

THE BOSOM OF ABRAHAM

Andrew Evan Mendelsohn

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Thesis Committee:

Darrin Doyle, Ph.D.

Committee Chair

Matthew Roberson, Ph.D.

Faculty Member

Jeffrey Bean, M.F.A.

Faculty Member

February 3, 2012

Date of Defense

Roger Coles, Ed.D.

Dean
College of Graduate Studies

May 10, 2012

Approved by the
College of Graduate Studies

This is dedicated to my family and friends
for all of their support.
Thanks.

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ABSTRACT

THE BOSOM OF ABRAHAM

by Andrew Mendelsohn

The following thesis is comprised of a series of short stories and reflective essays that work to dramatize, among other things, the individual search for identity in a post-racial world; the outrageous nature of outrage, which is to say the role that anger plays in our increasingly homogenized culture; and the disintegrating landscape of the American nuclear family, the stage upon which the larger American drama is ultimately played out. The author has chosen to focus his gaze inwards in order to achieve these goals, hoping to generalize from his personal experience some larger insight about the human condition that might be valuable to his readers. The author has also tried to be funny.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

The following thesis contains a series of interlinked short stories and memoirs that explore issues of identity and ethnicity as played out on the post-assimilative landscape of 21st century America. These stories investigate, and in many ways challenge, the metaphor of the American melting pot as put forward by playwright Israel Zangwill, dramatizing how attempts to homogenize the various ethnic voices that inform our culture has led to a diminishment of that culture, a desire to crawl back through the rubble of Ellis Island and piece it back together.

The collection also investigates the ability of writing to confront that failed metaphor, to deal with the lingering ethnic shadows that haunt our notions of self, particularly the writing self, as it struggles to look forward without having to look back. The collection utilizes both fictional and non-fictional forms as it attempts to dramatize this struggle, aiming for a larger emotional truth when necessary rather than a smaller factual one. As such, the collection may appear to some readers as a debate on form itself, questioning the idea of genre as a necessary structuring tool when it can ring so arbitrary and false.

Finally, the work explores the limits of rage as an expressive medium, confronting the legacy of ethnic anger that has culminated in the dubious art-form known as the rant and question its creative merits, hoping to find a suppler outlet for all that emotional energy than mere hate.

Origins

In order to justify the unusually narrow focus of my thesis—its troubling ethnic obsessions—it might be useful to conduct a brief genealogy of my career as an English student. I preformed the majority of my undergraduate work during the late 1990s, a transitional moment in the development of English studies where a dramatic shift of analytical interest was underway; a lifting of the critical lens off its traditional focus of inquiry (white European writers drenched in western metaphysics) and a panning over to the margins of society, hoping to recover the voices and experiences lost by centuries of literary colonialism and outright racism.

I breathed deep the multicultural air that wafted over the gargoyles and bell-towers of my university, repeatedly bending the light of my scholarship towards those darkened margins. I walked *The Famished Road* with Ben Okri, Endured *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with Gabriel García Márquez, devoured *Blood and Guts in High School* with Kathy Acker, and watched *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Hell* with Sherman Alexie. I grew my hair out and pierced my nose. I telephoned my father and told him I was voting for Al Gore. No sacrifice was too great—particularly if I thought it could help adjust the gross imbalance of power that was evident in every corner of that quaint, pre 9-11 world.

But while such noble gestures made me an exceptional student of literature, leading to numerous departmental acknowledgments and awards, it left me a terrible writer. I wasted untold hours trying to craft a series of political allegories for my writing professors, believing that a virtuous spirit would somehow make up for an utter lack of talent. They were very patient with me, those professors. More patient than I was with

myself. No matter how deeply I believed in the multicultural project, I couldn't produce anything near the quality of what was being turned in each week by my decidedly a-political classmates.

They were also patient with me, my a-political classmates, perhaps even more than my writing professors. Especially considering how unready I was to accept the lessons they had already learned, that when a writer sacrifices his point of view (for whatever reason) he gives up most of what makes his writing unique, those things that hold the reader's attention and keeps him turning the page. A particularly stinging critique leveled during my senior workshop finally opened my eyes. Across the top of the manuscript it announced in angry red letters: the author is not present in his own story!

Of course I wasn't present, I shouted back in my mind that night. Who am I to have a point of view when so many people live in darkness; a voice when so many cannot speak; and more importantly, who am I—this squeaky, privileged college kid, on a trust fund no less—to project his consciousness onto the great big punishing world when he can barely write a sentence?

A voice from the back of my head provided the answer: who are you *not* to? It said.

In an instant I was reminded of my own neglected point of view, the lingering Jewish strains that run through the fibers of my body, the rogue Yiddish phrasing that pops up in the middle of my everyday speech—like some big *macher* who can't stop talking, I am! For the first time since I entered college, I was reminded of *me*.

Such memories prompted me to reconsider the inside out relationship the Jewish people occupy within American society; how such a relationship helps to shape our

chameleon-like personalities. Allow me a brief moment to explain: because of our faith, the Jewish people remain mostly outside the important spheres of influence in America—though conspiracy theorists would have you believe otherwise. And yet because of the relative “whiteness” of our skin, we are allowed to participate more fully in its rituals than people of color. In this way the Jewish people in America can be viewed as both foreigner and citizen, oppressor and oppressed, existing both inside and outside the dominant culture—a living deconstruction of ethnicity, albeit one with kinky brown hair and a nose for good salmon.

Intrigued by this phenomenon, and the possible explanation it offered to my own inside out relationship with . . . well . . . everything, I took to the nearest library and did what I was trained to do: search the stacks for a record of how these problems were experienced and subsequently resolved. I was on the fifth floor of my college library when I finally hit the mother lode (PS 3500 – 3600 according to the Library of Congress classification system), it was there that my eyes were greeted with shelf upon shelf of Jewish-American literature. More than any man could read in a lifetime. Within those jaundiced pages it was all spelled out for me, in loud angry letters. Characters like Al Manheim, Sammy Glick, Moses Herzog, and Alex Portnoy screaming out my own fears and frustrations in a voice I knew instinctively was my own. So thoroughly did I absorb the lessons of those writers that their names can be read as a DNA chart for every story in my thesis. Allow just a brief sample

From Henry Roth, author of *Call it Sleep*, I learned the importance of hybridity, how old and new worlds can combine (rather than collide) to enrich the experience of both. From Saul Bellow, author of *The Adventures of Augie March*, I learned the joy of

the sentence, how it can ramble on and on, acquiring new emotional valence, until it finally ends up here, back in my introduction, ready to lead seamlessly into the next example. From Grace Paley and her *Little Disturbances of Man* I developed an appreciation for whimsy, for the sleight authorial hand she uses, and for the gorgeous textuality of her intricate prose. And finally, from Philip Roth, all bunkered down in his Connecticut writing shack, I learned the outrageousness of outrage, the way comedy and tragedy inhabit the same moment, threatening to rip the heart out of all but the most stalwart individuals.

It is from this moment that I date the beginning of my writing career. And it is to this moment, when overwhelmed by the demands of teaching or the daunting emptiness of a blank page, I will always return.

A Few Notes About Art and Science

To call the following collection of writing a thesis is to do a great injustice to the idea of a thesis. Commonly understood, a thesis is an original body of research organized in such a way as to produce a series of logical and defensible conclusions. In the pages that follow, I'm afraid you won't find more than a few scattered phrases that could be called either logical or original. And nothing that could be called conclusive.

To begin with, its organizational structure is governed more by emotional sensibilities than logical ones, logic proving (at least in my experience) to be at cross purposes with creativity. Secondly, there is hardly a single impulse within these pages that could be called original, as the author borrows heavily—in both style and subject—from the great Jewish-American writers of the twentieth century. More to the point, in the service of this project no fresh research has been conducted, unless you are willing to

include the countless hours the author spent crawling through the downtown bar district, scribbling his every thought onto a yellow legal pad, hoping such liquor-soaked observations as he can record will somehow make up for his inability to connect with even the most open, warm-hearted individuals. As you can see, it was the angel of self-pity who guided the composition of these pages, and not the angel of science.

Or the angel of short sentences.

With logic, originality and research thus crossed out, we are left with only one defining criteria: defensibility. In which case the author will freely admit that there is no defense for what he has done—delivering himself so fully to the angel of self-pity—and acknowledges that the work will have to rise or fall on its own merits, such as they are.

So what should we do with a project that so glibly heralds its own insufficiency? Should we trust an author willing to fall so gracefully on his sword? Or should we follow our distrustful instincts and push to discover what other tricks he is hiding up his sleeve; realizing, as we do, that there is no more deceitful character on the planet than a writer who is asked to talk about his writing?

I caution patience.

First, let me assure you that I am hiding no tricks up my sleeve. It is not a dissembling nature that drives me to highlight the insufficiency of my work—though one might suspect so given the oily nature of my previous remarks—but rather a cool pragmatism, one that knows how to sidestep any institutional landmines on the bumpy road to graduation. In other words, when it comes time to reconcile the mercurial nature of art with the inflexible demands of science—as this introduction seems to demand—surrender seems the most prudent option.

Aye, but here's the rub: while questions of style, influence and structure are important to gauging the impact of a particular work of art, scientific discourse can only account for so much of that impact, or the creative process that helped produce it. How does one measure, for example, the flush of inspiration that drives an author to the keyboard each morning before the first pot of coffee is brewed? Upon what bar graph can you chart the visions that break through the firewall of the unconscious and unspool like an old nickelodeon across the back of the eyelids? And inside what pie chart can you divide the imagination? In other words, when it comes to the creative process a thesis can be, well, antithetical—and possibly destructive.

And yet the stories in the following collection have developed (quite unintentionally, I assure you) a cohesive structuring logic. Each tale seems to flow naturally into the next, as if the final form always existed, to be carved out of Carrara marble like Michelangelo's David, making the author a sculptor when he would prefer to be a painter. But there is something more fluid about these stories than a sculpting metaphor would suggest; themes, images and motifs repeat, gather momentum, and ultimately open onto a larger world of meaning than could ever be contained within a block of stone. Art and Science locked in an eternal power struggle.

We seem to have reached an impasse. While critical theorists like to talk about the impossibility of truth, the creative writing instructor obsesses about the particular truth in a piece of writing. I have no answers to present at this time, not even another question, only an earnest hope that within these pages the reader will be able to experience half as much pleasure as the author had producing them.

THE BOSOM OF ABRAHAM



Caption Essay: Boot Camp Graduation, November, 1990

He is a warrior. He is a fanatic.

He is me.

And somehow I am him.

Was him.

I mostly recall the forgetting: feeling for the rolls of fat I used to stuff inside my jeans each morning only to find them shrunk like a sheet of plastic wrap. In their place I had sprouted a wall of Spartan steel, washboard strong and diamond tough. I began to linger in the shower after the platoon had returned to their bunks to inventory the features of this new hardness: the masonic taper of my abdominal wall, the iron veins that surged into my groin, and the groin itself, slumbering between my legs, but not sleeping at all, more like America before Pearl Harbor, a drowsy giant ready to awaken and destroy the world.

"*This* is the face you make," Aunt Mimi asked, dropping the camera from her cheek.

"What's the matter, Schwarzkopf," Uncle Sasha mocked, "too good to smile for your family?"

But I couldn't force an ounce of happiness across my lips.

My father, a man crippled with grief, had pulled out a bottle of Manashevitz when he heard I had enlisted in the army and began gulping it down like seltzer. "You were right, Gayle," he wept to the bleary wedding photograph hanging above the sofa. "Our little boy wants to be a soldier."

But the old man was a soldier too, back to back with Uncle Sasha in the snowy mountains of Korea. With Chinese infantry massing in the valley below, they fired their overheated machine guns until they had to urinate on the glowing barrels to keep the bullets shooting straight. I would ask to play with their medals whenever I found them hiding at the bottom of an old shoe box or buried in the contents of a forgotten drawer. The men were unnerved by even the most innocent displays of worship.

"Medals are for circus clowns," Uncle Sasha would dismiss whenever the subject came up.

"Can medals raise the tumors off your mother's corpse?" my father would add.

But the effortless masculinity the two men shared, the scratchy-faced love they lavished on each other made me feel a puny thing in comparison.

"You can't smile," Aunt Mimi asked, hoping for another picture?

"Get a load of this one," Sasha grunted. "He can go off to liberate the Gulf of Arabia, but he can't smile for his Aunt?"

"*Kuwait*, Sasha," Mimi groaned. "He's going to liberate Kuwait. There is no Gulf of Arabia"

“Fine, so he’s going to liberate Kuwait. How is that going make for a better picture?”

“Not one teensy-weensy smile?” Aunt Mimi pleaded. “Not even for your father, who wanted to be here, but . . .”

But there was no smile left in my cheeks, only determination. A desire to experience something heroic, something mythic, something unavailable in the empty shopping centers of my hometown, beyond the reach of my mother’s corpse and whatever old shoebox she buried what remained of my father.

Von Mendelstein's Revenge

No Saturday morning, legion of justice, hero worship for this bullied eight-year-old. Iron dreams instead. Black-booted fantasies where little Ari Mendelsohn, driven to tears by his smart-mouthed Yeshiva classmates, is suddenly transformed into General Felix Von Mendelstein, the Butcher of Kiev, winner of the Iron Cross, and one man scourge of the Chosen People. From the depths of his icy blue eyes, to tip of his ruthless crew cut, the General proved all the Superman I would ever need.

It was the summer of 1978. Fear presided over the tiny village of Skokie, Illinois. One in ten residents carried the inky talismans of Auschwitz or Treblinka on their wrinkled forearms. One in three residents had lost a close relative in the war. No one felt safe. Whenever a muffler backfired or a tire blew out, crowds of terror-stricken villagers would hurl themselves to the ground screaming, "*nicht shiessen, nicht shiessen*" soiling the concrete with their resurgent Warsaw Ghetto fears.

It was down these terror-stricken boulevards that Von Mendelstein would roll, perched atop his Tiger tank, the long barrel of his 88mm. cannon taking careful aim at whatever passed through its sights. With a roar of his Maybach V-12 engine, Von Mendelstein would plow through the fragile tracts of suburban housing seeking out each of little Ari's tormentors. First on the list was Cantor Ira Schulman and his beefy wife Myrna who would kick little Ari under the Sunday school table for not remembering all the words to the Israeli national anthem.

Von Mendelstein was swift in his vengeance. Taking position five hundred meters across from the Cantor's house, he would carefully engage the gyroscopic aiming system. Then, lowering the gun sight on the blazing mezuzah nailed to the door, he would pull the

trigger and POW the thirty eight ton chassis would rock back on its treads, sending a high explosive shell screaming through the bay window, blowing piles of flaming, plastic-covered furniture up through the decimated roof and down on the smoking lawn. Matzah balls, like Christmas ornaments, now dangling from the smoldering evergreens.

From there, it was on to the Yeshiva to confront the hunchbacked rabbis whose inflexible Talmudic moralizing had determined that little Ari's grieving father would remarry at once—for the sake of the children—then proceeded to find for him the worst of all possible matches, Arlene Birnbaum, the widowed bakery assistant who liked to read Charles Dickens to her cats. Von Mendelstein dispatched these relics with a righteous blast from the machine guns mounted on either side of the turret. Sheets of 7.62 mm. bullets withered the ancient scholars, leaving an indistinguishable puddle of blood and gabardine where the Jewish heart of Chicago once lived.

With his engines still growling, Von Mendelstein would race around the back of the Yeshiva to deliver the same fate to little Ari's acid-tongued classmates playing four square in the parking lot. Squinting through the aiming reticule, the General would grip the red trigger and squeeze, instantly flooding the turret with a mountain of spent shell casings. In seconds it was all over. A carpet of skull caps lay strewn across the parking lot, shining in the evening light like a garden of decapitated mushrooms.

Finally, Von Mendelstein would surge down Devon Avenue to deal with the Hasidic diamond merchants who agreed to sell Mendelsohn Sr. the ring without which little Ari was convinced his father would have never gained the power to marry Arlene Birnbaum and her cats. A line of fire erupted from the napalm tanks just below the driver's window igniting each bearded shop owner on the street, sending the entire

fanatical community screeching back to Jehovah, the light of God finally burning in their minds.

Once home, little Ari would hang up his yarmulke and become little Andy again, the secular version of the same tormented child. Unable to assimilate to Arlene and her omnipresent cats, he (or should I switch to “I” here) worked feverishly to nurture the Wehrmacht fantasies of those merciless Yeshiva days.

From an Ace bandage and a black Sharpie I fashioned an impressive swastika armband which I proceeded to wrap so tightly around my bicep that the tip of my chubby fingers went purple and then numb. Sister Hava’s ballet pants, which I discovered at the bottom of the Goodwill bag, became the billowy trousers of a Prussian cavalry officer, while my father’s galoshes became his boots. A dark bath towel provided a suitably dignified cape. Not the flamboyant fabric that trailed the effeminate superheroes of Saturday morning television, but the sturdy woolen cloak of a Teutonic Knight to shield my young body from the Wagnerian gusts rolling off the Masurian Lakes—or in this case, the dining room. To round out the uniform, I would borrow my step mother’s eyelash mascara and paint a wispy mustache atop my pink, hairless lip and a pointy van dyke beard below it. Once in uniform, I would storm around the house barking battle orders at the puzzled cats while watching grainy combat footage on PBS and critiquing what I saw.

Arlene nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw me. “Is that my mascara?” she shrieked. Moments later she grabbed my swastika-covered arm and dragged me into the basement.

“So, you like to play dress up.” Arlene began, pacing the tiles like a seasoned Gestapo agent. “What do you think, Miss Havisham?” she asked the musty, wedding dress of a cat rubbing against the cuffs of her polyester slacks. “Do you think we should help little Andy play dress up?” At that moment she withdrew a bag of makeup from her purse and began to paint my overheated face. “I think we should.”

The result was a clown-like horror show. Chunks of rouge slapped atop my already red cheeks, pink eye shadow smeared across my blurry lids, and sheets of lipstick connecting both ears to my mouth in a sea of red wax.

“There now, Miss Havisham, isn’t he pretty? Now you stay in that chair young lady until I call for you. Little girls shouldn’t exert themselves. Come on Miss Havisham,” Arlene cried out, slapping the side of her leg. “Let’s go.” But Miss Havisham didn’t follow. Instead, she stayed downstairs and circled the folding chair, purring as the waves of humiliation came pouring out of my face. I thought about killing that useless animal, bashing its head against the cinder block wall until it was covered with brains and fur. But I couldn’t. That part of me didn’t exist yet. And probably never would. Vengeance of that sort was for harder, less sensitive men. Men like Von Mendelstein who, judging by the cloud of dust I could see rising through the basement window, was two maybe three miles off and bearing down hard.

Hello, Shlomo

These are my father's memories, the weepy-eyed recollections of a sentimental, Jewish toilet paper salesman. And yet they are so entwined with my life, these knot-in-the-throat remembrances, that I believe they are alive in my bones, shaping how I face the world.

Or don't face it.

I am twenty months old. This is the medical community's preferred method for marking my development, as if I had such a fragile hold on existence my survival had to be measured in weeks and days. And yet I wasn't the sickly one.

After a rough bath in the sink, and the word 'rough' doesn't do justice to the event—I'm told my mother would wash and dress me like a chicken, plucking the crumbs off my body as if I were to be hung upside down in a butcher's window—she would pin a fresh diaper to my backside and send me off to play. My father assures me this was the routine, adding the detail of a pair of powder blue footsy pajamas that I was never seen without.

My father takes over the story from here. He is drunk on two sips of kosher brandy and staring through the French windows of our brand new suburban home.

“It was November, *tatteleh*,” he begins, lifting his eyes to the photograph of my mother hanging above the sofa. “And you were wearing the green ski cap your *bubbi* knitted for you that August, the one with the yellow puff ball that would shake from side to side as you bounced across the apartment. Oy, I could just eat you up then, you and those dark curls spilling beneath those *meshugenah* earflaps. Such hair covered my own

head when I was a boy,” he says, removing his yarmulke to reveal the impressive curve of his skull. “See?”

“You had just received one of them . . .” he throws his arms out to the side as if trying to frame something too large for words. “*Big deals*” is the term he finally settles on. “You had just received one of those big deals from Aunt Mimi and Uncle Sasha and were riding it through the apartment. Oh, how you loved your big deal,” my father beams, winking at the bleary wedding photograph hanging above the sofa. “Didn’t he, Gayle?”

You must allow me to set the scene more clearly here, by which I mean more emotionally. I received my first Big Wheel in October 1971. This information comes fresh from Aunt Mimi who acquired the item through the back-alley efforts of Yitzhak the Scrounger, a Lithuanian refugee who spent most of the 1960s profiting off the refuse of the second American baby boom. The Mendelsohn’s were still a tribal people then, packed into four blocks of Chicago known as Rodgers Park.

We lived back to back with Aunt Mimi and Uncle Sasha on the northern, more exclusive end of Albany Avenue. Our apartments were joined by a long wooden porch that even in its sparsest sections was crowded with milk bottles, garbage cans and lines of dripping laundry. Upon the weathered planks of this urban footbridge the commerce of our two families ran uninterrupted, with dogs, cats and kids all passing back and forth without distinction. It was our own Rialto, a renaissance of community living tucked away amongst all the synagogues and delicatessens of Rogers Park. I often wondered if this was what my father was searching for outside the frame of those glittering French windows—our immigrant past.

The tribal nature of life in Rogers Park made it hard to believe that our little clan didn't own a personal interest in the entire neighborhood, that our wellbeing wasn't somehow tied in with the rest of the community. Financial statements would later confirm this theory, just not in the way a liberal-minded college student would hope. Instead of shamans or chieftains, it turns out the Mendelsohn's were landlords, managers of some of the wealthiest properties north of the Chicago River. Grandpa Albert got the enterprise started in 1938 by purchasing the first of several buildings along Albany Avenue.

It was a beautiful five story brownstone that Grandfather purchased, with chunks of gleaming amber embedded in the herringbone brickwork. I remember rushing downstairs on summer afternoons to rub my face against the cool, smooth stones. Sometimes I would lick the glossy surface to see if I could taste the orange flecks trapped inside the rock.

Grandpa Albert had a less child-like view of his property. "Fifteen units at eighty five dollars a month," he would complain nightly over his seltzer, "and I still can't pay off my wife's credit cards!"

"Like you even try!" she would holler back, rummaging through his old trousers for loose change.

Aunt Poo Poo and Uncle Donkey owned a pair of bungalows two blocks south, on the bad stretch of Albany where the *shvartzes* (as they called them) were moving in. In addition to the bungalows, which they rented at twice the going rate to upwardly mobile Negroes (as they also called them) they owned a tract of land off Devon Avenue that they were planning to develop once the financing went through. It was all too profitable, even long-haired cousin Micah, who had renounced private property shortly before graduating

law school, owned a set of buildings. Except his buildings had painted windows instead of upwardly mobile minorities, windows that pulsed at odd hours with hot bursts of psychedelic light.

The memory of such an intimate geography lives in the crevice of my bones, and each hollow nook recalls with satellite precision the smorgasbord of flavors that colored those anything-but-salad days: the sound of a football game blaring from the Admiral television set, the scratch of an Allan Sherman record skipping on the hi-fi. Somewhere there is a mahogany buffet table, cleared of newspapers and bills, and now filled with heaping containers of coleslaw, macaroni salad and chopped liver. A silver tray is set up next to the chopped liver and stacked with mountains of butcher-fresh cold cuts; slabs of corned beef piled so high they threaten to tip over into the horseradish and short circuit the nearby toaster! A basket of onion rolls sits left of the corned beef, just beside a jar of yellow mustard and a dish of sliced pickles. For the kids, a line of paper cups full of sticky red juice with finger holes that pull out like the ears of a chimpanzee and squares of chocolate cake that will wind up anywhere but in our mouths.

I am not conscious of any of this, yet somehow I know I am there, looking up between people's legs and watching with great awe as fists full of greasy pastrami are pulled over my head and shoved onto straining paper plates then dragged off to the safety of one of the TV trays set up in the family room, the stacks of soggy cardboard bending under the weight of all that beef. Shiny cheeks, clogged arteries, drooping plates: my bones remember all.

“And you, you little *pisher*,” my father exclaims. “You would ride your big deal all around the house. Around and around you would go. My son, Ari Ben-Shlomo,

the little cab driver.” My father leans forward and grabs an imaginary set of handlebars in front of the recliner.

“You would peddle up to Uncle Donkey and honk your little horn. And Uncle Donkey would look down over his big belly and seeing you at his feet would smile and say ‘Hello, Shlomo!’ and off you would go. And then you would peddle up to Aunt Mimi, run right into the hem of her flowery skirt, and you would honk your horn. And Aunt Mimi would look down over her bandaged nose, the one she had fixed yet again because she couldn’t fully remove the bump she inherited from Grandpa Albert, and she would smile and say ‘Hello, Shlomo!’ and off you would go. Even the rabbi, whose position in the community demands at least a passing show of respect, was not immune to your charms. You would peddle right up to his holy slacks, honk your horn—Gabriel, we should have named you with all that honking—and demand his attention. And the rabbi, looking down from such reverent heights, would suddenly find a smile parting his ancient beard, a new light twinkling in his dark eyes, and he would reach down and kiss you on the forehead, whispering, “God bless you, Ari Ben-Shlomo. Miracle child.”

“And mommy,” I ask.

Here my father’s features darken. The next part of the story I get from Aunt Mimi lounging in the sun room of her beach front condominium.

“Your mother was sick, what do you want me to say? She spent a lot of time in the bathroom washing bandanas and cleaning vomit out of the drain. And you would peddle up to her in your little green hat and . . . and . . . why do you always want to talk about this stuff, it’s a sick fixation with you, you know that? You’re not well.”

“That may be,” I joked. “But you guys get so tight-lipped about the subject, it makes me suspect you're keeping some dark secret. Fess up, did the woman beat me, sell me to the gypsies . . . ?”

“Your mommy didn’t beat you guys,” Aunt Mimi dismisses, picking a ball of lint off her Bermuda shorts and flicking it towards the ash tray. “She spanked your tushies once in a while. That’s all. A little spank on your tushies. It was a different time. Different opinions about discipline.”

“She *potched my tuchas*,” I say, switching to the more familiar and less violent Yiddish term.

“Exactly,” Aunt Mimi says, examining another ball of lint. “She *potched* your *tuchas*. And let me tell you, she wasn’t the first mother to give a little *potch* to her children. Some say she should have *potched* you kids more. A lot more.” A ball of lint goes sailing over my shoulder.

I pull out my Yiddish-English dictionary and open it to the word “*potch*.” I show the entry to Aunt Mimi. She pulls the bifocals off her chest and starts to read. This is what she sees:

Potch: to mark or bruise; cause discoloration as in the rupturing of capillaries due to traumatic contact or injury.

Aunt Mimi drops the glasses to her chest and rolls her eyes at me. “She was sick. Why can’t you understand that? And you were riding around on your Big Wheel. Ach, I should have never got you that stupid thing in the first place. You were riding around on your Big Wheel and you were wearing your green hat with those goofy earflaps, God were you cute, and . . . ”

“. . . And she *potched* me.”

“And what if she did?” Aunt Mimi erupts. “A dying woman acts emotionally. What does it prove? How does it help you live your life any better?” Aunt Mimi leans across the glass table, her dark, freckled bosom smothering the book of Chagall reproductions that sits beside the ashtray. “Let me tell you something, Cookie,” she sneers, her face set harder than the marble in her floor. “We all had a bad childhood, maybe it’s time you learned to move on.”

My father finishes the story. He picks up his bottle of brandy and heads unsteadily towards the stairs. “No more big deal after that,” he says, bracing himself against the banister. “All day in the crib or out in front of the television; crying, crying, crying. You didn’t eat for a week. I had to do cartwheels to get you to take the bottle. And you never reached out to people anymore, you pulled back into your own little world.” My father looks at me with his sad European eyes and brushes my cheek with the back of his hand. “We never really got you out.”

He is too drunk to make it up the stairs. I urge him back into the recliner and tuck the afghan around his feet. I start to swivel the chair to the dark window and the willow trees beyond. He digs his feet into the carpet, stopping the momentum of the twirling seat so it can face the sofa. He grunts three times and shakes his hand towards the wall. I know immediately what he wants. I remove the photograph of my mother and lay it in his lap. He smiles and releases a milky burp.

Muriel's Gift

My return to fatness began on a drizzly November afternoon outside the Old Country Buffet in Park Ridge, Illinois. I was standing behind Muriel Eiserman, waiting for her and the rest of the three o'clock dinner crowd, to shuffle past the angry Mexican woman leaning in the doorway. It was her job to collect everyone's plastic containers before admitting them into the restaurant. A sign above her shoulder warned that all food must remain on the premises under penalty of law. Staring through the window at the fists full of brown lettuce being packed into the salad station, I couldn't imagine this was much of a problem.

Muriel reached into the bag draped across her walker and pulled out a mini Krackle bar. "Here," she smiled. "These lines can take forever." I turned my head towards the nursing home across the street, hoping to decline the offer by a show of indifference. But Muriel would not be denied. "Go on," she insisted, shaking the bar of chocolate at the back of my neck. "You've got to keep your strength up."

It was silly to refuse Muriel's offer, informed as it was by hours of waiting in such lines. But I had made my decision months ago and was determined to see it through.

"I'm sorry," I confessed. "But I'm a vegan."

"You're a what?" Muriel inquired, screwing her face into a skeptical glare.

"A vegan," I repeated.

"Goodness," the old woman gasped. "Well, you're still a young man, I'm sure you'll find a girlfriend soon."

"It means that I don't eat any products that come from animals," I corrected.

Muriel dug a finger into the forest of silver curls spiraling off her scalp and began to scratch. After a few moments she removed the finger and looked up. "But it's not an animal, dear. It's candy."

My mind froze before I could respond. In the past when confronted about my eating, I would engage people in a series of heated arguments about the morality of their food choices, lecturing them with an indignant scowl how trembling calves, still wet from the womb, were penned up flank to flank and slaughtered for their meat. But I had no response for the milk-fed assertions of Muriel Eiserman. Having survived both the Great Depression and the world war that followed, she regarded the denial of free food as nothing short of insanity, an act of gastrointestinal hubris. It made confronting her about the high crimes of the Hershey Corporation, producers of the mini Krackle bar now resting in her palm, seem downright silly, if not insulting.

I guess it was at that moment, looking down on the soft, puzzled features of Muriel Eiserman, that the absurdity of the past five months came sharply into focus: the concentration camp weight loss, the militant animal activism, and the beans, God help me, the beans, enough to make a cadaver fart blood—it was all a sham. Once you got beneath all the free-range, organic posturing you'd find the same chubby cheeseburger of a child who used to stage his own panty raids at Camp Confidence (a division of Weight Watchers) only now he was a balding, thirty nine year old cab driver obsessed with a girl fifteen years his junior, the poet Sophia Snow, pretending he shared her values, her commitments, all the while dreaming lustily about curly fries, Tuna Helper, and steaming metal trays full of rib tips and chicken wings.

But how do you explain such obsessions to a woman like Muriel Eiserman who probably spent half her life in a tattered housecoat stretching thin balls of meat loaf with stale bags of bread crumbs. How do I tell her that through my devotion to Sophia I was trying to love myself again, make up for the years of irresponsible gorging, and somehow come to terms with my firehouse appetites, which even as I closed in on the snow drift decades beyond forty, rang out with five alarms in my head.

Unable to discover a meaningful answer to this set of questions, I found myself taking the bar of chocolate from Muriel's hand and searching for the possible upside of a life of heart disease, diabetes and unsightly male mammaries.

"There now," Muriel beamed. "That's a good boy.

And I must have been a good boy, because the second I took hold of Muriel's chocolate—just took hold of it—something inside of me unclenched. The caps of my guard tower shoulders stood down, easing into my collarbone, while the ulcers in my stomach fizzled away with a sour burp.

"Excuse me," Muriel giggled.

I thumbed off a quick text to Sophia. She was teaching a supplementary writing course at the nearby technical college. Roughly translated from my Motorola shorthand the message read: *At Old Country Buffet. Grandmas everywhere pushing chocolate like heroin. Resolve crumbling. Hunger rising. Please help.*

At the front of the line, Morris Berger turned in his Tupperware with an indignant growl.

"This is discrimination," he bellowed. "Next, you'll want me to pin a yellow star to the sleeve of my overcoat and take a shower without soap."

“You know the routine,” the angry Mexican woman instructed.

“Yes,” Berger grumbled. “I know the routine. It’s the same one they had at Auschwitz.”

Muriel grabbed my arm. “He wasn’t even in the war,” she gossiped of her fellow nursing home resident. “He sold dresses with his father in Roosevelt Park. Cheap ones too,” she added, hoping to convince me that the threadbare slacks that currently encased her body were the height of fashion.

“What’s the big deal,” Berger pleaded. “Would the universe crumble if I took a little potato salad back to my room for later?”

“Rules are rules,” the angry Mexican woman replied. “I’m only following orders.”

“Following orders, huh?” Berger narrowed his eyebrows. “That’s what Eichmann said. Maybe we should convene a tribunal for you too?”

“I don’t even know what an Eichmann is,” the angry Mexican woman cried out.

“Then I’ll show you,” Berger hollered back. Without missing a beat, the old man snapped off a defiant ‘Zieg Heil’ and began a methodical goose step towards the entrance of the restaurant.

“Oh, for goodness sake,” somebody called out from the back of the line.

“Is this really happening,” another person inquired.

Muriel tugged my arm. “This is why no one lets him play bingo,” she said.

The angry Mexican woman released a sharp burst of laughter as the old man continued his assault. “Help, I’m being invaded,” she winked to the security guard standing next to her. But Berger was undeterred.

“Today, Park Ridge. Tomorrow, the world!” he cried out.

But there was no tomorrow for Morris Berger. Unlike the Nazi assault on Europe which had delivered the Low Countries to the Third Reich in less than forty days, Berger's blitzkrieg ended in disaster. Somewhere around his fifteenth step, the old man tripped over the boot of the angry Mexican woman who, having Googled up the term "Eichmann" on her cell phone, thrust it between his goose stepping legs, infuriated by the comparison leveled between herself and the infamous architect of the Jewish Holocaust.

"Not *one* day in the army," Muriel pressed on, returning me to her earlier line of gossip. "The world is at war, and he's safe at home selling dresses. What kind of man is that?"

"A smart one," I mumbled.

A wall of gray clouds had swallowed up the sun. I pulled my jacket up around my ears and lowered my face into my muffler. Muriel seemed unaffected by the changing weather. I reached into my pocket to see if Sophia had called. Muriel interrupted me before I could locate the phone.

"Aren't you going to eat your candy?" she asked

"I was planning to save it for later," went my tactful reply.

"Don't worry," she answered with a snap of her purse. "I have plenty of extra, see?"

"This must be my lucky day," went a slightly less tactful reply.

Realizing I was trapped, I began to scrutinize Muriel's candy. Judging by the faded red wrapper I imagined it had been sitting in a dish somewhere at the back of her nursing home, poked at by the therapy dogs and drooled on by stroke victims, avoided by terrified grandchildren who, like myself, lacked the sophistication to refuse such an offer.

Even Morris Berger, willing to smuggle a bowl of potato salad out of the Old Country Buffet in his trousers, wouldn't touch it. Only sweet Muriel, with her encroaching senility and penchant for hoarding, had the courage to give it a home.

“Go on,” Muriel encouraged.

Unable to bring myself to “go” just yet, I turned the candy over in my palm and continued the examination. The foil that encased it had lost its crunch and lifted silently off the bar, which was so dusty it practically dissolved in my hand. I could just imagine Sophia grimacing at it, turning her slim, pierced nose into the air and asking why I would want to poison my body with such garbage when she had a fresh batch of legumes chilling in the fridge at home.

Food was so much a part of what Sophia and I were about: the competitive under-eating, the naked weekends sharing a tube of soy paste, then arm-in-arm through the co-op, calling each other “babe,” hunting through the dusty aisles for a particular brand of turmeric, trading recipes with the regulars, meeting them again at the fair trade coffee shop, the long days of hunger and narcissism enflaming a sense of personal satisfaction I had never experienced before, or felt I deserved.

Part of me didn't want to give it up. And another part of me was ready to chuck it deep into the ocean, because just the thought of another night of earnest, face-to-face love making—the merciless eye contact demanded by those still young enough to believe in the possibility of change—threatened to reignite the fires of my slumbering ulcer. And true to form, it wasn't long before that burning knot in my belly began to flare up, choking my guts with thick clouds of bile and regret. I grabbed my stomach in an effort to settle it down. But this only provided a momentary sense of relief. With the morning's

acid refluxing into my throat, I realized even a cup of coffee (the reason I had originally stopped off at the Buffet) seemed out of the question. And yet I didn't want to disappoint Muriel who was staring up at me with that sour milk smile of hers waiting for the gestures of gratitude that would explode across my face once I had devoured her candy.

“What are you waiting for?” Muriel asked.

And the truth is; I didn't know any more. Nothing about the past five months felt real. It was as if I had dieted my way into another man's body and everything that was once distinctive about me had melted away with the extra pounds of flab. I reached again for the phone in my pocket, hoping Sophia could somehow help move me past the fissures of doubt that began splintering my resolve. But the reflective glass of the surrounding strip mall made the obvious questions unavoidable. And so, with the cellphone lying dead in my pocket, I decided to ask them:

Who was this emaciated creature staring back at me in the glass of the Old Country Buffet, those strip mall windows asked, and what had he done with the adorable, greasy-faced, monkey who managed to smile his way onto nearly every photograph hanging in O'Malley's pub next door? Would anyone love this Andy; this dry Andy, this dusty Andy, and if Sophia had her way, this *writer* Andy, and a graduate student writer Andy no less (because that's how she'd done it) with all the skinny-jean, coffee-house, expectations that come with that line of work, as if good writing were something that could be starved into existence.

And not nourished.

At that moment I had a vision of Sophia. She appeared behind me in our bathroom mirror. We were both naked. I was shy, as usual, embarrassed about my body.

Seeing this, she commenced a series of soft kisses on the back of my neck and ran then up into my ear. “Everything will be okay,” she whispered. “I believe in you.”

Then, with her left hand, she scooped up the sagging pile of skin that hung beneath my ribcage. And with her right hand, she pointed to the hollow sockets that encircled my eyes. “This, babe, is what being happy looks like.”

And then I had another vision. It was Morris Berger calling to me from the far end of the Old Country Buffet. He was dressed up in a Nazi uniform and holding a plastic bowl out in front of him. Inside the bowl he had a brick of tofu, a collection of Syrian love poems, and what appeared to be a photograph of Sophia and the rest of the 2005 graduating class of Smith College. “They were all just following orders,” he cried out, before dumping the contents of the bowl down the front of his trousers. “What are you following?”

“Well,” Muriel said, tapping her wristwatch, “that candy isn’t going to eat itself.”

I decided to leave the decision to fate. I thrust my head backwards and dangled the confection over my throat secretly wishing a strong wind would rise up out of the gray clouds and blow the thing into the street.

“Ooooooh, that’s just how my brother used to swallow goldfish,” Muriel cooed.

I had another vision of Sophia. She was frowning at me from the loveseat this time, making expressions of failure and disappointment. My elbow began to weaken as I absorbed the disapproving energy of each new face. I was just about to lower it to my side when hungry Morris Berger, having built up a new head of steam, broke from the dinner line and made another run for the buffet. A voice of solidarity rang out inside of my head. “Go Morris, go!” the voice shouted. By the time the old man had leapt over the

boot of the angry Mexican woman and slipped through the metal doors at the entrance, I realized that I had already released the tiny rectangle of chocolate into my mouth.

Muriel bashed her mittens together like a cartoon seal. “Isn’t that better?” she shouted.

It was more than better. My knees buckled as the waves of sugar entered my blood stream. My head grew light. I began to swoon. An inexplicable joy came over me, not only because there was more candy in Muriel’s purse, but because there was more candy in the world, more decadent deserts here at the Old Country Buffet, and in drive-thrus along each road that took me home, a virtual carnival of salt and fat and sugar all at my disposal, and Sophia would never know, though she would later claim that she could smell it in my clothes and taste it on my skin.

A ruckus broke out by the restaurant’s entrance as the last chunk of Muriel’s chocolate began to dissolve on my tongue. I turned just in time to see Morris Berger being dragged out the door by two burly men in hair nets.

“You’ll get your bowl back tomorrow,” the angry Mexican woman called out from the front of the line.

“Your damn right I will,” Berger shouted over his shoulder. “And it better not stink of your frijoles either.”

As the security guards dragged Berger past the hungry customers still waiting in line, he thrust an angry index finger into the air. He wasn't going to surrender his position without a final, culminating gesture of defiance. “Don't worry, friends,” he called out with all the theatrical authority he could muster, “I shall return!”

“Goodness,” Muriel snorted, reaching into her purse for another piece of candy,
“let’s hope not.”

A Man of Weight and Substance

Caitlyn Janowitz, all of twenty three, opened her class with a question. "Can any of you tell me why you're here?"

Before we could return an answer, she hopped onto the edge of her desk and began kicking the back of her heels against the enfolding metal skirt.

"I'm waaaaaiting," she sang out.

The enormity of the question was too much for a sluggish Monday in Macomb, Illinois. The prairie heat demands an incremental approach to learning, a way to ease into those profound truths they seem to serve up on a dinner roll in graduate teaching seminars. But Caitlyn Janowitz would have none of it.

"Don't make me use an ice breaker?" she warned, cracking an imaginary block into her lap. A weary chuckle was all any of us could muster for the performance.

The opening days of the fall semester had been difficult for the incoming class of 1999. Humid hours in poorly ventilated rooms made the eyelids heavy, made the heart sour. It made me, all of twenty eight, yearn for the easy, whiskey-addled pleasures of my lost Chicago summer: Belmont Harbor in the gloaming; Wrigley Field under a bank of blazing lights; a basket of Demon Dogs to soak up the bottles of cold, cheap beer that helped give shape to the shapeless afternoons of bongwater and Playstation.

The city was never far from my thoughts. Even in the cornfields of Macomb I felt the electricity of the elevated train pulsing through my body. Only five days off the Red Line and I already yearned to unstick my sneakers from the platforms at Belmont, Fullerton and Clybourn. *Doors open on the right at Clybourn*, the automated conductor would say.

The fact is I had no idea why I was there, why after blowing through the Windy City for so many years I had finally washed up on the shores of Western Illinois University, trying to figure out the best way to land a little white ball into a pukey glass of Heineken. Beer Pong, I believe it was called. Worst of all, I was getting fat.

My classmates were not bothered by such concerns. They began to bark out answers to Professor Jannowitz's question.

"To learn to write better," one shouted.

"To help us think clearer," another cried.

"Because it's required," a bolder subject opined.

"You're all correct," Caitlyn smiled back, her green eyes twinkling as she prepared to deliver the *coup de gras*. "But you're also here to tell your story."

I damn near spit my coffee on the carpet when I heard. One look at the designer T-shirt Caitlyn pulled across her chest, not to mention the hole in her nose where I suspect a ring had been ripped out the previous night in an effort to look more professional, and I knew this girl didn't give a damn about my story or anything else that couldn't be sucked out of the bottom of a shot glass.

I'd seen Caitlyn out on the square before school started. She was pounding lemon bombs with the rest of the graduate students. The girl was a wild and irrepressible drunk: heckling friends, throwing popcorn at strangers, flirting with the willowy theatre kids who were liable to break out into a chorus of "Hey Big Spender" at any moment. She single-handedly ruined the bar scene for half the town drunks, showing up with her flamboyant tribe wherever people went to drown their sorrows.

I am a man who understands the seriousness of drinking, how it needs to be approached with the ritual of a shaman and the reverence of a monk. I began to hate Caitlyn Janowitz for trivializing it. And then I began to hate her for everything. For laughing at inappropriate moments, for stealing sips of vodka out of other people's cups and then spitting them back on the counter. I hated her for playing favorites—mostly cute boys or willowy theatre geeks—who I later learned she took drinking after class. I hated her for being so annoyingly Jewish, right down to the tight Semitic curls she wore bunched at the back of her head like a stick of brown bananas. She was the little girl in Hebrew school who always knew the right answer, who always made the Rabbi smile, the little girl whose neck I wanted to strangle, or kiss, I was never quite sure.

But mostly I think I hated her for not noticing me, the fat guy pouring his heart into a pile of napkins. I hated her for not answering the psychic summons I sent out for her to join me, read my work, and help unpack all the stories that lived inside my guts.

Instead, Caitlyn clung to the shaggy-headed boy lounging by the dart board, the one with the Ashton Kutcher haircut and the factory-ripped jeans. She listened as he lectured on about his year of teaching in Brazil and the importance of finding just the right pair of flip flops to match the denim strap of his brand new Sao Paulo messenger bag.

At first she simply rubbed his arms, exploring the veins and muscles that come with being twenty one. Then, as the night grew bleary, she began pulling at his Von Dutch belt buckle, her voice small and whiney like a little girl who needed a cookie. When her hand finally disappeared below that buckle, I tore out of the bar and

raced home to the safety of my kitchenette: the sugary embrace of a half-eaten bag of Funyons and a two-liter bottle of Slice.

The thing is I knew this girl. Not as a person, but an archetype. In high school she was Amanda Hawthorne, who I followed around the beaches of Wilmette like a lovesick puppy. At Fort Riley she was Joleigh Watts, barista extraordinaire whose sultry looks I was never quite sure were meant for me or my latte. In some ways she was also my mother, slamming the bathroom door in my face because she doesn't want her three year old son to see the clumps of radiated hair that had fallen into the sink.

And now she was my teacher, endowed by the university trustees to shape my future as a writer. If this woman didn't approve of my work she would never let me move on to the next level, and then I'd never write again. Or so went my muddled thinking. Somehow, I had to reach through the invisible barriers that separated us and make her see that I was more than just some creepy fat dude pouting at the edge of a bar, that I was a man of weight and substance ready to take his place among the community of serious writers. A community it seemed she alone guarded with a syllabus in one hand and a Sea Breeze in the other.

After rattling off the semester calendar, Professor Janowitz announced that our initial paper would be a memoir. It was the first piece of good news I'd heard since leaving Chicago. What else had all those lonely, napkin-scribbling nights out on the square been but me crafting my memoirs, inching paragraph by paragraph towards this long overdue moment of recognition and acceptance?

The plan was simple. I'd uncrumple the best ideas from my pile of napkins and polish them until they could cut glass. Then, after a burlesque of humility, (You don't

accept bribes, do you Professor Janowitz?) I'd lay them on her desk like a chain of time bombs, dreaming giddily about the explosions to come: "Boom," there goes that achingly beautiful paragraph about my mother. "Boom," there goes that wistful description of the city at night. "Boom," there goes that devastating conclusion.

In a stack of dreary essays, this one shining paper would reach out and punch Caitlyn in the eyes, tighten her stomach muscles with jealousy. It would drive her to meet with her colleagues over glasses of Chardonnay to reconsider her profession. She'd bring me up at one of her teaching seminars, where I'd finally enter the lives of the Macomb literati in a triumphant discussion that would spill over into the bars on the square. Before long, they would return a unanimous verdict: "The boy is brilliant!" And I would hear their exclamations all the way back in my dreary kitchenette where I sat with my head buried in a bag of Funyons.

The following Monday I handed in a memoir very much like the one you're reading now. Only it contained a rather overblown paragraph about cunnilingus and the American Dream (ah, the joys of being a freshman). But in all fairness, this wasn't me trying to be shocking. This was me trying to be F. Scott Fitzgerald, only relocating the misplaced dreams of Jay Gatsby to the seat of my own dubious desires, my cousin Lindsey's vagina (again, the joys of being a freshman). Of course, you couldn't convince any of my classmates of this. That Friday Professor Janowitz gathered us into groups for peer reviews. My paper was first.

Barbara Morris, a returning student and proud mother of two depressed poodles, clutched the ruffles of her blouse as if suddenly knocked out of breath, "I felt violated," she said, aiming her watery eyes at me. "Totally violated."

"The man clearly hates women." Lara Tolkien snarled, handing Barbara a tissue.

"He hates everything." Sondra Lockwood agreed.

"It's obvious that Andrew is speaking from a position of great inadequacy." Quentin Squires piped in, tugging at his \$90 Bloomingdale slacks.

Arlene Harris leaned forward, "I don't feel safe with the author in the room," she whispered to the group.

"Totally violated." Barbara Morris repeated.

"Word rapist!" Valerie Ackerman condemned.

Professor Janowitz presided gracefully over the debacle, circling our desks the way a jockey circles the track after winning an especially crucial race. The depth of her victory became apparent when she generously took up my defense.

"I thought there were some lovely passages in this story, guys. Let's not be so hard on Andrew. He has a real gift." Suddenly it was my eyes that had been punched out, my guts that churned with jealousy. I should have been flattered, even grateful. Instead I felt obliterated. And then the old question reared its head, the one that pops up whenever I get knocked on my ass in a workshop: why is writing such a war with me, with obliteration the only end? The answer came just as quickly as the question: because this is the only thing you do reasonably well, dummy, and in a world that constantly picks at you, challenges your manhood, this is where you decide to stand your ground, punch it out toe-to-toe with any challenger. It was an awful answer and it made me sick to my stomach.

It wasn't long before I left Macomb. I wasn't ready for college. I returned to the city and my job driving a cab. The undergraduates of DePaul University had taken Fullerton

Street back from the homeless population and I made easy money shuttling the girls of Sigma Pi back and forth to the bars of Wicker Park. I began to hate things with greater intensity, mostly the bleary, bloodshot masses who stumbled into my cab each night. I wished they would all go away, be marshaled into some miserable camp somewhere and exterminated.

I began to think about Adolph Hitler for some reason, in particular the desolate urban paintings that kept him out of art school in Vienna. Though I come from a Jewish family, I had to admit something about the emptiness of his work appealed to me. Imagine, I thought, a barren metropolis with nothing between my worshipful eyes and the noble stones of Louis Sullivan or the shiny glass of Helmut Jahn, how glorious!

I suppose it's simpler that way, a city without its citizens. It's probably why I prefer to deal with the public through the bullet-proof windshield of my cab. Why I'll probably never be a good writer, or a writer at all. Because it's always easier to hate.

A year later Caitlyn stepped into my taxi. She looked dehydrated. The muscles in her neck stood out all dry and sinewy as if she'd spent too many hours on the treadmill chasing a body she was never meant to have. A powder blue halter top did little to relieve the punishing effects of her under eating, calling attention to each sunken feature.

"Take me to Schubas," she hollered, wiping a runaway tear off her cheek.

"At your command." I hollered back, throwing my Bonneville into first gear with a transmission-rattling pop. Her pink Motorola Razor rang angrily to life.

"What?" She barked into the keypad. "I don't care if you work with her, Matt . . . Fine, let *her* write your resume then, let *her* walk your damn dogs . . . No, I am not coming over . . . NO!" And then she slammed the phone shut.

The colors of Lincoln Avenue blew past the cab in a haze of red and blue neon. Caitlyn watched the lights flow along the surface of the window, tracing them with her finger, looking for a moment as if she hoped she could stop the whole merciless progression by the simple application of thumb to glass.

Life was hard outside the bubble of Macomb. There was too much competition in the big city, too much rejection. When we pulled up at Schubas it was my turn to be generous. I refused to take her money.

She smiled. "You look familiar, where did you go to high school?"

"GED," I lied.

She saw the taxi license pinned to my dashboard. A flicker of recognition danced across her face. She smiled again, seductively this time. "Do you have a card, Mr. GED man, in case I need a ride home?"

"No," I answered, revving the engine.

"What if I'm all alone?" She purred, flashing her green eyes as if it were last call on the square. I felt a tingle below my belt.

"I might be around," I said, returning what I hoped was a seductive smile, but from Caitlyn's point of view might have looked like epilepsy. "Just stick your head outside and give us a look."

"I'll do that," she said, then disappeared into the crowd mulling by the entrance.

I spent two hours circling Schubas that night, waiting for Caitlyn to stumble out of the bar all drunk and horny and ready to make a bad decision. I was still working the Southport area when the sun came up. It was only then that I began to suspect that the attraction I felt for Caitlyn wasn't physical, per se, but located in some deeper,

inaccessible organ of my body, a complex of nerves and anxieties that kept pushing me through the world like a tourist instead of engaging with it like a human being, a perpetual visitor in my own city, entering people like buildings, stopping only to perform a function, but never to stay.

It wasn't much of an epiphany—if it was an epiphany at all—but it was enough to get me out of the Southport bar district that night and back to work. Besides, the traders at the Mercantile Exchange didn't put much stock in epiphanies, especially when it came to calculating your tip. And I was content, for the moment at least, to let money be my greatest revelation.

The Fine Art of Eating Pussy

I

It begins with hunger. Memories of orange, fire-lit skies and shirtless, beer cooler weekends. Two young lovers wrapped in freshly laundered sheets, their warm bodies cooled by the hum and blow of the air conditioning unit rattling in the window. A bowl of pears ripens on the counter. A stick of bananas browns atop the fridge. These memories heal you, sustain you, open an emptiness no pair of thrusting hips can ever hope to fill, out there beyond the edge of your flicking tongue.

II

It is February and the wind of a mid-Michigan winter whips the loose flakes of snow into a tornado around your feet. Girls in fuzzy boots parade down the salt-slick bike path reminding you with their long, gazelle-like strides of the fuzz they wear in other, more private places. And that's the thrill of it, the source of your hunger: the wild tangle of pubic hair swimming between those prim, well-manicured thighs. It awakens an ancient, animalistic urge. The thought of it leaves you awed and humbled. Your impulse is no longer to tame that shimmering heart of darkness, drilling away towards whatever glimpse of transcendence you routinely mistake for orgasm, but to kneel before its mystery and make devotion with your tongue.

III

The act of coitus seems suddenly vulgar. A bull in a china shop. A monkey saying mass. You've evolved past the standard, chest-thumping consummation of cock and balls and reach for a more meaningful way to connect to the women in your life because you're

forty now, your back hurts, your feet ache, and some days you'd rather stay home and empty the day's passion into a nearby sweat-sock than grind up against another well-meaning barfly.

IV

It's about presentation as well as hunger, looping your thumbs through the delicate panty strings and sliding them gently down the legs, popping the soft triangle of satin off the moist rumple of flesh beneath it. Like pulling the lid off a steaming tray of lobster, you take the vapors in through your nostrils and release a deep, pleasurable sigh. A good woman, like a good wine, needs to be decanted slowly over time, not swallowed in one ravenous gulp. And yet you dive in all the same.

V

Technique is a minor concern. The way you part the labia with your index finger, or circle the clitoris with your tongue, is ultimately meaningless when compared to desire. But your desire does not always come from the sunniest places. Each day the titty girls bounce past you on the running track. Imagine: chubby, desperate you sweating laps around the fitness center dreaming of getting a crack at those living Barbie Dolls and giving them what they've never had before, an experience beyond the typical dorm room fumbblings of some eighteen year old beer guzzler with a hair trigger penis and a pink muscle shirt announcing, "I (heart) boobies." But rather laid out on a sun-lit mattress and licked from head to foot, with special attention paid to the golden spiral of fur circling the navel and the meaty cleft of flesh where the buttocks join together; and then entered in one fluid motion and screwed so hard their blue eyes cross and they climax weeping,

embarrassed about the shallow lives they've lead. Your penis as an instrument of social vengeance, the dream of every chubby, powerless man.

VI

This hunger that drives you to such elaborate fantasies, it has nothing to do with the girls themselves, or their revealing outfits. You've lusted equally after soccer moms, bubbly grocery clerks, and the moist center of a freshly glazed doughnut. Not to mention the full-skirted Hassidic girls giggling on their way to temple. Oh, to feast on such pious flesh, to hoist the Rabbi's daughter on your face, her pale belly full of brisket, her dark eyes seeing the promised land while you lick the morning *Sh'ma* between her knees, the waters of Babylon running down your chin and refreshing that corrupted vision of paradise that stains your sheets each morning and organizes your every thought.

VII

Still, you feel something inside of you is changing, becoming more human. You think of Kayleigh S. from last summer, the cutter who liked to pull her own hair during sex. You remember her naked body sprawled across the comforter, her white skin etched with the most violent pattern of scars you've ever seen: horizontal lines up and down the torso with oozing triangles on either side of the pelvis. She picks at them to stop the healing process then sucks the blood off her fingers. You realize you don't want to fuck her anymore. You just want to kiss her scars, pack her lunch, and make sure she gets off the bus safely. She is nineteen, a full twenty years younger than you are. The only intercourse you should be having is paternal. You tell her you are heading back to Michigan in August. You expect her to be relieved. Instead, she socks you in the jaw and

starts bawling, shouting tear-filled epithets about being abandoned by another useless man. She locks herself in the bathroom and starts cutting. By the time she comes out she has your name sliced across her forearm with a bloody line through it. You are horrified by the spectacle.

VIII

And this reaction pleases you. There was a time when a gesture like this would have filled you with an overwhelming sense of pride. That chubby, powerless you could drive a beautiful young girl to such an act of personal violence seemed like a victory for all chubby, powerless men. But now that you are forty, that victory seems hollow. Instead of gloating, you help Kayleigh gather up her clothes and walk her to her car. You promise to let her get on with her life: drink foofy coffee and text her friends. Be nineteen again. You try to make eye contact as she starts the car. She glares at you through the window. You kiss the glass by her cheek and cover your heart with your fist, hoping she understands what you're trying to do. There is a moment when you think you connect. Then she backs over your foot as she pulls out of the driveway.

Motherless Vermont

The *New York Times* called her work soaring and original. The *Kirkus Review* said her prose contained an effortless grace. Even the notoriously picky *Observer* hailed her debut novel *Lotus of the Heart* as one of the ten great coming-of-age stories of the twentieth century. She was Laing Vei, runner up for the 2006 Peterson award for fiction.

Three times the Pulitzer committee had short-listed her for their prestigious prize. Three times, however, they sent her home with little more than a fruit basket. It wasn't until the summer of 2007 that she finally reached the upper levels of literary stardom, though not in the way she had intended. It was that year she brought about the end of the fabled Montpelier Writer's Workshop, a feat she accomplished with what colleagues called, "her Mongolian approach to the human spirit," a quote that somehow never makes the cover of any of her books.

With her soy sauce skin and rice bowl hair, Laing Vei hardly seemed the type to bring down such a renowned program. It was a face that should have been smiling back on a can of noodles or steaming up a batch of egg rolls. Some of the world's greatest manicures have been delivered by such a face, chatting away about life in the mall as you soaked in their bubbling pink dish of goo. And yet it wasn't long before that let-me-dry-your-nails look of hers revealed its kamikaze-like capacity for cruelty. She dragged me into the barn on the first day of workshops, actually shoving me against the wooden planks, only to tell me that my application manuscript was littered with worst kind of adolescent vulgarity. Grade school, she called it, poking me repeatedly in the chest.

“You’re just lucky I wasn’t on the admissions committee,” she warned, drilling away at my sternum. “Or I would have flung your packet in the dumpster and followed it with a match.”

By this point, I felt lucky she didn’t take a match to me.

At the inaugural address that evening, Laing Vei continued the tone she established with me in the barn. She gripped the lectern with her stout, emery board fingers and leaned nose-first into the sticky Montpelier air.

"American students have been coddled for too long," she began, looking as though she were about to swallow a throat full of sour milk. "Good writing can't be nurse-maided into existence. It has to be pounded, punched and prodded. I'm not the motherly type," she later confessed, tugging her shirt down firmly against her stomach. "If I wanted children, I would have had them. So let's put our insecurities aside and get to work."

Thirteen poets withdrew on the spot. Seven novelists followed. Those of us who stayed—mainly the non-fiction crowd—held to the idea that our new director was little more than a figurehead, a fancy name brought on to boost enrollment. But to nobody's surprise the author of: *I Am That Tyrant You Fear: a Writer's Memoir* wasn't content to remain a mere figure head. She showed up at every workshop, every conference, a clipboard balanced on her knee and a murderous glint raging in her eye.

The pressure became unbearable. After only two days, memoirist Iris Kushner had to be rushed to the hospital for bronchial spasms. The following afternoon, poet Vance Silverberg contracted a case of diarrhea so severe he thought he was melting, and venerable Irv Weston blew out a hip trying to avoid her on the quad.

As for myself, seeing Laing Vei breeze through the thick Montpelier mornings made me feel fat-witted and dull. Only wind and fire moved at such a terrifying pace. Being made of baser elements, mostly shame and cholesterol, my body clung to the mountains, inching slowly towards the smell of breakfast, questioning with each step the accidents of history that had delivered our program to such a state.

Couldn't some bomb-laden pilot circling the seventeenth parallel have found little Laing Vei driving her ox cart through a steamy rice paddy, I wondered? Couldn't he, with just a flip of a switch, have taken her into his bomb-sight and spared the world the six novels, seven essays and twenty one short stories that gave this woman license to dump all over our heartfelt works of "suburban drive!" as she called the sum total of our creative output for the 2007 summer session?

The answer is a resounding no. My mother and her art-school minions stopped that conflict before it could pay off any meaningful dividends. With just a shake of her sun dress she managed to grind down the gears of the military industrial complex (or so she claimed) dooming her youngest, most creatively inclined child, to a life of oriental servitude.

"The reflective mind has to work harder," Laing Vei said of my essay during our workshop. She piled her bony legs on top of each other and pulled them into her chest.

"What this piece amounts to is sloppy writing. Precisely what I've come to expect from Mr. Mendelsohn and his work."

I scratched my fingers into the orange chair below me with such intensity that they tore through the vinyl cover. Laing Vei saw the sticky puffs of cotton rising through the shredded armrests and angled her lips into a malevolent smirk.

"Don't take your frustration out on the furniture, Andrew," she cautioned. "It's the only thing you've touched that has a workable form."

This time, my fingers dug clear through to the metal frame.

My mother tried to teach me about the corrosive effects of hate. She would load me into the stroller after getting my brother and sister off to school then wheel me to the park. I would sit in her lap and tug the beads of her Indian vest while she painted rays of sunshine across my face with a sticky yellow marker.

"Life is too short for bad energy." she would sing, blowing a symphony of wet raspberries into my tummy before feasting on each one of my chubby little toes. And she was right, too. Why allow yourself the poison of hate when there was so much joy bubbling at the end of your mother's lips?

But the old lady learned to hate soon enough. While the afternoon sun shined gently through her hair, a battalion of rebellious cells were subdividing beneath her chest, plotting the overthrow of her body. As the sickness advanced, she began to leave me with the sitter and drive out to the park, planting herself in the middle of a desolate field. There, undistracted by the riots of home, she would visualize the tumors in her body drying up and crumbling to the dirt.

A mantra delivered by Ira Weintraub, part time yogi and full time CPA, provided all the medicine she needed. Each afternoon she'd babble her ancient syllables to the sky waiting for the pools of toxic energy to be magically sucked from her skin.

When further testing revealed that the tumors remained moist and supple beneath her chest, she moved on to more proactive measures, actually punching herself between the ribs crying, "Out, cancer, out!" It was only after the subsequent bruising was mistaken for leukemia that she allowed herself to be admitted to the nearby hospital. And only after considerable begging did she finally consent to the first of several rounds of chemotherapy, an experience that even my mother the flower child couldn't just dream away.

And what did Laing Vei dream about at night? The gold Pulitzer medallion being draped around her neck, an evening of spooning her lover before a roaring, upstate fire, the two of them battering each other senseless with a collection of spiky dildos they purchased online from a website called Sapphic-Plastic (An incident she faithfully recorded in her 2005 essay: *The Limits of Latex*). Why should this behavior go unpunished while my mother, only thirty years before, had rotted away for the simple crime of raising a family?

Each time the surgeons wheeled my mother into the operating room she came back less like the woman I knew. The ample, earth-goddess bosoms I recalled nuzzling at the park were lopped off with a surgical machete and laid out on a cold metal tray. The soft, raspberry lips that bubbled joyously against my belly now tasted like sea salt and mercury. And the rare porcelain skin that encased her supple young body showed transparent as crepe paper.

We gathered around the hospital bed before she was whisked away for another procedure. The scene is indelibly burned into my mind. My brow-beaten father shrunk behind the lapels of his powder blue leisure suit, my short-haired sister fidgeted with the

ruffles of her dress, while my acne-covered brother wiped his runny nose along the entire length of his paisley sleeve.

Mother pulled herself wearily to her elbows. Her face was thin and ashy, purple along the temples from weeks of chemical transfusions. I remember reaching out with my fingers to trace the hollow sockets around her eyes. She quickly slapped them out of her face. "Won't somebody control him?" she barked.

After regaining her composure, she motioned the family to come in close to the bed. What happened next shouldn't have come as such a surprise. "I never wanted any of you," she snarled, the ridge of her radiated eyebrows narrowing into a bitter frown. "Any of you!" she repeated. Seconds later her elbows gave out and she collapsed on the mattress, her delicate body unable to produce the angry thud the moment seemed to call for. No one said a word. We each listened quietly to the sound of her gurgling lungs as orderlies in stiff white coats rushed her down the shiny corridor.

That night we met with a team of oncologists in the hospital chapel below the operating room. A Methodist deacon with a copy of the Old Testament ushered us through a set of wooden doors. Inside, Dr. Sklar was waiting in a pair of bloody scrubs to inform us that our mother's heart had given out. "It's the damndest thing," he said, scratching at the clumps of feathery tissue hanging off his smock. "She died with a smile."

Laing Vei rarely smiled. She had an indifferent scowl permanently stamped on her face. Her cheekbones were high and flat, more like the wings of a pelvis than anything you'd expect to find north of the collarbone. Her slender jaw housed a set of yellow, snaggletooth fangs that could have just as easily sat in the mouth of a hyena as a

human. Unlike my mother, Laing Vei had no visible curves. Beneath that short sleeve, olive green, Chairman Mao blouse sat nothing but a set of ribs and nipples, sharp angles that should have held something plump and round.

Underneath the straining buttons of my Chicago Cubs jersey sat the roundness I sought: a pair of puffy pink nipples together with a cavernous navel that expressed itself through my undershirt like a crying baby's face. I was marshmallow soft, and this woman enjoyed roasting me at every turn.

"It's not just sloppy writing," Laing Vei went on to say of my essay. "It's sentimental and bland. The author clearly knows nothing of the basic pathology of cancer. He begs for our sympathy by dangling a few maudlin images. Really, Mr. Mendelsohn, who dies with a smile?"

At this point the armrest snapped off completely in my hand.

And yet she wasn't always this cruel. To Wendell Black, our most promising author, you could find her sharing a piece of gossip or even rubbing a cramp out of his strained neck. She would seek him out during presentations to pour him a cup of the special Mekong River tea she brought back from one of her many Asian book tours.

Oh what I wouldn't have given to share a glass of that leafy Siamese river water with her or feel those bony fingers wrap around my aching neck. Would she ever hold me in her lap and paint rays of sunshine on my cheeks, or would I live forever in the aura of that snaggletooth frown, marinating in my own hatred?

I came out of the workshop nauseous and dizzy. A group of local women had formed a drum circle by the fountain. I sat down on the steps beside them and let the Cubs jersey ride up my belly, allowing the crying baby underneath to catch his breath.

Laing Vei came out of Stevenson Hall moments later. I immediately tugged my shirt down and straightened my posture. She stopped by the tennis courts to adjust some papers then moved on to the cafeteria. I wiped a line of sweat off my brow.

She turned suddenly. "I have something for you, Andrew," she called out.

"What, a punji stick?" I mumbled.

She walked over to the steps where I was seated. Her eyes seemed softer, less confrontational.

"The workshop shouldn't have gone like that, no?"

"It's part of the process, I guess," went my mumbling reply.

"Yes, but people take these things too personally. They forget it's about the work."

"Guilty as charged," I confessed.

"I'm not good at this stuff," she said, digging her sandal into the dirt. "I wrote everything down. Here," she handed me a slip of paper, "this should make sure it never happens again." She turned abruptly and headed back towards the cafeteria, but not before I could detect something of a remorseful blush painting her cheeks.

My heart soared. What magical words might be contained within this folded slip of paper? A job offer, a haiku, an invitation to tea? Something to help me move past the angry, hateful stories I'd been known to write when under such stress, the kind that had me reaching for the adolescent comfort of racial stereotypes to settle an old score when I should have been digging for a deeper, more meaningful truth.

The nameless thirteen year old narrator of Laing Vei's first novel, *Lotus of the Heart* put it best. "It seems the more love we need the less loveable we become." This was particularly true in my case, especially during the early part of the residency.

Whenever Laing Vei stepped past me on the quad I would blast Ride of the Valkyries from my lap top and announce how I loved the smell of pot stickers in the morning. And after my sixth beer, I'm told, I'd start calling her Ling Ling instead of Laing Vei and demand she put less starch in my collars. I even once remember asking if she could contact Godzilla for me because I thought I saw Mothra buzzing on the horizon. The woman wasn't even Japanese, but when wounds run that deep, any slanty-eyed insult will do. But all that would change now. It's about the work, as the great lady had told me herself. And tough love is still love after all.

I circled around the bushes to read the letter in the dappled light of the old elm tree. The rhythmic chanting of the ladies and their drumming seemed to follow me through the hedges, rising with new promise into the sky.

I unfolded the letter slowly, like a child on holiday waiting for the gift he'd been dreaming about all winter. But as I peeled those pages apart all I could see was my mother's face snarling back at me from her hospital bed.

It was a bill for the orange chair. How quickly the red blush of hope can turn to hate.

I found myself in the computer lab an hour later Googling up pictures of Hiroshima, drooling over the vengeful mushroom cloud rising over the obliterated cityscape, rejoicing in the image of eighty thousand individuals roasting in the poisonous fallout, not questioning for a moment the source of all that anger.

This America

One look at those furious green eyes was all you needed to see that Barbara Brodsky was out of her mind. They cut through space, the irises a kaleidoscope of broken glass with each shard ripping through the soft fabric of the visible world. As the summer of 1973 drew to a close, Barbara decided to fix those eyes on Moredecai "Mortie" Swinefarb, toilet paper king of Chicago's Roosevelt Park.

Barbara followed Mortie through the streets that summer, turning up at movies, arriving unannounced at parties, a fire at the back of her kaleidoscope eyes flashing brighter than the lights atop the Sears Tower, burning into every unseen corner of the city. On one occasion, Barbara followed Mortie through six miles of housing projects just to get to the synagogue where he was planning to say Kaddish for his wife Sissy even though the doctors hadn't officially pronounced the woman dead yet, just uncooperative.

There are even those who claim that Barbara was present when they finally laid Sissy into the ground; incognito, of course, for Barbara didn't want to appear desperate at the graveside; but incognito in a Nieman Marcus sort of way, for Barbara did want to appear stylish. A set of Jackie-O sun glasses glared out above a thin yellow scarf that encircled the tendons of her ravenous neck. According to reports, once Sissy's coffin came to rest, Barbara kicked her sandals into the dirt and curled her toes into the family plot. Now it was determination that spun in those furious eyes, savage and unstoppable.

And yet it was partly her mother's determination that spun in Barbara's eyes that summer, for Barbara had sworn off men after her last date, Barry Feingold, pinched her behind the salad bar at the brand new Spirit of 76 steakhouse, a possibility that Mother

Brodsky (Fannie to her friends) had tried to warn her daughter about before she went grab-assing down the street with Elsie Feingold's youngest boy.

Fannie was still in the doorway when Barbara came home from her date that night; hoping to convey a kind of kitchen sink stoicism in her flannel housecoat and orthopedic socks. Fannie had piled her snowy hair into a magnificent mountain atop her head then welded it to her skull beneath an impenetrable shield of will power and Aqua Net.

Barbara was unimpressed by her mother's appearance. She clawed her way past the old lady's hair and threw herself on the sofa, landing with a crunch against the plastic cushions.

"Why is everything so difficult?" she sobbed, her tears rolling off the laminated pillows and forming a dark circle on the Oriental rug.

"Again with the theatrics," Fannie cried. She followed her daughter to the sofa and cocked a weary hip on the edge of the credenza.

"I don't get it. You expected him to settle for ham salad and deviled eggs?"

"I expected him to be a gentleman."

Fannie looked down at the sofa as a belly full of sour gas began to ripple towards her dentures. Soon the air above the china hutch was filled with the stale aroma of cold Sanka and pickled herring.

"So you expected him to be a gentleman," the old woman lectured, folding her arms across the pleats of her stomach. "And just who told you there was anything gentle about men?"

There wasn't anything gentle about Fannie either. At sixty five she was the oldest counter girl at Kaufmann's Bakery, a woman who wore each minute of her seniority in the lines around her face, the gravity of nearly forty years of crumb cakes and apple slices driving her cheeks steadily into the floor

Mortie didn't object to the sight of that gloomy puss each morning. He would stop by Kauffman's on the way to the hospital hoping to find something beneath those weathered jowls to tempt the sickness from his wife's appetite. A little schmoozing couldn't hurt his chances; Mortie would determine on his way into the shop, not that Mortie Swinefarb needed an excuse to schmooze. He would lean into the counter, flick the rim of his fedora, and in his sugariest voice entreat from Mother Brodsky the finest of her morning labors.

"Do you think I could get one of your cinnamon coffee rolls?" Mortie would ask and then almost as an afterthought add, "young lady."

Young lady, how that killed her.

"Go on, Moredecai," Fannie would blush into the honey cake. "I'm almost twice your age."

"But love has no age," Mortie would smile back.

You could almost hear the old lady's heart give out as the syrupy words oozed past. After steadying herself against the oven door, Fannie would run her fingers across the front of her apron, feeling for the blood pressure medication she packed each morning along with a tin of peppermints to regulate her hypoglycemia.

As always, Mortie was a monument of patience during this routine. Only when certain that Fannie's stop-and-go organs would not give out in a great thrombosis of love would he lay his hands atop her trembling wrists and continue the seduction.

“So, how’s my girl?” he'd ask.

"*Gut in himmel!*" would come the ancient cry as Fannie, drawing back her wrists, would invoke the old Yiddish God of Ellis Island for protection, the one who presided over these women: their babushkas and their shopping carts, their chopped liver and their varicose veins, the great bearded patriarch who protected each of their quivering chins against the encroaching dangers of the New World, dangers that included air conditioning, automatic grocery doors, and overly familiar merchantmen with sweaty fedoras and a taste for wrinkled flesh.

Mortie would pull Fannie back to the twentieth century with a playful tug.

"Stop being childish, Fancheon. What we have is serious. The French even have a word for it."

Aroused by the use of anything continental, Fannie would lean into the counter, her flaccid cheeks suddenly aflame with all the warm blood her cholesterol-packed arteries could carry.

"What Mordecai, what do the French call it?"

"*Oyskidatz*," Mortie would answer after a nervous pause.

"*Oyskidatz*," Fannie would repeat, "this is French?"

"It's Roosevelt Park French, darling."

"But Moredecai, sweetheart, *oyskidatz* is Yiddish for crazy," Fannie would point to her head for emphasis. "You know, out to lunch."

“Precisely,” Mortie would exclaim with great relief. “Who can be rational in the presence of such beauty?”

That was all it took to send Fannie's skittering heart into overdrive. Unfortunately for Fannie, the sudden burst of excitement would savage her glucose levels as well, forcing the old girl to spend the rest of those heated afternoons sipping juice in the corner, sucking the life out of those peppermints.

“What a character,” she’d pant, slumped into the orange footstool. “And not a bad match for my Barbara either.”

The needling would begin as soon as she got home.

To force any descriptive flourishes upon the bouts of ritualized nagging that followed these heart-fluttering encounters would only bleed away from the intensity of the experience. In order to preserve the immediacy of the event then, simply imagine two women, one old and one young, both sitting in a pair of matching recliners. The recliners, each flanked by a set of crowded snack tables, are turned inward to face the fuzzy tube of a 19’ black and white television. It is important to note that neither woman makes any eye contact during the conversation, choosing instead to communicate their thoughts through the lips of Eric Sevareid and the rest of the CBS evening news team.

FANNIE: You know who's a nice man?

BARBARA: Dr. Kissinger?

FANNIE: Moredecai Swinefarb.

BARBARA: The guy with the sweaty fedora?

FANNIE: There's no shame in hard work. Your father, God rest his soul, didn't get this house by dancing for the king.

BARBARA: I know, but selling toilet paper from a cart?

FANNIE: You think it's so easy for a Jew to get a job? My Sheldon wrung chicken necks for twenty years. Are you, his only child, any less special?

BARBARA: Still, toilet paper?

FANNIE: Toilet paper, chicken necks, never ask a man how he makes his living. Under every dollar you're liable to find the thumbprint of a butcher.

BARBARA: [frowning] It's all one big punchline to you. Isn't it?"

FANNIE: [under her breath] I'll punch *you* Miss Smarty Mouth.

BARBARA: [under *her* breath] You can go ahead and try.

FANNIE: [slight pause to regroup] A real *mensch*, this Mordecai. Always insisting on the best pastries for his wife. And her with the cancer everywhere. On the wallpaper even. Such a man knows how to be good to a woman. And you, with your moods, all locked up in your room growling like a caged animal, you need all the kindness you can get. Of course, if you should want to stay home and shame your mother into an early grave."

BARBARA: Early grave? Please, you've been dying of the same heart attack since 1948. Face it, Ma, people like you live to be a hundred.

FANNIE: So you think it's funny to taunt your ailing mother? Maybe we should go down to the polio hospital next and kick around the cripples. Maybe bash in a few iron lungs while we're at it?

BARBARA: Jesus, there hasn't been a case of polio in . . .

FANNIE: You have something against polio now?

BARBARA: Do I have something against polio, listen to you. I'm just saying, maybe we should let the woman's body go cold before you marry me off to her husband.

FANNIE: Barbara, darling, your thirty four now, yes, soon to be thirty five? Who do you think's going to go cold first?

After weeks of such abuse, Barbara finally jumped into her mother's Chrysler and fired the ignition, determined to get down to the sanitary canal—where Mortie kept his cart—and see what all the fuss was about. After firing the ignition, Barbara slammed the transmission into overdrive and stomped on the accelerator. Within seconds she had obliterated the driver's side door panels of Manny Farber's brand new Buick, knocking the side view mirror out of its housing so that it hung from the window by an umbilical cord of black tape and frazzled electrical wires.

Manny, with his pants belted halfway up his neck, walked over to the lifeless contraption and took it in his hands. Baffled and helpless, he tilted it towards the sky half expecting Jehovah, in all his glory, to resurrect it with a divine spark.

Mrs. Farber, appeared at the window, curlers and all, to prompt her husband out of his grief. Stone faced, she cupped her hands around her cracked lips and called out like a wild bird.

“You don't hold it, Manny. You fix it.”

Unlike New York with its garbage-packed streets and receding ziggurat skyline, Chicago is a city of dark and crowded alleys. These alleys carve each neighborhood into two distinct areas: front and back. The eye is drawn first to the stone-faced, terra cotta, front: the gleaming milk-bottle stoops and glittering bay windows that look out onto the

obsessively swept sidewalks, the squares of Tiffany glass that hang in the vestibules between apartments. This is the neighborhood's public face.

In Roosevelt Park, this is where the ruddy-cheeked mailmen, decked out in their fancy blue uniforms, delivered packages from across the globe: jewelry, vases, dishes, whatever small treasures that could still be rescued from the ravishing Teutonic hordes of the previous war and then shipped back to America to be driven up such streets that, while not exactly paved in gold, still managed to achieve something of a hopeful luster.

Down these optimistic boulevards the portly Irish alderman would promenade each November, stately in their overcoats, one smiling hand extended on behalf of the Democratic party the other one bent sideways above their freckled heads, pressing down the sheets of combed over hair whipped vertical by the driving wind.

And it was here on Friday evenings that pious Jews still put candles in their windows to observe the Sabbath, lighting the cobblestone sidewalks beneath their flower boxes in a warm orange glow. In this soft, mournful, light people in their best suits mingled on the way home from temple making polite, if restrained, conversation, the wail of the dive bombing Stukas still a fresh enough memory to keep each family generally to themselves, sharing as they did the guilty secret of their tribe: survival

And then there was the cindery, smoke-clogged alleys where such secrets came to rest. Here, women in housecoats with cigarettes dangling from their lips pulled the laundry in with one hand while smacking their children with the other. Here, the bellowing mufflers of the old fin-tail cars belched clouds of exhaust up through the maze of telephone wires and clothes lines that crisscrossed overhead giving the appearance from a distance that the area was in revolt, as if the Jews of Roosevelt Park, having

finally achieved a foothold in the land of milk and honey, would ever burn it to the ground like those crazy *shvartzes* on the West Side with their black power and bottles of flaming gasoline.

Barbara found Mortie in the alley between the sanitary canal and the Hassidic temple, tossing a rubber baseball back to one of the boys. "Don't drop your elbow, Tishman," he shouted into the fray. "You'll never hit one straight." The sweat was collecting in a dark ring around the brim of his fedora and falling one drop at a time between his splayed feet. He plunged his fist into his t-shirt pocket fishing for the stump of an old cigar. As his meaty knuckles sank into the impossibly distended fabric, a volcano of matches, pen caps and sunflower seeds erupted over the sides, spilling on to the pavement.

After jamming the butt end of that cigar into the corner of his mouth, Mortie called out to the passing Hassidim in their fur hats and black coats. "Why are you walking so stiffly, Rabbi, has the Lord smote your *tuchas*?"

He could have been talking to any of them, but it was Rabbi Hyrum Werner, limping from the great red rash spreading out between his cheeks, who turned to answer the toilet man's brazen call.

"You've scrubbed yourself raw with that cheap synagogue sand paper again, haven't you? How many times have I told you, Hyrum, with Grossbart down the street you get what you pay for?"

He approached the old scholar with a handful of samples from his cart.

"Here, your holiness," Mortie smiled. "Allow yourself a small, secular pleasure." At this point Mortie lifted to the Rabbi's face, like the Torah itself, a gleaming roll of

Heavenly Bouquet, his most celebrated product. Had a nearby bush suddenly burst into flames the old Rabbi could not have been any more transfixed.

"Go on," Mortie encouraged, pushing the soft roll over to the Rabbi's face.

"Touch it." A pair of gnarled fingers reached out from a sleeve of shiny gabardine to take a timid squeeze.

"Nice, huh?" Mortie nudged. "Two plies of paradise right here on earth. It's the same stuff they use over at the Palmer House. Why should Frank Sinatra and his entourage sitting in booth one have all the comfort in life? Between you and me Rabbi, one roll of this stuff and we won't need to wait for a messiah, the whole universe will open up to our command, with our undersides smiling their thanks for all eternity.

Seduced by the promise of a smiling underside, the Rabbi lifted the fur hat off his head and reached inside the damp lining for the few rusty Sheckles he kept tucked away for a rainy afternoon. Sheckles being a euphemism for the old world currency these holy men no longer transacted their business in, as the zealous congregants of Temple Shalom were more securely invested than half the bankers on Wall Street, or LaSalle Street, as the case may be.

Mortie waved a hand violently in front of his face.

"Absolutely not, Rabbi. For you, free. But maybe after the next holiday, when the donation plates are full, you should consider treating your whole congregation to such luxury, for as the Talmud says..."

The old Rabbi stopped Mortie with a frown, knitting his brow into a look so intense it may have been God's own eyes glaring in disappointment.

"And who are you," The Rabbi blurted out, "the Tevea of toilet paper?"

The sudden decent into the vernacular shocked Mortie,

“This is my life you’re mocking,” the Rabbi proceeded, “not some traveling road production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I live these traditions you scorn. They give me energy and balance. A sense of connection to almost six thousand years of history. That’s a lot of years to turn your back on just for the sake of a few quick jokes.”

“I’m sorry, Rabbi,” Mortie said. “I was just trying to make a point.”

“I understand, Mordecai, but tell me, as an intellectual experiment, what is it you have against your people? To hate is sin enough, but to hate one’s self...”

“Let me stop you right there, Rabbi. I’m not one of those self-hating Jews you read about in one of your scholarly journals. If you must know, I’m a Jew hating Jew. A man fed up with the physical and emotional stinginess of his tribe. Seriously, would it kill you to shave? I carry a very nice line of lotions. You’ll look ten years younger. And the toilet paper, my goodness, why must you people be so cheap? You’ll suffer for weeks with an inferior product just because that *chazzer* down the street Grossbart promises to save you a few pennies.”

“This is how you answer my question,” the Rabbi broke in. “Evasions?”

“The God’s honest truth, Hyrum, when my Sissy first got sick I came into your synagogue. You were visiting Mitzy Cohen in the hospital, administering to her ingrown toenail or some other ridiculous thing. Rabbi Girshbaum agreed to see me. Girshbaum of the Cossacks and the pogroms and the sneaking out of Warsaw in a coffin just so he could say Kaddish for his father. I told him about the problems with my Sissy, about the tumors that were chewing out her guts, about my three soon to be motherless children. And what did Girshbaum do? He swung his chair to the window so he could face the skyline and

throwing his arms to his side cried out, ‘Ach, this America!’ then shook his head weeping. His verdict? My wife was dying because we had turned our backs on our religion, somehow merged with that skyline, rejecting God in the process. Glass and steel idols, he called those buildings. As if I intended *them* to Bar Mitzvah my children instead of you. I’m a reasonable man, Hyrum. I don’t expect miracles. I came with an honest question. I deserved an honest answer

The Rabbi’s eyes softened. He returned his hat to his head and kicked a dark stone over the railing and into the muddy canal.

That shouldn’t have happened,” Rabbi Werner acknowledged. “Girshbaum is old. He shouldn’t be talking to a lox, let alone a layman. But you and I are going to have to reach an accommodation someday, Mordecai. I can’t afford to lose any more reasonable people. Have you seen my congregation? More wheelchairs than a retirement home. Half my flock has run off to the country, or do they call them the suburbs now, where the rivers run with Pepsi and the hills are cooled by air from Westinghouse. At Temple Isaiah in Willowstone, they have velvet chairs that vibrate to relive back pressure. I can’t compete with vibrating pews, Mordecai. I spend my time reading Torah and contemplating the infinite, not having bake sales and sponsoring sisterhood productions of *South Pacific*.

“Ah, this is true,” Mortie interrupted, shaking a roll of Heavenly Bouquet in front of the Rabbi’s face. “But you can’t get the good stuff up there, now can you? A few cases of this and the chosen people will once again be choosing you for their spiritual salvation. Filling your old pews from armrest to armrest just to get a crack at your well stocked toilets.”

“All right Mordecai,” The Rabbi relented. “I’ll bring the matter up to the board after the New Year and see about placing an order. But you and I will talk again, we have much to discuss. Your children for one.

“Their spiritual salvation?”

“Their lack of a mother.”

Something took hold of Barbara that afternoon. She began to stalk Mortie through the city like a lion on the savannah. Up and down the Roosevelt Parkway, inside Drenka’s deli where he installed a new set of dispensers for Drenka and her incontinent father. Inside the yeshiva where he restocked Rabbi Isadore’s private commode and then lowered the water pressure so that the old man would have to use more product. And finally, speeding past Harry Grossbart’s stand on the other side of the canal where he called out to Harry from the window of his passing Chevelle, “Hey, Harry, guess who doesn’t have the toilet paper concession at Temple Shalom anymore? You, ya’ fat shmuck!”

Three weeks after they laid Sissy in the ground, Barbara hit on a plan to snag the toilet king for good. She decided to sneak into the back seat of his Chevelle while he was closing down his cart and surprise him on the way home from work. All day she dreamed about the meeting, the shock and delight of leaping into his arms. The heart-melting quiver of receiving his first kiss. Something in his soft, brown eyes—her father’s eyes really, or what she remembered of her father’s eyes—deepened the attraction, made it seem safe and familiar, yet somehow thrilling and forbidden.

It was a smell too. Something Barbara caught on the wind: Old Spice, perhaps, or Aramis, or maybe just the thick summer air drenched in the toilet man’s potent

pheromones, sucked in through the air conditioning vents of the overheated Chrysler. It made Barbara flushed and dizzy, just like Fannie at the bakery.

Barbara pulled a tissue out of the small plastic case she carried in her handbag and began to blot the corners of her face and neck. The sheets of perspiration made her realize there was something different about this feeling. This wasn't the scentless, non-committal attractions she felt for men like Barry Feingold, Elsie's boy, who got all aggressive with her behind the salad bar of the Spirit of 76 Steakhouse. It was something deeper, something limbic, something coursing through her liver that made her feel all hot and cold at the same time.

The sun was setting above the muddy waters of the sanitary canal. Floating in the brown current were wads of red white and blue bunting left over from the Independence Day festivities. There was something resilient about that bunting. It seemed to ride the restless currents of sewage instead of being devoured by them. Perhaps hope springs eternal, Barbara thought watching the flotilla pass below her feet. Perhaps we are all tougher than we think.

A voice from the limbic darkness: "Don't trust hope."

Barbara tried to shake off the encroaching gloom, her mother's gloom she realized, carried over to this country after centuries of oppression and filth. She thought of Mortie and his Chevelle, of his soft eyes and quick wit. The gloom receded for a moment. All will be well tomorrow night, Barbara concluded. Providence has things safely in hand.

All the same, she stopped at Knuteson's Hardware before she went home to purchase a crowbar and a slimjim.

How Les and Libby Stomach the Suburbs

or

What Makes Mortie Run

Mortie Swinefarb, recently widowed toilet paper entrepreneur, strapped himself to the family commode nearly every morning at six o'clock. From high atop his rusty throne, the self-proclaimed king of the Swinefarb family would fire off a series of long dry farts so deep and penetrating they seemed to echo in the bowl for hours.

Mortie was never shy about his accomplishments. "Did you hear that, kids?" he'd boast while unleashing another furious round of methane into the pot. "Men half my age have their insides locked up tighter than a bank vault. Your Uncle Lester for one, up there in his brand new fancy-pants castle, he can't fill his toilet with a shovel and a mule. But look at your old man; he's crapping like a slot machine!" With that, Mortie would grip the sides of the bowl and launch into something that sounded like Viva Las Vegas.

Meanwhile, from deep inside his fancy-pants castle, Les Sizzelman would continue to strain bitterly, hoping to squeeze out a few measly kernels of last night's salmon patties or stuffed peppers. It wasn't for a lack of effort that the big man's labors went so thoroughly unrewarded. He ate pound after pound of dried figs, crates of Exlax (both liquid and chocolate) and even snorted lines of pulverized bran powder, a cure he took from the back page of the 1937 Farmer's Almanac. But no amount of home remedy could break the iron grip that suburban living had gained over the big man's guts. Something drastic had to be done.

The wind was whipping the trees of Willowstone sideways the night that Libby Sizzleman determined to confront her ailing husband. A new resolve took hold of

her face, lifting her basset hound cheeks into the snarling aspect of a Rottweiler. Wind or not, she would deliver her Lester to that new specialist downtown.

"And if *he* can't help you," she warned, folding her arms across the front of her polyester jump suit, "then it's the goddamn plumbers!"

Upon hearing this ultimatum, Lester wrapped his knuckles around the wooden bannister and pulled his body up the staircase, determined to lock himself inside the master bathroom before his wife could voice an additional note of complaint. He damn near slammed the door off the hinges in the explosion of rage that followed.

Under no circumstances would he, Les Sizzelman, hand his money over to some high-priced doctor just so the man could bend a flashlight up his backside and then charge him for the privilege. Les Sizzelman would open his blockaded body the only way Les Sizzelman knew how: by the application of pure will. And that was that. Or so the slamming door was meant to say.

Libby unfolded her bracelet-clad arms as the door crashed shut overhead and retreated to the safety of the kitchen. There, she brought a pot of prunes to boil, believing that when it came to her husband's digestion, it never hurt to have a backup plan. As the sad aroma of warm prunes began to drift through the dining area, Libby began to worry that she might have to move the enema bag to a more accessible drawer.

"Please, God," Libby whispered to any available deity, "not the enema."

Libby Moser had steeled herself for many things during the course of her marriage to Les Sizzelman: his hairy feet scratching her under the covers at night; his insistence that she call him "Big Lester" during sex; and of course the rage-fueled

outbursts that drove them from therapist to therapist until only the free ones at the Jewish Community Center would consent to treatment.

But staring into that dark vat of prunes, Libby was beginning to realize there are some things even the well-meaning counselors at the Jewish Community Center can't fully prepare you for.

"When did my life become a Philip Roth novel?" Libby asked the appliances in her kitchen with a defeated look.

"When you started replacing the people in your life with things," replied the Oster 6000 Food Processor.

"The moment you let your insides rule your outsides," added the cabinet full of Maalox.

"Prunes?" Grandma Rose inquired, emerging from her basement apartment with an armful of folded boxes. "The man is up to his eyeballs in mortgage papers and aggravation and you want to fill him with hot fruit? A stick of dynamite, maybe, to loosen the hold your cooking has over his *gaderum*, not shriveled plums."

"My husband's *gaderum* is none of your concern," Libby scolded her mother.

"Don't tell me what my concern is," Rose warned as she reached for the roll of tape sitting on the counter. "At my age everything is a concern."

"Oh, go fold your boxes," Libby frowned.

As far back as Libby could remember her mother was always packing things into boxes, securing them with duct tape and labeling them for storage. It was not only putting things into boxes that gave her pleasure—heaven forbid the Germans should return—it

was the piling and the labeling that she loved, so high and tight no one would dare disturb them.

"Let me tell you about prunes," Rose announced as she dragged a seam of tape across the cardboard flaps between her knees. "Back in my village of Tabachnick, Yodle the rag salesman was blocked up just as badly as your husband. For fifteen days the town nurses stuffed him with hot prunes until one night—KABOOM—his stomach exploded, entrails scattered across the ceiling like sausages."

"I'm sure it happened just like that," Libby dismissed with a snort.

"Of course, his wife couldn't cook either," Rose snorted back. "But that's because Yodle married a Ukrainian girl with blond hair and blue eyes just like that Mimzy Bancroft across the street with the willow trees half way up her *pupick* and the old darkie fussing after her like she's Scarlet O'Hara. And just who does she think she's kidding with that tennis skirt at sixty five years old? Who are these people that we've moved in with, Libby? *Goyim*, that's who. White people.

"For Christ's sake, Ma, it's 1973; nobody talks like that anymore."

"Yes, yes, I've seen the commercial. We're all part of the same rainbow, a bottle of Coca-Cola in one hand and a smiling *schvartze* in the other. Forget the dreams of television, Libby. The world isn't some soda pop rainbow. It's a ghetto, bitter and cruel. And the lessons we learn mashed up against our own people don't just fall away once you reach the fancy hills of this Willowstone."

Libby found herself searching the prairie outside her window for any sign of these fancy hills even though she knew her mother was always misreading the terrain when it came to people and their soft drinks.

"It's in here," Rose said, thumping her daughter on the chest. And then she pointed out the window to the towering homes across Farnsworth Avenue. "Sure, you can smile at them, make small talk about what you saw on the television last night, but they're not Jewish. How do you know what they think?"

The lump welling in Libby's throat confirmed that her mother's theories were not entirely off base. Some days Libby could feel that ghetto fear pushing through her body like a river of warm sludge, driving her to duck behind the pyramid of canned peaches at the grocery store whenever she saw Mimzy Bancroft conducting her cart through the produce aisle like some untouchable queen, selecting long stalks of asparagus or plump strings of grapes as if they were grown specifically for her pleasure. Fear was the inheritance of the ghetto, and no matter how many appliances Libby packed into her kitchen, it would mark her like a scarlet F.

A dreadful barrage of grunts came booming through the bathroom walls. Libby felt her eyes shift nervously to the enema drawer.

"You still think he wants a glass of prunes?" Rose asked, fluffing the collar of her housecoat with a triumphant smile.

You couldn't fault Old Rose for the sudden burst of pride. After nearly thirty five years of darkness, the light of fashion had finally shined on her rumpled shoulders. The white hair and blue housecoat she donned shortly before escaping Poland had been sported by no less than Golda Meir the previous summer. Not that Rose cared, but if the Prime Minister of Israel could address the United Nations in this outfit, then she could certainly handle the mood swings of her increasingly grumpy daughter.

Each morning, following Golda's example, Rose would twist her hair into an explosion of grey clumps. She felt the coif gave her an additional air of authority, suggesting not only her blessed Golda to passersby, but Albert Einstein and David Ben-Gurion as well. Eccentric hair being the prerogative of Jewish genius, according to Rose.

Rose crowned this ensemble with a pair of discount reading glasses so thick that it made each eyeball in her head stand out like a ceramic dinner plate. Were it not for the smells of dried fish and cold chicken that clung to her body, giving it a hint of metaphysical ballast, you might not think that Rose Moser was real, but rather some horrible cartoon creation liable to drift off at any moment.

Being the author of her own stereotype though, Old Rose was not terribly affected by the accusations regularly leveled at her by irate members of the local Hadassah.

"Should I want to be any different?" she'd curtly reply over brunch. "This is a cartoon country, to make an impression you need to paint in broad strokes."

"And besides," she'd continue to her daughter Libby at dinner, "who am I, Cookie Kleinberg with her frosted hair and that *facacta* green shrub she stuffs into her family room every holiday? What is a 'Hanukah Bush' anyway?"

No, Rose Moser was not Cookie Kleinberg. She didn't assimilate at the point of a candy cane and eight tiny reindeer. She had survived Hitler's genocide dressing like this, so she figured she'd survive the Temple Shalom chapter of the Hadassah as well.

"I think there's a brick in my stomach!" Big Lester shouted.

Libby felt the blood drain from her face.

"You want I should go up there?" Rose asked, wiggling an index finger above her head. "It's how we cured the impacted livestock of Tabachnick."

"Absolutely not!" Libby shrieked. "My husband is not the village mule."

"Of course he isn't," Rose agreed. "The mule made less noise."

"What's that, Mother?"

"You want we should listen to this all night, then?"

"Yes, Ma. Until the Messiah comes and rings my Lester's bowels between his blessed fingers."

"Alright, no need to get snippy. I was only thinking of your husband."

"Of my husband," Libby laughed, catching sight of the finger her mother bent eagerly at her side. "Your kind of help, I don't think he needs."

Rose was not about to let her daughter's attitude go unpunished. She quickly gathered up her pocketbook and went barreling towards the door.

"Really," Libby sighed, "this again."

But Rose could not be stopped.

"Let *'Mrs. Ungrateful'* get the twins from ballet," she growled as she scooped her keys off the end table. "Let *'Mrs. I'm-too-good-to-help-my-impacted-husband'* pack away the rest of the Passover dishes," she barked as she fastened the neckerchief around her steaming forehead. "I know when I'm not wanted."

Before reaching the door, Rose stopped in the foyer to make her final goodbye. Curling her hand into a megaphone, she lifted her face to the ceiling.

"Yoo-hoo, Mr. clench-bottom, I'm off to your brother-in-law Mortie's house to spend the night. They may not have as much as you, but at least they get the job done."

"Enough, Ma," Libby cried. "If you're going already, then go."

“Going,” Rose mocked. “Who’s going?” And then she lifted her face one last time to the ceiling, “I’m the only one *going* in this house!”

Libby collapsed into the sofa as the sound of her mother’s Oldsmobile went backfiring down the driveway. It was times like these that she missed her sister most of all, times she needed the extra back of Sissy Swinefarb to help shoulder the old-world insanity of their temperamental mother. Some days she thought Sissy got off easy with the cancer. What’s the eternal sleep of death when compared to another holiday with Rose? Or, God help her, a lifetime with crazy Mortie and the kids.

Not long after these thoughts ran guiltily through Libby’s head, a seismic plop was heard splashing down in the upstairs toilet. The long sigh of relief which accompanied this miracle rang through the Sizzelman house like a chorus of church bells announcing the end of a long plague.

But as Libby’s eyes surveyed the disaster area that had become her home—the stack of bills piled on the desk; the heap of laundry spilling out of the hamper; and the shredded ballet slippers rotting in the corner—she felt a stab of anxiety pinch her own *gaderum*.

So this was the price of escaping the city, Libby mused as she folded her arms across her bloated stomach, a prairie-sized constipation that bore down on anyone who pushed north of The Roosevelt Park Highway. A wince of pain escaped her lips as she attempted to massage away the high cost of freedom. It was quickly answered by a thundering yelp from the upstairs john.

“Here I go again,” Big Lester cried.

A set of church bells rang somewhere in the distance. Libby pulled her knees into her chest. In a few days little Gentiles would go scrambling across her neighbor's lawns searching for colored eggs and cellophane bunnies. Everything would be powdered and pink unlike the streets of Roosevelt Park where a driving rain would bring scores of earthworms to the surface in an ecstasy of slime and mud.

The truth was simple: Libby's stomach ran like a faucet back in Roosevelt Park; Lester's too. Here, everything dried up except the watered lawns. She could just see her crazy brother-in-law Mortie, king of the Swinefarbs, beaming atop his Roosevelt Park throne, flushing turd after turd into the muddy lake while her defeated husband slumped over an empty pot. Maybe there was something medicinal in the streets of the old neighborhood that was missing from the lawns of Willowstone. Maybe the old Yiddish proverb her mother recited each morning was truer than she wanted to admit: live with the *Goyim* and lose your *gaderum*.

"God damn it!" Lester shouted. "Is that all there is?"

"I'm stewing some prunes," Libby called hopefully up the stairs.

"Forget the damn prunes, Libby. You know what I need."

"Not really, Les. I'm not a mind-reader." She was going to make him say it.

"You know . . . the thing."

"The *thing*?"

"The contraption."

"You mean the *en-e-ma*?"

"Jesus, Libby, don't pronounce it. Just bring it."

A light clicked on in the house across the street. Inside, Mimzy Bancroft was pouring her first glass of scotch while her husband fed logs into a glowing fire. *Goyim*, Libby thought as she untangled a length of hose from the drawer beside the refrigerator.

"Today, Libby!" Lester hollered through the floor.

"I'm coming!" Libby hollered back.

Under such circumstances Libby should have grown resentful, become what her analyst called "self-loathing." But the fact remained that Libby never felt more connected to her Judaism than when she was perched atop the vanity hosing out her husband's behind. It was a kind of intimacy the Bancrofts, with their warm fires and mellow scotch, would never know. And while this might strike some as a massive rationalization, it was enough to bring Libby up the stairs each week to service her husband in a way that no spouse, Jew or Gentile, should have to experience more than once.

The Bosom of Abraham

I was eight years old the last time I saw my babysitter, Othena Baines, the grown woman Aunt Sophie called, "the girl." That would have made her son Cyrus nine. The three of us spent the majority of our evenings lounging before one of the giant screens at the Wellington Theatre, a converted burlesque house just across from Miss Othena's federally subsidized apartment. There was a time when we would have simply gathered before the television and improvised an antenna from whatever coat hangers or soda bottles we found lying on the floor. But after reading an article in her adult literacy class entitled, "Putting the Lid Back on the Idiot Box," Othena came to believe that its presence in her home was the sole reason she could not achieve the promise of the American Dream.

In a fury one afternoon she hoisted the contraption up on her thick shoulders and dragged it three flights down to the laundry room where she left it for the bewildered Kim family who had just finished drying a load of whites. Cyrus and I looked on from the hallway.

"We don't need your garbage," Mr. Kim snapped sharply, his slim eyes narrowing against Othena's imposing frame.

"No, we certainly do not," added his wife in a huff, not realizing that her two children had already rushed over to the television, dropped before its cooling tube, and waited like disciples at the tomb of Christ for the retreating circle of light to come suddenly back to life.

"Big Bird, Big Bird!" the kids cried into the darkening screen, hoping their desperate invocations might coax just one more squawk of life out of that dying box.

And that's how assimilation begins; the elder Kims must have worried seeing their children thrust upon their knees: first, a disrespect for their parental authority, followed by a gradual abandonment of their native tongue, and finally, a total disregard for the teachings of the Korean Church. Mrs. Kim tried to hurry her children out of the laundry room, but as she rushed them towards the door she noticed they kept checking on the flickering green light behind them. It would be murder getting little Woo Jong and Min Jong to study their Bibles tonight, Mrs. Kim appeared to realize hearing her kids pine for the terrycloth monsters of Public Television, or sit at their cellos tomorrow. A compromise had to be reached. Regardless of what the zodiac hanging in Mr. Kim's restaurant said about dragons and rats, Mrs. Kim understood that 1978 would be the year of the Muppet.

Though hardly a Muppet, 1978 found my father manipulated in a similar fashion. It was the year that Sol Nudelman (of Nudelman's Supply House) took him off the street, separating him from the place where he had come into his manhood hustling french-fry bags and wax paper to the vendors on Randolph Street. I was there the day old man Nudelman delivered the news.

"Al," he said, throwing his rubbery arm across my father's shoulder, "this is the first time a non-Nudelman has been given such a promotion. We don't just pull any schmuck off the street and make them a junior vice president you know. We give you this honor because we trust you, because to us you're family, and family always deserves to have a little extra on their plate."

And indeed the Mendelsohn plate became much fuller that year, allowing us to move into a bigger house with better trees and a long empty driveway that circled the

property. But it was clear to everyone, including Nudelman, that my father had lost something of his vitality being cut off from the street. His shoulders began to slouch more as the year dragged on, curving over his spine into that defeated question mark he had only recently erected himself from since our mother's passing. Evenings were the worst, countless hours wasted before the television as he tried to dream his lost lover out of the test patterns and particles of passing static. Breezy summer nights at the Edgewater Hotel were always interrupted by the sudden jump in volume that accompanied Johnny Carson's return from the commercial break; Karnack the Magnificent unable to divine a cure for my father's paralyzing sense of loss or my mother's ravenous tumors.

He began dragging me to Miss Othena's more often, ostensibly to see Cyrus, but mostly, I believe, to reconnect with the city that sired him, the one that kept him upright and hustling when the rest of the world seemed determined to break his back.

The skyline stretched out immensely on those long drives south, rising like a steel stepladder all the way to the downtown Loop. My father's hulking frame seemed to swallow the wheel as he navigated those congested lanes. Every mile or so a pile of cigar ashes would build up between his fists until a sudden turn would sweep them out across his body. Covered in ashes, it must have seemed to the passing motorists as if my father was in a perpetual state of mourning, grieving some unreachable loss. But at a closer range you noticed a resiliency about him, a strength you could not imagine being crippled by something as incorporeal as grief.

As the summery hues of the outlying suburbs gave way to the creeping shadows of the city, a spark would return to his eye. Brushing the soot from his chest, he'd push his body away from the steering wheel and pull me tightly against his ribs. Together, we

would recite the names of the streets as they passed: Montrose, Addison, Fullerton, and so on until a warm glow would wash across his cheeks and settle into his stomach.

Hearing me crack off those names like a regular cab driver, he would lay his hand atop my soft head and begin to finger the curls that spiraled off my scalp; the ones Aunt Sophie never forgot to remind him had populated his own head when he was just a boy.

"Oy, a little darkie should only have such lovely curls," Aunt Sophie would say, never fully convinced that her baby brother wasn't the product of a secret union between their tiny Jewish mother and the *schvartze* Jazz musician she used to give nickels to on the way to the bus station.

As preposterous as it sounds, I would sometimes try to imagine my father as the product of that union, a man with as much soul running through his veins as sorrow. It didn't take much to summon the vision. He would regularly scat along with Ella Fitzgerald on those long drives south or blow imaginary trumpets with Miles Davis. Occasionally, when the music moved him, he would pull over at the specialty clothing store on Maxwell Street to try on the latest urban styles. Looking at him with an orange turtleneck held up against his white button-down work shirt, I thought he'd make a fantastic Negro. "Buy it, daddy," I'd beg, pulling at the pleats of his stiff blue trousers. "Buy it, please." He would linger at the mirror for a while, tilting the orange turtleneck across his chest, until all at once he'd exhale a sharp "Naaaaaah," and usher me out of the store under an oppressive cloud of guilt.

Whose guilt, I was never quite sure.

Somewhere around Madison Avenue this stepladder of a city would rise into one impenetrable wall of glass and steel. As the car neared the Madison Avenue exit, my eyes

would instinctively lock shut, fearing our little Ford Maverick would be flattened against all that surging metal. But the city of Chicago doesn't work that way. It doesn't crush you against its iron facade; it recedes before your ambition, sucking you in through its network of converging arteries before it finally slams you between its legendary big shoulders.

It was more or less what was happening to my father at the time, a gridlock of competing emotions all converging on his chest, locking it up in secret spasms. Men of my father's generation had yet to learn how to deal with the grieving process. To them, emotions belonged in the suburbs of the body, leaking out along the sinuses or straining the muscles at the back of the neck. Let it migrate to the interior, they said, and it bubbled into cancer, each swallowed grief another tumor waiting to explode across a vital organ.

My father must have registered at least a subliminal awareness of that old wives tale for he held me so close during these rides that I thought I could feel all his unspoken grief pushing through my body. As the buildings swallowed us into their shadows, I'd curl into my father's lap and fall asleep dreaming of my future, one that seemed to stretch out with as much wonder and mystery as the skyline rising up all around us. Curled into the ashtray of his lap, I'd sometimes wonder how a person could love something as fully as my father loved his family without being somehow diminished by the process.

"The Negroes abandon their children in dumpsters," Aunt Sophie would say, flipping through the afternoon paper. "But what do you expect of these people, they have no sense of family. Only animals treat children like that, Ari—animals!"

But an animal is free, Sophie, I want to scream into the past, free from guilt and some say free from grief. Watching my father at the clothing store I worried that he

missed that kind of freedom. And that one day, given the attitude of the decade, he would reinvent himself as one of those hedonistic, child-abandoning Negroes and leave us to chase a series of feather-headed divorcees across the dance-clubs of the Midwest.

"Oh go on," I can just hear Aunt Sophie reply. "Your father is a good Jewish boy. Good Jewish boys don't just run off from their families."

But how many good Jewish boys were crowding the discos that year, Sophie? Polishing up their eighteen carat Stars of David before washing down their bodies with gallons of Hai Karate? You must remember that your brother was impulsive when it came to love, proposing to my mother after only three dates. Patterns repeat. At some point, Sophie, we're both going to have to accept that during much of the 1970s your little nephew was never more than one Harvey's Bristol Cream away from the orphanage. And that part of him, anticipating your smug remarks about "good Jewish boys" might have rooted for him to do just that.

Thankfully, such stubborn childhood paranoia didn't last long. Miss Othena's front window opened onto the abutting Woodlawn district like a great proscenium arch, driving whatever concerns I had about my father's marital status directly from my head. Drawing back the thick, green curtains, Othena's son Cyrus and I were allowed unprecedented access to one of the most vibrant neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side.

And yet I couldn't bring myself to look through those curtains for more than a few seconds at a time. Directly across the street, fastened to a sign above Sweet Willie's Liquors, grazed the meaty, bovine eminence of the Schlitz Malt Liquor Bull. He was a fearsome sight, that bull, with muscular blue shanks that glistened nightly through the cold air while jets of hot smoke burst from his nostrils to pummel the pavement below.

He had garnered a terrifying reputation over the years by exploding through the walls of unsuspecting homeowners to deliver his intoxicating blend of barley, malt and hops. Even though it was only a commercial, I was certain that one day soon he was going to do the same thing to me.

The threat of that looming explosion drove me to fits of weeping that Miss Othena was at a total loss to quell. On the worst days—the gray ones that brought out the neon most distinctly—I’d rush off to the bathroom and lock myself inside for hours, refusing to come out until she assured me that not one hair on my curly head would ever feel the steam of those furious nostrils. These fits would derail poor Cyrus, driving him to sink behind the radiator and chew the skin off his thumbs.

Eventually I would unlock the bathroom door and join Cyrus behind the radiator. Seeing this, Othena would scoop the pair of us up in her arms and begin to sway us back and forth, massaging our frazzled nerves with a chorus from an old spiritual she learned from her grandmother back in Mississippi. My meager writing skills can’t do justice to the healing power of Othena’s voice, but the chorus went something like this:

Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham

Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham

Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham

Oh, rock my soul.

“You know, Abraham was the first Jewish patriarch,” Aunt Sophie would remind me whenever I broke into Othena’s song. “He was the father of our people. And let me assure you,” she’d say, pushing her lower lip out as if she were suddenly the mammy from *Gone With the Wind*, “he didn’t keep no darkies in his bosom.”

It was Cyrus who helped me overcome my fear of the bull. He would drag me to the window and demand I become complicit in his secret voyeurism.

"You see those bitches?" he'd say, pointing to the collection of bruised limbs gathered into the ring of the bull's dreary light. "Those are the women who work this area. When the whistle blows at four-thirty they go over and have sex with the men who come out of the meat factory for money."

"Wow, sex for money," I'd echo.

"And you see over by the phone booth? Those are the men who all those dumb bitches work for."

"Bitches?"

"*Bitches.*"

"Wow."

"One day I'm gonna' be a pimp," he'd say, straightening himself before his reflection in the window. "Gonna' run this whole damn city. And ain't no Big Momma gonna tell me what to do."

Nine years of bitterness seemed to converge on his lower lip as he stood before his reflection, filling it with a sense of hunger that I could only access through my imagination. Stepping away from the window, he'd narrow his eyebrows into a fierce "V" and focus all that hunger into a pinpoint above his nose. Once he was certain he'd gotten the expression just right, he'd step back to the sill and shoot that hungry scowl into the glass, hoping to pulverize each childlike feature that smiled back.

Already over five feet tall at the age of nine, Cyrus had the deceptive sort of muscularity which only revealed itself in movement. It was a body that tensed in action

only to resolve into baby fat whenever he came to a stop. Above those mounds of baby fat, Cyrus wore a scattering of mole-like flecks so indiscriminate that it looked like someone had loaded up a shotgun full of freckles and blasted it across his face.

Miss Othena had caught us pressing our freckles up against the window that day and was fit to be tied. We were watching the second-shift woman prepare for the four-thirty whistle and wagering on which ones would do the most business.

"Go on now," Miss Othena cried, "how many times I got to tell you to keep away from that window?"

"Aw ma," Cyrus complained.

"Don't 'aw ma' me," Othena instructed. "Ain't nothing down there but a bunch of lazy, no good niggers."

"But momma," Cyrus replied, just a hint of confrontation in his voice, "ain't I a nigger too?"

Miss Othena drew in a sharp breath of air.

"Ain't we both niggers?" he continued, "What's wrong with being a nigger?"

Silence followed the remark, ominous and profound like the anxious stretch of time that falls out between the lightning and the thunder. Then, with a hand that seemed to reach back to the dawn of creation, Miss Othena brought a smack down across her child's face that nearly knocked an order into all those shotgun freckles.

Cyrus bit down on his lower lip as he attempted to shake off the trauma of his mother's fist. Othena was unfazed by the effort. "Ain't no niggers up in this house," she insisted. "You hear me? Ain't no niggers up in this house."

An inbound "L" train released a flurry of paint chips as it went screaming by the window.

The snowy fragments billowed to the ground, dusting both Othena and her son as they fell.

"That hurt," Cyrus said.

"I know," Othena replied.

They kept their eyes locked until the outbound train went rumbling by in the opposite direction. Unable to bear the tension, Cyrus turned his head to scrutinize the second wave of falling chips. They drifted gracefully on unseen waves of air, riding invisible currents to all corners of the apartment. Cyrus dropped his chin to his chest and rolled his eyes upward, searching for some kind of détente in this escalating war of wills.

Othena answered her son's peace offering with a contemptuous snort, and then strutted off to the bedroom, snapping her fingers in a triumphant circle around her head.

Lifting a hand to massage his smarting cheek, Cyrus mumbled only too audibly to his mother's retreating back. "Ain't no niggers up in this house but YOU!"

When Othena returned from the bedroom she had a white cigarette slanted across her face. In sloppy, red slashes the filter picked up all the lipstick she must have just thrown on. Cyrus stood firmly on the spot where he'd been smacked, hoping to call his mother to a sort of moral attention as she passed. She didn't give him a second look.

"Go on and pull that chicken out of the fridge at five," she said, gathering up her things, "and try to wipe up some of this paint while I'm gone. And don't let me catch you looking out that window. I've got eyes in the trees, boy, and ears in the wind, and if I find

you be at that window, well, you know what I'll do." And then she pulled her heavy jacket across her thick shoulders and slung her purse across her back.

"Okay, baby, no sugar from momma now. Momma's got to go do her shopping. Remember, get that chicken out of the fridge at five, drag a broom across this hallway, and for God's sake make sure that boy don't run off to my toilet again. Poor child think he gonna' flush his way home."

Cyrus's lips began to quiver as the door slammed past his face. My heart squeezed up in my chest as I watched his chin weaken and his eyebrows start to shake. With the sounds of the city bubbling up through the windows, I decided to offer my friend the only solace I could.

"Do you wanna' play Nigger?" I asked.

"Let's give her a couple minutes," he answered, nosing back a drippy tear.

Playing Nigger, as we called it, began innocently enough. About two months before this incident, feeling an absence in our lives exacerbated by the images we soaked up nightly from the street, Cyrus and I took to putting on his mother's wigs and stuffing rolled sweat-socks down the front of our pants. Once dressed up, we'd throw open the window and flip on the stereo, hoping to catch a simulcast of last week's episode of Soul Train so that we could identify, however briefly, with the effortless cool of Don Cornelius and the unreachable sex appeal of his manly voice

We each took turns strutting across the living room, primping our afros and adjusting our bulges. It was amazing how much those little wads of rolled cotton altered our gait. It allowed us to add a unique rhythm to our walk, pronounce a manly limp by

dragging our right leg heavily behind the left as if the additional weight in our pants could no longer withstand the constrictions of the average suburbanite's stride.

It was the stride of my father all scrunched up against the wheel of his little Ford Maverick, I must have realized on some level. And it was the stride of his father, too, nursing his hunched extremities all the way home from the garment factory where he was never allowed to fully expand into his body. And it was the stride of the Nudelmans, all six of them, fussing over the polish of the mahogany conference table where they repeatedly called my father to task.

We fell into a particularly engaging scenario that day. Big Momma, as Cyrus had come to call our nemesis, was trying to take over the street. She had kidnapped all the second-shift girls and kept them fenced inside an area behind the meat factory. And there Big Momma beat them every day. Beat them because she was big, beat them because she was bad, and beat them because she was just plain mean.

Financed by the shrewd investments of Irving Cohen—a character inspired by Crazy Irv Mandzelman, co-owner of Crazy Irv's resale shop just two doors down from the Wellington Theatre—Sweet Willie Balls (Cyrus) and Iceberg Schlitz (myself) geared up to mount an expedition to rescue the girls. But just as the tanks were about to roll out, just as we were about to storm those imaginary fences, the real Big Momma burst through the door, took one look at us all dressed up in her socks and wigs and damn near had a stroke.

She went apoplectic with disbelief. One eye seemed to pop out of her head while the other shrank to nothing. The weight of her body shifted across her pelvis like the

sides of a scale thrown suddenly out of balance. It was amazement brought to us courtesy of the Warner Brothers—cartoonish in the most alarming sense of the word.

Cyrus was the picture of calm. "What," he said, "we just playin'."

Othena threw down her groceries and went for her belt. Seeing this, I made a run for the bathroom, whipping my sweat sock out the window along the way. Cyrus dug his feet into the carpet, refusing to flinch at the beating he knew was about to come.

"Tell me again how this is going to hurt *you* more than it hurts me," he said, or rather I thought I heard him say through the bathroom door before I immediately covered my ears. The rest was a flurry of muffled yelps and blistering snaps all delivered courtesy of Othena's belt. I cowered behind the toilet, pressing my knees into my chest, hoping by some miracle to be sucked down the drain. There was safety between that sturdy block of porcelain and the wall of crumbling plaster beside it. Even when the beating stopped, I refused to come out, determined never to rejoin that family again.

But Miss Othena would have none of it. After pounding on the wall until the ceiling threatened to cave in, she finally smashed through the door. With her meaty hands wrapped around my ankles, she dragged me into the kitchen and laid me down beside her battered son.

Flank to flank, with our tailbones crushed into the baseboards, Cyrus and I braved the lurid light of the alley. His face hardened as the sky went purple. The hungry "V" he practiced earlier now seemed permanently stamped into his brow.

"Oh lord," Miss Othena cried, "what am I gonna' tell this boy's father?"

"Why you got to say anything?" Cyrus challenged.

Othena puffed up like an over-cooked pie hearing this. But feeling a twinge in her punching arm, decided to cool off by the window instead.

"Don't you know that you got to love yourself?" Othena began, her voice searching for the perfect balance between a good sermon and a bad after-school special. "Don't you know you can't be something you're not? You are two fine boys. I raised you myself. And if I can love you, if Miss Othena can love you, than surely you can love yourselves."

Othena got up slowly and made her way back to the living room. Upon arriving she let out a long breath and collapsed into the recliner.

It was November and the dusk was settling early along the "L" tracks. Those deep hours of autumnal darkness between four and six seem to linger for a lifetime in the memory of a child. Cyrus and I were convinced we'd sinned beyond redemption. Soon my father would come trudging up those steps and life would end as we knew it.

We sat silently in our corner of the kitchen, comforted by our proximity but careful not to touch in any way. We opened our senses to the light pouring through the window and watched the sky together. We noticed its touch, its taste, its sound, its smell; how the clouds had different textures at different layers, how it all got bluer, the colors became richer in the darkness once your eyes grew accustomed. And getting outside my body somehow I saw us from the back and sensed that we were both part of that spectacular panorama, black shadows before the gloaming, connected to it and to each other at various points, supporting each other's weight now, actually touching, as the fear closed in around us. And together we watched the sun recede, grow darker still, until

whatever fire there was to light the day was just a crimson smudge quivering on the horizon, and then a pinpoint, and then nothing.

It wasn't long before we heard the sound of my father entering the building. I grabbed Cyrus's hand for comfort. He grabbed mine back.

Miss Othena choked on the sudden intrusion into her slumber. After three aborted tries she was finally able to generate enough momentum to rock her body free from the recliner. She took a moment before reaching the door to cast Cyrus a sinister look.

"You don't feel the least bit sorry, do you boy?" she said.

"You got to love yourself," Cyrus mocked, defiantly.

"Can't be something you're not," I added in a whisper.

"I'll show you something I'm *not* in a minute," Othena snarled, reaching for the doorknob. "The knot in the end of my fist."

But as the door flew open, Othena's expression changed entirely. The fist that was meant to discipline her child was suddenly jammed into her mouth, hoping to beat down the terror-stricken yelp that had risen inside it. Then, that yelp swallowed, she turned her back on the open hallway and stormed off to her bedroom, mumbling something about this old masquerade of a world no longer making sense.

And what hellish vision had startled Miss Othena that night; sent her mumbling back to her bedroom a full two hours before supper? There, behind that dangling slab of wood, stood a man who looked in every way like my father except that his white, button-down, work-shirt had thickened into a bright orange turtle neck, his sensible brown loafers had sharpened into a pair of shiny black boots, and most telling of all, those loose

amber curls in which Aunt Sophie had once taken such ridiculous pride, were now teased into a mighty afro.

"What do you think, boys?" my father asked, lifting a zodiac medallion off his sweater for inspection, "pretty groovy, huh?"

Cyrus sank his head into his fists and tried to grind the image out of his eyes. I blinked twice before releasing a tidal wave of urine into the protective lining of my Spiderman undershorts. When my father finally coaxed me out of the bathroom an hour later, we left without saying goodbye.

From the street below, I saw the hulking shadow of Miss Othena brooding in her bedroom. My father offered up his hand in a parting gesture. Othena threw down the curtain as soon as it came up. As we passed her shadow in the window, I noticed my knot of sweat socks marinating in the gutter below. Something inside of me wanted to run up and squeeze it dry, take its magic back with me to my new home on that long, empty driveway. But circumstance denied me the opportunity. The Maverick was parked by Sweet Willie's Liquors so my father had to yank me out of the gutter to reach it. As we crossed the street we were forced to pass beneath the dirty blue light of that angry bull. I pulled up sharply when I noticed it swinging in the wind before me.

"What's wrong *tateleh*?" my father asked, "did you make another sissy in your pants?"

I couldn't bring myself to say a word.

"Do you want me to get the car for you?" he asked, petting my curls.

Again, I said nothing.

Following my terror-stricken eyes to the sign, he pulled me closer. "Do you want me to ask them to shut it off?"

More silence. Then frustration took hold. "Do you want me to cover your eyes, do you want me to pull it down, what do you want?"

"I want you to carry me," I finally said.

"Oh," he answered. And soon I was up in his arms, cradled into that special spot between his head and chest where the troubles of the world could no longer reach me.

Cyrus had slid down the fire escape while my father was coaxing me out of the bathroom. He was now standing in the alley, watching us from the shadows. His red eyes glowed fiercely out of the darkness. A burst of warm air shot from his nostrils as he kicked at the gravel beneath his feet. If I didn't know any better, I could have sworn he was going to charge. I sank my head deeper into my father's neck and thought of how often both he and Aunt Sophie had called Othena family.

"Everyone at this table is family," my father would announce drunkenly on Passover; this after making a big deal of letting Othena put down the dish rag and join us for dessert. But this didn't seem like how you treated family. You didn't leave them out in the cold, seething in the dark. I felt like I had to share some of my good fortune with this boy, my Passover brother. But my father's neck felt too good to let go. And unlike Othena's ample breast there was no room for a twin. Guilt washed over me for the first time, pale, hot and sticky. I unclasped my hands from my father's neck as we reached the Maverick and let him buckle me into the back seat. The engine fired up without a single cough or sputter. He spent the next few moments scrambling through the glove compartment before finally settling on an eight track. Soon the sounds of Neil Diamond

were pulsing through the speakers. My father gave himself a quick check in the rearview mirror before pulling out into the street. I was asleep before we hit the expressway.

