

THE OTHER SIDE

By

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THE OTHER SIDE

The snow rose like two enormous mountains from either side leaving him standing dwarfed in the cleft between. He looked straight up into the grey sky which seemed to blend thoroughly with the snowy peaks, feeling himself trapped at the bottom of an all-sided icy world. He turned to see the small prints of his fur shoes trailing behind in an endless erratic pattern. He imagined them to be the prints of an animal, perhaps a small bear or a wolf, searching the barren outskirts of the small Russian town for its prey. The thought made him quicken his steps a little, but his terror was short-lived for the fascination he felt in the white-blanketed world was overwhelming dispersing all other feelings or speculations. The delicate pattern of the snow began to change before his eyes as the fragile force that held the tiny crystals in their place gave way, gradually at first and then with greater speed, to an invisible power that swept down the narrow path in a whirlwind of snow. He turned his back to the frigid wind and saw his footsteps erased, rendering past and future equal.

The path widened into a bare field bordered by tall fir trees boughs heavy with snow; in the distance a small wooden house stood alone and solemn. Snow was piled on all sides and icicles hung like giant frozen tear drops from the rims of the white roof. A blackened chimney percolated a steady stream of ebony smoke against the grey sky and white snow background. He did not hurry to the schoolhouse as he knew that he should, but walked slowly letting his eyes fill with

rapturous scenery. He paused often; so intense was his delight with the spectacle that surrounded him that his own being seemed vanquished in awe of the utter splendor.

The door of the schoolhouse was thick and weatherworn, its uneven perimeter allowing the sounds of a man's voice to trickle out to him. He hesitated before entering, caught between two worlds. A bird flew across the frozen sky and landed on a treetop eliciting its own brief snowfall. The wind howled suddenly like some tremendous beast calling him abroad. He felt his blood race. He tried to picture the animal within himself that compelled his spirit, but its form eluded his imagination.

Inside the little cabin the air was heavy, the room hot, dark and confining. Hurriedly he removed his overcoat and fur hat thrust them onto their wooden peg and squeezed behind the table among the younger children. The Yiddish tones of their teacher's voice modulated the air pleasantly. The closeness of the children, sharing among them the aged tattered books, bound them together in security. The children nodded with the teacher's voice, their various lengths and shades of side curls dancing lightly across the letters.

He watched his teacher's eyes dart from student to student, waited his turn and responded with attention. But after a time he became weary and let his eyes float to the icy window to view the windblown day. As he sat still in his place, the animal within him burst through the pane of glass. He could feel him roll in the

cold snow, invigorated by his freedom, and run upon the surface of the frozen field, his hot breath teaming like the chimney smoke.

“Yisroel!” His teacher’s voice was stern, his fellow classmates were stiff in anticipation of the forthcoming rebuke. “It would be better if you were on the outside looking in, than on the inside looking out.”

THE LIGHT of the REVOLUTION

Diana looked at herself in the mirror and felt an immediate sense of embarrassment. Her blond hair all up in the air like a bee hive looked as ridiculous as the fake eyelashes and greenish-blue eyeliner that intermittently, blinkingly, concealed her blue eyes. Equally absurd were the reddish tint of rouge on her high cheeks and dark red lipstick that curled along the lines of her full lips. But her father had insisted. She winked sensually and the image in the mirror winked back. Giggling, she began to strip away the façade.

After unzipping her dress and letting it fall to the floor, she kicked off her high-heeled shoes and removed her slip and stockings. Her hair came easily undone and she combed it free of tangles down upon her narrow bare shoulders. The picture in the mirror had changed. It now reflected the image of a young, pretty girl, budding with life; her full breasts blossomed beyond the prudent restraints of her bra. She encircled her naked waist with her hands feeling the pureness of her virginity. She laughed again and then dressed herself in threadbare, faded jeans, a grey sweatshirt and sandals.

“*Oy vey,*” remarked Diana’s mother looking disapprovingly over the top of her magazine as her daughter entered the living room. “You looked so mature before,” her mother paused, “maybe it is time you start dressing up? You are not in high school any longer. Remember?”

“Listen,” Diana answered lightly, “Daddy is only my boss in the office,” and poised her lithe body to turn a cartwheel between the armchairs.

“Don’t you dare.” cautioned her mother, reaching to protect her Chinese vase, half believing her daughter’s threat.

“You’re just afraid,” challenged Diana, “that the sorority girls won’t accept me when I go to college in the fall.”

“Oh, I’m sure everyone will accept you, darling, even in worn out pants,” sighed her mother with relief that Diana had desisted from her acrobatics and was now searching through her hand-knitted satchel. “Lost something, dear?” she asked, settling back into the sofa cushions with her magazine.

“My key to freedom,” Diana answered grinning.

“Looks like Daddy’s graduation present are a hit,” commented her mother absently as she turned to a gaunt, half-clothed woman frozen in a pose of wicked seductiveness, looking miserably bored in her new superdelux mascara. “Where are you off to?”

“I want to try and meet Noel before it gets too late. He might be leaving for the weekend.”

“I do worry about him living there all with all those kooks,” frowned her mother turning the page to an elaborate designer kitchen. Diana smiled. “Well, don’t be late.”

“I’m a working girl now,” said Diana proudly, “don’t worry.”

Outside the day was warm, blue and brilliant. She started up the V. W. Bug and settling back in the seat slowly let out the clutch and began driving toward the mountains far in the distance. At the first stop sign she withdrew her hands into her sweatshirt, like a tortoise, and unhitched her bra. She quickly removed the harness from the bottom of her shirt and stuffed it beneath the seat.

After reaching the foothills it was a short drive over the rough, bumpy road beneath a canopy of overhanging trees before she let her car roll slowly to a stop in front of the old one-storey wooden house and got out. She walked slowly toward the house, trampling a small patch of overgrown grass that lay before an open porch of weathered grey wood. An incongruous metallic sound scratched faintly. She turned and saw a pair of legs protruding from beneath an old Buick by the far side of the house. The pants were white and grease-stained.

“Walt?” she asked, walking over to the car that stood by a rickety garage. Her inquiry was met with silence, save for the noise of rubbing steel followed by a sharp grunt and a protracted groan of exertion. She waited.

“Hey man, hand me a wrench.”

She did so with an easy grace; their casual acceptance of her into this weird world was exhilarating for her as she knelt by the grease-splattered legs and looked up into the underside of the car. “What’s wrong?”

“Transmission,” answered the man in a heavy, panting voice while straining against his adversary. “I think I almost have it fixed.”

She waited for a time with him, crouching on the ground, trying to anticipate the tools he might need. After a while the silence became difficult for her. She wanted to speak, but not the trivialities to which she was accustomed at her job or at school. While Walt struggled to elevate the heavy transmission by means of makeshift pulleys and levers and blocks of wood, she contemplated the artistic black and grey swirls encrusting the underside of the car. “Do you think the car appreciates your efforts to fix it?” she asked.

Walt was still for a moment and then replied seriously, “I think so. Somewhere in its cosmic consciousness the car is thankful. You know, everything wants to function.”

She was pleased with her question and the comment it elicited. Feeling oneness with the man, the car and the cosmos, she looked up into the blue sky, listened to the song of the birds against the background of an erratic melody of scraping steel and felt the wind rearrange the strands of her hair. Walt continued to work until the mammoth part was seated and secured with two large bolts.

“Is Noel around?” she asked.

“He’s in the house,” answered Walt. “He might still be sleeping. Long night last night”

Her mind flashed to the different possibilities of what might of occurred the night before. She had heard a lot of stories, but was unsure which ones to adopt. The air of the house was cool. The shadowy darkness was sprinkled with random bits of light that had strayed through the makeshift window covering, illuminating the galaxy of dust particles that floated around the shabby room. She opened her eyes wide to adjust to the darkness. The wooden floor echoed her footsteps into the cavernous silence as she walked between the old overstuffed couch and an armchair that had had its legs removed and sat squat upon the floor. In the center stood a low narrow table arrayed with a scattering of objects: two empty wine bottles, a half-burnt candle, various books and an old hat balanced awkwardly upside-down with a tie-dyed ribbon encircling the brim that wound itself off the tabletop into the darkness like some paisley snake.

The walls were lined with books tiered on brick and board. She read a few of the titles ordered randomly on the shelf, trying to picture a bohemian discussing of cosmic consciousness and Freudian concepts. She picked out a book on Taoism, wondering what it must be like to live in a house where all ideas and emotions could be expressed freely and sincerely. A voice interrupted her.

“Diana. You belong here.”

She looked up, but not immediately. “For a moment I thought that you were a voice inside of my head.” She smiled at the man before her. His face was

pleasant his dark brown hair hanging long over his shoulders past his thin beard gave the man an ethereal look.

“Perhaps I am just the voice inside your head,” he replied. “Perhaps everything is. Maybe you are all that exists—a solipsist. Your eyes see only inward to create companions at your own will. Or, perhaps we are just words out of a book moving and speaking as we are told, or maybe the words spoken by some phantom god...”

“Or maybe there is a reality on the other side of these eyes.”

“Maybe reality is what you make of it? Come move in with us and find out,” he gently teased her, “moon-goddess Diana.”

Diana pursed her lips, and then pushed a strand of hair away from her face. “You know, Jeff,” she said testing her ability to let her inner thoughts flow into speech. “I am like the moon. I can accept your words and your reality, but part of me is still dark and unsure. That dark part has dark thoughts that say ‘Your mother will kill you. Your father will call the police.’”

Jeff smiled broadly, lifted himself on his toes and raised his hands, palms outstretched as if attempting to bless her, but looking like a comical, oversized ballerina and laughing at his own farcical behavior didn’t get too far. “May the moon grow full,” he said and like the sun on its determined route, headed for the door.

“Is Noel sleeping?” she called after him.

“I think so, but you can wake him up.”

She walked down a narrow, dark hallway off the living room, stood at the door of her friend’s room and waited there an uneasy moment, considering the distinct possibility that Noel was sharing both his bed a woman. Hesitatingly she lifted her hand to knock, but failed to do so. She bit her lip and her brow creased. She finally knocked, but so lightly as to be inaudible even to her own ears. Pushing the door slightly, she viewed Noel lying, alone, on a thin mattress on the floor, covered with a blanket. Kneeling by his head, she passed her hand softly over his contented face. His jet black hair, not long, was straight and disheveled. His face was smooth, hairless, and almost childlike. He opened one eye and looked at her. His thin lips curled into a slight smile. He rolled over onto his back and groaned. “What time is it?” he muttered.

“After two.” she whispered..

He propped himself up on his elbow and the blanket slipped down below his chest. His frame was thin and riddled with bones that stuck out beneath his dark, yellow-tinged skin. His face was only slightly asian, revealing a blend of cultures running through his blood. The residue of sleep slipped through the silent moments and was finally, completely vanquished by a loud yawn and a stretch that made his bones crack. He sat up and threw off the blanket. Startled by his sudden nakedness, she stood up abruptly and turned to examine a picture pinned up against the faded wallpaper; a surrealistic clock melting like an ice cream cone on a hot

summer day. He rustled into his clothes. “You okay?” he asked with gentle concern. She turned to face him. His eyes were sharp and piercing and seemed to understand everything.

“You fit here,” she stated flatly, and smiled at his concerned look. “I mean, like this,” and she gestured with her hand to include his entire room, an anarchistic clutter of visions and ideas pinned to the walls and strewn upon the floor. “You are being you.” He nodded but didn’t remove his eyes from hers. She lowered her eyes and explained in a hushed voice, “I envy you Noel. I never really feel like I’m being me. I’m like my name, like the moon—I have no light of my own.”

“You are a moon looking for a sun,” he smiled, and his eyes released her slowly, his intensity replaced by something soothing in his easy manner. He buttoned his shirt with a relaxed calm. His hands moved like a Chinese artist who with one brushstroke could communicate an entire picture. She felt his unspoken, gentle acceptance and wise patience with the eclipsed moon that stood before him.

“I heard from my parents yesterday, “ he said lightly, “Someone wrote and told them I had moved in with a bunch of weirdoes and they were quite concerned.”

“What will you do?” she asked.

“I’ll write and tell them about the books that I’ve been reading and how my college courses are working out. How the house that I live in is large and quiet and good for meditation and study.”

Together they scanned the small room from the foot of the bare mattress where a suitcase was open and overflowing cornucopia of clothes, to the floor, cluttered with empty coke bottles, open books, papers, magazines and a pile of discarded sketches and watercolors; to the walls arrayed with all manner of articles and pictures that warranted display. Their eyes met and they laughed, rollicking unsteadily against one another.

As they turned to leave, Diana noticed a neatly stacked pile of pamphlets by the door. She stopped to examine them, fanned them as though they were a stack of playing cards, to assure herself of their repetitive sameness, then took off the top one and briefly scanned its contents.

Standing up, she met Noel's earnest look, her own face oscillating between disappointment and surprise. She handed him the little tract in the manner of a campus propagandist standing on some street corner. As he took the piece of paper from her hands, her eyes petitioned him for an explanation. "It's important." He stated simply.

"But you always said it's bullshit—there's no truth in politics!"

"This isn't politics," he said, encircling her shoulders with his left arm, waving the pamphlet with his right. "The super-powers are playing games, just power games. But they can't win. They're dying. The Vietnam War is the spark that's going to ignite the revolution!"

"Got your gun?" she chided, knowing his abhorrence of violence.

“Right here,” he said, tapping his skull. He pulled her closer and kissed her briefly. “The revolution will shine down upon you.” He smiled.

Before Diana could respond, the door burst open and Sandi ran in jubilantly, her dark hair a mass of curls and frayed ends tumbling halfway down her back, her voice excited, effervescing with delight. “Hi, there little sister!” She embraced Diana and kissed her upon the mouth. “Come,” she said, taking Diana and Noel each by the hand. “Walt has fixed the car. We can go for a ride.”

Outside, Walt was driving the car up and down the dirt road, switching from reverse to drive time after time, checking and rechecking, intently listening to every slight and unaccountable sound. While Noel searched the kitchen for something to eat, Jeff, Diana and Sandi stood on the open porch applauding enthusiastically. But Walt’s face remained stoic and deeply serious. Only after he had stopped the car, satisfied with its performance, did he permit his composure to lighten. His sunken cheeks and pock-marked face and sallow complexion burst into a smile and he beamed. The two girls and Noel settled into the spacious back seat, Sandi wiggling unceasingly. Jeff joined Walt in front.

After they had passed through the quiet provincial town and started on the road that led to a small college, Jeff lit a joint and past it to Walt. Passed the college the road narrowed and tall evergreen trees began to line the side of the road, giving the impression of tunneling into the mountain. The image was heightened by the change in their own perceptions as the little hand-made cigarette

circulated among the occupants of the car, each in turn taking a long, hard drag before exhaling. One joint followed another until the occupants of the car were thoroughly saturated.

“I feel like I’m in a spaceship,” said Diana, listening to the steady drone of the car engine, watching the brown trees flicking by the window like passing stars, as the big car wound its way upward.

“Everything is so beautiful.” Sandi murmured, calmed into childlike wonderment.

They wound their way through the mountains. The road careened and swayed sensually, the hills and valleys reflected a spectrum of blended forms, each hilltop and ridge revealed a scintillating panorama to which they responded with gasps and breathless exclamations.

“Wow! Look at that tree,” said Sandi, pointing down the sloping hillside into the myriad of trees, her free hand pressing Diana’s slender arm fervently to draw her attention. Diana leaned toward her friend, becoming aware of the scent of her being, as fragrant as a field of wildflowers. She stared out the window at the forested mountain beneath flowing in kaleidoscopic shades of green as a gentle glacier, down to the outskirts of civilization where Man had forged his thumbprint in a geometric design that extended to the sea; the great ocean shimmered like a huge smooth pane of glass that mirrored the sapphire sky.

“Yeah,” said Diana, “It’s a nice one.”

“Huh?” replied Sandi, who had forgotten about the tree and was studying the light that reflected through her friend’s golden hair. They giggled softly together as if sharing a secret. The car dipped down from the top of the ridge overlooking the sprawling city below.

The other side of the mountain was wildly free of any urbanite encroachment. Except for the narrow, winding blacktop, it was a virgin ground, forested with tall trees casting long shadows from their high limbs and boughs thick with dark green foliage. Intermittently dispersed throughout the wooded domain were resplendent fields alive with wild flowers. Large craggy grey rocks, molded by the elements, watched on with cold aplomb. A cop car rushed by them hurrying somewhere.

Walt continued to drive but after a minute took the first turn away from the route along which they had been traveling and took a less traveled road. This new road was narrow, overgrown and full of potholes. They drove the way slowly through the greenery which had become less dramatic and lush. The sun, tempered by the overhanging branches, trickled its light through like a mist that left a covering of golden dew. The road left the mountain summit, not steeply but in a gradual decline, a definite descent, implacably so. Their ears were filled with the rushing sound of water, mingled with the excited chatter of birds winging rapidly away from before the lurching Buick. The road tapered onto a small wooden bridge whose uneven slats clattered against the wheels of the car. At the

other side of the bridge the road seemed in better repair, as though they had entered some paradise from the back. Walt turned sharply left and came to a stop in a clearing at the base of the bridge.

They spilled from the car and ran down towards the river, stopping a ways from the bank to watch the rushing water. As the water flowed from around a bend to the left and under the bridge, it was dark and unobstructed. But opposite the clearing in which they stood a large boulder jutted into the water, from which emanated torrents of white bubbles and foamy currents.

“It is like looking into the face of truth,” said Walt with solemnity and he stood concentrating on the river with the same intensity he had shown the transmission—as if to say: If I can understand how a car works maybe I can understand how everything works.

Noel also seemed more contemplative and suddenly sedated. He and Diana stood together watching the constancy of the river in its faultless recreation of currents in an unchanging pattern and listened to the symphony of voices that gushed and rippled in a resonance that sprayed the air with its complex melody. “It is a picture of the creation of the universe,” explained Noel, pointing a finger at the submerged rock, “within the river of infinity. See how one bubble floats to the surface and then begins its journey downstream. For a moment it appears to be an existence apart from the water, but then it bursts and returns to its source.”

He looked at Diana and she smiled her agreement. “The river is a microcosm of all existence. The Zen monks used to spend whole lifetimes just sitting by the banks of a river listening to the voice of the water,” He nodded toward Walt who was standing not far from them, staring intently at the swirling currents with an enraptured look upon his face. “He is the most Zen person I have ever met,” said Noel in open admiration.

“Look,” said Jeff a bit further downstream. “It’s Sandi by the sea shore.”

Sandi looked up and smiled. She had unclasped her sandals and was standing barefoot in the water. “It’s not so cold, Jeff. You want to go swimming?” She did not wait for his answer, but stepped from the water, stripped off her blue jeans and T-shirt and waded into the undulating water. Her black hair cut a jagged image against the white skin of her back which contrasted in turn with the ebony water. Occasional streaks of sunlight pierced through, igniting the water into flames of blue. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms about her waist. Her breasts were uplifted, nipples hard and extended. “It’s so sensual,” she whispered. “It’s like being touched by a thousand fingers.”

She dove gracefully beneath the surface cutting a white line through the clear water. Jeff followed her into the river. The two of them swam upstream against the current and then let the river carry them downstream, taking care to keep clear of the boulder where the water spilled into its foamy universe of bubbles.

“The gods are at play,” said Walt looking toward them.

“Look here,” said Noel to Diana with a gentle persuading glance as he walked a few steps toward the river and knelt to the ground. Diana found him holding in his cupped hands a beam of light that had pierced through the surrounding trees. “Want a taste of golden nectar? His face seemed as golden as the light he held in his hands. His eyes shone with a light of their own into his open palms. She dipped her head into his hands, like a queen bee, to taste his flesh. He caressed her cheek.

“Some people,” he said looking toward their friends cavorting playfully in the water, “can find the truth and submerge themselves in it, swim upon its surface and be buoyed by its opulence, but others,” he looked into her eyes, “Must follow its light,” He took her hand and with her smile and nod of assent led her up a narrow path that disappeared into a pine-covered floor with walls of darting shadows through prisms of light and tall trees as pillars.

Their cool abode slanted upward as they followed the light that burst upon them with such suddenness at the top of the ridge as to make them turn their faces back toward the darkness, away from the blinding light. “You know,” mused Noel as they walked slowly through a field of fresh hay, feeling the soil give beneath their feet, “a person could search, perhaps his whole life, for the truth and when he finds it he turns away his face.” He looked up at the brilliant, pulsing sun which seemed suspended in the blueness of the sky, but his vision was forced back down

to the ground by the intensity of its light. “It’s strange,” he said, “I know that I am searching and trying to elevate myself beyond what I understand and yet sometimes it seems that the only truth that I can really grasp is a reflected light in some shadowy corner.”

“You mean, just sit home and read a book?” asked Diana, enjoying the breeze blowing through her yellow hair, feeling the radiant sun warm her body.

“Yeah, you know, maybe that’s where Walt is at,” said Noel stopping, seemingly stunned by his own observation. “Maybe that’s the only place that you can see truth, in the palm of your hands,” and he cupped his hands as he had done beneath the ray of sunlight amid the shadows of the tall trees, “in a reflection.”

“Like the moon,” said Diana softly, letting their eyes meet, “is a reflection of the sun’s light,” A warm current of air seemed to envelope them.

“But you can feel the sun,” said Noel as she encircled his neck with her arms and let their faces caress.

“You only feel the warmth of the sun,” she said, letting his body press against her, “but in the moon you can behold the sun’s full light. When the sun shines into the moon then the truth shines for everyone, a light that’s easy to hold. Truth, peace....love.” she said as he kissed her so hard and long upon the mouth that it took away her breath.

The field seemed an appropriate bed for her virgin love; the field was a woman letting the sun caress her fertile soil springing forth with life. They sank

upon the soft ground. She touched his cheek; he cupped her breast, as he had the beam of light, in his hand. She felt her love rising upward, like the earth lifting toward the heaven to draw the warm summer rain down upon her. She felt her spirit liberated, her passion unharnessed. Her love was elevated beyond her lover, into the sky, beyond the heavens, encompassing all of creation. She wanted to be the earth implanted with the mighty tree, but for the moment she was everything—all sensations had merged into one potent emotion that made indistinguishable her lover's breath from her own. The face of truth smiled down upon her, she had only to open her eyes to meet its vision, but her eyes were shut in ecstasy.

Then a gunshot exploded in her ears, smashed the heavens, pounded down upon the earth and murdered truth. Noel lay quietly upon her, the storm of his passions stilled. She wanted to hold on to him, to stop him from going, but she knew that it was impossible. She felt Noel raise himself like a snake, a periscope in the long grass, to survey the immediate area. Diana opened her eyes and saw the blue sky bobbing with little white clouds, heard the whistle of a robin, the scratching of a cricket, and a far away voice that screamed, "Stop in the name of the law!"

Diana took hold of his hand as they ran crouched over, hoping that the tall grass would partially conceal their presence, to the edge of the field. They peered over the ledge. In the little gentle alcove two shiny black police cars had joined the old Buick. Walt was being led away handcuffed, his stoic, Buddha face revealing

little emotion. Jeff had waded in from the river and stood on the shore shivering from the cold, or perhaps anticipation of what was in store. One cop approached him while another stood on the shore and signaled to Sandi who was standing in the middle of the river, shoulder-deep in water.

They could hear her respond in a belligerent voice, “Why don’t you come in and get me?” Then she put her head back and let her body float to the top of the water, allowing the currents to carry her downstream.

Jeff, though naked and cold, made an academic gesture with his hand to the approaching cop to help advance his argument of privilege and freedom. The cop did not miss a stride, confronting the long-haired naked man with a fist that gouged into his stomach, cutting short his vindication as the rest of his breath escaped in one sharp burst of agony. Jeff fell to his knees. The cop pushed him on his back and kicked him hard in the groin. Noel winced.

Sandi, seeing the vicious treatment that her friend was receiving, turned on her stomach and began swimming hurriedly downstream, but the other cop had already waded in, stalking her like a menacing bear, and caught her by the foot. He grabbed her by both knees, forcing her head under water, and let her struggle in vain for air as he dragged her half submerged to the shore. He threw her against the rocks and watched her vomit convulsively.

Diana was stunned with disbelief. She shuddered and pressed Noel’s hand, but strangely elicited no response. She turned her head to look at him. His thin face

was contorted, his lips fiercely convoluted. "I must go to help them," he said softly with a dazed, almost euphoric voice."

"They'll kill you," she moaned, incredulous.

"Don't move! And don't make a sound. They don't know that you're here. I'll circle around the back so they won't know where I came from," he said with surety, and then was gone before she could restrain him.

Cautiously she watched from her vantage point. Three of the cops had gathered together in a conclave and were laughing. A fourth cop had just completed rummaging through the old Buick and had emerged with a broad smile on his fleshy face and a leather bag in his hand. Then Diana saw her friend, her lover, burst suddenly into the clearing. Gone was the gentle manner. His stride was long and defiant. With his clenched fist raised like a banner of victory, he shouted in a frenzied voice not words, but the fierce battle-cry of the zealot, delivered in the delirium of a David mustering all his violence to come do combat with the great Goliath of the world.

The cop turned, dropped the small leather bag then drawing a long-barreled revolver which he grasped with both hands and held it at arm's length as though it were a powerful monster. Diana screamed and hid her face in her hands upon the soft grass, but her voice was drowned out by the rage of madness.

She awoke from a place of such complete darkness that she did not know whether she had slept, passed out or dissolved into her tears and melted into the black earth. Looking out on the stage where the actors had played out their parts, only the Buick remained. The cops were gone. Her friends were gone. Hope was gone.

She leaned her face close to the ground, closed her eyes and let the soft grass touch her cheek like the reassuring hand of a mother upon her child's face, and she wept. "Little blade of grass," she spoke opening her eyes but looking upon the tiny green blade of grass in such close proximity as to obliterate the rest of existence. "You entered into this world by pushing aside a little clump of dirt and proudly proclaiming life." Her small voice choked with emotion. "You uncurled your soft little body before the wind and reached out for the sun. But I am not a blade of grass and I can't do as you do." And she lay crying like a baby born and abandoned.

She wanted to deny the truth, but the old Buick stood as proof and witness that what she had beheld was indeed reality. She wanted to slip into the infidelity of disbelief, to doubt that what had transpired was anything more than a vaporous dream, but against her own volition her tears fell like torrents against the ground beneath her face. She tried to close her eyes with her hands, to dispute the emotions of her heart and in the darkness heard her own mournful moaning. She

tried to clear her mind of the jumble of incoherent thoughts and terrifying images, but the specter that had seized her would not let her go.

A powerful force pushed her to her feet, like a primordial instinct for survival and compelled her to run. She fled across the field, down into a meadow, up and down sloping hills until she came to a small country road. “Dead end,” she cried to the road. “You are just another dead end, like life leading only to meaningless death.” In her exhaustion, numbed with her pain, she followed the road, step after lonely step. The birds screamed viciously from tree to tree as she passed. The disordered forest surrounded her, a maze of jungle-green hiding malevolent dark shadows, overgrown and tangled into diabolical forms. The mighty trees creaked and shouted at her. In the shadows tiny sounds hid in the undergrowth, whispering, conspiring, threatening to ambush and destroy her. The sky glared above, steel blue and hard.

Her walking was now slow and even. The road had a sort of soothing effect. She pushed herself to try to think clearly. She shook her head and clenched her fists trying to beat her senses back into equilibrium. But as her emotions ebbed away, like the sea that draws away momentarily revealing the ocean floor, the image of her friends bloodied and lifeless brought forth her emotions in a violent eruption, once again to flood her being, bursting from her eyes like two hot, raging, bitter rivers that made her dizzy and numb with pain. The infrequent cars that passed did not slow to look at her.

Peering up at the road in the dim light of the fading day she gradually came to distinguish a form in the distance as a car parked by the side of the road. “Help!” she thought first, “but no.”

And she stopped. “It must be the police. They were following us since we left the house and know there was a fifth person in the car. They are hunting me down. No, it is a man who wants to pick me up. He is waiting by the side of the road pretending to be watching for birds and when I come there he’ll grab me. He’ll rape me and murder me.” But now the light of day was quickly fading and she feared the dark moonless night more than all else, she began walking quickly towards the car hoping that it would not suddenly speed away ahead of her.

“Helfin_mir,” called out a quavering, foreign voice as she approached. The words sounded like the echoing of her soul.

She rubbed her eyes with her hands, wiped away sweat and tears and pushed the tangle of hair from before her face. He came into view, appearing before her as a mirage, a dream hidden in the golden cloud of her billowy hair. He was small and old; his skin was emaciated and his face grooved with lines that seemed as ancient as time. A long fragile beard, brittle and yellow as the pages of an old book, fluttered on his chest. Long locks of hair hung limp and sorrowful in front of each ear from under his broad-brimmed, round black hat. Not just the lips that uttered the words, but his eyes begged her and his entire being implored her.

He pleaded in a language that she did not understand and then pointed a knotted, misshapen finger at the sun that pulsed bright orange above the horizon. He pointed again, this time to the flat tire of his car. He encouraged her with fervent motions of his hands, the car keys jingling frantically. She nodded in consent and he opened the trunk of the car. She worked quickly as though running from her weariness which threatened to consume her the moment she stopped. She pried, loosened, lifted and wrenched; the big car creaked and shuddered and bellowed its resentment in a chorus of discordant sounds. Straining against the weight, she elevated the vehicle above the ground, her arms shaking with weakness and exhaustion, until the wheel became free and wobbled at her light touch. She lifted it off and let it roll away from her.

Standing up, she glanced at the old man standing a short distance away clasping and unclasping his crooked hands. His eyes, serious and penetrating, spurred her with an uncommon zeal. His need for her help seemed somehow to be the only justification for her existence. She quickened her pace, panting heavily, replaced the tire with the spare, locked the lug bolts in place then let the car down too quickly. The steel body bounced and lurched, kicking the jack violently away. Diana jumped back; the old man gave a startled look but did not move. She tightened the lug bolts, gathered up the jack and the old tire, threw them into the trunk and slammed it closed. She tossed the keys onto the steel fender. Their slight metallic click was quickly replaced by the finality of silence.

She stood resting against the car, her breathing long and hard. The man lifted his gaunt face to the heavens and quickly whispered something full of reverence. He gathered up the keys and opened the door on the driver's side. He looked at her questioningly and motioned with his arm along the country road as it ascended to the mountain's peak. Weakly she nodded imploring him mutely with her eyes, blindly begging him to relieve her of her desperate flight. He quickly seated himself behind the wheel and his rapid flinging open of the other door formed a command with which she complied dazedly, wanting only to sink into the relief of obedience.

The old man gave a last suspicious glance towards the setting sun before he ruthlessly jerked the car into motion and pumped the accelerator, clenching the steering wheel tightly in his gnarled old hands. She clasped the arm rest, bracing herself against his erratic driving, but feeling towards him as a sailor towards a trustworthy captain steering a ship in a stormy sea. She stared at him, feeling at one with him, their journey together taking on overwhelming power and magnitude. She began sharing his keen interest in the setting sun.

She envisioned herself and the old man to be the moon rising in the night sky; he the old remnant of the faded moon, she the beginning of the new. She wanted to tell him about this new moon and the world upon which it shone. She wanted to tell him about love and violence and about people who live meaningless lives in finely furnished houses and never glimpse the sky. Just before the

mountain crest the old man swung the car to the side of the road, stopped abruptly, and exited as vigorously as his aged body would allow.

She climbed out automatically and closed the door. To be abandoned now seemed impossible for her to accept. “Please,” she blurted out. “Please!” She felt herself screaming.

He lifted a bushy eyebrow, the fire in his eyes greater than that of the sun.

“Where can I go?” she cried out to him. “This world is suffocating me!” He looked at her questioningly; his facial expression became concerned and plaintive, then serene. At last he smiled with gratitude and pointed with his eyes up the narrow road to the mountain crest. He nodded to her, radiating both compassion and encouragement. Then, with a last worried look at the fading sun poised on the dividing line between heaven and earth, he disappeared down a little path between clusters of cabins.

Although her first impulse was to run after him, to make him understand that she needed refuge, a place away from the cruelty and violence of the world, a shelter from the dark, cold, and moonless night, yet his final look had anointed her his emissary. She could not remain protected, but was compelled on some mission as yet unrevealed. She looked up the road to where the mountain’s peak kissed the purple sky and began to run.

At the apex of the mountain she saw below the city spread out at her feet. In the far distance the ocean extended to infinity. The ebony waves curled up from the

depths and hurled themselves violently upon the earth only to recede with immeasurable disappointment, swallowed into the foamy sea—the sea of pain, the revolution proclaimed in a hissing roar—to fall into that ocean of blood, into the cavernous holes of death, to rise once more and to sink back only to drown again. But a mist escaped; a fine mist raised from the dark turbulent waters, escaping the madness to gather into a cloud, a cloud to burst into a delicate rain, raining upon the earth, dissolving its hardness.

She heard the raindrops spilling onto the ground and reached out with both hands, catching her tears. As her vision rose from the ocean through the mist, she saw through the black sky a streak of light; the new moon in her ascension.

FRIDAY

He could smell the rain. Ironic, he thought, you have to be in the desert to smell the rain. It was an exciting thought, like when he had discovered the hibernated frog, emaciated and dead-looking. He had picked it up wondering out loud, “What is this,” and dropped it suddenly, cringing.

“Now ain’t you never seen a frog before,” said his boss slapping a knee then realigning his cowboy hat?

“But it’s dead.”

“It ain’t dead, Friday, it’s hibernated.” And then he stopped for a moment and smiled, recognizing the wide-eyed child inside the worker who did a man’s work from five in the morning until nine at night and often got drunk afterwards.

“It’s going to rain,” he said confronting the owner of the ranch, and then spat on the ground.

The old man turned sideways a little in order to look at him through the corner of his eye and said, “maybe, maybe,” in reference to an obscene joke about a chinaman.

It’s going to rain,” he repeated. “I can smell it.”

“Friday, ya know, I might make a cowboy out of you yet.”

He liked the nick-name and he liked the red-faced, veiny-headed old man who was wiser and gentler than appeared from his tough, age-worn face.

Once, well after midnight and after they had consumed between them a pint of burbon, Ryland asked his young friend, “Is Browning right? Is it the best of all possible worlds?”

Friday had realigned his senses long enough to remain silent, but then overtaken by his own youth intoned emphatically, “Yes, it is the best.” The cigar dropped from the old man’s lips and he grunted because of his age.

It did rain, but only a little bit. The ranch was situated on the western side of the mountain and the rain came in from the east. First a black fist of thick clouds pushed up from behind the mountain ridge. A body of ebony followed then stretched across the sky blotting out the sun. Rumbblings rolled down the mountain slope sounding like giant indigestion. In the end the angry clouds only spat upon the earth and then quickly traveled on.

Naked to the waist and oblivious to anything else, Friday stood and watched the celestial display. When the clouds began to disperse he resumed his work. He had been collecting flagstones in the field and dumping them into an old chevy pick-up. It was hard work made even more difficult by his intense fear of snakes, but he worked steadily, carefully watching his every move and noting any movement around him. The sun once again reappeared and the sweat was freely rolling down his back and chest. From the position of the sun, Friday realized that the mason would be coming soon.

Inside the cab he started the engine and maneuvered the floor shift until he was sure that it was in neutral. It was stifling hot inside of the cab. He took off his hat and laid it beside him. With both hands on the steering wheel, he sat and contemplated. His hands were rough and hard, his body dark brown and glistening. He felt life pulsing inside of him, bursting like the desert sun. He could not explain, even to himself, the feeling that had been growing inside of him since leaving the road for a laborer's job at the ranch, but it was a good feeling, a feeling of unity with the human kind.

He threw the old Chevy into gear and began his journey home. The dirt road was rocky and narrow. He drove too fast and let himself bounce freely, bucked by the untamed road. The truck approached a barn-red house on the top of a knoll. The house was new but the rough battering gave it the appearance of antiquity. Old Ben was walking from the barn when he saw Friday leading a whirl of dust down the road, he waved him over. The truck slowed then turned up the long driveway.

Ben stood and waited for the truck to approach him. His black cowboy hat only partially covered his thinning hair, the color of frost. Ben stood tall and straight, his large frame seemingly unaffected by his years. Like an old Chinese vase with its many minute cracks, even the lines of his face seemed to accent his strength and longevity rather than signal weakness.

“You need a hand with something?” asked Friday.

“Nope,” said Ben with a broad smile, “just thought you might want a beer. Looks like you’ve been working.”

“Sure,” said Friday, swinging himself out of the cab like a cowboy off his horse. “But, this time no whiskey, you almost got me fired last week.”

“O.k., O.k.,” said Ben. “But you don’t have to worry, Ryland ain’t goin’ to fire you. You’re what we call a pissin’ post between two cowboys. Why boy, you are indispensible” and Ben put a friendly arm around him as they walked toward the garage. Through the kitchen window Ben’s wife busy canning for the winter, smiled at him while she worked.

The garage was dark and cool compared to the outside. “Better drink this slowly,” cautioned Ben. “It’s plenty cold.”

“To drink a cold beer slowly on a day like today,” said Friday, “would be just about the hardest work I could think of,” and he drank half of it down in one swallow.

“Tell me;” said Friday as they sat together at a small table, “you lived around here all your life?”

“Nope,” said Ben, “I come from Pennsylvania. Got married almost fifty years ago but, we left right after the wedding. I had one of those motorcycles, ya know with a side-car, and we drove across this whole country like that. We would drive all day and then stop and walk up a mountain a ways, make us a campfire

and spend the night.” Ben’s blue eyes were shining while he talked. “Me and that big blond, we shook the ground from one end of this country to the other.”

Friday smiled. Looking into Ben’s big weathered face it was easy to believe him.

“Another beer, Friday?”

“No, I really have to go back to work.”

Outside they were met by Ben’s dog, a dark brown mongrel with friendly eyes, wagging the back third of his body ecstatically, nuzzling up to them, begging for attention. Ben walked by unsympathetically, but Friday stopped and petted the animal that in return clawed at him and tried to lick his face.

Friday stooped down and gave the dog his face to lick.

“Hey, that’s disgusting!” said Ben. “That’s a dog!”

Over by the wooden fence which enclosed his pasture, Ben stood upon the first railing, clapped his hands, and whistled. A big brown horse came trotting over and stuck his head over the railing. Ben petted the big brown head.

“Hey, watch this Friday,” and Ben took out an alfalfa pellet from his pocket and placed it between his lips, leaving half of the pellet sticking out looking like the butt of a cigarette. Ben turned his big ruddy face up to the horse. The animal sniffed and then, in the manner of horses, turned back its lips revealing an immense expanse of pink gums and its prodigious straight teeth. The enormous head closed in on Ben’s smiling face. Friday grimaced as the horse went for the pellet. It

resembled the cowboy's version of the animal trainer putting his head into the mouth of a lion. As the horse jerked its head back a moment of panic overtook Friday, who was half expecting to see a bloody, gouged out head, but instead the mammoth beast only left a foamy white trail of saliva which slowly dripped down onto Ben's still smiling lips.

"Now, that's disgusting!" exclaimed Friday.

"Disgusting?" Ben blinked furiously. "Disgusting? Why you don't know nothing, Friday.

Horses, well, they're almost human."

"Well, thanks for the beer, Ben. I've got to be getting back."

"Anytime," Ben grinned.

As he slowly backed the pick-up down the driveway he could see Ben reaching for another pellet.

He was still smiling, visualizing Ben's antics, when he reached the ranch. Ryland met him at the back of the truck.

"From the look of that smile," said Ryland, "Ill bet you've been down at Ben's drinking again."

"Only had one beer," said Friday Quickly.

"How's Ben doin'?"

"Ben? Well he's probably by now knee deep in saliva."

"Just one beer, hum?"

“Honest,” laughed Friday. “He’s feeding his horse.”

Ryland contemplated his worker for a moment and then said, “Better get these rocks offloaded. The mason has been here more than half an hour.”

The mason was an enigmatic man. For the three days Friday had been working with him; he hardly spoke, to him or to anyone else. Yet he did not appear to be an unfriendly person, just quiet and intensely concerned about his work. He was perhaps in his middle fifties and when he did speak, it was with a heavily accented voice. Friday did not even know his name and though he assumed that Ryland did and also John Foye, who was overseeing the construction work, did, yet everyone just called him “the mason.”

After he had finished removing the rocks from the truck, he went to search for the mason. He found him preparing the cement mixer, pounding with the end of his wooden trowel against the grey metal tub of the mixer; encrusted hunks of cement from yesterday’s work were rattling inside while a white cloud of dust belched out the mouth-like opening.

“I’ve got some rocks for you,” said Friday in a quiet voice.

The short, thick chest man turned, “Good.”

His hard hands touched the rocks with surprising gentleness. He looked at them individually with a penetrating stare, then smiled faintly and said, “These are nice stones.”

There was a mild rapprochement in his voice as if Friday had maligned the stones by calling them rocks.

Together they carried the stones, one by one, down to where they had built a cinderblock retaining wall. When they were finished Friday went to mix the mortar and the mason picked up his mason's hammer and began by examining each stone, looking for lines, discovering flat planes, chipping away at unneeded edges and then at last giving one solid strike with his sharp steel hammer and majestically, almost miraculously, the rock would cleave into two smooth-faced variegated stones; two brothers with mirrored tapestries.

Friday brought the mortar in two black, rubber buckets; he staggered a little at their weight and the heat of the day. He watched the mason as an apprentice watches a craftsman placing rock to rock, cognizant always of shape and color, the mason built his pattern of stone as though reconstructing a world which had fallen into rubble.

When the sun had begun to decline, the mason hung his hammer on a newly faced rock and withdrew a brown leather pouch from his pocket. Sitting on two cinderblocks and using his knees for a table, he carefully rolled a cigarette, lit it and then sat staring, unmoving, towards the wall.

Friday sat down on the ground and leaned his back up against the yet faced part of the wall, a little to the left of the mason, and ventured to speak to him.

“How long have you been a mason?”

The older man studied his workman intently for an uncomfortable moment and then answered in a slow, deep, accented voice, “Forty years.”

“That’s a long time,” said.

The mason again regarded him with his silent stare, but this time with less suspicion. There was also something faintly friendly in his eyes, as though one who had accustomed himself to trust only the inanimate rock and steadfast cement was suddenly being awakened by the innocence of youth.

“When I was twelve years old, in Germany,” the man spoke haltingly, “I began my apprenticeship.” His eyes became vacant, clouded with long ago memory. I came an hour before the workers and left an hour after the work was done.

“Germany...then did you fight in the German Army, in World War Two?”

“Yes.” The curt reply was without emotion, neither apologetic nor adamant, a mere statement of fact. After a brief silence he added, “Everyone went.”

He stared at the man who sat frozen in far away thoughts, as if a living portrait of the old soldier, the enemy. The only movement was the thin spiral of dark smoke that quickly dissipated into the blue sky. He could not articulate his feeling. He sensed that the man before him and the setting in which they found themselves should provoke some profound thought, yet that thought eluded him and left him with a nameless emotion.

And so they remained amid the rubble of the unfinished wall, each one plunged into his own secret emotions and shadowy thoughts, the old Nazi soldier and the young exiled Jew, until the mason snuffed out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe and shredded it with his thick fingers then returned to his work. They worked steadily, without speaking, until the sun peered at them from just above the horizon. The mason gathered his tools and with a slight nod quietly left.

Friday knew that there was other work to be done, but he found the sunset to be hypnotic. He walked carelessly away, entranced by the last vestiges of light. He reached a solitary knoll above the ranch house where he stood like a lord and viewed the valley below. The sun was a bright orange orb suspended just above the far away rocky western ridges. He watched the sage turn from green to brown to grey. As he looked about it seemed as though the colors were being sucked from the earth. Towards the west, behind the distant silhouetted mountains, the sky blush fiery hues. The purple and the trailing clouds burned scarlet towards the sun and ash black towards the night. He stood thoughtless and still until all was dark.

There was no moon. The sky was clear, the color of polished ebony. The Milky Way crossed the sky like a fog of stars. Friday found in the starry night the Big Dipper and then the North Star. After some searching he found the constellation of Orion. He remembered how as a child he had been stranded on top of a roof by some mean boys until after night had fallen. He had prayed then to

Orion, the great hunter, beloved of the moon goddess. Hearing muffled voices from the ranch below, he descended.

Close to the back of the barn, he suddenly froze, petrified by what he saw in the gloomy darkness. Other than the violent hissing sound at his feet, all he could hear was the terrible loud beating of his heart. He squinted and saw before him the terror that had hid behind his eyes, in his imagination. The snake waved hideously in the air before his trembling body. He tried to still himself but to no avail. The hissing head brushed against his pants leg. Unable to contain his fear any longer, he turned and ran whooping and howling.

“What’s all the racket?” Ryland’s voice was perturbed.

“A snake,” panted Friday, “there behind the barn. Big like a cobra!”

“John,” yelled Ryland to the ranch hand, “bring a light and a gun. Quick.”

John Foye appeared from the back door almost immediately, a heavy duty flashlight in one hand and a shotgun in the other.

Friday examined his leg and after a few minutes was sufficiently convinced that he had not been bitten. The way his blood was surging through his body, he thought, he would have been dead long ago if indeed he had been injected by the snake’s poisonous venom. Rolling down his pants leg he could see the light bobbing through the darkness as the two men hurried past the barn.

As he advanced toward them he could hear Ryland shout his name, but could not discern the emotion behind his voice. He quickened his pace and sidled up behind the two men.

“We found your snake,” said Ryland. “It was Gertrude.”

“Oh no,” gasped Friday.

John Foye shined the flashlight towards the corner of the barn, catching its glow a longneck duck that waved its scrawny neck and hissed at them.

“Oh no,” said Friday, wishing rather that a rattler had bit him in the heart.

“Looks like,” said Ryland, his voice mockingly serious, “yep, looks like you were bitten by a duck. Only known cure is a shot of burbon.”

“Tell ya something, Friday,” said John as the three of them walked slowly back to the ranch house, “the first time that I saw my wife she was trying to break a wild horse. The horse threw her to the ground and tried to trample her, but she got right back up and before she could saddle up again, the beast tried to kick her. She jumped out of the way, then went right over and kicked that horse as hard as a mule kicks. Then the horse tried to bite her. You know she went right over, didn’t even blink an eye, and bit that animal on the back of the neck. I’m tellin’ you Friday, if you’re goin’ to be a cowboy you got to be tough.”

Turning to Ryland, John said, “Ya know when I got home I told my dad, ‘Pa, I just met the woman I’m goin’ to marry.’”

Friday was relieved to hear the two men laugh over something other than his folly. But it was only temporary.

“What’s all the commotion?” Hank appeared from the newly constructed extension. He was a plumber from a nearby town.

“Friday, here, got bit by a duck,” said John.

“Only known cure,” said Ryland, “Is a good shot of bourbon.”

The mention of drink was a sign that the day’s work had come to an end.

The barbecue pit was round, made of stone, large enough to roast a side of beef. The stones were crusted with a smooth layer of cement where Friday liked to sit and tease the fire with his flesh. It was Friday’s job to tend the fire, prepare and cook the steaks and potatoes, and see to it that the drinks were plentiful and varied. He did his job with alacrity and then would sit by the fire sipping scotch and listening to the conversation.

Many people would come to this out-of-the-way ranch to seek Ryland’s advice in matters of politics or just to share his company and listen to his rough, homespun wisdom. Ryland was as comfortable with the governor of state as with the simple workmen for whom he liked to cook breakfast. John and Ryland drank almost nightly together. This evening they were joined by Hank who had finished his work, but found the fire, drink and relaxation a bit too compelling to leave. The three men sat on wicker chairs and talked about how the construction was going and what plans were for the future. Friday sat at his place by the fire and

watched the flames lick the empty grates. Ryland never ate until he had finished drinking, which was seldom before midnight. The others would eat in their own time.

They could see a car approaching the ranch from about a half a mile away. Friday watched the dim lights wind their way through the darkness. After a while he heard the engine stop. A man was walking towards them, his step sure and brisk.

“Ryland?”

The old man got up from his chair to greet his guest. They shook hands vigorously.

“What are you drinking, Jerry?”

“A beer would be fine. I’m on duty tonight.”

Ryland gave Friday a look and Friday ran to the kitchen like a dog delighted to do its master’s bidding.

“Let me introduce you,” said Ryland. “I think that you already know John Foye?”

“Yes, of course,” and the two men shook hands.

“And this is Hank Smith. He’s a plumber. Lives down in Reading.” Friday had returned and was waiting patiently holding a cold beer. “And this is Friday.” The young man nodded and handed the guest his beer.

Jerry took the beer without giving the cupbearer much notice. He opened the flip top can too quickly and the beer suddenly erupted, spraying its foamy

white liquid into the warm air. Jerry bent himself over, as one might bend over a too vigorous water fountain, attempting to suck the contents into his mouth faster than it was spewing forth from the can. At last when the beer had settled back into its quiescence, Jerry stood up straight and checked his powder blue uniform for damage. His clothing was unstained and his round belly, which folded partly over the thick, black bullet-studded belt, testified to his having drunk many such beers in similar manner.

“What brings the sheriff up to these parts?” asked Ryland, settling back into his chair and taking a sip of his straight bourbon over ice. Ryland offered the sheriff a chair, gesturing with his hand.

“No thanks, Ryland. I only got a minute. But I’m well,” and he bit his lower lip and clenched his right hand into a fist. “I’m damn worried about the election.” Then turning to Ryland, hooking his thumbs into his thick belt and taking a defiant stance, he looked at the old man directly in the eyes, “after what I saw hanging on the big oak tree of yours, I don’t know whether to ask your advice or arrest you.”

“Why, what’s wrong Sheriff Butler,” asked Ryland with mock innocence?

“You know damn well, Ryland. Now what’s this you got Hoffman’s poster hanging in front of your home for? Why people will think you are voting for that scoundrel.”

“I’ll tell you, Jerry,” said Ryland mildly, “Hoffman came up here today and asked me if he could put his poster in front of the house. I told him sure; I needed something to shoot at.”

Ryland squirmed with delight. “You know that fool went and put it up anyway.”

Everyone laughed except the sheriff. He drew in a deep, slow breath and snarled, “You can all kiss my ass. Listen Ryland, you might think that Hoffman is a fool and so might I but there are a lot of folks out there that believe the lies that he’s been throwing around. Ryland, the people they got to know the truth.”

“The truth, Jerry? Why?” Ryland’s voice was serious, but his eyes gently laughed and glittered.

“They got to know the facts. You know what I mean, what’s really going on. We got to organize and present the people with the real low down.” The sheriff squinted and his eyes narrowed.

“Listen Jerry,” said Ryland, “Once I ran for mayor. This was many years ago when I lived in the city. I was running against a man who claimed to be the paragon of truth and honesty. There was also a third person in the race, I think his name was O’Reilly, who made no secret of the fact that he liked to drink and chase women. O’Reilly didn’t have a chance in hell of winning. When the reporters asked me who was the most honest in the race I told them, ‘of course O’Reilly.’ Jerry, truth is like a naked woman, you got to keep her to yourself.”

“But Hoffman is telling lies. I want to tell people the truth!”

“Alright Jerry,” Ryland’s voice and demeanor were more serious, “what is the truth?”

“Well, that’s why I came to you Ryland. I know that you’re good with words and I thought that maybe you would help me. I know the truth; I just don’t know how to say it.”

“How can you tell me what the truth is without saying it?”

“Well, I thought, uh, Ryland, that you also know the truth so I wouldn’t have to tell you.”

“Which truth is that, Jerry?” asked Ryland sitting back taking another sip of his bourbon.

“Why, you know, The Truth. The one about patriotism, democracy and liberty.” The sheriff stood straight and tall, speaking his words with a look of blissful exhilaration.

“You forgot apple pie,” interjected Friday.

The sheriff turned on him, his face red with fury, his thick hands touching the pearl handle of his revolver that hung in western style low against his leg.

“Watch it, kid.”

Friday cautiously eyed the sheriff’s hand on the gun. Ryland stood up and walked quickly to the sheriff, putting a hand on his broad shoulder. “I think that I know what you’re looking for, Jerry. Why don’t you give me the night to think

about it and I'll come down to your office tomorrow and we'll work something out."

"Thanks, Ryland, I knew I could depend on you." Jubilant relief melted through the anger. "Well, goodnight everyone. Good seeing you again John and nice meeting you Hank." The sheriff shook hands with the plumber and, casting a last contemptuous look towards Friday, strode away through the darkness. As the footsteps faded into the night, two loud gunshots exploded by the front of the house echoing through the silence in the vicinity of the opposition's poster.

"Now that's truth," said John.

"Ya know," said Hank, "I used to do a lot of travelling when I was a kid. Ya know, searching, looking for truth, it sort of runs in my family. I never got too far. Went out to set the world on fire, but kept having to return home for matches."

Ryland exploded with laughter and clapped his hands together.

"But my granddaddy," continued the plumber, "when he was a young man actually decided that he had found the truth. My granddaddy he grew up in Russia, and during those years, so he said, there was but one thing to do if you found the truth; go to Leo Tolstoi. And that's what he did. I guess Tolstoi was an old man then and even though he'd become rich from his writings, he still wanted to live a simple life and had a little shack built behind the mansion where his family lived. That's where he met Tolstoi; my granddaddy said, Tolstoi was very nice to him. Served him tea and cookies and listened to him speak for an hour or more. When

he'd finished, Tolstoy leaned back in his chair, rubbed his chin and said 'I think that I'll continue the search.'"

Ryland nodded appreciatively. Hank smiled at everyone as he rose to leave. "See you all in the morning."

After Hank had left, Ryland turned and said in a meditative voice, "John, a prospector once told me that you never know in what pile of rock or craggy mountain you might find a vein of gold. Maybe in all of them what do you think?"

"I think," grinned John, "that this is too much philosophy for my weak brain. Let's have something to eat." Friday cooked up a thick steak and then served him potatoes from the red hot coals. Ryland sat and nursed his bourbon.

After John had left, the old man and his young friend both sat and pondered their secret thoughts. Ryland sat and infrequently rubbed his half-empty glass. Friday sat by the fire and poked at the coals. The night seemed eternal and timeless.

"I think it's time for dinner," said Ryland putting down an empty glass.

"Yes," answered Friday, but he did not move, mesmerized more by his thoughts than by the fire.

"What's the matter with you? I don't know if I have ever seen you so serious."

Friday heaved a long sigh, feeling himself being dragged out of the world of thought and into the realm of speech. "It's just a feeling I got. I can't really explain

it. Ya know, I could be very happy here, a place like this, a ranch of my own; this style of life. But I got this feeling.”

“You want to set the world on fire?”

“Yes,” answered Friday unabashedly.

“A sign of youth. Look, there are only two ways to change the world, Friday, either politics or religion. One’s a pit of vipers and the other’s a pit of snakes.”

“I’ve got too much horseshit in my heart for either of them. But I have this feeling. I don’t know if I can explain it to you. I don’t know if you can understand.”

“Try me,” said Ryland.

Friday sat quietly for a few minutes just staring out into the seeming nothingness that surrounded them. “Ryland, there’s a world out there, a world that I don’t understand. Yet I feel this incredible sense of responsibility, obligation. But I don’t know where to go or what to do.”

Ryland leaned out of his chair a little toward him. His voice seemed old and frail. “Listen son,” Ryland paused for a moment and then sat back in his chair. “Ben told me a story some years ago.” Ryland took his glass and poured himself more bourbon.

“Once there was a settlement under siege by the Indians. It was small and isolated—out in the desert with nothing but sagebrush for miles and miles and with Indians coming out of nowhere and everywhere. After a few days the people

realized they were desperate. Unless they could get help from the cavalry in the fort some three days away they would be lost. But who could break through for help? Well, there was an old guide there and if anyone could succeed it was him. So he agreed to go, but on one condition—that he could have his choice of horses. This guide knew horses. And he knew that he needed a special horse. Not just fast and strong but something more. He chose the commander's horse. He rode that horse, day and night, without stopping, over hills, through passes, dodging arrows. When he got into the fort—just as they entered the gate—the horse's heart burst and the animal died. The guide fell to the ground exhausted. But, you know, they made it! They did it. They saved the people.”

The night seemed like a black empty casket that hovered above them. “I’ll tell you,” said Ryland, “you find out where that fort is. Then get that horse, Friday, and ride. Ride like there is no tomorrow. Keep away from the Indians. And don’t stop until you get there.”

THE RIGHTEOUS ARE SAILORS

The remnants of the full moon lay scattered in the troughs of the sea that splashed against the steel sides of the ship lumbering through the night. The night was still and warm, a typical spring evening in the mid-Pacific. It was difficult to think of Vietnam on a night like this. It was difficult to think of anything. And so he put his chin on the wire railing, closed his eyes and listened with his body to the rocking of the water.

The bosun's whistle jarred him, followed by the gentle chiming of the bells. He counted silently in his mind; 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8: eight bells. It was time. He left his perch on the bow and went below through steel hatchways, down grey and rolling corridors and across reeling decks to a small compartment with a table. He was the first one there.

Next in was the chaplain. Though Catholic, the chaplain had been invited, both as a gesture of respect and as Friedheim had said, the wagon don't move if you don't grease the wheels. A few minutes later the captain arrived with his perpetual grin and in his normal exuberance shouted, "Well!" Both men sprang to attention and the captain jumped and grabbed onto the superstructure, did a couple of chin-ups, pushed himself through the air and sailed down onto the ever-bobbing deck. "Well," he said again and looked at the chaplain, who shrugged.

Both pair of eyes fell upon the enlisted man who was trying hard not to smile at the captain's antics.

"You the only one?" asked the captain.

"No sir. The others must be down below getting the supplies."

"This is Third Class Petty Officer..." the chaplain interceded.

"Oh, I know who he is," interrupted the captain. "Gunnery, right?"

"Uh, no sir, electronics."

"Oh, right," said the captain. "You're the one who got his thumb caught in the porthole." The captain gave a small laugh.

"Yes, sir," said the sailor and hung his head in humility.

Some joke, he thought, they almost had to cut off his thumb. But he was always getting something caught somewhere, from the time he boarded his first ship and tried a little too enthusiastically to help push a platform to catch the gangplank and got his head wedged against a fence. Embarrassed, he had whispered to a fellow sailor to help release him, but the sailor had betrayed him and instead yelled to his mates, "Hey, the recruit got his head stuck," and the entire ship compliment from captain to enlisted man had stood on deck laughing at him for five interminable minutes, while he pulled and wiggled in vain.

At least, he thought, the captain had not remembered the fire in Okinawa.

He had been asleep at the time the fire alarm had sounded, and according to what he had learned in boot camp and what he had seen in the old war movies,

when an alarm is sounded you run immediately to your station. He had felt a little strange being the only one there in his underwear. Everyone else, though also asleep, had managed not only to get his pants on but his socks and shoes too.

When he heard the boson's whistle, thinking that alert had ended, he started below only to be startled to hear his name called over the loud speaker directing him to his work area. He turned to go, trying to be whimsical and philosophic, but it was hard to remain self-assured without his pants. He turned back and sidled up to a sailor whom he knew casually. "Can I borrow your pants?" The glare that he received in reply assured him that an explanation was not required. But before he had even taken a breath to speak, again came the boson's shrill whistle, and again his name was being pounded through the air, only this time chased by an emphatic, "at once!" He gave a fatalistic shrug, bent his shoulders and trotted off.

His division officer was the first to see him. He grabbed him by the arm and asked incredulously, "Where's your pants?"

"I left them by my rack."

"Well, why did you do that?" asked the officer, shaking a bit with rage. "Go get your pants and come back!"

"Is that him?" it was the captain's voice.

The division officer snapped a quick reply and pushed his ward into the throng of officers.

"What happened?" asked the captain to the scantily clad sailor.

“I thought you were supposed to leave your pants...”

“Huh?” said the admiral.

“No, uh, yes, uh, what happened here?” Asked the captain.

There he stood, 110 pounds, in his underwear, facing the captain of the ship, the admiral of the entire 7th fleet amphibious force, and a dozen grim-faced officers. The compartment was grey and a thin black smoke that continued slowly filtering in blended with and obscured the fine definition of the surrounding bulkheads. The officers had congregated in a walkway that permitted access to the equipment that crowded the compartment. They stood knee-deep in smoke. The tall, metallic transmitters interspersed every few feet peered down upon them like monoliths in a mist-covered marsh.

The officers encircled their thin, disrobed mentor and waited for him to say something brilliant that would at once disperse, if not the smoke, at least the mystery of where it was issuing. They towered above him, staring with icy eyes as the smoke billowed against the red safety lights making it look like a conflagration of khaki-colored demons about to attack a pure, but pantless soul.

“Looks like there’s been a fire,” he said, attempting an air of confidence.

“We know there is a fire!” bellowed the admiral. “But where is it?”

“I don’t know, sir. I just got here.”

“Well, you’d better go find out,” said the captain a little more gently.

After a few minutes he had found a smoldering generator that had been overfused. He ran back excitedly to the officers and when he could barely see them through the smoke cried out, "I've found it." The officers turned and, following the admiral's lead, began chasing the unclad figure through the smoke...

"Tell us what we are going to do, son." The captain's voice brought his mind back to the present.

"I don't really know," said the sailor.

"Aren't you Jewish?" asked the chaplain.

"Yes, sir, but I never did this before."

He did not like being asked such questions. Perhaps his oversensitivity was due to the experience of almost three years in the Navy. Having grown up in a somewhat liberal, sheltered environment, his conception of anti-Semites had been either visions of the past or the present delusions of paranoids. It did not take him long to become a bit paranoid himself. Chile was five-foot-three any way you measured him. Meeting him once coming through a hatch, the smiling, freckled-faced sailor looking more like an angelic campfire girl, tapped chili on his prodigious stomach and said, "Hi ya Chile." Whereas Chile grabbed him with both hands around the neck and said, "Hi ya Jew boy," and choked him until he passed out.

This was not the only time his naiveté had gotten him into trouble. Jerry Putnam, nicknamed Putz, looked like a pig and it was hard to take him seriously

while eating in the same galley with him. Once Putz quipped to him, “do you know why Jews got big noses? Because air is free.”

“Gee, that’s a pretty dirty crack,” said the Jew. Putz smiled. “Talking about dirty cracks, Putz, how’s your mother?”

A few days later Jerry Putnam found the Jew sleeping on a work bench, doused him with lighter fluid and lit it.

He shuddered at the memory and when the door finally opened he sighed with relief. In walked Marty Friedheim and Steve Fishman clutching bags and boxes, stumbling at every step like overloaded mules. Friedheim was a skinny wiseguy with a voice three times his size. He often said the world was a smorgasbord and the purpose of life was to eat as much as you could. As his appetite was not confined to food, he had spent much of the cruise in quarantine recovering from what the doctors called, according to Friedheim, an extraordinary case of gonorrhea.

Steve Fishman was quite the opposite; fat, fallacious, certainly more knowledgeable about Jewish things than the other two, but pointedly supercilious. He was hopping around the table putting things into their proper places like a stereotypic Jewish mama. At last the lights were mostly put out and the candles lit.

The Passover seder began.

Fishman stood up and started rattling off what everyone assumed was Hebrew, though it sounded more like on of the Hong Kong tailors yelling at his

seamstress. The captain and the chaplain tried to look solemn. Finally he sat down and motioned to the wine. He filled all glasses to the brim and everyone leaned to port like listing ships and waited, their eyes pinned on the captain. He nodded and everyone drank.

“The main part of Passover,” Fishman explained, setting down his empty glass, “is to drink wine and eat matza.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” said the captain who had only drained a quarter of his glass. “this is your holiday. Only, I am due on the bridge soon.”

Somewhere amidst the subsequent discourse the captain and the chaplain quietly left.

Marty Freidheim took his turn to read the haggadah, stumbling from word to word, while the third Jew listened silently.

“Why don’t you read the next part?” asked Marty. “You can read it in English.” He stood up reluctantly. He felt, not exactly unholy, but humble and unworthy of such a deed. He closed his eyes, adjusted his white hat, and then just stood for a moment swaying to the movement of the ocean that surrounded them. He began reading, but his voice was not his own. He stopped immediately and blinked. Not only were the words not his own, but they did not seem to be articulated with his tongue—rather they emanated from his chest, resting only briefly in his mouth. He started reading again, pausing every few words as though leaving space to listen to the echo return.

The words, though English, were strange to him; but more strange was his voice, deep and throaty. His heart throbbed. The ship rolled. He felt as though he were swimming in the air. The grandeur-filled voice lofted with resonance. Steve and Marty sat motionless, just staring at him as the beautifully resplendent voice spilled from his lips. The ship pitched gently as it continued to cleave its way across the ocean. He felt as though he were a great amphitheater where the air was feathered with the voice of his people.

His face flushed with emotion, he sat down, hard.

Marty grabbed the wine, filled his glass to overflowing and cried, "I'll drink to that!"

As Marty filled all the glasses, Steve waved the matza in the air enthusiastically, "This is the bread that our fathers ate..." and soon they were eating and toasting with all the commodities that the sailors had commandeered while in Japan: gefelte fish, chicken soup with matza balls, nuts, canned fruit and bottle upon bottle of dark, sweet red wine. They drank and they sang in Hebrew and in English and in Pilipino slang.

Sometime towards morning he fell into his bed delirious with drunken delight. Letting himself be lulled into sleep, he saw a vision of the water, glimmering, flashing, shimmering to infinity. In his vision he looked up and saw the sun though far away its warmth was close at hand. He closed his eyes and fell asleep feeling as cared for as a child in his father's arms.

BATTLE WOUNDS

She stumbled and the stone floor tilted away from her, only to come up from behind and hit her with a muffled smack. The sudden stillness was hypnotic; the coolness from the smooth floor against her skin evoked a sensation of pleasure subduing any lingering pangs of pain that still throbbed from her fall. She lay there for a time studying the tiny cracks in the ceiling, then began reading them, muttering their sounds to herself in a small muted voice, until boredom overtook her.

Pressing her small hands against the floor she righted herself then stood erect to survey her surroundings. Amid the harsh angles and planes, which often struck at her without warning, was a soft, seemingly endless curve. She climbed upon the velvet cushions which immediately embraced her snugly. She felt content, peaceful and a little weary.

Her vision became blurred, her breath heavy and slow. The symbols of her reality were deteriorating, leaving great gaping holes where once, just a moment previous, objects had stood. She fought back by blinking her eyes but to no avail. Her body was chained still and immobile, but when the blackness had devoured the last vestige of form, it released her. She fell into fluid darkness, tumbling down through the fingers of infinity, while her consciousness floated away from her into the timeless ocean of nothingness.

She did not feel like she awoke for she had not intended to sleep, and she cried, feeling ill at ease and lonely. She descended from the couch that had before given her such security then stumbled away confused, unstable, and insecure. Seeing her father watching her she ran to him, clutching his leg, and buried her face in his lap. He lifted her to him, surrounded her with his arms and rocked her gently to ease the sorrow. As the tide of her emotions subsided she looked upon her hand and saw an old wound, a scratch covered by a spotty scab. She lifted the finger to her father and said with deep emotion, “Oh, it hurts so much!”

He sympathized with his daughter’s emotion, feeling her pain beneath her trembling flesh, but that she should attribute it to so wrong a cause forced his smile. Even the pain was not real, only confusion, fear of the dark, fright of nothingness. He held her gently and soothed her suffering with his hands. He towered over her, feeling superior, knowing more about her than she knew of herself, having memories of her that had vanished from her small mind. Her myopic present he viewed with the weathered knowledge of a man of the world. Even her future to some degree he could foresee and forestall. How many times had he saved her from calamity? He could not count and she did not acknowledge rescue, knowing only that her desired freedom was often hampered by her father.

He shifted her small weight on his lap and settled back in contemplation of pain. He looked at the couch on which she had slept and thought how it was not yet paid for. The instability of his job made him weak with fear, the aging of his body

was beginning to show, and the wearing of his nerves, which he steadied with an occasional drink. His wife had lost her beauty and was unromantic. The news was pitiful; the economy doomed, the streets rampant with crime, a world of poverty and destitution, morality a joke, perversion a pleasure; but none of it really mattered with the bombs poised in mid-air against the Jewish State.

He could not clarify the feeling that overcame him so suddenly, but he wanted to raise his finger. He felt a tear wash against his own cheek. He blinked and shook his head, but could not restrain his own lips from muttering softly, “Oh, it hurts so much.”

THE GREATEST JEW

The greatest Jew was fat and nameless.

He was not fat like Rabbi Elazar or Rabbi Yishmael whose wisdom was wider even than their stomachs; when they stood together and spoke a herd of oxen could graze at their feet in the cool shadow beneath the meeting of the two mammoth abdomens. Nor did the greatest Jew have the name and renown of Rabbi Yochanan who, though fat, was extolled for his beauty, for his skin glowed like a goblet still red from the silversmith's fire. Rabbi Yochanan, after the destruction of the temple, was called, "the remainder of the beauty of Jerusalem."

The greatest Jew, after twenty years on the docks, was called "supervisor."

But his wife was not fat, not like the wife of Rabbi Elazar whose stomach equaled her husband's in breath and bounty and whose husband's stomach was so large that the Roman women would chide him, saying, "Your children are not your own!" The perhaps blushing rabbi replied, for the sake of his children's reputation, "Where there is desire, the flesh makes way."

But this Jew's wife was thin and Catholic and their son was named John.

The day was hot and hazy. The stagnant air was heavy with moisture and modulated filth. The New York summer had begun early and with a vengeance. The supervisor left his little wooden hut, tired of sifting through papers, and stood, hands on hips, upon the loading platform scrutinizing the barren vista of cement

and scattered semis. There was little commotion. It seemed as though the world wilted.

He saw the gate open at the far end of the area reserved for trucks only. A small dilapidated van sped through and wove its way around the motionless trucks like a busy insect on a sultry day. The incongruity of such a vehicle made the stillness even more pronounced. The supervisor stood and watched, bemused, until the van came and stopped before him.

Besides being old, rusty and dirty, the van was covered with graffiti. “Jolly Jumpers” was scrawled across one side. Hell’s pals had claimed a prestigious area by the rear tire, and other smaller names were scattered throughout, all inscribed hastily in black spray paint. A short, thin, bearded man jumped from the truck, seemingly unaware of the stifling heat. “I’ve got a delivery from JMS,” said the man energetically. “Can you tell me where to go?”

“Yeah, why don’t you go back to hell,” and the supervisor broke into uncontrolled laughter.

The driver waited.

“You can put it here,” said the supervisor, his look of gloom and disgust returning completely.

“I think I’ll need a hand,” said the driver meekly.

“A hand, hell!” bellowed the supervisor. “Here’s a skid, now load ‘em up!”

The driver stood for a few moments studying the discrepancy between the height of the loading platform and that of his truck. Finally he opened the two back doors, got into the driver's seat and let the truck roll back, slamming on his breaks at the last possible moment, causing the doors to jettison out, crashing into the concrete foundation. The supervisor shook his head dolefully.

The bearded man crouched inside the van pushing heavy boxes toward the back. He lifted a few onto the loading dock then climbed up to stack them on the skid. The job was arduous. He stopped only long enough to shake the sweat from his face and realign the yarmulke on his short-cropped hair. The supervisor went over to the skid and without a word began stacking the cartons. The truck driver quickened his pace so as not to lose his momentum or his helper.

When the job was completed, they were both sweating profusely. The supervisor looked intently upon the beard and the yarmulke and asked, "You a rabbi?"

"Yes," said the bearded face looking up at the fat cheeks of the supervisor.

"So why do you drive a truck? This ain't no job for a Jewish boy," and then he laughed as though he had said something extraordinarily original.

"I suspect for the same reason that you work," said the driver pausing to remove a handkerchief from the pocket of his black pants and straighten his white, soiled shirt. "I have a family to support."

“So work as a rabbi.” The supervisor’s voice boomed from a height well above the driver’s head. “You’re too skinny to do this kind of work.”

“You Jewish?”

“Pope got an ass,” replied the supervisor rhetorically.

The rabbi winced, but continued, “When was the last time you were in shul?”

“Huh,” scoffed the supervisor, “when I was thirteen.”

“That’s why,” said the rabbi with a shade of gentleness in his voice, “the shuls are empty and the rabbis are unemployed.”

“Rabbi, you wouldn’t want me in your shul. I’m a dead man. Dead men don’t go to the shul.” The big lumbering man leaned a thick hairy arm against the stack of boxes they had offloaded. “I married a *goya*, a *shicksa*,” he said, mocking himself. “I didn’t know nothing. I was just a kid. I got married when I was seventeen. Everyone disowned me. My family sat *shiva* for me. They don’t want to see me. They don’t even want to see their grandson.”

“Sometimes one’s family can seem cruel,” he said putting a thin, pale hand on the big man’s arm. “And you shall eat the fruit of your bodies,” quoted the rabbi gazing up toward the heavens, “the flesh of your sons and your daughters that were given to you...” The rabbi lowered his face and looked at the man who was staring blankly into oblivion.

“Ya know, rabbi,” the man looked down at the rabbi, “sometimes I feel like doing something Jewish. My family wasn’t orthodox or nothing like that. But my father would always make Kiddish on Friday night and light Chanaka candles and things like that. You think maybe it would be alright for me to do something like that?”

“Not only would it be right,” said the rabbi squeezing the man’s arm with emotion, “but it is actually a very great thing to do. We Jews who have been doing these things all of our lives might not be doing them for the real reasons, like love and fear and because we were commanded. We might do them out of habit. But to go against your habits and to do something for the sake of heaven is the greatest act a human being can perform.”

“Hey, I see why you don’t work as a rabbi. If you ever talked like that in a synagogue, they would kick you right the hell out!” The big man laughed with a booming voice.

“It’s easier to be a truck driver,” said the rabbi as they walked across the pavement towards the hut to get his bill of lading signed, “then you can say what you want.”

The hut was crowded by piles of papers stuffed into boxes. A fan buzzed incessantly, blowing hot, thick air around the stuffy little compartment. A picture of a naked woman stared down upon them, here face frozen in a perpetual expression of bliss.

“You know something, Rabbi? I always told my son that he’s Jewish, but I never pushed him to learn nothing about it or to do nothing. Maybe we’ll start doing things together, like Kiddish or something. After all,” said the man excitedly, “he’s as Jewish as me, right Rabbi?”

The rabbi struggled for a tactful, yet honest answer. “You would think that the Jewishness goes after the father,” he said cautiously, “since whenever the Torah follows the lineage of the Jewish People or of a particular family, it is always through the men. And even the Messiah is said to come from the house of David. Everything seems to be transmitted through the men. But the woman’s job is to keep the home Jewish, both in physical ways and spiritual ways. It is through her that the spirit of Jewishness is passed on. Do you understand?”

The rabbi looked hard at the supervisor who returned his serious look with a smile.

“Here comes my son now. I want you to meet him. He’s here today helping me.”

A young man about sixteen years old, with black hair and a dark complexion entered the hut at his father’s beckoning.

“John, this here is a rabbi and I want you to hear what he has to say. Go on Rabbi; tell him what you told me.”

The rabbi hesitated for a moment and then, staring intently at a piece of paper on the floor said, “If the mother is Jewish then the child is Jewish.”

“The mother!” exclaimed the man incredulously. “The mother? You mean the father!”

“No.”

After an uncomfortable silent moment the father turned on his son and said tersely, “Do you hear? You got to know who you are! Do you hear? You are not Jewish!”

The boy stood uneasily for a moment and then smiled innocently at his father and shrugged.

The father turned angrily and scrawled his signature on the bill of lading. “Here take it,” he yelled at the truck driver, “Take it and get out!”

And this fat man turned away.

And he is the greatest Jew, this fat, unsavory Jew. For he is even greater than Rabbi Chalafta who, though fat, climbed a great mountain on a hot day in order to be cool and who coaxed his daughter saying “If you will fan me I will give you much perfume to delight you..:”

When immediately a breeze arose, Rabbi Chalafta fell down before the Creator of the universe and said “How much more must I give to you?”

AN ACT OF KINDNESS

Dr. Kaplan flipped back the leather cover of his watch and checked the time. It was 11:30. He had another hour before he was to meet his wife for lunch. The rest of the day was free except for a racquetball game at four. With the thought of athletics, he became aware that his posture was not straight. He lifted his shoulders and naturally pulled in his abdomen. His metabolism was such that he tended to gain weight if he did not exercise.

The winter had almost passed and he had not yet gone ice skating. He wondered as he walked if he was letting his profession skew his perspective on life. At forty he was a successful doctor, but that had not diminished his love for the outdoors. Happily married, with two children, a house in an affluent suburb, his only worry was to guard his body from deterioration.

Deterioration, he thought as he stepped into the hospital elevator to make his last official visit of the day and saw in his mind's eye the disintegrating body of his patient. The elevator stopped at the ninth floor. Dr. Kaplan walked quickly through the quiet, softly illuminated hall. He stopped at the door of a private room and gently knocked. He did not wait for an answer, but slowly opened the door and walked noiselessly across the polished floor. A gaunt figure of a man, slightly propped up on a pillow from the hospital bed, stared up at him.

Dr. Kaplin did not have to think about it, his bedside manner came to him of itself. He enjoyed playing god. Generally a warm smile and the soothing, gentle tone of his voice were enough to still the fears of his anxious clientele, draw their devotion and, needless to say, their money. On occasion he found it necessary to be more severe, inculcating panic in a sick man whose interest in his own health had waned, or implanting dread of the doctor's departure in those who attempted to become familiar and presumptuous.

But here there was no cure and there was no hope. Most of all there were no presumptions. There was only time dragging moment by moment towards nothingness. Looking at this skeleton of a man, death seemed more kind than life. The doctor picked up the chart at the end of the bed. Bronstein, Louis; date of birth...

"You don't need a chart to know the score," said the man in a deep-throated groaning voice. His eyes were sad and sunken, his cheekbones jugged out, covered by pallid skin.

"O.K.," said the doctor and let the chart slip from his fingers, his face poised with a look of annoyance. The doctor pressed his lips together. It was his look of concern. A façade of hope sparkled slightly behind his eyes.

"You know what the Good Book says, huh Doctor?" asked the rasping voice rent with bitterness. "The angel of death needed help so doctors were created."

Dr. Kaplin was for a moment speechless. He was not used to being spoken to in this manner. He fingered his stethoscope and waited for his composure to return.

“Alright,” said Dr. Kaplan, his voice almost normal, void of affectations “I guess we can drop the formalities and pretensions. You are dying. You might die in an hour or in a day or maybe even a week. If you live as long as a month it will be a miracle. But I think that you already know all of this. What you refuse to accept is that I can be of some help to you, even now. I cannot cure you, but I can make you more comfortable and your pain more endurable. I can give you drugs, very powerful drugs that will not only take away the pain, but will fill you with euphoria. Yes, it is sleight of hand. Only your perceptions will change. I can control the pain, but not the disease. The drugs will fill you with hope and happiness, but will not alter the fact that you have very little time left. Shall I...”

He stood holding a prescription pad, his pen poised.

“My pain,” sighed the man mournfully, “No one can still. It is not pain of the body, but distress of the soul. My disease eats away my flesh, but my life eats away my heart.”

“I am a doctor of the body,” he said smiling tolerantly, “and I do my best...”

“Your best, huh!” Mocked the dying man. “You are only an axe in the hand of the woodchopper. You doctors deal in lies. You can’t even alter perception in any meaningful way. If the perception really changed, if we saw the unabashed

truth, then the pain would become pleasure.” Exhausted, he lay back on his bed and closed his eyes.

“Well,” said Doctor Kaplan with an ultimate sigh of dissatisfaction, “I have been your doctor for the last six months. I am sorry that there is no longer anything that I can do for you.” He turned to leave.

“Doctor?” the man called out weakly. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to insult you. In fact, there is something you can do for me. Listen,” pleaded Bronstein hoarsely, “I have no one to confide in I’m an only child, never married and both my parents are dead. And friends? Well, when a person is about to die he finds out if he made friends or business. Me, I made business. And now...Do you have a few minutes, Doctor?”

The doctor checked his watch, nodded briefly, and sat sedately by the bed as though taking a case history.

“Doctor, I am a condemned man in his final moments before execution, and my last request is that you listen to my story.”

The doctor nodded again and Bronstein began slowly to recount his story.

“I was born in Ellenville, New York, a small town in the Catskill Mountains. My parents were good, simple orthodox Jews. They ran the town grocery. I loved them, the town, and the mountains. I had this dog named Autumn. We spent many hours every day, roaming the countryside.”

“I also like the country,” remarked the doctor approvingly.

“But everything changed after the war, 1948, the year that Israel became a state. The fever of Jewish nationalism was running high and I was one of the casualties. My parents had dreams of me becoming a rabbi.” Dizziness overcame him and he paused momentarily to regain his equilibrium. “They sent me to a yeshiva high school in New York City,” he continued, “and like a yoked animal, I tried to live my parents’ dream. Perhaps you know what I mean, Doctor. Every Jewish parent who doesn’t want his son to become a rabbi wants him to be a doctor. Right?”

Doctor Kaplan nodded and smiled.

“It was my last year of Yeshiva; I stayed in New York for the High Holidays. I hated to do it. I missed the mountains. But I was getting used to doing just what I was supposed to do. That Rosh HaShona I was up before six—I always loved the early morning—but coming out of the bathroom, without thinking, I turned off the light. Do you know what that means, doctor? It’s a sin to use electricity on Yom-Tovim. But I’d just done it out of habit, without thinking. I whispered ‘sorry’ to no one, really. Could the Creator of the universe really care if I turned off a light switch?

The doctor chuckled a bit in agreement.

Bronstein scowled and went on. “‘No,’ I thought, ‘the Almighty wants our prayers and supplications. God wants our good deeds. God wants us to be kind to

one another. The Creator of everything cares about suffering and inhumanity, not about light switches.’ And so I left without thinking more about it.

“That morning, because it was Rosh HaShona, I went to the mikva—I think they call it in English a spiritual bath. This was in order to enter into the New Year with purity. There was only a red exit light glowing through the warm mist rising out of the mikva into the cold room. An old man was removing the last of his clothing and I watched his descent down the narrow steps and disappear beneath the fog and water. Somehow I expected him either to disappear altogether or come out young and vibrant. But instead he came out as he had gone in—hunch-backed and wrinkled.” Bronstein looked steadily for a moment into the doctor’s eyes. “I was always expecting to see revelation and never did.”

“Well, perhaps...”began Doctor Kaplan philosophically as he uncrossed his legs and prepared to rise.

“But listen,” commanded Bronstein, and a new fire grew in his eyes forcing Doctor Kaplan to shift his weight again and remain seated. “You must hear what happened.” The doctor raised his eyebrows a bit, looked at his watch, and opened his mouth to speak. But Bronstein had his eyes closed and was continuing.

“I felt good after the mikva and was walking down the sidewalk along a six-lane boulevard, enjoying the early morning cool breeze and the relative quiet. It was too early for rush hour traffic and the few cars just raced hurriedly by.

“When I reached the corner I heard the bark of a dog and I looked up. Across the side street, also on the corner, were two dogs, looking just like my Autumn—a mottled brown color—and her friend Rusty. I almost called out, so stunned I was. Of course it really wasn’t them—both dogs were a hundred miles away in the Catskill Mountains. But, I was so happy to see them, remembering early morning walks through the meadows and the forests.

“The dogs wanted to cross the six-lane boulevard and I watched them with concern as we waited for the light, they on their corner and I on mine. But at the first break in the traffic, the reddish dog, self-assured and quick, scampered across the street. The mottled one, the dog that looked like Autumn, hesitated a moment in the street by the gutter and lost her chance. A large car was turning right from the side street. It must have looked like a monster to her. She lost her composure and started running down the street with the car right behind her. I could only stand there, in terror for her, pounding my fist into my hand.

“As the car sped by it looked for a moment as though she had turned a somersault, and then she got up and began running towards me. I never saw an animal run so fast. All four legs seemed to be off the ground at once, like an apparition flying just above the ground. As she reached the corner where I stood, there was this moment—this infinite, timeless, boundless, silent moment when everything stopped, then the dog fell over and the world raced on.

“The poor beast fell into a mud puddle. She shuddered as she fell and then went into uncontrolled convulsions. Every nerve and spark of fire of her meager life burst and exploded in the ungentle hands of death. And then she was still and then came this mournful cry, not full of wrath, anger and indignation for a world too cruel to care for the living, but simply the bleating crying sorrowful moan of an animal in pain. Then with a few shorter, sharper outbursts the last spasms of life recoiled through her body. Finally, lying still and quiet, she whimpered herself to death.”

“The light changed and I averted my eyes and crossed the street. The ground rose and fell and swirled before me. My eyes blurred. My mind tumbled with thoughts. I wanted to run away. I walked on, somehow, through the sea of swaying concrete. I wanted an answer. The Creator: kind, merciful, almighty, patient and forgiving who watches over all things was, I protested, cruel, hideous, and sadistic. God had turned away and forsaken creation. Shul seemed the last, and at the same time, the only place to go.”

“No one looked up to see my face, perhaps white with fear, terror and dread. White also was the covering of the ark portending kindness. Everything seemed absurd. I took a prayer book into my hands and began muttering like I felt I was supposed to. The familiar Hebrew sounded strange in my ears; I didn’t wish to understand—my heart had conquered my head.”

“The hours neither ran nor crept. The only thing that seemed to move was my heavy tongue stumbling like a child over stones. The shul filled and the noise became like a roaring ocean. Still I sat and mouthed the sounds to the eternal and infinite light, yet I sat in darkness and confusion. The sound of the *shofar* trembling through the people startled my ears and exploded into my mind. It was the voice of the dog! A long bellowing blast full of pity and torment, three cries of pain, followed by sharp, short sounds like the choking whimpering of children. It was as though all the crying and pain of the world were condensed into these few short moments and uninterruptible sounds blown into the face of a deaf and mute god.”

Bronstein opened his eyes, a look of triumph on his withered face. Doctor Kaplan smiled benignly, “If you wish to discuss this more, I can have the chaplain stop in after lunch...”

“No, Doctor,” Bronstein croaked emphatically. “This is only for you. You see, I left the yeshiva, doctor, and went into business. I lived my life as you now suggest that I end my life—with drugs. The drugs called work and money, these are also drugs, things to excite and involve the mind and body, leaving no time or energy for questions of life and death or truth, leaving no interest in a dialogue with the Creator.”

“Many people in your position begin to fear death...”

“No, doctor,” the man’s voice was exasperated and weakened by the ordeal of his speech. “I do not fear death. What I fear is life. As I lie here day after day and wait for death to come, I wonder if maybe my whole life has only been a misperception.”

“Perhaps,” said the doctor as he checked his watch again and stood up with finality, “your Creator of the universe really is good and maybe God really does watch over everything and maybe God really does care about light switches?”

“Maybe,” screamed Bronstein weakly, “it was I that killed the dog with the flick of the switch and a sarcastic ‘sorry’? Tell me doctor, couldn’t one who creates and conducts infinity have shown me the consequences of my actions? Maybe it is I that am the madman and not God?”

“We have an excellent psychologist on our staff. Let me ring for the nurse...”

“But doctor,” protested Bronstein in a whispered wasted voice, “you did not answer my question.”

The door to the room opened and a nurse entered. “You rang, doctor?”

“Yes,” answered the doctor as he finished scribbling a prescription. “Give him some of this and call Peterson in this afternoon.”

“Yes, Doctor Kaplan.”

“And by the way,” said the doctor as though verbalizing an afterthought, “I will not be in tomorrow.”

“Something wrong?” inquired the nurse.

“No.” said the doctor. “I am going ice-skating. I’ll call in and leave a number where I can be reached.”

“Doctor,” said the man, his voice imperceptible, not strong enough to be heard over the silence of the room. “I’m a dead man.” The faint voice flickered before the impinging darkness. “And here is my legacy to you: the Mishna says, Shami was walking by the river and seeing a skull floating in the river said to the skull, ‘you drown because you had drowned another and he who drowns you will also drown’.

THE FRIEND

It was not exactly a hole in the ground, but he felt like Alice in Wonderland; it was more like a hole in the sky but he knew that it was Brooklyn. He was coming home to visit a friend who had flipped out and joined a Chasidic sect in the middle of the black ghetto. Robert Frost crossed his mind, "Home is the place that when you got to go there, they got to take you in." It was a long way from Vermont, where he and Robert Frost had passed each other on the road of poems and given a nod. The day and a half it had taken him to hitch-hike down to the city had been interesting, but this was intense.

A young black woman pretty and perfumed walking her city style, her short tight dress animated with quick exaggerated movement, passed by him. He stopped and looked after her. Her straight and glistening hair bobbed as she walked. He followed her into the light that protruded from the top of the stairs. Outside, the boulevard was lined with black people strutting in peacock-colored clothes: shiny silky, polyester synthetic sharkskin, nylon velvet dyed in bright tropical colors. It was the first warm day of spring. Interspersed among the colors were black-hatted white men with beards hiding glum expressions and long black coats. The black people walked swaggeringly lurid: the girls sensual and teasing the men virile and daring. The white men in black garments passed through the color-clad people like ripples of water ebbing towards the shore.

He searched his pockets and found a crumpled piece of paper on which was written the address where his friend had said they could meet. But he saw no numbers, only the decaying rubble of a dying city. He looked at the rows and rows of apartment buildings, sad and grey with neglect. He envisioned the people inside, black or white, huddled together against the vermin and the encroaching doom of destruction that pervades the slums of cities.

From the subway railing by the street where he stood, streams of pedestrians raced towards him. Something peculiar caught his eye. Amid the quickly walking people trotted a dog. There was a frenzied, euphoric look in its eyes. As the dog turned the corner before him, he could see that its tail had been ripped away by a recent accident, its entrails protruding from the bloody opening. The scene seemed a parable of life in the city. He thought, sadly, about the world with which Ghandi had described the west as, “the great rudderless journey”. He already yearned to be back in the country.

He took off his green bandanna and shook his head a little, his long brown hair caught the air and washed the back of his neck with a cool breeze; he wiped his beard down with his hand. Walking along the boulevard carelessly watching the two opposite cultures ignoring one the other, he felt sort of caught in the middle: one his heritage and the other his style. He was tempted to leave and return to Vermont where the Indians had said there was a hole in the sky leading up into heavens. Vermont is the holy ground and still exuded its powers over anyone

searching for the peace of meditation and thought; he stared about himself in disbelief remembering the quiet serenity of his home in the forest, this was a hole leading into hell.

Amid the rubble there was a beautiful building, royal and elegant, but not ostentatious. He knew this was the shul and part out of curiosity and part because it would be a place where he could get directions to his friend abode he walked over to the shul and felt gladdened; he decided to enter following one of the black clad young men who hurried by. Inside, the structure opened up into a large circular room which was full of men about his same age all sitting at tables and screaming at one another in a foreign language. They all looked so similar that it was difficult to distinguish one from another; they all were wearing the same flat, broad-brimmed black hat and long black coat and all of them had beards and curly long tufts of hair by their ears that moved wildly as they gesticulated intently and screwed their faces into all sorts of strange expressions

The walls of the room seemed not made out of brick or board but of books. Everywhere that he looked he saw books from floor to ceiling. The tables were also piled high with books. The men had strident fingers pressed to his open books while others gestured and pounded the table with a free hand. It reminded him of a poem that he had read describing the library of paradise.

As in a dream, he wandered freely across the room gazing at the rows of books. He picked one up from a shelf, not entirely sure of what he expected to see

between its covers: instructions on how to square a circle, or a poem of infinite beauty, the working of peace or the philosophy of a leaf. He opened the book up to the middle and felt his heart fall. A sick feeling pulsed inside his stomach. Each word, small and neatly printed, each line after terrible line, was written in a language whose symbols were almost completely foreign. A vague recollection of the Hebrew letters dawned on him.

Suddenly he became aware that the noise inside of the room was quickly subsiding. He felt the presence of hostility gathering about him. It was the same feeling that he had when he had been rolled by some black guys in the Filmore district of San Francisco. He turned slightly and saw that he was being surrounded by bearded men shrouded in black clothes. They spoke in an unfamiliar language that sounded German and there was a strict terseness in their voices. They were closing in on him with blatant disregard for his humanness. They stared and inspected him as though he were a tree suddenly sprouted in the middle of the room.

It was not fear that overtook him, but anger. He turned and found himself nose to nose with a bespectacled, black-clad man who did not even blink. That's religion, he thought to himself angrily. Not only can they not accept someone who is different, they can't even believe that someone who is not exactly like them is really a person with feelings and emotions and thoughts of his own.

He bolted for the door.

Feeling the security of the door knob in his hand, he turned to look behind him. The men from whom he fled had not chased him. Some stood together conversing softly while others remained staring after him with that same detached look. He opened the door and escaped the madness. However, he had lost his bearings; he did not find himself on the outside staircase leading to the street, but in another room, much smaller than the first. The air was warm, stale and motionless. There was only one table with ten or more open books piled upon it. Some were put off to the side as though for future reference while others were stacked, open, one on top of another like a ladder leading into the heavens. At the pile's apex lay the sleeping head of a man nestled into the ancient letters.

But the man did not give the impression of one who had been studying and wearied by the monotony of his endeavors, laid his head down for a brief rest, but rather like one fervently searching in heaven's library the eternal annals of suppositions and conclusions. It was not as though the sleeping man had reached the truth and in blissful exhaustion slept, but rather like one who strives beyond his own capabilities and falls. He knew the scenario well. He envied the sleeping man. He hoped that when he found truth that he would also be able to give himself over with the same utter unmitigated completeness. He remembered part of a poem, "They fall, they sleep, they dream; these bearers of the world".

An adjacent door led to a corridor which he followed, descended in a stairway, and opened the door at the bottom. It was a small door leading into a

great hall. The empty space, the sprawling solemnity, the quietude drew him inside. It was like an empty cavern waiting for the sea to roar in; like a woman, alluring, waiting to be filled. If he had a prayer within him this was the place to utter it.

A voice, “hello,” pierced the quiet. The one simple word was slightly broken and accent filled. The tone was old and knowing. It was the sort of voice that he might conjure up in his imagination. He turned, surprised to find the figure of a man standing before him. The man was short with a big black hat. His coat was long and black and shiny. His beard was white and wispy with a remnant of amber running through it. The man looked to him as a sage from antiquity, a seer who stepped out from between the letters of the book of truth. He blinked, not understanding why this little man should affect him so.

“What is your name?” asked the old man.

“David,” he replied and immediately touched his own beard, brown, unruly, yet unstained by age. He was shocked how his very name reverberated inside of him so pleasantly. He felt very Jewish. Even the way that the two of them touched their beards seemed some sort of recognition.

The old man smiled at the sound of the name yet it was not a smile for his lips did not move, rather his entire face remained still and serene, only it suddenly glowed with an unabashed blush of happiness.

“Are you looking for someone?”

“Yes,” David recalled, “I am looking for my friend.”

He paused momentarily and peered into the old man's eyes which were both calm and intense at the same time. His eyes seemed filled more with knowledge than color. They shone with a brightness and clarity. He spoke his friend's name and the old man withdrew into himself, pondering the name. At last looked at him shyly and shrugged that he did not know.

While he fumbled in his pockets looking for the pieces of paper where was written the address where he was to meet his friend, the door opened and in walked three young men, seemingly carbon copies of those from whom he had recently fled. But David felt protected, more comfortable in the presence of the serene old man. The old man turned and said something in words as rapid as machine gun fire. The three turned and left hurriedly.

He watched with wonder the little man who seemed to rule his world with the countenance of a king. He felt like a flower basking in the rays of the sun, but a sun that was quickly racing across the sky and might at any moment disappear, for there was nothing superfluous about the man: every word, indeed, every gesture seemed to have import and reason.

He read him the address; something welling up inside of him: a feeling, like a question, but without words. The old man turned to David whose mind was erupting, spilling images of his life before the embarrassment of his eyes. His philosophies seemed puny and insignificant, his observations null and meaningless in the presence of this great man. He had loved life and had danced in its

maelstrom, but now he saw the sum total of his existence seething and boiling in a brimless vessel—that unbridled feeling that begged for an answer.

The old man's face, full of knowing, looked up at him. David opened his mouth but only his muted breath beat against the air. The white beard with thin streaks of amber and the diamond, sparkling eyes answered the silent storm with a small smile of serenity. "You go out those doors," he said leading him towards two double doors not far from where they had been standing, "go to your right. Two blocks, on this side." He repeated his instructions again and then opened the door leading out to the street leaving David no choice but to exit.

David walked through the double doors and found himself outside in a little alcove bordered with stones and shrubbery. The rush hour mass of humanity had begun running out of the subway station. Bitterness riddled their faces. He tried to think about truth, but felt himself impotent and scared. The face of the old man haunted his thoughts. The sounds of a coin in a metal cup startled him. He turned to see a beggar. Mindlessly he reached into the pocket of his jeans and removed a quarter. He handed the money to the man and returned to his mental anguish.

"Are you Jewish?" asked the beggar, a tone of astonishment in his faltering voice.

The question seemed rhetorical in this part of the city where one was either Black or Jewish. He did not answer. But he thought about the question. "No," he

thought, “I am not Jewish. There is only one Jew in the world. He is a little old man with jewels for eyes. The rest of us are poor excuses and hypocrites.

“You have friends here, yes?” pestered the beggar.

“Yes,” answered David. He turned his back and took a step away.

The beggar adjusted his thread-bare, ragged-edged yarmulke on his balding head and took a step towards him. David could almost feel the beggar’s fetid breath against his skin.

You must see the Rebbe while you are here,” said the beggar. “He will give you a blessing.”

“Yea, sure,” David replied carelessly, wishing to be alone with his intolerable thoughts.

“The Rebbe is very wise,” insisted the beggar.

“I know,” said David sighing, “I met him a few moments ago.”

“What!” exclaimed the beggar. “You met the Rebbe? He spoke to you?”

David nodded.

The beggar shook his head. “It couldn’t be. NO, no. The Rebbe is very holy and wise, he does not jus speak to people, not to plain people.”

“Well the Rebbe spoke to me,” said David condescendingly.

The door of the shul opened.

“Two blocks,” said the old man to David pointing with his hand to the right, then handing a coin to the beggar turned the opposite way down the crowded

sidewalk and disappeared.

“See,” said David to the beggar, “the Rebbe speaks to me.”

“But that’s not the Rebbe,” said the beggar “that’s the shumash.”

“The what?”

“That’s not the Rebbe,” repeated the beggar, “that’s the janitor.”

THE REPENTANT

At the time it seemed to be a very reasonable thing to do: to light the candles behind his bed so that on one would see, since it was against the rules. When everyone would go downstairs he would remove them and put them on his table. It reminded him, though somewhat guiltily of how he had hidden his stash in the little cabin in the hills of northern California, but he quickly brought his mind back to the present. He thought about the stories that he had heard of the time of the inquisition in Spain, how the women used to light their candles in cupboards or closets. Staring into the blackness, the pale light of the faded day casting an eerie twilight shadow on the walls above, he felt a chill of fear as his history transported him back into time. He removed his suit jacket from its hanger and left.

The long, narrow corridor was black and silent. Above the staircase was a red exit light diffused streaks of ruby color towards him. He remembered sitting in a movie theater as a little kid stealing surreptitious looks at the glowing exit sign, wondering what the word meant, so predominant and imposing. What a life that past had been, a real theater of the absurd. Now insight had replaced absurdity and his spiritual awareness revealed his present surroundings to be a microcosm of life. The walk through the darkened hall was his journey through life to the eventual point where he would exit. The walls were the law that kept him on the path, the floor the stability of community, and the ceiling was the striving beyond his grasp. The gentle clicking of his footsteps assured him that indeed he was going

somewhere. Up through the stairwell came the illumination from the ground floor of the yeshiva, like the bright light of the world to come. The house of study was the garden of paradise.

The yeshiva's main room housed the library. Books covered all walls except for the easternmost which was dominated by the Holy Ark, a large wooden structure covered in front by a deep red curtain that contained the scrolls of the Torah. He entered, bowed slightly toward the edifice to acknowledge its sanctity, and took the closest seat available, which was next to Pinny Kravitz.

“Hey, Moshe,” whispered Pinny. “What’s happening? Pretty boring dude, don’t you think?” and he yawned sleepily. “Catch you later—I’ve got to crash.” He laid his head down into the open pages of large tome and literally fell asleep in the middle of the tractate Shabbos.

Everyone, all thirty five of them, was seated at the study tables. Reuven Smilovitch was standing at the end of the room, going on about the Rambam to the group as a whole. Reuven had studied acting before coming to the yeshiva and now played his role perfectly. He already had all the gestures and nuances of rabbi speak. Although a respective quiet prevailed, only about ten of them were actually listening. Moshe, too, had missed too many details to follow anything that Reuven was saying. A little bored, he leaned over Pinny’s softly wheezing head and read the inscription on his makeshift pillow, the second chapter of the Talmud Shabat

entitled: With What Do You Light? The chapter began with the concerns of the lighting of the Shabbot candles prior to the sunset.

As he began reading, a sudden sick feeling overtook him. He fought off the immobility of disbelief and jumped to his feet, startling Pinny, turning the heads of a few others and receiving a bold look of dissatisfaction from the speaker and an emphatic, “Sit down, Moshe”. But it was too late. Before he could even utter a word or turn to leave the door flew open and in ran Asher King, disheveled and excited, shouting, “Fire, fire!” Asher had been in Vietnam a few years before and now roared as if they were being called out to battle.

Reuvan, on the brink of his conclusion, having untangled all the various threads of his argument and about to weave them into one resplendent vision, responded with a sigh of impatience and waited, hands clasped behind his back, for the room to quiet. But it did not quiet. On the contrary, it became uproar of questions and exclamations. Some ran to seek out a rabbi; others to find a goy to call the fire department, and the rest ran to the books of Jewish law and began debating the proper actions to be taken. No one ran for water and only Moshe, having premonitions of the disaster began perpetrated through his hands, ran quickly through the darkened hall to his room.

Panting more from anxiety than fatigue, he threw open the door and a fiery flame, like a serpent’s tongue, hissed out to him. He stared with astonishment at the contents of his room being devoured by fire. He watched amazed, mesmerized,

the red, blue and orange colors dancing before him in the darkness. It was as if he were looking directly into a shabbos candle whose light completely obliterated the rest of the world. And that is the way it is supposed to be, he thought excitedly.

As the tan paint began to peel before his eyes through the translucent, dancing flames, looking like the crust of the world being stripped away and then burnt into black ashes that disintegrated into nothing, his musings were interrupted by quick, heavy, trudging footsteps. He turned and saw the uniformed and helmeted fire brigade approaching him.

The firemen carried with them a long, thin, deflated hose with a shiny brass nozzle which when they pumped it full of water resembled an immense burlap snake. Through the open door of his room the two snakes did battle: the hissing snake with fiery tongue against the roaring, golden-mouthed snake. They clashed with brutal vehemence amid the black billowing smoke and the grey, misty steam. Then into the brawl ran a man, with an axe that glittered silver on his shoulder, intent on dismembering the adversary, and then another and a third, and all that could be heard was the smoldering sound of an extinguished flame.

Moshe now began to think about the havoc this event was going to play with his life and the normal routine of the yeshiva; first of all, he was likely to be thrown out of the yeshiva, but secondly, and more of an immediate concern, was how everyone was going to sleep tonight with the smoke and the smell and the blaring lights overhead that the firemen had switched on. As the third fireman left

the blackened remains, tears and mucus running down his face, Moshe asked him, “Are you Jewish?” He was met with a wild look of utter incomprehension.

“Good,” continued Moshe, “then would you mind turning off the lights?” The man clutched at his axe more intently and strode by without answering. “It will be hard to sleep like this,” Moshe yelled after him. But the firemen were gathering up their things and leaving.

After the evening prayers, the students dispersed to the homes of various families in the community for the shabbos evening meal. Moshe couldn't bring himself to want to participate. He could only think of the damage that he had caused to the yeshiva and the great inconvenience he had brought upon his fellow students. He would not go, he decided, but would fast and repent his lack of regard for the physical world.

He sat in a corner of the main hall, swaying fervently and chanting the holy words of the book that lay open on the table before him. But soon he fell into a remorseful silence. He got up and began pacing about the room wondering how such a disaster had befallen him and why he had been smitten by fate's hand. What was wrong with him? What blemish lay deep inside that refused to be cleansed by his learning, his prayers and even his tears? What flaw was so pervasive and deeply rooted in the essence of his being that he was so completely unaware of it? Everything that he did was only a façade, a cover over this essential evil that lurked inside of him, or perhaps was him. He was caught by a sudden impulse to

take off his yarmulke and toss it into the dwindling light of the Shabbos candles that still burned in the front of the room.

Just then something caught his eye.

He approached the Shabbos candles and saw that they had not been kindled on their regular metal platform but on a block of wood. As he watched the white candles melt away into a smooth, mysterious pool of diaphanous, ethereal substance neither solid nor liquid, he was struck by the impending catastrophe that only he could prevent. The candles had disappeared and the wax was burning of its own volition and beneath the invisible pool of melted wax the block of wood was beginning to char black. Soon it would burst into flames, catch on to the ark covering, and the ark would be set afire along with the holy Torah and all the books of the library.

Now the divine purpose was revealed: one disaster had come to prevent an even greater one. Through his meritorious act of lighting candles of his own the forces of heaven had chosen him to deliver the congregation from calamity. Without hesitation he ran out for help.

Outside the streets were quiet and the sidewalks empty. He walked two blocks and finally found a policeman standing on the corner clutching his night stick with both hands in front of him as if practicing his moves for dispersing riot crowds. His light complexion and pug nose proclaimed a distinctly non-Jewish

heritage. The cop turned on him with a tough expression on his tight muscular face.

“I need some help,” said Moshe in a low, mysterious voice. “Can you come with me?”

The cop eyed him suspiciously. “What’s the problem, kid?”

“A fire,” exclaimed Moshe but still in a hidden, secretive voice.

“Another one,” said the cop. “I’ll call the fire department,” and he grabbed his walkie-talkie from his thick black belt.

“No,” said Moshe and thrust out his hand to prevent the policeman from taking any action, then grabbed him by the hand. “Please, just come with me. You’ll see, it’s a small fire. Just you and me can take care of it.”

“This some kind of a joke?” asked the cop warily.

“No. Honest. You’ll see, but come, quickly before it is too late.”

“What the hell, guess you can call this part of the job?”

Moshe ran up ahead trying to encourage the cop to walk faster, but he just sauntered along, looking this way and that, until finally he reached the yeshiva steps where Moshe stood waving his hands furiously to indicate that he must hurry.

By this time most of the lights in the study hall had been turned off by the automatic clock. They stood in the silent darkness, the cop clutching his nightstick tensely, riveted with fear.

“Okay, where’s the fire?”

Moshe led the way. “There!” he said emphatically as they approached the place beneath the dim yellow illumination of the eternal light that burned above the ark.

In the middle of the ebony, cracked surface of the block of wood danced the smallest green flame. “That’s the fire?” bellowed the cop.

Moshe nodded shyly.

The cop extinguished the fire with his thumb, and proclaimed, “You is an idiot, boy!” And he stomped away.

Alone again in the big room, Moshe was overwhelmed by the emptiness and futility of his life. He stretched out on a narrow wooden bench and fell into a troubled sleep. His dreams were inconsistent, full of emotions of pity and sorrow, where nothing made sense yet everything was demanded of him and he continually failed. In the dream he was a huge giant who clumsily tried to fit into a miniature world, but with his every step he would unintentionally crush all the delicate things surrounding him. He roared like a huge fire devouring everything that came to his touch. Finally, in his sleep, he cried out to be anything but big. With great axes he was dismembered and was now very small and everything that happened around him was a crushing experience; there was nothing that did not hurt him. He was as small and vulnerable as a tiny flame that could be extinguished by a mere touch.

He awoke a few hours later feeling the empty space beneath him as he rolled off the bench onto the floor. He righted himself, brushing off his clothes and

rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. An eerie light penetrated through the filmy windows. Mechanically he went through the ritual hand washing and morning blessings. He wandered about the yeshiva, wondering how normality could be so illusive. His echoing footsteps around empty tables and chairs made him feel invisible and of another world.

He left the yeshiva.

Like a leaf torn off a tree, he drifted in the winds of destiny. On reaching a park, he left the street to follow the path between the trees. The park was quiet except for the chirping of birds and the rustling of squirrels. The grass was moist and on the green benches was a thin layer of dew. The incoherent, mumbling sounds of the city were far away in some distant past. He sat on a bench and let himself be absorbed into the power of life.

He sat so still that the birds flew close to him, undisturbed by his presence, and sang their full-throated songs without restraint. A squirrel approached and from a safe distance observed him without moving. With his eyes he beckoned in a friendly manner to the animal who responded with a few quick steps in his direction. The movements of the animal were childlike, full of innocence and delightful. Moshe smiled at the squirrel which jumped on to the other side of the bench and regarded the human with interest.

At such close proximity, alone in the early morning, the animal was quickly losing its cuteness, as it crept forward in its menacing way. Eying the animal with

suspicion, he carefully lifted himself from the bench just as the beast ran to the place where he had been seated and then looked up at him quivering slightly. Moshe stamped with his foot and yelled but the squirrel was not frightened off; rather it jumped down from its perch and began a steady approach. Moshe yelled once more but seeing that his voice had no effect turned and ran like one hunted.

Tortured by his weakness having been stared down by a squirrel he was quickly losing his resolve for life. He watched convoluted images twist through his brain. He saw himself walking to the Brooklyn Bridge, climbing the superstructure before anyone could stop him. He saw himself climb to the highest possible point and then hurl himself spread-eagle into the arms of death.

In a whimsical, wanton moment, an inexplicable lark, a joke on the angel of death, he instead followed some black-coated, round-hatted Chasidim into an old and dilapidated shul. He gazed at the throng of black-clad Chasidim pressing around a long white-covered table. Here time seemed to be held at bay, through a communal knowledge that any sudden or thoughtless movement would shatter the room like glass. It was like a dream inside of a crystal, the place where life and death merge.

Somehow he understood—not the faint Yiddish that cascaded over the heads of the men behind whom he stood, not in verbal or visual images, rather he felt comprehension. As he stood on his toes to peer beyond the black coats in front of him he was able to look into the eyes of an old man whose face was white as

alabaster yet his skin had the soft beauty of a child and the tone of a pearl. Even the lines of age that riddled the pearl face did not seem etched out of worry and pain, but rather carved and cut like a diamond. When he spoke, the words seemed to emanate not from his mouth, but from his face, like a light from a prism. From within the prism there glowed a fiery coal: his soul or the soul of the world?

Their eyes met and the old man interrupted his words, lifted his arm, and pointed a long white finger at him. The Chasidim turned and there was some rustling as a glass of wine was passed back to him. Someone whispered, “Mach l’chiam.” He lifted the glass to his mouth, pronounced its blessing, and took a small sip. This time he did not need to stand on his toes for the Chasidim had parted in front of him. He raised the glass of wine and the angelic face nodded. The parting immediately disappeared like the return of the waters of the Red Sea. He again stood facing the back of a black coat as the Rebbe’s Yiddish continued modulating the air around him. He remained standing for another hour.

Suddenly the chasadim broke into song, none of them taking their eyes off their Rebbe whose head was now slowly bobbing as the ends of his long white beard danced on the table. He went over to a corner of the shul and sat down at a small table. He was confused. The feelings that had brought him here, though they had subsided, still lurked somewhere within him. He picked up a book and looked at the title. It was the Song of Songs, the love song written by King Solomon. He began intoning the words, but the language was very difficult. He tired after a few

minutes and laid his head down upon the book. He wanted to cry. He felt pitifully alone.

A yellow-bearded old man came and sat down across from him, His face was a bitter face turned sweet like the alchemists' dream of lead turned into gold.

“Where do you learn?” asked the broken teeth with an accented voice.

He was startled to hear English coming from the bearded face. He told him the name of his yeshiva and then added, “I’m a Baal Tshuva.” He thought for a moment of the meaning of the words he had spoken, Baal Tshuva: master of return—a repentant. He wanted to laugh and cry at once. It was a cruel and mean joke. He had not returned to a path of righteousness. He had only changed his clothes from blue jeans to a suit and in so doing had metamorphosis into a hypocrite. It appeared to him that he had changed from a beautiful butterfly struggling to fly to the ultimate heights of the heavens into a worm groveling in the dirt. He hated himself.

The old man stuck a gnarled finger into his shoulder. He looked up. The old man’s face was closer and his voice excited, yet soft and restrained. “When I was a young man I used to dress up like a policeman and stop carriages and take people’s money. I robbed! Ah, but I did tshuva. I repented.”

He looked at the old man, his long black coat with a sash tied around his waist, his long beard and line-riddled face, and shrugged. Again he dropped his face into his book.

And again the gnarled finger came prodding him. “Now I am a businessman. I make money honestly and support many charities, but all I can think of is money. I don’t sleep at night because all that I can think of is how to make more money. How can I do tshuva? How can I repent for those wasted nights?”

“I don’t know,” he said and again lowered his face.

“Listen.” And when he lifted his face they were only inches apart. “Once I had a girlfriend and she got pregnant from me. How can I repent for that child?”

He lowered his eyes and saw the book before him, the love song the poetic parable that casts the Jewish people as a young maiden being courted by the great and mighty king. At that moment a sudden recognition came to him and he saw that dark thing from which he was fleeing: the maiden, the Jewish people, had been thrown from the palace, left to wander in the streets and be abused by the peoples of the earth, and he was the bastard child.

He looked up. A flash of acknowledgement beamed from his eyes and the old man caught it. Their souls were tied together. For a moment there was total silence. Their souls embraced. And then something began flowing from deep inside of him into the old man, like a gentle river flowing into an ocean. He felt light and buoyant. The old man smiled and then got up and walked away.

He was light with life. He smiled an uninhibited broad smile and then admonished himself for his levity. It was incomprehensible to him that he could

have been in a bottomless pit of depression, quickly spiraling downward and at the next moment happily smiling blissfully emancipated.

From the corner of the shul where he sat alone, he viewed the Chasidim intent upon their Rebbe's words which drifted to him as a dull whisper. He drummed his fingers against the wooden table seeking some morsel of understanding of the experience that had unfolded before him. His tapping became louder and then took on a melody. The words of a folk song swam back to him and then burst like a stormy sea, "And if you could just pack up your sorrows, give them all to me. I can use them. You'll only abuse them. Give them all to me..."

THE REBBE

In the dream the Rebbe was speaking on a ship at sea; the Chasidim were gathered around, but were talking—in the dream he understood the Yiddish, but the Chasidim were so noisy he could not make out the words. Frustrated he found an onboard phone that he held to his ear, but then the phone dropped—emanating from the phone was the voice of the Rebbe asking, “Who is it?”

“It is me,” he said in the dream and the Rebbe repeated his name, but in a way no one had ever pronounced his name.

“Dovid, come to me,” commanded the Rebbe

In the dream he passed through grey hallways until he met his teacher who asked him where he was going. Upon hearing that his student was going to the Rebbe told him to eat first and offered him the cooking of his Chinese chef. Feeling satiated he went off to his destination as the dream ended.

He awoke into the dream; it was the day he was to meet the Rebbe after a year of dedicated toil in the study of Torah his reward was a few minutes alone with the Rebbe. He had wanted to fast on this day, but his teacher convinced him to eat and a friend invited him over for a vegetarian meal which all made him reflect on the dream from the night before.

The Rebbe often stayed up all night seeing visitors and granting what was called Yichedot/Alone with the Rebbe. He was somewhere between a Chasid and a visitor; though he lived in the community and attended the yeshiva, he would

always be a visitor. It was his beard, which they all knew was counterfeit; while the Chasidim wore beards because of the proscription of the law, his beard had been grown as a rebel against society—having cut his long hair and dressed in a suit, he now looked just like them, but he was not.

While he waited throughout the night the Chasidim told him fantastic stories in preparation for his audience with the Rebbe. One told him about the Chasid who had read that a Rebbe could see on the person forehead the sum of their life's work so he went into Rebbe with his hat pulled down over his forehead—the Rebbe remarked, seeing the hat pulled down so low, if I could see on your forehead I can also see through your hat. Another told him of a Chasid who, as was customary, wrote a short note to the Rebbe then tore off the blank part to write the Rebbe's words upon exiting. This particular Chasid mistakenly gave the Rebbe the blank piece of paper and wondered after exiting how the Rebbe had managed to answer his questions when he still held the paper with the questions. One of the Rebbe's many male secretaries inquired within and returned with the Rebbe's answer: your note was difficult to read.

The Rebbe saw Dovid around four in the morning. He was both exhausted and elated having watched throughout the long night people entering with trepidation then exiting excitedly a few minutes later. He had already had a few encounters with the Rebbe who would at times stare at him during the Rebbe's public discourses as if trying to break the code of this counterfeit Chasid. It was a

custom in the community that when the Rebbe was walking the Chasidim would empty the sidewalk before the Rebbe by crossing the street to walk on the opposite side. When he tried to do that he ended up in the middle of the street along with the Rebbe who was crossing to the other side—the two men, the revered Rebbe and this young man dressed up as one the Chasidim stared at it other in the middle of the street.

Then there was the time when he saw the Rebbe leaving the shul and hid peering at the Rebbe from behind a tree; as the Rebbe walked to the waiting car he spotted someone behind a tree and stopped to see who it was, but he was quick to move hiding himself from the Rebbe. As the Rebbe walked he turned his head towards the tree hoping for a peek of the person behind the tree who continued to readjust his place so the Rebbe could not see. At a last attempt before entering the waiting car the Rebbe suddenly lurched back to catch a glimpse, but again he was fast and quickly hid. Finally as the car moved away he felt safe to come out from behind the tree as the Rebbe from the back seat of the car turned around and looked at him squarely.

Now was his time to enter in the Rebbe's room and confront the man whose presence was enough to keep him in one place for a whole year. Because people often got confused in the presence of the Rebbe it was a custom to write one's information on a letter and hand to the Rebbe rather than speaking, which is what he did. Rebbe took his letter than after quickly reading said, "I have met you

before.” He was immediately taken aback. What kind of thing was that to say? Was this man a charlatan posing as some great figure? He had met people like that out in the world who said vague things hoping to arouse mystery. The Rebbe looked at him curiously and said his Name, Dovid, I read this before. The Rebbe reached for another letter with his handwriting.

His teacher had cautioned him to write to the Rebbe a few days before and then in the letter he handed to the Rebbe include something new, but he had not been able to think of something new and just a copied of what he had previously sent to the Rebbe. The Rebbe looked up and said his name—he recognized the voice in the dream commanding him to come. His name spoken from the lips of the Rebbe opened up his soul and he found himself suddenly floating behind the Rebbe’s shoulder looking down upon his letter.

At one point in the brief meeting he thought that perhaps the Rebbe was getting him mixed up one someone else, afterall the Rebbe meets so many people; he boldly said to the Rebbe, “Maybe you do not know who I am?”

The Rebbe looked up, a disgusted look riddles the Rebbe’s face as he replied, and I don’t want to know who you are.”

It caused him to reflect upon his life and hubris with which he had lived; truly, why would the Rebbe want to know about who he was and what his life had been. As the Rebbe pleasantly modulated his name in that beautiful voice leaving him feeling like lead before gold, he realized that he had not come to see the

Rebbe, he had come to see himself. Though the Rebbe gave him simple advice, what was written already in the books for thousands of years—leave bad then do good—that was something inextricably extra in the words of the Rebbe. The Rebbe often said, what leaves the heart enters the heart.

The Rebbe and what he said was serious, the advice he imparted were words to think about for a lifetime; the two men looked into each other's eyes—one giving and one trying to receive. In the end the Rebbe wanted to leave him with a blessing which began as a wave of gladness sweeping across the Rebbe's illuminated face. At one point half of the Rebbe's face was engulfed in gladness while the other half was still occupied with the seriousness of the meeting.

His one chance to be alone with the Rebbe happened very fast and like the dream he had dreamt the night before he suddenly found himself awake on the other side of the door trying to comprehend what had been imparted. The Rebbe had said: I hope to hear good news about you; he knew it was a custom for the Rebbe to say instead: I hope to hear good news from you. It was clear, the Rebbe wanted him to leave, to go out into the world and be a light unto the nations. A little bit of light can disperse a whole lot of darkness.

He went back to the yeshiva, he did not even wait to say goodbye to his teacher and before anyone had awoken, he was gone.

INSIDE OUT

Chaim Kravitz waved good-bye to his wife who smiled back before driving away down 22nd street to have lunch while he finished up some work on the quiet Sunday. He would accompany his wife to the Bronx to visit their newly born granddaughter later in the day, but he had not built up his printing business by neglecting his responsibilities.

Standing in front of the street-level door that opened into his business of twenty years, he searched his wallet for the extra key that he always carried as a precaution. The street was uncommonly quiet and still. He liked working on Sunday because of the peace and tranquility that pervaded the city before the start of another week. There had been a time, when he had first started into the adventurous world of self-employment and proprietorship when he worked every Sunday to make up for being closed on the Shabbat, but those days had passed and brought in their stead times of affluence and gratification as he and his family had settled down into a comfortable life-style. The children had grown and married. He and Rose had a peaceful life blessed by healthy years and new grandchildren.

Inside the air was dark and cool and strangely silent. He flicked on the light and observed his waiting machinery stretched before him. He looked at a piece of equipment remembering when he had purchased it, how the shop had changed and grown and expanded. He felt a congratulatory sense of accomplishment welling up inside of him. He had been successful. The Almighty had smiled upon him.

As musing was not in his nature and besides, in a few short hours his wife would be back to pick him up and he did not want to make her wait, he took off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves preparing to work. His wife often admonished him for working in his dress clothes, but today he certainly had a good excuse by forgetting his keys and being locked out of his office.

He walked over to the old Royal Zenith. The large offset press had been his first major purchase and even twenty years ago he had purchased it used. None of his employees understood why he kept it around. It took up space, was uneconomical and slow. Some of them even refused to work on it and no one but he was able to repair it. The press had served him well through the years and many long nights that he labored to put out orders and build up accounts. People have no sense of age or character any more, he thought to himself, The world only wants more and faster. If I let them get rid of my press, next they'll want to get rid of me. Smiling to himself he put a friendly hand on the old press and turned the switch that ignited the overhead fluorescent light.

He worked slowly and steadily for two hours, checking, balancing, greasing, and adjusting, methodically preparing the old press for the next morning's run. After the majority of the work had been completed, he turned the press on and let it idle briefly while watching the moving parts with a keen eye, walking slowly around from side to side, squirting oil in appropriate places. Turning off the power

once again, Chaim bent by the automatic duster which had been out of repair for sometime and began to disassemble it.

Rising after a while, wiping the dirt from his knees, he noticed a grease stain penetrating into his pants leg. He tried to brush it off. As he walked to the restroom envisioning his wife's reproofing nod and a probable outstretched finger. Eventually she would smile and admit that it would come out.

Being locked out of his office he was forced to use the employees' lavatory. He couldn't locate the light switch so with a pocket flashlight he guided his way to a nearby commode. After a short inspection satisfied him as to its general cleanliness, he shut off the light and began unbuckling his pants. Sitting and waiting, visualizing the duster mechanism and its probable cause of defect, something caught his eye. An image on the cement floor in front of him was taking on form as his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. Half interested he shined the light on it. Immediately startled, he sat there staring dumbly. In full, natural, poignant color the picture of a naked woman smiling up to him from the floor.

Chaim turned away his head and shut off the light. He quickly finished, stood up and dressed himself in the dark. As he turned on the light to leave the stall his eyes again caught the colorful page. Towards the bottom another picture showed that two naked men had joined the woman who was smiling pleasantly at their touch. Chaim averted his glance and ran from the restroom.

Back beneath the white lights, standing before the dispassionate stares of his machinery, Chaim realized that he was perspiring even though the air was cool and dry. He shook his head as though awaking from a bad dream. He walked slowly over to the press, dazed, blinking his eyes nervously trying to wink away the image that remained in his mind. He forced his attention back to the mechanism he had been attempting to repair.

After only a few minutes his physical needs again called him into the restroom. He walked from his press and crossed the large room passing between the silent equipment like one mesmerized. He was determined not to enter the same stall, but magnetic attraction pulled him close and invisible arms grabbed at him and sat him down. “This is ridiculous,” he shouted at himself inside of his mind. Trying to rid himself of the awful image, he bent over and turned the page.

His curiosity seduced by the darkness, he pointed his flashlight at the magazine that lay on the floor. The three naked figures were cavorting on a bed, their hands and mouths devouring each other’s bodies in an erotic feast of animal pleasure. Holding his pants with both hands just above his knees, he fled the restroom and finished dressing in the safety of his shop.

“Disgusting,” said Chaim in a loud voice to the unhearing wall. “Absolutely disgusting,” and he spat hard on the floor. Confident that he would not re-enter the restroom he resumed his work. However, after a short time had passed, again he felt the urge to relieve himself. He knew that his body was completely void of all

refuse. He slammed down the screwdriver that he had been working with onto the cement floor, stood up and ran to the restroom. He did not bother using the flashlight. He found his way quickly to the stall, bent over, picked up the magazine and stuffed it into his shirt.

Outside, again in the light, he double-checked that his shirt was well buttoned. He looked about himself suspecting, delirious with fear. He walked rapidly to a desk in the middle of the shop and sat down. He lifted the black telephone receiver to his ear and quickly dialed a number by heart. He sat tensely still, his lips pressed tightly together, his mind praying fervently that the phone would be answered. With a clicking sound the ringer stopped.

“Yeah.”

“Mendle, is that you?” Chaim panted, sighing with relief.

“Yes,” said the voice in a slow drawling voice edged with annoyance.

“Mendle, it’s Chaim”

“Oh, Chaim. Why do you sound so strange?”

“Mendle, I’m in trouble. You have to help me.”

“What’s a matter?” asked Mendle with friendly sarcasm “are your hemorrhoids bothering you again?”

“Mendle, I’m serious. You have to help me. There’s no one else I can turn to.” His voice sounded full of desperation.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at work.”

“I’ll be right down.”

“No!” screamed Chaim so loud that he looked across the room into the entrance hall where a sliver of light was piercing through the window of the front door, to see if anyone was peering in at him. “Mendle, please, just listen to me. You have to tell me what to do.”

“Alright,” said Mendle, calmly waiting in anticipation.

“Mendle, there’s a naked woman here.”

“What?” asked Mendle in an astonished voice that suddenly rising two octaves. “Of all people, you Chaim and a naked woman? I don’t believe it.”

“It’s not my fault Mendle, believe me. I didn’t even know she was here. I just walked into the bathroom and there she was lying on the bathroom floor without a stitch on. You could see everything.”

“She alive?” asked Mendle, concerned.

“Oh, ho is she alive! And besides that, there are two men with her.”

“Well tell the men to take her out of the bathroom and get out of your shop.”

“They’re not in the bathroom anymore, Mendle. And the men don’t have any clothes on either.”

“You have an orgy going on in your shop? What’s happening there?”

“Exactly, Mendle, an orgy. But they’re not in my shop, Mendle. They’re in my shirt.”

There was a silent pause then Mendle asked, “Chaim, you sure you’re alright? Maybe you had one too many schnapps today at shul?”

“Mendle, listen to me. I came to work today. There were some things I had to do to get a job ready for tomorrow. I had been working here for a couple of hours, but I had forgotten my keys. I used an extra key to let myself in, but I didn’t have the key for the office so I had to use the employee’s bathroom. There on the floor, Mendle, was this horrible magazine and staring up at me was this woman without any clothes. The colors and tones of the printing were so fine that it looked even more real than life. I tried not to look, but suddenly something happening to my body. Every five minutes I was running back into the bathroom. I thought that if I just turned the page and got rid of the image that I’d be able to forget it. But then I just wanted to look on the other side. There was this picture, full-page, bright and beautiful printing, of her and two naked men, may they all drop into Gehinom, in bed together and I can’t even begin to describe what they were doing to each other.”

“Save you the bother,” said Mendle, a sense of relief in his voice. “But I don’t understand why you have it in your shirt. Just leave it in the bathroom and tomorrow one of your employees will happily remove it.”

“I can’t leave it there. I keep going back and looking at it.”

“Chaim, I don’t understand you. You’ve been around Manhattan for years. You’ve seen all the pornography that these animals put on their walls. You’ve

walked down 42nd street and seen the garbage they sell and the prostitutes waiting on the corners. Why all of a sudden you're acting like a seventeen-year-old?"

"Mendle, this is different. I'm alone here. When I'm in the street or in someone else's business, well, there are people around and heaven forbid they should see an orthodox Jew looking at one of those pictures or admiring a prostitute. But here I'm alone. I'm a human being alone with all these lustful, alluring desires, the opposite of everything that I believe, but I'm afraid that I'm going to look. It's crazy, but I want to look and what I've already seen is going to haunt me for the rest of my days. Mendle, I've got to get rid of it. What am I going to do? "

"Flush it down the toilet," said Mendle abruptly.

"I thought of that, Mendle, but it won't fit. If I have to tear it apart I will look at each and every picture and besides, Rose is suppose to pick me up soon. Mendle, I've got to get rid of it, fast and forever."

"Burn it."

"The smoke will set off the fire alarm."

There was a prolonged silence on the phone before Mendle spoke again. "I'll tell you what to do. You can work the freight elevator that runs in your building by hand, right?"

"Right," said Chaim, unsure of what his friend was getting at.

“Well, draw the elevator up a bit and slide the magazine into the shaft. It’s a long drop even though you’re on the ground floor and neither you nor anyone else is going down there after it. It will be gone forever.”

“Brilliant, Mendle, absolutely brilliant! I’ll do it right away. I’ll never forget you for this.”

“That’s what friends are for,” assured Mendle, but his friend had already hung up.

Mendle lingered for a few minutes, the phone to his ear, listening to the silence while he scratched his chin beneath his black beard. After he put down the phone he picked up his hat and suit coat and left the house without telling his wife where he was going.

Actually he did not know where he was going. The phone call had bothered him, not so much the bizarre escapades of his friend, but something had struck a note of discord within him. He walked a couple of blocks absorbed in his own thoughts not noticing the warm spring day or familiar neighborhood.

Jarred from his introspection, he turned his head towards the sound of someone tapping on a window. He realized that he was in front of the house of Rabbi Zalmanoff and the old man was beckoning to him from the second story window where the rabbis’ study overlooked the street. Mendle smiled and the rabbi motioned him to come in. Mendle walked up the brick steps and rang the door

bell. The rabbi's wife opened the door and let him enter. After greeting the rebbetzin cordially he walked into the rabbi's study.

“Mendle, I'm very glad to see you,” said Rabbi Zalmanoff rising from his chair and extending a friendly hand to his visitor. The rabbi was dressed in a long black caftan with a sash tied about his waist. As he vigorously shook Mendle's hand his white wispy beard moved gently against his chest.

“Money, right?” said Mendle and laughed.

“The Yeshiva needs a thousand dollars,” said the rabbi sitting down, “But this time it's just a loan. I think we can pay it back to you in a month.”

“You should live and be well,” said Mendle not believing but removing his checkbook.

“Listen Mendle,” said the rabbi chuckling, “there is a price for everything, even being rich.”

Mendle was silent for a minute then said, “I would like to tell you something that happened to me recently. Something curious, I guess part of the price for being rich.”

Rabbi Zalmanoff smiled graciously, rummaging inside of his desk drawer withdrew a bottle of Russian vodka. He filled two unwashed shot glasses that stood amid the disarray of paper and books while Mendle took a seat opposite the rabbi. They drank to each other's health and in one easy motion drained their glasses. Mendle closed his eyes, for a moment not breathing while he waited for

the sting to subside. When he opened his eyes he was met by the unanswered stare of his mentor.

“The price of being rich is much more than you might expect,” said Mendle without elaborating.

Rabbi Zalmanoff sat back in his leather chair interested.

“You think that the test of being rich parting with your money? That is only one side of it. There is the other side, the side that says you can buy anything that you desire.” Mendle rubbed the shot glass between his thumb and forefinger then accepted another shot before continuing.

“Last month I took a trip to California, a business trip. But after finishing I decided to make a stopover on the way home. At seven o’clock at night I left from the Los Angeles airport and flew to Las Vegas.” Mendle stopped speaking and looked up at the rabbi’s face. “I guess you don’t know what Las Vegas is?”

The rabbi shrugged that the word meant nothing to him.

“Well let me describe for you what I saw. When we arrived into the city of Las Vegas it was night, but you would not have known that it was night. The streets were as crowded as Manhattan in mid-day, but no one was working. They were playing, playing very grown-up games. They were drinking and gambling. The drinks were free and the people milled from place to place in the warm night air throwing their money into slot machines, dice boards, roulette tables. There must be a thousand different ways to lose your money. But like I was saying it was

night, but you wouldn't know it. Everywhere there were lights: blinking lights, flashing lights, colored lights. It is a city flooded with illumination; it is eternal day. No stars, no moon, no darkness. I guess its some people's idea of paradise.”

Mendle stopped and again looked into the face of the old man. His eyes were sharp, black and interested.

“I went into Caesar's Palace, a fancy hotel, and took a room. No, I didn't take a room; I took the suite, the most expensive room in this very exclusive hotel. A bellboy took my luggage and another man who looked like a butler accompanied me. The sitting room was enormous with a crystal chandelier, dark mahogany paneling, mirrors, thick carpeting, plush couches and chairs, you name it. The bedroom was more of the same with an immense bed the size of my entire bedroom. There was a dressing room and a bathroom with a bathtub large enough to be a mikva. And that's not all. After they had deposited me and bags and the butler poured me a drink, a knock came on the door. I said come in and in walked one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen in my entire life. I won't bother describing her. Besides, I don't think I could do her justice.”

“Mendle!” interrupted the rabbi. “What would your wife think if she heard you speak like that?”

“What would my wife think?” repeated Mendle. “Sara would probably think that I have not changed much in twenty-four years. At any rate, this woman tells me that she is my personal maid and will see to anything that I want or need. I

could tell from the look in her eyes that she meant it. You know what I did?" asked Mendle looking into the wrinkled face of the rabbi.

Rabbi Zalmonoff only lifted his large bushy eyebrows in concern.

"I sat there on the edge of this huge bed after the woman had left. I sat there and looked about me trying to realize where exactly where I was. I sat there and knew that any pleasure I might desire was there to be had. All I had to do was lift my voice, even just a whisper. I sat there, Rabbi Zalmonoff, I sat there for two hours and then took the phone, called the desk and told them that I was checking out. I took a midnight flight back to New York."

The rabbi, without moving his head, raised his eyes skyward and muttered something beneath his breath. "But, Mendle why did you do it? Why did you go to such a place?"

"I just wanted to see the other side."

Rabbi Zalmanoff was silent as he twirled the long strands of his straight beard. Finally he looked up and said, "Mendle, perhaps you could help me to understand something that happened to me over the winter?"

The rabbi sat back in his chair and pressed down his long white beard with both hands and then, staring towards the ceiling, began to speak. "The Rebbe suggested that I go to a place called Miami Beach to try to raise money for the yeshiva. Have you heard of it?"

Mendle just smiled, then added, "Who hasn't heard of Miami Beach?"

“Oh,” said the rabbi, somewhat hurt. “Well I had a list of people to meet and one of them was a retired businessman. I had to meet him in his room at the retirement hotel where he was because he could hardly walk. He had some sort of disease. I forget what he called it.”

“Arthritis?” interjected Mendle.

Rabbi Zalmanoff thought for a moment, then smiling a little sheepishly admitted, “I really don’t remember, but he could barely walk, even with his two metal crutches. His legs were bowed and crooked. Anyway he could walk around some and he suggested that we go to the bar and have a *l’chaim*. It was one of those big, fancy hotels like the one you described, but there were a number of orthodox people there and he himself wore a black hat and a beard.”

“Whatever that hotel looked like, add ten just like it and you might have something like a Vegas hotel, but no matter.”

“It had a stage, also,” said the rabbi, but drew no response from his listener. “At any rate, Mendle, this thing happened and I cannot understand. This young girl comes out to the stage and announces the winning number was 302. The number seemed vaguely familiar, but by the time that I realized that it was the number of the hotel room of the man that I had come to see, well, what do you think? He had run off. Actually left his crutches at his place and ran off to this young woman. Even worse, when he got to the stage, he took her in his arms and

began dancing her! And when the music stopped he kissed her, right on the mouth.”

The Rabbi rubbed his nose and pushed his glasses against his reddened face. “I was embarrassed. It’s not nice for a rabbi to be associated with such things! But, I was more amazed at how could he, an orthodox Jew have done such a thing? When he returned to his place beside me, we were both silent for some time. I didn’t know quite what to say. I could not imagine an orthodox man acting in that way. Finally I turned to him and said, “How is it possible that just a few minutes before you were hardly able to walk and suddenly you threw down your crutches and ran?”

“He looked at me with a surprised expression on his face and said, ‘You don’t know about the power of the *sitra achra*?’”

The rabbi turned to Mendle, his voice laced with excitement. ”The *sitra achra*,” he repeated, and for emphasis translated the term into English, “The Other Side, Mendle, The Other Side!”

Mendle looked up at the rabbi, whose face expressed utter alarm. He thought about the rabbi’s words nodding slowly.

“The Jewish people,” continued the rabbi with emotion, “the children of Israel are losing the battle. Is not two thousand years of exile long enough? How can we stand against this any longer? What can we do?”

Mendle put his hand inside his coat and removed a pen. “This is all that I can do,” he said and wrote out a check.

After Mendle had left, Rabbi Zalmonoff folded the check then put it into his pocket. He sat there brooding for a long time. Suddenly he ripped the air with his fist and slammed his hand hard upon the wooden desk top. He stood up, placed his black felt hat on his head and closed the door of his study after him. His wife met him in the front room.

“Yisroel., what’s the matter with you?”

Rabbi Zalmonoff only stared intently in front of him without speaking as he walked towards the front door.

“Where are you going?” demanded his wife. “Is there something wrong?”

“I am going to the Rebbe,” said her husband in a stiff, authoritative voice.

“Only the Rebbe can help us.”

It was four long blocks to the main yeshiva where the Rebbe could be found. Though the rabbi was close to eighty, he walked briskly, intent upon his mission. He knew that access to the Rebbe was not easily obtained, but for the older Chasidim exceptions were made. As he approached he saw that the Rebbe had left his office and, escorted by his personal aide, was walking toward his car.

Rabbi Zalmanoff began to run as he did he shouted, “Rebbe, Rebbe.” The Rebbe turned and, seeing the elderly rabbi, stopped. But Rabbi Zalmanoff continued to run. He felt like the ram that Abraham had sacrificed in place of his

son Isaac. It was said in the Torah that that ram had been running towards Abraham since the beginning of creation. He felt tired and weak. His legs trembled as he ran.

The Rebbe raised his hand. The rabbi slowed and the two men began walking toward one another. The Rebbe's face beamed radiantly. When the two men were close enough to touch one another they stopped.

“The sitra achra!” pleaded the rabbi.

The Rebbe's countenance changed abruptly at the mention of the word, his face paled and the previous expression of elation was replaced with a serious, intense stare. Then at once he gathered himself and with a far off gaze, said, “But, don't you see, Yisroel?”

The old rabbi turned and followed the Rebbe's line of sight, but all that he saw was the rubble and gloomy façade of the grey city. He turned back to the Rebbe whose face now glowed brilliantly with an uninhibited smile; the Rebbe's vision extended beyond the physical plane of existence. “Look!” commanded the Rebbe. “They are coming back, the children are returning. The long exile is finished. The children are coming back.”