

Yours to Carry: A Collection of Short Stories

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## ABSTRACT

Yours to Carry: A Collection of Short Stories

Daniel Didier Glassman

The protagonists in the stories of this collection of short fiction confront variations of the same existential question: How—if at all—are we to carry our life’s burdens? Can we unburden ourselves of them? If so, at what cost? What role do those with whom we share our lives play in the carrying of these burdens with us? The title, *Yours to Carry*, echoes this theme and is overtly explored in the last two stories of the collection. At the same time, as a work of literary fiction, the title suggests to readers that something—namely, the book they now hold in their hands—has been unburdened upon them by the author. The reader may choose to pick it up—or not—but is given the terms of the exchange at the outset.

For my grandfather, Pinhas Cohen.  
You taught me the love of words and language.  
You embodied the art of storytelling.

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## A TALMUDIC TEACHING

The Rabbis taught: Adding the measure of one *kab* to a porter's load without divulging it to the porter is considered an overload; meaning, the loader is liable to the porter for paying the extra cost of carrying that additional *kab*.

What if the overload caused injury to the porter? Shall the loader be liable for injury to the porter as well?

How can the loader be liable for the porter's injury? Is the porter not an intelligent being? Let the porter drop the load if it is too heavy for him to carry!

*Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Bava Metzia, 80b.

## FORBIDDEN CHEESE

**F**or someone with a confirmed lactose intolerance, Miri Charnofsky was going at the Brie with alarming gusto.

“Do you like it?” Zach asked.

“Mmm,” Miri answered.

“There's nothing like Brie when it's ripe. Runny even. A Brie is not ready until it crawls by itself across the plate,” he said.

The cheese was indeed delicious. Its flavour was permeating her entire head, banging Pavlovian bells in her brain, causing all kinds of secretions.

“Are you seeing fireworks yet?” he asked.

“Mmm-hmm,” she nodded.

“A work of art, isn't it?” he added.

She was thinking that Zach's eyes were a work of art. He was cute and fun to be with. His interventions during class had convinced her he was smart but unpretentious. He was also swarthy, with sensual facial features—Semitic enough, she thought, to convince her parents. They would kill her if they knew she was dating a Gentile.

“That was really good,” Miri said. “Are you supposed to eat the skin?”

“Yeah, the skin's edible, but some people don't. Some people find it's bitter or they're just grossed out because it's mold.”



“I just ate mold?” Miri said, her expression displaying her alarm.

“Edible mold, good mold. Ever hear of penicillin?”

“Not the same thing,” Miri said as she took another chunk of cheese.

“Hey, mold is mold,” Zach said.

“I never saw mold on any of the antibiotics I've been prescribed.”

“Oh, so you're one of those.”

“Umm, please feel free to elaborate,” Miri said.

“One of those people who are grossed out by something when they see it, but if they can't see it, it's no problem.”

“You mean I'm normal?” she said as she bit down on the oozing cheese, skin and all.

“You're eating it again,” Zach said pointing at her mouth, confusion in his expression.

“Just because I have a visceral aversion to something, doesn't mean I can't overcome it.”

Zach paused a moment to watch her savouring the cheese.

“You're turning out to be interesting,” he said, looking at her pensively. “Hard to reach, but interesting.”

It was the first time since childhood that Miri Charnofsky had eaten anything with milk in it. She had been “allergic” to dairy products from birth. Who knew, perhaps even before birth, she thought. The irony was that her parents loved cheese.

Her childhood was thick with memories of her father coming home from business in France, suitcase brimming with cheese. He travelled twice a year and stocked up to carry the family from Pesah to Rosh Hashanah. Brie, Camembert, Bleu de Bresse, Gruyère, Edam—thirty kilograms of cheese, a fortune's worth, enough for half a year of *fressing*, that barely lasted more than a few weeks, although Miri, of course, never had any. Cheese was even one of the reasons

her father fussed about moving back to France someday. There were Jewish markets in France's major cities that sold kosher-certified productions of all the most popular French and other European cheeses. That was something sorely lacking in Montreal for the Charnofskys.

On one occasion, years ago, her father had come home with the usual booty but this time many of them were uncertified.

“They're not kosher,” Miri's mother had reprimanded him. “What is this?” she said, turning over one of the cheeses in her hand, looking for the kosher label.

“Honey, it's the same cheese that they produce under kosher supervision. The exact same company, the exact same cheese, the exact same ingredients. In fact, it was produced under kosher supervision. I happened to meet the kashrus supervisor of the plant and he told me he had a batch that the council refused to label because the producer hadn't paid the kosher supervision invoice for over three months.”

“Again a story?” Miri's mother said.

“Not again a story. The supervisor bought the batch from the producer to bring home for himself and to sell to some friends. He made me promise to be discrete about it. He was even glad I was taking them away overseas. They cost me half the price. The supervision council are thieves!” her father argued. “Can you imagine how much they're charging if the cheese is twice as much with a kosher label on it?”

“This is amazing. For a pound of cheese you're willing to throw away your religion.”

“Now I'm throwing away the religion. They're the exact same cheeses I tell you.”

“So why wouldn't anybody eat them? The supervisor you found was a phony.”

“Who's anybody?”

“Anybody is everybody. Yossi Fried wouldn't eat them. He wouldn't eat them if it was the last piece of cheese in the world.”

“Yossi can do whatever he pleases. Why do you always have to bring me Yossi? And by the way, I happen to know the supervisor. He's a God-fearing man.”

“At least you'll know how I feel for once,” Miri said to her mother, smiling. “All that cheese, but you can't have any of it.”

“She can have as much as she wants, Miri!” her father said, leaving the kitchen. “No need to be more religious than the pope!”

That was the cue that meant the argument was turning into something more visceral. Her mother had the judicious knack of referring to Yossi Fried, her father's closest friend, to illustrate her father's laxity in any matter of religion, every time they argued. After that, the argument always escalated. He came back into the kitchen and moved stuff around in the fridge, making a raucous. Then, he closed the fridge door roughly, with the cheeses crammed into the dairy drawer.

“When will you learn to trust my judgement?” he said.

“When I see that you make good use of it.”

“Unbelievable,” he exclaimed, “I'm ten years old again.”

“Just tell me if this is an example for your children. Eating non-kosher cheese and slandering the Kosher Supervision Institute.”

“Keep us out of it,” Miri said from the adjacent room. She had gone there to get out of the way.

“Of course! Bring the children into it. Now not only am I a sinner and a juvenile, I'm also a bad father.”

Over the next few days, her father served some of the contentious cheese to her younger siblings. Miri and her mother quietly abstained, although for different reasons. Miri had thought her father reasoned her siblings were too young to be conscious of eating something forbidden, and that the act wouldn't imprint itself on them as a condoning of transgression. Or perhaps he really thought those cheeses were permitted for consumption and he wanted to prove a point. She never really understood what had transpired on that occasion. She knew, instinctively, that it was one of those things her father had wanted to say but considered impossible to talk about directly. "Questions!" he always hollered. "Questions are what we need, not answers!"

"Papa, was it really for the better price and selection that you bought those cheeses?" Miri had asked him a few weeks later, when she thought the time was right.

"What do you think, sweetie?" he answered.

"I can't believe you'd eat something that wasn't kosher for those reasons.

"You're right. Those reasons are just an excuse. I just can't accept that we've come to believe that what makes something kosher is a sticker that's slapped on the package."

"I don't understand," Miri said. "Isn't the label meant to certify that the food was processed under supervision? That somebody watched the process and guarantees there's no treif in it?"

"That's exactly what the kosher certification label stands for. I'm actually surprised you knew that. Most people, even among our own, have a vague understanding of what kosher certification is."

"So? How come you bought cheese without certification?"

"Because my responsibility, as a Yid, is not to buy food with certification, but to buy food that I know is kosher. The easiest way to know that food is kosher, is to rely on

certification. But the price we pay for that is we become Jews who eat certified, as opposed to Jews who eat kosher.”

Her mother was more about having the right answers, about propriety, about things you just don't do. Not that she was tyrannical with rules, she just had a built-in respect for the order of things. Her father didn't have the same luxury of certainty.

“Abe, do whatever you like,” her mother chided. “I don't understand you and this thing you have for fancy cheese at the cost of bringing treif into the house.”

At that, he raised his hands and walked out of the kitchen to seclude himself with his books. Later Miri noticed her father had somehow rid the fridge of the stash. She never knew if he had kept it somewhere else to consume on his own or if he got rid of it in a fit of repentance. Miri knew, that day's incident with the uncertified cheese was anything but fickle religious observance. Even her mother knew that. She just didn't have any other way of interacting with his disdain for convention than throwing the book at him.

Zachary Melas and Miri Charnofsky had met in Language and Mind, an undergraduate summer course in linguistics. For Miri, who was a psych major, it was an elective. For Zach it was part of his core.

“I agree with the point he made,” Miri said to the professor, glancing over where Zach was sitting, “language acquisition is only partly innate. A lot of language is probably learned.”

It was the second class for this course.

“Yeah,” Zach replied, looking towards Miri, no longer addressing the professor, “the poverty of stimulus argument isn't very strong evidence for innate ability.”

The rest was history. Miri had approached him after a class early in the semester to discuss something in that week's readings, and they started having lunch together on campus every Tuesday and Thursday after class. Three weeks later Miri had accompanied Zach on his walk home after their lunch. At the building's entrance he invited her in for a coffee. Miri, convinced that Zach wasn't a creep, hopeful even that he was as nice as he seemed, accepted. That was when he introduced her to his fondness for cheese. That was when she had tasted a food, one that had always been readily available, for the first time.

Zach had brought the cheeses out, one by one, and lectured on each of them. She knew way more about cheese than she let on, of course, but she was mesmerized by Zach's passion for it. He went on about how it was made, what monks or cultivators had nursed it to maturation, the difference between pasteurized and raw cheese. Before long, it was late afternoon and Miri had decided to allow herself to stay until evening. It wasn't unusual for her to come home past dinner time, so she reasoned her parents wouldn't suspect anything.

By 6:00 pm, a few open wedges of cheese littered Zach's coffee table. Miri had eaten more than half a Brie and she was feeling okay. A few gurgles and minor cramps, but really a much milder reaction than she thought she'd have. She figured her body would give in if she wanted it badly enough.

"We're going to have to do this properly," Zach said. "Tomorrow night, you and me and a real selection of cheese."

"Here?" Miri asked

"Right here, in mi casa."

"That's the cheesiest invitation back to a guy's apartment ever."

“Very funny. Did I give the impression of inviting you back to my place? Hell no. This is an invitation to discover the best of what cow’s and ewe’s milks have to offer. I am working on your gastronomical salvation here.”

“Ahh, I see.”

She couldn’t refuse his invitation. She didn’t want to either.

“Okay. Tomorrow night, Cheesefest!” she said. To pull it off, she planned to tell her parents she was going to study with Leah Fried until late.

At 6:30, Zach walked Miri halfway home. They lingered and talked for an hour by the gazebo in the Parc du Portugal, enjoying the perfect weather of a Montreal August evening. He kissed her good night, on the cheek, before they parted. Miri walked the rest of the way home with butterflies in her stomach. Feisty delicious dairy butterflies.

The following evening when Miri knocked on Zach’s apartment door, he opened up displaying a whole round cheese in his hand. “Il Gorgonzola!” he declared, unwrapping a stout cylindrical wheel of blue cheese.

“I see you’ve been preparing for me,” Miri said with a smile.

“You have no idea,” Zach replied, showing her into the apartment.

A young Dylan played softly from somewhere inside. *It’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard—it’s a hard rain’s a gonna fall.* Miri knew the song well, there was a line in it she really liked. Especially the way Dylan sang it. *And I’ll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it.*

After some small talk, they sat across from each other, cross-legged on the floor of his living room, with the low table between them. Half a dozen cheeses were set up on a stone platter with some knives and pieces of fruit nearby. Miri had snuck out with a bottle of Bordeaux

stuffed in her knapsack. Her father had a decent collection from the wines he brought back from his trips. She was confident he wouldn't notice.

On this second day of experimenting, Miri felt a persistent discomfort in her belly, but nothing she couldn't live with. Zach started with the Gorgonzola, cutting himself a wedge and putting it on some Melba toast before sliding it into his mouth.

"Blue cheese? More mold?" Miri said as she sized up the Gorgonzola, wondering why each one of those green spore's nests wasn't lethal.

"I don't think I can do this," she said to Zach.

"Suit yourself," Zach said, "but you won't resist for long."

Miri watched as Zach took another wedge of the cheese and closed his eyes to savour the precious piece of *Italian history* as he had put it. He stayed that way, chewing the morsel slowly with his eyes closed, for what seemed a long time. He swallowed the cheese and then raised his glass to her and drank the wine. He leaned back with his hands behind his head and his back against the sofa behind him.

"This wine is really good. Your father knows his stuff," Zach said, eyes still closed.

Miri had no intention of making conversation. She rose quietly from where she sat, came close to him on the other side of the table, and leaned down to put her mouth on his. This jolted him but he didn't push away. They quickly got past the technical challenges of first kisses, a sign, Miri thought happily, of their compatibility. She moved over until she straddled his legs, her face slightly above his. They explored each other's mouths lengthily with that passion that comes from the curiosity and hunger of youth. For Miri it was beautiful; his mouth was warm and cool all at once. He was gentle in the way he held her and his kiss told her everything important she wanted to know about him. His kindness and strength. That kiss turned her on to him in ways she



didn't know were possible. With the exception of Jared Wiseman, a younger boy from up the street she had once kissed on the lips behind the school in fourth grade, Zach was the first.

“This is amazing,” he struggled to say with his mouth pressed against hers.

“Shut up,” she mumbled into his mouth taking more of it into her own.

And Miri, in the rapture of that kiss, tasted a moment of freedom, a moment of release, of letting down a load she had carried far and long. But the moment was fleeting. Like the passing shadow of a bird mid flight. She had barely perceived it and it was already gone, irretrievable.

Then as Zach and his mouth rematerialized, she began to taste the cheese he had eaten. It wasn't a bad taste. It was even pleasant. A whisper of the wine also lingered, enhancing the taste with the subtlest hint of fruit. But her innards began to move. Her bowels were turning to water. It was reflexive, she knew, and fought against it, kissing him harder. The cheese insisted, delicious, but ultimately forbidden to her.

When the pain started, it struck her with stunning ferocity. Daggers in her belly. She couldn't hold on. She felt herself biting him as she winced with pain. The unmistakable taste of blood, warm ferrous and salty, introduced itself and blended not unpleasantly with the cheese. Zach was erecting himself now, gently pushing her off him.

“What's up Miri? Are you okay?” his voice broke as he put his fingers to his lips to check for blood. Miri was already off him and frantic to find her way out of his apartment. Tears blurred her vision as she fumbled with the door. She wanted to say I'm sorry, to say keep the wine, or thanks for the cheese, but the nausea was consuming her, and she couldn't muster anything more than a moan in his direction before swinging the door open and racing down the steps to the exit. Outside, a convenient flower pot sat opposite the building's entrance. She

lunged towards it and vomited at the base of the bush that grew in it. Zach had come after her. He was behind her now on the sidewalk, putting a comforting hand on her back.

“Are you okay Miri?” Zach asked, genuinely pained.

“It's not you,” Miri said, gasping for breath. “It's the cheese.”

Zach was jarred by her words. “It can't be the cheese Miri, even the moldy stuff. Unless you're allergic to it?”

“It's not you—” Miri groaned as she felt her stomach convulsing again. She said the words, unsure herself of their truth. “It's not you, it's the cheese,” she slurred out, between two breaths.

She moaned, hugging her abdomen, struggling to stay standing at the base of the bush while the stench of her own vomit stung.

Zach held her from behind with both arms trying to comfort her, to reassure her she was going to be okay. “It's okay Miri, we don't have to eat the cheese. You're going to be okay.”

But Miri, prompted by Zach's kindness, dry heaved, scratching her face against the bush. She was thankful for Zach's hold on her while it seemed at the same time to be the cause of her anguish. She spat to rid her mouth of the dangling thread of saliva that was chaining her to the plant.

“You can't stop the cheese, Zach,” she gasped. “You and cheese go together.”

When the worst of the spasms subsided, Miri pushed herself away from the shrub and turned towards Zach. “I'm sorry,” she said.

Despite the fluids that had marred her face, she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. “I'm sorry,” she said again, then turned from him and walked away, up the street. After a few paces, Zach leapt after her and faced her, taking hold of her two arms.

“Miri, what’s wrong? What’s happening?” he pleaded with her.

“Zach, please let me go! We can’t be together!” Miri said.

She spoke with such conviction that Zach let go and watched her walk away. She cried all the way home. The tears smudged her make-up and reddened her eyes and nose. She was thankful when it began to rain. She wouldn’t have to explain her disheveled appearance to her parents.

Miri no longer took Tuesday and Thursday lunches with Zach. She only responded to him directly outside the classroom door. She denied all his pleas to spend time together. Her deep conviction gave her this strength, although at times she thought she would soon give in. A few weeks later, the semester was over and she hadn’t seen Zach since their class together.

At home, on Friday evenings after the Shabbes meal, Miri sat with her parents and younger siblings in the living room. Several months had passed since the last time she’d seen Zach, but there was still some bruising she hoped her father might help to sooth.

Friday night was a time for conversations, even if some of these were trivial or even silent. Her twin brothers fought over the question of whether crowding the boats in Battleship was allowed. Her younger sister curled up against her mother with her nose buried in a thick volume of Harry Potter. Miri sat curled up in the large padded tub chair across from her father’s recliner. He had a book, but it rested, opened and face down on her father’s chest. His eyes were closed, but he wasn’t yet asleep.

“Papa, do you think it's reasonable to consider something forbidden if it brings you happiness?”

Her father opened his eyes and looked over his reading glasses at her. Her mother shifted on the sofa and looked up from her magazine.

“I mean,” Miri continued, “didn’t the Creator make this world for us to rejoice in it? How could some of its beauty be forbidden?” Her mother resumed her reading.

Her father sat, staring at some invisible spot in the space between them. “I don’t know Miri,” he said finally. But this question, *Are you forbidden to me?* that you’ve somehow learned to ask when you’re facing something that presents itself to you . . .” her father’s expression softened. “That’s a precious one. Few people even know it exists or how to formulate it.”

Miri slid further down into the soft upholstered armchair and pulled a pillow to her chest. She hugged it tightly, as though to convince herself there was something she could hold fast.

“Questions,” Miri said, “right Papa? Questions, not answers.”

## SCRAPS

**A**fter eighteen hours of driving, at the top of the Carolinas, Jon Milner began to see the road like wreckage. Montreal to Tampa Bay was a twenty five-hundred-kilometer trek. Black steel-belted tire scraps littered the interstate like leftovers from an overnight massacre. As though packs of famished beasts had preyed on all of the interstate's night traffic, leaving nothing but torn strips of carrion for the crows to pick. It was 10:00 a.m., their second morning on the road, and the sun was already beating down on Jon's thighs through the windshield. The fatigue of yesterday's drive still weighed on him, though he had slept soundly. It was a peculiarly satisfying ache that gave him the sense that he had earned the mileage. He drove with the wakefulness of purpose.

The tire scraps reminded Jon of one summer vacation, several years ago, when they had stopped for gas on the road, not far from where they were now. He had started talking to a highway maintenance guy while Cari and kids were inside waiting in line at the food court. The highway worker hauled a pile of tire scraps in the back of his pick-up. His job, he had explained to Jon, was to clear the highway of the hazardous scraps. He said it never ended. He said sometimes the more he cleared them the more there seemed to be the next time he went through that section of highway.

“What's the best tire on the road?” Jon had asked him, thinking if anybody would know it would be him.

“They’re all the same. I’ve got all kinds of them in the back,” the highway man said. He gestured to a billboard with a Bridgestone ad nearby. “They all have fancy ads, but when a tire blows it doesn’t much matter what they said about it, does it?” the worker added, looking at Jon as though waiting for him to agree.

Jon looked up at the sign and scanned the words printed in bold next to a glowing black tire. *First you drive it. Then it drives you.* The slogan had stuck with Jon. It sounded like a promise.

When planning the trip to Tampa Bay earlier that summer, Jon had considered a number of possible routes. He explained the advantages of each to Cari one Sunday morning in bed.

“If we take the 81 we’ll avoid a heavy line-up at the border,” he said, studying an old folded road map.

“Sounds good,” his wife replied from behind the book she was reading.

“But the 87 is a shorter route,” he said.

“Okay.”

“But we might make up for it by going through the border quicker. Plus, they say the number of trucks on the 81 is insane,” Jon said.

“I hate trucks,” Cari said in agreement.

“But the 81 would lead us through the Shenandoah Valley. It’s supposed to be beautiful.”

“Uhuh.”

“And we wouldn’t have to deal with the traffic around Washington. We could lose hours—”

“Jon, I’m trying to read,” Cari said. “Whatever you decide is fine. The driving is your thing.”

On the morning of their departure he had surrendered to the appeal of the Blue Ridge Mountains and took the 81. He was happy he had done so. The drive through Pennsylvania offered breathtaking scenery.

His buddy, Allen Brodie, who had done the trip several times, had told him to avoid stopping in the Virginias south of Richmond. “Meth labs scattered everywhere across the Blue Ridge Mountains,” he had said, smirking. Jon hadn’t been able to tell how much of Allen’s warning was disingenuous. After driving for sixteen hundred kilometers, darkness had fallen and Jon had decided not to push any further. They had stopped for the night in Lynchburg. Despite the town’s name, the short visit turned out to be uneventful.

The next morning, they started out from Lynchburg at 8:00, after a quick complimentary breakfast. He had been making good time with the I-77 South for nearly two hours now. He thought of making a stop but had driven past a few signs indicating food and gas. Once on the road, he found it difficult to stop. But Cari hadn’t had her coffee yet and he knew she’d be happy if he surprised her with a stop for coffee while it was still morning. After a few missed opportunities, Jon forced himself to take the approaching exit which had advertised a fuel station and a Starbucks about a mile back. A car in the right lane honked when he swerved to catch the exit ramp in time.

His wife loved Starbucks coffee. No road trip was complete without multiple pilgrimages to the green mermaid shrines, scattered across the road map like drive-in temples. She shifted out of her sleep as the van slowed to take the exit.

“You making a stop?” Cari asked, stretching in the seat.

“Yeah, Starbucks coming up,” he answered looking over at her.

“You’re such a sweetheart,” she said, taking his free hand.



“I’ll get gas while you get coffee.”

“I should probably take the kids in for pee stops,” Cari said. “You want anything?”

“No, I’m good,” Jon answered.

He pulled into the Starbucks parking lot and rolled around to the other side of the building for a spot near the door.

“Can I have a frappuccino?” the younger one called from the back.

“Alex, you’ve already had some coffee this morning,” Cari said. “Too much caffeine for you, sweetie.”

“Mom, I’m having one, right?” Margot, their thirteen-year-old, said to her, softly.

“Sweetie, why don’t you take a hot chocolate, that way Alex will follow your lead,” Cari said.

“I don’t want a hot chocolate. Are you having a hot chocolate?” Margot challenged.

“Just let them both have frapps, Cari, it’s vacation,” Jon said.

He knew the tone was wrong as soon as he heard himself speak it.

“No, Jon. What does hooking your kids on caffeine have to do with vacation?”

For Jon, Cari was a model of efficiency and singular vision. She was a benevolent ruler, in a word. She did what she always knew, instinctively, she had to do. Baths, healthy breakfasts, hard and fast bed times, suppers, lunches, and brushing teeth were the bricks and mortar of their family life. Next to her, Jon felt like a free radical, something organic and cancerous.

“Okay Cari, do it your way,” Jon said. “Margot, just take a hot chocolate and help your parents keep everybody happy.”

“I knew it,” Margot fumed. “My whole life is going to be one big sacrifice to make that stupid kid happy.”

“Oh my God, Margot, I see an Oscar nomination! ” Jon prodded.

“Stop it Dad!” she yelled as she leapt into the parking lot.

With Margot’s words resonating in the van, everybody was out of the vehicle, padding their way obediently into the mermaid sanctuary.

Jon thought the van looked strange with its doors open and nobody in it. Like an experimental cell. A human research lab abandoned by its subjects for a break. Jon pressed the switches above his head and the side doors slid closed. He rolled a few yards away from the parking lot to an adjoining gas station. He figured he had time to fill up and stretch before they came back out. After selecting a grade of fuel, he inserted the nozzle and squeezed the handle while he stared out toward the woods beyond the rest area.

Earlier that spring, Cari had taken the lead and set her sights on a summer beach vacation on Florida's West Coast. During the summer season, rental prices decreased the farther you went south. After South Carolina, condos were half the price of a comparable place on the Jersey shore. There was a reason for that. The heat.

One evening, after the kids had gone to bed, they broached the topic.

“Jon?” Cari had called from downstairs.

“Are you on the computer?” she said.

“Yeah,” Jon answered. “I'm looking at rentals in Sarasota.”

Cari came upstairs and joined him in front of the screen in the room by the stairs. She pulled up a chair and sat beside him.

“Did you find anything good?” she asked. “That one's nice,” she added, pointing to a listing, “or that one.”

“Cari, I'm doing this with such mixed feelings that the last thing you want to do is try and make this a thing we do together,” he said.

“Rough day, my love?” Cari said, with a hint of cynicism.

“Not really,” Jon said blankly. Cari got up and walked toward the door of the room.

“Jon, if you don't want to go to Florida just say so. You've been impossible every time the subject comes up. There's plenty of time to change plans.”

“I didn't know this was already a plan.”

“Well, whatever. Why are you looking for rentals now?”

“I don't know.”

Cari turned and walked out. “Just do what you want. Find us a vacation spot where you'll be happy and book it. I can't take the indecision.”

“I don't want to go on a beach vacation.”

Cari looked back at him from halfway down the stairs. “Well, the kids are really looking forward to it and I really need a vacation,” she said, “so stop being a jerk.”

“Stop being a jerk. Stop being a jerk,” he mumbled to himself. His face glowed blue in the screen's light. After chewing his bile for a while, and after Googling everything other than rentals in Florida, he pushed himself away from the screen, nauseous from the massive amount of information online. The choices were endless. He felt helpless, without enough time or resources, to figure out what he wanted. Cari was still downstairs fixing tomorrow's lunches when he came down to the kitchen with his tail between his legs. He anticipated a fight, one he knew he'd lose.

“Can we talk about this for a second?” he said to Cari, from the other side of the kitchen island.

“About what?” Cari asked.

“About vacation,” Jon said.

“Yeees?” she chimed, with a hint of impatience. “I thought you said you didn’t want to do this together.”

“I just don’t understand why we can’t do another kind of vacation for once,” he said.

“What do you have in mind, Jon Milner?” Cari said, continuing to pick things out of the pantry to fill the lunch bags with an assortment of snacks.

“Could you stop for a sec so we could talk?”

She put her hands flat on the counter top and looked him with wide eyes.

“Yes?” she said, opening her eyes wide, miming full undivided attention.

“I’d like to change the style of vacation. I’m sick of meaningless beach vacations where all we do is wake up late, go to the beach, and spend late afternoons in American outlet malls buying stuff we don’t need.”

“What have we ever bought that we don’t need?” Cari challenged.

“Seriously?” Jon said.

“We buy clothes for the kids for school. Most of the time, you’re the one saying let’s splurge and get something we don’t need.”

“Like what?”

“Like the juicer you said we should buy last year,” Cari said, pointing to the contraption in a corner of the counter.

“And we use it fairly regularly, don’t we?”

“Yes, but we didn’t *need* it.”

“Oh, so you get to decide which, of the things we use, we actually need?”

“Are you seriously going to stand there and tell me you think a juicer is like buying clothes for your kids?” Cari said. “Really?”

“Whatever,” Jon conceded. “Forget about the shopping thing, I wasn’t trying to say that you shop more than I do. Maybe I’m worse than all of us. I’m saying I want a vacation that isn’t about shopping. You get it?”

“It’s not about shopping,” Cari said. “If you really want to do something different on vacation, all you have to do is plan something.”

“Like what?”

“There are plenty of museums and activities with the local wildlife we could do in Tampa. Get that organized and we’ll all follow your lead, okay?” Cari said, turning back to the pantries.

“What museums? You think the kids want to go to museums?”

“I think kids don’t know what they want. Adults make up their minds and kids follow,” she said tossing more food into the bags.

After sixteen years of marriage Jon was into what he had no other name for but another mid-life crisis. Yet, the condition itself was something he was unsure about. Living, it seemed to Jon, was one long series of crises. Calling this a mid-life crisis, made him wonder how wide the middle was, and where the extremities began.

After the first few years of marriage he had decided, with Cari’s support, to move back to Montreal from Seattle. They had gone to Seattle because, as he had argued, “The cutting edge of the planet is the West Coast, Cari. I don’t need to tell you that.” Cari had dual citizenship and secured a contract with a teaching load at the University of Washington. Jon, a professional photographer, banked on picking up wedding and bar mitzvah gigs with the local Jewish

community to get things started. Three years later, because, as Jon had put it, American and Canadian cultures were irreconcilable, they planned on heading back to Montreal. Cari relented, particularly after she clinched a tenure-track position at McGill. Living on the cutting edge of the planet turned out to be a three-year stint.

“They’re the new bourgeois,” was how he summed up his opinion of their friends in Seattle to Allen Brodie, one evening, in their Mercer Island apartment. Allen, and his wife Francine had been visiting for the weekend.

“I love it when you think you’re the proletariat,” Allen said. “What else bothers you about Seattle? I heard you don’t like their coffee,” he added mockingly.

“Allen, the day you taste their coffee is the day you lose that asinine smirk of yours.”

“It’s true,” Francine said. “Leur café c’est de la merde.”

“Thank you, Francine,” Jon said, smiling at Allen.

“Coffee’s the measure of civilization. Everybody knows that,” Allen said, smiling back.

“When a place advertises that it sells espresso and croissants—the kind of stuff, incidentally, that Seattleites eat with their pinkies in the air—you expect something that vaguely resembles the original concept.”

“So, what? Their croissants are bad imitations. Now you can’t live here?”

“Imitation? This is way beyond imitation, Allen. Subversion is more like it. I mean, food has tradition. It’s culture. It’s art.”

“I’ll tell you what. It sounds like there’s a good business opportunity in Seattle. Authentic espresso and croissants.”

“That’s exactly it. Croissants and espresso coffee are perfect examples of usurped culture. It’s not about business opportunities,” Jon said.

“Oh please, spare me,” Allen said.

“Spare you what? The truth of the miserable state of affairs?”

“Spare me the bullshit, Jon. Everybody’s in it to make a buck. And not just in the USA, ”  
Allen said.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Jon said.

“C’est vrai, Allen, Jon has a point, it’s not only about making money,” Francine said.

“Of course not, but nobody would make croissants if they didn’t think they could make a  
living selling them,” Cari said.

Allen nodded agreement towards Cari.

“What happened to making croissants so good that people line up at the shop to buy  
some, instead of making these spongy everlasting things. I’m not against making a buck. I’m  
against making a buck with crap.”

“People don’t buy shitty croissants,” Allen said.

“That’s the thing. If it’s a croissant, it can’t be shitty. People are being sold a concept  
with nothing edible behind it anymore. It’s decadence.”

“That’s funny.” Cari said, “You’d think decadence was a better way to describe your  
fetish for *authentic* croissants and espresso. Who’s the bourgeois?”

“Touché,” Jon said to Cari. “My point was only that everything that’s artful and creative  
is disappearing. And I’ve never been so oppressed by this feeling as here.”

“Okay, Americans are culturally challenged. You think it’s better back in Montreal?”

Allen asked.

“Montreal has French. That’s half the battle right there,” Jon said.

That was back when Jon was building his case for telling her he wanted to leave Seattle and come back to *la belle province*. After their first year in Seattle, Jon was already complaining about what he perceived as America's profound philistinism. Margot was born in the midst of that crisis and Jon had insisted on a French name for her as they planned their *retours vers Montréal*.

Now, a decade later, it was a new contention. He was going on about moving someplace rural.

"I want soil on my hands and boots, Cari, not on my soul. You know what I mean? I want to live next to the guy that hand-feeds the chickens I eat."

Jon's fits of frustration with the status quo surfaced every spring when they planned their summer vacation. Jon recalled, uneasily, how inept he had felt this past spring in the kitchen, arguing with Cari for a different vacation than the one he was on now. This constant malaise—the mid-life thing—that compelled him to search everywhere for a possible way out had tired him. He wondered if that was what people called ageing. The way out of mid-life was to concede to exhaustion and embrace flaccid ageing.

In the kitchen, Cari had dimmed the lights and padded up the stairs towards bed. On the counter the lunch bags stood erect, gaping hungrily at what else she might toss into them at dawn. Jon lingered in the dimly lit kitchen, alone, staring at the lunch bags, marvelling at how easy it all seemed for Cari. He resigned to the fact that he wouldn't find the strength to plan for a different destination that summer. It would be Florida's Gulf coast. Maybe he'd find a way to carve a path through the dense foam of American materialism and make the trip meaningful.



The tension in the fuel dispenser's handle clicked and released, cutting the flow of gas. The tank was full. Jon was summoned back from his reverie. He topped it off to a round number, walked over to the booth and paid the girl behind the counter. He purchased a lottery ticket and a stale coffee from an automated machine. Cari and the kids were just stepping out of the building as he drove back around the Starbucks to pick them up. He slid the van doors open to let his family back in.

“Ready to go?” Jon said.

Alex answered in the affirmative. The girls climbed in and ignored his question. They hit the road again. The mood in the van was cheery. The sun shone brightly. Scattered patches of cloud floated across the solid navy sky. There was a scent of pine wafting in from the rusty topsoil to the right, away from the highway. Driving, thought Jon, just driving, cutting through the landscape, was a good thing.

They covered another two hundred kilometers after leaving the Starbucks. Alex was watching a film with animated prehistoric animals on the overhead screen in the back and Margot was multitasking between the film, music on her tablet, and a sporadic conversation with her mother.

“I need a restroom,” Cari said to Jon.

“Already?”

“It's the coffee.”

“Me too,” Margot said.

“How urgent?” Jon asked them.

“Soon,” Cari replied.

A road sign showing a fuel station swelled towards him until it flew past. The faded sign indicated an exit in one mile. Jon hated stopping at those isolated gas stations. They were rarely right off the road. Typically, they were nestled some miles further up the road from the exit, but he hadn't seen any signs for rest areas in a while, so he decided to take it.

He lifted his turn signal and gained the right lane with plenty of highway to spare. After a while he saw the exit's signpost at a distance. He put on his right blinker again and began to slow the vehicle to take it. As he approached the exit, he realized he had overestimated the distance and was forced to break more abruptly to take the turn. He could feel the tires biting into the pavement as they were burdened to slow the van before it was too late. He felt something jolt through the steering wheel and heard a loud pop. The front end of the car began to shake violently. He had blown a tire. It felt like his front passenger wheel. The van was doing forty and maintaining control of the vehicle was tricky. Reflexively his right arm shot protectively across Cari's chest to shield her.

“Oh my God!” Cari shouted.

“What's wrong?” Margot said, her head plugged up with earphones and a strange lack of alarm in her eyes. Alex was too absorbed by the film to notice anything.

“Just sit back!” Jon ordered as he manoeuvred the van off the highway and into the curving exit. Slabs of black tire slammed against the hull of the van before being spewed out onto the road. After a few long seconds, the van came to a halt on the side of the exit ramp. He was grateful to be out of the interstate's oncoming traffic. He looked at his family. “Is everyone alright?” he asked.

“What happened?” Cari said.

“We blew a tire. There must have been something on the road.”

“Dad? Why are we stopping?” Alex asked, as the overhead screen went dark moments after Jon turned off the ignition.

“We have a flat tire,” Jon said. “Don't worry, just sit still please.” Alex had already undone his seatbelt. “Just stay in your seat,” he said, more forcefully, as he imagined Alex crawling out of the car and into the road to investigate.

“Keep everybody in the car,” he said to Cari. He rolled down the passenger windows so that the kids could look on from inside the vehicle and then stepped out to assess the damage.

The tire was more than flat. It was almost completely gone. Only a narrow belt of treads hung loosely around the rim. He looked back up the road for the pieces of tire, as though these might help him, and saw them lying about, looking strangely peaceful, abandoned beneath the sun and sky. Jon was absorbed by the surroundings when Cari's voice pulled him out, calling him to action.

“What are we going to do?” Cari asked him from the window of the van. She sat looking at him standing outside. Jon looked back, not really seeing her.

“Any other brilliant questions?” Jon said.

“Don't take this out on me,” Cari said.

“How about we don't do anything, Cari? This seems like a fine spot to spend our vacation. Right kids?” Jon said, a strange mass of rage welling up inside him.

He considered putting on the spare himself but changed his mind when he remembered the price of his CAA membership included service in the States.

“I'm calling CAA,” he said as he came back to the driver's door to retrieve his wallet and the plastic card that was in it.

The dispatcher he spoke with said a unit would be there within the hour. The wait would be a waste of time, he thought, so he thought he'd pull out the jack and set it up beneath the car to get things started. He took the lug wrench as well, figuring the more he'd do before the roadside service came, the quicker they'd get back on the road. Probably to shop for a new tire, he reasoned. The quicker, the better.

"Alex, come help, kiddo," he said.

With Jon's guidance, Alex placed the jack beneath the van's frame near the front passenger side where the tire was missing. Jon inserted the tapered end of the wrench into the jack and pushed it up and down until the jack was secured and tight beneath the van. He pumped it a few more times and stopped when he saw the van begin to rise.

"Should I get out?" Cari asked, opening the door slightly.

"You can stay in the van, Cari. We'll wait for road service to come do the rest," Jon said. In truth, he began to feel he might have changed the tire himself.

Occasional cars taking the exit drove past them. Jon waved off the first few that slowed to offer help. "We're good!" he shouted to the cars as they slowed and rolled past. Twenty minutes after the blowout, a loud two-door Camaro came around the bend of the exit ramp and pulled up with the windows down and radio blaring. Two shirtless men rode in front. There was no one in the back seat. The man on the passenger's side smiled wide at Cari with his arm out the window holding a can of beer.

"You folks need a hand?" he hollered over the music and rumble of the engine. He continued to ogle Cari as he spoke, although Jon had stood up from behind the van with Alex beside him.

"We're good, I'm almost done here," Jon hollered back.

The man kept his eyes on Cari inside the van. Then he turned to say something to the guy at the wheel and they rolled slowly forward with the engine gargling loudly. They pulled up in front of the van, some twenty feet ahead, and turned off the engine. The car went silent and the two men got out, opening the doors widely. The two men moved lazily towards the Milners and their van. Jon felt the hair on his nape stiffen. He eyed the wrench that was still in the jack under the car.

“You folks look like you could use a hand,” the man who had been driving said. “Don’t they, Jimmy?” he said to the other. The driver was tall and lanky. His gaunt face had a thin red tuft of beard under the lower lip and chin. His chest was white, flat and shapeless. He had a sleeve line where his arms went darker just below the shoulders.

The other man had a heavier, stronger build and his torso was red from exposure to the sun. His upper body was sculpted but his face was ruined by acne scars. He had blue eyes that swore against the redness of his eyelids and skin. The tall man walked up to Jon and, before Jon could react, took the lug wrench from the jack.

“Don’t worry, mister, we’ll have you fixed in no time,” the tall one said, kneeling down to face the wheel.

The one with the blue eyes walked over to the driver’s window of the van, leaning on its ledge and looking into the vehicle.

“You folks are a pretty little family,” he said to no one in particular. “Ma’am you just relax, we’ll have you fixed up and on the road ‘fore you can count to a hundred.” He looked at Alex through the van’s windows on the other side and said, “Can you count to a hundred, little man?” Alex was twelve and looked all of his age. The question was ridiculous. The boy looked

at his father, unsure if the man with the blue eyes was really talking to him. Margot was oblivious, absorbed by whatever she was watching on her tablet.

“Yeah,” Alex said to the man.

“That’s good, little man. You do your schooling and you’ll be somebody someday, like your daddy here. Not like me and my buddy Dave. That’s what my old man used to say, but I ain’t listened to him,” he said, standing up straight near the van window, as if to display himself to the Milners. “I just ride all day with my friend Dave,” he said with a laugh. “That ain’t no kind of a purpose. What do you think, little man?”

Jon and Alex kept quiet.

Dave, the tall one, had removed the last bolt from the tire rim. He hoisted the rim off the wheel studs and carried it to the back of the van and put it down over some luggage. He closed the hatch and got the spare off the pavement near the front wheel where Jon had put it earlier. He bent down and lifted it onto the studs. He easily handled the spare, which Jon had found surprisingly heavy. He put the nuts onto the studs with quick dexterous twists and tightened them one by one with the wrench. The van bounced up and down as the man applied enough torque to fix the wheel fast. He released the jack and the van dropped stiffly to the pavement. The tall man put the jack into Jon’s hand. Jon felt encumbered by it but could think of no place to put it down for now.

“Jimmy, give it a test drive,” the tall man said to his partner.

Jimmy, blue eyes glimmering, hopped into the driver’s seat next to Cari and started the van. Cari kept her gaze fixed on Jon. She looked as though she were seeing Jon for the first time, as though she were watching a captured animal from the other side of the glass in a zoo.

Jimmy revved the van's engine and put the gears into drive. The van took off into the exit ramp with Cari in the front and Margot still oblivious in the back. Jon stood there, jack in hand, as they disappeared around the bend.

"Where's he going?" Jon asked the tall man named Dave. The sound of his own voice surprised him.

"He's making sure the spare's on good. Don't you worry, mister, your women are in good hands."

"What's your name, mister?" Dave, the flat-chested man, said.

"Jon," Jon said.

"You got a mighty nice family, Jon," Dave said.

"Where did Mom and Margot go?" Alex asked his father.

"They'll be right back, they just went for a little drive," Dave said to Alex.

Holding the jack in both hands like a Hasselblad, Jon took in the scene around him. The dull red Camaro parked twenty feet to his right. Dave's flat white chest, a line of black grease smeared below his left pectoral. The longleaf pines fifty yards away colouring the air with a warm scent, filling the breeze with wordless whispers. The ruinous tarmac laid out before him, its eroded white lines curving out of sight. A bright car driving slowly past. His photographer's instincts intruded with untimely suggestions about aperture and depth of field. The scene was a puzzle. A composition he could put together a number of ways.

No more than ten minutes had gone by when the van came back around the bend. Cari was driving now. Jimmy with the blue eyes was in the passenger's seat up front. Margot was in the back, busy with her tablet. The van pulled up to where they stood. Jimmy got out and left the door open.

“She’s good to go,” Jimmy said to Jon.

Jon turned to Dave. “How much do I owe you guys for your help?” he said.

“Nothing at all, Jon.”

Jimmy walked up to Dave. “She’s on tight. I told the missus where to go for a new set of treads.”

“Thank you,” Jon said as he walked toward the open door.

“Much obliged,” Jimmy said, smiling wide and glancing at Cari before turning to join Dave. The Camaro came to life, rumbling, gurgling, loudly. A few moments later it had moved steadily around the curve and out of sight.

Alex climbed into the van. Jon hesitated.

“Get in,” Cari said to him. “I’m driving.”

The van paced smoothly down the I-77. Cari drove with both hands on the wheel. Jon could hardly tell there was a spare on. After ten minutes, Cari broke the silence.

“You did nothing,” she said.

Jon considered what she said.

“What was I supposed to do?” he replied, finally.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But you did nothing.”

Alex had resumed the animated movie and Margot had lowered the back of her seat to listen to music while trying to get some sleep.

“What was I supposed to do, Cari? Attack them with a wrench? Meanwhile, our tire’s fixed and we’re on our way.”

“You did nothing!” Cari said, shouting this time.



“What was I supposed to do, Cari?” Jon shouted back. “What was I supposed to do? You tell me!”

The van sped down the interstate.

“I did,” Cari said calmly to Jon after some time.

“You did what?”

“I did what I was supposed to do, Jon. I did something about it,” Cari said.

“What?” Jon said. “What did you do?”

“It doesn’t matter. I did something. Just like now I’m taking us to where we can get a new tire put on.”

The inside of the van was too warm, despite the AC being on max.

“What the hell did you do, Cari? Don’t tell me you did something stupid,” Jon said.

“You did nothing, Jon. So I did what I had to.”

“Please, don’t tell me you did something stupid, Cari,” Jon said, louder, pleading.

Cari didn’t answer. The heat in the cubicle was causing Jon considerable discomfort. The sunlight reflecting off the hood and the confinement of the van oppressed him. There was barely enough air. He recalled the events, earlier by the side of the road, and saw himself standing idly as the scene unfolded.

Something inside him broke, like a vial releasing some fiery fluid that climbed through his veins, dilating every part of his body. He wrestled with an overpowering need to urinate. He imagined a scene in which he threw his door open, the pavement beneath the vehicle racing past the edge of his seat. He saw himself leaning out over the screaming road. The hurtling tarmac promised to grind him to non-existence. “How about I do this?” he saw himself yelling to Cari over the roar of the road. “Is this doing enough, Cari?” he said, leaning way out of the van. “How

about I do this!” he shouted still louder, feeling his grip on the door giving and his body inching towards the blur of pavement. His screams were muffled by the hot air which pounded and broke the words and threw them back into his face. In this vision, he saw Cari turn her head to look at him, then quickly turn her attention back to the road, like she turned her attention back to what was in the kitchen cabinets, or the gaping lunch bags.

Jon’s mind raced, strangely euphoric from the scenes it conjured. The oppressive heat collapsed him into a feverish sleep until, some minutes later, he felt the van slow. He woke, groggy. Cari was manoeuvring the van across the lane to take the next exit.

Over the tree line Jon saw a tall white metal mast, crowned by a massive Bridgestone logo. The black and red B, taller than the rest of the name, hung like a jewel in the sky. Cari, pretty hands still gripping the wheel, craned toward the windshield to see it too.

## THE SEAT

Luc Léveillé and Josh Safra made their way out of the stuffy classroom on the sixth floor of the university's Library Building. It was the second time in the course of their MFA in creative writing that they were in the same workshop. They had established a sort of ritual wherein they left the building together and hung out on the street for a few minutes after the class to schmooze and share some smokes before parting.

"The weirdest thing happened to me," Luc said to Josh in the elevator on the way down.

"What?" Josh said.

"I don't know if I'm being paranoid, but George said something to me at the end of workshop. I'm having trouble making sense of it."

Josh had noticed the small skirmish at the beginning of workshop between George and Luc. "What did you do? Steal his seat?" Josh said.

"How'd you know?" Luc exclaimed.

The elevator doors opened onto the ground floor.

"Something similar happened to me with George last year. He's nuts about where he sits. Or maybe it's about routine. Some of us are less organically inclined than others," Josh said.

"No way. You had a falling out with him over a seat?"

"Yeah."

“That’s exactly what happened this afternoon. I couldn’t believe he was serious. He went ape-shit because I sat in ‘his’ seat,” Luc said.

“Oh, he’s serious about it. But don’t worry, George doesn’t hold a grudge. I suspect he knows he’s a bit over the top with the seat thing.”

“Alright. Because I was like, take it easy man, I didn’t take *your* seat, I just took *any* seat. But he was like, ‘Don’t fuck with me, the third one on this side, it’s mine.’”

“I know. You’ll see, though. Next time you see him he’ll be completely normal with you, as if nothing happened.”

“Whatever. Man, I can’t imagine what the deal over a seat is about. You’d think I’d taken his girl or something.”

Josh considered the comparison.

“That’s a good analogy, actually. Don’t mess with a man’s seat!”

“You serious? You understand this?”

“Are you joking? Seats and who gets them are one of those things that drives the world, man. Seats are like economics.”

“You got smokes?” Luc asked Josh.

“Sure. Help yourself.” Josh extended the pack to him.

They were outside the building now. The afternoon was still a bit chilly, but the sun was warm. They headed to their usual spot across the street, where a small group of students gathered to smoke.

“Let me tell you a story about seats,” Josh said to Luc. “My older brother was there, so this is straight-up non-fiction,” Josh said.

Luc smiled at him. Josh was a good storyteller.

“Go for it,” Luc said. “Just keep the smokes coming.” He handed the pack back to Josh.

“So, in this place, where my older brother did his rabbinical studies—”

“Your brother’s a rabbi?” Luc asked.

“Yeah. He lives in Toronto where he heads a congregation of nearly two hundred families. But stick to the story, man, this is a good one,” Josh said.

“All ears,” Josh said.

“So in this Jewish study hall—we call it a *beis medrash*—my brother was one of the junior scholars working toward rabbinical ordination. It takes about four years, depending on the student and the type of ordination. Anyway, so in the *beis medrash*, like in any *beis medrash*, there’s an unspoken rule, like a law that was given to Moses at Sinai, you know? Something ancient and unquestionable. Seats are a sort of inviolable property,” Josh said. He looked at Luc to see if he was following.

“When a guy comes into the *beis medrash* for the first time and puts his tush onto an available seat, the gesture is considered sufficiently meaningful to effect a *kinyan*, Talmudic legalese which means a binding acquisition. In other words, by sitting in a seat, you acquire it.”

“Oh, this would be a good place for George to pursue a higher education,” Luc said, laughing. “Rabbi George MacTavish!”

“Ha!” Josh laughed. “I’m seriously calling him that next workshop. Rabbi MacTavish. There’s an authentic Jewish ring to it!”

“That’s funny. Does this mean anybody can get the title of Rabbi just by sitting around?”

“Don’t laugh. The Jews in the *beis medrash* invented the art of sitting. There’s a common saying that to be a Jewish scholar you need to have good padding before having a good head.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. The idea being that not everybody’s able to sit for hours every day, to learn.”

“Sounds like work!” Luc said. Josh looked at him to discern whether he was trying to be funny. “No, Seriously!” Luc said. It sounds like hard work!”

“It is,” Josh agreed. “And just like in any trade, the artisan grows attached to his tools. The men in the beis medrash have a special relationship with their seats,” Josh said. “When a guy sits in a seat, the seat becomes his forever. Or until he graduates or drops out, which is sometimes longer than forever.”

Luc signaled for another cigarette, not wanting to interrupt the story. Josh handed him the pack.

“A seat can even get sacralised permanently—depending on the illustriousness of the tush that sits in it, you know what I mean? Think of it like sports jerseys. A jersey’s number is retired in professional sports, because it belongs to the legacy of the player that wore it, right?” Josh said.

“I guess,” Luc answered, exhaling smoke

“Yeah, well, in beis medrash culture, a seat can be retired like that, out of reverence for a scholar that sat in it for many years.”

“I get it.”

“Anyway, there was this guy when my brother was there. His name was Eli Klein, ha!” Josh interrupted himself with a burst of laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Luc asked.

“It’s just that his name in Yiddish means My God Is Small,” Josh chuckled. “Every time I thinks of his name and this story it makes me laugh.

“Very cool name,” Luc said, enjoying Josh’s fit of laughter.

“Tell me about it. I wonder if he ever anguished over what his name means. They’re both such common names, nobody would think of putting they’re meanings together.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway,” Josh continued, “this guy Eli Klein had these lofty aspirations for his seat in the beis medrash”

“You mean he hoped they’d retire it, like the Habs number 4?” Luc asked.

“Exactly. The seat was a big deal for him.”

“Another George.”

“Right. He was a senior scholar—had been there for ten years already when my brother was there. Anyway, so one morning Eli Klein walks into the beis medrash—”

“Sorry, where is this place?” Luc interrupted.

“It’s in the heart of Montreal’s Orthodox Jewish community, on the corner of Van Horne and Wiseman avenue.

“Outremont?” Luc asked.

“Exactly.” Josh put a cigarette between his lips and lit it, “Anyway, this guy, Eli Klein, walks in one morning and perceives an imminent threat to his legacy,” Josh said, breathing out a cloud of smoke. “Someone was sitting in his seat.”

“I like this story already,” Luc said.

“I know, just listen. The someone who took his seat was a guy named Shimon Gozal. He was a second-year junior, like my brother. They call them pishers when they’re juniors.”

“A pisher challenging a veteran! The chutzpah!” Luc said smiling.

“You’re talking Jewish now, nice,” Josh said.

“It’s not Jewish, dude, this stuff is in the Oxford dictionary,” Luc said, smiling.



“Really?”

“Yup. So anyway, what the hell happens to Shimon Gozal? And what does *his* name mean?” Luc said.

“Shimon is a name from the Bible, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Gozal, is Hebrew for a hatchling chick, a baby bird.”

“Okay,” Luc said.

“Not the same prestige as My God Is Small, right?” Josh said.

“Definitely not. My-God-Is-Small is epic.”

“I know. Man, you should hear my brother tell the story. This guy Eli Klein is legendary. Bigger than his name.” Josh laughed.

Okay, keep going, you got my attention,” Luc said, smiling.

“So, when Eli Klein, Mister My-God-Is-Small, sees someone sitting in his seat, he stands near the door to the beis medrash, trying to figure out what to do. The situation would have been much simpler if the usurper, Gozal, had been a newcomer, someone who had never been to this beis medrash before. There were no markings on the seats. A newcomer would have to guess which seat was available to park his tush in. Had the man in Eli Klein’s chair been such a newcomer, Klein could have resolved the problem any number of ways.”

“Like straight-up Rabbi MacTavish style. This is my seat. Touch it again, you die,” Luc said.

“Maybe. But Klein had to be strategic, this couldn’t be a kneejerk reaction. There was too much at stake. Klein thought about his options,” Josh said.

“Like?” Luc asked.

“Like, he could be magnanimous and, upon entering the study hall, play it as though the seat meant nothing to him. Move into the hall without the slightest indication of purpose and take some other seat, ideally an undesirable one. By the traffic, near the door, you know. Or better yet, within the area where the pishers agglomerated. Or even alone, in a corner all the way in the back. This response, if Klein went for it, had the distinct advantage of insuring that the onlookers, his fellows, especially the seniors, would chalk him up as unpretentious, forgiving, unambitious—not so mundane as to care about a seat and not so base as to worry about legacy. Those were hard accolades to come by. You get the picture?”

“Totally,” Luc said.

“Or,” Josh continued, “Klein could be matter-of-fact and transparent and approach Gozal directly. He could apologize for inconveniencing him but, you know, so sorry, Little Bird, the seat is taken. A softer George MacTavish. You see?”

“Yeah.”

“The advantage of this approach, besides the ease of implementing it, was that there was no chance he’d be suspected of playing the incident to look unpretentious, forgiving, unambitious, yada yada. So, option number two also had its appeal.”

“Basically, he’d come across as real,” Luc said.

“Exactly. We have a word for a person like that. We say he’s a mensch. If Eli Klein could come out of this looking like a mensch, it was all good. But, there was also another possibility,” Josh said, sizing up Luc.

“Yeah?” said Luc.

“The option of reacting strongly. A move heading in the opposite direction to the other two. Klein could walk directly to Little Bird and blast him for failing to notice—or even ask

himself whether—the seat belonged to someone. That someone being him, Eli Klein, eleventh-year senior scholar, close adviser to the Rosh Kollel—the Headmaster, possibly even next in line for that top seat.”

“What?” Luc exclaimed. “Small-God wants the throne?”

“Oh yeah. My brother says it was as blatant as a fat wart on his nose. He gloated with every bit of attention the headmaster gave him. He never hung out with the juniors, unlike most of the other seniors, who often did. If he ever addressed one of them, it was to admonish them for something. My brother said that all the juniors hated him and that he was either clueless about it or it didn’t bother him—”

“Or that’s exactly what he wanted,” Luc said. “Sounds like a strong reaction is in the cards.”

“You’re right. And if Klein pulls it off, it could prove a brilliant strategy. Causing a scene over the seat could be seen as gutsy, ambitious, authoritative. He’d be scoring a hat trick. In a word: the perfect move for a man just on the threshold of that plateau where he’s entitled to pretend to the top seat but requires that little extra push, that single dose of vitamin A—that *Auctoritas*, that proverbial *je ne sais quoi*, to push his advantage squarely above that of his peers.

“Alright! Unsheath your swords!” Luc grabbed Josh’s pack from the nearby ledge and yanked another smoke out with a wide gesture. “I’ll buy a pack in a bit if we run out,” Luc said.

Josh laughed at the cigarette sword in Luc’s fingers, then continued.

“The problem was, though, that Shimon Gozal, Little Bird, was not such a newcomer. None of these *simple* solutions applied.”

“Aww, man, I was poised for a dual here. But, I get it. Gozal knows what he’s doing. Klein can’t just come out with the light saber humming, because Gozal knew this was a possible

reaction before he put his ass in Klein's seat. This could be a trap! Who is this guy? He sounds extremely cool," Luc said.

"Who was Shimon Gozal, indeed. I bet you Klein was asking himself the same question. Gozal was a mere second year, like I said, a pisher. Granted, a bright one, who had distinguished himself with insightful readings of the medieval Tossafists. He was the go-to, amongst the juniors, when the Rosh, the Headmaster, invited them into a heated debate with the seniors. But Gozal couldn't possibly imagine that he was Klein's rival. Or so thought our man—"

"With the small God," Luc said, picking up the cue.

"So what did he want? What was on the little bird's mind? That was the question. A solid, brain-twister. Nothing short of a Talmudic subtlety. Whatever it was, it could not be a pretention to the position of Headmaster. The mere fact of being a second year ruled that out. Gozal was no naive idealizing teshuvnik, like a convert or latecomer. Gozal played according to the rules too well to be that. And it was absolutely certain that Gozal knew about the Law of the Seat. What's more was that Gozal certainly knew that Klein knew that Gozal knew." Josh smiled widely.

"So, what was Gozal up to?" Luc said.

"That was the question. Think of it like chess. This was Gozal saying, 'Check.' Checkmate, was as little as a move away if Klein read him wrong."

"So Klein's options had to be way more nuanced," Luc said.

"Exactly. He could play it magnanimously, as he had previously envisioned, but then he'd have to rely on one of his senior fellows, like his chavrusa, his study partner, Ephraim Bender, to intercede on his behalf and 'inform' Gozal that this was Klein's seat. But as enticingly simple as this solution was, it would not work. Gozal was no greenhorn, we've established that. He knew the Seat Law, knew also that Klein had this seat. If Bender were to step in and 'inform' Gozal,

then what? Could Klein simply mosey on over to his seat after such a coup as Gozal had orchestrated? Klein would retrieve his seat, yes, but he'd have failed to address Gozal's challenge—whatever that was. So magnanimity was an option, but it would only buy Klein some time on the chess board. Gozal would be poised, for tomorrow—or next month—or in an hour!—to attack again.”

“Holy fuck, this place is intense,” Luc said.

“Understatement.”

“Geez. So Klein had to address the challenge, not just get back his seat,” Luc said.

“That's right. And the same problem was true of playing the complacency card. Simply walking up to Gozal and informing him, with heartfelt apologies, that this was his seat, would fall just as short. Gozal would apologize in turn and walk back to his usual spot. Klein would retrieve the seat, but the upper hand would still be with Gozal.”

“Maybe Gozal would refuse to move. Even after Klein or his study partner informed him. Isn't that a possibility?” Luc asked, rubbing his cigarette out on the wall he was sitting on.

“An interesting possibility, because that would be a fatal mistake for Gozal. Klein wouldn't have to do anything more. The entire beis medrash would turn around to watch the scene and silently condemn Gozal for contempt of the Seat Law. But Gozal, all of the pisher that he was, wouldn't make such an obvious mistake.

“You mean, the others were with George MacTavish when he grilled me over his seat?”

“What?” Josh didn't grasp Luc's deduction.

“In workshop today. People must have sided with George against me.”

“No, what I'm saying is that maybe a few of us understood that you had done something suspicious when you took George's seat. But when George reacted the way he did, everybody

was like, Who do you think you are? towards George. What George should have done was ask you, nicely, if he could have the seat back. He could claim it was the best seat for him because of the distance from the prof's chair for his eyesight, or something. Also, offer many apologies for taking the seat back from you. Then George would have reclaimed his seat, and you would have come off as an asshole that steals people's chairs, or, at best, a jerk that doesn't know that seats can matter," Josh said.

Luc and Josh, stood some moments, silently, as crowds of students outside campus walked past them.

My brother said you had to see Klein, who, all this time, stood at the bookshelves near the entrance to the beis medrash, leaning back against the wall. You could almost hear the gears working in his mind, *Think, Eli Klein, think*. At one point, the boys even thought they recognized a look of admiration creep onto Klein's face as he watched Gozal. In his mind, he probably conceded to Gozal the achievement of a formidable challenge. Shimon Gozal had formulated the perfect riddle. Had revealed the notorious *bombe kashe*. Raised a difficulty worthy of putting everything and everybody in the beis medrash on perilous hold. No small feat. They could tell that Klein, who at first had been annoyed, was now experiencing *a shtikl chiyus*, just a little bit of elation, as he watched Gozal and his birdy-tush parked comfortably in his seat."

Luc considered the scene Josh had described for him. "Is that how it ends? With Klein recognizing his defeat?"

"Are you not listening, lad? We're talking about seats here, dude. This is as life-and-death as it gets without blood," Josh said.

Luc smiled. "So?" he said.

“So, Klein figured he had no options. The only one that ever made some sense was making a fuss. He’d go directly to Gozal and tell him to leave the seat. Klein could do it loudly enough for the others to hear, which would draw their attention to the scene. Of course, he’d lose all the perks of being viewed as forgiving, unpretentious, etc., but wasn’t that also something to be gained? Klein knew that in order to claim the headmaster’s seat he’d have to earn the respect, even the reverence, of his peers. Strong leaders were not forgiving—certainly not with regard to transgression of the laws, right?”

“I get it,” Luc said.

“So anyway, I’m just saying it was possible, that in showing no mercy while defeating Gozal, Klein could also secure his claim to the throne. There was still one thing, though, that Klein had to make sure of.”

Josh paused and gave Luc another one of his looks. “He would need to make a fuss, so as to attract the attention of the others, yes, but he could not allow himself to lose his calm. Any display of anger or losing his grip, would have exactly the opposite effect on the men,” Josh explained.

“Of course,” Luc said, he can’t be seen to be manipulated by a pisher.

“Exactly. And, supposedly, this was particularly true for Klein. Klein, more than any of the other men, couldn’t afford to lose his calm.”

“What was he, the hulk or something?”

“No. There was a story that went around, especially with first years, about Klein. Klein, during his own second year, lost it, once, with the Headmaster. They debated some Talmudic passage hotly, at first, but then it got ugly and turned into something else. The Headmaster remained stony calm, and the icier he became, the more Klein went out of his mind. Hurling

insults at the top of his lungs. My brother says it hangs over Klein like a permanent shadow. Everybody knew the story about the day Klein lost it. He could not afford a repeat of that mistake. It could even be that this thing with Gozal was the moment to make amends and wipe that stain from his reputation for good, or otherwise bury himself with a second mistake of the same nature.”

“Heavy,” Luc said.

“Yeah. I know.”

The sun was casting long shadows from the tall buildings around campus. Some of the streets were as cold and grey as the pavement and concrete that loomed all around. While small sections of other streets were glowing white with what was left of the sun. The sun was a pulsing ember, now, low in the western sky. Only the tops of high buildings caught its flame and were ablaze with it.

“It’s crazy how much of this story is about reading,” Luc said.

“What do you mean?” Josh asked.

“I mean, you’ve told me a story that’s nothing more than the story of a guy watching another guy sitting in his seat.

“I’m not done,” Josh said.

“No, but you could be. Whatever happens next is just tidying up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Klein is enough for me, man. Think about it. The story in all those readings that Klein has of this one, potentially meaningless gesture that Gozal makes,” Luc said.

“You mean Klein was making something out of nothing?”



“Not exactly, although that’s possible too, I guess. I’m just saying Klein is the storyteller here, you know? Just like you read all kinds of things over Klein while he’s standing still by the door or when he hesitates. You, or your brother, I mean. It doesn’t matter. In the end, all anybody ever saw was Klein looking at Gozal from the other end of the study hall. It’s the other stuff that’s the story,” Luc said.

“So you don’t want to know what happened?” Josh asked, mockingly.

“I do, but it’s like *and they lived happily ever after*, or *the end* on the last page. You get the meaning just fine without it.

“Sometimes those last words change everything,” Josh said.

“Yeah, I know. It’s like a ray of light lighting casting a new angle on the the landscape,” Luc said, looking up at the patterns of shadow across the architecture of the buildings. “Okay, let’s have it,” he said, finally.

“You sure?” Josh prodded.

“No.”

“I’ve got one last smoke. Let’s share it.”

Luc took the cigarette, lit it and passed it to Josh after dragging a long hall from it.

“For whatever it’s worth, the story unwinds like this,” Josh said, looking at Luc through the smoke. “Klein goes up to Gozal and stands before him at the seat. Gozal is absorbed by the text he’s reading and doesn’t even notice Klein standing there. They stay that way for a good long minute. After a while, Klein makes the first move and says, ‘Gozal!’ loudly enough for everybody in the beis medrash to hear, you know.”

“I can’t take this,” Luc said, cringing.

“Hold on, just a little more,” Josh said, pulling on the cigarette again and passing it back to Luc. “He says, ‘Gozal! Was it on account of *gezel* that the Almighty brought the flood onto the world, or debauchery?’”

Luc looked puzzled.

“Gezel means theft, in Hebrew,” Josh said.

“Okay,” Luc said.

“Klein thought there was an obvious similarity between Gozal’s name and the word for theft, *gezel*. Everybody in the beis medrash was watching now.”

“What did Gozal say?”

“Gozal, without hesitating—it’s a question for kindergarten kids—answers, ‘On account of *gezel*. That’s how the Sages explain it. Theft is worse than vice.’”

“What? Gozal didn’t pick up on the insinuation?”

“You think?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Klein waits a bit for the Gozal *gezel* inuendo to sink in. But nothing doing. Gozal just stares back at him blankly and after a few seconds, just goes back to his book as if Klein wasn’t there.”

“GOZAL and GEZEL sound like they might be related,” Klein says again, louder and over-enunciating this time. Now everybody’s listening and watching as if this is Kasparov vs. Topalov. You could hear a fly walking across a page of Talmud.”

“Does Gozal finally ‘get it’?” Luc said, drawing quotation marks in the air.

“Oh, yeah. Gozal responds by feigning naive. He looks at Klein and answers, ‘Actually, I was told Gozal means small bird. It’s also possible we’re descendents of the tribe of Binyomin.’”

He was the last of Jacob's sons. The smallest.' Then he looks at Klein with a smile and adds, 'But, are you trying to tell me something, Rabbi Klein?'"

"Here it is," Luc said. "Drum roll please."

"'You're in my seat!' Klein bursts out, looking around at the others for support. But the men are already turning back to their texts. Klein had made his move. The men in the beis medrash knew it wasn't going to be enough. 'Of course!' Gozal says, looking suddenly enlightened. 'Of course, I'm sorry, I hadn't realized this is your seat, of course it is, isn't it? I'm so sorry Rabbi Klein, I just never noticed you were there.' Gozal says this with the most serious face he could muster."

"The pisher!" Luc said, standing up from the wall he was sitting on.

"I know. My brother said you could cut the tension in the room with a knife. It was checkmate. My brother said he could never get it out of Gozal why he had done it. Most of the guys believed it was a payback for Klein's peevishness with the juniors. Some said it was to save the beis medrash from the possibility of Klein taking the reins. *I never noticed you were there.* What a line," Josh said with finality.

"A man's fate with a one-liner!" Luc said.

"You liked that one?"

"I did."

The two stood a while longer with no more cigarettes to share.

"Dude. That's all I'm really asking for. To come up with some brilliant one-liners," Luc said/

Josh considered Luc's comment.

“That’s it, isn’t it? It all about how willing you are to fight for a seat to park your ass in.  
Isn’t it?”

## THE THEFT

**A**dam Geffen was a home owner on a pleasant tree-lined street in Lower Westmount, with two children, and well in the throes of his first decade of marriage when he began shoplifting. It occurred to him one day, rather subliminally, that shoplifting might improve his life. His credentials as a family man and tenured English professor no longer made the cut. His legacy, he thought, had to include some form of radical break with convention, even if this would only manifest as a footnote in the narrative of his life.

The thieving started, predictably, with something small, and what seemed at the time like a good enough reason. A few coffee capsules, with no box or price tag with which to scan them at the cash, lay like forbidden fruit on the depleted shelves of the Wal-Mart. The thought of presenting these to a lifeless cashier who would flip on the signal light, then waiting for a well-meaning student employee to return with the observation that the capsules were only sold in packages of ten—of which none were left in stock; further waiting for a manager—possibly an individual thoroughly void of any doubts about anything—to enter and explain, as if such things made sense when their mechanics were explained, that they could not sell the capsules individually, convinced him of the soundness of the theft. He pocketed the coffee shots in what he reckoned was a security blind spot in an isle surrounded by stacks of potato chips and soft drinks. Outside the store, he wondered at how easy it was, but even more at how obvious the

solution had been. That's it? he marvelled to himself, revitalised by the open air and the awareness of the capsules filling his pockets.

The first time was followed by some remorse and the moral reflex to reason the capsules were sure to be disposed of in the store's trash bins out back or stolen by some overnight employee. Why not short the process and take them for himself? he thought. There really never was a second time. After the coffee capsules, it felt to him as though the whole moral dilemma was moot. From then on, anything he deemed the price of which to be abusive—a condition he conjured just for the form—was ripe for the picking. He'd go grocery shopping, fill up his cart with whatever was needed, and pay at the cash like everyone else, but unlike—he assumed—his middle class, middle-aged grocering peers, he also carried a token item deep within his overcoat pocket. After a time, having grown comfortable with his newly acquired skill, he punctuated the theft with friendly, have-a-nice-days, to both cashier and the sidekick bagger, as he walked away toward the sliding door entrance with a watchful globular camera eye above.

His wife Aviva nearly called him out on the stealing once or twice. She read him like an open book but never used that perspicacity as a weapon. She never openly confronted him about the shoplifting, but she also stopped short of being complicit in the petty thefts. Once, holding the bill she liked to peruse when she came across it in the bag, she said, “They charged you for four steaks, Adam. How come there's five?”

“I guess the cashier miscounted. Free steak for us, courtesy of Provigo, my love.”

“Weird,” she'd said, “these things never happen to me.” She smiled accusingly at him.

“Happens more often than you think,” he said, smiling back.

As a couple, they fought often, rants mostly that were the products of frustration with the unwieldy baggage that comes with married life. He loved her deeply and had felt that way for her

since the weekend they first met on an open-top bus tour of New York City. It had taken longer for her, but in recent years Adam recognized a willing vulnerability in her that revealed her growing trust and affection for him.

On another occasion, he said, “The cashier didn't see the package at the bottom of my cart, Vivie. I didn't say anything and I went through as though I hadn't seen it either.”

She said, “Can you imagine if you're suspected of shoplifting? I heard they post pictures of shoplifters in the store.”

One evening out with the boys and enough drink to provoke some boisterous conversation, one of the guys said to Adam, “Nice to have an evening free from the wife's clutches, eh Adam?”

Adam responded without hesitation, “I'm free of my wife's clutches three hundred and sixty-five days a year, you sorry piece of shit.” Adam had meant it as a profound compliment to Aviva, only a couple of his older friends caught on to that. Vivie had grace, she had strength and self worth that made her the most attractive woman to him. He had never suspected that with age everything would get better—the sex, the intimacy, the friendship, and the cruel vivid truth of the fights. To avoid any further confrontations about his clandestine activities, he took to disposing of the bill before he got home with the groceries.

After a nearly a year of the shoplifting, he'd settled into a rhythm of pocketing items only once in a while. He had a few guiding principles he adhered to, to dress the stealing in highbrow ethics. First, he never stole from mom and pop businesses, or private individuals. Second, he never stole something he wouldn't otherwise spend money on under normal circumstances. No jars of caviar just for kicks. He wouldn't munch caviar at the expense of big corporations. Lately he was rethinking that last rule. He thought if anything justified his thieving it was stuffing his



face with caviar and foie gras while abandoning himself to the tepid cushiness of the twenty-first century. He didn't bother with convincing himself that big corporations stole from him. He knew these were commonplace justifications and unconvincing to exculpate his thieving. He just acquiesced to the act as a way to fight against a culture of inhibition he felt was closing in on him and knew instinctively was eroding his humanity. Words he was no longer allowed to employ. Sensitivities and causes he could no longer risk to offend. Willfully displayed cleavages he was no longer allowed to look at.

When he took an item he might mutter something like, *This one's for you, the word "savage." If only people knew you were untamed, undomesticated—originally of the woods Rest in peace my wild unbroken fighter.*

It seemed serendipitous then, that in the midst of this adventure—the shoplifting was a short stint that lasted only a few years—he should be facing a student caught stealing on campus. The university's English department had inaugurated the Irving Layton Reading Room in the fall of the previous year. It was stacked with Layton's books, those he authored as well as many he consulted, plus an impressive collection of handwritten drafts of poems and notes penned by him throughout his life. The room's centerpiece was the 1960s Smith Corona typewriter, reduced to a silent relic now, on the original makeshift desk Layton had worked on. There was also an old ashtray and a 1973 nude calendar guarding the hairdos and other voluptuaries of the time within its sealed plastic sheath; both were vestiges of Israel Lazarovitch's now extinguished and banished vitality. It was Northerp Frye's *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, glossed with Layton's heavy exuberant hand, that had been stolen. It was during a master class with a visiting scholar from York that the book-theft occurred. The discrete camera above later revealed the student had taken the book from one of the shelves to peruse. The student then

stuffed it into her backpack as the class ended, and simply walked off with it. She was a senior undergraduate, apparently with a good GPA and excellent reputation amongst those who taught her

Lena Chaudhuri, an assistant professor in line for tenure, had spotted her and brought the theft to Geffen's attention the same year he had accepted the position of chair of the department. She hadn't had the courage, perhaps due to lack of experience with such unconventional things, to confront the student directly. The video captured by the camera supported her claim unambiguously.

Geffen thought it was likely there were formal procedures in the university's code of conduct for dealing with such a thing, but he wanted to meet the student privately before turning the procedural machine on. He was profoundly interested in what the student would say when confronted. Geffen had summoned her to an appointment via e-mail.

*Dear Ms. Beiles,*

*Please confirm your availability to meet with me on Thursday, November 3rd anytime between 1:30 and 2:30 PM in my office (LB-12-803), to discuss a matter pertaining to your status in the program.*

*Adam Geffen*

A reply from the student appeared some hours later:

*Hi Dr. Geffen,*

*2:30 Thursday is fine. Is there something, i.e., documents, I need to bring to our appointment.*

*Angela Beiles.*

Geffen responded promptly,

*Hello Angela,*

*Come as is, nothing to worry about, just some things to clarify about your present status.*

*Best,*

*Adam Geffen*

On November 3rd, a few minutes before two, Geffen sat behind his desk pondering what he might say to Beiles. At precisely two o'clock, a hollow knock echoed at his door.

“Come in,” Geffen said cheerily. He wondered if the tone he had taken was right.

Angela Beiles was of average height with a strong padded build. Her tattooed knuckles gripped the strap of her backpack. Geffen vaguely recognized the face, but was certain he had never taught her. The most prominent features of Beiles' face were the piercings, the thick heavy eyeliner and the dyed black hair. Something about the way so many of the students covered themselves in artifice undermined their supposed militancy for truth in his mind. But perhaps assuming truth was their god was a leap, he thought. He suspected himself of being profoundly disconnected with the generation's concerns and its way of expressing them. The piercings reminded him of the exposed tips of field mines. He was thankful he had had taken measures to install a video camera in his office. It had been Aviva's idea. After witnessing the lynching of a colleague accused of fondling a fifth grade boy during a private tutorial in the resource room—a boy known for his brazen antics and manipulation of the staff—the new protocol at the school where Aviva taught was never to isolate oneself with a student without a second staff member present as a witness. She had advised Adam to take precautions while receiving students privately in his office.

“Hello, I'm Angela Beiles,” the young woman said as she manoeuvred into the office.

“Yes, please have a seat.” Geffen gestured to the chair in front of his desk. “Thank you for coming.” He had trouble subduing his cheery tone. “I’m not sure how to broach this, so I’ll just come out with it, although I’d ask that you measure your reaction so that we could talk about it. You’ve been caught on video removing a book from the Layton Room.”

Beiles shifted in her seat, but remained silent. Geffen was relieved that the student held eye contact.

“One of the faculty also saw you do it last Monday. It was brought to my attention. I felt it was important for us to discuss this as opposed to deferring straightaway to the powers that be.” Geffen managed a slight smile in the hopes of reassuring the student.

“The powers that be?” Beiles smiled back. “This is a used book removed from a public room we’re talking about, Dr. Geffen.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Geffen said, “although it’s not altogether a public space, nor is it simply a used book we’re talking about.”

At first Beiles said nothing, then as if to embolden Geffen she said, “So what did you want to talk about, Dr. Geffen?”

Beiles’ intervention annoyed Geffen. He felt the silence in exchanges was most meaningful when allowed to resonate, breaking it to patronize him was a double offense. Yet he admired Beiles’ forwardness.

“Well, firstly, are you admitting to the theft? Perhaps you took the book by inadvertence or for some particular reason.”

“I’m not sure,” Beiles ventured tentatively.

“I’m suggesting you may not have intended to steal it,” Geffen offered.

“I took the book, professor, I knew what I was doing.”

“Right. Well, perhaps you want to tell me about that. Did you mean to borrow it?”

“No. I wanted the book. With all due respect Dr. Geffen, I figured it would be put to better use in my possession than on the shelves of that museum of patriarchy.”

This was what Geffen had been hoping for. Not some docile student with no inner workings to explain her actions. Beiles struck him as a clever. It was clearer to him now why he had decided to meet Beiles rather than throwing the book at her. Beiles' motives were of the utmost interest to him. That the comment about patriarchy singed a little was of no consequence. He understood the obvious connection between Layton and patriarchy, even sympathized with it on critical grounds. He was glad to be conversing with a student who had something to say about an important issue, doubly glad that she was willing to voice her critique accompanied by a concrete gesture of civil disobedience. Geffen was fully attentive.

“*Museum's* a strange word for the Layton Room,” Geffen said, emphasizing his concession to the mention of patriarchy.

“That's what it is, though, isn't it, professor?”

“In a sense, I suppose,” Geffen admitted. “So what's this all about? Are you compelled by the thrill of burglarizing artifacts from museums, or is there some political motivation to your action?”

“Nothing to do with politics, professor, although I'm not unhappy to pillage Layton's legacy in the process.”

“You're motivated solely by the thrill of burglarizing, then?”

“Wouldn't you be, professor, if the institution was wide open to it?”

Geffen contained his astonishment at the question. “I suppose I might be tempted,” he said, “but I don't think I would actually go through with it.”

“Don't get me wrong, Dr. Geffen, but under the right circumstances, I think you would. Anybody would, at least anybody who knows there's a thrill to it, like you just said.”

“Well, it's heartening on the one hand to know that you see your actions as warranted; on some level it exculpates you from moral transgression, perhaps, but there is the unfortunate reality that you've been caught breaking the law and that the law doesn't quite see things your way.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Geffen no longer saw the piercings when he looked at Beiles.

“I'm sorry, professor, but why am I here?”

“Like I said, Ms. Beiles, I wanted an opportunity for both of us to discuss this.”

“Are you recording this conversation?” Beiles asked with aplomb.

Geffen was startled by the question. “Absolutely not. There's a video camera that records images, but no sound,” he said looking up to the corner of the office. Let me be very clear about my intentions, Ms. Beiles. I have not decided to formally accuse you or bring this to anybody else's attention. I've asked you to come so I might get a better sense of what happened. I want you to speak freely and in confidence. Nothing you say here will incriminate you. If anything our conversation will only help to contextualize the facts.” Geffen was unsure he hadn't given Beiles too much leeway.

“I think I've been pretty clear about what happened. I took the book because I wanted it, but I knew I was taking someone else's property. If you think this case is clear, professor, then maybe we should just get on with whatever consequence you think is appropriate.”

“It's my turn to ask if you're recording this conversation,” Geffen said suppressing a smile.

“No, sir . . . then again . . .”

“Then again?”

“Well, if I'm a thief, what's my word worth anyway? Funny question, professor, with all due respect.”

“Not so funny, Ms. Beiles—am I pronouncing your name correctly?” Beiles nodded affirmatively. “I think there are mitigating circumstances to why people do things that necessarily reflect on the quality of their character. Wouldn't you agree?”

“I do,” Beiles said tentatively, “but what about Dr. Chaudhuri? She saw me take it. Does she also see things your way?”

“Well, Dr. Chaudhuri did bring this case to my attention. I think she might agree with whatever measures I take to rectify the situation.”

“Like I said, professor, let's get on with it then. Let's rectify this.”

“Could you stop calling me professor, Beiles, this isn't a formal hearing; at least I don't think it has to be.”

“Yes, professor,” Beiles smiled widely now. “Is Dr. Geffen okay?”

“Adam,” Geffen said. “It's what all students on campus call me.”

“I'll stick to Dr. Geffen,” Beiles said.

Geffen felt the tension growing between him and the student who was proving, disconcertingly, to be unyielding.

“Suit yourself, Ms. Beiles,” Geffen conceded.

“Exactly, professor,” Beiles said. “You call me Ms. Beiles, and I call you Dr. Geffen. Neither of us seems to be comfortable with the first name thing.” She shifted in her seat and glanced up at the corner in the ceiling where the camera watched.

Beiles was right, of course, Geffen thought. He was on a first name basis with all his students, but it was a two-way street. It was easy, he knew, to feign familiarity with students, so long as there were no stakes. He found the proposition of addressing Beiles by her first name nearly impossible. But what were the stakes here, he wondered. Beiles was sharp to have picked up on the ambiguity, he thought.

Geffen felt he had gotten himself into a bind. He wasn't sure where he wanted the conversation with Beiles to go. Maybe he had hoped Beiles would be more remorseful so that he could be magnanimous and let her off the hook, even offer to buy her a copy of Frye's *Bush Garden* as a token of how appreciative he was of the way the conversation had gone, although he realized now how patronizing that would seem. He could tell Lena Chaudhuri that Beiles had been forthcoming and that they had had a long meaningful talk about the virtue of moral rectitude as consonant with a career in academia. Geffen maintained his conviction that Dr. Chaudhuri would feel justice was served without recourse to the indiscriminate code of conduct. They were, he and his colleagues, scholars of literature, in the end. People who understood nuance and ambiguity. People who thrived on the necessity of transgression to the creative enterprise. Surely his people were not the bureaucrats of the eleventh floor. This young student impressed him as understanding that on some level as well.

“Ms. Beiles, I'm a little hesitant to bring this to bear on our conversation, but . . . how can I say this without being misunderstood . . . I'm not all that impressed by theft. I mean to say, I don't think thieving is such big a deal, depending on the circumstances of course.”

Beiles remained quiet.

“I feel compelled to let you off the hook. Let me rephrase that, I'm almost convinced there is no *hook*. Do you understand what I'm saying?”



“Yes, professor, I think so.”

“In fact, I'm more interested in hearing how *you* think this should be played out. If it makes sense to me, I think I'd be compelled just to let you—”

“Can I keep the book, professor?”

Geffen was thinking that if only Beiles could be a little more reasonable, this would all play out to her advantage.

“I'm afraid that's impossible,” Geffen countered, “Dr. Chaudhuri is expecting a resolution to this, and I don't think the scenario you're proposing would fly.”

“But as far as you're concerned it would, professor?”

“You know what, Beiles, I think it might,” there was a tinge of impatience in Geffen's tone. “I could arrange to have the book scanned in high definition for you, in exchange for which you'd give the original back.”

“I think I'd like to keep the original,” Beiles said.

Geffen waited for her to say something else, for Beiles to understand the precariousness of her own position and tone down her request, but nothing came from Beiles except further silence. She still held Geffen's gaze.

“I'm afraid that's impossible,” Geffen said, after a pause.

Geffen began to suspect his largesse had brought the discussion to an absurdity. She stole the book, she knew it and she also knew that others knew it. Yet she wanted to keep the book, which was understandable on some level, but obviously impossible. Surely Beiles understood that, he thought. Geffen concluded he had done too much to make Beiles feel at ease.

“Ms. Beiles, let's do this another way. I believe you have class on Mondays, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. So please come and see me here at this time on Monday, with the book in hand. It will have given both of us time to think about what to do. How does that sound?”

“That's too much time, professor.”

“Too much? What do you mean?”

“I have the book with me here.”

“Yes, well, as I've said, I'd like some time to think about this. You want to keep the book and I want you to return it. You must admit, you having it here today doesn't help much in resolving our stalemate.”

“Dr. Geffen, it's too long for you to wait until Monday. With all due respect, professor.”

Geffen looked at Beiles, genuinely puzzled. He was searching Beiles' facial rings for signs.

“Professor, I work at Provigo.”

Geffen still didn't understand.

“The Provigo where you shop, professor.”

“That's where I've seen you before!” Geffen said, almost shouting.

Then it dawned on Geffen what Beiles was implying but felt himself curiously unmoved. It was his own composure that began to intrigue him now.

“You work at the Provigo on Cavendish boulevard?” Geffen asked.

“Yes.”

“That *is* where I shop. Why are you telling me this?”

“It's too long to wait until after the weekend, professor, because the management has printed a picture they've captured of you. They're going to post it on the shoplifter's board at the

entrance. I saw it before they did and asked them not to; I said you were a respectable professor in my university and that I had an appointment with you today.”

Something warm and massive, like a tropical storm front, was engulfing Geffen.

“My God, Beiles, they can't post that picture of me.” Geffen's eyes were crazed, Beiles still held them fast.

“Professor, don't lose it now. I just want to keep this book. If you give me a few bills for the Provigo management and promise not to shop there anymore, I think everything will be okay. But it can't wait til Monday.”

Geffen, stared back at Beiles, too dumb to respond.

“If you don't have the money now Dr. Geffen, I'll take your word for it. I trust you. I think there are reasons why people do things, right professor?”

With that, Beiles rose from the seat and turned to leave. Geffen rose abruptly, an inarticulate grunt escaping from his throat, and gestured for her to stop. He glanced towards the camera on the periphery of his vision.

“I'll give you two-hundred dollars, on Monday, Ms. Beiles,” Geffen stammered, “or tomorrow if you don't mind coming in. Will that be enough? Are they trying to extort me or just get back what I've taken? Is two-hundred enough? I doubt I've even taken that much from them.”

“Up to you, professor, but I think that that'll do it. If not, I'll let you know. Don't worry about the pictures, Dr. Geffen.” Beiles turned away and opened the office door.

“Beiles,” Geffen said.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to hold this like a guillotine over my head?”

Beiles looked at him, puzzled.

“Are you going to blackmail me forever with this?” Geffen asked, all traces of a smile gone from his face.

“No, Dr. Geffen. No, I just want to keep the book. I'll make sure the picture file is destroyed. Have a nice day, professor,” Beiles said and walked out.

Geffen was left standing before his desk, small, and loose in his own clothes. What was growing in him now, was a staggering sense of his own crushing domesticity. He couldn't quite fathom what brought his attention to it, but he felt broken by the distance of Aviva's body from his. Feared he'd somehow lost it, like so many indexed words

He understood with cruel lucid clarity, that the tide was receding in a flux that was leaving him stranded with his feet buried in the decaying mud flats. Even Beiles' metal rings and permanent inks were a lure, nothing substantial enough to hold on to.

Geffen left campus early. On the way home, he scanned the reverberating storefronts along Sherbrooke Street West, everything a blur now, in the traffic and pedestrian confusion of this wet November dusk. He was searching for another Provigo where he might start over again. That night Vivie said softly into his ear, “Come take me. I'm yours.”

YOURS TO CARRY

Uncle Leibel had been living with his daughter, Elizabeth, in Scarborough when he died late in the winter of 2016. Heart failure, according to my mother's report. She had heard the news from his daughter some weeks after his death. "He insisted on a burial in a Jewish cemetery," my mother had conveyed with painful finality.

Some months later, I received a phone call from Elizabeth early one Sunday morning.

"Rabbi Leibowitz? This is Elizabeth Anderson . . ."

"Yes?"

"Elizabeth Zuckerman Anderson, your Uncle Leibel's daughter in Toronto."

"Elizabeth . . . Lizzie! How are you? What a nice surprise."

"Thank you. I'm glad I caught you. How is your family?"

"Everybody's well, thank you. We are in the midst of preparing for Passover. It's a busy time, you know, important family time. How have you been since your father's death? I'm sorry, I meant to get your number from my mother to convey my condolences."

I was surprised by her call. I knew who she was, of course. We had played together as cousins on the rare occasions my mother invited Uncle Leibel and his family to the house for dinner or a holiday meal when they lived in Montreal. That was before Lizzie's mother, Alice, had died. It must have been nearly four decades since I'd had any contact with Uncle Leibel's children. Lizzie was almost certainly married with children of her own now.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

“Yes, everything is fine. I’m calling about a matter concerning my father. If you are busy with the holiday, we can speak another time,” she said.

“Oh no, this is as good a time as any, Elizabeth, I could use a break from all the cooking and cleaning,” I said, sincerely.

There was a short pause on the other end of the phone.

“You know, my father was very fond of you. When he spoke about his family, he spoke essentially of your mother, Esther, and of you, the rabbi of the family.”

I wondered if Lizzie had known about my last altercation with her father over my grandfather’s Kaddish almost a decade ago. It had caused a rift between us.

“Yes, he often called me that, *the family rabbi*,” I said, laughing into the receiver.

“You know, Benjamin, I am calling you because we have gone through my father’s papers. He kept so many notebooks. They’re journals, essentially.”

“Journals. That makes sense. He loved to write. I’ve kept some of my favorite columns of his, from his days with the *Yiddish Weekly*, in Montreal.”

“Yes, he was very prolific. We found a number of these journals filled with recollections of his life in Europe with your grandparents. Some in English, many in Yiddish, which we’re thinking of having translated. There were also many entries about his life in Montreal, about your family—his sisters and his parents, your grandparents.”

“After he came back to Montreal?” I asked, mostly to assure her I was paying attention.

“Yes, before my mother’s death and also after, when he came back to Montreal.”

“Okay,” I said.

“There’s also a notebook dedicated to you. It’s almost full. We were thinking you might like to have it.”

The significance of this information had failed to dawn on me at the time. I expressed my interest in the journal.

“Really? I would love to have a look at that,” I said.

“We were even thinking, after we have the Yiddish ones translated, we may put some of this together in some sort of printed form and offer copies to family members.”

“Great idea,” I said.

“I know. There are so many notebooks, though, we’ve got our work cut out for us.” I could hear the tinkling of china she was handling in the kitchen as she spoke. There was a pause in the conversation.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a few seconds, “I’m just making myself a coffee.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked, beginning to wonder where the conversation was headed.

“Oh, well you can run downstairs for a carton of milk, there’s none in the fridge upstairs,” she said, laughing.

“Oh no, I meant with your father’s writings,” I said, then laughed too. An awkward intimacy had crept into the phone call. It amazed me, really, how easy it was to talk to Lizzie. We were family, after all, although the ties between us seemed uncertain. She broke the silence first.

“It’s really nice to be talking with you, Ben. It’s been ages and yet it feels like yesterday we were playing at your mom’s.”

“I know! This is really nice,” I said, conceding to a closeness with Lizzie I had known decades ago.



“Yes,” she said.

For some moments, neither of us spoke.

“Lizzie, can I come to Toronto?” I asked, breaking this last silence. The idea had come to me impulsively.

“Oh, gosh!” she said. “That would be great—”

“I mean I’d like to come to help you sort out your father’s writings and perhaps visit his grave. I feel like I owe him that.”

I could hear her choking up on the other end. My eyes began to swell with moisture and I felt a familiar ache in my throat.

“That would be lovely,” she said, struggling to speak through tears.

The conversation dwindled after I obtained her address. She assured me that there was no reason not to stay with her and Stephen. There was plenty of room and it would be nice to spend some time together. I said I’d come to Toronto the next day but couldn’t possibly stay for more than one night.

My wife, Rachel, was intrigued when I told her of my plan. There was so much to do before *Pesah*, which would be upon us this Thursday evening. But I sensed Rachel understood. She kissed me goodbye dreamily when she rose to accompany me to the door the next day at 5:00 a.m.

“*Tzeyskha leshalom, vetahzor leshalom*” she said, as I walked down our front steps toward the car. “Go out in peace, and come back in peace.”

Highway 401 was quiet. Uncle Leibel’s death and Lizzie’s phone call prompted a review of my family memories. I had a long drive ahead to do just that.

Nearly a decade ago, when my grandfather died, Leibel, his only son, found himself facing the problem of reciting the mourner's Kaddish. Leibel, the family's eldest, had inherited all of my grandfather's impressive Lithuanian build along with the thick and heavy facial features of his Jewish ancestry. But he had lived a life at odds with Jewish practice. Of his three sisters, he was fondest of my mother, Esther, with whom he was closest in age. By extension, and perhaps for other reasons I never fully understood, he always paid special attention to me, the first of his nephews and nieces.

In the hospital room, where my grandfather's corpse lay covered. Uncle Leibel approached to embrace me. His face, broken with grief, seemed uncharacteristically vulnerable. I was unsure if he meant to console me over my grandfather's death or if he saw in me someone who might console him over the loss of his father. His chest heaved, as if suddenly frightened by its own fragility. I breathed the humid warmth of his proximity as he pressed his face against the lapels of my wool coat. After a brief moment, he straightened and took a step back from me. His battered eyes held mine for an instant before he spoke.

"I want to ask a favor from you," he said, with a slight Yiddish accent he had never fully purged. I remained silent, dumb, from the day's events but held his gaze. "You know that I don't hold with the prayers. I don't believe in all that," he added.

"Yes," I said to him.

"I want you to say the Kaddish for my father," he said.

I hadn't seen that coming. I was not compelled as I thought Uncle Leibel might have expected me to be. There was something in his request that seemed disingenuous to me. If he didn't hold with the Kaddish—that much I suspected he was truthful about—why did it matter to him that someone else do it in his stead? The Kaddish was a filial duty that every son must

someday be called upon by Jewish law to uphold. What would my doing it in his place accomplish? I would have been more compelled by the honesty of a stance in which he fully assumed the implications of his rejection of it. Passing the load seemed to me a way for him to have his cake and eat it too.

“It belongs to you, Uncle Leibel. It’s your burden to carry,” I said, knowing I was walking a thin line.

“Yes, but I don’t hold with the prayers, I’m not a hypocrite,” he said.

“I understand. I know you’re an honest man—” I began to reply.

“You will do a good job with it. You were close to him and you know the prayers, Ben. Your Zaide would have wanted someone to say Kaddish for him,” he said.

“Wouldn’t *someone* ideally be you?” I prodded.

Uncle Leibel stood before me, muted by the disappointment he was struggling to conceal from his face.

“We could take the time together to learn the Kaddish, understand what it says,” I offered. “I think you would find it doesn’t go against your convictions if you—”

“I’m not going to say Kaddish, Ben.” He stood there, unmoved. “Will you say the Kaddish for me or not?”

I fought the impulse to accept even though it seemed an important request for him. I was torn between granting my uncle some roundabout way to accomplish his religious duty—it was, after all, a gesture that proved his lingering attachment to Jewish practice—and my sense that the solemn occasion of his father’s death was not one to squander with half measures and compromises. Better he own the implications of his refusal, my gut insisted.

“No, I’m sorry,” I said. “Don’t think I mean to pressure you into doing it, Uncle Leibel. I have too much respect for you for that. I just don’t think finding a way out of this dilemma is something I want to take from you. I think I’d be betraying you if I did.”

He stood considering what I’d said a moment longer, then turned away and walked out of the room, leaving me alone with my grandfather’s lifeless body. I was devastated, watching him walk away, by the realization that he was broken by my refusal. I had hoped, walking this tightrope, that he would come to understand my position and reconsider his request. Whether he then took on the duty of reciting the Kaddish or not was inconsequential in my mind.

I hadn’t been present when my grandfather drew his last breath, when the religious men on watch had prodded his eyelids shut, reciting the *Shema Yisroel* with him. I walked toward the white sheet and felt like a thief as I gently pulled back the cloth from his face. His eyes were shut but his mouth was slightly open. The dry swollen tongue wedged his mouth slightly open, as if, with his last breath, he was still dumbstruck by the beauty of the world he was taking leave of. His skin was a strange shade of grey, although he had already begun to lose his colour some days ago, when he started on his descent from life. I pulled the sheet back over his face hastily, despite a keen sense that I’d always feel I hadn’t looked upon him long enough. I couldn’t bring myself to persist in what seemed like his desecration by looking at him on that hospital bed, reduced so palpably by death.

I thought, then, that it may have been hasty to refuse Uncle Leibel the way I had but I grew increasingly convinced that I had to convey the Kaddish was his alone to do, that I would not take it from him to alleviate the weight of carrying what was his to carry. He didn’t see it that way, I thought, or just as likely, he refused to have any religious observance dictated to him, by me, by the duty itself. I wasn’t sure. I knew that my stance was idealistic and that it would likely

fail to convey its meaning. Despite my refusal, he would not have to carry the consequence—whatever that meant for him—of denying his father the Kaddish. There were others, more than willing, to take on the Kaddish if Uncle Leibel refused. But it wouldn't be me, I had decided.

Uncle Joe, my Aunt Dina's husband, walked into the room moments after Uncle Leibel had left. Of my mother's three sisters, Dina had married the most zealous of the family's son-in-laws. He wasn't the most religious, mind you, just the most vociferous. I stood, frozen in thought, next to the death bed. Joe came in, extended his arm, and rubbed circles on my back.

"How you doing, big guy?" he said. I said nothing, so he rubbed me some more.

"Your Uncle Leibel said he won't say the Kaddish," he said, as he removed his hand from my back. "What on earth is wrong with him? His own father!" he pleaded. "It's unbelievable how averse he is to anything having to do with religion."

"Almost as averse as you are to the idea of letting him be," I said, too quickly perhaps. There was a tinge of aggression in my tone. He smiled uncomfortably.

"You'll do it for your grandfather, of course," he said, matter-of-factly. "Uncle Leibel said you didn't want to, but of course you'll do it, won't you?"

"No," I said. "I won't."

"What do you mean?" He was smiling awkwardly again.

"I won't do it in his place. It's his. He won't be rid of it on me."

"You don't want to because you're not the son? Is it forbidden for you to do it?"

"Not at all," I said.

I wanted also to say that my grandfather had been like a father to me and that I thought I might bear an obligation of my own, on some level, to recite the Kaddish for him. My own father had died a few months after my birth and I had been raised by my mother. We were often with

my grandparents during my youth. But my Uncle Joe knew how close I had been to him, and I sensed I'd be fueling his conviction if I added these parameters to the discussion.

"I don't understand," he said, his forced smile changing to a more vexed and authoritative expression. "There are lots of mourners who enlist others to recite the Kaddish in their stead when they can't do it themselves."

"I know," I said. "Uncle Leibel is free to do that."

"Then it should be you. You'll do it, won't you?" he said rubbing my back again, concern in his voice now.

"Why's that?" I said, stepping away from his hand and turning to face him.

"Because, he was like a father to you, and you're the rabbi in the family, you would do it best. You should honour your grandfather's memory, Ben."

"I think I'm honouring my grandfather by refusing, Uncle Joe," I said.

"This is not a time to be a philosopher, Ben, it's not complicated," he said.

"There's rarely a time more appropriate to be a philosopher," I said, "and you're right, it's not complicated, but it is subtle."

"Uncle Leibel says he wants you to do it. He's meeting us half way on this one."

"Us?" I said. "What, you think you and I are an institution, a religious tribunal that Leibel owes something to?" I said incredulously. "He's shirking his responsibility, not ours, and he thinks I'm going to jump at the opportunity to carry this."

"I also would have thought you would."

"You're not listening."

"So what, your grandfather's going to be buried and no one will recite Kaddish for him? That's unacceptable."

“It’s perfectly acceptable, and we all expected it would be like this. We all accepted this a long time ago. We knew it was likely Uncle Leibel would bow out. This can’t be a surprise to you, Uncle Joe.”

“It’s not a surprise, but I’m surprised at you,” he said, a flash of contempt distorting his face. “A good man like your grandfather without a Kaddish!”

“It won’t kill him,” I said.

His face was a collage of pity, disgust, wonder. After a few moments he said, “I’ll do it. Forget about it, you don’t have to do it, I’ll do it.”

“Of course you will, even if I had accepted, you’d still want to get on board and do it. You came to recruit me for the parade.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. And what’s wrong with recruiting? The more to an important cause, the better,” he said.

“Of course, and your generation and mine will be united in paying our respects to the dead. Like a two man orchestra banging drums and blowing tubas as we march down the boulevards of Tradition and Rectitude. But our causes aren’t the same, Uncle Joe. My cause is with the living, yours is with the dead.”

Uncle Joe left the room mumbling suppressed curses to himself. On the periphery, I thought I saw my grandfather kicking under the sheets. He had always insisted that I respect my uncles, that it was proper that I be mindful of the years they had on me. But I couldn’t heed that lesson now, there was none of his commanding presence without his deeply lined face or the gravity of his rumbling voice. These were rotting before me on the gurney, turning grey and drying out, becoming dust and the stuff of waning memory.

The following morning, my grandfather was buried in the plot he had purchased years before for my grandmother and himself. The burial took place on a sunny day in May. I remember thinking there was too much light for this sort of thing. The Rabbi of my grandfather's shul, a man of the same age, born in the same village in Lithuania, led the service. The crowd that attended the burial to pay their respects exchanged awkward embraces and mumbled words of solace. Seeking some measure of tangibility in his death, I dropped the customary three shovels of dirt on the unadorned pine coffin. My grandfather was a formidable man that insisted on dying as simply as possible. A few others took to the shovel as well—Uncle Joe, of course, and a few of my cousins. The wooden box below resounded with the thud of a loose drum as the dirt dropped onto it. The mourners—my grandmother, my mother, my aunts, and Uncle Leibel gathered by the grave and tore their vestments, ushering themselves officially into the status of mourners. Uncle Joe, although not technically a mourner, stood nearby. The Rabbi, who had not been privy to the previous day's decisions, looked towards Uncle Leibel and indicated with a gentle nod that it was time to say the Kaddish. Uncle Leibel responded by staring down at his large boots. There was a moment of silence as the Rabbi waited. I thought Uncle Leibel might actually begin reciting the prayer if we waited for him long enough but Uncle Joe approached the Rabbi and said something to him privately. They both stared at Uncle Leibel, who hadn't moved, and Uncle Joe began, hesitatingly, to recite the Kaddish in Uncle Leibel's stead. Sixty seconds and seventy five words later it was done.

Uncle Joe, single-minded and zealous, didn't miss a single day. Some months later, my mother related to me that Joe was still reciting the Kaddish daily at synagogue. Aunt Dina was glad he had a reason to be out of the house every day. Joe recited the Kaddish for the entire twelve months that Uncle Leibel would have been required to do so.



In the short years that followed, Uncle Leibel, whom I had been close to as an adolescent, took distances from the family. He refrained from participating in family celebrations that had any religious connotation. He only accepted, on choice occasions, my grandmother's pleas to come to the holiday meals, and that was all I would see of him after my grandfather's death. I wondered, uneasily at times, if my refusal to grant his request had anything to do with his distancing himself from us. Of course, Uncle Leibel's history with the family had always been a story of distancing and fence-mending. His final years away from the family probably had nothing to do with me.

The road to Scarborough was pleasant. I had stopped early near Cornwall and donned my phylacteries before reciting morning prayers. A few curious bystanders at the *ONroute* service centre stared, but it was nothing I wasn't used to. Four hours after leaving Rachel on the steps of our home in Montreal, I drove past Kingston. A few exits later, I glimpsed an exit for Picton, via route 49. The name of the village resonated with a mythical quality for me. There was history there between Uncle Leibel and me.

After my birth, Uncle Leibel had had three children of his own with a Canadian woman he had married in a quiet town of rural Ontario. The very place I was driving past now. They were wed in a small Presbyterian church in the heart of Prince Edward County, a few steps above the shore of vast and windy Lake Ontario. No one in the family had gone to the wedding except for my mother, who had taken me along. I was a toddler of two. We waited outside the small stone church in Picton until Leibel and his bride came out the arched doorway of the building. When Leibel saw us, my mother turned around, me in her arms, and drove back to Montreal. Not that I remember that day, but my mother told me the story once while we were having a

discussion about Uncle Leibel. I found the story so curious precisely because nothing had happened. It was as if she had gone all this way in order not to go.

“We went there just to turn around and come back?” I had asked my mother once.

“Yes,” she replied, and changed the conversation. That was all of what she had to say about it. We went there to turn around and come back.

The newlyweds, my uncle and his Canadian wife, had lived in an upper duplex on Mountain Sights, in the Snowdon neighbourhood. Montreal was where Leibel held his jobs as a columnist with the local *Yiddish Weekly* and as an archivist with the Jewish Public Library, nearby.

His wife, Alice, died seven years later from breast cancer and Uncle Leibel moved to Ontario, children in tow, where they had spent so many summers with his wife’s family. He raised his children there, in Brockville, as a single father, with the help of Alice’s siblings. When his third child, Elizabeth, left for her first year at University of Toronto, he had moved back to Montreal, trusting his adult children to their own futures. He said his wife’s family were good people but he had no intention of living the rest of his life in Ontario. “*Es iz kayn yiddishkayt mit di Englander;*” he had said upon his return. “There’s no Jewishness with the English,” was how he explained his move back to Montreal.

He had always argued the *Franchozen*, the French Canadians, were kinsmen with the Jews. In this too, he was at odds with the general sentiment in the Montreal community that invariably aligned the Jews with the Anglophones. Uncle Leibel felt at home with the *Quebecois*; their *joie de vivre*, their fight for identity and self-determination, their brilliant and evocative politicians and artists. He wrote about many of them in his column but the Jewish readership had

a long unforgiving memory of Quebec Anti-Semitism before Leibel's time. He had to back off with the columns about Quebec politics.

Three years after my grandfather's death, my grandmother died and Uncle Leibel moved back again to Ontario. Toronto, this time, to live closer to his children who were now all married with children of their own. His love of Montreal was surpassed only by his love of his children. Especially, now that he had grandchildren.

His daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband, Stephen, had a furnished bachelor in the basement of their Scarborough home. They offered to rent it to him and he accepted willingly. Since then, more than fifteen years ago, the family in Montreal had very little contact with him, save on rare occasions when my mother would call, usually at least once a year, for news of her brother. Now, all these years later, I was headed to Scarborough to see my cousin Lizzie and her husband. It was also, for me, a pilgrimage to my uncle's last place of residence and grave, as well as an opportunity to peruse his writings. I wasn't sure what I'd find, even less what I was looking for. The events during my grandfather's death, my refusal to grant Uncle Leibel's request, were still vividly with me.

Lizzie and Stephen were lovely people. The day after Lizzie's phone call, I reached their pleasant, well kept bungalow on the corner of Delawana and Densgrove in Scarborough before noon. When I arrived, they offered me a coffee, in a paper cup. They said they knew my kosher diet prevented me from using their dishes and cutlery. Uncle Leibel had taught them all about that.

After some small talk and a quick tour of the house, Lizzie brought a carton box filled with composition notebooks her father had written in over the years. I helped them sort some of the ones written in Yiddish.

“This is the one I told you about that’s dedicated to you,” Lizzie said, handing me a blue speckled composition book.

“Wow,” I said, taking the book. “Do you think I could make a copy of it while I’m here?” I asked.

“Oh, we think you ought to take it. It’s yours,” Lizzie said.

The notebook was almost full of Uncle Leibel’s handwriting. On the cover, in the white space beside *Subject*, he had written, succinctly, *Binyomin Leibowitz*.

“Thank you, Lizzie. I’m very grateful,” I said, accepting the gift.

The notebook was heavy in my hands. I was struck as it dawned on me that my uncle had kept me on his mind throughout the decades. During his years in Montreal, we had seen each other at family occasions, and I was always glad to spend time with him. He was interested in my life. Asked about my family life and my studies for the rabbinate. He engaged me with his thoughts on many of the Biblical narratives he remembered from his youth. Particularly the stories of Ishmael, Esau, and Joseph, the three pariahs.

Yet, he was always, to me, like a respectful tourist, curious about local customs, but ultimately only an observer. The choices he made during his lifetime and the years he spent distanced from Jewish practice, had cast a strangeness about him that I could never unravel or dissipate, despite my deep interest in him as a person. We never discussed the choices he had made although these had caused much strife with his family. I never pushed for explanations either. With the notebook in my hands, I wondered if I hadn’t been his last bridge to the Jewish life he had turned his back on.

Some moments after handing me the notebook, Lizzie and Stephen looked intently at each other before turning back to me again.

“There’s also this,” Stephen said, handing me a slightly creased and worn piece of paper. “In the hospital, on the night before he died—he was heavily sedated with pain killers—we hadn’t been able to communicate with him coherently for days. I was there with our daughter, Chloe. All of a sudden he opened his eyes and looked around the room for us. He asked me feebly for something to write on. I think he said it first in Yiddish and then in English, gesticulating as though he were scribbling on something. I checked my pockets and found a pen and rummaged through the bedside table until I found something, anything, for him to write on. He seemed distressed as though it was urgent. He had his hand outstretched towards me until I found the pen and paper and handed them to him. Chloe took the clipboard that was hanging at the foot of his bed and placed it before him as a hard surface to write on. He struggled to write these few words, folded the note and handed it to me. He said, ‘For my nephew, Benjamin, the rabbi of the family.’”

Stephen looked at Lizzie, then at me. “I’m sorry, I read—I tried to read—the note,” Stephen said. “Chloe and I were so distraught. We thought there might be something important in it that could help him. Your uncle smiled at his granddaughter and collapsed back into his sedated state after handing me the note. A few hours later, after we had gone home, the hospital phoned Lizzie to tell us he had passed away.”

I took the piece of paper and expressed my gratitude once again. I was certain I already knew what Uncle Leibel had written to me in his last moments of life. My throat was parched and stiff.

“Have you read the note since. I mean have you had it translated?” I asked.

“No,” Lizzie said. “It’s written in Hebrew script. That’s when we understood it was meant for you to read,” she added.

“Would you mind if I read it here, now?” I asked.

“Of course,” Lizzie said and Stephen nodded approval.

I unfolded the paper with some trepidation and struggled for a moment with the handwriting. There were a few short words of Yiddish written in a shaky hand. Some of the letters were malformed, but it was still legible.

*Vet ir zogn di kaddish far mir, Binyomin?*

After reading the words, I said them in Yiddish, audibly. Elizabeth and her husband stared back at me blankly. “It says, ‘Will you say the Kaddish for me, Binyomin?’” I said, to them.

They searched my face for further explanation but the dull ache in my throat strangled me. I sat, mute, before them. The paper and its few broken words trembled in my hands as my fingers fought to find a way to hold on to my uncle’s last words.

## THE DRIVE TO PICTON

*Together with their friends and family  
Alice Anderson and Lionel Zuckerman  
request the pleasure of your company  
on their wedding day*

*at*

*First Presbyterian Church  
56 Queen Street, Picton*

*on*

*Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1973 at 12:30 PM  
and afterwards at*

*The Bloomfield Winery  
12, Loyalist Parkway, Bloomfield  
at 5:30 PM*



**T**he glove compartment, like all of Esther Zuckerman's drawers and cabinets these days, was a mess. Being a single mother encroached on all the ways Esther thought she defined herself before her son's birth. This day trip to Picton, although not a vacation by any standard, was a welcome reprieve from the clatter of her daily routine in Montreal. The traffic on Autoroute 20 was light to nonexistent as she drove the Ford Pinto westward, now past the St-Zotique exit, and steadily on towards Ontario. "Where is that thing," she mumbled, as she groped for the small prayer book. Her tone took her by surprise. She thought it was curious she could be so flippant referring to a sacred book. She stole a glance from the rear view mirror to determine whether her two-year-old son, Benjamin, had heard. He was fast asleep, sprawled across the back seat. She thought perhaps it was the marriage of her Canadian and Jewish cultures that prompted such incongruities.

When she found the book, beneath an 8-track of Shlomo Carlebach, she held it close and flipped the worn pages using her chin and thumb while keeping an eye on the road. *Tefilas haderekh*, the wayfarer's prayer, was a short paragraph featured on a page near the end of the book. "*May it be Your will to lead us toward peace, to emplace our footsteps toward peace, to bring us to our desired destination, for life, for gladness, and for peace!*" After saying the prayer she put the book back, popped the Carlebach tape into the dashboard, and pushed the play button. It was in the middle of one of the last tracks. *Though I walk through the valley of death . .*

. *I fear no harm . . . for Thou art with me.* She hummed the tune. It was a beautiful, haunting waltz. The road and landscape outside raced by, contrasting with the slow rhythm of the song. The music and the ancient words uplifted her, gave her strength for the trip.

It was a four hour drive from Picton to Montreal. She had taken her son along because she thought it was important that he be there too. His Uncle Leibel, her older brother, had been there for them, both, in the months that followed her husband, Shaya's, death. Then Leibel had announced his plans to marry Alice and things changed.

At noon today, Leibel, or Lionel (as the invitation claimed), and Alice were to be married in a small church in Picton. At home it was mayhem like the days following The War Measures Act during the October Crisis. Her parents' anguish had put the entire house on edge. She remembered the day the invitation came in the mail. Her mother had called to say she couldn't even open it. "Ech," was all her mother, Rachel, could muster when the dreaded envelope had arrived amidst a stack of bills.

Leibel had already announced his intentions months ago, but on paper it became official and suddenly irrevocable. Esther's mother had put the sealed invitation down on the table with the care she would have given an official government document, a summons from the Supreme Court of Canada. It was a trial to decide on her guilt in a case of failed parenting.

"I put it on the table for your father to open," she told Esther over the phone. Esther pictured her mother on the other end of the line, the phone wedged between her shoulder and ear, the long plastic cord tethering her to the wall where the base was hung. "*A Broch!*" her mother said, bursting into tears "I burnt the supper."

"Ma, there have to be worse things than this. Don't take it so hard," Esther tried reassuring her.

“What kind of treif is he going to eat now?” she pleaded with Esther.

“Ma, Leibel’s been eating treif for years now,” Esther said. “And is that what you’re so upset about? Food?”

“Of course this is bigger than food, Esthie, but your brother still has to eat. I’m just saying, he loves his mother’s cooking. You’ll see, once they move in together, not only will I have goyim for grandchildren but Leibel will be thin as broomstick. *Nicht do gedacht!* God spare us, it shouldn’t happen! Everything goes through food, Esthie.”

When Esther’s father, Reb Shulem, came home and saw the large envelope before his plate, he said, “Rachel, I won’t open it. What’s in this envelope is enough to finish me off.

Esther’s sisters, Dina and Bassie, expressed variations of the same reaction. The family gathered at their parents’ home for the Friday night Shabbes meal.

“It’s not Leibel,” Dina said, in the kitchen to her mother and sisters as they helped to clear the table between the soup and the chicken. “She made sure he knocked her up good. Now Leibel’s doing what he thinks is the right thing.”

“I don’t know, Dina,” Esther said. “He’s been talking about this for a long time. He’s been seeing Alice for two years now.”

“You don’t know how a modern Canadian woman thinks, Esthie,” Bassie, the youngest, said. “You’ll see, in five or six months we’ll get another invitation, to a baptism this time.”

“*S’ken gemolt zein?*” the mother groaned. “Is such a thing imaginable? *Farshporn zol er oyf tsu shteyn?* What’s the point of getting up alive, with such things to look forward to?”

“Ma, does everything have to be such a melodrama? Your dying’s not going to help anything,” Esther said.

“Don’t sound so disappointed, Esthie,” her mother said. “*Alevay* I should be a *kaporeh* if only that’ll change his mind.”

“But it won’t, so stop being such a Jewish mother, ma,” Esthie said.

In the dining room, the men—her father and Joe, Dina’s husband—sat around the table discussing the same news.

“I don’t know, Reb Shulem. How does a young man from such a respectable family go so far astray?”

Esther’s father paid no attention. Joe was an expert at identifying problems but useless for fixing them.

The family moved to the living room for tea after the meal. Esther’s mother sat, resigned, on the edge of the thick plastic-covered sofa, occasionally lifting a kerchief to her eyes. Behind her was a framed needlepoint of a Jewish mother and father, blessing the children one by one as they lined up around the candle-lit table. The Canadian sunlight had faded the colours long ago.

“I don’t see what the point of lamenting like this is,” Esther ventured, after a long silence.

“I had one son,” her father said, as if that explained everything. He was holding Ben, Esther’s son, his first grandchild, in his lap.

“You still have a son,” Esther said. “He’s not dead.” Esther knew what she was talking about. She had been recently widowed and Ben, orphaned.

“He may as well be! What kind of children do you think this marriage is going to give?”

Joe nodded in docile agreement before Shulem had finished his words.

“Children who go to *cheder* to learn the *aleph beis*?” Reb Shulem continued. “Children who play with dreidels and light the Channukah lights when the goyim are lighting their pine trees? Illustrious Talmudists maybe?”

“I don’t know—” Esther tried to retort.

“My father was killed by Russian mobs because he was Jewish, Esthie, and your brother Leibel is finishing off our family, and all because of a girl. It’s a crime, Esther. It’s unforgiveable.”

“As if Hitler hadn’t done enough,” Joe added, looking to see if his father-in-law would acknowledge his comment.

“He’s not committing a murder, Ta, he’s marrying a woman he loves,” Esther said, unsure herself that these were all the facts, or if they were sufficient.

“Please, not you too, Esthie. There’s no such thing as love,” her father said. “He’s murdering a generation of Zuckermans, is all he’s doing,” he added, struggling to hold on to Ben, who was becoming restless.

“Maybe he doesn’t share your ideals,” she said. “Maybe he doesn’t want to live his life for future generations.”

“That’s what love is, Esthie. This love he feels now will fade. The one I’m talking about would have grown on him as he built a devoted Jewish home, Esthie,” her father said.

“Ta’s right,” Dina said. “You’ll see, Leibel will regret it.”

“Maybe, I don’t know,” Esther said. “But for now, Leibel made a decision; maybe we can respect his right to make choices.”

“You think I don’t understand his choice?” Esther’s father said, more agitated now. “It’s not very complicated to understand such a thing. But there’s more to a life than doing what you want, there are also responsibilities.”

Esther understood this argument. Her father had embodied it his whole life. And, it was true, he wasn’t an unhappy man for it. He loved his family, his work, his friends and community.

She struggled to find the fault in her father's view, if only to give Leibel some room to exist outside of it.

Bassie, the youngest daughter, got up and stepped towards her father. "I'll go and change him," she said reaching for Ben who was becoming impossible. "I think his diaper's full." She hoisted him out of his grandfather's lap and took him into one of the bedrooms.

"Thanks, Bassie," Esther said, absently.

"It's okay. It's good training for later," Bassie said, walking away. She was approaching the age when the *shadchanis*, Fruma the matchmaker, would call the Zuckermans with propositions.

Esther's father rose out of his seat. "It's my fault," he said, looking down at the thin carpeting. "I took him out of yeshiva when he was fourteen because he was driving his rebbes crazy. He had fancy questions. I was busy making a living. Too busy to answer his questions. Such a *yiddishe leib*, a true Jewish heart, my Leibel had. Nobody knew how to talk to him. He was always way ahead of everybody."

Esther's mother wiped tears from her eyes and nose. "Esthie, you should go to this wedding, he's closest to you. I'll make some cake. He'll be happy to have something to eat," she spoke the words through her handkerchief.

"Nobody should go," her father countered. Esther, who knew the nuances in her father's expressions, knew he had stopped short of issuing a command forbidding anybody in the family from going. It was small glimmer of light in Esther's mind. "We can't show support for what he's doing," her father continued. "We can't give up on Leibel's ability to turn his life around. That's real respect. You understand, Esthie? *Farshteyst du?*"

Times were difficult at home, what with the news about Leibel and everybody worried about Esther and Ben, now that Shaya was gone. The quiet road gave her time to reminisce about the years, not so long ago it seemed, when things were happier, when she and Leibel had been closer.

Contrary to what her father thought, Leibel had no *taynes*, no complaints, against anybody in the family, nor even against his teachers in Yeshiva. Esther thought Dina might be right about Alice being pregnant. Leibel had been with her for a while but he had never broached the topic of marriage until recently. It seemed sudden. Hasty. She had imagined Leibel and Alice would live together before marrying. She thought Leibel would buy time and come back to his roots and end things with Alice. But there was never a reason to think it would end with Alice, really, the more she thought of it.

What there was, she thought, was her standing by, idly, when her brother confided in her and told her about Alice. In time, Alice became a normal part of the conversation. She had never encouraged, or discouraged Leibel, only been there to listen. But Leibel hadn't talked much about Alice, either. Just some casual comments about Alice finishing her BA in journalism or a movie they had seen together. There had never been a conversation about Alice between Esther and Leibel. It was just a thing that happened and, two years later, she was on her way to their wedding.

Esther and Leibel were seven years apart in age. Leibel was born in the winter, on the night of the first Channukah light, in Lithuania, and Esther in the spring, between Purim and Pesah in Montreal. Leibel's arrival convinced Shulem and Rachel Zuckerman to emigrate to Canada. The Zuckerman girls were born on Canadian soil. The two youngest, Dina and Bassie,

were two hearty girls that followed in succession. The first, Dina, was born when Esther was nearly six. They had shared a bedroom until Bassie was born a year later. Some months after Bassie came, Esther and Dina bunked together on one side of the bedroom while Bassie's crib and dresser—which also served as a changing table—occupied the other side. When Bassie no longer required a crib, she and Dina took the bunk bed, while Esther, the eldest of the three, had a bed of her own on the other side of the room. They lived in a lower three-bedroom duplex on McKenzie Street, in the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood of Montreal.

Leibel had been the only one with a room to himself and it differed from the room the girls shared. Theirs was a common space where small patches of wall and designated shelf space became inviolable territory for each of the girls' paraphernalia. There was no room for more than small personal items, and perhaps one or two books each. These were usually the library books they were currently reading. Leibel's room had two bookshelves that were neatly filled with books and notebooks which he wrote in.

Esther and Leibel frequently hung out in his room after school. They would listen to songs and stories by Carlebach on the sound system he had bought with money from his paper route for the *Montreal Star*. There was also a small desk on which kept a variety of books he used more frequently. Dictionaries and his prayer book and a large volume of the tractate of Talmud he was presently learning at Yeshiva.

His father had withdrawn his son from the yeshiva during his eighth grade and Leibel did the rest of his schooling at the more modern West End Hebrew School. He had told Esther it was strange at first to be in school with girls, that it made the boys behave differently from those he had known in yeshiva. The boys were more reckless in this new school, even though they behaved better in class.



Leibel had also told Esther about the way they learned Torah in the new school.

“They study Chumash as though it were some kind of storybook,” Leibel told her once, laughing. “They read the story of Avrohom as if it was just another story. Like history, I guess,” Leibel said. Esther thought he expected her to say something about that but it all seemed a little foreign to her. She had never thought about different ways of learning the Torah.

“It’s a goyische way of learning,” he told her, more seriously. “The Torah is like history or Shakespeare to them. They talk about the Talmud and its logic as a way to become good lawyers or businessmen. The lessons in the Torah are optional, suggestions—it’s like going shopping, you know what I mean?”

“I think so. They pick and choose, you mean,” she said.

“Exactly,” Leibel said. “I like subjects like English and science and history, they teach them more seriously than at yeshiva. But they teach Torah as if it’s the same thing. I hate the way they teach it here. So do most of the students. I don’t think Ta knows how they learn Torah here.”

“Why don’t you tell him, Leibel, I’m pretty sure he could have you accepted back in yeshiva,” Esther said.

“I don’t think I want to go back,” he said.

“Why not? You said you don’t like the way they learn Torah at West End,” Esther said.

“Yeah, but I’m not crazy about the way they learn Torah in yeshiva either. In yeshiva, certain questions aren’t allowed. It’s my luck those are my questions,” he said, grinning.

“What kind of questions?” Esther asked.

Leibel looked at her, considering whether to burden her with his own questions.

“Like I once asked what was the point of davening, of asking God for anything, when we know that He knows everything, even our deepest thoughts.”

“What did they say?”

“My rebbe told me not to be a troublemaker. I think he thought I was making fun of it.”

“I think it’s an easy question,” Esther said.

“Yeah?” Leibel challenged.

“Yeah. Just because God knows, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk to him. We don’t know,” Esther said. “You know what I mean?”

“I think I do,” Leibel said, looking fondly at her. “You’re a smart girl,” he said to her.

Esther felt sorry things were so complicated for her brother. In the Beis Yakov, the girl’s school she went to, things seemed easier. There were good teachers and bad teachers, but generally, it seemed to her, there was more room for girls to be individuals and express their ideas. It was as though in Yeshiva they were training soldiers. There was no room for mistakes. In the Beis Yakov they were training girls to be mothers, Esther thought. They could teach you about it, but Esther knew every girl had to figure a lot of it out on her own.

On one occasion, Leibel confided to Esther that he hoped to marry a girl with an open mind. “Someone who’ll have the same kinds of questions as me, questions that are on everybody’s mind about Yiddishkeit, but nobody wants to be the one to ask,” was how Leibel put it.

“What kind of man do you think you’ll marry?” Leibel asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said. She thought it would be weird to say, “Someone like you, I think.” Esther had always looked up to Leibel, and he was her strong, handsome, and brainy older brother. Someone like Leibel would be fine, she thought.

“I’m sure you’re going to marry a great guy. I’m going to like him, and you’ll have a son who’s a scholar and a great Rabbi,” Leibel said enthusiastically.

“Amen!” Esther said. “What a blessing you just gave me! Same to you.”

“You will, you’ll see,” Leibel said.

“Your wife will be pretty special too, I’m sure.”

“Will you come to my wedding?” he said.

“What kind of a question is that?” she responded.

“I don’t know, you’re right, it’s a pretty stupid question. Maybe you’ll be living somewhere far away, like *Eretz Yisroel*,” he said.

“Leibel. Of course I’ll be at your wedding. Seriously, are you thinking of getting married on the moon or something?”

“Who knows,” he said.

Leibel and Alice had met at poetry reading in March of 1967 in the basement theatre of Sir George Williams University. Alice was studying English and Leibel journalism. That same year, Esther married Shaya Leibowitz, a schoolmate of Leibel’s from his days in yeshiva, but four years younger than her brother.

Esther and Shaya had a son soon after marrying. For the bris, Esther argued Leibel should be *sandak*, the godfather, explaining the choice made more sense than bestowing the honour on either of their fathers.

“Leibel needs this,” she pleaded with her husband. Shaya was skeptical.

“I don’t know, Esthie. I don’t believe Leibel is even *shomer Shabbes* anymore.”

“This could make all the difference,” Esther said. “He might see himself fitting in, becoming an important link in the family. It’s like saving a life, isn’t it Shaya? That’s more important than anything.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Esthie,” Shaya conceded gently. He was a gifted listener and committed to his wife’s happiness. “ But we’ll have some explaining to do. Especially to our fathers.”

“Mine will understand,” Esthie said. “He’s not a stickler for honours.”

“You know what, mine neither,” Shaya said. “Let’s call Leibel, let’s see if he agrees to it.”

Leibel agreed to be *sandak*. He said he couldn’t refuse knowing that Esthie had chosen him above the more obvious candidates. Esther’s son was in Leibel’s arms as the ceremony ushered the new-born to his place among his people. *Veyikarei shemo be’Yisroel . . . Binyomin!* And his name among the People of Israel shall be . . . Benjamin!

A few weeks after Ben’s *bris*, Shaya was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The terrible disease barreled into him like a freight train. Twenty-eight grueling weeks later, Esther buried him with Ben still nursing at her breast. She had wanted Leibel to give a *hesped*, say some words about Shaya at the *levaya*, but the Leibowitzes were opposed to the idea. The debate was all for nought. Leibel had not come to the funeral. He called Esther that evening and tried to explain.

“Esthie, my sister, *meyn zeisele*, before you say a word let me say something.” Leibel’s voice was shaking. “My heart is broken, Esthie.” He choked on the words. “I wish I had the strength to carry this with you, to make this easier for you. I couldn’t set foot in that place today, Esthie. I came all the way, but I couldn’t go in.”

“Leibel—”

“I couldn’t go in and show you I was there for you, I couldn’t bear the sight of the hats and beards come in flocks to eat their fill of honours off the backs of dead men, Esthie. I couldn’t do it, Esthie, I couldn’t do it.”

“Leibel, don’t—”

“I can’t, Esthie. These people everybody thinks are so holy. They haven’t got an ounce of shame for how they take charge, how they steal the rite, how they rob tragedy from those who’ve been dealt it. They think they suffer more than you, Esthie. They can’t get enough of it—death and Jewish suffering, it makes them feel important, indispensable. They eat up our pain and vulnerability because we go to them for guidance, Esthie, and they’d slap each other on the back and burp in satisfaction if it weren’t for the fear they have that each one is watching the other, waiting to pounce on a misstep.”

“Leibel, there’s still seven days, come to the shiva,” Esther said, but Leibel wasn’t listening.

“Shaya was a twenty-five year old father, Esthie. God’s not keeping up his end of the deal, Esthie. HE’S NOT KEEPING HIS END OF THE DEAL!”

It was the first time she had witnessed Leibel in such a state. It was the first time she felt let down by him.

“Leibel, I need God right now, Leibel. *Kum aheym*. Come home for the shiva.”

But Leibel didn’t show.

On that Shabbes evening, when Esther’s father had voiced his opposition to anyone from the family going to Picton, she knew she couldn’t betray the promise she’d made to Leibel. Her father had kept silent when, a week later, Esther said she would be going. He had even told Joe to keep quiet when he began to lecture her at the table on the Shabbes before Leibel’s wedding. Joe said he had called Leibel to tell him how devastated everybody in the family was and how no one would come.

“You didn’t tell me you called him,” Dina said to her husband. “What did he say?”

“All he could do was tell me how I wouldn’t understand. How he owed it to her. He said church meant nothing to him, that it was only to make her family happy,” Joe reported.

“I knew it!” Dina said. “He knocked her up!” She looked thrilled.

“You don’t know that for sure,” Joe said. “He wouldn’t tell me anything about that.”

“If it’s for a baby that he’s marrying her, why doesn’t he ask her to convert?” Bassie said.

“I think it’s time we all accepted that Leibel’s no longer interested in living like a Jew,” Joe said. He looked towards Esther’s father, who was listening to the conversation with his chin in his hand. He hadn’t said a word all evening.

Esther took the road early Sunday morning after having bought a map and asking one of Shaya’s brothers for instructions on how to get to the 401.

Just before Kingston, Ben, her two-year-old son, woke up in the back seat where he had slept next to the cake his grandmother had sent for Leibel. “How are you doing *Reb Binyomin, meyn tzigele?*” his mother chanted to him through the rear-view mirror. In response, Benjamin raised the stuffed animal he was holding towards her. He was still sleepy but seemed to be in a good mood.

Price Edward County was quaint. In its own modest way, even pretty. The sun shone like a promise on the apple blossoms and leisurely rural lawns. In Picton, the homes were heterogeneous, some big, some small, square ones, and multifaceted, oddly-shaped ones. They made up for the people who seemed, at best, like subtle variations of one person. Esther picked up the card to find the address of the venue. *Alice Anderson and Lionel Zuckerman . . . the pleasure of your company. . . First Presbyterian . . . 56 Queen Street, Picton . . . 12:30 PM.*

Queen was just off Picton's Main Street and Esther parked the Pinto a short distance from the church. She turned toward Ben in the back seat and announced that they had arrived.

"We're here, Binyomin. Mommy's going to get out of the car and fix her crinkly skirt and then she's going to come to your side to take you out with her."

Ben just stared at her, gesturing toward the window at the colorful house nearby. Esther was glad to get out of the car. She stretched and straightened her skirt. She went to Binyomin's side and lifted him from the seat into her arms. Then she stood on the curb by her car, uncertain about what to do next, so she waited. The church entrance was roughly a hundred feet away.

Some individuals were dallying outside the open church doors. They looked more like city dwellers than the people she had seen in the town on her way in. She could hear a ceremony was underway inside. It was five to one. Soon a rush of applause resonated from out the front doors. Moments later Esther saw her brother, Leibel, and Alice walk out of the gaping church. They were hand in hand. A group of guests followed behind them, joyous, throwing rice. Nothing had ever seemed stranger to her than the image of her brother Leibel on those church steps.

She wasn't sure how the stone building's mouth-like doorway had managed not to spit him out whole. How could a Jew be in a church? Esther thought, genuinely bewildered.

She looked more intently to assure herself it was Leibel. He stood erect, but his arms hung resigned beside him. Alice held Leibel's hand and led him toward the church steps. He followed. On the threshold, Leibel looked out across the quiet street and saw Esther and Ben on the opposite curb. His expression brightened, as though he had been shaken out of somnolence. He waved feebly towards his sister and nephew with his free hand. Esther didn't respond. Ben, whom Esther had stood next to her, tugged at his mother's hand, eager to walk out in the

direction they were facing but she held him fast. Alice, sensing her groom had seen something, turned and saw Esther now. She turned back to say something to Leibel, but his expression, even at this distance, revealed he was unresponsive. His hand was still raised, frozen in mid gesture. He looked like a man in a photograph frozen in a foreign landscape, like that picture of Buzz Aldrin on the Apollo 11 mission. Esther had seen the eerie picture in the *Star* during her last year of high school.

Esther turned from the church to head back to her car. She rubbed the back of her hand under her nose to catch a tear that had traced its way down the shape of her face. She lifted Benjamin into her arms and walked quickly towards the Pinto. Her eye makeup was a mess. A local woman walking by noticed her crying and said, “Aren’t spring weddings the loveliest?”

She put Ben in the back seat, then went to the driver’s side and seated herself at the wheel. The car’s engine started with a loud roar as Esther pushed down on the gas pedal. She manoeuvred the car through a U-turn as the churchgoers began to file out onto the street. She traced her way back down Queen Street, onto Picton’s Main. She caught glimpses of Lake Ontario, shimmering in the distance and marvelled that expanses could be so big, so big they could reach beyond eyesight.

She found the county road that lead to the highway and home. After an hour on the road, Ben said matter-of-factly and without any prompt from his mother, as children sometimes do, “Unko Leibo?”

Esther looked into the mirror at the back seat. “Yes, Uncle Leibel, sweetie,” she said back to him, feeling a swell in her throat rise again.