIRPLANE WINDOW AS JOSEPH AND RIVKA EMBRACE IN A LONG LINGERING KISS.

SLOWLY THE CAMERA PULLS BACK, REVEALING THE AIRPLANE AS IT VEERS AWAY FROM THE NEW YORK COASTLINE AND SOARS INTO A MAGNIFICENT EXPLODING SUNSET.

CUT TO:

INSIDE THE AIRPLANE
ON JOSEPH AND RIVKA

RIVKA

I love you.

JOSEPH

I love you too.

CUT TO:

JOSEPH'S MOTHER

SITTING IN THE SEAT BESIDE THEM, A HAPPY SMILE ON HER FACE AS SHE HOLDS HER SON'S HAND.

CUT TO:

THE CRESCENDING SUNSET AS THE AIRPLANE SOARS INTO THE CLOUDS ON ITS WAY ACROSS THE OCEAN TO ISRAEL.

THE END