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Welcome to Century Village

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WELCOME TO CENTURY VILLAGE

By

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Welcome to Century Village is a collection of short stories narrated by second and third generation Jewish Americans living in South Florida. All of the stories are told in first-person, in a distinctly Yiddish idiom. Most of the stories in the collection are about elderly Jews living in Building E of Century Village, a retirement community in Boca Raton and a world unto itself. These stories have recurring characters that are dealing with similar issues: loneliness, aging, wayward children and grandchildren, and the changing ethnic landscape of their close-knit community and of multicultural South Florida. The stories focus on the primarily Jewish milieu of Century Village, a closed world of clubhouse kibitzers, shuttle bus shoppers, and sun worshippers at the pool. It’s a threatened world and a dying world, and these stories render the changing landscape of South Florida, with its shrinking older Jewish community. Since I’m in the process of transforming these Century Village stories into a novel, this thesis also includes an excerpt the opening chapter of the novel.

There are four Century Village stories in this collection--with characters from one story appearing in the others--as well as the novel excerpt. The novel begins with the 2000 presidential election, and the opening is told from the point of view of Golda Rosenberg, the queen of the Century Village kibitzers and publisher of the newsletter Voice of the Village, as she goes to Temple Beth Shalom to vote. The next story, “Demitra Silverman,” involves Mimi Silverman, who at the age of seventy-two inherits a “half black” great-grandchild. “The Shlemiel of Century Village” is the story of Saul Schwartz, who is trying to toughen up and stop letting the world take advantage of him, but who suddenly finds his n’re do well son moving in with him and testing his resolve. Another Century Village story, “Your Own Mother,” is told from the point of view of Adele Vogel, who longs for connection with her daughter, but finds that as her health deteriorates, so does the possibility for this connection. The final Century Village story, “Welcome to Century Village,” involves a romance between Rose Cohen and Ray Lopez, the first gentile resident of Building E.

In addition to the Century Village stories, this thesis includes two stories of third generation Jews in South Florida. “My New Motto” tells the story of a woman deciding between her Cuban handyman or giving up on men altogether, and like the Century Village stories, the voice is influenced by the patterns of Yiddish speech. “Fellow Travelers” is the story of flea market sunglass salesman Abe Levitz, whose son returns from a trip from Russia with a surprise that tests their relationship. Like the Century Village stories, these two stories of the next generation also deal with the changing cultural landscape of South Florida.
On the morning of the election Bernie and I took the shuttle bus to Temple Beth Shalom to vote, the same as we’d done the last fifteen years we’d lived in Boca, but this time God forbid it was different altogether. Looking out the window of the bus was like looking at another country, and what shocked me was that overnight it had happened.

Just a few years ago you could take a walk around Town Center Mall and see nothing but fellow Century Villagers and maybe a few doctor’s wives out shmying around, but now even just driving by the parking lot I could hear loud thumping music from the cars of black teenagers parked in front of Burdines. It wouldn’t surprise me if ten years from now every shvartze in America is deaf from their own music. The bus made a stop at the Publix on Lyons Road and it was no better there either, every day changing for the worse. It used to be that only the bag boys were from Haiti or Cuba, but now the aisles were clogged with wealthy Cuban women who’d fled from Castro to buy up Miami. From Miami God forbid they were moving north to West Palm Beach, and it had gotten to the point where they put up an entire Cuban food aisle at Publix. They say the Jews are pushy, but the Cuban women will slam their shopping carts into you just for spite if you don’t get out of their way. Believe me, I’ve got a bruised hip to prove it. On the drive down Palmetto Park road to Temple Beth Shalom there used to be three delis, but now only one was left standing—Bagels Bagels, the hole in the wall Saul Schwartz in E301 owned. Now instead of delis there was an all-you-can-eat China Super Buffet, a Burger King crowded with shvartzes, and God forbid only thirty feet from Temple Beth Shalom a place that served Haitian food. Who knew that they even had their own food, the Haitians?

Inside the reception hall of the temple it was no better. Last year it was only the temple congregation who could vote here, and the volunteers were mostly middle-aged Jewish housewives and their Bar Mitzvah boys. But this year there was a big stink from the local gentiles and they had to make it open to the public. Personally, if I wasn’t Jewish I wouldn’t go voting at a temple, but that didn’t seem to bother the black women in front of me in line. “House slippers they’re wearing,” I said to Mimi Silverman, who was looking through her big vinyl purse for her voter’s registration card. “God forbid.” I’d worn a red blouse, white pants, and blue heels to show my respect for our right to vote as Americans.

“That you can go to vote for a president in slippers is beyond me,” Mimi said.

Mimi has a voice a little on the loud side, and both of the black women gave us a look like murder. I was embarrassed for Mimi’s sake and I kept quiet through the rest of the voting process. There were so many candidates for president of this and judge of that and clerk of the other that I got all fablonged. It wasn’t until I’d already given the girl my ballot that I realized I’d God forbid voted for Buchanan by accident.

“Oy, I need that back,” I said. “I once heard Buchanan say on Meet the Press that the Jews owned Hollywood.” I reached for the ballot but the girl slid it real quick into the machine.

“It’s too late now,” she said. She was just a teenager, this election girl, with short and spiky blond hair and a little upturned goyishe nose. She kept chewing on her thumbnail, even while she talked. Probably this election job was public service for a crime she’d committed, because a girl like that I couldn’t see volunteering for anything.
“What do you mean too late?” I said. “It was confusing, the ballot. So many arrows and boxes.” I wanted for Bernie to set this girl straight, but he was still in the voting booth. I could see his white golf shoes under the curtain. He was playing a round with Abe Levitz after he voted.

“No do-overs,” the girl said. She turned to Saul Schwartz, who was in line behind me, and said, “Next.”

“I want to speak with your supervisor,” I said.

“You can’t vote twice.” The girl rolled her blue eyes. “This is America.”

“Don’t I know this is America,” I said. I was shouting now and I saw out of the corner of my eye that at the first sign of trouble Saul Schwartz had run off. He was over six feet tall but a schlemiel nonetheless. “My father didn’t flee across Europe to escape the pogroms and sail for a month in the hull of a boat so some pisher could lecture me about democracy,” I said.

“Lady, I don’t care if your dad was fleeing a program,” the girl said. “You don’t get special treatment.” She scratched at a ring in her nose which I just now noticed. Everywhere with the holes and the rings, these kids today. Even regular Americans were beginning to look foreign to me.

I turned to Mimi Silverman, who’d taken Saul’s place in line. “This is why they should stick to temple members working the polls here,” I said. “Instead they give us juvenile delinquents.” Mimi nodded and patted her silver hair. The truth was she had such a perm it looked a little like an afro.

When I turned back to face her the blond girl said something just loud enough so I could hear. She was looking right at me when she said it.

“Hitler should have finished the job,” she said.

A million dollars I would give to have that moment back, because in return I said nothing. I just stood there like a deaf and dumb person. It didn’t help that just above the election girl was hanging a painting of Rabbi Singer wearing his tallis and black yarmulke, staring down with eyes that felt like they were going right through me. Maybe I’d misheard her, I said to myself. At my age, you couldn’t trust your ears. And this was Boca, not God forbid the deep South. Anti-Semitic remarks you’d hear every once in a while in New York, especially when the blacks like that Farrakan were making protests, but I’d never heard such a thing the entire time I’d lived in Boca. After all, Building E was a hundred percent Jewish, if you counted Lil Horowitz’s husband Vinny, who converted from Italian and took Lil’s last name.

When I got back on the shuttle, I didn’t say a word to Bernie about what had happened, and I didn’t mention it to any of the girls. The entire ride back Mimi and Lil and Adele Vogel and Rose Levitz kvetched about how noisy and crowded it had been at Temple Beth Shalom and how confusing the ballots were, and even though I was dying to, for once I didn’t join in.

When we drove by the guard house of Century Village, I wanted to tell them to close the gates and never open them again. If I never left it would be too soon. It reminded me of when Bernie and I first moved into Century Village. Back then there were only a few buildings up, but in the office they had a model of what the place would look like—a cardboard replica of the clubhouse, little plastic trees and cars, a green felt golf course, even a tiny guard gate. The model was under giant glass panels so you couldn’t touch but just look, and at the time it made me uncomfortable. As though they planned to enclose the actual Century Village in glass, and we would never be allowed outside the gates. But now I wish they had put a glass box around the place. I wish they’d build a fence fifty feet high to keep out what was coming up from the turnpike and I-95. Nowadays every sign for every business in Miami is in Spanish, but there was
only one Spanish word *I* was going to use--*adios*. Good-bye and go away. Away with the goys, away with the Cubans, away with the Haitians. Away from West Palm Beach, away from Boca. Away from Publix, away from Temple Beth Shalom. And if I had known then what was going to happen with Mimi Silverman, I would have added one more away to the list. Stay away, God forbid, from Century Village.
I hadn’t spoken to my son, Ross, in six months, when out of the blue he knocked on the door of my condo, a cardboard box in his arms. Ross had borrowed a thousand dollars from me for God knows what, and when he couldn’t pay it back I told him in so many words that he was nothing but a burden to his mother in her old age, and since then he hasn’t called me. Sometimes Ross stole a loaf of challah bread or a beef brisket from Bagels Bagels, the deli where he waited tables, and when I noticed the advertisement for Shultzman’s potato latkas on the side of the box, I figured he was bringing food to make up with me. My granddaughter, Rebecca, was standing a few feet behind Ross, pouting. The last time I saw Rebecca her hair was dyed bright orange. Now it was blue.

“I know we’re not talking, Ma,” Ross said, letting himself in, “but there’s something you need to know.” He put the latke box on the coffee table and took my seat on the couch, where I’d been watching *Wheel of Fortune*. He smelled like dill pickles and I wished I had the plastic covers on the couch.

“Let me guess,” I said, “The Mafia’s after you again.” Ross used to own his own deli, Bagels Unlimited, until he lost all the profits gambling at the horse track. He started borrowing money from some seedy character named Vino something or other, and me and my late husband, Irv, had to bail him out to the tune of five thousand dollars.

“Sit down, Ma,” Ross said. He patted the seat of the arm chair next to the television. It had been Irv’s favorite chair, and I could never bring myself to sit in it.

“Rebecca, you want to tell your grandmother the news?” Ross said. He nodded at Rebecca and she trudged inside and sat down next to Ross. She was wearing jeans with holes in the knees and she sat like a boy, legs open. Rebecca just stared at Pat Sajak spinning the wheel, and I asked Ross what’s this news that’s so important I have to sit just to hear it? And what’s with the latkas?

“Congratulations, Ma,” Ross said, “You’re a great-grandmother.” He put the latke box on my coffee table. He tapped the sides of the latke box. The flaps of the box were open a crack, and I saw a little hand poking out.

I was sorry I hadn’t sat down, because I almost fell over.

“Rebecca had a baby,” Ross said. “It was a month ago. We didn’t tell you because...well, we didn’t tell you she was pregnant because we weren’t sure how you’d take it. And you weren’t speaking to us.”

Then I did sit down, and even though the a/c was blasting I felt like it was suddenly a hundred degrees inside my condo. A baby! It wasn’t so long ago that Rebecca was just a little thing, playing shuffle board with Irv when she and Ross and Ross’s first wife came to visit. When Rebecca was younger she came to play shuffleboard and swim at the clubhouse pool every Sunday, but now she didn’t want anything to do with me. You get old, and nobody wants you.

“Who would put a baby in a box?” I said. “Take it out already. Is it a boy or a girl?” I reached for the box but Ross grabbed my wrist.

“There’s something I need to tell you, Ma,” Ross said. “I wanted to tell you sooner, but Rebecca didn’t want to.”
“Fuck that,” Rebecca said. She cursed like a sailor and Ross didn’t say boo. “I don’t care if she knows. She’ll just call him a nigger.”

“What kind of language is that to use?” I said. I never used such a word in my life. “And who’s this him you’re talking about?”

“The father,” Ross said. “James.”

“What’s the matter?” I said. “He’s not Jewish, is that it?”

“No, he’s not Jewish,” Rebecca said. “He’s black.”

“He’s colored?” I said. “You married a colored boy?”

“We’re not married,” Rebecca said.

“He left town,” Ross said. “No one knows where he is.”

“He’s coming back,” Rebecca said.

If Irv was still here, he would have had a heart attack right on the spot. Ever since our honeymoon trip to New York, where he was mugged by two colored boys, he was a little prejudiced. But I kept my calm. Say what you will about me, I’m no racist. I was even going to vote for Jessie Jackson when he ran for president, until he made that meshuggeneh remark about New York being Hymie town.

“How could you let her get knocked up?” I said to Ross. “A baby, at the age of sixteen?”

“I know you’re upset, Ma. But just look. Look at this gorgeous little girl.” He opened the flaps of the box and held up the baby. What stared up at me was a little caramel colored thing, the color of coffee with a lot of milk. She was wrapped in a pink blanket, and she reached toward me with her little fingers, which were covered with drool.

“Why don’t you hold her?” Ross said.

“No thanks.”

“She’s got your eyes, Ma.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“We even named her after you. Her name’s Demitra. Demitra Nicole Silverman.”

“Demitra?” I said. “That’s a colored person’s name.” Don’t get me wrong. I had nothing against the name itself. It was a good name for a little colored girl, but not such a good name for a little Jewish girl. And I couldn’t see how he got Demitra from Mimi, which is my name.

“I told you she’d be like this,” Rebecca said, and all of a sudden she stood up and headed for the door.

“That’s what you get, Ross,” I said. “That’s what you get for letting her run around at all hours of the night, doing God knows what.”

“Look, Ma,” Ross said, “we’ll come back later, when you’ve calmed down. I know it’s a surprise.” He followed Rebecca out the door, cradling the baby.

“You’re telling me it’s a surprise,” I yelled, and when I raised my voice the baby started screaming bloody murder. Such a big noise from such a tiny thing! It reminded me of Ross when he was a baby, kvetching all night, for what reason God only knew. When the baby started in with the yelling, I realized I was standing in the doorway and Golda, my nosy neighbor and the head of the Century Village Residents’ Committee, was probably listening to every word I said. I played pinochle with Golda on Wednesdays, so I knew how she gossiped to the girls at the clubhouse.

“That’s why I needed to borrow the money,” Ross said. “It was for the baby. Diapers don’t grow on trees. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can, Ma.”

As he walked off he held the baby by the wrist and waved her little hand at me, which took some chutzpah. And I knew Golda had heard everything, which meant by tomorrow all of
Century Village was going to know. With the size of Golda’s mouth, probably all of South Florida would know. Golda with her wealthy husband and two grandsons that she was always showing off to the other yentas down at the pool. All Golda talked about was her son the chiropractor who sent her for a month to Israel and gave her two wonderful grandchildren. And what did I have to brag about? A waiter for a son, a granddaughter with blue hair, and a great-grandchild who was the color of coffee. Not that I cared what color she was. Like I said, I’m no racist. I just think people should stick to their own.

A week later Ross showed up at my door, begging me to watch the baby.

“It’s only for a few hours, Ma,” he said. This time the baby was in a wicker bread basket from Bagels Bagels, and she was sucking on a pacifier and drooling like there was no tomorrow. “I’d watch her myself, but I’ve got to work the afternoon shift.”

“Why can’t Rebecca watch her?”

“She’s going to the Walking Dead concert down in Miami,” Ross said, “and the baby-sitter canceled.”

“I take the bus to the grocery store on Saturdays.”

“You can take her with you.”

“Forget it.”

“I guess I’ll just have to leave her by herself then. The poor little thing.”

“You can’t just leave a baby alone.”

“I’ll leave her at your doorstep if I have to,” Ross said. “I mean it, Ma. I’m desperate.”

“All right already,” I said. When it came to Ross, I always gave in. Between me and Irv, we spoiled Ross beyond all reason. Believe me, I wasn’t thrilled to be stuck with that baby. But he practically forced me.

“And if you wouldn’t mind, Ma, I made out a shopping list. Just a few things for Demitra that we’re out of. I’d get them myself if I had the time.” Ross put the list in the baby basket and handed the whole kit and caboodle to me, including a bottle of baby formula and a little blue backpack full of diapers. “Just in case,” Ross said. Never mind that I hadn’t changed a diaper in fifty years.

The Century Village bus shlepped all the women that couldn’t drive anymore to the Publix ten minutes down the road, and when it was time to go I grabbed the baby basket in one hand and my canvas shopping bag in the other. The backpack I slung around my shoulder, not that I had any intention of changing a diaper. It was just my luck that Golda opened her door as I walked by. I should have just stayed home, but I needed food, so what can you do?

“Are you catching the bus?” Golda asked. “I’ll walk with you.” She was wearing gold earrings and a gold belt, with shiny gold colored shoes to match. She looked down at the baby all surprised, like she’d just now seen it.

“So who’s this in the basket?” Golda asked.

“Just a baby,” I said.

“Whose baby?”

“It’s Rebecca’s,” I said. I figured it was better that she heard it from the horse’s mouth.

“You mean the one with the orange hair?”

“She changed it to blue.”

“So you’re a great-grandmother, Mimi. Mazel tov. And such a complexion the child has.”

“The father’s Italian,” I said. “A little olive skinned.”
“That explains her temperament,” Golda said. “So how come I wasn’t invited to the wedding?”

“Because there wasn’t one. Not yet, but soon. You know how the kids are nowadays.”

“Sure,” Golda said. “Believe me, I thank God every minute that my granddaughter is married to a dentist and doesn’t want for anything.”

Luckily the bus pulled up before Golda could kvell more about her wonderful granddaughter. There were only a few open seats, and I had to sit between Ester Rosenbloom and Adele Vogel. Ester was half-blind, and even though she had a good heart and never said a bad word about anyone, she had some interesting habits, such as nose-picking and cleaning the wax in her ears with her fingernails.

“What’s that?” Ester said as soon as I sat down. “Is that a baby?” She pinched the baby’s nose, which she must have been aiming for her cheek.

“Look out,” I said. “She’s a drooler.”

“She’s just adorable,” Ester said.

Adele grabbed the baby’s hand. “Such tiny fingers!” she said. “Are you a great-grandmother, Mimi?”

And just like that I had to tell everyone on the bus the story I’d made up. “Tell, tell,” they said, so I told. I told it in such a convincing way, I almost believed it myself. “I thought that baby looked Italian,” Ester said when I’d finished, and Adele congratulated me. “So Rebecca found herself a nice boy,” she said, “Who would have thought? It’s just too bad you got the great-grandchild before the grandson-in-law.” “That’s Ross for you,” Golda said. “He was always giving Irv trouble. Nothing but tsuris. So why should the daughter be any different?” “Maybe now she’ll settle down,” Ester said, patting the baby’s cheeks with one hand while she cleaned her own earlobe with the other. And that’s how it went until we got to Publix.

On Saturdays they bused all the retirees in from Century Village, King’s Point, Golden Acres—all the retirement communities within fifty miles of Boca. Nothing but pushing and shouting everywhere, with shopping carts bumping into you and fat women in sandals and pastel blouses clogging up every aisle. One woman who was built like a house was complaining about the free sample of the chocolate chip cookies they were selling. “This little nothing bite is a sample?” she said. “God forbid they should give away a whole cookie.” Another woman was screaming at the boy behind the deli counter because he wasn’t slicing her meat thin enough. “You call that thin?” she yelled each time he held up a slice for her approval.

Usually when I went grocery shopping it was the same five or six things—some yogurt, a few cans of tuna, a quart of skim milk—whatever I needed to last through the week. But this time it was a big production, with a shopping cart to push around even, and Demitra drooling all over my shopping list and letting out a holler every time someone banged into the cart. Ross had put “baby formula” at the top of the list, but he didn’t say what kind he wanted. They had such choices like you wouldn’t believe, twenty different brands. So I just grabbed one of each kind I saw, and then pushed the cart down to the diaper aisle. Ross didn’t mention what kind of diapers he wanted, and what did I know from all of these fancy new diapers? There were training diapers, pull-ups, baby wipes, you name it. I got a few boxes of each, and they took up so much room in the cart I had to take out the baby for a second to shove them all in. I put the backpack where the basket was and filled up the cart with Huggies. Then I headed to the seafood counter to get some whitefish.

The bus was pulling out of the parking lot when Ester asked me where Demitra was. “Oy vey,” I said, “I think I left her in the diaper aisle.” And God forgive me, but for a second I
thought about just leaving her behind. Maybe they would find a nice colored couple to adopt her. Everyone would be better off, Demitra included. But of course, I didn’t have the nerve. The bus driver turned around as soon as I told him I’d forgotten the baby, and you’d have thought I asked him to drive off a bridge the way everyone started shouting and complaining. “For God’s sake, stop your kvetching,” I said. “I forgot the baby.” This shut most of them up, except for Brownie Rosenberg, who kept crying that her milk was going to go bad.

At Publix they had the baby at the customer service desk. The manager was on the phone with the police and two of the cashiers were holding Demitra and making kissy faces. When I told them my story one of the cashiers, a young girl with a big ring in her nose who reminded me of Rebecca, glared at me.

“How can you forget a baby?” she said. “A poor, helpless baby. Shame on you.”

Maybe the fact that she looked like Rebecca got to me. Or it could have been that Demitra was silent for once, just staring at me with her little brown eyes and sucking on her fingers. All of a sudden I felt a little ashamed.

“What do you want from me?” I said. “I’m just an old woman. At my age, what business do I have looking after a baby?” I guess she felt sorry for me because she told the manager to get off the phone with the police and she handed Demitra to me. Demitra was giving me a look like she knew exactly what I’d done, and I admit that I felt guilty. That’s the only reason I agreed to the baby shower, not that I had a choice.

The baby shower was Ester Rosenbloom’s idea. When she mentioned a shower I told her not a chance, but she said she’d already bought invitations and she wouldn’t take no for an answer. Forget it, I told her, I wouldn’t want to trouble you. But she insisted, so I put the plastic covers on my furniture and Rose Levitz baked a chocolate cake with a little baby drawn on top in white frosting. I’m sure Rebecca only showed up because Ross told her they needed the baby presents. The girls knew I wasn’t rich, and they got practical things: a car seat, some tiny socks, a stroller. Rebecca got all dressed up for the occasion in her Walking Dead T-shirt and some big black boots like she just got back from combat, and after we’d opened the presents and started eating the cake Golda began harassing her. I guess in the back of my mind I knew the truth was bound to come out sooner rather than later, even though I’d hidden Demitra in the bedroom and closed the door.

“So the father’s Italian,” Golda said. She was sitting next to Rebecca on the couch, chewing cake while she talked. “I never understood the Catholic religion. What with all the crackers and wine and Jesus this and Jesus that. Will he convert, you think?”

“He’s not Italian,” Rebecca said.

I was in the kitchen, helping Ester put the cake on the plates, and I ran out to the television room when I heard this.

“Who wants some cake?” I said. “Less talking and more eating.”

“Did you tell them James was Italian?” Rebecca asked me.

“What difference does it make, one way or the other?” I said.

“That’s right,” she said. “It doesn’t make a difference. And as a matter of fact he’s black.”

“Black?” Adele Vogel said. “As in Negro?”

“No, as in black,” Rebecca said.

“I always said that Ross was going to bring you grief,” Adele said to me. “A black great-grandchild. What is the world coming to?”

“Half-black,” I said, but I knew that for Adele it made no difference.
“What’s the fuss?” Ester said. “Have some cake and mind your own business.”

“What’s the fuss?” Golda said. “She’s running around with a black boy, that’s the fuss.”

“I don’t need this crap,” Rebecca said, and she sprang up from the couch and headed for the door. Before she left she turned to face us, and the truth was she was almost in tears.

“I never wanted it in the first place,” she said. “He was the one who said he wanted it. He said he wanted to be a father.” Then she slammed the door behind her. This got Demitra riled up, and she was wailing away like a Hasid at the wall in Jerusalem.

“Such a granddaughter!” Golda said. “My heart goes out to you, Mimi.”

“God forbid,” Adele said. “You poor thing.”

“All right, the show’s over,” I said. “Thank you for the presents, now out.” Sympathy I could take, but not pity.

When they cleared out I had a big mess to clean up, and on top of that I was stuck baby-sitting until God knows when. So I put the baby on the coffee table and turned on the television. The baby’s diapers needed changing and she was making a little whining sound like a puppy, but I wasn’t interested. She stunk to high heaven, but I wasn’t about to change a diaper. “Don’t worry, I’m not even looking her way,” I said to a photograph of Irv that I kept above the television. Even though it was a picture of Irv at Rebecca’s Bat Mitzvah, it looked like he was accusing me of something.

Now that he figured he had a free baby-sitter Ross called me all the time, asking if I could watch the baby for a few hours. To make sure he felt guilty about asking I always complained a little and told him I couldn’t stand the sight of the baby, and at first I’d leave her in the bedroom and let her go hungry or sit in dirty diapers if there was a movie on I wanted to see. But my condo was starting to smell like a zoo, and God forbid if she wasn’t fed ten times a day she screamed so loud I could hear her even if I closed the door, so I had to give in. “I know you don’t approve, Irv,” I would say to his photograph while I was feeding Demitra or changing her diapers on the coffee table, “But what can I do? Better I should sit alone and watch television while Rebecca teaches the child curse words or gets her little body pierced God knows where? And it’s not like I’m parading her out in public.” I never took Demitra grocery shopping with me again, and whenever Ross dropped her off I would close the blinds and stay inside. But even that didn’t stop people from talking, because a month after the baby shower I was sitting and watching television, the baby in her basket on the coffee table, when Golda knocked on my door.

“I haven’t seen you in ages,” Golda said when I let her in. “The girls are all worried sick. You haven’t come down to the clubhouse to play pinochle in three weeks.” She took a seat on the couch, which still had the plastic cover on it because you never knew when Demitra was going to spit something up.

“I’ve got to be honest with you, Mimi,” Golda said. “This is an official visit. There’s been some complaints to the resident’s committee about a baby crying at all hours of the night.”

“This baby never says boo,” I said, and like it was on cue Demitra started crying her head off, which meant she was hungry. I grabbed the kosher baby formula from the fridge and used a kitchen towel to wipe off whatever she drooled down her chin. I got the kosher formula from the Jewish aisle at Publix. As the saying goes, you are what you eat, and I was hopeful.

“It’s not up to me, Mimi,” Golda said. “Like I said, we’ve been getting complaints. To each his own is my motto, but truthfully, if Irv was alive he would never put up with this baby in his house.”

“Well he’s not alive,” I said, and I was surprised by how it came out. Usually I talked about Irv as if he was still here.
“We’re just worried about you, that’s all. How does it look when a seventy-two year old woman is shlepping a colored baby around Publix?”
“I’m seventy-one,” I said. “And I never leave the house with this baby.”
“I don’t blame you,” Golda said. “When the coloreds moved into our neighborhood in New York, the place went to pot.”
“Well don’t be surprised,” I said. “If you have one more colored neighbor in your lifetime.” I said this to scare Golda, just to see the look on her face. God knows, I had no intention of having Demitra move in with me. It was the last thing I wanted. But like Irv used to say, sometimes the last thing you want is the first thing you get.

It wasn’t until a few weeks after she was gone that Ross told me Rebecca had run away. At first he lied and said she’d taken a night job to help pay for the baby, and he roped me into watching Demitra a few extra nights a week, which I should have known better. When I got a call from the police asking me if I had any idea where Rebecca was, Ross had to come clean. It wasn’t long before we got a postcard. As it turned out Rebecca was with her mother--Ross’s second wife--in California. “I couldn’t take all the crap,” was what the postcard said, which coincidentally was the same thing Ross’s third wife said just before she left him. Some mother. Not that the grandfather was any better. A few weeks after we got the postcard from Rebecca, Ross called me from work, excited.

“I need five hundred bucks, ma,” he said. “There’s a golden opportunity I can’t pass up.”
“You still haven’t paid me back the thousand,” I said.
“Our busboy gave me a tip on a horse,” he said. “And listen to this. The horse’s name is Rebecca’s Return. Can you believe it? Rebecca’s Return! It’s fate, ma.”
“Fate?” I said. “What are you, a crazy man?”
“10 to 1 odds. That’s five grand. Five grand buys a lot of diapers.”

When he said that, he left me with no choice. I wasn’t going to sit around watching Wheel of Fortune while Ross gambled away diaper money. I took the bus to Ross’s apartment, and I told the baby-sitter--a little blonde goy with a button nose and bright red lipstick--that she wasn’t needed anymore. She’d put Demitra in the bedroom closet so she could watch television and talk on the phone, and she didn’t seem too heartbroken about being fired. There were beer cans and empty pizza boxes on the kitchen table and the floor of the bedroom, and I noticed a cigarette burn on the pink baby blanket. On top of that it looked like Ross had stolen one of the busboy carts from the deli for the baby’s crib. Demitra’s diapers needed changing, and she was yelling at the top of her little lungs. When I picked her up her fingers grabbed at my blouse and she quieted down. I used one of Ross’s bathroom towels to wipe the drool off her chin, and I grabbed her baby basket from Ross’s bedroom. “I’m not thrilled about this, Irv, believe me,” I said. “But look at this place. Is this any place for a baby? I’m bringing her back with me. Forgive me, but what else can I do?” I left a note for Ross and then I left. I didn’t even bother to grab the shmata baby clothes that Ross had picked up at Goodwill. I figured I would take the bus to the mall and get her something decent, which I did.

I also got her a crib, which I had delivered and put in my bedroom. I bought her a blonde-haired doll that looked a little on the Waspy side for my taste, but it was the only one in my price range, so what can you do? It’s not like you can find Jewish-looking dolls at Toys-R-Us. On the other hand, at Bloomingdale’s I found a mobile that had all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. And of course I had to go to Publix to get baby formula and diapers. That night Ross came by to thank me for taking Demitra off his hands. Even though he’d just gotten off work and he stunk
like lox and pickles, I invited him to stay and watch Jeopardy. But he said he had things to do. In other words, he was going to the track to put whatever he got in tips that night on his horse, Rebecca’s Return.

“What you’re doing, ma,” he said before he left, “It’s a good deed. A real mitzvah.”
“Do what you have to do.”
“It’ll just be until Rebecca comes back.”
“Meanwhile, I won’t hold my breath.”
“She’ll be back. She just needs time.”

“Let her take all the time she needs.” And I said that not because I was so excited to have to take care of a baby. Raising Ross was enough for ten lifetimes. And after all, how many years did I have left on the earth? Ten, maybe fifteen? When Demitra would be turning eight, I would be eighty. Just as she would be getting out of diapers, I would need them myself. I probably wouldn’t live to see her Bat Mitzvah, if the temple would even let her through the door. A half-black Bat Mitzvah girl would be something new to Temple Beth Shalom. But it’s a different world that we’re living in. That’s what I wanted to say to the Century Village Residents’ Committee when I got their letter a few weeks after Demitra had moved in.

In so many words the letter said that Century Village was a retirement community, and even though it was a pleasure to have grandchildren and great-grandchildren visiting, they didn’t necessarily want them to stay. I knew the girls were mad that I’d stopped playing cards, but enough was enough. I figured I’d try to talk some sense into them. I took Demitra down to the pool.

I made sure to go on a Sunday afternoon, when all the girls on the committee would be out in the heat working on their skin cancer. I had a key for the gate, and when I walked in the first thing I noticed was Golda’s grandsons shouting and doing cannonballs. The committee had put up a sign with a hundred different rules, such as shower before you swim, no smoking or eating, and no diving in, but apparently the rules didn’t apply for Golda’s grandchildren. They were splashing the women who stood at the shallow end of the pool and kibbutzed, white shower caps protecting their expensive hairdos. I didn’t want anything to do with Golda’s little monsters, and I pulled a lounge chair up to Ester, who was sitting under the shade of a concrete overhang. Demitra I left in the sun. After all, she was brown already, so what could it hurt?

“She’s just so adorable,” Ester said, “Let me hold her, Mimi.” She grabbed Demitra in one arm and with her free hand she shoved a finger up a nostril and picked away. As long as she didn’t wipe her buried treasure on the baby blanket, I didn’t mind.

“Hello there, stranger,” Golda piped up, and Adele Vogel asked me what I’ve been so busy with that I couldn’t go out to brunch or play cards with the girls anymore. She was second in command on the residents’ committee, so she had a lot of nerve.

“You’ve got eyes,” I said to Adele.
“I heard Rebecca ran off to Detroit with the colored boy. Is it true, Mimi?” Rose Levitz asked.

“Leave her be,” Ester said. “Stop your nuging.”
“No offense, Mimi,” Golda said. “But if I had a great-granddaughter that color, I wouldn’t be showing her off.”
“You should be the one to talk,” I said. “Sitting in the sun all day, your skin is darker than Demitra’s.”
“It’s not the color of her skin,” Adele said. “It’s that blacks and Jews don’t mix. It’s not a good combination.”
“What’s mixed is mixed,” I said. “So what can you do? Better I should teach her about her people.”
“What people?” Golda said. “What do you know from the coloreds?”
“I know plenty,” I said. “I saw a show about it.”
“What kind of show?” Rose asked.
“About the black Jews,” I said. “And I don’t mean Sammy Davis.”
“Sure,” I said. “There are Jews in Israel as dark as any colored. I saw it on the television. As black as night, but they keep kosher and even go to the synagogue. Which is more than I can say for some people.”
“This I haven’t heard,” Rose said, defensive.
“It’s true,” Ester said. “We raised money for them at the temple last year.”
“Just because there’s a few black Jews in Israel doesn’t mean we need them in our own backyard,” Adele said.
“Nothing good can come from all this mixing up,” Golda said. “It’ll be the end of us Jews.”

When Golda said that, I stood up and grabbed Demitra from Ester. I couldn’t sit and listen to their talk anymore. There was no way they were going to see my point of view, so why bother? They could sit by the pool and talk all day about how things should be, but meanwhile the world still went on with its business all around them. I opened the gate and walked off, leaving them behind to talk about me for the rest of the afternoon. Or the rest of their lives, if they couldn’t find anything better to do. And I would give them plenty to talk about. When I got back to my condo I opened the blinds and put Demitra in her basket on the coffee table, so all of Century Village could get a good look. Imagine the nerve, to say Demitra is the end of the Jews. Granted, she wasn’t a hundred percent kosher. But she wasn’t the end of the world, either. And when Golda came knocking again, a copy of the Century Village covenants under her flabby arms, I already had it all planned out what I’d tell her. I’d gone over it a hundred times until I had the words just right. Golda, I’d say, this baby isn’t the end of the Jews. With a baby, it’s always something that’s just beginning.
THE SCHLEMIEL OF CENTURY VILLAGE

Around Century Village, I'm the man with a hundred nicknames, each worse than the last. "If it isn't Saul the Schlemiel," the kibitzers at the clubhouse say when I sit down to play pinochle. "Has Sadie sent you any postcards from Sun City?" This because I didn't believe the pinochle gang when they warned me that my neighbor, Max Grossman, was making plans to run away with my wife to Arizona. As the saying goes, all things grow with time except grief, and after two years Sadie and Max I've forgiven. But it's hard to forgive and forget when the girls at the pool have their own nicknames. "Saul the Simpleton," Golda Rosenberg says, when all I want is to lie in the sun and forget my troubles. "How's business? Have the waitresses cleaned out your cash register yet?" This gets big laughter from the women standing in the shallow end of the pool, doing aquarobics to Neil Sedaka. All of Building E knows the story of the waitress who skimmed a thousand dollars from the register and skipped town, leaving behind a three-legged cat in a milk crate in the walk-in cooler. Rather than it should be given its eternal catnap by some animal pound Nazi, I took the cat home with me and named it Shlepper. I'd like to retire like the rest of Century Village, but I keep Bagels Bagels open so my son Izzie, who's still finding himself, doesn't starve. And if the waitresses skim a little here and there, and Izzie asks for a loan to pay for a fundamentals of bowling class at Palm Beach Community College, why make a stink? The waitresses aren't rich, and Izzie said that a few night classes and they would make him assistant manager at Boca Bowls, so for everything there's a reason. There was even a reason why Izzie, at the age of thirty, moved back in with me.

Izzie appeared at my door dressed in his orange Boca Bowls T-shirt, the front untucked and hanging over his big belly. He'd gained weight since the last time I saw him, which was three weeks ago when he dropped by to beg for the bowling class loan. I'm thin like a walking stick and six feet tall, a giant for a Jew, but somehow Izzie is five foot four in sneakers and round as a matzo ball. His shoulders sloped down to his chest and he had the usual look in his eyes, which is defeat.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "How come you're not at work?"

"Dad, I need to move in for a little while. Those bastards at Boca Bowls fired me and my rent is three months overdue."

"Oy gevalt. What this time?" He'd already been fired from Bloomingdale's for knocking over a display of Fabrege eggs and from West Palm Zoo for accidentally giving the kangaroo food to the bears. After he dropped out of real estate school I tried to groom Izzie to take over Bagels Bagels, but behind the cash register he couldn't put two on top of two to make four, and he broke more plates than he served. For Izzie the toast always lands jelly side down when it drops, and whenever his breakfast stained our berber carpet Sadie would smack him on both of his chubby cheeks and call him a klutz and a golem and say she wished he'd never been born, which is one reason I try not to make a fuss. As the saying goes, except for the heart, if it's broken it can be fixed.

"I dropped an eighteen pound ball on someone's toe," Izzie said. He brushed past me without bothering to wipe his muddy feet on my Shalom doormat and plopped down on the couch, where Shlepper was taking a nap, all three legs spread. She meowed for a little pet from Izzie, but no such luck.
“Dropped on purpose or by accident?”
“As usual, the pin holder on lane seven got jammed, and as I’m trying to get it unstuck some teenager in an anarchy T-shirt rolls his ball right at me. So I dropped it on his foot. How was I supposed to know his father is a lawyer?”
“This is South Florida,” I said. “Everyone’s father is a lawyer. Even bowling anarchists.” To console Izzie I brought from the fridge a sesame seed bagel and some lox, his favorite. He shuped it down in three bites.

“Sleeping on this couch is going to kill my back,” Izzie said with his mouth full.
“Take the bed,” I said. “I don’t mind the couch.” My New Year’s resolution was to toughen up and stop letting the world take advantage, but when push comes to shove, who can say no? My one desire is for Izzie to be happy. Besides, I was tired of talking only to the television. If it wasn’t for that waitress leaving Shlepper behind, I would have gone out of my mind living alone, so it goes to show that right can come from wrong. That’s what I told Izzie, that Shlepper was living proof that sometimes even two wrongs can make a right. But already Izzie had the television on full blast, and my words of wisdom were drowned out by the Disney Channel.

It didn’t take long for the girls to give Izzie a nickname of his own. “Izzie the Shnorrer” they called him, a shlemazel born from a schlemiel. This because he spent more time lounging around at the pool than Golda Rosenberg and Mimi Silverman combined. “I’m finding myself,” Izzie said to Golda when she asked him how long he intended to live off the charity of others, and then he squirted suntan lotion on his hairless chest and rubbed. I put down the book I was reading to blind Ester Rosenbloom—a Jewish romance novel entitled *Marry Me, Murray*—to come to Izzie’s defense. Which it wasn’t easy, considering he was wearing a swimsuit with images of Mickey and Minnie Mouse on it.

“It takes time to find a job,” I said. “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”
“Never mind a day,” Golda said. She pushed her sunglasses down to the tip of her beak of a nose and glared at Izzie. “For three weeks he’s been coming to the pool. You can’t find if you don’t look.”

“Take a look at this,” Golda’s husband, Bernie, who liked to read the *Sun Sentinel* under the concrete awning while Golda kibitzed, held up the classifieds section. “A hundred jobs there must be. A young man like Izzie who has his health. It’s a shandeh the way he’s taking advantage of you, Saul.”

“I don’t want to take just any old job,” Izzie said. “I’m sick of being demeaned.” He turned over in the lounge chair to get sun on his back.

“You should take a pottery class at the clubhouse, Izzie,” Mimi Silverman said. She was sitting on the steps of the pool so she wouldn’t get her new perm wet. “A nice cereal bowl or a candy jar would sell like hotcakes at the gift shop.”

“I could use a vase,” Ester Rosenbloom said.

“My grandson made me an ashtray by hand at the Hillel summer camp,” Ester said. “So creative, that one. He’ll be an architect someday, mark my words.”

“Bernie the Third plays the viola like he was born for it,” Golda said. “Private lessons, my daughter-in-law buys him.”

“So he’ll take the pottery class already,” I said. I was tired of Golda and Ester and their constant kvelling about children and grandchildren. As the saying goes, children should be a consolation, not a contest. Not that I had any grandchildren to take consolation in.
“How about it, Izzie?” I said. “How does pottery sound?”

Everyone turned to look at Izzie, but he was asleep, his pink love handles hanging off either side of the lounge chair.

“The next Picasso, that one,” Golda said, and the kibitzers laughed and hooted. So let them laugh, I said to myself. If it turns out Izzie is a natural with a wheel and clay, it will be Saul the Schlemiel who has the last laugh.

It was no fault of his own that Izzie had inherited my heavy hands. “Hands like boxing gloves,” Sadie used to say, even though she was the one who liked to hit and shove. I tried to encourage Izzie when he came home from the pottery class at the clubhouse with brown stains on his shorts and a glob of clay in his hands. “A nice vase you made,” I said to him, but as it turned out it was a bird house. I put it on the limb of the banyan tree behind my patio, just like the time Izzie brought home a B- paper from school and I taped it to the fridge to show him how proud I was. “What’s that shmata hanging on your tree?” Bernie said to me at the mailboxes. “It looks like something out of Salvador Dali. The melting bird house.” I told him the sparrows loved it just the same, which was a little bit of a lie.

To add insult to injury, Shlepper preferred to drink from the toilet rather than take her chances with the cracked water bowl Izzie made for her. Just as bad as the bowl and the bird cage were the lopsided vases that even blind Ester Rosenbloom wouldn’t buy. So what could I do? When Izzie was at the pool, I snuck over to the gift shop and bought a vase at a time until they were sold out. And if they wound up at Goodwill, what was the harm? Izzie lost interest in pottery soon enough anyway. After all, at Century Village there were plenty of free classes to choose from.

Archery, Chinese cooking, stained glass, haiku, leather working—it was a new class every week with him. By February, my condo was cluttered with broken arrows, leather belts, a wok that never saw so much as a noodle, and unfinished haikus on pieces of scrap paper that Shlepper slapped around the kitchen floor with her one front paw. With a little tough love I could have told Izzie to go out and earn a living, but instead I snuck off to Bagels Bagels to grab a nosh when I needed to get things off my chest.

“The poor kid has no mazel,” I said to Dot, the waitress who smoked a pack a day despite that she was down to one lung. Even though there was someone waiting to be served in the booth next to the kitchen and two yentas across from us at the counter who’d finished eating their ruebens ten minutes ago, Dot took a seat on the stool next to me.

“Forget luck,” Dot said. “What that Izzie needs is a kick in the pants.”

The customer at the booth, a man in a pink golf shirt and matching pink visor on his bald head, started banging his spoon against his coffee cup. “What am I, invisible?” he shouted at Dot.

“Kish mir in tuchas,” Dot said, which is Yiddish for kiss my you know what. She had a mouth on her, that Dot, and the temperament of a rabid dog. Sadie insisted I tell Dot to change her ways or look for a new job, but who among us is perfect? Better to just accept people as they are and make the best of it. As the saying goes, if your grandmother had a beard she’d be your grandfather.

“I’m going across the street to have lunch at Pizza Thick and Thin,” the guy in the pink shirt said, “where they treat you like a person.” He headed out the door, not such a dramatic exit considering he was using a walker and it took him five minutes just to get up from the booth. As
the man hobbled out, Ross, the cook on weekends, opened the kitchen door and rushed up to the counter. He had a bulge under his shirt in the shape of a challah bread.

“I just got off the phone with my mother,” Ross said. “Her refrigerator’s broken and she needs me to help her eat everything before it goes bad.” Ross was the son of Mimi Silverman in E12, and I’d hired him as a favor to her.

“Do what you need to do,” I said. Not that it mattered, because Ross had already taken off his apron and punched out.

“Looks like you gained some weight back in the kitchen,” Dot said to Ross, but he was already walking out the door. Dot leaned closer to me and from a foot away she smelled like a pack of Marlboros. “He’s robbing you blind, Saul,” she said. She poked a fake pink nail on my shoulder for emphasis. “I wouldn’t be surprised if next time he shoved a pot roast down his pants.”

“I didn’t notice anything,” I said. “I’ve got other things to worry about.” I bit into my onion bagel and gazed at the sign on the wall across from me: *If a seagull flies over the sea, what flies over the bay?* Sadie used to beg me to take down all the fakakta signs and the photos of Izzie in his Boca Tire Kingdom T-ball outfit that lined the walls. She had visions of expanding Bagels Bagels into a national chain, an early retirement for the two of us, yachts and caviar and a mansion on the Intracoastal. But what do I want with a chain? As the saying goes, health is wealth. Max Grossman with all his millions from draining the Everglades and putting up planned communities could die of a heart attack tomorrow, and what good would all his money be then?

“Listen, Saul,” Dot said. “I’m going to tell you just what to say to that Izzie of yours. I’ve got one word for him. Computers.”

“Computers?”

“That’s what I said. Computers. With computers, how can you go wrong? My daughter runs her whole business off the computer. She never has to leave the house.”

“My son is a lawyer,” one of the yentas at the counter piped up, “and he has so many cases he has to put them in his computer just to keep track. A real whiz with the computer, my son.”

“Forget your son,” yenta number two said. “You should hear about my grandson. He works for a company in Silicon Valley yet. A big time macher in the computer business, my grandson.”

“All right, so I’ll buy Izzie a computer,” I said. “Please, enough with the kvelling already. One more kvell and we’re closed.”

At night Izzie and I watched the late shows, Leno and then Conan, with Shlepper curled up between us on the couch. It was a nice little routine the three of us could look forward to until I bought Izzie the computer. Dot told me to get him something simple, but the salesman at Best Buy made me feel like only a father without a heart would get anything less than a fancy shmancy Compaq 9000 portable computer with global positioning, digital image quality, and a Pentium 4 processor. Izzie took an Introduction to the Internet class at the clubhouse, and from that moment on he spent all night in the bedroom with the door locked, typing away like nobody's business. “Enough with the tipping and the tapping already,” I’d shout through the door, “come and watch Jay Leno.” But he told me he was carrying on a deep conversation in a Disney chat room with a woman he referred to only as 2much4U. According to Izzie she was a Polish girl from Buffalo, but other than that she wouldn’t describe herself or send so much as a single photograph. Even so, Izzie thought he was in love. This I knew when he flung open the
bedroom door and announced in the middle of Jay Leno’s monologue that 2much4U, whose real name turned out to be Wanda, was flying to West Palm Beach for a visit.

"A visit already?" I said. "All this from just chatting a few weeks?"
"Wanda’s a go-getter," Izzie said. "I think she's just what I need right now."

What you need is to get yourself a trade and stick with it for more than a week, is what I should have said to him. My father God rest his soul used to remind me ten times a day how he slaved away in the Newark Shirtwaist Factory so his children could make something of themselves in the Goldeneh Medina, America. My father liked to boss and shout and complain, but I think there’s a reason we have two ears and only one mouth. I went years without speaking to my father, and I didn’t want the same to God forbid happen with me and Izzie, because the truth was despite the dirty laundry spilling out of my closet and the plates with leftover crusts of peanut butter and banana sandwiches left on top of the television and the bedroom dresser and even the bathroom sink, I liked Izzie’s company. Besides, Izzie had no luck when it came to women. His high school sweetheart cheated on him with a substitute teacher, his girlfriend from real estate school moved to Alaska to get as far away from him as possible, and the last woman he dated had four dybbuks for children who yanked on his long earlobes and kicked him in the shins until he bled. So would it hurt for this Wanda to make one little visit?

"She can take the couch," I said. "I'll buy a sleeping bag next time I'm at WalMart."
"One more thing," Izzie said. "Her ex-husband left her with nothing. Flat-broke. I told her I would pay for her ticket."

"In other words you charged it to my Visa," I said. "I’ll pay you back as soon as I find a job."
"You couldn't ask me first?"
"There was a discount from Buffalo on the travel website and I wanted to take advantage."

"Oy gevalt," I said. I would have gotten up from the couch and waived my fists at Izzie, but just that second Shlepper climbed into my lap and demanded a pet. Possibly it was a mistake to put Izzie's name on my Visa, but when they canceled his Master Card, I wanted that he should have something in his wallet for an emergency. So maybe Izzie’s entire life is an emergency, I said to myself. And if this Wanda helps him find himself or at least find a job, what’s one airline ticket? As the saying goes, behind every great man you find a woman.

What was my first impression of Wanda? In more ways than one she reminded me of Sadie. The same stocky peasant build, but from Poland rather than Russia, and the same mask of make-up. Sitting high on her thick black hair was a pink cowboy hat with the word Princess in glitter across the front, which a JAP I’ve heard of but never before a PAP. She was wearing tight black jeans and black heels that clicked on the tile as we walked to the baggage claim. While Izzie and Wanda held hands and giggled like two schoolgirls, I pulled her luggage--also pink--from the carousel. Each of her suitcases felt like it weighed a thousand pounds, and it was all I could do to shlep them back to where the lovebirds were sitting.

"Three suitcases you brought?" I said to Wanda.
"One of them is just make-up," she said.
"You'd be beautiful even without make-up," Izzie said. Which it goes to show that beauty is in the eyes of beholders, because this Wanda had thighs the size of two beef briskets, one thick eyebrow like a fuzzy caterpillar inching across her forehead, and like most Pols a second chin even bigger than the original. Not that it matters what a person looks like. My only wish was that
Wanda would make Izzie happy. And if that meant the two of them using my credit card to treat themselves to dinner at the Melting Pot without inviting me, then so be it.

While the lovebirds ate fondue I scrounged from the freezer Bagels Bagels leftovers and watched Jay Leno with Shlepper. At midnight Izzie and Wanda still weren’t back, and I laid my sleeping bag out on the kitchen floor and tried to fall asleep, even though I was sick with worry. As it turned out I could have slept on the couch, because Wanda slept with Izzie. Not that they did much sleeping. When me and Sadie visited my parents, may they rest in peace, we slept in separate beds out of respect. My father would give me a swift slap in the kepeleh if he even caught Sadie and I necking on his couch. But Izzie and Wanda went at it God forbid like rabbits all night. At breakfast the next morning I wanted to ask Wanda if her tickets were one-way or round trip, but that kind of nerve I didn’t have.

As the saying goes, charge nothing and you’ll have plenty of customers. Now, instead of supporting one prematurely retired person, I was supporting two. During the day the lovebirds either rented Disney movies and lounged on the couch eating Crunch and Munch or laid out at the pool until they were pink from head to foot. They would pull two lounge chairs close enough that they could hold hands, but out of earshot of the kibitzers, myself included.

“So far away they sit?” Golda said to me. She was wearing a black swimsuit with gold sequins.

“They treat you like a third wheel, Saul,” Mimi Silverman said.

“Where did you say this Wanda was from?” Ester Rosenbloom asked. “Russia?”

“She’s from Buffalo,” I said. “Which happens to be in America. But she’s Polish. Not that it matters.”

Bernie Rosenberg peered up over the sports section. “Where I grew up in Cleveland, we didn’t mix with the Polacks,” he said. “That was the other side of the tracks.”

“We were all the same in Hitler’s ovens,” I said to Bernie, which I wanted to put an end to the subject.

“What does Wanda look like?” Ester Rosenbloom said. She’d bought some special glasses the size of pickle jars, so she didn’t need my services to read her latest Jewish romance novel, The Secret Life of Hannah Levi, but Wanda was out of her range.

“The Poles are not such an attractive people,” Golda said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“If she makes Izzie happy,” I said, “that’s what counts.”

“A nice thought,” Golda said. “But happy doesn’t pay the bills. Those two have a good thing going, living off Saul the Sucker.” As if to make Golda’s point, Izzie did a belly flop into the pool and Wanda toasted him with her glass of pink lemonade.

“Just visiting, this Wanda,” I said. “Not living.”

“As long as Saul the Shmendrick is covering room and board,” Bernie said, “why would she go back?”

I like to think the best of people, but he had a point. Already Wanda had shopped until she dropped at Town Center Mall five times in one week and charged five hundred dollars worth of clothes and shoes to my Visa. This I didn’t mention to Bernie, who moved out from the awning and sat down in the chair next to me. The wind had slanted his hairpiece and it looked like a squirrel was taking a snooze on his forehead.

“Listen, Saul,” he said. “The Residents’ Committee is hiring a security guard to work days. Why don’t you tell Izzie to apply? Maybe if Izzie’s not around this Wanda will get bored and go back to Buffalo.”
“We never talked about hiring another security guard at the last committee meeting,” Golda said.

“Sure we did,” Bernie said. He stood up and shouted at Izzie with a voice louder than when they blow the shofar at Temple Beth Shalom. “Hey Izzie,” he said. “How would you like to take a job as a Century Village security guard?”

Izzie just shrugged his sunburned shoulders, but Wanda turned around in her chair and lifted her sunglasses.

“How much does it pay?” she asked.


“He’ll take it,” Wanda said. She turned back around in the lounge chair and Izzie stared at her with a look like the end of the world. It reminded me of a saying: The husband is the boss—if the wife allows it. Not that God forbid Izzie and Wanda had plans to tie the knot.

Now that Izzie was working nine to five, Wanda never left the house except to go to the mall to spend his paycheck. What little space Izzie had left me in the bathroom was taken over by Wanda’s make-up and hair brushes and blowdryers, and I hadn’t been able to catch a Marlins game on the television all season because she always had the remote control in one hand and a bag of Twizzlers in the other. Who even knew that Disney made so many movies? As for conversation, the most we ever said to each other was “good morning” and “good night.” At least when it was just Izzie I had someone to talk to. Now even Shlepper hid under the bed all day. I was even more lonely than when Sadie left. If I wanted to kibitz my only option was the pinochle gang or Dot and Ross at Bagels Bagels, which I chose the lesser of two evils.

“What are you, a doormat that this Wanda should walk all over you?”

“Not so loud,” I said to Dot. The table of customers she was ignoring were giving her the evil eye.

“We pretend to look at the sign on the wall behind us: What kind of bait do you use to catch a gelfilte fish?”

Dot put a bony claw on my shoulder and pinched. “Are you going to spend your whole life getting pushed around, Saul Schwartz?” she said.

“Please, you’re making a scene.”

“You go home right now and give that Wanda a piece of your mind.”

“Right now go home?”

“This instant.”

“But I’m not done with my blintz.”

She grabbed my plate and dumped the blintz in the garbage behind the counter.

“Now you’re done,” she said. “Go.”

So I went.

# # #
When I got back to my condo, Wanda was in the same position she was in when I left, eyes fixed on *Dumbo* and one hand shoveling Cheezits from the box to her mouth. She’d really put on the weight recently, and the Cheezits weren’t helping. I’m not one for conflict, and I waited until the movie was over before I confronted her. I stood beside the television so I had her attention.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I said to her. “I don’t want you to take it personal.”

She put down the Cheezits and looked at me with eyes like Bambi from the movie the other night when the forest caught fire.

“You’re kicking me out,” she said. “I knew it was too good to be true. You’re right, I don’t deserve this kind of luck.”

“No one’s booting you out,” I said. “Don’t get emotional.”

“I know you think I’m not good enough for your son,” she said. Then with the tears she was about to start. There’s nothing like a woman in tears to break my resolve. Once they turn on the faucets, my will goes out the window.

“Please, no crying,” I said. I sat down next to her on the couch. “As the saying goes, not what’s beautiful is loved, but what’s loved is beautiful.”

“That’s so sweet of you,” she said. And just like that she had her big arms around me in a Polish bear hug. Probably I had orange Cheezit stains on my white golf shirt, but what can you do?

“I don’t know if Izzie told you, but I’m from a poor family,” Wanda said. She took off her *Princess* hat and held it to her heart like she was reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. “What little my father made he spent on booze. My mother ran away when I was fourteen. The money I’d saved to open up a fashion shoe store my ex-husband stole to buy a souped-up Camaro.”

After hearing a story like that, what could I do? Who knew she was divorced? No one could blame me for trying to offer her a little hope.

“I don’t know from fashion shoes,” I said. “But if you want to go into business, I could loan you some money.”

“Do you mean it?”

“Sadie had a different pair of shoes for every day of the month,” I said. “Alevai, you’re in the right place for shoes. Maybe you could sell them at the gift shop.”

“I’d only need about two thousand dollars to begin with,” Wanda said. “I just want to be able to pitch in and pull my weight.”

“So much just to get started at the gift shop?”

“I’ll need to fly to Milan to pick out the shoes.”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t need to fly to Israel to pick out latkes for Bagels Bagels, but if it was a matter of her wanting to contribute I didn’t want to start an argument. After all, what did I know about the fashion shoe business? And I was looking forward to some time alone with Izzie, which I got more time than I bargained for.

Wanda had been gone two weeks when Izzie showed up at the door at three in the afternoon, the badge torn off of his blue guard uniform.

“What’s with the rip in your shirt?” I said. “Aren’t you supposed to be manning the gate at this hour?”
“I pulled off my badge and threw it in the garbage,” Izzie said. “Those bastards on the Residents’ Committee fired me.” He stormed into the living room and nearly sat on Shlepper, who’d finally come out from under the bed now that Wanda was gone.

“I thought things were going good,” I said. “Just yesterday I ran into Mimi Silverman at the mailboxes and she said you looked very handsome in your uniform.”

“Joe Siegal died,” Izzie said, “that’s what happened.” Joe Siegal, who was ninety-four years old and lived in Building C, was the other security guard on Izzie’s shift. Like most of the security guards, he was a resident looking for a little something to do to kill time other than golf and pinochle.

“Don’t tell me you God forbid dropped something heavy on him and killed him.”

“I thought he was sleeping,” Izzie said. “Usually after lunch he naps in his chair in the guard house. Except this time he wasn’t napping.”

“So why should they fire you?”

“Bernie Rosenberg wasn’t too happy I’d left Joe sitting there for two hours.”

“How did Bernie know?”

“He showed up to yell at me about my making calls to Milan on the guard house phone.”

“Oy gevalt.”

“I think this is a blessing in disguise,” Izzie said. “Now Wanda and I can totally focus on the fashion shoe business.”

What business? I wanted to say. It’d been two weeks since Wanda left and she hadn’t even looked at shoes yet. In her postcard she said she needed to absorb the Italian culture before she could make an educated decision about fashion shoes, and I’m ashamed to say that part of me wished she’d never come back. Let her absorb until her heart’s content, I said to myself. But no such luck. A few days after Izzie was fired she returned with two pink suitcases full of the ugliest shoes I’d ever seen in my life.

For three weeks the shoes sat in a pile in my closet while Izzie and Wanda sat on the couch watching movies. When I opened the closet door to grab a shirt and a pair of pants out would tumble shoes—shoes, shoes, and God forbid more shoes. Shoes so bizarre-looking to call them fashion was an irony. The first thing that struck you were the colors...bright yellow, neon blue, an ugly brown which it put me in mind of Shlepper’s little poops. What material these fashion shoes were made of God only knew, because some were fuzzy like the time when Izzie was ten and I had the barber give him a buzz cut, and others were as leathery as Golda’s skin at the end of the summer. It was one of these mishuggeneh leather pairs that I tripped on and dislocated my hip.

I’d just gotten out of the shower, and my towel slid off when I fell, so there I was all of a sudden naked on my bedroom floor, a shooting pain in my hip. I shouted for Izzie, but he couldn’t hear me with the television blasting—101 Dalmatians barking away while I lay there in my birthday suit, my left leg numb. Shlepper was cowering under the bed, and I yelled at her to go get Izzie, but no such luck. Thank God Izzie had Sadie’s tiny bladder, because it was during a bathroom break that he finally heard my groans and called for an ambulance.

Two weeks I was in Boca hospital, but Izzie visited only once, partially to find out where I kept the key to the mailbox because he’d ordered a Disney movie off of Ebay and he was expecting it any day. Ester Rosenbloom came by with one of her infamous pineapple kugels, but apparently the rest of the retirees were too busy playing pinochle and watching Matlock to check up on me. The closest thing I got to a card was from Dot and Ross, a postcard with an alligator
about to bite the tuchas of a blonde in a bikini. On the front it said, “Welcome to Florida,” and on the back, in Dot’s cursive scribble, “Get better,” which it was more like a command than a consolation.

When you have nothing to do but sit in a bed in a flimsy hospital gown and think, you start to look back over your life and ask questions, especially when the painkillers kick in. The number one question was this: Had I been a mensche my whole life or just a fool? A thousand memories presented themselves to my me as examples: Murray Horowitz at Sunday school who told me he would plant a tree in Israel in my honor if I gave him twenty dollars cash, Bernie who thought I wasn’t paying attention every time he neglected to count a golf stroke and I held my tongue, my life insurance policy which still had Sadie as the beneficiary, and now Izzie and Wanda eating kettle corn and watching videos while those shoes gathered mold in my closet. I came to the decision that enough was too much already. As the saying goes, it’s last that nice guys finish. No more was the world going to take advantage of Saul Schwartz. No more Saul the Schlemiel. From now on they would call me the Saul the Son of a You-Know-What.

It was on my first day back home that I put my new personality into practice. It hurt to walk even on crutches, and I was laid up on the couch, Izzie on one side of me and Wanda on the other, the two of them passing a bag of Fritos back and forth. Izzie’s movie had come in the mail that morning, and he’d put it in the VCR even though a Marlins game was about to come on. I grabbed the remote control from his hand and ejected the movie.

“Come on, Dad,” Izzie said, “It’s the anniversary edition of Lady and the Tramp.”

“I don’t care if Walt Disney rose from the grave and delivered it himself,” I said, “From now on we watch what I want to watch.” My voice was raised so loud that I sounded to myself like someone else.

“Fine, watch the game,” Izzie said. “Wanda and I wanted to go to the pool anyway. Sunday is aquaerobics.”

“Forget the pool,” I said. “The two of you can clean up this house. You’d think I was gone for months, looking at this pig sty.” There were empty pizza boxes on the coffee table and on top of the television, furballs from Shlepper blowing like tumbleweeds across the living room carpet, and piles of smelly laundry nearly bursting open the door of the utility room.

“It seems clean to me,” Izzie said.

“You can start with the shoes,” I said. The fashion shoes they hadn’t touched, and I was liable to trip all over again.

“I can put the shoes in a box if you want,” Wanda said. She licked Frito salt off a plump finger and sunk further into the couch.

“Forget a box,” I said. “Take them to the gift shop and sell them already.”

About this the two of them giggled. I try to get tough and instead I hit funny bones.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“These Century Village women aren’t going to appreciate Italian shoes from Milan,” Wanda said. She rolled her eyes and shoved a fresh handful of Fritos in her mouth. The crunching drove me over the edge.

“The two of you deserve each other,” I said. “I regret the day I ever let either one of you into my home.”

“Calm down, Dad,” Izzie said. “You know what will take your mind off your pain? Lady and the Tramp.”
“I’ve had enough,” I said. Despite the unbearable pain, I grabbed my crutches and hobbled to the door. “I’m going to Bagels Bagels. If I get into a car accident on the way and die, let it be known that all of my earthly possessions can go to Ester Rosenbloom.”

“Leave us the key to the pool,” Izzie said.

“Forget the pool,” I said. “When I get back, I want the shoes and the both of you out.” I tried to slam the door, but my crutches slipped out from under me and it didn’t even shut.

I told Dot that I was worried what I’d said to Izzie and Wanda was maybe going too far, but she dismissed my concern with a wave of her hand.

“You can’t spend your whole life letting the world walk all over you,” she said. “The two of them should find their own place to live.” As she talked she blew smoke in my face, which she knew I didn’t like for her to light up inside Bagels Bagels. A woman with a baby at one of the booths was making exaggerated coughing sounds, but Dot ignored her.

“Five thousand dollars I gave them for those shoes,” I said. “Not to mention clothes and groceries and free rent. And what do I get in return? A busted hip and tsuris from all sides. Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right,” Dot said. She had to shout above the coughing woman and Ross, who’d dropped what sounded like a tray full of dishes on the kitchen tile in the back room.

“What has being such a Mr. Nice Guy ever done for you?” Dot asked.

“It’s done nothing for me, being nice,” I said. “As a matter of fact, better I should have been a little more on the tough side right from the start.”

“Forget a little,” Dot said. She inhaled with red lips. “A whole new attitude is exactly what you need. You’re finally thinking about yourself for a change.”

“As the saying goes, in life it’s every man for himself.”

“Exactly,” Dot said.

“No more letting the world take advantage,” I said.

“Now you’re talking.” Dot blew a long stream of smoke and from the kitchen another plate dropped. The woman at the booth went into a regular coughing fit. Just loud enough so the woman could hear Dot called her a shtik drek, which means the same as what Shlepper leaves in his litter box.

“Dot,” I said, “you’re fired.”

She grinned and the cigarette dangled from the corner of her mouth, all ash.

“Very funny, Saul,” she said.

“About this I wouldn’t joke,” I said. “You said it yourself, no more Mr. Nice Guy.”

“You’ll never fire me, Saul,” Dot said. She put out her cigarette in a bowl of half-eaten coleslaw that had been sitting on the counter for an hour.

“From now on I tell it like it is,” I said. I banged my fist on the counter and rattled my coffee. “You’re a lousy waitress, Dot, and how many customers you cost me in the last ten years who could even begin to count? Not to mention I’ve seen you steal from the register with my own eyes.”

“A person needs to make change once in a while,” Dot said.

“No more looking the other way for Saul Schwartz,” I said. “Facts are facts. I’m just letting out instead of keeping in. And let me tell you, it’s a relief.”

Before Dot could say another word Ross threw open the kitchen door.

“Listen, Saul,” he said. “I forgot to tell you that I need to drive my mother to get a perm today. Would you mind cooking for a few hours?”
“Turn around,” I said to him.
“What do you mean?” Ross said.
“I mean what I mean. Now turn.”
He spun 180 degrees and under his white apron you could see that Ross had a salami tucked into the back of his pants.
“Put the meat back,” I said.
“Look, Saul, I was going to pay for it.”
“What am I, born yesterday?”
“It’s just that food is so expensive nowadays and with my mother’s fridge going out...”
“Get out!” I shouted. “The both of you. Out. And don’t come back.”
“I’m taking the salami,” Ross said. He dashed out the door carrying the salami like a running back holding a football.
“I told you he was no good,” Dot said. She grabbed her purse and clocked out. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said. “When you’ve calmed down.”
“There won’t be a tomorrow,” I shouted after her as she walked out the door. “I’m selling Bagels Bagels.” But the door had already shut and she didn’t hear me.

When I got home from Bagels Bagels, Izzie and Wanda were gone. The fridge had been emptied out and all of the snack foods had disappeared from the counters. Except for the fashion shoes, Wanda’s clothes were gone from my closet, and Izzie’s T-shirts and jeans no longer filled up my dresser drawers. Shlepper was slapping a Post-It note around the bathroom floor, and as it turned out it was a good-bye message from Izzie and Wanda. “We know when we’re not wanted,” Izzie had written in purple magic marker. As I sat down on the couch and turned on the Marlins game, a little part of me—the old Saul—wanted to find the two of them and beg them to come back. But I fought this urge and tried to focus on the game, another pounding for the Marlins, a team which I could relate. As a day turned into a week and still no word from the lovebirds, it was all I could do to keep from holding my head in my hands and crying right in front of the girls at pinochle. The old Saul was telling me to get in my car and drive the streets of Boca until I found Izzie and Wanda. I was on the verge of calling the police, but then I got my Visa bill, which had a charge for two one-way flights to Buffalo. That’s when I resolved to wash my hands of both of them. Months passed by, and I didn’t get so much as a phone call or even a letter from Izzie, but I didn’t cave in. Let him be the one to come crawling back. As the saying goes, out of sight, out of mind. And what those two didn’t realize was I was a new man, tough like a nail.

My first act was to take Izzie and Wanda off my Visa card, although the truth is in the end I just lowered the maximum balance. Sure, I wanted to show them who was boss, but I didn’t want them to starve either. Then I brought the fashion shoes to the gift shop and marked them up two-hundred percent, but that wheeler-dealer Golda talked me down to ten dollars a pair and then bragged about what a bargain she got when she wore a pair to pinochle. I took down the photos of Izzie and put a “For Sale” sign on Bagels Bagels until the kvetching from the Century Village Women’s Brunch Bunch got to be too much and I relented, which I always gave them a fifty-percent off deal on Saturday mornings and if I closed they’d have nowhere to go. Ross and Dot continued to show up to work even though they technically were fired, and in the end I decided that the best course of action was to hire them back but to install a security camera, which I was going to do as soon as I had the money. At golf I subtracted a stroke for every three that I took, and if my ball was deep in the rough I gave it a little kick and knocked it into the
fairway, and I would have kept on with the cheating if Bernie didn’t catch me in the act and threaten to beat me over the head with his five iron. The truth was, once you’re given a name like Saul the Shlemiel it tends to stick, and I blew my last chance to show the world just how tough I can be. Three months after he’d left, Izzie showed again at my door. A scraggly beard was growing in spots on Izzie’s cheeks and chin, and his orange Boca Bowls T-shirt was untucked, just like the last time he’d suddenly appeared. The only difference was that now around his neck he was wearing a sling with images of Donald Duck on the outside, and inside a crying baby.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “I thought you were in Buffalo.”

“It’s Wanda,” Izzie said. “She divorced me.”

“What divorce? You’re not even married.” I had to shout over the baby.

“We eloped in Buffalo. Wanda was pregnant and she said she’d leave me if I didn’t marry her.”

“She’s having a baby?”

“Had a baby,” Izzie said. “This baby. A girl.” He turned sideways so I could get a peak at the baby. She looked like a miniature version of Wanda, with two chins even. The more I looked, the more the baby cried, and Izzie stuck a pacifier in her mouth to keep her quiet. In my head I did the math—three months since the lovebirds flew away, three months Wanda and Izzie had been with me before that. And as hard as I tried, I couldn’t get three plus three to equal nine, which it’s a good thing Izzie was no good at math.

“Where’s Wanda?” I asked.

“We’re divorced,” Izzie said. “I got Sally.”

“Who’s Sally?”

“The baby.” Izzie held her up and for a moment I pictured a bowling ball dropping. With Izzie’s butter fingers, this baby would be lucky to make it out of infancy alive. Better off she should be raised by wolves than Izzie.

“She cost me ten thousand dollars,” Izzie said. “But she’s worth every penny.”

“Who cost?”

“Sally. Wanda gave me custody in exchange for ten grand.”

“Oy gevalt. Where did you get that kind of money?”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about,” Izzie said. “Can we come in?”

For a moment I thought about saying no. “That Izzie never learns,” I heard Sadie’s voice in my head, “let him fend for himself for once in his life.” “Look out for number one,” my father would say if he was here. “Saul the Schlemiel,” I could already hear the kibitzers at the pool and pinochle tables and the golf course saying, “He’s feeding two mouths, one of which isn’t even his.” And I knew that to pay for the two of them I’d need to keep Bagels Bagels open until the day I died, which wouldn’t be long if I let Izzie and this baby in to stay. But what business did I have refusing? To be without pity takes willpower, and that kind of will I didn’t have. I looked into those baby’s little blue eyes, and how was it possible I could say no to such innocence? Such helplessness, such trust? After all, what are babies if not the ultimate schlemiels, nature’s perfect fools? “Come in already,” I said to Izzie, and I flung open the door.

As the saying goes, the highest wisdom is kindness.
YOUR OWN MOTHER

When we aren’t on speaking terms, my daughter Linda and I send each other letters. I mail her my checkbook to balance or my social security statement, and she sends back a letter reminding me to take my heart pills and to double-check that the oven is off before I go to bed. We only live ten minutes apart, but once I waited two months for a letter. That was after I accidentally called Linda’s boyfriend, Pete, a loser while he was sitting right across from me at her kitchen table. I’d just had surgery for my cataracts a week earlier so everything was still blurry, and I thought Pete was in the bathroom. Linda gave me the silent treatment all the way back to my condo, and when she sped off at a hundred miles an hour I knew she wouldn’t be coming by to take me grocery shopping on Sunday. After two months without so much as a single phone call, she mailed me a letter three pages long. In so many words the letter said that I never had a kind word to say about any of the men she was ever with, starting with her date to the junior high prom, Melvin Schultzberg, who I remembered had a nose the size of a grapefruit and was such a klutz he couldn’t make it across the living room without tripping on one of his left feet. “But I haven’t heard from you and I’m worried,” the last lines of the letter read, “so call me, Mom.” Instead of calling, I drove to her apartment. It was a Friday night, and there was a movie I wanted to see starring Tony Danza as a handicapped busboy who falls in love with a movie star. I figured Linda and I could watch the movie together, which I should have known better.

What was the first thing Linda said when I opened the door? “Mom, you’re not supposed to be driving.” I’d gotten into a little nothing accident with a palm tree which wasn’t even my fault, and she insisted I take the Century Village bus everywhere.

“For two months I get nothing but a letter, and this is how you greet me?” I said. “Anyway, I’m shvitzing out here, so invite me in already.” It was almost June and humid like you wouldn’t believe. Between the heat and the roaches I hated South Florida, but when Linda’s ex-husband, Lou, was transferred by IBM from Cleveland to Boca twenty years ago, I moved. I wanted to be close to Linda, so what can you do?

When Linda finally let me in I noticed Pete was on the couch in the living room. Pete was a big fat guy who sold fake cologne at the Sunrise flea market for a living, so you can see why I called him a loser. Not that Linda’s ex-husband was a prize, but at least he was thin and made a decent living as an accountant. Only a year Linda had been divorced but she was running around with Pete like she was a teenager and not a forty year-old woman: driving motorcycles, taking airboat rides in the Everglades, and quitting the receptionist job Lou had gotten for her to go work as a bartender at Chili’s. She even looked like a teenager, all dolled up and wearing a dress so tight I wondered how she was still breathing.

Pete gave me a big smile when I sat down next to him on the couch. “How’s the eyes, Mom?” he asked. A real sweet talker, this Pete. He’d only been dating Linda for four or five months and already he was calling me Mom. I guess it was because he called me Mom that I made a little mistake. I accidentally called him by Linda’s ex-husband’s name. “Looks like you gained some weight, Lou,” I said. Linda was standing behind Pete and she made a strangling motion at me, so I changed the subject.
“I thought you’d might want to watch a movie,” I said to Linda. “It comes on in a few minutes.” I knew Linda wasn’t a big TV watcher, but with Tony Danza, what’s not to like? Pete just got here,” Linda said. She sat down on the sofa next to Pete and started massaging his knee with her hand like I wasn’t even there. Save me the touchy-feely business, I wanted to say, but I held my breath.

“But you have such a nice big television,” I said instead.

“What about the magnifier for your television?” Linda said. After my cataract surgery my eye doctor, some quack from India whose name I couldn’t even pronounce, sent me to this store for half-blind people. For a small fortune they sold me a magnifier to put in front of my television screen.

“Seventy dollars that thing cost me, and I still can’t make out Tony Danza from a hole in the wall. What kind of doctor rips off his own patients like that? A thousand Jewish doctors in South Florida, and you take me to the one Indian guy.”

“These doctors are all con-artists anyway, right Mom?” Pete said. I saw him wink at Linda and she rolled her eyes.

“They’re crooks is what they are,” I said. They both had a laugh when I said that. A million inside jokes with these two.

“What’s so funny? Is there something funny about a person losing their eyesight? I can’t read, I can’t watch television, I’m not supposed to drive. I might as well be dead. It would be easier for everyone.”

“I don’t see why you won’t look at assisted living places, Mom,” Linda said. “They take care of all your meals, and you can play cards and bingo and maybe meet some new people.”

“I don’t need to meet people,” I said. I used to play bingo at the clubhouse once a week, but I stopped going. It was nothing but a bunch of yentas wearing too much cheap perfume and flirting with the widowers like there was no shame in the world. My husband, Milt, died five years ago, and the last thing I needed was to shack up with some old goat that wanted nothing better than a slave to cook his meals and drive him to the golf course. That experience I already had.

“Besides,” I said to Linda. “I’ve got you to take me around.”

She let out this big sigh, real dramatic. Then she started in with the fidgeting, twisting her long brown hair through her fingers like she used to when she was a teenager and I did something that embarrassed her, like sneaking salt shakers from McDonald’s home in my purse. I didn’t know what she had to be so nervous about. I was the one going blind.

“She can’t do it all by herself,” Pete said. He was sitting spread out on the couch, like he owned the place, and I noticed he was wearing black boots. So who wears boots in Boca? Probably Linda would marry him, I thought, and the two of them would run off to Texas and leave me to fend for myself. Just like my son, Max, who married a goy named Carrie Lynn and moved to Fresno.

“I know your plan,” I said. “You want to throw me in a nursing home. That way you won’t even have to see me. You can wash your hands of me. I thought in my old age at least I’d have you. I thought we would do things. But you’re always running around with Pete.”

“That’s it, Mom,” Linda said. “I’m taking you home.” She grabbed my arm and started leading me out the door like I was a child, but I pulled away from her.

“I’ll drive myself home,” I said. “I’m not helpless yet.”

She and Pete must have had big plans, because she didn’t give much of a protest when I got into my little Plymouth Horizon and pulled out of her driveway. What I didn’t tell her is that
I wound up circling around her duplex another ten times before I found my way out of the Village of Boca Barwood, but is it my fault they built the place like a maze? Once I got lost from an appointment with my mishuggeneh Indian doctor and wound up somewhere in Miami. Linda had to take the lunch shift off at Chili’s so she could come get me, and the way she carried on you would have thought I drove the wrong way on I-95 on purpose.

Linda didn’t come by on Sunday to go to Publix with me, and I wasn’t going to call her. Let her call me, I thought. I’m her mother, and she should have a little respect. After another week without hearing from her I admit that I checked my mailbox twice a day, but she didn’t send a letter and I was running out of food. So I drove to Publix myself and carried all my groceries from the car to my condo, which feels like ten miles when it’s ninety-five degrees and you have a plastic bag full of canned soup in each hand. I must have been distracted, worrying about if I would ever hear from Linda again, and I don’t even know what I slipped on, but when I fell the first thing I felt was the stinging in my hands and such a pain in my thigh that I thought I’d never be able to walk again. Later I learned that the Silvermans—my nosy neighbors who always waited until one in the morning to have their shouting matches—called for an ambulance.

I wound up with a bruise on my hip so bad I couldn’t lay on my side and five broken fingers. When Linda came to visit me that night at the hospital her hair was soaking wet and she had her bathing suit on underneath her blouse, which meant she’d been scuba diving. This diving was another one of her little mid-life crisis adventures.

“I just got the message on my machine that you fell,” Linda said. “The doctor said you broke some fingers.”

“I’m in bad shape,” I said. “That’s what I get for shleping my groceries all by myself in this weather.”

“Pete’s parking the car,” Linda said. “He’ll be up in a minute.”

I pulled the bed sheet over my hospital gown so Pete wouldn’t see me half-naked and held up my hand to show Linda the blue splints they put on my fingers.

“I can’t even feed myself,” I said. “It’s no fun, this getting old business.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t break your hip,” Linda said. “The doctor said I’d need to hire a nurse to help you with meals and bathing. Just for a month.”

“Those nurses are as bad as the doctors. They’ll charge me an arm and a leg, and for what? To open up a bottle of apple sauce?”

Linda was about to start in with her usual complaining about what a miser I was, but Pete walked in and cut her off.

“Looks like your boxing career is over, Mom,” Pete said. He set a box of chocolates next to me on the bed. As usual, he stunk like cheap cologne. “How are you feeling?” he said.

“Do those chocolates have cherry on the inside?” I asked. Cherry I could live without.

“Listen, Mom,” Linda said, “The doctor gave me some phone numbers of home health care places. He said Medicare should pay for most of it.”

“I don’t want a nurse,” I said. “Why can’t I stay with you?”

“She’s got her own life,” Pete said. He’d plopped down on the chair beside my bed and I noticed he had a shirt on that said, “Divers do it deeper.” A real class act, this Pete.

“Don’t I know she has her own life,” I said. “I can never get a hold of her. She’s either working or off scuba diving or doing God knows what.”

“You can’t accept anything I do, can you?” Linda said. She grabbed a wet strand of her hair and twirled away. “I’m a grown woman. I don’t need you constantly judging me.”
“If you want to drown yourself or get eaten by sharks, be my guest,” I said. “All I ask is to stay with you a few nights. Is a few nights so much to ask of your own daughter?”

“All right, Mom,” Linda said. “You know how to push my buttons, don’t you? A few nights. But then we’re getting you a nurse.”

I noticed Pete mouth something to Linda and shake his head, but I ignored him. I was already thinking if there was anything good on television that night that Linda and I could watch. Maybe a rerun of *Who’s the Boss?* That Tony Danza I liked.

At first staying with Linda was a pleasure, and not just because I wasn’t so lonely now that I had someone around at night to do for me. We had dinners together and rented old Bette Davis movies, and when I begged her to let me stay a few more days, she didn’t say no. When my hip was feeling better we went to look at Pelican Harbor, an assisted living place in Ft. Lauderdale. A woman in this mishuggeneh pink business suit with blonde hair done up in a big round puff showed us around. According to her, everything was “just adorable”: the plastic pelican centerpieces on the dining room tables, the paintings of pastel beach scenes that I’m sure they got on sale when one of the hotels closed down, and the five feet of concrete out back with plastic chairs set up so you could stare out at the parking lot. “Isn’t this patio just adorable?” the woman said, and I told her it was, even though I had no intention of moving into a place like that. The truth was, if I pretended to like the place I figured Linda would take me around to a few more, and it was nice to finally have some time with her. And what was the nicest part? When we walked around this Pelican Harbor, I put my arm around Linda’s. I made out like I couldn’t see the nose in front of my face so she would let me hold on to her. I know I’m not the most affectionate person, and I worry that when Linda was growing up I sometimes forgot to tell her she was pretty and I loved her, which would maybe explain her resentment. So it was nice to put my arm in hers and say to all the nurses at these assisted living places that this was my daughter taking me around. Of course, I should have known that kind of happiness doesn’t last.

I knew my stay at Linda’s was through when I overheard her talking to Max on the phone. I was on the living room couch, pretending I was asleep. It was a little trick I picked up from an episode of *Matlock*, and you’d be surprised what people will say about you when they think you’re sleeping. Linda was on the phone in the kitchen, making dinner while she talked.

“I can’t handle this anymore, Max,” she said. “I know that when push comes to shove she won’t move into assisted living. I’ve been taking care of her for the past twenty years. Don’t you think it’s your turn?” Max must have said something nasty because she cursed under her breath and slammed the phone down on the kitchen counter. When she did that I sat up and made like I was yawning.

“Are you up?” Linda said. “I made you a tuna casserole, Mom, and you can help yourself. I’m going out with Pete Tonyght.”

“So how am I going to eat it?” I said. “My fingers are killing me.”

“The doctor said you should be feeding yourself by now.” She spooned some casserole on a plate and set it on the dining room table.

“Does this mean you’ll be out all night?” I said. “Leave me the number of where you’ll be.”

“Don’t you think this is a little weird, Mom?” Linda said. “I feel like I’m back in high school.”

“So you want to boot me out.”
“Nobody is booting you out. You’ll be happier in your condo. I’ve got a girl to help you with meals and take you places in the afternoons.”

“I don’t want to go back to the condo,” I said. “What if I sell it and give you the money? Then maybe I can stay here with you.”

Linda turned red, although it could have just been that she was wearing too much makeup. She had on so much lipstick and blush she looked like a prostitute.

“I can’t handle this right now,” Linda said. “Pete’s already upset that he hasn’t seen me in two weeks.”

“You can do better than a cologne salesman,” I said. “You’re a pretty girl,” I added when I saw her make her famous strangling motion. Then I ruined it. I was sorry for what I said next, but it was out before I knew it.

“I don’t see why you have such a problem holding on to men,” I said.

Linda gave me a look like murder. I hadn’t seen such a look from her since the time she told me she was marrying Lou, and I told her it would be a mistake she would live to regret. She was so upset about my comment about Lou that they eloped. I got a postcard from Vegas, and Linda had written that she was married and I was going to have to learn to accept her choices. To show her I was sorry about what I’d said I took the next plane to Vegas and gave them a surprise hello, but in the end I was right about Lou being a mistake.

Linda grabbed her purse from next to me on the couch and headed for the door. I tried to explain to her what I’d meant. I’d only meant that in my days people didn’t get divorced like it was changing clothes. Milt was no angel, I said, but I stuck with him for fifty years. But I don’t think she was listening, and she slammed the door so hard the whole apartment shook.

After Linda left I tried to watch television, but nothing could hold my interest. On the news there was nothing but murders and hijacking and one country invading another. The commercials were all young people with orange hair jumping off cliffs with a soda in their hand, or women slinking around in their underwear who were so thin they looked like they just walked off a concentration camp. According to what you see on television the world belongs to the young, and if God forbid they show someone over fifty it’s usually an add for Depends. After ten minutes I turned the television off and just sat there in the dark. The truth was, I was feeling all alone in the world. I was taught that children have certain responsibilities, but nowadays you get old and nobody wants you. When I was a girl my grandfather came to live with us when he couldn’t do for himself anymore. I remember bringing him meals and reading the Yiddish paper to him every night. But now they put you in a nursing home and you see your family once a month if you’re lucky. I’m normally not a crier. But I felt like crying and I went to the bathroom to wipe my eyes and take my pills so I could go to bed.

It was seeing all my pills lined up on the bathroom counter that put crazy thoughts in my head. Twenty different pills I had to take. Some pills I took just to get rid of the side effects of other pills. There were pills for my heart, pills for the pain in my fingers, and pills that I took for depression which were practically the size of the bingo chips at the Century Village clubhouse. The depression pills were Lou’s idea. Lou the logical accountant, who thought everything could be solved by pills. He’ll change his tune when he gets to be my age. When his body goes and his skin is shriveled, we’ll see how far his pills get him. When I was a young girl I had half the boys in Shaker Heights chasing me around, but now I couldn’t stand to look at my wrinkled fingers as I opened the bottles. These were my hands? It didn’t seem possible. To add insult to injury, you could see that the fingers that were broken were going to be crooked even after they healed.
I poured out five or six pills from each bottle and lined them up on the sink. It was probably enough to kill a horse if I took them all at once. How foolish I was, to think Linda would let me stay with her. She had her own life, and I wasn’t in the picture. I imagined her coming home late from her date and finding me on the couch, dead from an overdose. She would be upset, of course—but deep down, would there be relief as well? It was a question I needed an answer to, but dead I wouldn’t get it. So I took my usual dose and put the rest of the pills away. Then I went back to the living room and waited for Linda. It made me nervous when she stayed out so late.

When Linda came stumbling in I noticed that her mascara was running down her cheeks like she’d been crying, and by the way her hair was tangled up I could tell she’d been fidgeting. “It’s one in the morning, Mom,” she said. “What are you doing up?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Maybe now’s not such a good time. I got in a big fight with Pete and I’m stressed out.” She opened the freezer and pulled out a carton of rocky road.

“It’s big news,” I said. “I’ve decided to move to Fresno.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“About this I wouldn’t kid. Anyway, it’s Max’s turn. I’m putting the condo up for sale tomorrow.” Then I waited for her response. In my head, I’d imagined her crying and insisting that I stay. I’d pictured the final scene in *A Daughter’s Dilemma*, which was a made-for-TV movie starring Jane Fonda as a daughter who hires a hit man to have her own senile mother killed, God forbid, but then at last minute calls off the hit man and instead goes with her mother on a cruise around the world. But unlike Jane Fonda, Linda didn’t seem upset in the least. She took a big scoop of rocky road, licked the spoon, and started naming a thousand reasons why I should go.

“The weather is a lot nicer in California,” she said. “And between Max and Carrie Lynn, you’ll have more people to drive you around. Not to mention the assisted living places are cheaper in Fresno.”

“So how come you’re such an expert on the rents in Fresno?” I asked.

“Of course, Max will probably say no,” she said. “You shouldn’t move if he’s not going to help you with groceries and bills.”

“He’s my son,” I said. “It’s his duty.”

“That’s true,” she said. She scooped another spoonful of ice cream. “It’s a thought. I mean, if that’s what you want.”

But it was more than a thought to Linda, because within a week she’d put an ad in the *Palm Beach Post* for my Horizon and reserved a ticket to Fresno for the first of August. When I asked Max if I could stay with him now that Aaron and Lisa were in college he said it wasn’t possible because of the way that Carrie Lynn and I carried on. The one time I visited them, Carrie Lynn had cooked a noodle kugel to try to impress me, and I accidentally mentioned to her that I could get a better kugel at Publix and she should stick to Christian food. So instead of making room for me Max put a down payment on an apartment at Golden Manor of Fresno. It was an assisted living place, which is doctor mumbo jumbo for a home where they send you to die. The whole time I thought Linda would change her mind, even though the plane tickets were non-refundable. After all, a bond between a mother and daughter is different than a mother and son, and she was the one I wanted to take care of me when I couldn’t do for myself anymore. But she never let on like she was having second thoughts, and when she put another ad in the *Post* for a moving sale in July, it felt like the whole thing was out of my hands.
Even though the ad said the sale didn’t start until nine, at eight fifteen the vultures were already peaking in through my window, trying to get a glimpse of the merchandise. I’d spent all night putting price tags on my furniture and appliances, but when Linda and Pete came over they crossed out all the prices and lowered them. They even lowered the price on my living room sofa by half.

“My own mother gave me this sofa when Milt and I moved into our first place in Shaker Heights,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean you can charge three hundred dollars for it,” Linda said. “You just want to get rid of this stuff as quick as you can.”

“That’s not true, Mom,” Linda said. She looked at her watch. “It’s nine,” she said. “Let’s get going.” She opened the door and it seemed like half of Century Village rushed in.

As it turned out, the Rosenbergs bought the sofa for a song. While Golda Rosenberg haggled Linda down to a hundred dollars, Bernie Rosenberg sat his big tuchas down on the sofa like it was already his. Pete was having a grand old time, and he wheeled and dealt with the old men in white belts and pink golf pants and their wives, who kvetched and kvetched about the price until Pete was practically giving all my possessions away. They even sold my television, although Linda said I could borrow hers until I left. When it was all over I was cleaned out, and the only furniture left in the living room was a card table from when I used to have the girls over for pinochle and the oak cabinet where I kept the record player and the Glen Miller albums, which I hadn’t even touched since Milt died. When I saw how empty the condo was I decided to admit to Linda that I was having regrets.

“Maybe we should call this off,” I said. “What if I don’t like Fresno?”

“You’ll like Fresno,” Linda said. She was sitting on the floor of the living room, counting the money that was piled in a shoe box. Pete was on his knees next to Linda, packing up the few items that didn’t sell in a box for Goodwill.

“There was a show on television the other night,” I said, “and they said that one big earthquake and all of California would sink into the ocean.”

“You’ll get to see Aaron and Lisa,” Linda said. Aaron and Lisa were Max’s kids, who sent me a card exactly once a year, on my birthday.

“I’ll never see you.”

“You’ll see me,” Linda said. “Let me ask you something,” I said. “Will you miss me?”

Linda stopped with the money and looked up at me. “Of course,” she said. “You’re my mother.” Then she went back to counting the money.

“A nice thought,” I said. “But the fact is, you’re probably counting the days until I leave.”

“Twelve days and fifteen hours,” Pete said. “But who’s counting?” Linda elbowed him in his fat gut, which he deserved it.

“I’m not counting the days,” Linda said. “I thought this was what you wanted.”

“I was only doing what you wanted. Your problem is you’re ungrateful.”

“Don’t start, Mom.”

“You’ve got no respect for your own mother. What kind of daughter behaves like this?”

“Let’s go,” Linda said, and she grabbed Pete by his elbow and dragged him up. She stuffed the money in the shoe box and started marching out the door. “I’m using this to pay for the flight, Mom,” she said. “You can call me when you’re ready to be civil, because I don’t need the abuse.” Then the two of them were out the door.
I didn’t call, even though I had no television or car and I was going out of my mind. Sometimes when I was feeling lonely and blue I’d leave the television on when I went to bed, just for the noise. But now I just laid there in silence, and when I couldn’t fall asleep I turned on the light and read one of the romance novels I got in large print at Boca library. It reminded me of the first night after Milt died, which was the worst time of my life. I’d kept rolling over to put my arm on his shoulder but there was nobody there.

I got a letter from Linda three days before I was supposed to fly to Fresno. “I’ll be there at 8:30 on the first,” Linda wrote. “Don’t forget to pack your magnifier, and keep all your pills in your purse.” Some letter. On the day I was leaving, Linda was twenty minutes early. Real eager.

“Did you say good-bye to your friends?” she asked me before we left.

“What friends?” I said.

“Never mind,” Linda said, and she grabbed my suitcase.

On the way to the airport we didn’t say a word to each other, except when I mentioned I was dying from the heat. When Linda turned to me and said her a/c was broken, I noticed that her eyes were red and swollen. The only time I’d seen them looking like that was her divorce, when she’d cried all night and drove over to my condo the next morning to cry some more on my shoulder, even though the divorce was her decision. I remember that I made her scrambled eggs and told her that time heals all wounds, although the truth was I still lit a candle and said a kaddish for Milt every year at Temple Beth Shalom. I wanted to ask Linda if it was me she’d been crying over, but I couldn’t get up the nerve. Probably she just got in another fight with Pete.

“Don’t forget that you’re changing planes in Atlanta,” Linda said when we got to the gate. It was the West Palm Beach airport, not Miami thank God, and there were only a few people at the gate waiting: some business men in dark suits and a big fat whale of a woman who had a little brown mustache and was singing to herself in some foreign language. With my luck she’d be sitting next to me.

“If you need help, ask the person behind the desk when you get off,” Linda said. “Do you have your pills?”

“They’re in my purse,” I said. I took a seat because my feet were killing me, and Linda sat down beside me. She was dressed in her green and beige Chili’s outfit and she kept glancing at her watch.

“Did you call Max and make sure he knew when to get you?” Linda asked. “I should have called to remind him.”

“You’re making me nervous,” I said. I’d seen plenty of movies on television where a mother or daughter leaves on a plane, never to return. Memories are exchanged and the two make promises to call and visit. In none of these movies does the daughter keep glancing at her watch every two minutes.

When they started calling for passengers I was ready for some big change to happen. That’s the other thing about the television movies. More often than not at the last second there’s a surprise twist or a sudden change of heart, like with the Jane Fonda movie, and everything is back to normal. I imagined my plane being canceled or Linda telling me that she wanted me to move in with her after all. But when it was time to go all I got was the smallest of hugs and a little peck on the cheek. “I’ll visit,” she said. That’s when it hit me that I wasn’t going to see her again. The truth was, flying out to visit me would be last on her list. The next time she saw me would be my own funeral. That’s what I was thinking when I got on the plane. That and the fact that in six hours I would be in a new place that I’d never seen and probably wouldn’t like.

# # #
With a name like Golden Manor, you would think there would be tea and crumpets every afternoon and horses jumping over white fences in the backyard. But the only royalty on this manor were the old women who walked around like queens with their noses in the air and went on about the banana pudding and poached eggs like it was Wolfgang Puck cooking and not some shvartze in a hair net. To get Max to take me out to eat was pulling teeth, and I had a better chance of winning the lottery than getting a dinner invitation from Carrie Lynn. When Linda called me in a week and asked how I was adjusting, what could I say? I told her I was so bored I spent all day with the other zombies watching the communal television. “Half of them are in wheelchairs and drooling like rabid dogs,” I said. “If Jews had purgatory, this would be it.” I told her about my neighbor, this geezer with one tooth in his whole mouth who slides little notes under my door asking me to sit with him at dinner. “What does he want from me?” I asked Linda. “Does he think I want to hop in the sack with a wrinkled prune?”

“You have a bad attitude, Mom,” she said.

“You don’t have to worry about my attitude anymore,” I said. “I’m out of your hair. You and Pete have your freedom, so what do you care?” I didn’t even finish my sentence when I heard a click. It was the first time in all our fighting that she’d hung up on me. Believe me, I was offended. But I figured she’d call right back when she cooled off, so I skipped dinner and sat by the phone and waited. I even thought of what I would tell her. “I know you say I only look for the negatives,” I would have said, “but what else do I have to talk about but my troubles?”

A week went by, and then another, and still no call. After a month without hearing from her I even thought of flying back to Boca and giving Linda a big surprise. I would move back into the condo, if she hadn’t sold it already. It would be just the kind of thing that would happen on the Sunday night movie. Tony Danza would play a taxi driver with a heart of gold who drives me back to Linda’s from the airport. Linda would fall in love with him and break up with Pete, and the three of us would move to a mansion on the Intracoastal when the cab driver discovers he’s an heir to a million dollars. Of course, in the movies a daughter would never go two months without calling her mother in the first place, and when it got to the point that we were about to break our record, I sat down and wrote a letter. If she wasn’t going to call me, I wasn’t going to call her. But I figured that a letter couldn’t hurt.

It wasn’t easy, writing that letter. My eyesight was terrible, not to mention there was hardly any light in my room. Every time I put pen to paper there was a pain in my fingers where I broke them. I figured I’d start off with some small talk, so I told her about the playboy of Golden Manor and how he asked me out to a Chinese restaurant. “I told him I don’t like Chinese food,” I wrote, “but he said it was the only place he could go since he only had one tooth.” I didn’t want to just talk about myself, so I asked her if she was still going on airboat rides, and warned her to watch out for the alligators. “I saw a show on television about animals attacking,” I wrote, “and they said that you should run side-to-side if God forbid an alligator comes after you.” I accidentally asked her how Lou was, and I had to scratch the name out and put “Pete.” “PS,” I wrote, “I’ve already forgiven you for hanging up on me.” Usually when I wrote to her, my salutation was “Your mother.” But this time, I wrote something a little different. “Love, your mother,” I wrote. “Love” was a word we’d never used with each other face to face. But before I left this earth, I wanted her to know how I felt. I wanted her to know that I missed her. The question was, did she miss me? There was only one way to find out. I mailed the letter, and waited for her reply.
I was sitting with Golda on her living room sofa, helping her stuff jam and Hanukkah cookies into the welcoming basket, when she started in about the new resident in E17. Four years it had been since we'd had a new face in Building E, and Golda was hoping for some fresh gossip for her mishugenneh newsletter, *Voice of the Village*.

“Rose, I only pray that he’s Conservative,” Golda said. “Lately, it’s been nothing but Reformed moving in.” She handed me a pile of cookies shaped like a dreidel and I wrapped them in tin foil. Hanukkah was still a month away, but when it came to holidays Golda liked to beat the goys to the punch. Ever since Publix started setting up their Christmas aisle in November, Golda had a menorah on her windowsill by October.

“If you ask me,” she said, “a Reformed Jew is no Jew at all. You see them at Bobby Rubino’s with a plate full of pork and it makes you want to say a kaddish.” I’d been skipping Shabbat services at Temple Beth Shalom to manage the little Century Village gift shop on Saturday mornings, a job I picked up after my husband Sam passed two years ago and I was bored and lonely, so this remark had probably been a dig at me, a fallen Jew in Golda’s eyes. Golda was just like my son, Alvin. With the two of them, nothing was so perfect it couldn’t be criticized. Unfortunately, Golda and I were all that was left of the Century Village Building E Welcoming Committee. There used to be five of us girls on the committee, but Ester Rosenbloom had a triple bypass, Mimi Silverman dropped out, and Adele Vogel’s daughter forced her to move across the country to Fresno.

E17 was Adele’s place before she moved, and when the new owner opened the door right away I could smell the perfume Adele used to wear, which made me sad for the old days when all the girls and their husbands went to the Melting Pot in Town Center Mall twice a week. The new owner had a look like a puppy dog, dark brown eyes and a real head of hair for his age, which was maybe a few years younger than me. He looked a little like Ronald Reagan, except that his skin was brown and he spoke with such a thick Spanish accent I could barely make him out.

“You ladies want to come in for coffee?” he said. The “Y” in “You” sounded like a “J,” and for a second I thought he called us “Jew ladies,” which is maybe why he and Golda got off on the wrong foot.

“We’d like to talk to the person who just moved in,” Golda said, and I knew exactly what she was thinking, because she had a maid with the last name of Hernandez clean up her place twice a week.

“This is who just moved in,” I said, and the reason I was so sure was that the doormat said “Bienvenidos,” which neither of us had noticed. Sam used to complain that the Cubans were taking over South Florida, and I’m sure he would be disappointed to see this doormat in front of Adele’s place. To tell you the truth, I was a little disappointed myself. I didn’t care whether it was Conservative or Reformed or even Reconstructionist, but a Jew would have been nice. Up until now Building E for whatever reason had stayed a hundred percent kosher, if you included Lil Horowitz’s husband, Vinny, who converted from Italian.

“I’m Ray Lopez,” the new owner said. He winked at Golda and I thought she was going to drop the welcoming basket and her big Liz Claiborne purse and pass out on the spot.
“We’re the welcoming committee,” Golda said, “so welcome.” She pushed the basket into Ray’s arms and walked off, her high heels clicking on the concrete. I shrugged my shoulders at Ray and ran after her. At the time, I was still worried about what Golda thought of me.

It was a slow Saturday morning at the gift shop, a few weeks since the welcoming committee incident, when Ray walked through the door.

The gift shop was stocked entirely with arts and crafts made by residents, including my stipple drawings, which I hadn’t sold any yet but I was hopeful because I was taking Stippling II at the clubhouse. I mostly did black and white pictures of kittens and sea shells, but I was working on a new series that would be a little more marketable, considering the clientele. The New Old Testament Series, I called it. The basic concept was to take Old Testament stories and set them in South Florida. With a thousand tiny black dots I’d drawn Moses parting the intracoastal, the tower of Babel in the middle of South Beach, and Red Buttons as Noah boarding an ark in front of Building E, a kitten in each arm. I kept my pictures in the prime retail space, on the first shelf you see when you walk in, just above Rose Wasserman’s seashell lamps and below the crooked mugs Ester Rosenbloom made five years ago in Beginning Pottery, and they caught Ray’s eye.

“I’ve never seen pictures like these,” he said, and at first I was defensive, since Sam used to tell me my kittens look like raccoons. I took up stippling as a way to relax when Sam was ill, and I forgave him for his criticism because I knew it was the cancer speaking and not him. Not to mention he was an engineer, so with him everything had to be precise like math. God forbid if I didn’t have three scrambled eggs and a toasted cinnamon raisin bagel ready at exactly 9:00 every morning, he acted like it was the end of the world.

“It took me four hours to make those,” I said to Ray. “You have to do it one dot at a time.”

“Thanks for the basket, by the way,” he said. “The cookies were especially delicious.” He was wearing a shmata T-shirt covered with yellow paint stains, and he had on the same cheap cologne Sam used to squirt in the attic of our house in Pompano Beach to scare away squirrels.

“What’s your name, if you don’t mind?” he asked.

“Rose,” I said. “I’m sorry Golda ran off so quick. I didn’t even get to ask you where you moved from.” The fact that he wasn’t offended by the Chanukah cookies threw me, and for a second I thought maybe he was one of those Portuguese Jews I saw on the Discovery Channel.

“Until my wife left me I lived in Boyton Beach,” he said. “But this accent is because I grew up in Columbia. I’m a fix-it man.” He pulled a wrinkled business card from the back pocket of his shorts. It said Ray Lopez Rent-a-Husband.


“I already have someone,” I said, even though the truth was the walls of the living room needed a new coat of paint, and I didn’t trust Alvin to change a light bulb even. Not that he’d offer, the nogoodnick. I put Ray’s card in my purse so he wouldn’t feel bad.

“Keep me in mind,” he said. He grabbed my Tower of Babel painting from the shelf and put it on the counter. “This is a beautiful work and it reminds me especially of my daughter, who lives in Miami and speaks seven languages. I’ll give it to her for Christmas. And if I’m not being too forward, I’d like to ask you to dinner if you’re available and not taken.”

I looked into those puppy dog eyes and almost said yes, but then I caught myself. May he rest in peace, but Sam was bedridden the last year of his life and I had to wait on him hand and
foot. The last thing I wanted was another man to cook and clean and for, not to mention someone from Colombia who probably couldn’t tell a blintz from a brownie. When Mimi Silverman adopted the half-black baby her granddaughter abandoned, Golda never let her hear the end of it, and I’m sure that one date with Ray and I’d be front page news in the *Voice of the Village*.

“I’m not interested in dating right now,” I said. The only date I’d gone on since Sam passed was with my neighbor, Mortie Shulman, a retired banker who took me to Jai-Alai and bored me to tears with advice about Roth IRAs, and I figured better to be alone.

“No problem,” Ray said. Even though he tried to act nonchalant those sad puppy dog eyes got to me, which is maybe why I called him two days later to paint my living room.

Bar none, Ray was the worst painter I’d ever seen. He didn’t put masking tape on any of the trim, which it wouldn’t have bothered me if he wasn’t so sloppy with his brush, dripping paint all over the chair-rail molding Sam had spent a whole day putting in. “Time for a coffee break,” Ray would shout every ten minutes, and I’d have to rush in from the patio, where I was working on a stippling of baby Moses in his basket being lowered into Lake Okachobee, to pour him a cup of decaf and sit and listen to him brag about his daughter the big deal translator. He kvelled over his five grandchildren worse than any Jewish mother, which considering Alvin never held on to a wife or a job for more than a month and had produced exactly zero children, I didn’t want to hear it. Ray had a little radio that he turned up full volume and sung along to some Spanish station out of Miami, and since he had a deep voice which put me in mind of Cantor Rosen at Temple Beth Shalom, I didn’t complain. Sam used to whistle show tunes and it was nice to hear another voice in the house besides Alex Trabek and Angela Lansbury. And I held my tongue when I saw beige paint stains on the carpet, because I could almost hear Golda saying that you get what you pay for.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Ray said when he was finally finished. “Ten percent off if you let me take you out Tonyght for a nice meal.”

“Such persistence,” I said. While Ray was washing his brushes in the bathtub, I’d changed into a blue dress that hid my hips a little, and I was trying to inspect his miserable job without getting any fresh paint on my outfit. “You should take off ten percent just for the dents you made in my wall with your ladder.”

“We can discuss it over dinner.”

“I’m not sure we’re compatible.”

“I don’t mind that you’re Jewish. Chosen person, right?” He winked and those long lashes made my knees wobble.

“Are you maybe against Colombians?” Ray asked.

“I’m no racist,” I said.

“Is it the age difference?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“I don’t try to offend,” he said. “I heard through the grapevines that you were sixty-five. Because I myself am fifty-four. But what does age matter?”

“That’s right,” I said. “It doesn’t matter. Is what I’m wearing O.K. for dinner?” Nu, he’d gotten me so worked up I had to agree to go out with him just to prove I would.

“This place I have in my mind, it’s not so fancy,” he said.

As it turns out, that was the understatement of the year.

# # #
When Sam and I went out to eat with Golda and her husband Bernie it was always some shmaltzy place in Mizner Park or Town Center mall where you needed a reservation, but needless to say we didn’t have to call ahead at China Super Buffet. We had to rush to get there before six because they had an early bird special, and it seemed like all of Century Village was crowded in the buffet line. The place was packed with yentas the size of Miami Dolphins linebackers and their husbands with white belts unbuckled three notches to make room for all the lo mein and sweet and sour chicken. One woman with a big mole on the tip of her nose pushed in front of me in line so she could grab the last seven egg rolls with her bare hands, and another woman had the chutzpah to pull a freezer bag from her purse and start stuffing it with crab rangoon and dim sum. This China Super Buffet had twenty different soups and a salad bar, not to mention three sundae machines. Ray and I were standing in the sundae line when God forbid we ran into Mimi Silverman.

“I’m surprised to see you here, Rose,” Mimi said. She was holding her great-granddaughter, Demitra, a little chocolate-colored thing grabbing at Mimi’s vanilla sundae.

“I’m surprised myself,” I said. Ray was behind me, waiting to be introduced, but I didn’t say boo.

“I see you’re with the fix-it maven,” Mimi said.

Ray patted Demitra on the head and gave Mimi the same wink he gave me. I admit I was a little jealous. Mimi had really slimmed down since she started walking Demitra around in a stroller, and after three plates of Moo Goo Gai Pan, I felt like I was nine months pregnant.

“This nice lady brought me some noodle choogle,” Ray said.

“That’s kugel, doll,” Mimi said. She squeezed Ray’s arm. “This one you should hold on to, Rose. Such hair! How does it feel to be robbing the cradle? I’d grab him up myself but I already have my hands full.” She nodded at Demitra, who was shoving chocolate sprinkles up her nose.

“We’re just friends,” I said to Mimi.

“This is our first date,” Ray said.

“We better get back before our sundaes melt,” I said, and I headed for our booth. I knew Mimi wasn’t a kibitzer like Golda, but why take chances?

When we sat back down, Ray asked me if I was embarrassed to be seen with him.

“Why should I be embarrassed?” I said.

“I can take off this chain, if it bothers you,” he said, pointing to the little gold cross against his brown skin. It was a nice shade of brown, his skin, not too dark. Like the tan Golda got from laying out at the clubhouse pool all day, but without the leathery side-effects.

“Keep the chain on,” I said. “It’s not like we’re getting married next week. Speaking of which, you never told me what happened with your wife.”

“She had expensive tastes. One thing you should know about me, I’m not a rich man.”

“Then I’ll get the check,” I said, but when the waitress put it on the table, along with two fortune cookies and a packet of wet wipes, he grabbed it and shot me a look.

“In Columbia, it’s an insult for a woman to even offer to pay,” he said. He had a short temper, this Ray, probably from his Latin blood. I’m not superstitious, and when I read my fortune, Your sweetheart may be too beautiful for words, but not for arguments, I thought nothing of it.

After China Super Buffet, Ray left a thousand messages on my machine, telling me to call because I was too “especial” to be sitting home all alone, which he had a point. At my age a
little companionship couldn’t hurt, and Ray was a real looker to boot, so I called. Besides, I was working on a picture of Moses threatening the Pharaoh with plagues of humidity, mosquitoes, and crab grass, and I needed someone Egyptian-looking to pose for me. I figured Colombian was close enough.

In return for posing I made Ray my famous pineapple koogle, just in case he had any funny ideas about Mimi Silverman, who all of a sudden needed a Rent-a-Husband seven days a week to fix things that weren’t even broken, and kineahora Ray ate the whole koogle. He asked me to the Hanukkah Under the Palms dance at the clubhouse, but I wanted to keep a low profile, so instead we went on a boat ride on the intracoastal to see the big pink celebrity mansions. Ray fixed my chipped bathroom tile with super glue, and in return I took him to the Burt Reynolds dinner theater to see Man of La Mancha, which we held hands all the way through like teenagers. So go figure, just like that I had myself a boyfriend. My goy toy, I called him, not that I was advertising. I avoided the girls altogether, which meant no temple Beth Shalom, no pinochle, and no stippling class. After three weeks of dodging Golda and the rest of the kibitzers at the pool and clubhouse, Ray accused me of keeping him under wraps. I admit I was feeling a little guilty, so when Alvin called a day before Hanukkah, not to wish me a happy holiday but to beg for a cut of Sam’s life insurance money for his latest fakakta scheme, which was running a flotation tank business out of his garage, I came clean about Ray. The minute Alvin heard the word Lopez out of my mouth he hung up the phone, and it wasn’t until the last night of Hanukkah that he called back, all apologies and inviting himself over for dinner to make nice and God forbid meet Ray.

Normally, Alvin wouldn’t know a Jewish holiday from a hole in his head, and when he showed up his usual thirty minutes late wearing a yarmulke and holding the blue prayer book people were always stealing from Temple Beth Shalom in one hand and a bottle of Manischewitz in the other, I knew he was up to no good.

“Shalom aleichem,” Alvin said when Ray opened the door. “You must be Ray Lopez.” He pronounced Ray’s last name in such a heavy accent it would have made Ricky Ricardo blush.

“Who died and made you a rabbi?” I said to Alvin when he stepped inside and gave me a kiss, the patchy beard he’d been trying to grow since his junior year of high school tickling my cheek.

“The festival of lights!” Alvin said. He took a deep breath through his big shnoz, which too bad for him he inherited from Sam. “I can smell the latkes cooking.”

“It’s french fries,” I said. “Now sit, dinner’s ready.”

“We should light the menorah before dinner,” Alvin said.

“Maybe later,” I said. I’d tucked the menorah away in the closet so Ray wouldn’t feel uncomfortable, even though the truth was I helped him decorate his Christmas tree with tinsel and hang a big plastic wreath on his front door.

“Take it out, Rose,” Ray said. He put his hand on Alvin’s shoulder. “After all, if your mother can go to church, I can celebrate Hanukkah.”

“What’s this about church?” Alvin said to me.

“One of Ray’s granddaughters was being confirmed,” I said. “Anyway, it’s just like temple. Up, down, up down, until you almost pass out.” I went to get the menorah before Alvin could give me any lip. When I came back and set it in the center of the dining room table, Alvin held the prayer book up like he was about to ask me to swear an oath.

“I will now light the shamu candle,” he said, grabbing a lighter from the back pocket of his jeans and holding the flame over the tall candle in the center of the menorah.

“That’s shammies candle,” I said. “Shamu is a whale at Sea World.”
“Ray,” Alvin said, “I’m going to recite the traditional Hanukkah blessing, so you can just listen at this point in the ceremony.”

“Sure thing,” Ray said. “I’m all ears.”

“Barukh atah Adonai,” Alvin began, but that was as far as he got. When he realized he’d forgotten the rest of the blessing, he feigned a prolonged fit of coughing, lit the candles, and said, “Amen.”

“Let’s eat before he chokes to death,” I said, and I brought the pot roast and fries from the kitchen. Unlike the Irish, Jews are not a drinking people, but I downed a glass of Manischewitz before Alvin and Ray had even filled their plates. Nu, it was going to be a long night with Alvin acting like a Hassid, so you couldn’t blame me.

“Take it easy, Mom,” Alvin said. “After all, Hanukkah is a time for reflection.” He took enough pot roast to feed Ethiopia and started shtuping it down, talking with his mouth full like Sam used to do. “You wouldn’t know this, Ray,” he said. “But Hanukkah commemorates the victory of the Jewish Macadamias over Haman, the Syrian despot.”

“Maccabees,” I said. “The Jewish Maccabees. And Haman is from Purim, not Hanukkah.” I poured another glass of wine and took three big gulps.

“Slow down, honey,” Ray said. He gave Alvin one of his big winks. “I keep my eyes on this pretty lady.”

“I’m not sure what your intentions with my mother are, Ray,” Alvin said, “but conversion to Judaism is very serious business.”

“Who said anything about conversion?” I said. I didn’t realize I was shouting until it was already out, and I lowered my voice because Golda with her radar ears could hear me from three condos down.

“We’re not even living together,” I said.

“God forbid,” Alvin said. “I can’t imagine my own mother, living in sin. With Dad watching down on us.”

“On the other hand,” I said. “Maybe we should shack up.” I tried to pour more wine and nearly tipped my glass over. “How about it, Ray? Want to move in?”

“Honey, you’re drunk,” Ray said.

“It’s settled,” I said. “You can move in tomorrow.”

All of a sudden Alvin stood up and headed towards my end of the table. I noticed he had ketchup on his beard, but I kept my mouth shut.

“I’d like to talk to you in private, Mom,” he said, and he yanked me up by my elbow and dragged me to the bedroom, closing the door behind us. I’d left the closet open, and I noticed a few of Ray’s shirts on hangers, which I hoped Alvin didn’t see. If he knew I had a man spending the night it would give him tsores.

“You’re carrying on like a teenager,” Alvin said.

“You’d rather see me alone?”

“How do you know he’s not just after your money?”

“Better I should be buying flotation tanks?”

“He’s Puerto Rican, for Godsakes.”

“Colombian,” I said.

“Either way, he’s Catholic.”

“So when was the last time you went to temple, Mr. Judaism?”

“That’s besides the point, Mom.”

“I’m going back to the table,” I said. “It’s rude to whisper behind closed doors.”
“He can’t move in with you,” Alvin said. “I forbid it.”
“Then I’ll move in with him,” I said.
Alvin threw his hands in the air, real dramatic, and grabbed his prayer book from the kitchen table on his way out the door. Without so much as a good-bye, he slammed the door behind him so hard I could feel it from the bedroom. In my head the bed was spinning, and I called for Ray.
“I shouldn’t have started in with Alvin,” I said. “He’s all the family I have left.”
“You have me,” Ray said. “My family is your family.”
“That’s a sweet thing to say.” I leaned my head on Ray’s shoulder and he scratched the back of my neck, which he knew I liked because Sam used to do it.
“My poor honey,” Ray said. “Let me get you some water. A lady shouldn’t drink so much.”
“However much I drank, I meant it about moving in.”
“Listen, Rose, it’s not right that you asked me to move in.”
“Not right? At our age, why waste time?”
“What I mean is, you should be moving in to my place.”
“I just thought since my place is bigger...”
“So my place isn’t good enough for you?”
“Your place is fine,” I said. I should have put up more of a fight, because Ray’s apartment was filled with chutzke souvenirs from soccer games and the Festival Flea market in Sunrise, but all of a sudden he’d raised his voice, and the way my head was pounding, I didn’t want to start an argument. A nice voice when he sings, that Ray, but not so nice when he yells.
“Maybe we should get married first,” Ray said.
“One thing at a time,” I said, and then, for the first time in my life, I passed out.

My apartment I kept, just in case God forbid things didn’t work out, but to Ray I told a little white lie and said I had a realtor showing it. I arranged it that we moved my things into Ray’s on a Friday night, when I knew Golda would be at temple, but nu, she had a sixth sense. I was in Ray’s living room, opening the box with my Englebert Humperdinck records, when Golda rang the doorbell. Ray opened the door and Golda looked at me like I had horns on my head.
“Such a surprise,” she said. “I didn’t think I saw you at temple, Rose.”
“To what do I owe the pleasure, Golda?” Ray said. Golda made like she was invited in but Ray didn’t move from the doorway.
“It’s all these decorations,” Golda said, and with her long fake nails she pointed out the big plastic wreath with the red ribbons on the door. “Not that I have anything against Christmas, but as the head of the Century Village Residents’ Committee it’s my duty to point out page twenty-eight of the covenants, which says that any exterior changes to an apartment must be approved by the committee in a two-thirds vote.”
“It’s just a decoration,” I said. Not to mention the fact that Golda had a mizzuza the size of a baseball bat hanging on her door.
“Who are you, Jews for Jesus all of a sudden?” Golda said to me.
“Don’t be a kvetch,” Ray said. I’d taught him a few Yiddish words that might be useful to know when the women started complaining about his home repairs, and he hadn’t gotten a handle yet on the difference between nuging and kvetching, which it’s a fine line.
“A Cuban speaking Yiddish?” Golda said. “Now I’ve seen it all. Listen, Ray, I know how you people feel about Jews, but rules are rules and the committee has received complaints.”

“He’s not Cuban,” I said. “He’s Colombian. And I’m the one that put up the wreath.”

“You’re hanging Christmas decorations?” Golda said. “I’m just glad Sam isn’t around to see this.”

“If you can’t say anything nice,” I said, “then say good-bye.” It surprised me when it came out, because it was the first time I’d ever given Golda the what-for.

“Shabbat shalom,” Golda said. She walked off with her big nose in the air. It was the last time Golda spoke a word to me or Ray, and when we bumped into her at the clubhouse or the mall, she acted like we didn’t exist. On the plus side, her Jews for Jesus remark inspired me to stipple my masterpiece, *The Bar Mitzvah of Jesus Christ*. I figured if Jesus was a Jew originally he must have had one, nu? It was set at Temple Beth Shalom, and for whatever reason I modeled Jesus after Alvin. The girls in Stippling II told me I should go back to kittens and sea shells, and the Tuesday night pinochle gang kvetched right in front of me about how Century Village isn’t what it used to be, which I knew what they were up to. But I wasn’t going to quit going to the clubhouse or the pool or my stippling class, no matter how much the girls talked or Ray complained that I was never home. As it turned out I had a better chance of seeing Ray fly to the moon than God forbid wash a dish or help put the groceries away, which you don’t know until you move in with someone. Maybe part of the problem was Ray was all I had left, so when he said jump, I jumped. Things went from bad to worse when he broke his leg changing Mimi Silverman’s light bulb.

Why Mimi needed help changing a light bulb I don’t know, and my suspicion is that Ray fell off the ladder because Mimi had her paws on him, maybe giving him a little pinch on the tuchas for all I know. I’d seen them talking real friendly at the mailboxes, and somehow with Mimi it always took Ray all day to do a job which normally it took ten minutes. Ray was in a cast up to his thigh, and he spent his time on the La-Z-Boy watching soccer and bossing me around. “Honey, I need the controller,” “Honey, get me a beer,” “Honey, when will dinner be ready?” was all I heard, all day every day, and when I went to play cards or take a little ride around Century Village in my three-wheel bicycle, he laid on the guilt. “Don’t worry about me,” he said when I came home from stippling class a few minutes late, “I don’t need to eat.” Just like a Yenta he sounded, and enough was enough.

“I told you before I left there were microwave dinners in the fridge,” I said to him.

“You’re late,” he said. “What took you so long?” He scratched an itch under his cast with a coat hanger and put the television on mute, which meant the Latino temper was about to kick in. He had the latest copy of *Voice of the Village* on his lap, which was also a bad sign.

“I was talking to Ester Rosenbloom about her operation,” I said. “She’s the only one who’ll speak with me anymore.”

“I’m sick of those women and their chibbitzing,” Ray said.

“You mean kibitzing,” I said.

“You should quit that card game until my cast is off.”

“What’s eating you?”

“This,” Ray said. He tossed the *Voice of the Village* on the kitchen table. On the front page, in big bold letters, was the headline: “Interracial: Will It Bring an End to Judaism?” I skimmed the article, a mishugenneh rant about the problems with Jews marrying gentiles, including a paragraph about how this disturbing trend has even infected Building E of Century Village, except Golda with her lousy spelling had written “inflected.”
“I don’t want you working at the gift shop anymore,” Ray said. “And no more pinochle with those girls of yours.”

“You’re not my jefe,” I said. Jefe was what Ray’s grandchildren called him, and I was trying to make a little joke to ease the tension, because Ray was shouting and his face had gone from brown to red.

“I should have seen this coming,” Ray said. “You Jews really stick together. No one is good enough for you.”

“I’ll give you one chance to apologize for that,” I said. “Otherwise, I’m going to spend the night back at my apartment.”

Ray clicked the sound back on the television and turned from me to the soccer game. Whenever we got in a fight he gave me the silent treatment, sometimes for an entire day, and I would always have to go crawling back and apologizing when I couldn’t stand it anymore, because God forbid he would ever apologize to me. But this time, I wasn’t crawling. I grabbed my suitcase, stuffed it full with clothes, make-up, and toiletries, and went back to my apartment for the night to show him what for.

The next day I sat by the phone and waited for Ray to call and apologize, but no such luck. A day turned into a week, and Christmas came and went and still not a call or a knock on the door. Like most Latins, Ray was Mr. Macho when it came to apologizing to women, but the truth was I missed his company, and I went so far as to make some flan, Ray’s favorite, to bring to him as a truce. But instead I ate it all myself, partly because I was depressed and partly because I wasn’t going to go running back anymore. To take my mind off my troubles I went to the pool and the clubhouse, but Golda and her gang wouldn’t say two words to me, and Ester Rosenbloom was still too weak from her surgery to go out for dinner or catch a movie. I was so desperate I broke down and called Alvin, which he was thrilled that Ray and I were on the skids. Not so thrilled, though, that he was willing to go to the mall or the grocery store with me. After Sam died I didn’t leave my apartment for a month, just sat on the sofa and stared out the window, and now it was the same thing all over. I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep. I wasn’t even interested in my television shows. I just sat and stared, and it didn’t help my blue mood when the only exciting thing I saw all week was Mortie Shulman being taken away in an ambulance, which it turned out he had a stroke and his daughter put him in a nursing home.

This I overhead when the real estate woman, a typical New York Jew with her puffy hair and expensive jewelry and a voice like a bullhorn, was putting the hard-sell on a little Oriental woman who couldn’t have been more than four and a half feet tall. When you see an Oriental on Jeopardy they’re usually smart as a whip but shy and soft-spoken, and this poor little woman must have thought the real estate agent was from a different planet, the way she talked and talked and wouldn’t even stop for a breath. So it surprised me that a week later I saw from my seat on the sofa a moving van and the little Oriental woman with what looked like her grandson, although to tell you the truth the Orientals are like the Blacks because you can’t tell how old they are. Once she was moved in this woman never left her apartment, and if it wasn’t for her grandson visiting on the weekends, she’d have no visitors at all. No Century Village Welcoming Committee greeted her, that’s for sure.

So nu, I thought to myself, I should sit on the sofa the rest of my life, waiting for Ray? After all, I was one-half of the welcoming committee. I made some oatmeal cookies, since they were neutral as far as religion goes. Besides, with oatmeal cookies, what’s not to like? My plan was to invite the Oriental woman to China Super Buffet, since we both could use some fresh air and all you can eat. I even went so far as to ask Art Grossberg, who taught English for a year in Beijing,
how to say “welcome” in Chinese. That way when I went over and knocked on the Oriental woman’s door, I knew exactly what to say. “Juan ying,” I said to her when she opened up, “Welcome to Century Village.”
MY NEW MOTTO

My motto used to be, “Men: With a little training you can break them in.” But the night Michael told me he couldn’t take living with me another minute and left for an apartment in the Village of Boca Del Mar that he’d already rented, my motto became, “Men: Who needs them?” In honor of the occasion I ran out to Publix, bought two pumpkin pies, and ate both of them at one sitting. Then on a sugar high I kicked my bedroom wall so hard I dented it. The kicking I got from Master Hwong and the Tae Kwan Do class for singles that I took just after my divorce. I’m smart with money and I put what little alimony I get from ex-husband, Larry, in mutual funds, but when it comes to home repair I’m not so talented, so I called Carlos, a.k.a. “Mister Fixer.” My friend Deborah gave me Carlos’ number four years ago, on the pretense that he could fix the chip I made on my tile floor when I smashed a set of plates up just after my divorce with Larry, a man who quit a good job with Otis elevators to teach aerobics part-time. Like most women my age, which is middle-aged, Deborah was under the illusion that even a so-so man was better than no man, and since Carlos was divorced himself, she thought she’d play matchmaker. Obviously, Carlos wasn’t Jewish—not that I minded so much—but on top of that he was an eater, a little too heavy for my taste. But his rates were cheap, so I made him number seven on my speed dial.

“Bad luck with men again, I see,” Carlos said, running his fingers over the dent. He’d lost some weight, and his Mister Fixer T-shirt hung loose on his limbs. I’d just gotten back from work, and I was wearing my dental hygienist scrubs and my hair was a mess, but I didn’t care.

“There’s a lot of jerks out there,” I said. That was my other new motto.

“Those jerks are keeping me in business,” Carlos said. “What happened this time?”

The last time he was over was when I found out that Peter, a fish salesman who I’d wasted four months of my life on, was still sleeping with his ex-wife, and I’d accidentally driven into the garage door. When Carlos came over to pound out the door I told him all the gory details about Peter, including the fact that he smelled like salmon even after he showered, and he insisted on watching every game of the NBA playoffs, even if it was just the first round and Deborah had invited us to see her son in the school play.

“After what happened with Peter, I should have seen the signs with Michael,” I said. “He was a real cold fish. I mean zero on the affection scale. No ‘I love you’s;’ no snuggling on the couch. Hated my friends.”

“I like your friends,” Carlos said.

“At least Michael remodeled my condo. That he can’t take away.”

“It looks nice, by the way,” Carlos said. He was filling the dent with some kind of gray paste, and even on his knees he was almost as tall as I was, which is a little over five feet. I was going to tell him he looked nice himself, what with the weight loss, but I kept my mouth closed. Like I said, I was through with men. Even men that could fix things.

“I used to let my ex-husband fix things around the condo,” I said. “Months after the divorce I’d call him to unclog the drain or help me move furniture. I don’t know what I was thinking. Now he follows me around the gym like a stalker.”

“You should change gyms,” Carlos said.

“I should,” I said. “I always mean to, but I never do.”
“When my ex-wife got remarried, I didn’t leave the house for a week. I couldn’t even drag myself out of bed. I was like Brian Wilson, but without the drugs. Now I’m right back in the game.”

He was a real smooth talker, this Carlos.

“Listen, Mr. Fixer,” I said. “Stick to walls. There’s nothing else around here that needs fixing.” And even though I said that to Carlos, after he left I ran out to Publix again and bought a box of glazed doughnuts and a quart of chocolate milk. I spent the night shtuping the doughnuts and chasing it with the chocolate milk, sitting on the couch that Michael bought and listening to my Carly Simon CD’s. I needed the noise because there’s nothing worse than feeling alone in the world in a silent condo and wondering if you should just get back together with your ex-husband like he was always begging you to. Michael never knew it, but I kept Larry as number five on my speed dial, even though God knows he didn’t deserve it.

The next day I woke up an hour late and my first cleaning, a snowbird from Canada with a toupee that looked like roadkill, let me hear all about it.

“I’ve been waiting twenty minutes,” he said as he got into the chair. He turned toward me while I pulled my gloves on and it looked like his big gut was going to slide right off the chair and take him with it. “I’ve got a ten-thirty tee time at Boca Municipal,” he said, “and if I’m late, Dr. Shwartz is going to hear about it.”

When he heard his name, Dr. Shwartz, also known as Underpants Man because he liked to unbutton his pants and show the girls what color underwear he was wearing, stepped into my room.

“Running behind, Cindela?” Dr. Shwartz said. My name is Cindy but he calls me Cindela because he knows it drives me crazy.

“She sure is,” roadkill piped up.

“I had a rough weekend,” I said, “and I wish everyone would get off my ass.”

“That time of month,” Dr. Shwartz said. He elbowed roadkill and the two of them had a big chuckle. I was glad when Dr. Shwartz left and I could get my hands in roadkill’s mouth to shut him up.

“All you men are the same,” I said as I scraped his teeth with the scaler. “A thousand laughs at our expense.” I just barely touched his gum but he pulled back like I’d stabbed him.

“I bet you play golf every weekend, don’t you?” I said when he’d settled back down.

“Just like Michael. Sometimes he’d play Saturday and Sunday. And stupid me, I would have dinner waiting for him when he came home. Like he ever appreciated it.” Roadkill tried to say something but he could only grunt because I was scraping plaque from his molars.

“God forbid Michael would ever make me dinner. God forbid he would be a little considerate. He would leave his dishes sitting in the sink like I was his mother and it was my duty to clean up after him. ‘I’m soaking them,’ he’d say. So who soaks for three weeks? Can you believe the nerve? But that’s what you men are looking for, when you get right down to it. A mother.”

Roadkill mumbled something that sounded a lot like “bitch” and I accidentally poked him in the gums. When I had him rinse and he spit blood I thought he was going to wet his white golf pants. “I’ll sue,” he said, but I pushed him back in the chair and had him bite down on the plastic x-ray film.

“You’ve got a possible abscess,” I said. “I’ll need an x-ray. Hold still.” I pulled down the arm of the x-ray machine and headed to the developing room. Dr. Shwartz was in there with
Heidi, the new busty dental assistant who looked a lot like the old busty dental assistant, and naturally he had his zipper down.

“Look,” he said, “orange.”

Heidi giggled but I told him to zip it up because he was making us all sick.

“Oh, lighten up, Cindela,” Dr. Shwartz said. But my next three appointments were as bad as roadkill: two whiny brats and their neurotic mother, all three of them dressed in black turtle-necks even though it was a hundred degrees outside, a man who hadn’t had his teeth cleaned since 1974, and a teenager with earrings in his nose and eyebrows and breath like rotting onions. I couldn’t lighten up until after work, when I ran to Publix again and bought a pack of triple berry wine coolers and a carton of Little Debbies. But sitting in front of the television and getting drunk only made me feel more lonesome, so I drove to Hair on Earth, just for the conversation and the feel of someone’s hand on my scalp. I had brown hair to my shoulders but I had the girl cut it off until it was short and spiky. When she was done I looked a little like a lesbian, which to tell you the truth was fine with me.

When I told Deborah that Michael broke up with me she invited me to join her at the mall to shop around for a Bar Mitzvah suit for her son, David. “I’ll bring you a valium,” Deborah said. She was divorced herself and on Zoloft, among other things, which is what happens when your ex-husband, Eli, runs off with a woman half his age, and Abe, your boyfriend of three months, opens an orthopedic shoe business that he runs out of your garage with the second mortgage on your house.

“There’s plenty of fish in the sea,” Deborah told me while we waited for the Misunderstood Genius to come out of the Bloomingdale’s dressing room. I called David the Misunderstood Genius because that’s what both he and Deborah thought he was. He was only a sophomore in high school but he wrote poetry about nuclear war and he was playing the role of Oscar Wilde in the school play. He was trying on a black velvet shirt that cost a hundred dollars but he said he had to have it or he would “just die.”

“I’m thinking of becoming a lesbian,” I said to Deborah. “Those lesbians are on to something. Lesbians don’t watch the NBA. Lesbians will snuggle.”

“Let’s change the subject,” Deborah said. She was nervous because the Misunderstood Genius had a lot of girls as friends but never any girlfriends.

“Maybe I let Michael move in too soon,” I said.

“A month is soon,” Deborah said, although I knew for a fact that she slept with Abe on the first date. Which it didn’t surprise me because after Eli left her, Deborah’s wardrobe went from Gap blouses and khaki shorts to tube tops and black miniskirts that barely covered her crotch. When you put on six inch heels to go shopping at Boca mall, you might as well wear a name tag that says, “Hello, I’m divorced and desperate.”

“You should go to singles night at the temple,” Deborah said. “That’s where I met Abe.”

“It’s a bunch of losers at the temple,” I said. “No offense to Abe.”

“You’re too picky,” Deborah said. I was going to tell Deborah she wasn’t picky enough when the Misunderstood Genius came out of the dressing room in his black velvet shirt, twirling like Dorothy Hamill.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“That’s what you’re wearing to your Bar Mitzvah?” I said.

“This is just for fun.”

“A hundred dollars for fun? You must think your mother is made out of money.”
He fell to his knees and clenched his fists like he was performing a scene from *Streetcar Named Desire* right there in the dressing room. “Please, mother,” he said. “Please, please, please.”

Even though she couldn’t afford it Deborah bought him the shirt and, later in the day, an Armani suit that cost as much as my Toyota Tercel. I get my clothes at Ross Dress for Less, and not that I’m complaining but that’s what happens when you marry a man whose goal in life turns out to be running in place to pop music. My son, Steven, had his Bar Mitzvah during the time Larry was out of work, and the only place we could afford for the party was the second floor of Cruisers, a bar on the beach, but the Misunderstood Genius was having his party at the grand ballroom of the Boca Hotel and Country Club. Eli was an architect, and Deborah got ten times as much alimony as I did, but she spent it all on the Misunderstood Genius like he only had a year to live. When Visa came knocking she would kvetch to me and then to her therapist, who charged her seventy dollars an hour and was one of the reasons she was in debt in the first place.

Pumpkin pie was the only therapy in my price range. Since Michael left I’d stopped going to the gym and my fridge was full of food you could just pop open and shovel down at one in the morning if you couldn’t get to sleep when you rolled over and no one was there lying next to you anymore: chocolate fudge ice cream, Oreos double-stuff, and pumpkin pie, of course. I found some low-fat whip cream and when I lumped it on the pie I felt less guilty about eating seven pieces. I found a poster at Wal-Mart, a picture of a gingerbread man with a caption that read: “The perfect man: he’s sweet and he doesn’t talk back.” I put this up on my fridge as a reminder of my new motto, but it only made me hungry and I wound up buying three bags of gingerbread cookies the next day. In the garage, buried under some blankets, I found Michael’s golf clubs, and on a whim I drove to the beach in the middle of the night and one by one I hurled them in the ocean. I sat on a blanket and ate key lime pie while the bag floated towards Cuba, and even though I was hoping for a cathartic moment all I could think about was taking romantic walks on the beach at sunset with Larry, and then Peter, and even once with Michael. When I got home I had three glasses of chablis and called Steven, who was away at college studying philosophy, of all things.

“Mom,” he said, “It’s two in the morning. What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got bad news. Remember how I said I was going to open up an IRA for you so you wouldn’t starve because of your philosophy degree? Well, I’ve decided to get an eye job instead.”

“You can see fine,” he said.

“I mean to get the wrinkles out. Don’t worry, it’s still an investment in your future. Once the crows feet are gone I’ll find a man with good hair and teeth and a decent job who will act like a father and call you once in a while unlike Larry who’s an embarrassment to both of us with his little exercise pants and I know it’s hard for you with the divorce and your mother dating someone new every year like a teenager...” I started bawling, and when he asked me what was wrong I told him about Michael. Then I got a hold of myself and informed him about my new philosophy towards men, which was right up his alley.

“You don’t need someone else to be a complete person,” he said. “It’s a basic tenet of existentialism.”

“You’re right,” I said, even though I knew he had a girlfriend at school who he would jump off a building for if she asked him too. “I don’t know from existentialism, but I do know I’m better off alone. And by the way, how is Jamie? Do you tell her you love her? Because
women need to hear that. We’re not mind readers, you know, and it wouldn’t kill you to express your feelings once in a blue moon.”

“I’m going back to sleep, Mom. If you feel lonely, call me.”

And I wanted to call him right back because I was feeling lonely, like I had when Steven left for college and I came home from work to an empty condo. At that time I felt so alone that I asked Larry to come over to fix the fan in the living room, even though it wasn’t broken, and he wound up spending the night. I’d vowed that I would never stoop that low again, so I grabbed a Hershey bar from the stash I recently put in the dresser beside my bed and read Being and Nothingness, a book Steven bought me for my forty-second birthday. I couldn’t understand a word of it, but along with a candy bar and a big glass of milk it helped me to fall asleep at night. “The ontology of being is an ontology of nothingness,” I read, and in ten minutes I was out cold.

The next day, when I ran to Publix for some rocky road and another pumpkin pie, I checked myself on the scale, and I’d gained so much weight I had to ask the manager if the scale was broken. I really didn’t care anymore if I was starting to look like a marsupial with a full pouch, because after all, who did I have to look good for? But if I was going to fit into the black dress I bought for the Misunderstood Genius’ Bar Mitzvah next week, I had to get on the ball. So I dragged myself to Bocaerobics, my gym.

I was on the exercise bike, listening to Carly Simon on my walkman, when who should tap me on the shoulder but Carlos. He was wearing one of his Mister Fixer shirts and a pair of blue shorts covered with white paint speckles.

“I’m not stalking you,” Carlos said. “I’ve been coming here for a month. I didn’t know this was your gym.”

“I must look terrible,” I said. I’d just thrown on a baseball hat and T-shirt, and my hair wasn’t even washed, not that I cared how I looked. I used to spend half an hour doing my hair and makeup before I worked out, like the other women at Bocaerobics who pretended to exercise while they flirted with the men, but not anymore. Make-up, heels, hairspray, pantyhose....I was coming to the realization that these were things only a man could dream up. I would have burned all my bras if it wasn’t for the fact that the smoke alarm in my condo went off even if I was just boiling pasta.

“Excuse my shvitzing,” I said.

“What’s shvitzing?” Carlos asked.

“It’s Yiddish for sweating.”

“Let me ask you something,” Carlos said. “Would you go out with someone who isn’t Jewish?”

“I don’t date anymore,” I said. “As a matter of fact, I’m looking into becoming a lesbian.”

“I know a great little Cuban place,” Carlos said.

“Let me ask you something,” I said. “Do you own a lot of potted plants? Because I used to have Cuban neighbors. Super nice people, but they had potted plants everywhere. Potted plants I could live without.”

“For you, I would get rid of all my potted plants.”

“What about drinking right out of the milk carton? Would you God forbid pour some milk in a glass when you’re thirsty, or would I catch you chugging away and spreading germs?”

“Look, Cindy, I’m not asking for marriage here. And I’m too old for games. When two people are lonely, why shouldn’t they go out and have a good time?”
“I’m not lonely,” I said. And just as I said it Larry walked up, which I should have known better because sometimes he teaches a step class on Thursdays.

Larry was wearing red and black bicycle pants and a muscle shirt, even though he didn’t have any muscles. He nodded at me and then held his hand out to Carlos.

“I’m Larry Abner,” he said. I didn’t change my last name, Abner, after the divorce, just for convenience’s sake, so Carlos knew exactly what Larry was up to.

“You must be Cindy’s ex husband,” he said.

“I was married to Cindy,” Larry said.

“I’m Carlos. I fix things around Cindy’s condo.” He squeezed my sweaty shoulder. “Give me a call, Cindy,” he said. “And by the way, I like your new do’.” Then he gave me a big wink and headed for the showers.

“Who was that?” Larry said.

“A friend.”

“Just a friend?”

“What’s it your business?”

“We were married for twenty-two years,” Larry said. “You told me you’d let me know if you were seeing someone.”

“I can’t believe you wear those pants,” I said. “You’re fifty years old, Larry. How long do you think your average career in aerobics lasts?”

“I’m making a video,” Larry said. “It’s called Sweatin’ Seniors. It’ll be light aerobics. Aimed at retirees.”

“An aerobics video with you as the star? Now I’ve heard everything.”

“I’m going to market it to nursing homes,” Larry said. “I know I’ve made some mistakes, Cindy, but I’ve got my feet on the ground again. There’s no reason for us to be miserable. Why don’t we go out to lunch sometime and talk things over?”

“I’m changing gyms, Larry. I can’t take this.”

“I think of you all the time,” he said. “I lay awake at night, wondering what I did wrong. I’m lonely, Cindy.”

The line about laying awake at night always made me feel sorry for Larry, because he used to call me at three in the morning crying like a baby. But I kept my new motto in mind.

“If you’re lonely,” I said, “try calling your son. He hasn’t heard from you in six months.”

“I’ve been busy with the video.”

“Your class is waiting for you,” I said, nodding to the group of yentas with implants in their boobs and lips who were mulling around behind the glass wall that separated the aerobics room from the gym. I stayed for another hour, watching Larry bounce around and form the letter “A” with the tips of his fingers over his head to Madonna, but finally I got so sick I had to go home. There were two messages on my answering machine. One was from Michael asking me if he could come over sometime and get his golf clubs, and the other was from Deborah telling me to meet her at Einstein’s Bagels on my lunch break because oy vey did she have something to tell me and don’t bother calling back because she was taking a Zoloft and three valiums to knock her out and she would talk to me tomorrow.

I never knew there was such a thing as a chocolate chip bagel, and since I had a little bit of a sweet tooth lately I got three of them and a large coffee with sugar. Deborah didn’t bat an eye when I came back with my tray full of bagels because she had other things on her mind. She was wearing a tight red dress and so much Obsession it made my eyes water. I felt like a shlub in
my white hygienist’s scrubs with a fresh blood stain on my sleeve from an old guy with soft
gums and fresh fingers who pinched me on the tuchas while I was scraping his molars.

Deborah took a swig of her coffee and pointed at my hair, which on a whim I’d spiked up
with a handful of gel. “If you’re thinking about becoming a lesbian, you’re off to a good start,”
she said. “I’ll get you some comfortable orthopedic shoes for your birthday. Lord knows there’s
enough pairs sitting around my garage collecting dust.”

“Enough about my hair,” I said. “What’s the big news?”

“Brace yourself,” Deborah said. “This one’s a shocker. David’s gay.”

“That’s a shocker?” I said. “As if velvet shirts aren’t proof enough?”

“I knew he was creative,” Deborah said. “But gay I didn’t know. Who knows they’re gay
at the age of thirteen?”

“He’s a prodigy in everything else,” I said.

“He got back from his last lesson with the rabbi and just like that he came out and said it.
He said, ‘Ma, I’m gay. And I don’t mean happy.’”

“What did you do?”

“I told him I loved him no matter what and whatever he was it was fine with me. Then I
took enough tranquilizers to sedate a giraffe and I was fine. Not that I mind that he’s gay, but I
want grandchildren.”

“Sometimes I wish Steven was gay,” I said. “We could have gone shopping together and
talked about our man problems.”

“You’re in your own world,” Deborah said. “Cindyland. They should have a ride at
Disney.”

“I like that idea,” I said. “Instead of ‘It’s a Small World,’ they could call it, ‘When it
Comes to Jerks, It’s a Small World.’” I pictured single mothers and their children chugging
along in a boat on a track while mechanical puppets of men from every country lie, cheat, and
leave dirty dishes in the sink.

“David wanted me to tell Eli for him,” Deborah said. “Needless to say, he didn’t take it
too well.” Eli is a former fraternity brother and not only does he watch sports on his satellite
hook-up twenty four hours a day, he has season tickets for every professional sports team in
South Florida.

“In fact, Eli’s not coming to the Bar Mitzvah,” Deborah said. “David’s all torn up about
it, so I bought him some new shoes.”

“That Eli, what a jerk,” I said. “Any man with season tickets to arena football can’t be
trusted.”

“Well, Eli may not be coming, but his cousin, Richard, is. This Richard isn’t bad looking
at all, and he’s got a steady job in the restaurant business. I’ll put him next to you at the singles
table.”

“That’s just what I need,” I said. “Someone with Eli’s genes.”

“With that attitude,” Deborah said, “you’ll spend the rest of your life alone.”

“That’s the plan,” I said, and then I went for another chocolate chip bagel to take my
mind off my mother, who spent the last twenty years of her life all alone in a one-bedroom condo
in the Century Village retirement community. I sold that condo when she died, because I was
nervous that if I rented it I’d wind up living there myself in ten years. I was afraid I’d spend my
retirement in that little box watching television and making breakfast, lunch, and dinner for one,
just like my mother. It was as hard to imagine putting up with that kind of life as it was to
imagine putting up with some shmuck with a belly by Budweiser and nose hairs the size of curly
fries telling me how fat I was getting in the hips and why don’t I get some implants to fix those sagging boobs? It made me think of another motto to add to my collection: When it comes to men, you can’t win.

The Boca Hotel was completely mishugana, a giant pink building with a pink ballroom and fifty tables with pink tablecloths. Deborah had blown up photos of the Misunderstood Genius acting and singing in *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Oklahoma!*, and they were staring down at us from the pink walls as we moved through the buffet line, which stretched out for a hundred feet. The singles table was against the corner near the kitchen, and there was only three of us: me, Richard, and Brownie, Deborah’s spinster Aunt from Israel who was ten years older than I was and nearly deaf. “Pass me the smeteneh,” she’d shouted in Yiddish when I first came back from the buffet line with a plate full of shrimp and chocolate eclairs. I had no idea what smeteneh was, and I grabbed the water pitcher and the salt before Richard figured out that smeteneh meant cream.

Deborah was right about Richard not being bad looking, but his little four-inch ponytail that stuck out from the back of his head like a horn was a red flag for a possible mid-life crisis, which I pointed this out to him to make conversation.

“So Richard,” I said, “What’s with the ponytail?”

“My first two wives weren’t very liberated,” he said. “They wanted me to slave away at a 9 to 5. You know, climbing the management ladder at Chili’s. Now that I’m divorced again I can be the real me.” He had both elbows on the table and he was chewing a pumpernickel roll as he talked. “You should let your hair grow out,” he said. “I’d bet you’d look nice. I mean nicer.”

“I like short hair,” I said. “It’s like a talisman against jerks. They think I’m a lesbian.”

“I had a feeling you were a lesbian,” Brownie said. “Not that I mind.”

“You’re one of those bitter divorced women, aren’t you?” Richard said. “I know exactly how you feel. I was stressed out after my second divorce. I mean, gloomy. Then I started to get into TM. That’s short for Transcendental Meditation. Do you realize that a thousand people meditating in Kosovo could have created enough positive vibrations to prevent the war in Bosnia?”

“How many people would you need to create enough positive vibrations to take twenty pounds off my hips?” I asked.

“You’re not that overweight. Just look at Brownie here.” He nodded at Brownie, who was shuping a plate full of noodle kugel like there was no tomorrow. “She wouldn’t know a vegetable from a hole in her head,” Richard said.

“Shush,” I said. “She can hear you.”

“All I’m saying is, if you put on a little make-up, maybe grew your hair out...”

“You’re a waiter, aren’t you?” I asked him. “Is that what you do at Chilis?”

“You’re starting to sound like my ex-wives,” he said. “You middle-aged women, all you care about is what a man does for a living. I’m not hung up on that stuff. I’m way beyond that. I take off every summer and travel to Bangkok. People are liberated in Bangkok.”

“I’ve never been married myself,” Brownie said, finally pausing from her attack on the kugel. “Who needs the aggravation? The secret is cats. I have fourteen cats back in my condo in Tel Aviv.” She slammed a chubby fist on the pink table cloth for emphasis. “A woman is never lonely when she has cats.”

“I’m going back for more eclairs,” I said, and I headed straight to Deborah’s table.
“So what do you think of Richard?” Deborah asked. She was at the head of a long table of family from New York: women with two-hundred dollar perms and gold tennis bracelets, their doctor and lawyer husbands fighting about the Jets and the Dolphins. “He’s cute, no?” Deborah asked.

“Loser is too kind a word.”

“At our age, we don’t have time to be so choosey. Abe is not exactly a dreamboat, you know.” Deborah pointed to the table across from hers, where Abe was on his knees in front of David’s uncle, who had his left shoe off.

“He’s bow-legged,” Deborah said. “Abe’s trying to sell him some orthopedic loafers.”

“This Richard, he told me I needed to grow my hair out and put on make-up, the shmuck.”

“Well, a little lipstick wouldn’t kill you. And God forbid you should put on some pantyhose.”

“You’re no help,” I said. “I need another eclair.”

At the buffet line, it was just me and a chubby girl who I recognized as Mother Courage in one of David’s school plays fighting over the last of the eclairs. As soon as I’d left her table, Deborah got up on the stage in front of the dining room to present a slide show she’d made of the Misunderstood Genius’ life and times, and I was grateful when they dimmed the lights because I’d noticed Richard peering around for me. With the lights off it was easier to hide behind the ice carving of a Torah that sat melting in front of the eclairs. The chubby girl had a dreamy look in her eyes as Deborah projected the first slide, which was David tap dancing at a summer camp in Vermont, and I felt obligated to set her straight.

“You better wipe that smile off your face,” I told her. “If they’re sensitive, they’re gay. It’s a given.” I took a bite of my eclair and patted her on the shoulder. “Better you should know that sooner rather than later, sweetie.” But she wasn’t ready to hear the truth yet, and she ran back to her table like I had the plague. I stayed behind the ice carving until the slide show was over and Deborah introduced the band, Little Paul and the Pirates. It was the same sorry group of pouchy, balding men that played fifties covers at the temple singles night. The kids sat and held their hands over their ears while Deborah and her family shuffled around the dance floor to “Can’t Buy Me Love” and “Mr. Postman.” When the Pirates broke into “Louie Louie” I noticed Richard get up to dance with himself, so I made my move. I was going to go back to the table, grab my purse, and go.

I was reaching for my purse when Richard grabbed my arm and started dragging me towards the dance floor.

“Come on,” he said. “Boogie time.”

I pulled back but he clenched tighter on my wrist. I didn’t want to make a big scene, but when we got to the dance floor I broke away from his grip and stood off to the side while he shook his hips like a crazy man.

“What dance is that?” I said. “The funky seizure?”

“You need to loosen up,” he said, and he grabbed my wrists again and started waving my arms while he threw his pelvis around.

“O.K., you’ve proven you’re the Jewish Elvis,” I said. “Now let go of me, Richard.”

“My friends call me Dick,” he said, and then he reached for my waist and pulled me right up against his chest. It was the first time I ever choked from cologne.

“What are you wearing?” I asked him. “Windex?”

“Just relax,” he said. “Feel the beat.”
I pushed my forearm against his chest but he was stronger than me, and he squeezed me in a bear hug. Then I felt something on my cheek, a cold wet feeling as if someone was rubbing a chunk of lox on me. It took me a second to realize that it was Richard’s tongue. He was licking my cheek. And I don’t mean kissing, I mean licking. What I did next was all instinct, like fight or flight. I thrust my leg out and kicked him so hard in the stomach that he dropped to the floor. I even made the little kee-yah sound that Master Hwong told us to make when we practiced the floating lotus kick. Richard was panting for breath and lying on his side, holding his stomach with both hands. The band stopped playing and a group of concerned men, the same ones that were arguing over football, came rushing out to the floor. They huddled around Richard, and in a second I heard Deborah start in with the “oy veys.”

“Oy, Cindy,” Deborah said. “Was his dancing that bad?”
“I’m sorry,” I said. “He was licking my face.”
“He always was a licker,” Deborah said. “Are you O.K.?”
“Not bad,” I said. “I mean, all of a sudden I feel better.”
“Kicking the wind out of someone makes you feel better?”
“You should try it,” I said. “The next time Abe tells you that you’re getting fat, sock him one. It’s liberating.”
“Maybe you should go,” Deborah said. “There’s a lot of lawyers in my family, and you might have broken a rib. Go home and get some sleep.”
“I don’t need sleep,” I said. “I’m wide awake. Refreshed, even.” I grabbed my purse and headed for the exit. The women with gold necklaces and earrings stared at me as I made my way through the tables and out the door, but I didn’t mind. Let them stare, what did I care? They never had the pleasure of giving their husbands a swift kick in the gut when they scheduled eighteen holes on their anniversary or came home stinking from the perfume the new paralegal wore.

I guess I was still riding the high from kicking Richard, because when I got back to my condo I didn’t have my usual Friday night fix of alcohol and sugar. It was only 10:30, and sometimes if I was alone on Friday and there was nothing on television I would go grocery shopping or drive around town, just to feel like I was getting out. But not tonight. Tonight I had a plan. I turned off the breaker for the power in the kitchen, and I grabbed the ladder from the garage. Then I unscrewed the lid of the dining room fan. I unhooked a blue wire and a black wire, and I screwed the lid back on. Tomorrow I would call Mister Fixer, but I wouldn’t have any illusions. If I was to find out that Carlos still had lunch with his ex-wife on Wednesdays, or was thinking about quitting his business, buying a motorcycle, and traveling to Canada, I would drop him in a second flat. If he could tell me how he felt about Dan Marino but not about me, or if he thought halftime was quality time, he could go take a jump in the lake. And when he came over to fix the fan, just so he knew where I stood, I would tell him about my new motto: When it comes to men, don’t settle for less. Because when you’re alone, you’re in good company.
FELLOW TRAVELERS

When my son Jason the gypsy called collect from a pay phone at the Tampa airport, begging me to come get him because he’d left Russia with only a few rubles and a granola bar in his backpack, I told him to find his own way home for once in his life because I was tired of bailing him out. Three months ago Jason informed me he was spending the summer in Russia instead of helping his old man sell sunglasses at the Tampa flea market, and I said to him don’t bother sending any postcards of Putin or calling collect from the Kremlin, because as far as I’m concerned we’re not on speaking terms. I was footing the bill for his little Soviet adventure, since I was the sucker who sent him seven hundred dollars when he claimed they were raising his tuition. When my father was Jason’s age he fled from the Cossacks when they were burning Jewish villages in Russia, and he walked across Europe and arrived at Ellis Island broker than Jason even. He would turn over in his grave if he knew his grandson went back to that anti-Semitic country of his own free will, and that God forbid I’d loaned him the money to do it.

“Maybe it’s time you learned that actions have consequences,” I told Jason, but my wife Ruth was already putting some unsalted pretzels into a plastic baggy for me to knosh on for the drive to the airport, and I knew it was two against one. To Ruth the kid could do no wrong. He’s only twenty years old but five times already he’s changed his major, and what’s Ruth’s explanation? His mind is too active to focus on one thing at a time. The kid can’t hold down a part-time job shelving books at the college library for more than two weeks, but Ruth kvels about him like he’s the next Messiah. If Jason was thrown in jail, she’d brag to all our friends that they gave him the nicest cell on the block.

“Tell him you’re on your way,” Ruth said.

“I spend all day hocking sunglasses in ninety-degree weather,” I said to Ruth when I got off the phone, “and now I’ve got to fight rush hour traffic to pick up the wandering Jew.” The last time I had to rescue Jason was a year ago, when he tried to take his Oldsmobile Cutlass that was held together with duct tape and a prayer all the way to Taos. He got as far as Baton Rouge when his engine block cracked because he forgot to add oil.

“He’s your son, Abe,” Ruth said. “You don’t have a choice.”

“Son, shmon. Someday I’m going to leave him high and dry and we’ll see if he wanders again.”

“I’ll pack you a diet Sprite,” Ruth said.

“If he thinks I’m driving him all the way back to his dorm, he’s crazy.”

Jason went to the New College in Sarasota, which if it sounds strange, it is. It’s the only college I ever heard of where they don’t give grades and they let you study whatever mishugenneh subjects you want, including Sanskrit and existentialism, Jason’s first two majors. This New College put the “liberal” in liberal arts, so naturally there’s no business classes, not that Jason would take one.

“Whoever heard of majoring in Russian folklore, anyway?” I asked Ruth. “How many ads for a Russian folklorist do you see in the classifieds?”
“He’s the creative type, like his mother,” she said, which she must have been thinking about the vanilla cake in the shape of a Torah that she made for Jason’s Bar Mitzvah, back before he renounced Judaism and became a transcendental pagan Buddhist, or whatever he was this week.

“He doesn’t think about money,” Ruth said.

“It’s a good thing someone in this family does,” I said, and I grabbed from the garage a case of white wrap-around sunglasses—the kind the kids wear nowadays that makes them look like Spiderman—and stuffed it in the suitcase, because you never know when you’ll have a chance to make a sale. My father worked his way up from selling pencils on the streets of Brooklyn to managing a successful hotel in downtown Tampa until the Cubans took over, and he was the one who taught me that opportunity is nine-tenths preparation. He was conservative when it came to investing, but I took the bonds he left me and put them into growth funds, which knock on wood the stock market was good to me in the eighties. The key to playing the market is a diversified portfolio, but try to tell Jason that and he rolls his eyes and goes on about the evils of capitalism. Never mind that it’s the interest from my Janus funds that pays his tuition.

Jason was waiting for me under the shade of the concrete overhang at the Delta pick-up area, and at first I didn’t recognize him, even though he was in his usual get up: ripped jean shorts, sandals, a scraggly beard, and round glasses like John Lennon used to wear. I was a fan of the Beatles when they were four mensches in suits, singing “Love Me Do.” But when they started in with the drugs and the strawberry fields, it was all beyond my understanding, which I felt the same way about Jason. Until his junior year in high school he played golf and baseball and wore his hair short, but then overnight he started dressing in tie-dyes and you could smell funny odors coming from his bedroom when he listened to Jim Morrison with the door locked. It was like a zombie movie, and somewhere under all that hair was my real son, taken over not by the undead but the Grateful Dead.

“I’ve got a surprise,” Jason said as soon as I got out of the car, and he raised one eyebrow and grinned, like he did when we caught him sitting naked on the roof and waving at traffic or playing frisbee with his Bar Mitzvah yarmulke in the backyard. “I met a girl in Moscow,” he said. Then he nodded at a skinny little Sephardic-looking thing with black braided hair and tan skin who was sitting on a bench a few feet away. She bounced up off the bench and shook my hand, not like a girl but real firm, and said, “Hiya.”

“Don’t freak out, Dad,” Jason said. “She’s not Russian. She’s from Miami. Her name’s Rain.”

“That’s a new one,” I said. “I never thought of naming my kid after the weather.”

“I changed my name when I was sixteen,” Rain said. “It was raining on my sixteenth birthday.”

“Be grateful there wasn’t a tornado.”

“Don’t start, Dad,” Jason said. He threw his grimy backpack in the trunk of the LeSabre, which I’d already popped open, and told me he was starving. “We’ve been living on crackers and water for a week,” he said. “I could go for a burger.”

“You told me you were switching to vegetarian,” Rain said, nagging like an old pro, which besides the Mediterranean looks was why I assumed she was Jewish. I also assumed she’d be catching the next bus to Miami, but out of politeness I didn’t ask.

At McDonald’s it took Rain twenty minutes to find something she could eat.

“I’m a lacto-vegetarian,” she said when I asked her why so indecisive.
“I’m lactose intolerant,” I said. “We’ve got something in common.”

She pinched her thick black eyebrows in a frown, a little upset by my comment maybe, and said she’d like a salad shaker. I was watching my cholesterol and I had a diet Coke and a grilled chicken sandwich.

“So did you collect any folklore?” I asked Jason when we sat down at a booth.

“I tried to get a job as a translator, but you need some kind of work visa,” Jason said. He opened his Big Mac and took out the onions and pickles. When Jason was a kid Ruth cooked him his own separate meal of macaroni or hot dogs if he didn’t like what she was making for dinner, and now he was the world’s pickiest eater.

“Thank God I hooked up with Rain,” Jason said. “She taught me how to braid hair for tourists to make a few bucks on the streets.”

“Sounds like a real entrepreneur,” I said.

“This trip really gave me some perspective on life,” Jason said. He took a bite of his Big Mac and started talking with his mouth full. No manners, this one. In middle school they were always putting him in detention for sticking fries in his ears and nostrils and scaring the girls.

“The way people live over there, it’s unbelievable,” he said. “I mean, one aisle of Super Wal-Mart is an entire grocery store in Russia.”

“That’s communism for you. Maybe now you see why I voted for Reagan and Bush.”

“Russia isn’t communist anymore,” Rain said. “Besides, only the Indians ever had true communism.” A real philosopher, this Rain.

Jason squeezed her shoulder and smiled. “She’s an anthropology major at University of Miami,” he said.

“There’s an Indian guy who has a booth next to me at the flea market. I guarantee you he would rather jump off the Tampa Bay bridge than go back to Pakistan.”

“I mean American Indians,” Rain said. “Besides, Pakistan is separate from India.”

“Isn’t she smart?” Jason said. “She knows all about ingenuous cultures.”

“Indigenous,” Rain said, and when she corrected Jason like that she reminded me of my mother, who always had to be right about everything and would set my father straight right away if he was telling a story and God forbid he got a name or a date wrong. One thing I liked about Ruth, she was quiet.

“So Rain,” I said. “When do you start school again?”

“I’m taking some time off to explore my options,” she said.

“Like braiding hair?” I asked, and Jason gave me a kick under the table.

“She’s staying with me for a while,” he said.

I put my sandwich down and stared at Jason. I could feel my blood pressure going up twenty points when he said that last bit about Rain living with him. Jason had a real track record when it came to women. In high school he dated this crazy blonde goy who wore Goodwill rags for clothes and lived on the beach, and the summer before college he went out with his high school English teacher, which gave Ruth an ulcer, although she’d never admit Jason was the cause.

“I thought you already had a roommate,” I said.

“He’ll be cool with it,” Jason said.

“Take in a few more fellow travelers and you’ll have yourself a commune,” I said. “You can start the first kibbutz in Sarasota.”

“Lay off, Dad,” Jason said. “Jesus.”
During the ride home I didn’t say a word, just listened to the two of them kvetch about Tampa and urban sprawl and suburbia, and how Russia might be dangerous and impoverished but at least it was real. I took them back to Sarasota, because God knows Ruth didn’t need the pain and the tsuris of having this Rain criticizing our bourgeois lifestyle in Seagull’s Landing and then sleeping with Jason in his boyhood bed.

A month later, I was in the middle of selling some imitation Ray-Bans to a young couple in matching white polo shirts when Jason and Rain paid me a surprise visit. Even though it was ninety-five degrees out, Jason was wearing some fakakta wool shirt that made him look like he just got back from herding llamas in Peru, and Rain had on a pair of his ripped jean shorts. I noticed she didn’t shave her legs, and she was hairier than me even. Maybe the matching polo couple also noticed, because they put down the sunglasses and told me they’d come back later. Most of the denizens of Tampa flea market were teenagers with baggy pants hanging down to their ankles or snowbird Canadians who kvetched about the bad exchange rate and would sooner give blood than part with a dollar, so when you’re in the middle of a sale with a nice couple who most likely were from a place like Seagull’s Landing, you’re not happy to be interrupted by a son who never bothers to pick up the phone or write a letter and his new sidekick with the hairy legs.

“We need to talk,” Jason said.
“If you’ve come to squeeze me for another seven hundred bucks, you can forget it,” I said. I turned to Rain, who I noticed was avoiding eye contact with me. It was the first time I really looked at her, and truth be told, she wouldn’t be a bad looking girl if she’d shave her legs and put on a little make-up. “I try to tell Jason that if he held down a job for a few months he could put a little money away in a Roth IRA,” I said to Rain. “The two of you could sell sunglasses at the Sarasota flea market on the weekends. I’d get you all set up.”

“We’ve already been through this,” Jason said. “I’m not going to profit from Mexican sweatshop workers making a dollar an hour.”
“I get the sunglasses from China, not Mexico.”
“Look, Dad, we have some news for you, and it doesn’t have anything to do with money.”
“So what’s the news?” I was afraid to ask.
For ten seconds Jason just stood there, fidgeting with the strings that hung down from the front of his llama herding outfit.
“So tell already,” I said, and when he didn’t tell Rain spoke up for him. She was wearing the pants, in more ways than one.
“Abe,” she said. “Your son and I are getting married.”
At first the surprise of her calling me by my first name got me flustered, and the part about them getting married didn’t register. Then I thought that maybe it was one of Jason’s little jokes at my expense, like the time I was playing poker with my buddies from the flea market and Jason wandered into the kitchen wearing one of Ruth’s dresses and announced to everyone that he was straight but not narrow. Granted, I found out later that he was helping Ruth adjust a hem line, but still.
“It’s going to be a small wedding,” Rain said.
“We decided to have it on the beach,” Jason said. “During sunset.”
“I need to sit,” I said. I had a stool that was high enough I could see over the display cases, and I settled down on it and grabbed some ice from the cooler I brought and rubbed it on
my forehead. Even though the full-time vendors got sites under a nylon awning, my blue golf shirt was all of a sudden soaked in sweat.

“Don’t worry,” Rain said. “I convinced Jason to incorporate some Jewish traditions in the ceremony. I think you have a fascinating religion.”

“She said our last name sounds very cultural,” Jason said. “She’s using it, even though she told me that taking the man’s last name is usually oppressive for women, which I totally agree.”

“Rain Levitz Martinez,” Rain said. “To honor both ethnicities.”
“Both ethnicities?”
“I didn’t want to tell you, Dad, because I knew you’d freak out,” Jason said. Then he got quiet again.
“Tell me what?”
“Rain is half Cuban.”
“Half Cuban? So what’s the other half?”
“My parents are divorced,” Rain said. “My Dad wasn’t anything. Just plain white.”
“This whole time I thought you were Jewish.”
“My mom’s Catholic. I’m spiritual, but I don’t believe in any one religion.”
“This is a joke, right?” I turned to Jason. “You’re having a little fun with the old man, is that it?”
“I told Mom you wouldn’t understand,” Jason said. “You never even try to understand me.”
“Ruth knows about this? What did she have to say?”
“She said we’re rushing into things,” Jason said. He put his arm around Rain’s shoulder, real dramatic. “But she just doesn’t understand. Rain and I are soul mates. Even though I haven’t known her that long, I’m totally in love with her.”
“Love, shmov,” I said. “You’re too young.” It’s not as though I don’t have a heart, and I remember when I was young and stupid and fell crazy in love each month with a new girl. My father warned me to sow the wild oats before I settled down, and when it came time to marry, it was understood that it would be a nice Jewish girl. That was back when a son actually listened to his father. We survived Hitler’s camps, my father used to say, but all of this Jews marrying gentiles we won’t survive. I had nothing against the Catholic religion, but when it comes to marriage, a person should stick to his own.
“I pay for you to run to Taos and Russia without saying boo,” I said, “and you change your major every week and I don’t complain. But this I forbid.”
“We’re going to get married, Dad,” Jason said. “With or without your approval. Let’s just go, Rain.” With my eyes I followed them as they walked out from under the awning and past the farmer’s market, back to Jason’s car, a Tercel with a muffler that dragged on the ground, no air conditioning, and a sticker on the cracked rear windshield that said, ‘My Karma Ran Over Your Dogma.’” As soon as they left, Vic, the guy from India who had the booth next to me, stepped out from behind a rack of Levis that were marked “imperfect.” He was about my age, with a bald spot the size of a yarmulke, but he dressed like a teenager, in Miami Heat basketball shorts that went down to his knees and sneakers with a big red Nike swoosh. Whenever he visited with me his son watched over his inventory. Say what you will about Indians, they stick together as a family.
“What’s wrong, Abe?” Vic said. “Not selling any of those cheap sunglasses of yours?”
I’m not being prejudiced but only stating a fact when I say that Indian people more often than not smell a little like garlic, but Vic was dripping with so much imitation Drakkar that he bought from the guy who sold fake cologne in the booth across from him that it made my head spin. It used to be that this aisle of the flea market was nothing but leather handbags and wallets, but lately things had gone downhill. Besides the cheap cologne, there were people selling vitamins, women’s underwear, and stereos that were probably stolen from the cars out in the parking lot. Even Vick had started changing his line from imperfect slacks and ties to T-shirts with images of the Mexican and Puerto Rican flags, marijuana plants, or a picture of some shvartze rapper who was recently shot and was now a saint, apparently.

“It’s my son,” I said to Vic. “He’s getting married.”

“Congratulations,” Vic said. “Mazel tuff. Isn’t that how you say it?”

“It’s mazel tov,” I said. “But in this case a blessing isn’t appropriate.”

“What’s wrong?” Vic said. “This isn’t one of those commitment ceremonies, is it?” Vic was there playing poker the night Jason walked in wearing Ruth’s dress, and I’d been putting up with gay jokes from him for over a year.

“How can he support a wife?” I said. “Not to mention the fact that she’s Catholic.” I rubbed another cube of ice on my forehead.

“A priest and a rabbi. That’s one expensive wedding,” Vic said. “Don’t even joke about a priest.”

“Instead of wafers, maybe you can use matzah to symbolize the body of Christ.”

“Very funny,” I said. But as it turns out, he wasn’t far off the mark.

Ruth wasn’t thrilled about the wedding either, but that didn’t stop her from calling photographers and florists. At Jason’s request she was even baking a wedding cake in the shape of the former Soviet Union to symbolize where the lovebirds met. As the three of them made plans I held to my original position, which was forbidding the marriage, so no one bothered to even consult with me until Rain’s mother flew up from Miami. She was even more against the marriage than I was, and she insisted that all of us meet to talk things over. I figured finally there would be an objective third party who was on my side, the side of reason. Little did I know what kind of chutzpah Rain’s mother had.

Maria was a tiny woman, a good six inches shorter than me at about five feet even, but let’s just say she had the mouth of someone twice her size. As soon as we let her in the door she went on and on about what a beautiful home we had with the tile floor and vaulted ceiling in the living room and crown molding in the kitchen, and later I found out she was a real estate agent at Century 21. She was a real go-getter, this Maria: twice married, twice divorced, and twice named agent of the month for the entire Miami-Dade region. This she told us at the dinner table while Ruth served portions of orange chicken and rice. Every time Maria referred to Rain as “Regina,” her original name, Rain rolled her eyes and made little gagging sounds like she was choking on an ice cube. With a pushy mother like that, I felt sorry for her.

“I try to tell Regina that there’s nothing but growth in South Florida,” Maria said. “She could get a license and we could be a mother and daughter team. Buyers would eat that up. After all, where will anthropology get her?”

“Money isn’t everything, Mom,” Rain said.

“They’re young yet,” I said. “I tell Jason to invest in a CD, and he comes home with The Best of the Yardbirds.”

“Let’s not pick on them,” Ruth said.
“Abe, you’re in sales, right?” Maria asked me. I was sitting across from her and she leaned closer, her beige suit pulling up at the shoulders like she was wearing football pads. You could smell her perfume from Key West. “Since we’re both business people, I’m going to get right to the bottom line. Abe, do you think these two should be married? Because I think they’re moving way too fast.”

“I know they won’t listen to either one of us,” I said. “But personally, I’m against the idea.”

“We don’t care if you’re against it,” Jason said. He stared at me and I noticed he had a piece of rice stuck in his beard. He was shaking, and I didn’t want to get him all worked up. When I told him he had to stop seeing the English teacher he packed up and moved in with her for two weeks.

“Maybe if Rain was willing to convert,” I said. “The Jewish religion is open-minded about conversion.”

“No offense, Abe,” Maria said. “But we’re Catholic, and the Catholic church isn’t so flexible about marrying non-Catholics. You wouldn’t even be able to find a priest who would do it.”

“Who said anything about a priest?” I said.

“Let’s not fight,” Ruth said. “Rain, tell them your plan for the wedding.”

“I think we can honor everyone’s beliefs,” Rain said. “We can have some Catholic traditions and some Jewish traditions. The ones that aren’t oppressive to women. And of course, Jason and I want to include some Buddhist and pagan rituals.”

“Pagan?” I said. “Over my dead body.”

“Judaism came from paganism,” Rain said. “We read all about it in comparative religion.”

“I don’t care if Judaism came from space aliens,” I said. “Jason should be married by a rabbi. Whether he likes it or not, he’s a Jew.”

“I don’t like it,” Jason said. “All religion does is cause fights. This is exactly why I got into Buddhism.” Then all of a sudden he stood up and announced that it was his life and he was tired of everyone telling him what to do with it. He grabbed Rain’s hand and led her towards the front door, even though she wasn’t finished with her orange chicken. “We’re going back to Sarasota,” he said. “And we’ll have our own wedding, the way we want it.” Then the two of them left, slaming the door behind them. For three minutes no one spoke a word.

“I made flan for dessert,” Ruth finally said.

For two months I pretended like I didn’t have a son. When the lovebirds came over to consult with Ruth on the cake, I went for a walk around Seagull’s Landing until the Tercel was gone from my driveway. If I was home alone I let the answering machine get the phone, and when the photographer came over with samples I got on the Internet to check my portfolio. Ruth told me that her brothers had gone without speaking for five years because one of them had accused the other of cheating at a family Monopoly game, and I guess she felt that enough was enough, because the first Sunday morning in November I was setting up the new display of imitation Oakleys I’d ordered for the holiday rush when all of a sudden the whole crew was standing right there in my booth: Ruth, Jason, Rain, Maria, and even some tall guy dressed in an undershirt and cargo shorts with blue paint stains who I thought was Jason’s roommate.
“What is this, an intervention?” I said. I noticed that this time Maria was wearing a big gold cross around her neck, which took some nerve. “I thought you went back to Miami,” I said to her.

“If I can’t convince Rain to hold off on this wedding, I can at least have some say in the planning of it,” Maria said.

“You plan it and I pay for it,” I said. “Such a deal.”

“Don’t start, Abe,” Ruth said. “It’s time to forgive and forget.” I noticed that she wasn’t wearing eye-liner or lipstick and her hair smelled like honeysuckle, which was probably from the herbal shampoo Rain told her to try. “The kids even hired a rabbi to make nice with you,” Ruth said.

Cargo shorts stepped out from behind Jason.

“I’m Rabbi Shlemberg,” he said, and held out his hand for a shake. It was small like a woman’s, and I felt that if I squeezed too hard I would break his wrist. He had such a pile of curly black hair it looked like an afro, like the shvartzes used to wear it.

“Rabbi Shlemberg is willing to include some Catholic prayers in the service,” Rain said.

“What kind of rabbi says Catholic prayers?” I asked. “Don’t tell me you found a Buddhist rabbi.”

“I’m a Hasidic scholar,” the rabbi said. “But like it says in the Kabbalah, the idea of God should have no boundaries.”

“Kabbalah? What synagogue do you belong to, rabbi, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“He’s a graduate student at New College,” Jason said. “But he’s also a rabbi. He’s writing his dissertation on Jewish mysticism.”

I was going to object to this mishugenneh rabbi, but I was distracted by a little brown gangster who was wearing a red bandanna on his head and one of Vic’s “Legalize It!” T-shirts. He’d been casing my booth all morning, probably just waiting for me to finish setting up the Oakley display so he could swipe a pair. He couldn’t have been more than thirteen years old, but nowadays they start early.

“If I don’t get a priest,” Maria said, “at the very least you should include a sacrament of matrimony and a candlelight blessing in the ceremony.”

“Doesn’t the candle represent Jesus?” Rain said. “I don’t want any of that ‘our father’ stuff. It’s demeaning to women.”

“What about the tent?” I said. “You can’t have a Jewish wedding without the tent.”

“You mean the huppah canopy,” the rabbi said. “It’s the sign of God’s presence, and represents the couple’s new home.”

“If it’s four sticks and a piece of nylon, it’ll be nicer than their current accommodations,” I said, remembering Jason’s dorm room. He’d hung tie-dyed pillowcases over the windows for drapes, and his coffee table consisted of ten Papa John’s pizza boxes stacked on top of one another.

“Maybe after the wedding they should just move into the hooper tent,” I said.

“Huppah,” Rain said. “I think it comes from a pagan harvest tradition. We can hang fruit from the poles to symbolize fertility.”

“God forbid,” I said, and Ruth told me to shush. I didn’t like her attitude lately, and I was sure that Rain was feeding her a bunch of feminist propaganda every time they got together to look at invitations and guestbooks.

“What about the breaking of the glass?” I said.

“What does that symbolize?” Rain asked.
“I forget. But I know it’s a big part of a Jewish wedding.”
“Some say it recalls the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem,” the rabbi said, “so that even at the height of personal joy, sadness is remembered. Others say it symbolizes the fragility of all human relationships.”
“I’m willing to break a glass,” Rain said. She was strumming her dirty fingernails on the sunglasses in front of her, leaving smudge marks on the lenses. God knows how many customers I was losing with the five of them taking up the entire booth.
“Actually, only the chatan breaks the glass,” the rabbi said.
“Who’s this chatan?” I said. With all his Hebrew words, this Rabbi Shlemberg was a little too Jewish for my taste.
“The chatan is the groom.”
“That’s typical,” Rain said. “Forget it, we’re not breaking any glass.”
“Then after the breaking of the glass you recite the Song of Songs,” I said. Memories of my own wedding were starting to come back to me now, and I wanted to show this Shlemberg I knew a thing or two.
“What about the Lord’s prayer?” Maria said. “A Catholic wedding always ends with the Lord’s Prayer.”
“We can recite the Song of Song’s and the Lord’s Prayer,” the rabbi said.
“This is getting way too religious,” Jason said. “Rain and I wanted the last five minutes of the wedding to be silent contemplation.”
“When is this wedding, anyway?” Ruth said. “Have you fixed a date? I need to tell the photographer and the florist.”
“We were thinking December,” Rain said.
“December is Christmas,” Maria said.
“Not to mention Hanukkah,” I added.
“It’s forbidden to have the wedding on a Jewish holiday,” the rabbi said. “Or the Sabbath, which is the day of reflection.”

The Sabbath was Saturday, which was fine with me. It was my biggest sales day at the flea market.
“None of that religious stuff matters to us,” Jason said.
“How about a Sunday in January?” Ruth said. “The weather will be nice.”
“As long as I don’t have to wear one of those little hats,” Maria said.
“You mean a yarmulke?” I said. “What kind of thing is that to say, ‘little hat’? You know, a yarmulke symbolizes something.” At the time I couldn’t recall what, but I knew it was something important.
“Take it easy, Abe,” Ruth said. “She didn’t mean anything.”
“That’s the thing about you Cubans,” I said. “So stuck up. Always in your own little clique. Twenty years my father ran that hotel, and the minute a Cuban buys it he fires my father and replaces him with another Cuban.” I was talking maybe a little too loudly, and I saw Vic shoot me a look. Half of his customers just got off the raft, so he was real sensitive.
“Don’t complain to me about Cubans,” Maria said. “It’s the Jews that own half of Miami Beach. Not that your son has any prospects of becoming a property owner in the near future.”
“My son is plenty good enough for your daughter,” I said.

Suddenly the rabbi held his arms in the air, palms up. God forgive me, but give him a staff and he’d look like Moses parting the red sea.
“Planning a wedding should be a time of joy, not fighting,” the rabbi said. “Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, said that from every human being there arises a light that reaches to heaven. When two souls are destined to find each other, their streams of light flow together, and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being.”

He talked like a book, this rabbi.

“I like that,” Rain said. “We’ll include that in the wedding.”

“Why not?” I said. “And on my way home from work, I’ll stop at Publix and get some bananas for your pagan fertility rituals.”

“That’s enough, Abe,” Ruth said, and she forced me to make nice with Maria and break down my booth early to take everyone out to Cracker Barrel for lunch, including the rabbi, who apparently wasn’t so religious that he couldn’t eat a pork sandwich. Ruth knew how to spend my money, and by the end of the meal we’d volunteered to pay for the wedding ceremony, the photographer, and half of the reception, even though if it was up to Jason and Rain we’d all be barefoot on the beach eating dolphin-safe tuna sandwiches and singing Kumba Ya after the ceremony.

By December the flea market was packed with snowbirds looking for a cheap gift for their grandchildren, and I was glad for the traffic because it kept my mind off the wedding, at least until Vic came over during lunch time on the pretense of asking me if I wanted some boiled peanuts and a hot dog at the food stand. I told him no thanks, since Ruth had packed a tofu burger in my cooler. Rain had taken Ruth to a health food store, and as much as I hated to admit it, tofu I liked.

“By the way,” Vic said, “When’s the big day?”

I’d read somewhere that in India you had to invite the entire village to your wedding, and I knew that what Vic really meant was why didn’t he get an invitation?

“They want a small wedding. We’re only inviting the immediate family. Maria, on the other hand, is inviting every Cuban in Miami.”

“Sounds expensive,” Vic said. “You might have to sell some of those stocks of yours.”

“The reception alone is going to cost me a small fortune. Ruth’s side of the family is kosher, Jason and Rain insist on vegetarian, and Maria gave me the name of a fancy Cuban restaurant in Ybor city that wants four dollars just for a serving of plantains.” I started to tell Vic all about the non-refundable down-payment I made with parks and services for a picnic shelter on St. Pete Beach when my buddy with the red bandanna walked right into my booth. He was wearing a pair of headphones connected to a CD player, and he bobbed his head in tune to a loud, thumping bass.

“Keep your eyes on this one,” I said to Vic.

Bandanna head tried on first one pair of Oakleys and then another. Vic smiled at him and said hello, but with the music turned so loud he couldn’t hear a thing. I was watching him like a hawk, but he didn’t pay me any mind. Fifty pairs he must have tried on, and finally I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Less shmying and more buying!” I shouted, and this he heard, because he gave me a dirty look and strutted off towards Vic’s collection of T-shirts for the discerning hoodlum.

“The kid was just trying on sunglasses, Abe,” Vic said.

“He was deciding which ones to steal,” I said. “It’s those new T-shirts of yours. They’re attracting a bad element.”

“Abe, if that kid had white skin you would have let him take all the time he wanted.”
“That’s not true. I have nothing but respect for your people, for example.”

As soon as I said that, Vic stood up, shot me a look like murder, and went off to get his boiled peanuts. I guess deep down he felt slighted because he didn’t get an invite to the wedding. Not that it would have done him any good. In the middle of December, instead of coming home for the holiday break, Jason and Rain eloped.

Jason had a talent for calling just as you were about to sit down to dinner, and Ruth was serving me a bowl of spaghetti and tofu balls when the phone rang. With a shaky voice Jason told me he was calling from Gatlinburg, Tennessee. There were no final exams at the New College, so he and Rain had skipped out early and driven to Tennessee. They’d gotten married by a justice of the peace in Gatlinburg and they were about to start their honeymoon, which consisted of hiking the Appalachian trail for three weeks. When Jason started complaining about how it was colder than they thought it would be and he wished he had enough money for a thermal blanket, I hung up the phone. It was the first time I ever hung on him.

“Your son has eloped,” I said to Ruth. Then I told her all the gory details.

“I’m worried, Abe,” she said. “What if there’s bears?”

“With any luck the bears won’t like kosher, and they’ll just eat Rain.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“I just don’t understand it. The kid has no respect for his own father. It’s like he’s a complete stranger.”

“He doesn’t feel that way,” Ruth said. “You’re always the first one he calls when he needs help.”

“Not anymore,” I said. “He can phone Castro. From now on, let him fend for himself.”

“You don’t mean that, Abe.”

“Sure I do. It’s time to cut the cord.” I felt like ripping the collar of my shirt and saying a Kaddish, but it was my Nike Tiger Woods edition golf shirt and at that moment I didn’t feel like Jason was worth it.

To take my mind off Jason and Rain, I tried to focus on my work. It was a few weeks before the holidays, and the flea market opened an hour earlier and closed an hour later. I was working seven days a week, selling out every day, but my heart wasn’t in it. My thoughts were somewhere else, and I would misplace entire cases of sunglasses or accidentally charge five dollars for a ten dollar pair. While fat geezers from Quebec and Toronto dressed in pastel tank tops and stinking of suntan lotion tried to haggle over the price of my cheapest sunglasses, I imagined Jason and Rain out in the woods, doing drugs and reading books whose titles I didn’t even understand, and I screamed at the Canadians to go back to their own country if they wanted something for nothing. A nice young couple wished me a merry Christmas after I sold them two pairs of the imitation Oakleys, and I snapped back, “Happy Hanukkah.” But it was only because I had a dream the night before that Jason and Rain had twins named Sun and Moon, moved in with me and Ruth, and ran a hair-braiding business in our kitchen. So I was already in a bad mood when my friend with the bandanna stuffed two pairs of the imitation Oakleys down his baggy pants while I was eating hummus on a whole wheat pita and he thought I wasn’t looking. I ran out from behind the display cases and grabbed him by his shirt collar.

“I saw that, you little thief,” I said. “What is this, a gang initiation?”

“I’ll put them back, sir,” he said in such good English it surprised me. The sneaky little bastard reached into his pants and slipped both pairs of Oakleys back on the display before Vic came running over.
“Call security,” I said to Vic. “He just shoved two pairs of sunglasses down his pants.”
“I didn’t do anything, sir,” the kid said to Vic. “Search me, if you want.” He threw his arms in the air.
“Let him go, Abe,” Vic said. “You’re scaring away my customers.”
“He’s been planning this for a month,” I said.
“Abe’s sunglasses fall apart as soon as you get them home,” Vic said to the kid. “If you’re gonna steal something, go to the mall.”
“I will, sir,” the kid said, and sprinted off so quickly I lost my grip on him.
“You’re some help,” I said to Vic.
“Abe, ever since those kids eloped you’ve been acting like a real ass.”
“You don’t know how it feels,” I said. I pointed to his son, who was folding T-shirts.
“You have a son who respects you.”
“I’m sure Jason respects you. He’s just going through a phase.”
“Phase, shmase. I wish we had arranged marriages, like your people used to. Then at least I’d have some say.”
“My people?” Vic said. “I never heard of no arranged marriages in Puerto Rico.”
“Puerto Rico? I thought you were Indian.”
“Not many Indians with the last name of Hernandez.”
“I guess not,” I said. “To tell you the truth, I didn’t know your last name.”
“Now you do.”
“I apologize.”
“You’re forgiven,” Vic said. Then he gave me this big stare and put his hand on my shoulder. He moved in so close I could smell the boiled peanuts on his breath. “Now do the same for your kid,” he said. “Forgive him.” It reminded me of that Oprah show that Ruth watches, when some psychologist in a fuzzy red sweater says something shmaltzy to a dysfunctional family and all of them cry and hug. Not in a million years was I going to hug Vic, though, even though I was feeling guilty. I was trying to remember if I’d said anything bad about Catholics in front of Vic. The Puerto Ricans are very sensitive about that.

The next morning I got a phone call in the middle of breakfast.
It was Jason, calling collect from a pay phone at Mt. Pisgah Park, wherever that was. He told me that they’d run out of food and money halfway through the honeymoon hike, but when they got back to the car the battery was dead. He’d left his headlights on, and God only knew where the nearest car shop was because they were a hundred miles from nowhere. To add to their misery, it had been pouring all week and Rain had a fever. “I’ll wire you money,” I said, but he said there was no way for them to get the money, even if I wired a million dollars. The nearest Western Union was in Asheville, an hour away. When I told Ruth about their predicament, right away she got the cooler from the pantry and started filling it with ice and cans of diet Sprite. I held the phone to my chest.
“Forget it,” I said. “No way. It’s two days until Christmas. The flea market will be packed.”
“Your son is more important than selling a few sunglasses, Abe.”
“I’m not bailing him out anymore,” I said. “He’s on his own.” But Ruth wasn’t even listening to me. She was putting some cheese and crackers in the cooler. “He can fend for himself,” I said.
“Tell him you’re on your way,” Ruth said.
“I’ll tell him that God helps those who help themselves,” I said. “I’ll tell him that I won’t spend the rest of my life cleaning up after his messes.” But when I got back on the line with Jason, that’s not what I told him at all. Instead I asked him for directions to Mt. Pisgah. I told him to ask the ranger for the name of a decent hotel in Asheville. He sounded like he was on the verge of crying when he thanked me and promised that it would never happen again, and I told him to get a hold of himself because this wasn’t the Oprah show and you do what you have to do, even if it means missing one of the biggest sales days of the year. When I got out of the shower, Ruth had already packed my suitcase and put the cooler in the LeSabre. I checked the oil and fluids, took the sunglass displays out of the trunk, and hit the road. And as I turned north onto I-75, there was nothing else to do but reflect. It was the Sabbath after all, so why not? And what I was reflecting on was this: that this wouldn’t be the last time I’d have to rescue the kid. Somewhere down the road he would bounce a rent check and get booted out of an apartment, or run out of gas in the middle of the Everglades. He would call for help again and again, that much I knew. And even though it was hard to admit, there was something else I knew. However many times he called me for help, I would always come.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dan Melzer received an M.A. in English from Colorado State University, a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition from Florida State University, and an M.A. in Creative Writing from Florida State University. This thesis received the 2003 Ann Durham Award for outstanding creative writing by an M.A. student. Stories from this thesis have been nominated for Harcourt’s Best New American Voices 2001 and 2002 and the 2000 AWP Intro award.